



SYNCRETISM AMONG IDOMA MUSLIMS IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Islamic Monotheism, known as tawhid, is a foundational concept that defines Islamic faith. It is with it that all righteous performance of a Muslim is accepted, while the absence of it nullifies and invalidates it. It represents the unwavering belief in the oneness of Allah and encompasses principles of worship, devotion, and ethical conduct prescribed in the glorious Qur'an and exemplified by the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Islam is a substantive religion that deals with all aspects of life with total submission to the will of Allah, whose tenets also negate the concept of polytheism or heterogeneous belief in any form of divinity. This paper aimed to look into the various beliefs and cultural practices aside from Islamic monotheism (Islamic faith) in Idoma, with a view to bringing out the real concept of Islamic monotheism (Tawhid), i.e., the oneness of Allah as the major priority from the perspective of the Qur'an, Hadith, and the scholars' and researchers' views on the concept of syncretism. The study reveals that there is a prevalence of religious heterogeneity among many Idoma Muslims and the impact affects them negatively; if a continuous awareness and campaign against these beliefs is not carried out, this phenomenon will continue among these Muslims. Hence, this research work is a possible outcome and solution. This paper gives a brief history of the Idoma tribe, including their population, and further identifies and analyzes the syncretic nature of the practice of Islam among the Idoma tribe. The research employs a historical and descriptive approach to analyze the collected data, focusing on reconstructing and interpreting the past to understand current practices and predict future trends. The findings reveal significant insight into the practice of monotheism among this tribe, highlighting the role of religious institutions and community leaders in shaping the beliefs and practices of the Muslim. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of continuous education and religious guidance in reinforcing the principles of tawhid, Islamic monotheism, among Idoma Muslims. It provides recommendations for enhancing religious understanding and promoting adherence to monotheistic principles, contributing to the broader discourse on Islamic practices among the Idoma Muslims.

Keywords: Syncretism, Idoma, Muslim, Benue.

Introduction

Islamic monotheism (tawhid) is so significant in that it transcends mere theological understanding, as it forms the core of a Muslim identity and shapes their worldview, guiding their relationship with the divine, fellow humans, and the environment. Islam implies peace and the worship of the supernatural controlling power; it is a way of life. Every community in an African setting has a culture peculiar to it; this is also true of Idoma land before the advent of Islam. The Idoma had their culture, i.e., way of life, but with the advent of Islam, some of their cultural activities were influenced by the Islamic teachings. However, some non-permissible element of the culture were mixed with some Islamic tenets to form some unique ways of life for the Idoma. Islam as a way of life is not against any culture or tradition as long as no element of the culture or tradition contradicts the teachings of Islam. Any



culture, custom, or tradition that falls within the framework provided in the basic guidelines of Islam can be rightly described as Islamic, while anything that contradicts Islam may be viewed as un-Islamic.

Hence, this paper focuses on the various traditions and religious beliefs and practices which the Idoma Muslims perpetrate simultaneously with Islam that show their indifference to Islamic monotheism; it also aims at bringing out the Islamic position on each of these beliefs. Despite their proclamation of Islam, we could still notice their involvement in several acts of syncretic practices. It should be reiterated that Islam is a religion that encompasses all spheres of our daily lives, as the Quran enjoins all Muslims to enter into the religion of Islam wholeheartedly; Allah says, "O you who believe, enter into Islam wholeheartedly and follow not the footsteps of Satan for he is to you a vowed enemy (Q 2:208).

Brief history of the origin of the Idoma

The Idoma people, primarily located in the central part of Nigeria, particularly in Benue State, are the second-largest ethnic group in the region, following the Tiv. According to Acha (15), the Idoma have a rich history deeply rooted in their oral traditions, which trace their origins to the Kwaraara Confederacy, a historic multi-ethnic entity in present-day northern Nigeria. Over centuries, the Idoma migrated and settled in their current location, establishing a society organized into clans and sub-clans, each with its leadership structure.

Adaji notes that the Idoma are renowned for their cultural heritage, which includes traditional music, dance, and festivals. A key aspect of Idoma culture is the belief in Alekwu, ancestral spirits that play a central role in the community's religious beliefs. The Alekwu are believed to protect the people and ensure adherence to moral and ethical codes, which has significantly influenced the Idoma's way of life, particularly in areas like social relations and conflict resolution (12).

Additionally, the Idoma are recognized for their craftsmanship, particularly in pottery, weaving, and carving, as noted by Ugbede (17). These traditional arts are crucial not only for their economic value but also for preserving the cultural identity of the Idoma people.

The population of the Idoma people is estimated to be between 2 to 3 million, according to Ocholi (18). They predominantly reside in the Idoma-speaking areas of Benue State, especially in the western parts of the state, such as Otukpo, Ogbadibo, Ohimini, and Ado Local Government Areas. However, there are also significant Idoma communities in other states, including parts of Enugu, Kogi, and Cross River States.

According to Ugbede, the Idoma language is a part of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family and includes several dialects, such as Otukpo, Otukpa, and Agila. Despite their spread across various regions, the Idoma people have maintained a strong sense of cultural identity, reflected in their language, customs, and traditions (25).

The Muslim population within the Idoma community is relatively small but significant. According to Adaji (12), although Christianity is the dominant religion among the Idoma, with many adherents belonging to denominations like Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Pentecostalism, Islam has a presence in the community. The Muslims in Idoma areas contribute to the social and economic life of the community through various means, including trade, agriculture, and education.



Muslim Idoma individuals and families often participate in communal activities, including festivals and community development projects. As noted by Acha (15), their contributions help foster unity and mutual respect among people of different religious backgrounds within the Idoma society.

Introduction of Islam to Idomaland

Islam was introduced to the Idoma people mainly through interactions with neighboring Muslim communities, particularly the Hausa and Nupe traders. These traders were key agents in spreading Islam as they traveled through Idoma land for commercial activities. The influence of these Muslim traders was felt in the form of cultural exchanges, intermarriages, and the establishment of small Muslim communities within Idoma territory (Barkindo, 89).

Some of the Idoma traditions practiced by the Muslims under Benue state are highlighted below:

Belief in Akpam

Agah, one of my interviewees, described Akpam as a very big tree that some Idoma people visit to present their problems. This is done twice a year, with the hope that their problems will be solved. Relevant Glorious *Qur'ānic* verses have already been cited in previous sections to address such practices.

The belief in Akpam is central to the spiritual and cultural practices of the Idoma people. Akpam is viewed as a powerful deity responsible for the well-being, justice, and moral conduct within the community. Traditional rituals and ceremonies are performed to honor and appease Akpam, particularly in times of need, such as during harvests, disputes, or health crises.

Muslim contributions to the belief in Akpam are particularly noteworthy in how they integrate and respect these traditional practices while maintaining their Islamic faith. Although Islam is a monotheistic religion, Muslims within the Idoma community have found ways to coexist with and contribute to the preservation of the Akpam beliefs.

According to Acha, Muslim members of the Idoma community often participate in community rituals and ceremonies associated with Akpam, not as a form of worship but as a demonstration of respect for the cultural traditions of their ancestors. This participation helps to maintain social cohesion and promotes unity among the Idoma people, regardless of religious differences. Muslim families may attend these events, offering prayers and support to their fellow community members while maintaining their Islamic principles (17).

Worshipping Okokolo River

The Idoma people hold the Okokolo River in deep reverence, considering it a sacred body of water with significant spiritual importance. According to Adaji (20), the river is believed to be inhabited by powerful spirits that oversee various aspects of life, such as fertility, health, and prosperity. The worship of the Okokolo River involves rituals, offerings, and prayers, often conducted to seek the blessings of the river spirits for a bountiful harvest, protection from harm, and overall community well-being.

Traditionally, the rituals associated with the Okokolo River include offerings of food, livestock, and other valuable items, which are presented to the river spirits by designated religious leaders or elders. These rituals are typically performed at specific times of the year, such as during planting and harvest



seasons, as well as in times of drought or other natural calamities (Acha, 15). The rituals are believed to appease the spirits, ensuring their favor and protection for the community.

Muslim Participation in the Worship of Okokolo River

Despite the Islamic prohibition against idol worship, Muslims within the Idoma community have found ways to engage with the traditional worship of the Okokolo River in a manner that respects both their religious beliefs and the cultural practices of their community. According to Ocholi (18), Muslim Idoma people often participate in the communal aspects of the river worship, such as attending the rituals, contributing to the festivities, and showing respect for the elders and religious leaders involved in the ceremonies.

Muslim participation in these events is generally characterized by a focus on the cultural and social significance of the rituals rather than the religious elements. For example, Muslim families might provide food, drinks, or financial contributions to support the events without directly engaging in the worship practices. This approach allows Muslims to maintain their religious integrity while still being active members of their community (Ugbede, 27).

In some cases, Muslims within the Idoma community have also played a role in adapting these traditional practices to align more closely with Islamic teachings. For instance, instead of offering sacrifices to the river spirits, Muslims may offer prayers to Allah for the well-being of the community during the Okokolo River festivals. This adaptation reflects the flexibility of Islamic practice in accommodating cultural traditions while upholding core religious principles (Adaji, 12).

Observing the Alekwu Festival

The Alekwu Festival is one of the most important cultural celebrations among the Idoma people, symbolizing the community's connection to their ancestors and the spiritual world. According to Ugbede (17), the festival is characterized by vibrant displays of dance, music, and traditional rituals, all aimed at honoring the spirits of the ancestors and seeking their blessings for the community. The festival typically takes place annually and serves as an opportunity for the Idoma people to express their gratitude for a successful harvest and to seek divine favor for future endeavors.

During the Alekwu Festival, various traditional rites are performed, including offerings of food, drinks, and sacrifices to the ancestors. These offerings are meant to appease the spirits and invite their presence to bless the community with prosperity, health, and protection (Acha, 20). The festival also includes processions, where participants dress in traditional attire, showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the Idoma people. The Alekwu Festival serves as a vital means of reinforcing community bonds and preserving cultural identity.

Muslim members of the Idoma community often participate in the Alekwu Festival, reflecting the community's commitment to unity and mutual respect among diverse religious groups. While Muslims do not engage in the traditional worship aspects of the festival, they actively participate in the communal celebrations and cultural expressions associated with the event. According to Ocholi (19), Muslims contribute to the festival by attending the celebrations, providing food and resources, and joining in the social festivities.

This participation underscores the adaptive nature of the Muslim community within the Idoma context, as they seek to honor their cultural heritage while remaining true to their Islamic beliefs.



Many Muslim families view their involvement in the Alekwu Festival as an opportunity to strengthen community ties and promote understanding across religious divides (Adaji,16). Instead of participating in the rituals directed toward the ancestors, Muslims may use the occasion to offer prayers to Allah for the well-being of the community and to express their hopes for prosperity and harmony.

Moreover, the Alekwu Festival serves as a platform for interfaith dialogue, allowing Muslim leaders to engage with traditional religious leaders and other community members. Such interactions help bridge the gap between different religious practices and foster a sense of shared identity among the Idoma people (Ugbede,20).

Conclusion

It is pertinent to understand from the foregoing deliberations and various arguments that Islam is a pure religion with its fundamentals as monotheistic. virtue as the real belief of Islam, and it's principle as the apex beliefs worthy of not practicing asides other beliefs found in our contemporary societies, such as the various beliefs in the African Tradition, which are contrary to the real injunction of Allah; hence, these should be ignored. Therefore, Muslims should not be part of such beliefs, and the Islamic Scholars should also preach fervently in the redirection of monotheism and its practice in Idoma land and Nigeria at large.

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