



## IMPLICATION OF RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM ON BAPTIST MISSION WORK IN OJO ISLAND, LAGOS STATE NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *Baptist is one of the denominations and mission agencies that have been doing mission work in Ojo Island for several decades now. However, the mission work in Ojo Island is not without challenges such as poverty, cultural affiliation and idolatry, but this study focuses on religious syncretism. Therefore, the study investigated factors responsible for religious syncretism in Ojo Island, Lagos State, Nigeria with a view to identify ways of strengthening the Baptist mission work. The framework for the study was premised on theology of mission, which underscores that mission found its basis in God's love and redemptive plan through Jesus. Descriptive survey design was adopted while questionnaires were administered to two hundred and twenty-three (223) members of the selected Baptist churches using the purposive random sampling method. The data generated was analysed through frequency count, bar chart and pie chart. Factors responsible for religious syncretism on the Baptist mission in Ojo Island include: assumption that all religious traditions are relative and complimentary, community background and economic life, seeking for rescue in a time of crisis and insecurity, family ties and brotherhood relationship. All these constitute a serious challenge and setback for the Baptist mission efforts in Ojo Island. The study recommends contextual biblical preaching, discipleship, power evangelism, and social actions such as regular medical mission and vocational training as means of strengthen the Baptist mission work in Ojo Island.*

**KEYWORDS:** Baptist, Mission, Ojo Island, Religious Syncretism..

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## INTRODUCTION

Ojo Island community has witnessed overwhelming visitation from several denominations and mission agencies. The Baptist denomination is one of the denominations that have been reaching out to the inhabitants of Ojo Island to propagate the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. The presence of the Baptist churches, several churches and mission agencies in Ojo Island contributed majorly to the liberation of the location. Whatever success recorded by the the Baptist denomination in Ojo Island, particularly Lagos Central Baptist Conference, is a product of collaboration among the Baptist churches and their mission departments. Existing works on Ojo Island mission focused on financial challenge and poverty, but sufficient attention has not been given to how religious syncretism has been undermining the Baptist mission work in Ojo Island. Therefore, this work examines the factors responsible for religious syncretism in Ojo Island and their effect on the Baptist mission work.

## CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

### I. Religious Syncretism

Generally, syncretism is a fusion of two contradictory schools of thought (Yufei, 2020). Thus, religious syncretism can be described as a fusion of two or more originally different belief forms. Religious syncretism is the merging of two or more religious beliefs, traditions, or practices in order to form a religious pattern, which sometimes demonstrates the characters of the religions involved. In relation to Christianity, Steven described syncretism as a mixture of Christian norms with those world norms that are discordant with Christianity (2021). However, it is important to strike a balance that adopting different customs, beliefs or practices is not necessarily syncretism if they are in tandem with the Bible. If a Christian church adopts certain African customs into the practices of Christianity, this is not necessarily syncretism if these customs, practices or beliefs agree with biblical teachings.

### II. Mission

The word Mission is a universal word because its use extends to various institutions, organizations, and corporate bodies to express what all of them actually stand for (Christian, 2018). This makes it difficult to monopolize the meaning or the definition of the word, mission. Even in Christendom, there are conflicting definitions of mission. The term mission as an English term with no direct biblical equivalent has a broad range of acceptable meanings. The word Mission comes from the Latin word, "*Missio*" which means sending (Adelakun, 2022). Similarly, Thinane argued that mission is derived and used in missionary sense from the Latin equivalents of the Greek verb *apostelo*, which means to send (2021). In essence, mission is a task to carry out. For this study, mission is a task of the Church and all believers in Christ to reach out to the world with the redemptive message of God through Jesus Christ.



### III. Overview of Baptist Mission Work in Ojo Island

Ojo Island is located in the riverine area in Lagos State and it comprises many prominent communities. These communities are under the jurisdiction of Amuwo Odofin Local Government Area along Badagry axis of Lagos State. According to Alonge (2014), the people group residing in the location are a mixed people group from diverse ethnic identities and cultural backgrounds. Some of them are immigrants from Benin Republic while others are Lagos indigenes such as Awori and Egun people group. The culture and tradition of the area cannot be separated from those of the indigenous dwellers of the Egun and Awori people (Alonge, 2014). In the past, the people were predominantly practising African traditional religions and nominally accepted Islamic religion. However, Baptist Churches alongside several churches such as Anglican, African Churches, Cherubim and Seraphim, Celestial, Methodist are labouring to propagate the gospel message in the location. In 2010, Lagos Conference Baptist Conference adopted Ojo Island as a mission field and deployed several methods such as open air revival, medical mission and social action to reach out to the people. Unfortunately, several factors seem to be obstacles for a bountiful harvest of souls for Christ. One of the obstacles, “religious syncretism” is the main focus of this study. Many who accepted the gospel are still mixing Christianity and Islam with their traditional beliefs and practices. This constitutes a major setback to the Baptist mission and other missionary agencies which are labouring in the location.

#### Theological Framework

This study is undergirded by the theology of mission. The reason is that theology and mission cannot be separated. Theology is the study of God and His relation to the world from the creation (Jacob, 2021). Similarly, William (2021) holds the same view that theology seeks to understand God’s creation, particularly human beings and their conditions, and God’s redemptive work in relation to human kind<sup>30</sup>. In summary, theology is the study of God while mission is God’s act to redeem sinners from eternal condemnation. Therefore, mission found its basis in God and His loving care for humanity. Therefore, theology of mission centres on God and His redemptive programs for humankind. In relation to this study, the Church from one generation to another has been positioned as God’s agent to achieve His mission on earth. Since its advent on the day of Pentecost, the Church also found its purpose in the mission of God to rescue humankind from predicament and judgment over sin.

#### Methodology

The study adopted qualitative research design. The target population are church pastors, missionary workers, Church members, Church unit heads, and lay leaders from six selected Baptist Churches in Ojo Island. The reason for the choice of these people is based on the fact that they represented major stakeholders of the Baptist mission in Ojo Island. A two-section questionnaire was designed by the researcher to gather information from the respondents. Section A of the questionnaire with a seven (7)-item statement was designed to understand the demographic information of the respondents. Section B of the questionnaire with a six (6)-item statement was designed to find out factors responsible for religious syncretism on Baptist mission work in Ojo Island. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statements in the questionnaire with the ratings of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided



(UD), Strongly Disagree (SD), and Disagree (D). The sample size comprises thirty-three pastors (33), forty-two missionary workers (42), one hundred and twenty-five church members (125), seventeen church unit heads (17), and six lay leaders (6). The data generated was analysed through frequency count, bar chart and pie chart.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

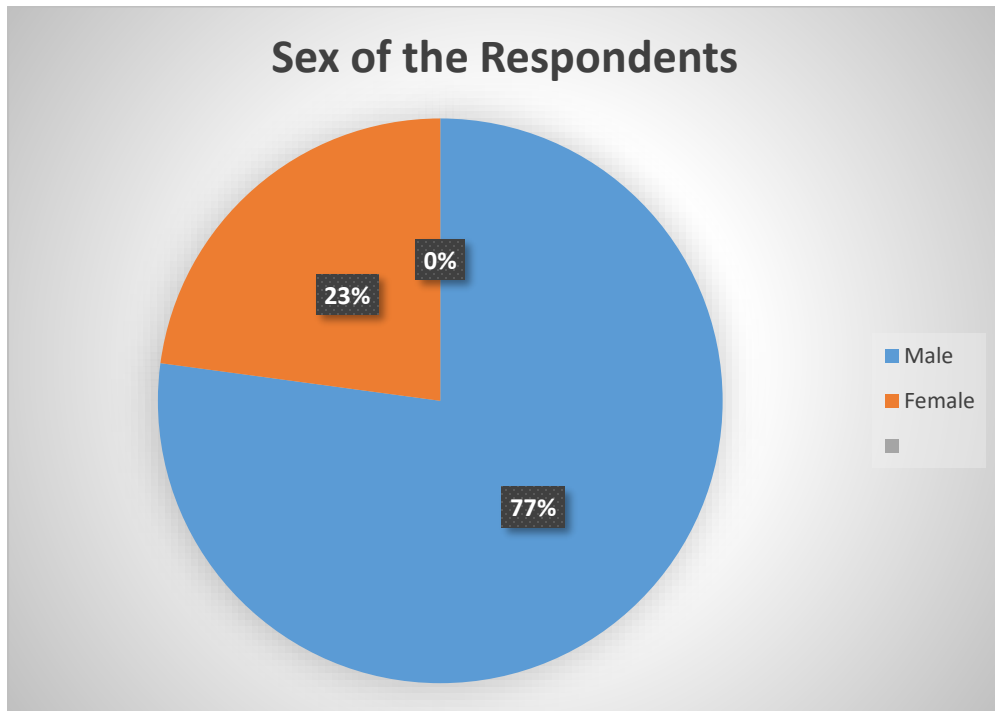
### Demographic Data Presentation

**Table 1: Distribution of Age Range of the Respondents**

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage
18–25	23	11%
26–35	38	17%
36–40	50	23%
46–50	65	29%
50 above	46	21%
Total	223	100%

**Source: Researcher Field Work, 2023**

The age distribution reveals the age of the respondents among the selected Baptist Churches in Ojo Island mission field. From the table and graphical representation below, the respondents' age range from eighteen (18) to fifty (50) years above.



**Figure 1: Gender of the respondents**

*Source: Researcher Field Work, 2023*

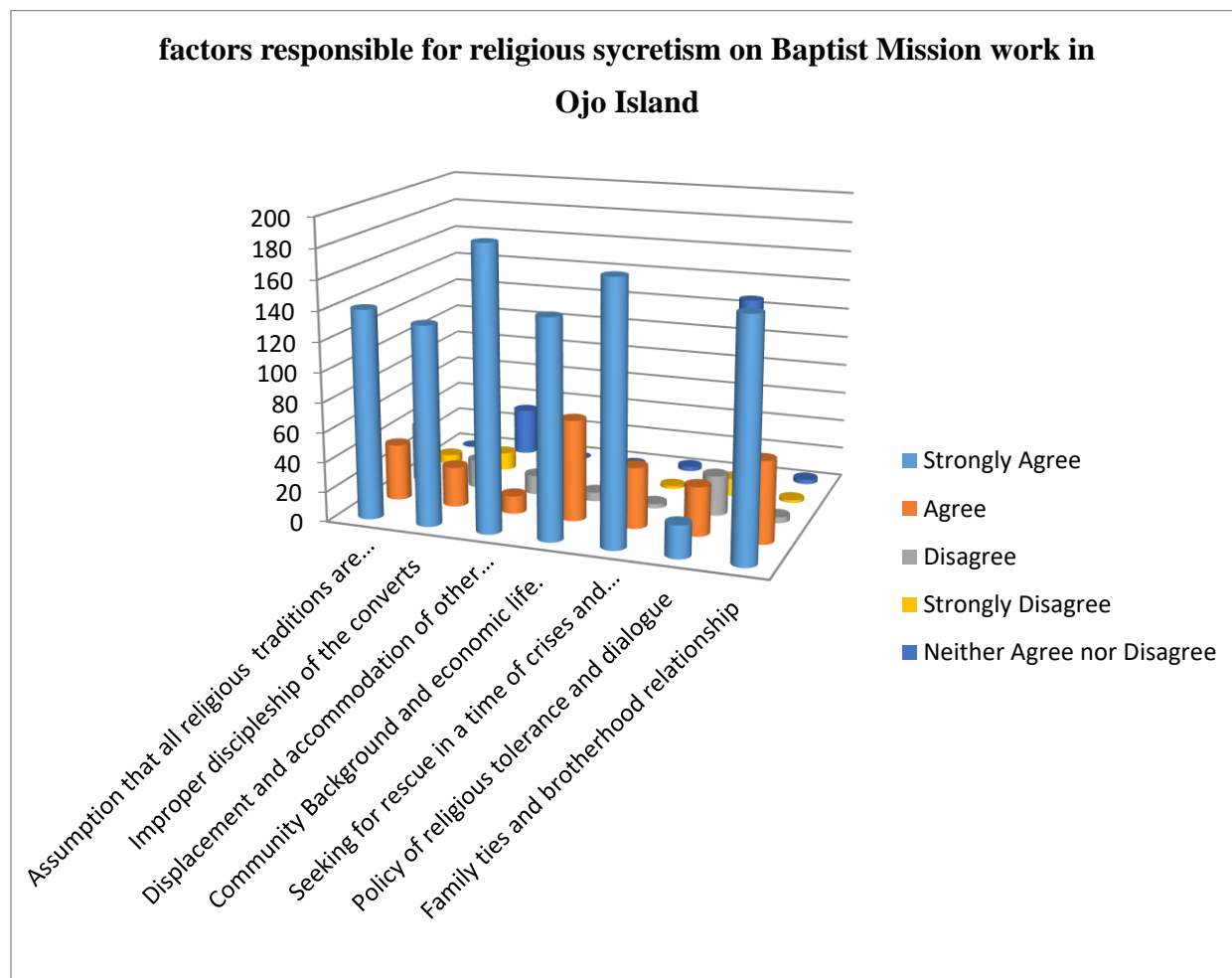
This section focuses on gender distribution of the respondents. Male respondents are 172 while female respondents are 51. In Ojo Island, females were not easily accessible to engage like male respondents. Men are the leaders of the house, and they determine family direction and religious affiliation, except some family heads who allow freedom of religion in the household.



**Table 2: Factors Responsible for Religious Syncretism on Baptist Mission Work in Ojo Island**

No	Statement	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Neither Agree nor Disagree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Assumption that all religious traditions are relative and complementary	140	63	38	17	39	17	6	3	0	0
2	Improper discipleship of the converts	133	60	27	12	19	9	12	5.4	32	14
3	Displacement and accommodation of other religious cultures	188	84	12	5.4	13	5.8	2	1.0	0	0
4	Community Background and economic life.	145	65	68	30	6	2.7	1	0.4	0	0
5	Seeking for rescue in a time of crises and insecurity	173	76	41	18	3	1.3	2	1.0	3	1.3
6	Policy of religious tolerance and dialogue	22	10	33	15	27	12	12	5.4	127	57
7	Family ties and brotherhood relationship	157	70	55	25	4	2.0	2	1.0	3	1.3

**Source: Researcher Field Work, 2023**



**Figure 2: Graphical representation and analysis of factors responsible for religious syncretism in the Baptist mission work in Ojo Island**

*Source: Researcher Field Work, 2023*

Based on the distribution of the responses, the chart above shows that most of the respondents agreed that all the factors highlighted in the questionnaire are responsible for religious syncretism on Baptist mission work in Ojo Island.



## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data and information gathered through the research instruments revealed that the existence and practice of religious syncretism is a function of many factors, but focus is more on those confirmed from Ojo Island mission field through the research instrument. In the first place, a larger percentage of respondents, eighty percent (80%), out of which sixty-three percent (63%) strongly agreed while seventeen percent (17%) agreed, believed that religious syncretism finds its way in Ojo Island mission field due to assumption that all religious traditions are relative and complementary. The belief that all religious traditions are relative and complementary is rooted in the principle of religious plurality that several individuals, religious leaders, and scholars are advocating for. A scholar named Harrison corroborated this situation within the context of philosophy of religion which considers theories of religious pluralism as models that provide a philosophical description of religious diversity (2023). This is related to several scholars' claim that the theory of religious pluralism recognised unique qualities in every religious beliefs and practice (George et al., 2020). The implication is that all religions are equal and good in all respects. This gives a ground and platform for syncretism to thrive among people living in Ojo Island. Several people who have embraced Christianity are also not free from religious syncretism because of the trend of religious plurality in the community.

Another factor responsible for religious syncretism is improper discipleship of the converts in the Church. The doctrine of Christianity is about new life through Christ. In other words, Christian belief is the regeneration of life, and a Christian is like a newborn baby who needs care, both physically and spiritually. This is supported by Alamba (2020) that discipleship is a spiritual school of training to tutor, mentor and train new believers who willingly surrender themselves<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the biblical condition to follow Jesus is discipleship. This means Christianity is based on loyalty and allegiance to only Jesus and his teachings. This is not the case among the so-called Christians and most people of Ojo Island mission field. Similarly, another factor that is responsible for religious syncretism in Ojo Island is displacement and accommodation of other religious cultures. In her view, Catharine described displacement as a challenge or pressing issue that affects human condition of life (2021). In actual sense, religion beliefs dictate the lifestyle and direction that a person follows in life. This is the condition of many people in Ojo Island. Many people in Ojo Island who have embraced Christianity while disengaged with their former religions find themselves suffering a sort of displacement of identity. This appears like what a scholar regarded as force displacement when he was analysing religion and force displacement in Ukraine and Russian war (Vovk, 2020). Many felt they were losing a part of themselves to Christianity and its practices.

More so, community background and economic life also creates a platform for people in Ojo Island community to run from one religion to another. Community background comprises community religion, language, cultural practice and many things that are peculiar to the life of the community. Community background provides a sense of identity for the inhabitants, whether indigenes or non-indigenes. This is corroborated by the chairman of UNESCO in Community, Leadership, and Youth Development in his publication that community identity enables common understanding, traditions, and values that are associated to the lifestyle of the people and their well-being (Brennan, 2023). In actual sense, community background contributes to building a sense of local





identity and solidarity. Supporting the above view, a researcher, Maggie, stressed that community background is an important source of social connection (2021). It then means community background gives the inhabitants self-confidence, a sense of belonging and trust in one another to jointly confront any challenge in the community. This is the challenge that several people had when Christianity came to Ojo Island.

Similarly, the same thing applies to the challenge of economic life and seeking for rescue in the time of crises and insecurity. This is in tandem with the argument of an individual that religion plays an important role in the face of life challenges, and is crucial for curbing insecurity because both are usually accompanied by tension and anxiety (Okobia, 2020). The crises of life do not necessarily connote conventional crises, but they can be sickness, spiritual attack, or any life threatening issue. In Ojo Island, several Church members are parading different religious leaders and spiritual houses both openly and secretly for help and rescue. The attitude and response of people towards challenges of life is corroborated by the claim of a scholar that religion is a powerful and unique source of strength during difficult times of life, and it provides the ability to cope with the situation without fear (Walsh, 2020). In reality, people usually find hope and assurance of safety and solution to life challenges from religion. In addition, the law and policy of religious tolerance creates fear for many people to stand with a single religious beliefs and practice in the Ojo Island community.

For instance, freedom of religion or belief is enshrined through Section 38 of the Nigerian Constitution but the challenge of enforcement cuts every tier of government, national, state and local level (ART Report, 2021). In most minority local communities, it is a fearful thing if anyone dares to leave family religion for another religion. In some places, it is so terrible to the extent that the family would wish or prefer that the individual who tried to convert to another religion different from that of their family died. In another place, the person can be disowned and considered an outcast. In order to corroborate the challenge from religious law and policy, a review of 2021 Senegal International Religious Freedom Report by the Office of International Religious Freedom, United States Department of State reveals a scenario in a village in the western part of the country that, a spokesperson for a local Christian community filed a police complaint against a Muslim cleric, accusing him of inflammatory preaching and attempting to convert members of the predominantly Catholic local community to Islam (International Religious Freedom Report, 2022). In Ojo Island, many new converts are afraid of this kind of scenario happening to them, so they dare not involve and practise their new religious beliefs openly.

From the information gathered, family ties and brotherhood relationships also constitute the reason people practise syncretism, which affect Baptist mission work. The pastors who are serving in Ojo Island unveiled that many church members are afraid of offending their family members or breaking ties with them on the account of religious difference. In relation to this, a group of scholars (Sen, Colucci et al., 2021) affirmed in their research work that during dangerous or life threatening challenges, people have confidence in seeking for help or rescue from their deity or members of their religious congregation. A situation like this was confirmed during interaction with some members who confessed that many of them nurse the fear of the unknown during crises of life. Many believed that Christianity can only take them to heaven but cannot rescue them from difficult situations of life. This is affecting the mission work and labour of Baptist pastors and



other mission agencies labouring to fulfil the mandate of the Great Commission in Ojo Island community.

## CONCLUSION

Syncretism has been a problem against God's mission and Church involvement for several decades. Majorly, syncretism denies the stand of Christianity as an exclusive religion. Similarly, experience shows that most of the local communities in Nigeria are living in abject poverty, and poor conditions of life. However, Christians are not expected to participate in those rituals and practices which are associated with the traditional religious belief. God detests and frowns against practices that are contrary to His own way. Therefore, the best defence against false teaching is to strengthen the faith of believers through biblical teaching.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking the gospel to a traditional local community like Ojo Island requires deliberate contextual biblical preaching. The gospel must be preached in their language and Christ must be presented in their cultural worldview. People need to understand God's love, care, provision, protection and plan of eternity through Jesus without foreign colouration. People need to see Jesus through the lens of their cultural milieu to enable them to have a full assurance of salvation through Jesus. This will save the people from any form of coercion and faith by force. Gospel devoid of foreign appearance will likely have a great impact on the people. This is because the message will be true to their cultural understanding. Supporting this, intentional discipleship is required to make the new convert to grow in the knowledge of God and a new life in Christ.

Consequently, to break satanic strongholds, power evangelism is crucial. People are facing several life-threatening issues which are making them unstable with Christianity. There is a need for revival and demonstration of God's power over every challenge of life for people to have an assurance that faith through Jesus is enough to save or rescue them in all situations of life. In one of Jesus' public preaching, He said "unless you people see signs and wonders you will by no means believe" (John 4:48). This is a motivation and assurance of the power of the gospel. In addition, constant social action is also an effective way to showcase and express God's love to people in Ojo Island and any local community. Among several challenges that are confronting people, poverty and the challenge of basic needs of life are critical. Several people are suffering from critical health issues which are also responsible for the reason why many people practice religious syncretism. Regular medical missions by Churches and mission agencies will in a way help stabilise people in their faith. Vocational training and community development programmes will possibly alleviate the poor conditions of living that are making people compromise their faith and seek solutions from different means.



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