

# Contextualization, Syncretism and the Gospel among Yoruba People of South-western Nigeria: A Biblical-Intercultural Study

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## ABSTRACT

*Indigenous Christian mission in Nigeria has achieved remarkable numerical growth and cultural penetration, particularly among ethno linguistic groups such as the Yoruba people of South-western Nigeria. However, this expansion has been accompanied by persistent theological challenges, especially in the areas of contextualization and syncretism. While contextualization seeks to communicate the gospel in culturally meaningful forms without compromising biblical truth, syncretism blends Christian faith with elements of African Traditional Religion (ATR), thereby undermining the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ and Scripture. This article examines the conceptual boundaries between contextualization and syncretism and explores the theological, cultural, and pastoral factors that encourage syncretistic tendencies in Nigerian indigenous missions, with special focus on the Yoruba people of South-western Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative approach that draws from biblical theology, musicological scholarship, personal observation, oral interviews, and selected empirical field data. The study identifies misconceptions of Christianity as a foreign religion, inadequate engagement with African metaphysical worldviews, weak teaching on Christian suffering and discipleship, and uncritical Africanization of Christianity as major incentives for syncretism. The article argues that authentic contextualization must be rooted in Christological fidelity and scriptural authority while affirming cultural identity. It proposes a biblically grounded framework for sustainable indigenous mission in Nigeria that seeks to maintain the integrity of the gospel while enabling Christian faith to be meaningfully expressed within Yoruba cultural contexts.*

## KEYWORDS

*Indigenous mission, contextualization, syncretism, Yoruba Christianity, African Traditional Religion, Nigerian Christianity*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Christianity in Nigeria has grown from the Western missionary enterprise into one of the most vibrant centres of global Christianity. Indigenous churches now dominate the religious landscape, and African Christians increasingly shape theological discourse, worship expressions, and mission initiatives. The Yoruba people of South-western Nigeria and their indigenous mission enterprise constitute the focus of this study. Christianity has taken deep

cultural root among Yoruba Christian communities, finding expression in indigenous languages, music, symbols, leadership structures, and community life. Yet this remarkable expansion has also exposed enduring theological tensions, particularly between the demands of contextualization and the dangers of syncretism. While contextualization seeks to embody the gospel meaningfully within local cultures, syncretism blends incompatible religious beliefs and practices, thereby compromising the integrity of Christian faith and witness.

This tension is not unique to Nigeria. From the earliest Christian encounters with Greco-Roman culture to contemporary engagements with Asian, Latin American, and African societies, the church has wrestled with the challenge of translating the gospel into new cultural forms without distorting its content. However, the African context presents distinctive complexities. African Traditional Religion (ATR), with its holistic worldview, communal orientation, and emphasis on spiritual causality, addresses existential concerns about health, fertility, protection, death, and destiny in ways that resonate deeply with everyday life. Where Christianity fails to engage these concerns adequately, converts may seek supplementary religious resources, leading to dual allegiance or overt syncretism.

The challenge, therefore, is not whether Christianity should be contextualized but how contextualization can be undertaken without compromising the theological substance of the gospel. The missionary task requires sensitivity to cultural realities while simultaneously maintaining the authority of Scripture and the uniqueness of Christ. In the Yoruba context, this demands careful theological engagement with traditional beliefs, communal structures, symbols, rituals, and metaphysical assumptions.

## **II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In Nigerian indigenous mission fields, particularly in rural and least-evangelized Yoruba communities, syncretism manifests in ritual sacrifices, prophetic divination, ritual baths, symbolic mediators such as oils, soaps, garments, amulets, unbiblical concepts and nuances, and invocations of angels and spirits not attested in Scripture. These practices often emerge not from deliberate theological rebellion but from pastoral inadequacy, cultural pressure, and unresolved fears regarding spiritual insecurity, suffering, and communal exclusion.

At the same time, contemporary movements toward Africanization in theology and worship, while rightly resisting colonial or Western missionary ecclesial forms, sometimes elevate cultural authenticity above biblical authority, thereby opening new avenues for theological distortion. The central problem is therefore the difficulty of maintaining a faithful distinction between legitimate cultural contextualization and religious syncretism.

The missionary and pastoral challenge is intensified by the Yoruba worldview, in which spiritual causality, communal identity, family continuity, protection, health, fertility, and destiny are closely interconnected. When Christian discipleship fails to address these concerns biblically and comprehensively, converts may retain or reintroduce traditional religious practices alongside their Christian confession.

Consequently, there is a need for a theological and musicological framework capable of

helping indigenous missionaries distinguish between cultural forms that can be affirmed or transformed and religious practices that are incompatible with the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture.

### **III. AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The study seeks to accomplish the following objectives:

- To clarify theoretically the tension between contextualization and syncretism and situate this tension within the context of Nigerian indigenous mission.
- To identify and theologically evaluate the efforts of indigenous Christian workers in their missionary enterprise among the Yoruba people of South-western Nigeria.
- To provide pastoral and theological insights for negotiating the challenges of preserving the integrity of the gospel within African-Yoruba sociocultural and indigenous religious values.
- To discover the nature and incentives for syncretism in Yoruba Christianity and respond from a biblical context to its implications for both indigenous missionaries and their converts.
- To make appropriate recommendations on how to protect the gospel from doctrinal dilution and protect converts from pre-conversion mental and spiritual bondage.

### **IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What is the conceptual clarification of contextualization and syncretism within biblical and musicological frameworks?
- How should contextualization be pursued faithfully without theological compromise?
- What are the primary incentives for syncretism on Yoruba indigenous mission fields?
- What are the effects of syncretism on the sufficiency and authority of Scripture and on Christological fidelity?
- What spiritual, cultural, and formative resources can indigenous missionary societies, agencies, or sending churches provide for the transformative engagement of indigenous religion, traditional beliefs, and cultural practices among the people their missionaries seek to evangelize?

### **V. METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative study that employs an interpretive phenomenological approach. Primary and secondary qualitative data were obtained through personal observation, oral interviews, and related literature. The target population for the study included indigenous missionaries, mission agencies, mission schools, pastors, and Christian worshippers in some of the least-evangelized and rural regions of the Yoruba people group of South Western Nigeria. The mission agencies and training schools surveyed included Peace Foundation (Ijaiye and Ilesha-Bariba communities), Arrow of God Salvation Ministry (Moniya, Igbo-Owe and Moshe

Communities), Calvary Rescue Response Ministry (CAREM) (Ilorin region and Isheyin communities) and Chrysotile Ministry (Ibarapa region).

Seventy-two (72) indigenous missionaries, Christian workers, and local church pastors serving within these agencies or ministries were purposively selected for Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) during short-term mission trips. Mission reports, prayer bulletins, publications, mission conference materials, and training manuals from two additional national-based mission agencies—Calvary Production (CARPRO) and the Nigeria Evangelical Missionary Association (NEMA)—were evaluated as secondary sources. Participant observation also permitted first-hand reporting of religious phenomenology within the mission fields. Christian theology and biblical-intercultural missiology provide the theological and interpretive contexts for the discussion of the findings.

## **VI. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### *A. Critical Contextualization Theory: Paul G. Hiebert*

This study is theoretically anchored in Paul G. Hiebert's Critical Contextualization Theory, which provides a balanced musicological framework for engaging indigenous cultures while maintaining biblical authority and theological integrity. Hiebert critiques both non-contextualization, which rejects culture outright, and uncritical contextualization, which unreflectively absorbs cultural practices into Christianity. He instead proposes a reflective process through which cultural beliefs and practices are evaluated through the lens of Scripture and Christian theology.

In the Yoruba context, this framework enables discernment concerning which traditional religious beliefs, rituals, and communal practices may be affirmed, transformed, or rejected in Christian discipleship. While Yoruba society affirms a strong sense of communal solidarity and moral obligation, practices such as shrine veneration, ritual mediation, and ancestral invocation must be critically assessed in light of biblical monotheism and the exclusive mediator ship of Christ. Critical contextualization therefore resists both cultural alienation and syncretistic accommodation. It seeks to foster an indigenous Christianity that is simultaneously faithful to Scripture and intelligible within Yoruba cultural categories. Furthermore, this framework challenges confrontational evangelistic practices that pressure converts to publicly desecrate sacred cultural objects as evidence of faith. Such approaches may undermine social cohesion and ethical responsibility and contradict the New Testament emphasis on patient instruction, spiritual formation, and embodied discipleship.

### *B. Syncretism and Worldview Transformation Theory: Charles H. Kraft and H. Richard Niebuhr*

A second theoretical anchor for this study is worldview transformation theory, particularly as articulated through the work of Charles H. Kraft and H. Richard Niebuhr. Kraft understands syncretism as inadequate contextualization in which essential biblical meanings are distorted through the uncritical incorporation of incompatible cultural elements. Niebuhr's typology of Christ and Culture further provides a theological framework for analysing the dynamics between Christianity and indigenous religious systems, including patterns of opposition, accommodation, synthesis, and transformation.

Applied to the Yoruba religious worldview—characterized by belief in Olódùmarè, the òrìṣà, ancestral mediation, and ritual symbolism—this framework enables analysis of how Christian faith may engage indigenous metaphysical assumptions without theological dilution. It allows for the identification of functional substitutes that undermine core Christian doctrines, such as ancestral mediation replacing Christ’s sole mediator ship, while also recognizing culturally meaningful expressions that may be transformed within Christian worship and ethics. Worldview transformation theory also supports the article’s critique of coercive evangelistic practices that demand performative rupture with cultural symbols as proof of conversion. Instead, it emphasizes gradual cognitive, spiritual, and moral transformation through sustained catechesis and discipleship, thereby preventing both syncretism and alienation from communal identity.

## **VII. CONTEXTUALIZATION AND SYNCRETISM: A MISSIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE**

### **A. Contextualization**

Contextualization refers to the process by which the gospel is communicated, embodied, and lived within a particular cultural setting in ways that preserve its essential theological meaning while making it intelligible and transformative to local communities. Keller (2012) describes contextualization as giving biblical answers to questions about life that people in particular cultures are asking, expressed in language and forms they can understand. Authentic contextualization therefore affirms cultural particularity without relativizing biblical truth or compromising doctrinal integrity. In missiological discourse, contextualization involves adapting religious ideas, beliefs, and practices to specific social, historical, and cultural realities while maintaining fidelity to the gospel’s universal claims.

Applied to Christianity, contextualization entails expressing the eternal truths of Scripture in culturally meaningful forms so that the faith becomes intelligible and indigenous to the people without distorting its content. Contextualization is therefore not mere accommodation but theological translation—a process that seeks to ensure both relevance and faithfulness. The ultimate paradigm of contextualization is the incarnation itself. God entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ, assuming a particular culture, language, and social world while remaining fully divine (John 1:14; Heb. 2:14–18). Christ lived as a first-century Jew in Palestine and identified fully with humanity so that redemption might be accomplished universally.

Scholars further identify multiple domains in which contextualization occurs, including worship patterns, music, architecture, leadership formation, preaching styles, discipleship structures, and community engagement. These domains provide spaces where biblical truth may be embodied through indigenous cultural forms without theological compromise. Jesus’ washing of His disciples’ feet provides a paradigmatic example of how scriptural truth can be communicated through culturally intelligible forms. In the first-century Mediterranean world, foot washing was associated with the work of slaves or the lowest-ranking household servants. Jesus’ action therefore represented a radical inversion of accepted social hierarchies. By assuming this role, Jesus embodied His teaching on servant leadership rather than merely articulating it. The act was neither a ceremonial rite intended to confer spiritual blessing nor merely a hygienic bath. Jesus clarified to Peter, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean” (John 13:10). Foot washing functioned as a symbolic enactment of the gospel ethic, transmitting theological truth

through a culturally resonant practice. Jesus employed a familiar social custom to subvert prevailing notions of authority and redefine leadership in terms of self-giving love.

This episode illustrates how biblical revelation may be faithfully contextualized—communicating eternal truth through concrete cultural forms without compromising its theological substance.

## *B. Syncretism*

### *1. Musicological Perspective*

In missiology, syncretism is understood as the blending of Christian beliefs with elements from other religious systems in ways that compromise or distort the core of the gospel. Kraft describes syncretism as inadequate contextualization in which essential biblical meanings are lost or seriously compromised through the incorporation of incompatible cultural or religious elements. This perspective emphasizes theological fidelity and guards against contextual expressions that undermine Christian orthodoxy.

### *2. Theological Perspective*

From a theological standpoint, syncretism refers to the fusion of divergent belief systems in ways that result in doctrinal inconsistency or contradiction. Net land (2001) approaches syncretism in terms of attempts to harmonize Christian truth claims with incompatible religious worldviews, thereby relativizing the uniqueness and final authority of Christ. This perspective focuses particularly on Christological and revelatory integrity as non-negotiable dimensions of Christian faith and practice.

## *C. Anthropological and Religious Studies Perspective*

In anthropology and the study of religion, syncretism may be viewed more descriptively as the process by which religious traditions interact, adapt, and integrate elements from one another within particular cultural settings. From this perspective, syncretism is analysed as a dynamic process of religious and cultural interaction rather than evaluated primarily as theological error. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that syncretism may be understood either normatively—as a theological distortion to be avoided—or descriptively—as a feature of religious encounter and cultural exchange.

## **VIII. SYNCRETISM: THE MOST PERSISTENT THREAT TO CONTEXTUALIZATION**

While contextualization enhances gospel relevance, syncretism undermines theological integrity. Syncretism involves the blending of incompatible religious beliefs and practices into hybrid systems that compromise the uniqueness of Christ's redemptive work and the final authority of Scripture.

It operates on the assumption that the central truths of a religion are insufficient to meet the existential, spiritual, or metaphysical needs of adherents and therefore require supplementation from other traditions. In Christian contexts, syncretism may assume that God and His Word are inadequate for salvation, protection, blessing, healing, or deliverance from spiritual affliction, prompting the importation of extra biblical religious resources.

Biblically, the accommodation of competing religious systems is consistently condemned. Israel's assimilation of Canaanite religious practices resulted in covenant infidelity and

prophetic rebuke (Judg. 2:11–13; 1 Kings 18). The New Testament similarly rejects the admixture of Christ with alternative sources of salvation or spiritual mediation (Gal. 1:6–9; Col. 2:8–15).

In Nigerian indigenous mission fields, syncretism commonly manifests through ritual sacrifices, prophetic divination using symbolic objects, ritual baths, spiritual soaps, anointed garments, amulets, and invocations of angels not attested in Scripture. Though framed in Christian vocabulary, such practices can reproduce elements of African Traditional Religion rather than biblical soteriology.

They subtly displace Christ's mediatory sufficiency with ritual mechanisms that promise power, protection, or prosperity, thereby eroding the theological core of the gospel.

## **IX. CONTEXTUALIZATION WITHOUT SYNCRETISM**

Proper contextualization guards against syncretism while simultaneously seeking to make the Christian message culturally accessible. It neither absolutizes Western ecclesial forms nor accommodates indigenous religious practices in ways that distort biblical revelation. Rather, it discerns which cultural elements can be redeemed and incorporated into Christian life and which must be rejected in obedience to Christ.

A biblically faithful model of contextualization must therefore affirm cultural identity while subordinating all religious expression to the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture. Only such an approach can sustain an authentic indigenous Christianity that is both culturally rooted and theologically orthodox and capable of addressing Africa's spiritual realities without sacrificing gospel truth. Among Yoruba mission fields in Nigeria, significant strides have been made in contextualizing Christianity without compromising orthodoxy. Indigenous languages dominate worship and preaching; local melodies, rhythms, and musical instruments—including drums, gongs, cymbals, and other indigenous instruments—are incorporated into Christian liturgy.

Harvest thanksgiving services have replaced ritual sacrifices to fertility deities at the beginning of agricultural seasons, redirecting communal gratitude toward the biblical God. Traditional attire for pastors and other church leaders is also welcomed in worship, replacing earlier European ecclesiastical dress codes. Furthermore, Yoruba translations of Scripture, both written and audio, have expanded access to biblical texts in indigenous languages. Efforts such as the Yoruba reference Bible, *Bibeli Atoka*, represent attempts to provide biblical resources that are accessible within Yoruba cultural and linguistic contexts.

Yoruba Christian communities have also incorporated aspects of traditional communal leadership structures into church administration. Local church offices may reflect communal patterns of age, gender, responsibility, and social representation while being understood within biblical ecclesial structures. Obasola (2017) observes that chieftaincy titles differ from one church to another but that common titles within some mainline denominations include:

- Baba Ijo – male leader of the church.
- Iya Ijo – female leader of the church.
- Otun Baba Ijo – assistant male leader of the church.
- Otun Iya Ijo – assistant female leader of the church.
- Asiwaju Ijo – church elder.

- Asiwaju Okunrin Ijo – church male leader.
- Asiwaju Obirin Ijo – church female leader.
- Baba Isale Ijo – eldest male of the church.
- Alatunse Okunrin – church male adviser.
- Alatunse Obirin – church female adviser.
- Baba Ewe – patron of the youth.
- Iya Ewe – matron of the youth.
- Alaje Ijo – female financial adviser.

These leaders are usually elderly, experienced, and regarded as wise and virtuous. They may serve on the diaconate board and church council.

Such contextual practices enable Yoruba Christians to participate in worship with their whole being—body, soul, and spirit—while cultivating a genuine sense of belonging within the universal body of Christ. They also allow Christians to express their faith within their own thoughts, language, and cultural settings while relating meaningfully to local church leadership structures.

Such developments demonstrate that contextualization, when properly grounded in Scripture, can enhance rather than undermine Christian discipleship.

## **X. INCENTIVES FOR SYNCRETISM IN YORUBA CHRISTIANITY**

Empirical field data from Yoruba indigenous mission contexts reveal four principal factors driving syncretistic tendencies, particularly within rural evangelization and church-planting initiatives.

### **A. *Misconception of Christianity as a Foreign Religion***

In contrast to urban centres where Christianity is deeply institutionalized and widely understood as a universal faith, many rural Yoruba communities continue to perceive Christianity as a “foreign” or “white man’s religion.” This perception is especially entrenched among traditionalists who accuse converts of abandoning African religious heritage in favor of alien beliefs. When such misconceptions persist among indigenous church leaders themselves, they inevitably shape the theological consciousness of their converts. Consequently, missionaries and new believers alike become susceptible to pressure to accommodate African Traditional Religion (ATR) elements — particularly where such practices promise supernatural intervention, healing, fertility, or protection in agrarian contexts. Syncretistic compromise is often justified as cultural authenticity, reinforcing the belief that African religious expressions are appropriate for Africans just as Christianity is presumed to be suitable primarily for Europeans ( 2 Cor. 6:14–16). The old Yoruba ‘Christian songs’ such as “Igbàgbò kò pé, ká maa se òrò ilé wa” (“Christianity is not enough; we must preserve our household rituals”) vividly capture this theological ambivalence. Missional formation must therefore emphasize that the gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s universal provision for all peoples and cultures. Although Christianity reached Africa through European missionaries, it did not originate in Europe, nor is it culturally proprietary. Rather, it is God’s redemptive revelation for all humanity (John 3:16; Rom. 3:29; 10:9–13). Without this theological grounding, indigenous leaders struggle to claim God’s promises as their own and to communicate a secure sense of Christian identity and sonship to their congregations (Eph.

2:19–21). Weak theological ownership perpetuates dual religious loyalties and compromises the lordship of Christ over culture (Col. 1:15–20; Gal. 3:28).

### *B. Failure to Address African Metaphysical Worldviews Biblically*

Yoruba cosmology assumes pervasive spiritual causality. Witchcraft (ajé), ancestral spirits, curses, mystical powers, and spiritual manipulation are widely feared, especially in rural and least-evangelized communities. These contexts are often perceived as strongholds of spiritual forces, analogous to biblical accounts such as Simon Magus in Samaria (Acts 8), Elymas the sorcerer opposing Paul (Acts 13:6–12), and the demon-possessed slave girl in Philippi who practiced divination (Acts 16:16–18). When missionaries fail to address these metaphysical concerns through biblical teaching and Spirit-empowered ministry, converts inevitably seek alternative sources of spiritual security. This dual allegiance reflects not cultural resistance but theological inadequacy.

Apostolic mission in the New Testament confronted spiritual powers not through ritual accommodation but through divine authority, proclamation of the cross, and the demonstration of Christ's victory (Mark 16:15–18; Acts 10:38; 6:8; 8:5–8; 19:18–20). Almost always you are bound to encounter witchcraft whether in the church where converts are still bound by its fear or outside the church in the larger African-Yoruba community where it is being practiced.

The following field reports amply demonstrate this observation:

- A new convert was threatened to die in 7 days for shaming the family by refusing to participate in his family pagan or idolatry rites;
- A missionary was told to vacate and abandon his field. He was threatened with mysterious death of wife or children by the tribal people he was trying to evangelize. They were mostly animist and nominal Muslims. To them, the missionary came to desecrate their land by worshipping a foreign god called Jesus;
- On another mission field, after a similar threat to a team-group of Christian workers, a member on the team began to feel a painful sensation in the neck which had begun to swell up without any explainable reason. However, after counter-intercessory prayer by the team and standing on their authority in Christ, the witchcraft manipulation was paralyzed and neutralized.

Satanic threats and spiritual attacks are rife on the mission fields but so also is the protection from the Lord's promise of his ever abiding presence. After a Holy Spirit invaded open air meetings it is common to see converts open declarations for Jesus, confessing their evil practices, bringing their fetish elements, idols, magical arts, charms etc to be burnt as physical evidence of a genuine heart change unto the Lord when they see the true power of God in manifestations of healings, deliverance and freedom from satanic bondage.

However it is a sad commentary that many of the children (sometimes almost all of them) in some of these tribal churches were seen with amulets or magical bands tie around the arms, waist or neck by their supposedly Christian parents to protect them from evil forces. They are already believers and submit to the Lordship of Christ but are not properly disciple and lack the conviction of the victory Jesus Christ has given them over the evil elements

around them. These areas must be given deserved consideration in evangelistic outreaches and discipleship training program provides by the sending churches or mission agencies of indigenous missionaries working in the least evangelized settlements of the Yoruba people group.

Effective indigenous mission, pastoral work and church planting among the Nigerian- Yoruba people group therefore requires power evangelism grounded in Christology and soteriology, alongside sustained teaching on believers' identity in Christ and authority over evil powers (Rom. 8:14–15; Eph. 2:13–17; Luke 10:19). Apostle Paul alerts us to cosmic warfare in many places in his Epistles (II Corinthians 2:11; Ephesians 6:12). Only when converts grasp Christ's cosmic lordship will they abandon ritual substitutes for spiritual protection and liberation.

### *C. Lack of Teaching on Christian Suffering and Discipleship*

Yoruba society places high value on communal harmony, family loyalty, and ancestral continuity. Conversion to Christianity frequently threatens these bonds, exposing converts to ridicule, ostracism, economic deprivation, or social exclusion. Where churches fail to prepare believers for suffering and perseverance, converts are more likely to compromise their faith commitments in order to preserve familial acceptance and cultural continuity (Matt. 5:11–12; 1 Pet. 4:12–19). Churches that establish intentional discipleship structures, counselling ministries, communal support networks, and material assistance programs demonstrate significantly higher retention rates and spiritual maturity among converts. Without such pastoral care, vulnerability to syncretism increases as believers seek to negotiate their religious identity through covert participation in traditional rituals. This invariably happens when converts are going through some personal or family difficulties and are not shown kindred spirit and brotherly love by their local church assembly and their membership of the church has already resulted in ostracism by their biological family. The Gospel is replete with warnings that prepare the minds of Jesus's disciples for resultant persecution due to their faith or biblical convictions.

The communal bond within traditional Yoruba society is exceptionally strong; therefore, unnecessary persecution of new converts by family members should be strictly avoided. Encouraging converts to return to family shrines, religious festivals, or sacred spaces in order to desecrate or destroy religious symbols, cultural artworks, or ritual artefacts as proof of the superiority of their newly embraced Christian faith constitutes violence, a violation of human rights, and an act of hatred and humiliation toward innocent adherents of indigenous religious traditions. Such actions do not reflect biblical discipleship but rather demonstrate zeal devoid of scriptural understanding.

Authentic Christian discipleship is centered on the systematic teaching of Christian doctrine, beliefs, and ethical lifestyles that commit converts to the lordship of Christ, his call to bear the cross, engage the world as salt and light, pursue the Great Commission, and await the coming kingdom rather than attempting to impose it prematurely through forms of "gospel triumphalism." It is further observed that there exists a significant deficiency in sustained teaching ministries within many Yoruba church communities.

### *D. 'Africanization' without Biblical Discernment*

Contemporary cultural renaissance movements across Africa have prompted many churches to foreground African identity and indigenous expressions of worship. While such impulses

reflect legitimate postcolonial and post-western missionary aspirations, they become theologically problematic when cultural affirmation supersedes the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Numerous Independent or Indigenous African Churches (AICs) and their offshoots legitimize practices—polygamy, ritual sacrifice, ritual bathing in streams, prophetic divination—and employ symbolic mediators such as “holy” water, “special” oil, “spiritual” soap, and “miracle” stones as alleged vehicles of divine power. Although culturally resonant, these practices undermine Christocentric faith and the sufficiency of Scripture.

Popular liturgical forms, homilies, and prayer prompts often betray a pervasive fear of satanic agency carried over from pre-Christian ritual frameworks and are presented in ways that lack biblical warrant. Many independent ministers justify healing practices and prophetic ministrations by appealing selectively to Old Testament texts and ceremonial prescriptions that, in classical theological interpretation, do not comport with the redemptive finality of Christ’s work on the cross (Heb. 9–10; Gal. 3–4). Some leaders assign magical or mystical uses to the Psalms and invoke angelic names—Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael, and others drawn from apocryphal or extra-biblical traditions—in ways that exceed canonical norms for angelology and ecclesial practice. Expressions and prayer formulas drawn from local idioms—e.g., Agbara Agbele pota (“power to remain at home and destroy the enemy without physical engagement”), Agbara Madari kan (“power to be difficult to harm”), and the chorus-like use of “Back to Sender” to repel spiritual attack particularly frame as Aransi ati Asasi (“Spiritual snippets and spell”)—are widespread in popular devotion. Such language and ritual forms, although often intended as spiritual resistance, can connote a theological understanding of the Holy Spirit as an impersonal mystical force rather than as the divine Person who indwells, communes with, convicts, empowers for witness, and shapes the life of the church (John 14:16–17; Acts 1:8). Current cultural images, motifs, symbols, metaphors, rituals, and words that can distort or misrepresent biblical hermeneutics are not good contextualization rubrics or model. A biblically related cultural motifs or context can be adopted remembering that God has revealed himself in all human culture at least in natural revelation.

**Theological and Musicological Concerns:** These phenomena represent genuine attempts to address the metaphysical worldview of communities such as the Yoruba people group; yet, absent scriptural scrutiny, wholesale importation of indigenous ritual into Christian praxis risks syncretism. When conversion does not effect a clear rupture between a convert’s previous ritual patterns and the ethics and worship of Christ’s body, the boundary between Christian discipleship and pre-Christian religiosity becomes blurred.

African medicine and indigenous healing systems situate traditional healers as community focal points—diviners, seers, and custodians of ritual knowledge who address illness, misfortune, and communal order. In some contexts, congregants transfer to church leaders the expected burdens once placed upon traditional healers, expecting pastoral figures to provide non biblical, ritual solutions to social and metaphysical problems. Where pastors capitulate to communal pressures and adopt roles analogous to Old Testament prophets—offering prescriptive directives on every aspect of life—clerical authority can metastasize into control over parishioners’ lives, undermining freedom of conscience and biblical pastoral theology.

Of particular concern within some contemporary African Christian contexts are practices labelled as “spiritual warfare” that involve negotiating with deceased ancestors at gravesites to secure forgiveness, reclaim familial rights, or obtain prosperity allegedly held by the dead.

Such practices risk necromancy and voyeuristic engagement with the dead—activities explicitly prohibited or strongly cautioned against in Scripture (Deut. 18:10–12; Isa. 8:19–20). Any spiritual warfare praxis that situates believers outside Christological vantage point—forgetting that they are seated “with Christ in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6)—reflects deficient biblical authority and a compromised understanding of New Creation realities.

Scripture consistently warns against religious practices that undermine a rightly ordered relationship with God and neighbour (Matt. 15:7–9; Col. 2:20–23). Consequently, such practices cannot be prescribed as biblically normative. Rather, they constitute a slippery slope toward necromancy and voyeurism. Where discernment or divine direction is claimed in this context, it must be exercised strictly within the boundaries of biblical revelation and theological coherence. Among the Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria, cultural expressions of joy, fulfilment, and worship are characteristically embodied through singing, clapping, and dancing. One of the most significant achievements of contextualization within Yoruba Christianity has been the composition of indigenous songs (native airs) that narrate personal and communal transformation through faith in Christ. These songs often celebrate liberation from idolatry, victory over witchcraft, and invite family members and neighbours into Christian faith. Many of these compositions possess deep historical roots, tracing back to the rise of Indigenous or Instituted African Churches, which emerged partly out of dissatisfaction and spiritual nonfulfillment within European mission-founded churches.

Nevertheless, a number of these early native songs reflect the theological and doctrinal limitations of what might be described as an “infant church”—a community marked by sincere zeal but limited theological formation (Rom. 10:2). This zeal without adequate scriptural knowledge contributed, in some cases, to confrontational encounters with adherents of African Traditional Religion in the early years of Christianity and subsequent pockets of fracas in later years both in the cities and rural settlements in south western Nigeria,

Despite these limitations, such songs remain particularly meaningful and spiritually resonant within rural Yoruba communities. Examples of these indigenous Christian songs include:

- “Ayan kasi Ologun, t’owo mi ba te Psalmu” (With the Psalms in my arsenals I can dare and discountenance the dreaded charm and its human agent)
- “Mo ti mo ona iye yi na, rara ko yi pada, Jesu l’ona iye naa, to lo si ile ogo” (I now know the way to life eternal, it never changes, Jesus is that way that leads to the glorious heaven)
- “Ogun Oso gbogbo, ogun Aje gbogbo, ogun Emere gbogbo ate pa, ate pa” (Every assault, attack and evil antics of the wizards, witches and familiar spirits are trampled under my feet)
- “Wa gba, wa gba, wa gba Jesu s’aye re o, akiri s’ore” (Come, come, receive Jesus into your life, he is the one who goes about doing good)

While many of these compositions functioned as testimonies of faith and invitations to Christian commitments, some warrant critical theological reassessment and contextual refinement. In particular, certain songs unintentionally retain conceptual frameworks rooted in pre-conversion religious worldviews. A representative example is the song:

“Mu mi wo yara agbara lo Jesu, oju ogun ti ya o, mu mi wo yara agbara lo”

("Jesus, take me to the strong room for spiritual armaments, the battle has begun; take me to the strong room.")

Although intended as a prayer for divine empowerment and victory—a theme clearly affirmed in Scripture (Eph. 6:10–18)—this imagery reflects the traditional Yoruba cosmology in which a chief hunter or warrior retreats to a secluded "power room" to consult spiritual mediators and equip himself with charms, amulets, and talismans before battle. When such imagery is transferred uncritically into Christian worship, it risks undermining the New Testament doctrine of union with Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Theologically, believers are already God's dwelling place (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19), and Christ lives in them in the fullness of divine power (Col. 1:27; 2:9–10). Consequently, Christians do not require access to a special sacred space or ritual empowerment to be equipped for victory, since their authority and sufficiency are grounded in their identity in Christ.

In sum, while indigenous Yoruba Christian music represents a rich and vital form of contextualization, it must continually be evaluated and reshaped by biblical theology to ensure that cultural expressions serve, rather than distort, the gospel. Faithful contextualization affirms cultural forms while transforming their underlying meanings in light of Christ's finished work, thereby safeguarding Christian orthodoxy and nurturing mature discipleship. Authentic contextualization affirms cultural identity while submitting every cultural form to Christ's lordship and the normative authority of Scripture. Without theological discernment and robust formation, processes of "Africanization" risk becoming "paganization," thereby undermining the church's witness and doctrinal integrity. Missionary and indigenous leaders must therefore pursue a balanced missiology that honours cultural dignity, protects biblical truth, and forms disciples capable of living faithfully in both local and transnational Christian communities.

## **XI. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### *A. Natural Theology and Cultural Witness*

Christian workers should attend to God's general revelation within cultural expressions and indigenous knowledge (Rom. 1:18–20). Natural theology and cultural witness afford entry points for proclamation; however, these must be refined and corrected by sound biblical exposition of the gospel and the economy of salvation. Mission praxis should not aim to destroy cultural goods indiscriminately but must engage critically the morally and spiritually corrosive aspects of local practices. Missionaries and indigenous leaders alike must recognize that no human culture is untouched by sin (Gen. 3; Rom. 3:23) and therefore requires transformation in accordance with the gospel. Historical exemplars—such as Mary Slessor's 19th-century interventions in Calabar, Nigeria. She stopped the killings of the twin child and rescued women from the ordeal they are subjected to if they became a widow. These illustrate the complex interplay of cultural challenge and evangelistic fidelity.<sup>24</sup>

The Universality of the Gospel will always clash with cultural identities and particularities, it is supra cultural absolutes must be upheld as expected standard. However this is not a call to Christian triumphalism that tramples on people human right, self-respects, communal values or setting ablaze cherished work of cultural arts, religious symbols or artefacts. A heart transformed by the Gospel experiences the power of God that invades every area of

his life bringing him to the obedience of faith. The Great Commission is to teach such all things Christ has commanded us and not The Great Compulsion to force Christianity as a religion down peoples' throat. Discipleship is not dehumanizing of converts or demoralizing of people.

#### *B. Religion-Cultural Sensitivity*

Respect for cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge does not imply capitulation to practices that contradict biblical revelation. Mission theology should cultivate respectful dialogue, intercultural communication, and methods of engagement that combine pastoral sensitivity with biblical fidelity. Ethnocentrism and cultural denigration are to be avoided; simultaneously, theological reflection must evaluate socio-cultural models for conformity with Christian doctrine and ethical teaching. Respect for cultural heritage however means building a bridge for meaningful dialogue, intercultural communication, peaceful co-existence and even a practical demonstration of the love and value the Christian God places on every soul. Egocentrism, ethnocentrism and insulting the cultural and religious sensibilities of the people are what to be avoided. Theological reflection, biblical evaluation of socio-cultural models they are using or contemplating to adopt in pastoral settings and respectful but transformative engagements are missioned tools to deploy.

#### *C. Sola Scriptura and Formation*

The principle of sola scriptura must be affirmed and jealously guarded in mission training, Bible schools, missionary-sending churches, and indigenous mission agencies. Curriculum and supervision for indigenous missionaries working in the least evangelized regions of south-western Nigeria should prioritize hermeneutics, biblical theology, and doctrinal clarity so that ministers are equipped to distinguish between culturally valuable practices and those incompatible with the gospel. While the Western missionary enterprise had manifold faults, many early European and American missionaries maintained a high view of Scripture that shaped their evangelistic and pastoral policies; contemporary indigenous mission formation should continue to underline the primacy of Scripture in proclamation and praxis. 25.

#### *D. Missionary Spiritual Formation and Practical Capacity-Building*

Mission's training schools, indigenous mission agencies, Bible institutes, and sending churches should equip Christian workers with competencies in intercultural communication, discipleship, pastoral care, and no coercive evangelism. Formation must include theological reflection on spiritual warfare, deliverance ministry, and pastoral boundaries so that leaders neither neglect legitimate pastoral care nor adopt extra-biblical ritual solutions. Contextualized catechesis and sustained discipleship are essential for nurturing converts in a Christian identity that is both authentically African and genuinely Christian. Training schools will contribute effectively to the success of Nigeria indigenous mission with particular reference to the least evangelized region of the South Western Nigeria by equipping Christian workers in training with skills in intercultural communication, Christian discipleship and inter-dialogue for peaceful coexistence. The Nigeria Socio-spiritual landscape has suffered too much carnage from religious clashes and inter-tribal fracas which most often follow religious dichotomy, as in Nigeria, it is common to see a tribe or people group that are predominantly Christian or Muslims.

## XII. CONCLUSION

The study argues that authentic contextualization must preserve the universality and sufficiency of Christ while allowing indigenous cultural forms to become vehicles of gospel expression. It further contends that syncretism is best understood not primarily as cultural failure but as theological deficiency — a symptom of inadequate Christology, discipleship, and engagement with African metaphysical realities. By situating Yoruba indigenous mission within the broader discourse on global Christianity and intercultural theology, this article contributes to ongoing conversations on how the church in Africa can remain authentically African and faithfully Christian. It seeks to equip missionaries, pastors, theologians, and theological educators with a framework for navigating the delicate boundary between cultural relevance and doctrinal fidelity in contemporary African mission.

Contextualization remains indispensable for indigenous mission in Nigeria and throughout Africa. However, when detached from biblical authority and theological discernment, it easily degenerates into syncretism, thereby compromising the gospel's redemptive core. Among the Nigerian-Yoruba people, syncretism is fuelled by misconceptions of Christianity as foreign, inadequate engagement with African metaphysical worldviews, insufficient teaching on Christian suffering and discipleship, and uncritical cultural 'Africanization'.

This study contributes to the ongoing efforts at the Gospel saturation of the least evangelized regions in indigenous mission fields in Nigeria. It brings to the fore the pattern of syncretistic practices challenging the authentic and biblical Christianity among the Yoruba Christian communities in South Western Nigeria.

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