



RELIGION AS A CENTRIPETAL FORCE: AN ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE IN ILISAN, 1980–2024

Okunade Seun Adedokun¹, Oremosu Iyanuoluwa Temiloluwa²,
and Erinfolami Precious Boluwatife³.

¹Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Arts,
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State.
Email: seun.okunade@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng; Tel.: +2348024570085

²Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Arts,
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State.
Email: iyanuoluwaoremosu18@gmail.com

³Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Arts,
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State.
Email: pboluwatife6@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: Religious syncretism is the fusing of traditional religion with the practices of imported religions. It is common in Yorubaland and particularly in Ilisan community, the focus of this paper. Blending of religious faiths in Ilisan is seen as a norm and served as a centripetal force, and reflect both the town's historical continuity and its adaptive responses to cultural change. The fusion of Yoruba traditional religion with Christianity and Islam emerged from deeply-rooted cultural imperatives, practical socio-economic strategies, and missionary dynamics. Far from undermining religious convictions, this pluralistic practice enriches the lives of the people of Ilisan, offering them multiple pathways to meaning, healing, and hope. Syncretism in this area has engendered peace, and the willingness of leaders to hold interfaith forums reflects a model of peaceful coexistence that could serve as a blueprint for other religiously diverse communities in Nigeria and beyond. This paper, through comprehensive interviews of elders in the town, highlights a deeper history of Ilisan in regard to syncretism with a new perspective. Pastors, Islamic clerics, or custodians of traditional shrines act as bridges among belief systems, guiding their communities toward coexistence through mutual respect, dialogue, and coordinated practices. Primary and secondary sources such as indepth interviews, books, journal articles, and internet materials were used for this research. The work argues that the hybridization of different religious faiths in Ilisan is not viewed as a contradiction but as communal completeness.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Syncretism, Religious syncretism, Ilisan Community, Yorubaland.



INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with numerous religions and ethnic groups, which help accentuate regional and ethnic distributions. All religions represented in the country are practiced in every major city. Nigerians are, by nature, accommodating and, by habit, ecumenical. Before the advent of missionary religions, such as Christianity and Islam, Nigerians were practitioners of African Traditional Religion (ATR). Islam and Christianity have been accommodated within traditional religions, as evidenced by the presence of adherents in many households today. Though the toleration that indigenous religions displayed in accommodating both religions helped spread these faiths, Islam and Christianity appear not to have reciprocated these gestures. Their propagators, fired by zeal, rather sought to destroy or, at most, cut these traditional beliefs and political systems down to size.¹

Meanwhile, human development is characterised by mutualism, informed by the borrowing of cultural aspirations from one culture to another. This phenomenon spreads across all aspects of human endeavor, including the religious sphere. It is concerning to such admissible borrowing that Christianity and Islam were preached amid the aboriginal traditional practices of Nigerians. This made the already existing faith suffer a temporal setback, but surprisingly in recent times the interaction between traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam became obvious, and hence the blending of some religions.² Religion is an organised collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and worldviews that relate humanity to the supernatural and to spirituality. Some authors define religion as “the belief in spiritual beings”⁵ while, others define religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things.⁶ Many scholars define religion as a regulated pattern of life of a people in which experience, beliefs, and knowledge are reflected in mans' conception of himself in relation to others, his social world, and the physical as well as the metaphysical world. While some authors attempt a definition of religion that takes certain factors into account. Religion originates in an attempt to present and order beliefs, feelings, imaginings, and actions that arise in response to direct experience of the sacred and the Spiritual. As this attempt expands in its formulation and elaboration, it becomes a process that creates meaning for itself on a sustained basis, in terms of both its originating experiences and its own continuing responses.⁷

The concept of syncretism is a philosophy or belief system that seeks to mix different religions and theologies into one. It is the reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief. Syncretism involves the synthesis of different religious forms, beliefs, and practices. The term is a contentious and contested one. This is most evident in the areas of philosophy and religion and usually results in a new teaching or belief system.³ Religious syncretism is generally understood to be the process of exchange and interaction that occurs when two or more distinct

¹ Asiegbu, M. F., *African Identity and Pentecostalism. In The New Religious Movements: Pentecostalism in Perspective*. Amuluche Greg Nnamani (ed.). Benin City: Ava Publishers, 2018.

² An-Na'im, A. A., *Proselytization and Communal Self-Determination in Africa*. New York: Orbis Book, 2019.

³ Asiegbu, M. F., *African Identity and Pentecostalism. In The New Religious Movements: Pentecostalism in Perspective*. Amuluche Greg Nnamani (ed.). Benin City: Ava Publishers, 2018.



belief systems are fused to create a new religion. The term may also be used to refer to an established religion that has adopted beliefs from other faiths. This means that religious syncretism often takes place when foreign beliefs are introduced to an indigenous belief system and the teachings are blended. The new, heterogeneous religion then takes the shape of its own. More recently, religious syncretism can be seen in such religious systems as the New Age, Hinduism, Unitarianism, and Christian Science. These religions are a blending of multiple different belief systems and are continually evolving as the philosophies of mankind rise and fall in popularity.⁴ Despite its contested nature, syncretism is nevertheless a useful concept through which to explore how cultures and religions transform themselves under the pressures of change, and it should be thought of as a dynamic process rather than as a specific entity or definition.

Major religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, as well as those that advocate notions of religious “purity” and orthodoxy, have frequently been hostile to the idea of syncretism. Other religions, such as Buddhism, however, have openly embraced the integration of new practices and beliefs within an existing system. In Nigeria, Islam dominated the North and had a number of supporters in the South Western part of the country. Nigeria has the largest Muslim population in Sub-Saharan Africa. Protestantism and local syncretic Christianity are also evident in Yoruba areas, while Catholicism is dominant among the Igbo and closely related areas.⁵ This paper centres on religious syncretism and its socio-economic impacts on Ilisan community 1980-2024.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For this presentation, some extant literature spreading across religion, indigenous African religion, culture, and syncretism, among others, will be reviewed. Ifi Amadiume’s *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* offers a critical framework for understanding the role of indigenous African religious systems, particularly through a gendered lens, and posed a challenge against Eurocentric interpretations of African societies by highlighting matriarchal traditions and the spiritual authority of women in precolonial cultures. The insights in this work help contextualise the persistent influence of traditional religion in Ilisan despite the encroachment of Christianity and Islam. The work underscores how indigenous beliefs are not merely residual practices but active frameworks that negotiate identity, power, and spirituality in postcolonial African societies.⁶ Ilisan has been noted as one of the epicenters of religious syncretism in Yorubaland, and engaging in a study of this nature in this location is most appropriate.

Kwame Bediako’s *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* provides a theological and historical account of how Christianity has been reinterpreted and reindigenised within African contexts. Bediako argues that African Christians do not merely adopt Western

⁴Catechetical Week Program. 3-10 October 2017

⁵Lane, D. A., *Steppingstones to other Religions: A Christian Theology of Inter- Religious Dialogue*. New York: Orbis Books, 2020.

⁶Amadiume, I., *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*. London: Zed Books, 1997.



religious forms but creatively adapt them through cultural lenses, often blending them with traditional cosmologies. This theological syncretism is particularly relevant to Ilisan, where individuals and families navigate multiple religious affiliations without perceiving contradictions. Bediako's emphasis on religious hybridity affirms the lived experience of religious pluralism as a form of cultural resilience rather than confusion.⁷ Gifford's analysis highlights the political and social dimensions of Christianity across several African nations. His work explores how Pentecostal and evangelical movements engage with power, development, and moral discourse in public life. Gifford's work is significant to this study, as it explains why, even in contexts like Ilisan where traditional religions remain strong, Christian institutions wield increasing authority over moral and communal matters. The tension between this dominance and the covert or integrated practices of traditional religion helps illuminate the complex nature of syncretism in African communities.⁸

John S. Mbiti's seminal text *Introduction to African Religion* remains a foundational work for understanding indigenous African religious worldviews. The work meticulously describes beliefs, rituals, cosmologies, and ethical systems that define traditional African spirituality. His characterisation of religion as a holistic, community-oriented, and ancestral system supports this research by affirming that in places like Ilisan, traditional religion is deeply woven into the social and spiritual fabric. Mbiti's work underscores that syncretism does not merely merge separate systems—it often represents a continuous indigenous religious experience evolving alongside external influences.⁹ Birgit Meyer's *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* examines how religious transformation unfolds in the context of globalization, colonial legacy, and Pentecostal expansion.

Meyer highlights the tensions between traditional religious practices and charismatic Christianity, revealing how each system interprets spiritual efficacy, morality, and cultural identity. In relation to Ilisan, her work offers a comparative framework for understanding how individuals move between spiritual systems, often interpreting spiritual forces in overlapping categories of traditional deities, ancestors, and Christian demonology.¹⁰

J. K. Olupona's edited volume *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, clearly confronts the simplistic binary between tradition and modernity, arguing that African indigenous religions are evolving rather than disappearing. The contributors in this volume present case studies that mirror the situation in Ilisan, where traditional rites coexist with modern religious practices and technologies. Olupona's central thesis, that African religions are adaptive and dialogical, reinforces the argument that syncretism is not a dilution of tradition but a survival strategy rooted in cultural pragmatism and spiritual innovation.¹¹ This is clearly expressive of Ilisan, out of which this paper emanates.

⁷Bediako, K., *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

⁸Gifford, P., *African Christianity: Its public role*. Indiana University Press, 1998.

⁹Mbiti, J. S., *Introduction to African Religion*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1991.

¹⁰Meyer, B., *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

¹¹Olupona, J. K., *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. London: Routledge, 2004.



Peel's *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* contributes authoritatively on ethnographic and historical account of how Yoruba religious identity has been shaped by sustained contact with Islam and Christianity. The work emphasises the fluidity of religious boundaries in Yoruba society, detailing how syncretic practices emerge not only as grassroots phenomena but also as responses to colonial and missionary pressures. His detailed analysis offers valuable insights into the specific regional dynamics of Ilisan, a Yoruba town, highlighting how historical trajectories of religious encounter shape contemporary spiritual pluralism.¹²

Furthermore, Sanneh (1989) examines how the translation of Christian texts into African languages had unintended effects, including the preservation and strengthening of indigenous thought patterns. Rather than eradicating traditional beliefs, missionary work often reinforced local epistemologies by embedding Christianity within native linguistic and cultural frameworks. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding how syncretism in Ilisan functions, not as an abandonment of tradition, but as a reinterpretation of Christian faith in ways that remain faithful to indigenous cosmologies.¹³ Rosalind I. J. Hackett's article "Religion in Calabar: The Religious Life and History of a Nigerian Town" provides a micro-level study of religious coexistence and transformation in a Nigerian town. Her findings on religious plurality, inter-religious tensions, and accommodation mirror the dynamics observed in Ilisan. Hackett's focus on how religion is lived, through rituals, interfaith dialogue, and social negotiation, provides a valuable methodological and conceptual model for analysing religious syncretism at the town level.¹⁴

Terence Ranger's chapter "The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa" explores how colonial powers and African elites constructed "traditions" to serve ideological or political purposes. This concept is critical for understanding how religious identities in Ilisan may be selectively emphasised or downplayed to serve modern religious or cultural narratives. Ranger's work helps unpack the idea that syncretism is not merely organic but can also be strategic, shaped by broader socio-political imperatives.¹⁵ Ebenezer Obadare's *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Nigerian Experience* discusses how Nigerians navigate religious diversity with a practical attitude, often switching or blending affiliations based on social needs, health crises, or political opportunities. Obadare describes this pluralism not as theological indecisiveness but as a pragmatic adaptation to Nigeria's complex religious marketplace. His perspective supports the core argument of this study, that syncretism in Ilisan reflects a

¹²Peel, J. D. Y. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

¹³Sanneh, L., *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

¹⁴Hackett, R. I. J., "Religion in Calabar: The Religious Life and History of a Nigerian Town." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 21, no. 3 (1991): 222–244.

¹⁵ Ranger, T. (1993). The invention of tradition revisited: the case of colonial Africa. In *Legitimacy and the state in twentieth-century Africa: essays in honour of AHM Kirk-Greene* (pp. 62-111). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.



culturally grounded pragmatism that prioritises community stability, personal efficacy, and spiritual harmony over rigid religious exclusivity.¹⁶

Historical and Social Context of Religion in Ilisan

Ilisan, a traditional Remo town in Ogun State, Nigeria, exhibits a rich religious history characterised by indigenous spiritual systems, the influx of Islam and Christianity, and an evolving syncretic religious culture. This section explores the historical foundations of religious life in Ilisan, the arrival and interaction of new faiths, and the development of syncretism, and examines its socio-economic implications.

Indigenous Religious Practices Before 1980

Numerous annual festivals exist throughout Remoland and these festivals are almost the same in each of the Remo traditional towns. These traditional festivals are age-long activities throughout the length and breadth of Remoland,¹⁷ and they include, The *Balufon* festival, the *Oro*, the *Eluku*, the *Agemo*, the goddess of the River, the Masquerade, and the Stilt, among others.

Some of these festivals are peculiar to an area, whilst some are strange or alien to other parts of the area. The first four festivals above are celebrated throughout Remoland. The *Makun* and the *Batoro* do not participate in the Masquerade festival, as it is a taboo in the communities. No other Remo community practices the stilt except Makun. Some other festivals are not fully celebrated now, unlike in the olden days. The *Jabajaba* was well practiced in *Ofin* in the 1940s and 1950s but not anymore, while the *Eyo* was well celebrated in Iperu years before, but with a little change in the system in contemporary times.

The Remo festivals are not for fun, as great importance is attached to the celebrations. The *Oro* and the *Eluku* are to ward off evil spirits within the communities. They are also used to punish evildoers in the community. The *Balufon* is for childbearing. Women sought for the blessings of the goddess to have the blessing of the womb. A host of revelations are within reach: that very many of such women received the fruits of the womb and by the following festival brought their children with offerings to the goddess. The masquerade and the stilt are for amusement and recreation; hence, the period of celebration and reunion of families and friends. It is a period of recess in the community.¹⁸ Customs and traditions of the Remo people are not at variance with those of the other Yoruba races, though little differences exist based on the peculiarity of the environment. The immediate environment reflects the customs and traditions of the people. The whole towns in Remo perform the annual Egungun festival except Makun and Batoro communities of Sagamu. Masquerade performance is a taboo in Makun and Batoro yet they are members of the thirty-three traditional towns. Iperu is recognised for Eyo celebration, no other Remo town is involved in the Eyo celebration. The immediate

¹⁶Obadare, E., *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Nigerian Experience*, 2018.

¹⁷Uddin, G., Adetunji, O. and Nzechukwu O., "The Home as Heaven on Earth: A Nigerian Marital Narrative." *Available at SSRN 4452384*, 2023.

¹⁸Ayodele, O., "History of Remo Thirty-Three Traditional Towns (Remo Metalelogbon)", 2008.



environment dictates some of our customs and traditions in Remo but a host of them are the same.¹⁹

Remo ancestors lived in compounds, which later developed into quarters. The compounds and quarters were used in the past as a means of locating people. People are now being identified with the streets where they lived. The housing system has changed from the mud buildings and thatched roofs of old period into multi-million naira types of buildings today. The pattern of building, the decorations, and the premises have changed today due to the influence of civilisation. Salutation is part of the culture of the Remo people. The Yoruba says “*kiki ni pelu ewa ara*” (Salutation adds to the beauty of the body). The Remo man of the past would not pass you without greeting you regarding the day’s weather condition, whether you were familiar with him or not. The culture of greetings has changed with the current generation; they place less importance on it. It has become difficult for younger generation to greet the head of the house in the morning unless the person is strict. Greetings have become evasive in their minds. The house heads were accorded an esteemed position in the olden times.

The appearance of people in Remoland before the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century cannot be compared with how people dressed afterwards. Most of the dressing in the traditional setting showcased the culture of the people, and decent dressing was a norm; children walked about in *puris naturalibus* but everything has changed now. The mode of dressing in the olden days had any of the following: Tobi (worn to cover the private section of the body), buba, sokoto, agbada, dansiki, pata, sinmi, yeri, dandogo, sapara, and kembe, among others, are now things of the past. The tastes of the present generation differ very considerably, as Youths aspire to wear foreign-made clothes rather than embrace clothes produced locally; many reject the clothes of their parents, regarding them as not modern and outdated.²⁰

The moral rectitude of the Remo people in the past was exemplary. Theft and all form of vices and indecent behaviour were rare in Remoland and even in Yorubaland at large. Customs and traditions were sacrosanct. But things are now degenerating.²¹ Liars were rare in the past as lying led to excommunication in the Remo society. The current generation lies with impurity and more mischievous. In rural Remo, the traces are still discernible but in the urban Remo centres there is a lot of decay in the responsibilities of children to their parents. Remoland is the smallest division in the whole of Southern Provinces of Nigeria. The land area is very small, some of the Remo towns do not have land again. The little they have are almost used up. The only alternative to agriculture is commerce. Trading and craftsmanship are the areas of attention by the Remo people.

The government of the Remo people was not at variance with the Yoruba traditional administration. The King led his people’s administration with the support of the Ogbonis. There was a ruling Council. The words of the King then were laws, and his authority was indisputable.

¹⁹Soile, O. I. and Odunlami B. A., "British Colonial Administration and Inter-group Relations in Yorubaland: The Case of Remo Groups in Sagamu, Southwestern Nigeria.", 2022.

²⁰Ayodele, O., "History of Remo Thirty-Three Traditional Towns (Remo Metalelogbon).", 2008.

²¹Ayodele, O., "History of Remo Thirty-Three Traditional Towns (Remo Metalelogbon).", 2008.



Nobody dared flout the authority of the King. If the King did not want someone in his domain, no matter how highly placed the person may be, the person would leave the domain of the King immediately. The Osgubos were the Chief Executives. They had the power of life and death, the power to enact, and power to repeal any law of the land. That system is no more. Individual citizens of Remo are now aware of their civic rights. Civic rights became exposed during the appearance of the Missionaries and the Colonial Administrators. Western Education changed the orders of the King and his Council. British system of government took off in Remo from the beginning of the twentieth century.²²

‘Osgubo’ means a group of elders, men and women that constituted the ruling council of the communities in the past. They can be referred to as the Statesmen of their individual communities. The male members are called Ogbonis, and the female members are called Erelus. In the olden days, all members of the Osgubo had traditional rites and rituals to perform when they joined the group of the Osgubo. The first tradition to perform is the entry into the Iledi. Iledi means “the house of mystery.” You have to be initiated before you become a member. The first thing is the initiation, which is called “*si so kun*” or “*okun si so*.” The second initiation is called “*wi we okun*.” The first and the second initiations cost a lot of money. One becomes a full-fledged member of the Osgubo immediately after one performs the second traditional rite. The two ceremonies are performed in the house of mystery known as Iledi. There is the beating of the Osgubo drums during the ceremony, and there is dancing and drinking. Food is served and money spraying is done during the dancing.

In the olden days, all the members of the house of “Mystery” were members of one cult or the other. The elders say that there are sixteen different cults and all members are expected to be involved in as many of the cults as possible. The intending members are to be initiated into the cults. The initiations include buying some articles, so it involved money. The members are in grades: high grade, middle grade, and lower grade. The positions are graded, and the sitting of members are also graded. There are officers of the cult. The head of the Osgubo is the Olu Awo usually called Oluwo, which is Oliwo in the Remo dialect. The Oliwo is the King in the house of mystery (Iledi). The Oliwo has able supporters who are called the Iwarefa. There is the Apena. He is an important officer of the Iledi, and he is very powerful in the Osgubo. He can be assumed to be the Secretary, others called him the Iledi messenger. The Apena sees more, acts more, performs more, eats more, etc., than any other person at the Iledi. A Yoruba proverb says “A ki da ‘gbo se lehin Apena (meaning one does not hold a community meeting after the death of Apena).” This proverb shows the importance and the role the Apena plays in the Osgubo of the towns.

Before the advent of Islam and Christianity, the people of Ilisan, like many other Yoruba communities, deeply rooted indigenous religion characterised by the worship of a pantheon of deities (Òrìṣà), ancestral veneration, and spiritual customs emphasizing harmony with nature and community cohesion. These traditional systems formed the bedrock of Ilisan’s cultural and moral fabric, shaping governance, justice, healthcare, and communal rites of passage.

Ilisan’s religious life revolved around the veneration of major deities such as Ogun (god of iron and war), Obatala (orisha of wisdom and purity), Esu (the trickster-messenger), and Oro, a communal deity associated with justice, order, and ancestral authority. These deities, known

²²Soile, O. I. and Odunlami B. A., "British Colonial Administration and Inter-group Relations in Yorubaland: The Case of Remo Groups in Sagamu, Southwestern Nigeria.", 2022.



collectively as Òrìṣà, were viewed as powerful intermediaries between humanity and the Supreme Being, Olódùmarè. As Chief J.O. Oduyoye (Lapenì elegun), in an interview put it, "Our forefathers did not worship idols blindly; these gods were powerful intermediaries to the Supreme God. The images were not just sculptures, they carried spirit."²³

These beliefs were not merely ritualistic; they carried a moral weight. Traditional religion was interwoven with the legal and ethical codes of society. Violations of communal norms often required spiritual restitution rather than mere secular punishment.²⁴ Chief Adeniyi Fagorala, an elder and respected custodian of traditional knowledge, recounted, "Every compound had its own shrine. Before the market opened, libations were poured. Before marriage, you consult Ifa. It wasn't superstition; it was governance, it was guidance." Central to this spiritual life were festivals and ritual ceremonies, notably the Oro and Agemo festivals. These were not only religious events but also served as vital mechanisms of social cohesion, conflict resolution, and cultural education. The Oro, for instance, played a critical role in purging the community of spiritual impurities and enforcing communal discipline. According to Anofu Kolawole Salami (Olumale Oro ti Iworu): "Oro is our town crier, our judge, and our spirit. When there's unrest, Oro speaks. Even today, the gods still speak to those who listen."²⁵

Shrines, known locally as *ugboti*, were sacred spaces where rituals were conducted. These shrines were not randomly placed; they followed ancestral prescriptions and were protected by designated custodians. Spiritual empowerment rituals, often involving *ogede* (incantations) and sacrifices, were conducted to infuse these shrines and idols with spiritual potency. Liadi Adeniyi Ogunusi (Asore Elegun) explained:

My father taught me how to invoke power into the images through herbs and chants. Once the spirits entered, the idols could speak, act, and even protect the town from danger. That's why we don't joke with Elegun.²⁶

The custodians of these rituals, including Elegun (spirit mediums), Onimale (Oro heads), and diviners, were deeply respected. Their roles were hereditary and required years of spiritual training, initiation, and communal validation.

Ancestral worship was another cornerstone of Ilisan spirituality. The belief in *metempsychosis* (transmigration of souls) was widespread. It was commonly held that deceased family members could reincarnate as new children within the lineage. Names like Babatunde ("father returns") or Yetunde ("mother returns") reflected this belief. Ancestors were buried within the family compound, and during rituals, they were called upon to intercede for the living. This practice, according to Chief Fagorala, "kept the family connected through generations." The practice of human sacrifice, although abhorrent by contemporary standards, was not part of Ilisan's religious structure. It was common in neighbouring towns and the act was believed to appease or energise powerful deities in times of calamity or communal rites. However, by the late 19th century, this practice faced serious opposition. Christian missionaries and colonial

²³Interview with Chief J. O. Oduyoye, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

²⁴Awolalu, J. O., and Dopamu, P. A., *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonjo Press, 1979.

²⁵Interview with Chief Salami Anofu Kolawole, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

²⁶Interview with Ogunusi Liadi Adeniyi, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



administrators lobbied strongly against it. Historical records, including those by Rev. James Johnson in 1892, documented cases of such sacrifices in Sagamu. With increasing colonial intervention, these were replaced with animal offerings, black cows, goats, and rams, marking a profound transformation in traditional rites.²⁷

This shift was not merely about colonial suppression. As Adewale Adekoya observed: “The people began to reflect. They realised that the gods could be satisfied with lesser sacrifices. It was a gradual awakening.”²⁸

Despite the spread of Christianity and Islam in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, traditional religion retained a stronghold in Ilisan. Many continued to adhere secretly or merged their practices with the new faiths, creating fertile ground for syncretism in subsequent decades. As Liadi Ogunusi aptly summarised, “You cannot remove the roots from the tree and expect it to stand. The roots of Ilisan are spiritual, and they are still very much alive.”²⁹

Arrival of Christianity and Islam

The arrival of Christianity and Islam in Ilisan, as in the larger Remo Division, began in earnest in the late 19th century, marking a pivotal turning point in the region’s religious and socio-cultural evolution. These new religions introduced alternative worldviews that both challenged and coexisted with the entrenched Yoruba traditional religious system. Yet, their early reception was met with skepticism, resistance, and at times, outright hostility from the indigenous population.

Christianity’s First Contact with Ilisan and Remoland

Christian missionaries, particularly from the Methodist and Anglican traditions, were among the first to reach the Remo axis. The Methodist Mission, represented by missionaries like Rev. H. J. Ellis, Rev. W. F. Mellor, and Rev. G. H. Lester, played significant roles in establishing Christian footholds in towns like Sagamu and later in Ilisan. According to the document’s historical accounts, Rev. H.J. Ellis, active between 1893 and 1897, and Rev. Lester (1922–1950) were especially instrumental in navigating both religious propagation and local politics, using their British connections to influence the colonial administration in favor of the Remo communities.

Their mission, however, was initially hindered by deep-rooted traditional beliefs. The Remo people, including those in Ilisan, were highly devoted to their ancestral gods and spiritual systems, which rendered missionary preaching ineffective at first. The document recounts a vivid episode in which a missionary, after preaching about the judgment and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, was misunderstood to be predicting the town’s destruction. The reaction was swift—the Ogboni (traditional council) summoned the missionary and declared, “*We do not want Christianity. We do not desire it. We do not feel our need of it.*” This initial resistance is echoed in the oral testimony of Onayiga Amos:

²⁷Peel, J. D. Y., *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

²⁸ Interview with Adewale Adekoya, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

²⁹ Interview with Ogunusi Liadi Adeniyi, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



The people feared conversion would mean abandoning their ancestors. Even kings refused to welcome missionaries openly.³⁰ Indeed, even professing Christian kings at the time were met with suspicion by their communities. Hosting missionaries was considered a betrayal of tradition, and converts like Ogun, mentioned in the document, were persecuted, imprisoned, or even executed. The Methodist missionaries, particularly Rev. Mellor, also aided the Remo people in their political struggle against domination from Abeokuta. Their ability to mediate between the colonial government in Lagos and the Remo communities further established their credibility and gradually earned them a place in the hearts of the locals. Over time, the missionaries established schools and health outposts, including St. Paul's Anglican Church and School, which played critical roles in attracting young converts and fostering literacy. These educational efforts softened resistance and slowly integrated Christianity into the local socio-cultural fabric.

The Emergence of Islam in Ilisan

Islam made its entrance into Ilisan through trade and migration, not by organised missionary activity. The most notable figure in the spread of Islam was Mallam Alabi Jimo Abubakar, a Qur'anic scholar and trader who settled in Ilisan. He began teaching local children to read and recite the Qur'an, and through his teachings and personal charisma, he won followers. His efforts culminated in the establishment of the first Central Mosque and the appointment of the first Chief Imam, followed by Mallam Sofunmowo, the first *Noibi*. As Liadi Adeniyi Ogunusi (Asore Elegun) recalled: "Islam did not force its way. It came through traders—quietly. Before we knew it, many were fasting and going to the mosque, even while attending Agemo."³¹

Islam's appeal lay partly in its non-confrontational entry and its cultural flexibility. Unlike the early Christian missionaries who condemned traditional beliefs outright, Muslim teachers were more accommodating, often allowing for parallel practices. Consequently, some families practiced a dual religious identity, maintaining traditional rites while attending Islamic prayers and festivals. It is altogether good to note that both Christianity and Islam contributed significantly to education and literacy in Ilisan. While Christian missionaries pioneered Western-style schools, Muslim leaders established Qur'anic schools. The A.U.D. School, established by Muslims, became a key institution for Islamic education in Ilisan. Snr Apostle Adetola noted: "Even though I'm a Christian, I attended Eid and observed how they worship. It was normal. We were just being trained to be responsible."³²

This cross-religious education helped blur strict boundaries between religious affiliations, setting the stage for later syncretic developments in Ilisan. While there were early conflicts—both physical and ideological between the new religions and traditionalists, over time a cultural and spiritual negotiation occurred. The missionaries' moral teachings, schools, and medical efforts began to influence public opinion. Simultaneously, Islamic festivals like Eid and Christian celebrations like Christmas and Easter became popular among even non-adherents due to their communal and festive nature. As Onayiga Amos shared:

³⁰ Interview with Onayiga Amos, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

³¹ Interview with Ogunusi Liadi Adeniyi, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

³² Interview with Snr. Apostle Adetola, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



Before, our father resisted them. But when their children became doctors and teachers through their schools, they began to open their minds. Yet, they never left the gods behind.³³

The arrival of Christianity and Islam in Ilisan was marked by resistance, adaptation, and eventual integration. Christianity, spearheaded by determined missionaries, struggled initially but gained ground through education and diplomacy. Islam's quiet spread through trade and teaching offered a less confrontational model of conversion. Today, both religions exist alongside traditional beliefs, not as replacements, but as co-inhabitants of Ilisan's rich religious landscape. The place of religious syncretism cannot be denied in the history of Ilisan, as it has become a characteristic feature of the society, as it would be revealed in the subsequent interrogation of their socio-cultural history.

Understanding the Drivers and Dynamics of Religious Syncretism in Ilisan

Religious syncretism, the blending of different religious and cultural belief systems, is a defining characteristic of Ilisan, a town in Remoland, southwestern Nigeria. While traditionally dominated by Yoruba indigenous religious practices, Ilisan has, over time, absorbed elements of Christianity and Islam, leading to a hybrid religious culture. This section explores the historical, socio-economic, and cultural patterns of religious syncretism and examines societal attitudes towards it, analyzing how it facilitated peaceful coexistence among various faiths in the town. This is complemented, among other sources, with oral testimonies of elders in Ilisan comprising religious and community custodians.

Syncretism and Its Socio-Economic Impact

Syncretism, the fusion or blending of distinct religious traditions into a cohesive spiritual practice, is not merely a theological phenomenon in Ilisan; it is a lived cultural reality. Rooted in the practical demands of everyday life and ancestral memory, syncretism in Ilisan represents a dynamic negotiation between tradition and modernity, indigenous heritage and foreign faiths. In Ilisan, the phenomenon arose as the people sought to reconcile their deep-seated traditional religious practices with the growing influence of Christianity and Islam, both of which entered the town in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rather than entirely abandoning their ancestral gods (Òrìṣà), many chose to incorporate elements of these new religions into their daily spiritual routines.³⁴ As Mr. Ademola Idowu succinctly puts it:

I pray in Christian way, but I still consult the oracle for important decisions. It's part of who we are, like one of the person in Ilisan will say Inu ni Igbagbo wa (Faith is in one heart), this is even the name they call the person.³⁵

He spoke further that: "there are no issues with religion; if they are doing masquerade festival, you can see Christians and Muslims following them. But for marriage, I am not so sure of Christians and Muslims marrying each other. I am not saying it does not happen; I am just not sure of that."³⁶ This dual allegiance is not seen as hypocrisy but as complementarity. The

³³ Interview with Onayiga Amos, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

³⁴ Ayodele, O., "History of Remo Thirty-Three Traditional Towns (Remo Metalelogbon).", 2008.

³⁵ Interview with Ademola Idowu, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

³⁶ Interview with Ademola Idowu, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



Yoruba religious worldview, inherently inclusive and non-dualistic, makes room for multiple paths to spiritual understanding. Hackett noted that religious syncretism in Nigeria often reflects "a pragmatic response to the multifaceted spiritual needs of individuals and communities."³⁷

The expressions of syncretism in Ilisan are both ritualistic and social, cutting across life events, festivals, and everyday spiritual interactions. Key examples include: Christian and Muslim participation in traditional festivals and cultural festivals such as Isanbi Day Festival, Oro, Agemo, and Balufon, among others. These festivals attract cross-religious involvement, with Christians and Muslims contributing money, preparing food, or observing traditional rites without necessarily compromising their religious identities. As Chief Solomon Babatunde observed, "Our festivals are the glue. Agemo, Balufon, and Oro make us one."³⁸ This statement underscores the symbolic power of festivals as tools of integration. Rather than being divisive, traditional festivals are designed to include all, regardless of doctrinal background.

Use of Yoruba praise poetry (*oriki*) and ancestral naming during Islamic naming ceremonies, particularly when children are named Yetunde, Babatunde, or Ifedayo, names steeped in ancestral and spiritual meaning and consultation of traditional healers and diviners (Babalawo) by both Muslims and Christians, often done in secret. Chief J.O. Oduyoye (Lapeni elegun) remarked: "They say 'we are Christians or Muslims,' but let small trouble come, *na shrine dem go first run to*."³⁹ Symbolic practices during burial rites, where Christians or Muslims may insist on burying their dead within family compounds (a traditional Yoruba custom) and call upon the spirit of the deceased during remembrance, regardless of the deceased's religious affiliation. This interweaving of beliefs is often not seen as contradictory. In the words of Mr. Adewale Adekoya (Traditionalist):

"Whether you wear a cassock or turban, we all return to the ancestors. The spirits don't ask what religion you claim—they know your heart."⁴⁰ Even Revd Otelaja (Christian), while firmly grounded in his Christian faith, recognises the spiritual richness of the community. He stated clearly that, "some of my church members still go for traditional prayers. I don't fight them. I only ask that they stay true to God in all things."⁴¹ Interestingly, Chief Anofu Kolawole Salami (Olumale Oro ti Iworu) shared how traditionalists sometimes attend Christian or Muslim ceremonies with full acknowledgment and even active participation: "We attend church harvests. We dance, we give. We even say 'Amen.' It doesn't change who we are. Religion should unite, not divide."⁴²

This sentiment echoes the Yoruba proverb often quoted in Ilisan: *Oríṣà bí ibè, kò sí; sùgbón ẹni tí ó bá sunmọ Ọlórún, lá ń bọ*. (There is no deity like one's own chosen one; but it is only he who draws close to God that finds salvation). In Ilisan, religious syncretism is not an anomaly—it is the norm. It reflects the town's adaptive spirituality, its respect for ancestral

³⁷Hackett, R. I. J., "Religion in Calabar: The Religious Life and History of a Nigerian Town." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 21, no. 3 (1991): 222–244.

³⁸Interview with Chief Solomon Babatunde, Legba Elegun, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

³⁹Interview with Chief J. O. Oduyoye, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁴⁰Interview with Adekoya Adewale, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁴¹Interview with Reverend Otelaja, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁴²Interview with Salami Anofu Kolawole, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



legacy, and its commitment to communal harmony. The blending of Christian, Islamic, and traditional beliefs has created a unique spiritual identity that remains flexible, inclusive, and deeply rooted in cultural memory. Far from undermining religious convictions, this pluralistic practice enriches the lives of the people of Ilisan, offering them multiple pathways to meaning, healing, and hope.

Influence on Festivals, Trade, Education, and Family Life

Religious syncretism in Ilisan has not only shaped the town's spiritual outlook but also left a significant imprint on its socio-economic structures. The blending of traditional religion with Christianity and Islam has created a multilayered cultural environment, where economic activities, social rituals, and family dynamics are deeply interwoven with a shared religious consciousness. One of the most visible arenas where syncretism manifests is in community festivals, particularly the cultural and social festival, *Isanbi* Day Festival, and the *Oro* and *Agemo* celebrations. These festivals, while rooted in indigenous religious traditions, enjoy widespread participation across religious boundaries. During the annual *Isanbi* festival, for instance, women from Christian and Muslim backgrounds join in communal food preparation, while men assist with logistics and security. Although the core spiritual rituals are conducted by initiated traditionalists, the cultural and economic dimensions of the festival are open to all. Markets spring up around festival grounds, with traders selling food, clothing, and religious artifacts. This festival economy is a major source of seasonal income for local artisans and vendors. It is a time of business and celebration for everyone.”⁴³

The *Oro* festival, though more spiritually exclusive due to its gendered restrictions, also reinforces socio-economic cohesion. According to Chief Anofu Kolawole Salami (Olumale *Oro ti Iworu*), even churches and mosques adjust their activities to align with *Oro* timing, ensuring that there is no conflict. “During *Oro*, there are rules, no drumming, no vigils. The churches understand and cooperate. There is a silent agreement,” he explained. While women remain indoors on designated nights, families often turn the occasion into a time of bonding, and men use the opportunity to network across religious and professional lines. This syncretic spirit extends to trade and economic exchange. In Ilisan's marketplaces, it is not uncommon to see a traditional herbalist buying grains from a devout Muslim or a Christian woman selling cloth to a shrine priest. There are no religiously exclusive markets. Religious pluralism has engendered a culture of mutual respect and commercial trust, encouraging social mobility and interdependence. According to Mrs. Ebun Oduyoye, “We all go to the same market and eat the same food. If the seller is Muslim, Christian, or traditionalist, what matters is honesty.”⁴⁴ This inclusive approach has shielded Ilisan from the kind of religious polarisation seen in other parts of Nigeria. Religious polarization has caused lots of conflict and unease in many societies, but Ilisan community stood out as a fusion of religious differences working to the advantage of the community.

Education is another domain where syncretism has facilitated balanced development. While Ilisan hosts a number of Christian and Islamic schools, such as St. Paul's Anglican School and the A.U.D. Muslim School, many parents, regardless of religious background, enroll their children in either depending on proximity, quality, or affordability. Children from traditionalist

⁴³Interview with Chief A. Fagorala, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁴⁴Interview with Mrs Ebun Oduyoye, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



homes often attend Christian schools during the day and return home to participate in family rituals in the evening. As Onayiga Amos (Christian) put it, “I attended a Muslim school and my best friend is a traditionalist. We learned from each other. Faith did not divide us; it built us.”⁴⁵ Religious syncretism also plays an important role in family life. In Ilisan, families often navigate multiple religious affiliations within a single household. It is common to find a father practicing traditional religion, a mother attending a Pentecostal church, and children enrolled in Qur’anic classes. Yet, these diverse expressions do not fracture the family. Instead, they are managed through inclusive rituals and shared values. For example, naming ceremonies may begin with a Christian prayer, followed by traditional libations, and end with a visit to the mosque for a Qur’anic blessing. According to traditionalist Mr. Adewale Adekoya, even Muslim or Christian parents sometimes consult the Ifa oracle for guidance before naming a child.⁴⁶ This indicates a deep cultural continuity where ancestral wisdom remains relevant, even in families aligned with Abrahamic faiths. Funerals also blend rites: a Christian service might be conducted while elders pour libations and chant ancestral prayers. The deceased is often buried in the family compound, a traditional practice that persists regardless of religious creed. As Liadi Adeniyi Ogunusi (Asore Elegun) explained, “When someone dies, we respect all sides. The church may sing, the imam may pray, but we still talk to the spirit of the dead. That is our way.”⁴⁷ This approach ensures that spiritual continuity and family unity are preserved even in moments of transition.

Religious Syncretism, Communal conflict and Cohesion

Religious syncretism in Ilisan has, for the most part, served as a powerful instrument of communal cohesion, enabling members of diverse religious traditions, Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religion, to coexist peacefully. The cooperative interfaith landscape seen in the alignment of festival schedules, cross-religious attendance at ceremonies, and rotational thanksgiving practices has created a social environment where pluralism is normalised rather than contested. As Snr. Apostle Adetola emphasised, “When we meet as religious leaders, we don’t talk doctrine; we talk peace. The church, mosque, and shrine have to agree for Ilisan to be at peace.”⁴⁸ These meetings, according to him, are not rare or formalities; they are regular and grounded in mutual trust. He further explained that during traditional festivals such as *Oro*, churches agree not to hold loud or conflicting programs, and in return, traditional leaders notify them in advance and include them in communal prayers.

This spirit of collaboration has been instrumental in maintaining social equilibrium. As Olupona argues, African indigenous religions provide not only spiritual guidance but also a social framework that fosters group solidarity, identity, and intergroup reconciliation.⁴⁹ In Ilisan, this is evident in the respectful blending of rituals and the adaptive cooperation among institutions. However, this interreligious synergy is not without challenges. A growing tension is emerging between generations, particularly as younger people embrace Pentecostal Christianity and more orthodox Islam, both of which often adopt rigid theological positions

⁴⁵Interview with Onayiga Amos, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁴⁶Interview with Mr. Adewale Adekoya, Traditionalist. Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁴⁷Interview with Ogunusi Liadi Adeniyi, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁴⁸Interview with Reverend Otelaja, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁴⁹Olupona, J. K., *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. London: Routledge, 2004.



that view traditional religious practices as idolatrous or demonic.⁵⁰ This clash of perspectives occasionally threatens the fragile balance that syncretism has built. Mr. Adewale Adekoya recounted a personal struggle:

My son sees my father's shrine as devilish, but to my father, it's sacred. He won't even enter the room where the staff of Ogun is kept. That hurts my father deeply."⁵¹

Such intergenerational friction reflects broader national trends in Nigeria, where Pentecostal expansion has been accompanied by anti-traditionalist rhetoric and calls for spiritual warfare against so-called ancestral bondage. In Ilisan, these tensions are often contained through dialogue within families and cultural education at the community level, but the growing influence of external religious ideologies continues to strain local harmony. Moreover, conflicts can sometimes arise over burial rites and naming ceremonies, where family members disagree on whether to follow traditional, Christian, or Islamic procedures. These disagreements are often not about belief alone but about what each rite symbolises, ancestral loyalty, spiritual purity, or religious identity. Liadi Adeniyi Ogunusi (Asore Elegun) stated that:

Some families argue over how to bury their dead. One side wants church service, another wants traditional rites. We try to mediate, but it's not always easy.⁵²

Despite these challenges, the communal memory of cooperation and the cultural legitimacy of syncretism continue to provide a buffer against full-scale religious conflict. Inter-marriage across religious lines is still common, and there are few, if any, reports of violent confrontations over religious differences. This is in stark contrast to other Nigerian towns where sectarian violence has fractured communities. Instead, Ilisan's religious community often resorts to what sociologist Ebenezer Obadare describes as "pragmatic pluralism", an approach where individuals draw selectively from different traditions to meet spiritual and social needs, without necessarily surrendering to doctrinal absolutism.⁵³ In essence, while religious syncretism in Ilisan is under subtle pressure from religious purists and generational shifts, it continues to act as a framework for tolerance, negotiation, and community resilience. The persistence of traditional festivals with Muslim and Christian participation, the ongoing rotation of thanksgiving events across sacred spaces, and the willingness of leaders to hold interfaith forums all point to a model of peaceful coexistence that could serve as a blueprint for other religiously diverse communities in Nigeria and beyond.

Role of Religious Leaders and Institutions

The successful maintenance of religious harmony in Ilisan owes much to the intentional efforts of religious leaders and the flexibility of religious institutions across traditions. These leaders, whether Christian pastors, Islamic clerics, or custodians of traditional shrines, act as bridges between belief systems, guiding their communities toward coexistence through mutual respect, dialogue, and coordinated practices. A central figure in this interreligious effort is snr Apostle Adetola, a church leader and peace advocate who has been at the forefront of fostering unity

⁵⁰Hackett, R. I. J., "Religion in Calabar: The Religious Life and History of a Nigerian Town." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 21, no. 3 (1991): 222–244.

⁵¹ Interview with Mr Adewale Adekoya, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁵² Interview with Ogunusi Liadi Adeniyi, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁵³Obadare, E. *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Nigerian Experience*, 2018.



among Ilisan's faith communities. He explained how he regularly organises interfaith meetings, especially during religious seasons when overlapping events could potentially cause tension: "We meet often—myself, the Imam, and the traditional elders. Before Agemo or Oro, we sit down, agree on the dates, and ensure there's peace. It's not about who is right or wrong; it's about the people."⁵⁴

These meetings are not mere formalities but are regarded as community security mechanisms, ensuring that everyone, regardless of faith, can prepare for or adapt to specific rituals. Snr Apostle Adetola also recalled a profound moment during one of his church's youth thanksgiving services: "A traditional chief entered the church and quietly removed his *șàkí*, the leather emblem of his spiritual authority, and held it in his hand throughout the service. He didn't say a word, but that act was louder than any sermon. It meant respect."⁵⁵ This act, deeply symbolic, demonstrated how traditional leaders in Ilisan recognise and respect sacred Christian space, even while retaining their religious identity. It reflects a mutual code of honour that enables sacred coexistence in the town. Similarly, Snr. Apostle Adetola shared his own gesture of solidarity with Muslims: "Sometimes on Fridays, I go to the mosque, not to pray like them, but to show support. I sit at the back, greet the Imam, and quietly observe. It matters to them. That's what unity looks like."⁵⁶

His example underscores a broader reality in Ilisan, where religious leadership is not about conversion but collaboration. It is this spirit of shared guardianship that prevents religious differences from escalating into division. From the traditionalist side, Chief Anofu Kolawole Salami (Olumale Oro ti Iworu) plays a vital role in maintaining harmony during one of the most sensitive periods in Ilisan's religious calendar: the Oro festival. As the head custodian of Oro practices in Iworu, Salami has the delicate task of ensuring that sacred rituals are performed without disrupting the broader community, particularly churches and mosques. He explained:

When it is time for Oro, we inform everyone ahead—churches, mosques, and even market leaders. We tell them the days there will be no drumming or vigils. And they always cooperate.⁵⁷

This coordination is particularly significant because Oro festivals traditionally require silence and restricted movement, especially for women. Yet, rather than clash with these restrictions, churches in Ilisan, out of respect, often reschedule or tone down their activities, avoiding special programmes or night vigils. In exchange, traditional custodians ensure that the rituals are confined to their designated time and space, with clear communication about safety and scheduling. Chief Tajudeen Dauda (Alase Ilu Ilisan), another key traditional figure, supports this cooperative structure: "We don't impose our ways. Even during Oro, we inform churches ahead, so everyone is safe. Nobody says the church should stop, just that we all respect each other's time."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Interview with Snr Apostle Adetola, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁵⁵ Interview with Snr Apostle Adetola, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁵⁶ Interview with Snr Apostle Adetola, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁵⁷ Interview with Chief Anofu Kolawole Salami (Olumale Oro ti Iworu), Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁵⁸ Interview with Chief Tajudeen Dauda (Alase Ilu Ilisan), Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



This mutual accommodation is emblematic of what sociologists like Olupona describe as “ritual negotiation,” where religious traditions engage in temporal and spatial coordination rather than confrontational exclusion. In Ilisan, this negotiation is not just functional—it is deeply relational, embedded in kinship, shared history, and collective responsibility.⁵⁹ It is also worth noting that mosques and churches serve broader communal functions beyond worship. They provide educational services, welfare support, and moral guidance, often overlapping with the traditional system of communal care. During crises, such as death, illness, or natural disaster—religious leaders across faiths meet, strategise, and support families together. Their roles, therefore, extend into political and developmental leadership, helping to shape the town’s moral compass and public discourse.

Factors Influencing Religious Syncretism in Ilisan

Religious syncretism in Ilisan is the result of multiple interacting forces that reflect both the town’s historical continuity and its adaptive responses to cultural change. The fusion of Yoruba traditional religion with Christianity and Islam did not occur by mere coincidence or passive acceptance; rather, it emerged from deeply rooted cultural imperatives, practical socio-economic strategies, political adjustments, and missionary dynamics. As mentioned earlier, traditional religious life in Ilisan revolved around the veneration of deities such as Ogun, Obatala, Sango, Esu, and Oro. These deities were powerful intermediaries between humans and Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being. Chief J. O. Oduyoye (Lapeni elegun) explained thus: “Our forefathers did not worship idols blindly; these gods were powerful intermediaries to the Supreme God. The images were not just sculptures—they carried spirit.”⁶⁰ Chief Adeniyi Ogunusi stated that:

Every compound had its own shrine. Before the market opened, libations were poured. Before marriage, you consult Ifa. It wasn’t superstition; it was governance, it was guidance.⁶¹

At the heart of syncretism in Ilisan is the powerful drive to maintain cultural identity. The traditional religion of the Yoruba people is not merely a set of rituals but a worldview that permeates every aspect of daily life, from birth to burial. The deities (Òrìṣà), such as Ogun, Sango, Obatala, and Oro are not abstract spiritual beings but custodians of moral order, social justice, and ancestral connection. They are evoked during festivals, rites of passage, healing ceremonies, and conflict resolutions. These practices anchor the Ilisan people to their history and land. Even as Christianity and Islam were introduced through colonial and missionary channels, the people of Ilisan found ways to retain elements of their indigenous religion. Rather than a wholesale replacement of one system by another, what emerged was a syncretic blend. Many Christian and Muslim of Ilisan indigenes continued to participate in traditional festivals such as Agemo and Oro, which remain pivotal in reinforcing communal unity. For instance, the Oro festival not only invokes spiritual blessings but also functions as a mechanism for moral discipline and communal protection.

⁵⁹Olupona, J. K., *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. London: Routledge, 2004.

⁶⁰Interview with Chief J. O. Oduyoye, Lapeni Elegun, Ilisan, March 28, 2025

⁶¹Interview with Ogunusi Liadi Adeniyi, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



As Chief J.O. Oduyoye, a senior traditional leader, remarked, “People don’t want to lose their roots. They still believe in the power of ancestors.” His words reflect a broader communal ethos that sees ancestral connection as vital, even when adopting modern religious identities. Names such as Babatunde (father has returned) and Yetunde (mother has returned) underscore the Yoruba belief in reincarnation and ancestral presence, concepts that persist even in Christian households.⁶² Scholars such as Peel⁶³ and Ranger⁶⁴ have documented how African societies integrate foreign religions into pre-existing religious cosmologies rather than abandoning the old for the new. In this context, syncretism is not a dilution but a reaffirmation of cultural resilience, a way for Ilisan to navigate modernity without cultural erasure.

Religion in Ilisan also serves pragmatic functions, particularly in securing economic and social stability. The blending of religious practices often reflects the community’s response to changing economic opportunities. When Christian missionaries established schools and hospitals, many Ilisan families embraced Christianity as a means of accessing education, healthcare, and new forms of employment. Similarly, the arrival of Muslim traders opened up new economic networks for commerce and livelihood. However, adopting new religions did not mean discarding traditional ones. Instead, many individuals strategically participated in both religious systems to optimise their access to spiritual and material resources. As Ademola Idowu, had stated: “People mix religions out of practicality. You pray in church but seek answers from the gods”. This pragmatic orientation is widespread. A person might attend a Sunday church service, visit a mosque on Friday, and consult a diviner or offer sacrifices to Ogun in the same week. He made references to someone in Ilisan who is called *Igbagbo Ninuwa*, which means faith is in your heart, and some of the respondents also alluded to this individual. This is to justify that whatsoever anyone is doing, it is based on their heart; whatsoever they believe in their heart, serving God is not just by going to church or mosque.⁶⁵

This hybrid religious life provides a form of spiritual insurance, what some scholars call “religious pluralism for survival.” It reflects the Yoruba concept of *àwùjò* (communal interdependence), where one cannot rely on a single source for security and well-being. In this way, syncretism is a strategy of resilience in the face of social and economic uncertainty. Political transformations, particularly during colonial and postcolonial periods, also facilitated religious syncretism. During the colonial era, British administrators often used Christian missionaries as intermediaries in local governance. Missionaries played key roles not just in religious instruction but also in negotiating disputes and representing local concerns to colonial authorities. For instance, Rev. H. J. Ellis, a Methodist missionary, was actively involved in Remo politics in the late 19th century and mediated between the Remo chiefs and the British colonial administration during disputes about political recognition and town boundaries.

This close alignment between Christian missions and political power introduced Christianity into the political fabric of Ilisan, but it also necessitated negotiation with existing traditional institutions. Leaders such as the *Onimale* (Oro priest) and *Alase* (Agemo chief priest)

⁶²Interview with Chief J. O. Oduyoye, Lapeni Elegun, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁶³Peel, J. D. Y., *“Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba.”* Indiana University Press, 2000.

⁶⁴Ranger, T., *“The invention of tradition revisited: The case of colonial Africa.”* In *Legitimacy and the state in twentieth-century Africa*, 1993.

⁶⁵Interview with Mr. Sunday Oremosu and Mrs Pelola Oremosu, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



maintained their authority over community festivals and moral codes. These traditional leaders worked in tandem with Christian and Muslim leaders, establishing informal mechanisms for religious coexistence. Furthermore, the colonial government's suppression of certain traditional practices, compelled communities to reframe and adapt their rituals to comply with new legal and moral standards. Rather than abolish these rites, the people of Ilisan transformed them, retaining their spiritual essence. This adjustment underscores the political aspect of syncretism: it is not just about belief but about navigating power, law, and community governance.

The methods used by Christian and Muslim missionaries also significantly shaped the trajectory of syncretism in Ilisan. Early missionaries, particularly from the Anglican and Methodist traditions, emphasised education, healthcare, and moral reform. Their approach was to "civilise" and convert by offering tangible social benefits. Schools were established, often with incentives for attendance such as food, clothing, and access to jobs in colonial administration. These efforts attracted many Ilisan families who were eager to provide better futures for their children. Missionaries also misunderstood or mischaracterised Yoruba traditional religion. They dismissed it as paganism or idolatry, failing to appreciate its theological depth and moral codes. This lack of cultural sensitivity led many converts to retain traditional practices covertly or adopt dual religious identities.⁶⁶

Over time, a process of indigenization occurred. Christian worship began to incorporate Yoruba language, music, and social customs. Talking drums, Yoruba hymns, and even praise-singing (*oriki*) found their way into church liturgy. This cultural accommodation made Christianity more acceptable to traditionalists, facilitating syncretism rather than confrontation.

Sanneh⁶⁷ and Bediako⁶⁸ argue that Christianity in Africa has often undergone a process of inculturation, a transformation in which Christian beliefs are expressed through local symbols and metaphors. In Ilisan, this process enabled the development of a uniquely Yoruba Christianity that coexists with traditional religion rather than replacing it. The syncretic religious landscape of Ilisan is a testament to the community's ingenuity and adaptability. Far from being a sign of religious confusion, syncretism in Ilisan represents a strategic and culturally grounded response to historical change, economic opportunity, political negotiation, and missionary engagement. It reflects a worldview that values continuity over rupture and inclusion over exclusion. As such, it forms the foundation of Ilisan's spiritual identity and offers a model for religious tolerance and coexistence in contemporary Nigeria.

Societal Perceptions and Acceptance

The societal landscape of Ilisan reveals a multifaceted relationship with religious syncretism. Unlike more polarised contexts where religious identities are fixed and oppositional, Ilisan's population generally views religious blending as both natural and necessary. This acceptance, however, is not uniform. Perceptions vary along lines of religious affiliation, generational

⁶⁶Interview with Reverend Otelaja, Ilisan, March 28, 2025

⁶⁷Sanneh, L., *"Translating the message: The missionary impact on culture."* Orbis Books, 1989.

⁶⁸Bediako, K., *Christianity in Africa: The renewal of a non-Western religion.* Edinburgh University Press, 1995.



worldview, and gender roles. Understanding these perspectives offers critical insight into the durability and evolving character of syncretism in Ilisan.

Despite the tensions and resistance that initially accompanied the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Ilisan, the town has gradually developed a distinctive model of religious coexistence, where traditionalists, Christians, and Muslims not only tolerate one another but actively cooperate in community life. This peaceful religious pluralism is a defining feature of Ilisan's social fabric. According to Anofu Kolawole Salami (Olumale Oro), "Though I'm a traditionalist, I've attended church weddings and even fasted with my Muslim friends. We've learned to live together."⁶⁹ Such interactions laid the groundwork for syncretic practices and communal tolerance. A central figure in fostering this religious harmony is Snr Apostle Adetola, a long-standing church leader who actively promotes interfaith dialogue and unity meetings among religious leaders. As he explained, "I always encourage dialogue. We hold meetings with imams and traditional leaders, especially during festive seasons. It's not just about prayer, it's about peace."⁷⁰ He recounted a symbolic event that exemplifies the growing synergy among religions:

A traditional chief once came to our church during a youth thanksgiving. Before he entered, he removed the *şakí* [a traditional leather insignia worn around the neck] and held it in his hand throughout the service. That was a powerful gesture—respecting the church while maintaining his identity.⁷¹

Snr Apostle Adetola also shared how, on Fridays, he occasionally attends Jumu'ah (Friday) prayers at the mosque, not to participate in the Islamic rituals per se, but to show moral support and community solidarity: "Sometimes I sit quietly at the back during Jumu'ah. It's not about doctrine, it's about being there for your neighbors."⁷² This adaptive coordination is more than just tolerance, it is active participation in each other's sacred rhythms. In Ilisan, it is common to see Christians and Muslims joining Oro festival processions, observing the rituals respectfully, and even contributing financially to preparations. A notable tradition that highlights this shared spiritual ethos is the rotational Thanksgiving system adopted by some families and community groups. Whether it's a chieftaincy celebration, harvest festival, or youth event, thanksgiving services are sometimes rotated among churches, mosques, and traditional venues. Liadi Adeniyi Ogunusi (Asore Elegun) maintained: "One year you do your thanksgiving in church, next year in the mosque. Even the babalawo will come and sit quietly. It's about unity."⁷³

This rotating practice helps de-emphasise rigid religious identities and foreground shared values of gratitude, community support, and reverence for higher powers, regardless of doctrinal specifics. The interpenetration of religious traditions is not only institutional but deeply personal. Salami further noted that "during Oro, you'll see Muslims, Christians, and even those who say they don't believe, everyone joins. Some help with logistics, some with

⁶⁹Interview with Salami Anofu Kolawole, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁷⁰Interview with Snr Apostle Adetola, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁷¹ Interview with Snr Apostle Adetola, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁷²Interview with Snr Apostle Adetola, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁷³Interview with Ogunusi Liadi Adeniyi, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.



prayers. Religion is not a wall here; it's a bridge."⁷⁴ The religious life of Ilisan is best described as symbiotic, rather than segmented. Through dialogue, cooperation, and shared cultural values, the people of Ilisan have fostered a uniquely Nigerian form of religious pluralism, where identity is fluid, respect is mutual, and coexistence is not just tolerated but embraced. Leaders like Snr Apostle Adetola and Chief Salami are torchbearers of this spirit, ensuring that religion remains a tool for unity rather than division.

Residents commonly engage in dual religious practices. For instance, a Christian may consult an oracle for guidance while still attending church. This duality is seen as spiritually enriching rather than heretical. Ademola Idowu summarised this view: "I pray in Christian, but I still consult the oracle for important decisions."⁷⁵ Traditionalists in Ilisan largely view syncretism not as a compromise but as a continuation of spiritual heritage. The integration of foreign religious elements into indigenous belief systems is seen as a practical and respectful evolution. For these adherents, the practice of syncretism reinforces the enduring relevance of the Òrìṣà and other ancestral deities. As Chief Solomon Babatunde, a 56-year-old traditional medium, noted, "Syncretism keeps peace. No one religion dominates." This perception underscores a strategic embrace of pluralism that ensures the survival of traditional values while accommodating societal change.⁷⁶ Christians in Ilisan exhibit a spectrum of responses to syncretism.

However, Christian leaders from Methodist and Anglican Churches such as Revd. Otelaja, Mrs. Oremosu, and Mr. Sunday Oremosu, who heads, voice concerns about theological purity. "Syncretism can confuse values," he explains. "People don't know where they stand anymore."⁷⁷ These concerns reflect a broader Pentecostal emphasis on exclusivist truth claims and rejection of traditional spirituality. Pentecostal theology, influenced by global evangelical networks, often characterises syncretism as a form of spiritual compromise or even demonic deception.⁷⁸ Muslims in Ilisan typically adopt a more subdued but adaptive response to syncretism. While Islamic orthodoxy, especially in its Salafi expression, rejects traditional rites, local Islamic practice in Ilisan is more flexible. Adherents continue to participate in Yoruba cultural ceremonies, particularly those associated with family rites such as naming and marriage. Chief Anofu Kolawole Salami, the Olumale of Oro in Iworu, noted that, "churches and mosques respect our calendar". This mutual accommodation allows religious institutions to maintain social harmony, especially during sensitive periods like the Oro or Agemo festivals.⁷⁹ This pattern of mutual respect and negotiation affirms the broader observation by Peel that Yoruba society has historically favored pluralism over exclusivity.⁸⁰ The syncretic model allows residents of Ilisan to maintain community cohesion without forcing individuals to sever ties with their cultural past.

⁷⁴Interview with Salami Anofu Kolawole, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁷⁵Interview with Mrs Ebun Oduyoye, Ilisan, March 28, 2025

⁷⁶Interview with Chief Solomon Babatunde, Legba Elegun, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁷⁷Interview with Snr Apostle Adetola John Oluwarotimi, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁷⁸Gifford, P., *African Christianity: Its public role*. Indiana University Press, 1998.

⁷⁹Interview with Anofu Kolawole Salami (Olumale Oro ti Iworu), Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁸⁰Peel, J. D. Y. *Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba*. Indiana University Press, 2000.



Generational attitudes toward syncretism in Ilisan are shaped by changing educational paradigms, global media, and evolving notions of spirituality. Elders, who lived through the pre-colonial and early colonial religious transformations, largely uphold syncretism as a mechanism of cultural preservation. They see the dual participation in Christian or Islamic worship and traditional rites as enriching, not contradictory. In contrast, youth perspectives are more fragmented. Many young people, particularly those influenced by Pentecostalism or reformist Islamic teachings, reject traditional religious elements outright. These individuals often view Òrìṣà worship and rituals like libation or incantation as relics of a bygone era or, worse, as spiritually dangerous. This resistance is partly due to religious indoctrination that frames traditional religion as fetishistic or satanic. Yet not all youth adopt a binary worldview. A significant number remain ambivalent, publicly aligning with modern religious institutions while privately participating in family-led traditional rites. These youths may attend church on Sundays but still return to Ilisan during the Oro or Agemo festivals. As Mrs. Ebun Oduyoye, a retired schoolteacher, explained: “Young people struggle to choose, but we teach them that both old and new have value.”⁸¹

This generational negotiation reflects what Meyer describes as the “conflict of modernities” in African religious life.⁸² Young Nigerians are often caught between globalised religious ideologies and locally inherited cosmologies. In Ilisan, this tension does not always lead to conflict, but it does create spaces of spiritual uncertainty. However, festivals, weddings, funerals, and rites of passage continue to serve as convergence points where generational divides momentarily dissolve and shared identity resurfaces.

Women in Ilisan play a crucial, though often underappreciated, role in maintaining and adapting syncretic practices. They are the custodians of domestic spirituality, particularly in relation to childbirth, fertility rites, and food offerings to deities. As Mrs. Babatunde, a retired midwife, pointed out, “Women especially prayed to the goddess during Balufon festivals. You will see a woman who prays in tongues but still performs Agemo rituals”⁸³. This dual participation is both practical and symbolic, representing women's multifaceted spiritual agency. The dual religious identity adopted by many women is not viewed as hypocrisy but rather as a comprehensive spiritual strategy. Women engage in Christian fellowship meetings and Qur'anic recitations while simultaneously maintaining shrines and ancestral altars in their homes. Ifi Amadiume also argued that African women have historically embodied religious pluralism, acting as mediators between tradition and innovation.⁸⁴ In Ilisan, this mediating role is visible not only in private homes but also in public festivals where women organise processions, prepare ritual meals, and lead song performances.

Moreover, gendered participation in syncretic rituals also challenges Western binaries of secular versus sacred, or Christian versus traditional. In Ilisan, spiritual life is holistic, and women's religious roles are integrative rather than compartmentalised. Their influence ensures that cultural continuity is maintained even as external religious forces reshape societal norms. Societal acceptance of syncretism in Ilisan reveals a community that is both spiritually dynamic

⁸¹Interview with Mrs. Ebun Oduyoye, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁸²Meyer, B., *Translating the devil: Religion and modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*. Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

⁸³Interview with Mrs. Babatunde, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.

⁸⁴Amadiume, I., *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, religion and culture*. Zed Books, 1997.



and culturally grounded. While traditionalists view syncretism as a vital legacy, Christians and Muslims engage with it through varying degrees of openness or opposition. Generational shifts create moments of tension but also opportunities for renewal, as youths return to festivals and rediscover cultural roots. Gender roles, particularly those played by women, serve as the glue holding together this intricate spiritual web. Syncretism in Ilisan is, therefore, not merely a historical artifact but a living cultural logic—adapted and negotiated daily by individuals and communities seeking harmony between faith, heritage, and modernity.

This peaceful negotiation aligns with Peel's⁸⁵ concept of “religious elasticity” in Yoruba communities, which refers to the ability of individuals and societies to adapt without losing coherence. It also reflects what Mbiti⁸⁶ calls Africa's “inclusive religiosity,” where spirituality is broad, interwoven, and community-centred rather than exclusivist. Amadiume argues that traditional festivals are not simply religious rites; they are vehicles for social memory, gender expression, and intergenerational transmission.⁸⁷ In Ilisan, this is especially true. The festivals reinforce belonging, reshape identity, and serve as counter-narratives to imported religious ideologies that may marginalise indigenous expressions.

Syncretism in Ilisan is, therefore, not merely about religious blending; it is a sophisticated system of coexistence, negotiation, and communal peace building. From co-habiting places of worship and interfaith ceremonies to community-wide festivals and institutional flexibility, the people of Ilisan have developed a resilient model for living together across religious lines. Rather than erasing difference, syncretism in Ilisan acknowledges diversity and transforms it into a shared cultural asset. The continued success of this model depends on the community's willingness to preserve dialogue, respect sacred calendars, and honor ancestral wisdom alongside modern expressions of faith. In this sense, Ilisan offers a compelling example of how tradition and modernity, indigenous belief and global religion, can coexist not only in tension but in harmony.

CONCLUSION

Religious syncretism in Ilisan reflects how a community can embrace change while holding onto its roots. It reveals the strength and flexibility of the people, who have managed to blend traditional Yoruba beliefs with Christianity and Islam over time. Instead of completely replacing old religious ways with new ones, Ilisan has developed a layered spiritual identity, one that brings together ancestral customs with modern faiths in a balanced and meaningful way. This experience goes against the common idea in Nigeria that religious diversity leads to conflict. Religious syncretism in Ilisan is the result of multiple interacting forces that reflect both the town's historical continuity and its adaptive responses to cultural change.

The fusion of Yoruba traditional religion with Christianity and Islam did not occur by mere coincidence or passive acceptance; rather, it emerged from deeply rooted cultural imperatives, practical socio-economic strategies, and missionary dynamics. It is a reflection of the town's

⁸⁵Peel, J. D. Y., *Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba*. Indiana University Press, 2000.

⁸⁶Mbiti, J. S. *Introduction to African religion*. Heinemann, 1991.

⁸⁷Amadiume, I. *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, religion and culture*. Zed Books, 1997.



adaptive spirituality and respect for ancestral legacy and its commitment to communal harmony. The blending of different religious beliefs has created a unique spiritual identity that remains flexible, inclusive, and deeply rooted in cultural memory.

Far from undermining religious convictions, this pluralistic practice enriches the lives of the people of Ilisan, offering them multiple pathways to meaning, healing, and hope. Syncretism in this area has engendered peace, as leaders usually hold interfaith forums that reflect a model of peaceful coexistence that could serve as a blueprint for other religiously diverse communities in Nigeria and beyond.

This paper, through comprehensive interviews of elders and resource persons of the town, has highlighted a deeper history of Ilisan in regard to syncretism with new perspective. Religious leaders act as bridges between belief systems, guiding their communities toward coexistence through mutual respect, dialogue, and coordinated practices. This work argued that the hybridisation of different religious faiths in Ilisan is not viewed as a contradiction but as communal completeness. Ilisan proves that with open conversation, mutual respect, and shared cultural practices, people of different religions can live peacefully, strengthening their community. This blend of beliefs isn't just a sign of tolerance, it's a deliberate and thoughtful way of life. Syncretism in Ilisan serves as a centripetal force and helps people stay spiritually connected to both their ancestors and their present-day beliefs. Ilisan presents to us the idea that religion doesn't have to divide people. Instead, it can be a shared space where different beliefs live side by side, rooted in respect and working together for the good of all.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Some of the limitation of this study is centred on hesitation from informants to be interviewed and their responses to the researchers. One of the authors of this paper is an indigene of Ilisan, which made accessing the chiefs and other informants possible for the researchers. Then, informants' demand for money can also be challenging when the fieldwork and the research are conducted out of personal limited resources, without any funding. This study opens opportunities for scholars who might be willing to expand the frontier of knowledge in the same area of research. Possible areas that can be considered are Egungun festivals and culture masquerades, and other socio-cultural aspects of Ilisan, as well as comparative studies of religious syncretism across Remo towns.

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INTERVIEWS

- Interview with Adekoya Adewale, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.
- Interview with Ademola Idowu, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.
- Interview with Anofu Kolawole Salami (Olumale Oro ti Iworu), Ilisan, March 28, 2025.
- Interview with Chief A. Fagorala, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.
- Interview with Chief J. O. Oduyoye, Lapeni Elegun, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.
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- Interview with Onayiga Amos, Ilisan, March 28, 2025.
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