Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.7 No.3 September, 2024; p.g. 29 – 40; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

FACTORS INFLUENCING RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN BENIN CITY, EDO STATE

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Abstract

This study was designed to determine factors influencing religious syncretism in Benin City. Five research questions were raised to guide the study. The design for this study was the descriptive survey research design. The population of this study consisted of 1, 178, 200 residents of Benin City while the sample for the study was made up of thirty (30) residents in Benin City who are involved in syncretic practices in religion. The instrument for data collection for this study was an interview schedule. Data from the study were analysed using thematic analyses. Findings from the study revealed amongst others that the historical factors that have contributed to the development of religious syncretism in Benin City are migration and cultural exchange, political structure and governance, ***missionary and cultural influence, urbanisation, resistance to colonialism and political and governance*** *system. In addition, findings reveal that economic factors contribute to religious syncretism in Benin City through trade and economic exchange, search for employment, informal economy and ritual practices, economic inequality, entrepreneurship, economic mobility and social status, economic benefits and economic incentives for religious institutions. Based on the findings and conclusion, it was recommended that it is essential to encourage open dialogue among religious leaders and communities. Entrepreneurship and social mobility initiatives that encourage inclusive growth can also help religious institutions provide sustainable benefits without resorting to exploitative practices.*

Keywords: Syncretism, Religion, Culture, Tradition, Influence.

Introduction

Syncretism, the blending or amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought, is a phenomenon that has been observed throughout human history (Smith, 2015; Turner, 2020). It is a lot more common in societies that have engaged in more interactions between different cultures or religious than others. According to Brown (2016), syncretism, an amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures or schools of thought is a practice evident since the dawn of human history. In other words, it is embodied as the mixture different elements of various traditions to create a new whole or pseudo-tradition/setting. As Johnston, (2018) espoused, syncretism is typically conceived of and understood as it relates to religion as the amalgamation of two or more differing religious practices into a unified – albeit a variegated one. But it reaches beyond religion to also encompass cultural, linguistic, and philosophical realms.

In an increasingly interconnected world, where globalization facilitates the exchange of ideas, goods, and people across borders, religious syncretism seems more relevant than ever. The phenomenon is not merely a historical curiosity but a dynamic process that continues to shape contemporary societies (Wilson, 2021). As diverse groups come into contact with one another, the potential for syncretic development increases, leading to both the enrichment of cultural

practices and the potential for conflict and misunderstanding. It is, therefore, very crucial to have an indepth understanding of the factors that influence religious syncretism so as to comprehend how cultures evolve and interact in a globalized environment.

This research aims to explore the various factors that influence religious syncretism, focusing on both historical and contemporary examples. Several key factors have been identified in the literature as contributing to syncretic processes, including colonization, migration, trade, and globalization (Smith, 2015). These factors often create environments where cultural and religious traditions can intersect, leading to the creation of syncretic practices. For example, according to Green, (2022) during the colonization of the Americas, the forced interaction between Indigenous, African, and European cultures led to the development of new religious practices that combined elements from each tradition.

Osadolor, (2020) noted that historical interactions including trade and colonization played a crucial role in the initial introduction of foreign religions. Social and political changes, particularly those associated with colonialism and post-colonialism, further facilitated the integration of different belief systems (Smith, 2015). Additionally, Stewart, (2017) indicates that the intrinsic flexibility of traditional African religions, which are often open to incorporating new ideas and practices, has contributed to the development of syncretic forms of worship.

Moreover, the role of power dynamics in religious syncretism cannot be understated. Brown, (2016) posits that dominant cultures often impose their beliefs and practices on subjugated groups, who in turn adapt and incorporate these elements into their own traditions in ways that may resist, accommodate, or transform the dominant culture. Syncretism, therefore, can also be seen as a form of cultural resilience and resistance, where marginalized groups find ways to maintain their identity while navigating imposed changes (Turner, 2020). Another important factor is the role of individual agency in religious syncretism (Johnston, 2018). While broader social, economic, and political forces set the stage for religious syncretism, individuals often play a crucial role in how these processes unfold. Stewart (2017) assert that religious leaders, cultural intermediaries, and ordinary people alike contribute to the creation of syncretic practices by selectively adopting, modifying, and transmitting different elements from various traditions.

In the context of Benin City, Edo State, religious syncretism represents a fascinating interplay between traditional African religious practices, Christianity, Islam, and other belief systems introduced through historical trade, colonization, and modern globalization (Gomez, 2023). Benin City, the capital of Edo State, has a rich historical and cultural heritage that dates back to the ancient Benin Kingdom, one of the most powerful and advanced civilizations in pre-colonial Africa. According to Okonofua, (2022), the traditional religion of the Edo people is centered on the worship of deities, ancestors, and the belief in spiritual forces that influence the physical world. However, the advent of European colonization, particularly the arrival of Portuguese missionaries in the 15th century, introduced Christianity to the region. Over time, this led to what Stewart, (2017) refers to as a complex interweaving of traditional beliefs with Christian practices.

Gomez, (2023) notes that Islam also made its way into the region through trade and migration, further contributing to the religious diversity in Benin City. The result is a unique religious landscape where elements of traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam coexist, often blending into new forms of religious expression. This blending, or syncretism, manifests in various ways, such as in religious rituals, festivals, art, and even in the personal beliefs and practices of individuals.

In contemporary Benin City, the factors affecting religious syncretism are multifaceted and dynamic. Urbanization and modernization have brought about significant changes in the socio-cultural fabric of the city. Gomez, (2023) asserts that the influx of people from different parts of Nigeria and beyond has increased religious and cultural diversity, creating a fertile ground for syncretic practices. The role of the family, community, and traditional institutions also remains significant in shaping the religious beliefs and practices of individuals. Moreover, the influence of globalization, with its attendant spread of information and ideas, seem to have further complicated the religious landscape in Benin City. Media, technology, and increased mobility have exposed the population to a wide range of religious and cultural ideas, contributing to the ongoing process of religious syncretism (Brown, 2016).

The study of factors affecting religious syncretism in Benin City is essential for understanding the complex and evolving nature of religious and cultural identity in the region. It also offers insights into how people negotiate and reconcile multiple belief systems in their daily lives and how these processes influence social cohesion, conflict, and change. This research will explore the historical, social, economic, and cultural factors that have shaped religious syncretism in Benin City, with the aim of contributing to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in the context of contemporary Nigerian society.

Statement of the Problem

Benin City, with its rich history and diverse cultural heritage, stands as a microcosm of Nigeria's broader cultural mosaic. As the capital of Edo State and a historical centre of the ancient Benin Kingdom, the city has long been a meeting point for different ethnic groups, religious traditions, and cultural practices. Over the centuries, Benin City has witnessed the blending of indigenous beliefs with external influences, leading to a complex and dynamic cultural landscape. This process, known as religious syncretism, has resulted in the coexistence of traditional African religious practices with Christianity, Islam, and other belief systems, as well as the fusion of various cultural elements within the community.

However, despite the prevalence of syncretic practices in Benin City, there is a lack of comprehensive research that systematically examines the factors driving this phenomenon. While it is understood that religious syncretism in the city is shaped by historical, social, economic, and political forces, the specific factors that influence the blending of religious and cultural practices in this unique urban context remain underexplored. Additionally, the impact of modern influences such as globalization, urbanization, and increased interethnic interactions on syncretic practices in Benin City has not been sufficiently analyzed.

This gap in knowledge presents a significant challenge for understanding how religious syncretism functions within Benin City and what factors most strongly influence its development. Without a clear understanding of these factors, it is difficult to assess the future

trajectory of religious syncretism in the city or to appreciate its implications for social cohesion, cultural identity, and religious practice. The problem of this study therefore is to assess the key factors affecting religious syncretism in Benin City.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What are the historical factors that have contributed to the development of religious syncretism in Benin City?
2. How do economic factors contribute to religious syncretism in Benin City?
3. What are the political factors that influence religious syncretism in Benin City?
4. How do individual and community identities influence syncretic practices in Benin City?
5. What are the challenges associated with religious syncretism in Benin City?

Purpose of the Study

The main aim of this study is to determine factor affecting religious syncretism in Benin City, Edo State. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Ascertain the historical factors that have contributed to the development of religious syncretism in Benin City.
2. Discover how economic factors contribute to religious syncretism in Benin City.
3. Determine the political factors that influence religious syncretism in Benin City.
4. Examine how individual and community identities influence syncretic practices in Benin City.
5. Identify the challenges and opportunities associated with religious syncretism in Benin City.

Methodology

This section deals with the procedures and methods that were employed in carrying out this study.

Design of the Study

The design for this study was the descriptive survey research design which is defined as a valuable tool that enables a researcher to assess the opinions, perceptions, thoughts, trends and feelings of respondents towards a phenomenon (Gorard, 2013).

Population of the Study

The population of this study consisted of three hundred and twenty (320) residents in Benin City identified to be involved in syncretic activities.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample size for this study comprised thirty(30) residents in Benin City who are involved in syncretic practices. The accidental sampling technique was used to select the participants of the study.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection for this study was an interview schedule. The interview was structured and was made up of five (5) questions bordering on the various factors influencing involving residents of Benin City in acts of religious syncretism.

Method of Data Analyses

Data from the study were analysed using thematic analyses. Transcripts from the interview session were reproduced and reported

Results

Research Question 1: What are the historical factors that have contributed to the development of religious syncretism in Benin City?

Table 1: Transcript of Interview on the Historical Factors that Have Contributed to the Development of Religious Syncretism in Benin City.

Respondents I.D	Responses
2	**Migration and cultural exchange** facilitated the blending of various cultural practices and beliefs, laying a foundation for religious syncretism as different traditions interacted and merged over time
1	The Benin people practised a rich traditional religion and had spiritual beliefs that permeated daily life. These religious practices were not easily abandoned with the arrival of Christianity, leading to a blending of beliefs where traditional practices coexisted with Christian teachings
4	The introduction of Christianity brought about significant religious changes. However, missionaries often failed to fully integrate their teachings with local customs, leading to a situation where converts retained elements of their traditional beliefs alongside Christian practices.
3	Many people in Benin City often mix Christian rituals with traditional ceremonies, which reflect a broader trend of cultural adaptation and resilience in the face of colonial and missionary influences.
5	The cosmopolitan nature of the city has facilitated the exchange of ideas and practices further promoting religious syncretism as people from various backgrounds interact and share their beliefs.
6	The Benin Kingdom's resistance to colonial rule reflects a desire to reclaim indigenous practices and beliefs. These led to the blending of traditional elements into Christian worship, resulting in a unique form of religious syncretism that challenged colonial narratives.
7	**The political and governance** system in Benin Kingdom allowed for the integration of new ideas and practices while maintaining traditional values, creating an environment conducive for religious syncretism.

This means that the historical factors that have contributed to the development of religious syncretism in Benin City are migration and cultural exchange, political structure and governance, **missionary and cultural influence, urbanization, resistance to colonialism and political and governance** system.

Research Question2: How do economic factors contribute to religious syncretism in Benin City?

Table 2: Transcript of Interview on the Effect of Economic Factors on Religious Syncretism in Benin City.

Respondents I.D	Responses
2	In Benin City, the integration of Christian elements into traditional practices can be partly attributed to the economic benefits associated with aligning with dominant religious groups.
3	Religious leaders often provide social amenities for people in various communities and may recognize the importance of cultural identity in attracting and retaining congregants. This can lead to a blending of indigenous beliefs with Christian teachings, reinforcing syncretic practices.
1	Traders from diverse backgrounds, tend to encourage the mixing of religious and cultural traditions, contributing to religious syncretism.
9	Economic migration to Benin City, to search for employment, has brought people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds together and fosters syncretic practices as individuals adopt and blend new beliefs that align with their economic and social realities.
5	Many individuals in various communities participate in the informal economy, which is often intertwined with traditional religious practices, such as seeking spiritual guidance for business success. This results in a syncretic blend of traditional religious rituals and prayers from other faiths.
10	The economic situation in the country makes many individuals to look for solutions to their problems. This includes blending traditional rituals with the prosperity gospel teachings of Pentecostal Christianity or using traditional charms alongside Islamic prayers for success in business.
8	Churches often incorporate elements of traditional religion into their services, creating a syncretic religious experience. For example, some Pentecostal leaders may use traditional healing methods or cultural symbols to attract followers, thereby blending economic and religious practices.
7	Some may adopt new religious practices while retaining traditional rituals, blending them as part of their new identity. This economic-driven shift in religious affiliation can lead to new forms of religious syncretism, where elements of both old and new beliefs coexist.

This means that economic factors contribute to religious syncretism in Benin City through trade and economic exchange, search for employment, informal economy and ritual practices, economic inequality, entrepreneurship, economic mobility and social status, economic benefits and economic incentives for religious institutions.

Research Question 3: What are the political factors that influence religious syncretism in Benin City?

Table 3: Transcript of Interview on the Political Factors that Influence Religious Syncretism in Benin City.

Respondents I.D	Responses
2	The political pressure to conform to colonial religious norms and cultural identity led to the integration of traditional and foreign religious elements.
9	The Oba is not only a political figure but also a spiritual leader, and his influence extends to religious affairs. Traditional religious practices, which often blend with Christian or Islamic rituals, are reinforced by the Oba's political authority. This gives a form of religious syncretism, in which traditional religion is integrated with other faiths in ways that align with the Oba's leadership.
1	Political push for unity often leads the development of religious syncretism through the incorporation of both traditional and modern religious elements, helping to maintain social cohesion.
4	At times, political conflicts between different religious groups have indirectly fostered religious syncretism. This is particularly evident in areas where traditional religious leaders wield political power and must navigate relationships with Christian and Muslim communities.
5	Political leaders in Benin City sometimes leverage religion to gain political support and may blend religious traditions in public displays or speeches to appeal to a broader base, influencing how religious syncretism is expressed in the public.
10	There is a kind of cultural revival in Benin City which is often accompanied by religious syncretism, as traditional religious practices are revived and blended with Christianity or Islam to reflect modern political and cultural realities.

This means that the political factors that influence religious syncretism in Benin City are religious imposition, traditional authority and the Oba's influence, political integration and ethnic harmony, religious and political conflict, political leadership and religious expression and cultural revival.

Research Question 4: How do individual and community identities influence syncretic practices in Benin City?

Table 4: Transcript of Interview on How Individual and Community Identities Influence Syncretic Practices.

Respondents I.D	Responses
1	Most of us do blend our personal religious beliefs with traditional practices. This may be due to familial teachings and personal experiences,
2	The bond between individuals and their ancestral heritage may result in integration of these elements into their religious observances, regardless of their formal religious affiliations.
4	Religious syncretism is sometimes a community thing because there is strong communal identity which is deeply rooted in shared cultural practices and beliefs. This is visible in communal rituals that blend various religious elements, creating a unique syncretic culture.
6	In many cases, religious syncretism acts as a form of resistance, where communities adapt and incorporate foreign elements into their traditional practices to preserve their cultural identity.
5	People may adopt practices from other religions for practical or social reasons (e.g., attending church for networking opportunities or participating in traditional ceremonies for communal acceptance) while maintaining their core religious identity.
10	Community identity in Benin City is often expressed through festivals, and ceremonies which provide opportunity where beliefs are publicly affirmed, allowing individuals to express their dual religious identities.
7	As individuals practice and learn these family traditions, they contribute to the continuation of syncretic practices by merging their religious affiliations with ancestral customs. This transmission of mixed practices across generations reinforces community-based religious syncretism.
8	Individual and community identities in Benin City are often influenced by the need to balance traditional roles with modern expectations. For example, an individual might participate in a Christian church for social or professional reasons while still holding onto traditional practices related to marriage, health, or social justice.

This means that individual and community identities influence syncretic practices in Benin City through **personal beliefs and experiences, cultural heritage and ancestry, collective cultural practices, resistance to external influences, identity flexibility in response to social change, community rituals and festivals, family traditions and religious continuity, social cohesion and religious inclusivity, negotiating modern and traditional roles.**

Research Question 5: What are the challenges associated with religious syncretism in Benin City?

Table 5: Transcript of Interview on the Challenges associated with Religious Syncretism in Benin City.

Respondents I.D	Responses
2	When Christians incorporate traditional African practices like voodoo into their faith, it can dilute core Christian teachings and beliefs.
1	It can lead to confusion and lack of full commitment to either faith especially when the individual considers himself a born-again Christian and still gets involved in diabolic practices
3	Trying to balance Christian teachings with African traditions often leads to theological problems.
4	The blending of traditional Benin religious practices with Christianity or Islam may be seen as diluting the purity of traditional beliefs, leading to conflicts within communities or families.
6	It can lead to an identity crisis, especially among younger generations who may struggle to reconcile their indigenous heritage with foreign religious influences.
8	Intolerance among some religious groups can cause divisions and social fragmentation in communities.
10	Another problem is that religious syncretism can lead to the gradual erosion of traditional Benin customs and values as they blend with external religious practices.
2	Some syncretic practices may include the commercialization of traditional rituals and symbols, which can lead to the exploitation of cultural heritage for profit without benefiting the local community.
5	It may lead to the challenge of social norms and practices especially those that have to do religious perspectives and when religious elements contradict traditional structures of authority and community organization.

This means that the challenges associated with religious syncretism in Benin City are **dilution of Christian doctrine, confusion and lack of commitment**, **theological problems,** cultural tension and conflict, identity crisis, religious intolerance, dilution of cultural heritage, economic exploitation and disruption of social norms.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from this study are very informative. This is because it has provided some enlightenment about the various factors influencing religious syncretism in Benin City. In the first place, findings from the study revealed that the historical factors that have contributed to the development of religious syncretism in Benin City are migration and cultural exchange, political structure and governance, **missionary and cultural influence, urbanisation, resistance to colonialism and political and governance** system. This finding is corroborated by **Osadolor, (2020) who argue** that the political system allowed for the assimilation of diverse cultural elements through **migration** and **cultural exchange**, particularly with neighbouring communities. His study also highlights the **resistance to colonialism** as a factor that promoted

cultural blending, as the people of Benin adapted to external influences without losing their indigenous identity. However, it is negated by Okonofua (2022) who found that **missionary activities** and **colonial influence** were more destructive than integrative, undermining indigenous belief systems rather than promoting religious syncretism.

Secondly, findings from the study reveal that economic factors contribute to religious syncretism in Benin City through trade and economic exchange, search for employment, informal economy and ritual practices, economic inequality, entrepreneurship, economic mobility and social status, economic benefits and economic incentives for religious institutions. This finding is in agreement with that of **Gore (2021)** who discovered that economic mobility and the search for employment create incentives for individuals to participate in religious practices, often blending traditional beliefs with new economic opportunities.

Furthermore, it was seen from the findings of this study that the political factors that influence religious syncretism in Benin City are religious imposition, traditional authority and the Oba's influence, political integration and ethnic harmony, religious and political conflict, political leadership and religious expression and cultural revival. This finding is in agreement with that of **Ayewa and Oyebade (2023)** who disclosed that political and religious conflicts have historically contributed to the adaptation and blending of various religious practices, particularly as political leaders sought to maintain ethnic harmony and control religious expression.

Moreover, it was seen from the findings that individual and community identities influence syncretic practices in Benin City through **personal beliefs and experiences, cultural heritage and ancestry, collective cultural practices, resistance to external influences, identity flexibility in response to social change, community rituals and festivals, family traditions and religious continuity, social cohesion and religious inclusivity, negotiating modern and traditional roles. This is in conformity with Marimbe (2024)** who reports that religious syncretism is heavily influenced by both individual and community identities. These include cultural heritage, family traditions, and collective practices that help communities navigate the tension between modern and traditional religious roles.

Finally, it was revealed that **the** challenges associated with religious syncretism in Benin City are **dilution of Christian doctrine, confusion and lack of commitment**, **theological problems,** cultural tension and conflict, identity crisis, religious intolerance, dilution of cultural heritage, economic exploitation and disruption of social norms. This finding is in agreement with that of **Sproul (2023)** who argue that religious syncretism often leads to a compromise of essential religious truths, resulting in confusion, lack of commitment, and religious intolerance. In the same vein, **Sanou (2018) reports that**religious syncretism leads to identity crises, as individuals struggle to reconcile traditional cultural practices with Christian beliefs.

Conclusion

The development of religious syncretism in Benin City is deeply rooted in historical, economic, and political factors. Historical legacies, such as migration, political structures, and colonial resistance, have laid the groundwork for syncretic practices. Socio-cultural dynamics,

including family structures, religious leadership, and community rituals, further shape religious syncretism by blending traditional and modern influences. Economic factors, from trade to entrepreneurship, offer both opportunities and challenges for religious institutions, while political forces, particularly the influence of the Oba, have mediated religious and ethnic tensions. However, religious syncretism also faces challenges, such as the dilution of religious doctrine, identity crises, and cultural tension. The interweaving of individual identities, cultural heritage, and social change continues to drive both the persistence and transformation of syncretic practices in Benin City.

Recommendations

In view of the findings from the study and conclusion made, the following recommendations are made:

1. It is essential to encourage open dialogue among religious leaders and communities. Educational initiatives that focus on the shared values and history behind syncretic practices can promote understanding and reduce cultural tension.
2. Entrepreneurship and social mobility initiatives that encourage inclusive growth can help religious institutions provide sustainable benefits without resorting to exploitative practices.
3. Political and religious leaders should work together to maintain ethnic harmony and political integration.
4. Encouraging flexible identity frameworks and fostering religious inclusivity will help individuals and families maintain continuity in their cultural and religious practices while adapting to social changes.
5. Leaders of religious groups should instruct their followers on the need and importance of religious tolerance so as to avoid possible violent clash.

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