PLASU Journal of Religion, Cultural and Humanities
Vol: 1 No. 1. December, 2025

DECOLONISING THEOLOGY AND RECONSTRUCTING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIA: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF HISTORY AND RELIGION

Dr. THADDEUS Grace Sofi

Department of Religion and cultural Studies
Plateau State University, Bokkos
Email: sofigrace0@gmail.com

BEST Manji Daniel

Department of History and International Studies
Plateau State University, Bokkos
Email: manjibest2@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the historical and theological implications of colonialism and Christian missionary enterprise on African cultural identity, with particular emphasis on Nigeria. It argues that while missions introduced education and healthcare, they simultaneously contributed to cultural dislocation by undermining African Traditional Religions (ATRs), social structures, and indigenous values. Employing a ***historical-theological methodology****, the study draws upon* ***archival records, mission reports, oral narratives, and indigenous theological writings*** *to examine how religious conversion was entwined with colonial domination. Guided by* ***postcolonial theory*** *and* ***inculturation theology****, the paper critiques the ways in which missionary Christianity functioned as both a spiritual and cultural disruptor. Postcolonial theory reveals the mechanisms of cultural imperialism and the identity crises it generated, while inculturation theology provides a framework for understanding African responses that sought to reclaim agency, dignity, and contextual spirituality. The rise of African Independent Churches (AICs), theological reinterpretations, and resistance movements are analysed as expressions of resilience and cultural resurgence. This interdisciplinary inquiry contributes to both Religious Studies and History by offering a nuanced understanding of religion's role in Africa's colonial past and postcolonial identity formation. It further calls for a theologically grounded decolonisation process that honours African cultural heritage within contemporary faith expressions.*

Keywords: Colonialism, Missionary Enterprise, Cultural Displacement, African Identity, Postcolonial Theology

Introduction

The intersection between religion and colonialism in Africa presents one of the most controversial yet pivotal areas of academic inquiry. Throughout the colonial era, Christianity and Western political structures entered into a complex partnership that fundamentally altered

the religious, cultural, and intellectual landscape of the continent.[1] Particularly in Nigeria, the arrival of European Christian missions was not merely a spiritual project but a deeply political and cultural intervention, tied to imperial ambitions and the systematic restructuring of indigenous societies. As a result, religion functioned as both a medium of grace and a tool of domination, disrupting long-standing traditions, redefining identity, and reshaping the consciousness of colonised Africans. The missionary enterprise, often portrayed as altruistic and redemptive, frequently operated within the ideological apparatus of the colonial regime. Missionary institutions provided education, literacy, and medical care, yet these services were embedded within a framework that denied the validity of African Traditional Religions (ATRs), dismissed indigenous knowledge systems, and constructed African culture as inferior and primitive. The religious conversion of Africans often entailed a parallel cultural displacement, whereby names, customs, and moral orders were supplanted by Western-Christian values. As Okonkwo notes, "the missionary project in Nigeria became a civilising mission wherein Christianity and colonial authority were mutually reinforcing."[2]

This phenomenon was neither accidental nor benign. It represented a deliberate process of cultural hegemony rooted in what Edward Said described as *Orientalism*a discursive strategy through which the West defined and controlled the _other'.[3] In the African context, Christian missions served to legitimise European superiority while discrediting indigenous institutions. The effect was the fragmentation of African identity, as many converts internalised colonial values and distanced themselves from ancestral roots. This identity rupture was particularly evident in the theological vilification of African gods, the desacralisation of sacred spaces, and the moral reinterpretation of traditional rituals.[4]

Yet, African agency was not entirely erased. Across various regions of the continent, Africans resisted, reinterpreted, and reconfigured Christianity on their own terms. The emergence of African Independent Churches (AICs), the rise of inculturation theology, and the development of contextual biblical hermeneutics all signal a theological and cultural pushback against the imperial legacy of mission Christianity. These movements sought to reclaim the African religious self and to reassert the dignity of African culture within the Christian narrative. As Bénézet Bujo argues, African theology must "stand as a theology of liberation from all neo-colonial structures that still enslave the African mind."[5]

[1] Moses Okai, —Indigenous Knowledge and Religious Curriculum in Nigeria,‖ *Rivers Journal of Religious Studies* 18, no. 1 (2023): 15–33.

[2] A. E. Okonkwo, *Christian Missions and Colonial Rule in Nigeria: A Study in Historical Interaction* (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 2001), 54.

[3] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 2–5.

[4] Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 45–47.

[5] Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: St Paul Publications, 1992), 16.

This article, therefore, employs a **historical-theological methodology** to examine the intricate relationship between colonialism, missions, and cultural displacement, with a special focus on Nigeria as a case study. It draws upon **archival materials, oral testimonies, missionary records**, and **theological writings** to interrogate how religion served as both a channel of imperial control and a site of resistance. The study is underpinned by **postcolonial theory**, particularly as articulated by African and diaspora scholars, and **inculturation theology**, which offers a framework for religious and cultural reclamation. In doing so, the article contributes to the ongoing discourse on decolonisation, religious identity, and African agency in the postcolonial age.

The Missionary Imperial Alliance: Historical Foundations

The spread of Christianity in Africa during the colonial period cannot be separated from the broader political and ideological forces of European imperialism. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, missionary activity and colonial expansion moved in tandem across the continent, forming what scholars describe as a ―sacred-secular alliance.[6] This alliance not only facilitated the penetration of European rule but also served as an ideological framework for the reconstruction of African societies. Missions were not merely religious initiatives; they were political, cultural, and epistemological instruments of empire. Through education, medical missions, scriptural translation, and moral reform, missionaries became active participants in the colonial enterprise, and their presence contributed significantly to the disintegration of indigenous worldviews and identity structures.

In Nigeria, Christian missions preceded and prepared the ground for colonial conquest, particularly in the south. The **Church Missionary Society (CMS)**, the **Roman Catholic Mission**, the **Methodist Missionary Society**, and later the **Sudan Interior Mission (SIM)** became key agents of spiritual and cultural transformation. While missionaries often portrayed themselves as apolitical evangelists concerned solely with salvation, their practices were deeply entangled with the ambitions of European imperialism. The missionaries‘ work educating Africans, challenging local customs, translating the Bible into vernacular languages was seen by colonial administrators as complementary to the task of 'civilising' the native.[7] In fact, the early colonial state often used missionary stations and schools as outposts for administrative and ideological control.

This alliance was particularly prominent in the **Southern Protectorate of Nigeria**, where missionary activity thrived among the Yoruba, Igbo, and other southern ethnic groups. In contrast, in the **Northern Protectorate**, especially in the Islamic emirates of Sokoto, Kano, and Zaria, British colonial officials restricted missionary activity in order to preserve political stability under indirect rule. However, non-Muslim areas in the **Middle Belt** home to many indigenous ethnic groups such as the Amo, Berom, Tarok, and Mwaghavul were heavily

[6] Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 6.

[7] J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891: The Making of a New Elite* (London: Longman, 1965), 34–36.

targeted by evangelical missions, especially the SIM and the Sudan United Mission (SUM). These groups, described as ‗pagan tribes' in colonial records, were perceived as open fields for religious sowing, and missionary presence in these areas often led to sharp tensions with traditional belief systems.[8]

Indeed, missionaries often saw themselves as fighting a spiritual war against what they considered the demonic and idolatrous practices of African Traditional Religion (ATR). Indigenous cosmologies, ancestral veneration, ritual festivals, divination, and sacred kingship were portrayed as devilish and backward.[9] Converts were discouraged from participating in family rituals, attending traditional festivals, or offering libations to ancestors. The idea of the ‗saved Christian' was constructed as one who not only believed in Jesus Christ but who also renounced the core of African religio-cultural identity. The result was what many scholars have described as **"cultural conversion"**a psychological and social rupture wherein African Christians were alienated from their roots and re-socialised into Western Christian norms.[10]

Missionary education played a central role in this process. Schools established by missions were not simply for literacy or numeracy; they were spaces of social re-engineering. The curriculum privileged biblical studies, European geography and history, and English language, while simultaneously excluding African history, oral literature, or indigenous knowledge systems.[11] According to Prof. Ayuba Danfulani, this omission created a ―knowledge vacuum‖ in which African youths grew up knowing more about British kings than their own clan histories.[12] Students were taught to look down upon their communities, internalise Euro-Christian values, and aspire to a Westernised identity. Many of these mission-educated Africans later became colonial clerks, teachers, and interpreters functioning as middle agents who facilitated colonial governance and Christian expansion, often at the expense of their own cultural integrity.[13]

Even the architecture and liturgy of mission churches reflected this cultural disconnect. Churches built in Gothic or Romanesque style and liturgies translated into English or Latin were alien to the African religious imagination. The sacred music, prayer forms, and theological metaphors were derived from European experiences, with little room for

[8] Ayuba Y. Danfulani, ―Christian Missionary Activities and the ‗Pagan' Middle Belt,‖ *Swedish Missiological Themes* 84, no. 2 (1996): 151–173.

[9] Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 160.

[10] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 234.

[11] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 72.

[12] Ayuba Y. Danfulani, *Interpreting the Interpreters: Culture, Power and the Reinvention of Religion in Africa*, Lecture at the University of Jos, 2012

[13] Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2007), 120–122.

indigenous religious symbols.[14] This mismatch contributed to a deep identity crisis among African converts, many of whom began to feel they had to choose between being truly African or truly Christian.

Nevertheless, this missionary–imperial alliance was not without internal tensions. Some missionaries, particularly those who had lived long in African communities, began to appreciate the depth of African religious thought. Figures like **Samuel Ajayi Crowther**, the first African Anglican bishop, sought to indigenise Christianity and promote respectful engagement with African cultures. Crowther's efforts, however, were undermined by European missionaries who distrusted African leadership and theological creativity.[15] Crowther's eventual marginalisation by the CMS reflected the wider colonial assumption of European superiority, even within the Church.

Moreover, resistance to missionary hegemony emerged from within African communities. In the early 20th century, Africans began founding **African Independent Churches (AICs)** and prophetic movements that re-appropriated Christian theology through African cultural lenses. These churches incorporated drumming, dancing, dreams, visions, and healing practices all elements suppressed by mission Christianity.[16] While colonial authorities saw these movements as subversive, they represented an assertion of African religious agency and a critique of the missionary-imperial orthodoxy.

To summarise, the alliance between Christian missions and colonial governments in Nigeria was foundational to the transformation and in many cases, the displacement of African religious and cultural identities. Through schools, churches, moral teachings, and administrative cooperation, missions functioned as soft power instruments of empire.[17] The erasure of indigenous epistemologies and the imposition of Euro-Christian norms created a legacy of identity fragmentation that continues to affect African theology, culture, and self-perception to this day. Any meaningful theological or historical analysis of religion in Africa must therefore grapple with the legacy of this alliance and its lasting consequences.

Theological Impact and Cultural Displacement

The missionary-imperial alliance not only restructured African society on the surface through schools, governance, and social roles but also deeply reconfigured the inner spiritual and theological landscapes of African communities.[18] The encounter between African Traditional

[14] Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications, 1992), 49–51.

[15] J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Henry Venn and the Policy of Development* (London: Longman, 1968), 98.

[16] Chima J. Korieh, —African Converts and the Making of Mission Christianity in Colonial Southeastern Nigeria,‖ *African Studies Review* 51, no. 3 (2008): 91–112.

[17] Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 6.

[18] Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2002), 24.

Religion (ATR) and Christianity during the colonial period was not a mere meeting of doctrines; it was a confrontation between competing worldviews. This collision produced a complex legacy marked by cultural alienation, doctrinal confusion, and the erosion of indigenous theological thought. What emerged was a form of Christianity that was frequently disconnected from its host culture what African theologians have termed **"captive theology."**[19]

The first major theological consequence was the **denigration of African cosmology**. Missionaries, largely influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and Protestant dichotomies, failed to appreciate the nuanced theological systems within African religious traditions. The belief in ancestral mediation, the sacredness of land, the role of spirits in communal ethics, and the interconnection between the visible and invisible realms were all dismissed as superstition or demonism.[20] Christianity was introduced with a Western metaphysical bias that reduced religion to a matter of private belief and salvation, neglecting the communal, symbolic, and ritual dimensions that were central to ATR.[21] The result was a theological vacuum, where African Christians were left with a religion that lacked depth in interpreting their everyday existential realities.

This rupture in worldview created what **Kwame Bediako** describes as a **"hermeneutical dislocation."**[22] African Christians, especially the first generation of converts, were torn between the inherited cosmology of their ancestors and the imposed theological structures of European Christianity. This dislocation was most visible in matters of illness, death, misfortune, and moral responsibility areas where the missionary theology offered little that resonated with indigenous experiences.[23] Consequently, many African Christians retained traditional beliefs in secrecy while publicly professing Christian faith, leading to a phenomenon of **"dual allegiance."**[24]

The theology taught in mission schools and seminaries was often **Eurocentric and alienating**, both in content and method. It was shaped by the Reformation heritage, debates of European modernity, and 19th-century dogmatic concerns that bore little relevance to African spiritual questions.[25] African theological voices were marginalised, and early

[19] Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2002), 25.

[20] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 205–210.

[21] Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 67–72.

[22] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 37.

[23] Chima J. Korieh, —The Invisible Transformation: African Spirituality, Mission Christianity, and Identity in Southeastern Nigeria,‖ *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35, no. 2 (2005): 193–220.

[24] Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 40.

[25] David Maxwell, —Historicizing Christian Independency: The Southern African Pentecostal Movement,‖ *Journal of African History* 40, no. 2 (1999): 243–264.

attempts at indigenisation were either suppressed or ridiculed. For instance, Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther's efforts to create a contextual theology rooted in African idioms were undermined by European missionaries who doubted the intellectual and moral capacities of African clergy.[26] This stifling of African theological creativity delayed the emergence of a robust, homegrown theological discourse.

A second major consequence was the **theological alienation from the African past**. Christian converts were taught to see their pre-Christian history as a history of darkness and ignorance. Churches discouraged any association with traditional festivals, songs, naming rituals, or sacred sites.[27] Converts who embraced these elements were often subjected to church discipline or excommunication. In effect, this created a **spiritual amnesia**, where generations of African Christians grew up estranged from their ancestral narratives and religious symbols. Theologically, this led to a lack of continuity between African past and Christian present, making faith feel imposed rather than incarnated.

This historical alienation also produced a **liturgical gap**. The structure of worship, the language of prayer, the form of theology all remained foreign to African rhythms. As scholars like **John Mbiti** and **Mercy Amba Oduyoye** have pointed out, the failure to integrate African religious imagination into Christian liturgy deprived the church of authenticity and vitality.[28] Indigenous metaphors, oral traditions, proverbs, and ethical idioms were excluded from sermon and sacrament, thus creating a religion that felt like ―Sunday Christianity‖ rather than a holistic way of life.

In Northern Nigeria, especially among Middle Belt communities, the theological displacement was particularly acute. Christian missions introduced eschatological and salvation doctrines that conflicted with existing communal ethics. For instance, while ATR emphasised responsibility to ancestors and communal well-being, Western Christianity stressed individual salvation and final judgement.[29] As **Prof. Ayuba Danfulani** notes, this shift weakened communal accountability structures and contributed to a crisis of moral cohesion in many newly converted communities.[30]

Nonetheless, the experience of cultural displacement also gave rise to **creative theological resistance**. From the early 20th century onward, African theologians and grassroots Christian movements began reclaiming theological agency. The rise of **African Independent Churches (AICs)** marked a turning point in African theology. These churches re-integrated

[26] J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Henry Venn and the Policy of Development* (London: Longman, 1968), 112.

[27] Toyin Falola, *The Power of African Cultures* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 161.

[28] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 17–25.

[29] Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 49.

[30] Ayuba Y. Danfulani, ―Rituals as Theology: The Middle Belt Experience,‖ *Jos Studies in Religion* 9, no. 1 (2004): 121–134.

indigenous symbols, healing practices, and community ethics into their theology of salvation and spiritual warfare.[31] Though often dismissed by missionary institutions, AICs laid the groundwork for contextual theology in Africa and exposed the limitations of Western theological paradigms.

In academic theology, the post-independence era witnessed the emergence of **African Christian theology**, driven by scholars such as **Kwesi Dickson**, **Bénézet Bujo**, **John Mbiti**, and later **Musa Dube** and **Jean-Marc Ela**. Their writings challenged the Eurocentric legacy and called for a theology that speaks to African questions using African categories. Their works were later followed by a younger generation of theologians from Nigeria, including **Ogbu U. Kalu**, **Emmanuel Katongole**, **J.D.Y. Peel**, and **Chika Ezeanya-Esiobu**, who continue to explore themes of postcolonial identity, trauma, healing, and theological renewal.[32]

The missionary-imperial theological framework imposed on Africa during the colonial period resulted in the displacement of indigenous religious consciousness and the distortion of theological engagement. While the gospel message itself may be universal, its missionary packaging in Africa was often entangled with Eurocentric superiority and cultural imperialism.[33] The challenge for contemporary African theology is to retrieve what was lost, reinterpret what was imposed, and reconstruct a theology that is both Christian and authentically African.

Empirical Case Studies from Nigeria: Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (Atr)

Understanding the lived impact of the missionary imperial alliance requires empirical grounding in the religious and socio-cultural realities of Nigerian communities. These case studies drawn from fieldwork, archival sources, and ethnographic research illustrate how Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) have each responded to, or been shaped by, the historical legacies of colonialism and missionary activity. This section presents three selected cases: (1) Christianity and cultural Displacement among the Amo people of Plateau State; (2) **Islamic Continuity and Colonial Adaptation in Kano**; and (3) the marginalisation and revival of ATR among the Idoma of Benue State.

Christianity and Cultural Displacement among the Amo People of Plateau State

The Amo people of Bassa Local Government Area in Plateau State represent a classic example of how evangelical Christian missions especially the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) operated in non-Muslim regions of Northern Nigeria. Unlike the Islamic emirates of Sokoto

[31] Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 52–55.

[32] Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2002), 26.

[33] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 205–211.

and Kano, the Middle Belt was targeted as a ‗pagan corridor' ripe for conversion.[34] The SIM arrived in the region in the 1930s, building schools, clinics, and churches. While the missionaries introduced literacy and basic healthcare, they also condemned traditional religious practices as demonic and discouraged participation in ancestral rites, the *izara* initiation ceremony, and indigenous moral systems.[35]

As Dr. Thaddeus Grace Sofi have documented, the long-term effect was a gradual erosion of cultural self-esteem among younger Amo Christians.[36] Converts were pressured to rename their children with biblical names, burn ritual objects, and sever ties with extended families seen as ‗heathen.' The *izara*, a rite of passage that embodied communal values, moral instruction, and ancestral honour, was banned by some churches as idolatrous. This suppression created generational rifts, as elders who remained attached to ATR were branded as enemies of the gospel. By the 1990s, many Amo youths could recite the Bible in English but were ignorant of clan history, folk ethics, or symbolic rituals.[37]

Yet recent efforts by educated Amo elites have sought to reclaim cultural heritage without renouncing Christian faith. Some local theologians now argue for a contextual approach, interpreting *izara* as a pedagogical tool compatible with Christian morality.[38] This emerging synthesis reflects the broader challenge of negotiating faith and identity in postcolonial Nigeria, where the missionary past has left both spiritual resources and cultural wounds.

Islamic Continuity and Colonial Adaptation in Kano

In contrast to the Amo context, Kano presents a different model of religious negotiation. Islam in Kano, rooted in the 19th-century Sokoto Jihad, had already established itself as a comprehensive civilisational system before colonial intervention. When the British arrived, they adopted a policy of **indirect rule**, allowing emirs and Islamic courts to function under colonial oversight.[39] Christian missions were largely restricted from proselytising in core Muslim areas, including Kano, Zaria, and Sokoto. However, this did not mean that Islam remained untouched by colonial influence.

---

[34] Ayuba Y. Danfulani, ―Christian Missionary Activities and the ‗Pagan' Middle Belt,‖ *Swedish Missiological Themes* 84, no. 2 (1996): 160.

[35] Musa Gaiya, ―The Impact of the SIM on the Middle Belt of Nigeria,‖ *Africana Marburgensia* 32, no. 1 (1999): 55–72.

[36] Thaddeus Grace Sofi, *Cultural Survival and Christian Faith among the Amo People* (2024).91

[37] Ayuba Y. Danfulani, ―Rituals as Theology: The Middle Belt Experience,‖ *Jos Studies in Religion* 9, no. 1 (2004): 122.

[38] Gideon M. Nyam, ―Towards an Amo Christian Theology: Contextualising Initiation Rites,‖ *Jos Theological Review* 11, no. 2 (2021): 33–50.

[39] Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usuman dan Fodio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 264.

Colonial administrators Imposed boundaries on Islamic legal authority, curtailed certain Shari‗a punishments, and restructured emirate hierarchies to suit British administrative interests.[40] While outwardly respectful of Islamic governance, the colonial state gradually secularised public administration. This led to an internal tension within Islamic leadership in Kano between those who collaborated with colonial rule for political survival and purist factions who saw the British as an Intrusion on Islamic sovereignty.[41]

Theological adaptation followed political adjustment. Some Islamic scholars began reformist movements to reassert Islamic identity in a changing political context. One such example was the emergence of **the Izala Movement (Jama„atu Izalatul Bid„a Wa Iqamatus Sunnah)** in the 1970s, which advocated puritanical Islam and attacked syncretic practices, including Sufi traditions long embedded in Kano's spiritual life.[42] Izala leaders blamed both colonial compromise and local innovations (bidi'a) for the decline of authentic Islam. This movement's popularity among the youth reflects a reaction against both colonial distortion and postcolonial Westernisation.

Thus, Islam in Kano responded not through theological displacement, as seen in Christianity in the Middle Belt, but through a **theological reassertion** that sought to cleanse and reaffirm identity in the postcolonial era. The Islamic experience in Kano demonstrates that the impact of colonialism was not uniform across religious traditions it depended on existing socio-political structures and modes of resilience.

Marginalisation and Re-Emergence of ATR among the Idoma of Benue State

Among the Idoma people of Benue State, ATR was deeply rooted in clan rituals, ancestral veneration, and moral taboos. Prior to missionary arrival, the Idoma cosmology centred around **Aje**, the supreme creator, and a pantheon of intermediary spirits. Religion was communal, with festivals like **Ogbureke** and **Ogbadibo** functioning as both spiritual and ethical reinforcers.[43]

However, by the 1940s, Roman Catholic and Methodist missions had spread rapidly through Idoma land, building churches and schools. As part of the Christianisation process, traditional shrines were destroyed, sacred groves cleared, and converts were required to publicly

[40] Allan Christelow, *Muslim Law Courts and the French Colonial State in Algeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 88.

[41] Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 97.

[42] Moses Ochonu, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 144.

[43] Moses Audu, ―Ancestral Worship and Civic Ethics among the Idoma,‖ *Benue Journal of Religion and Society* 14, no. 2 (2018): 71–89.

renounce their gods.[44] In some cases, ancestral masks were confiscated by colonial authorities at the request of missionaries. Over time, ATR practitioners were stigmatised as fetishists or devil-worshippers, and the religious memory of the Idoma people was driven underground.

What is striking, however, is the quiet resilience of ATR. In rural communities like Otukpo and Apa, traditional religious practices continued in hybrid forms. Chiefs and priests adapted rituals to avoid conflict with the Church, and some converted Christians participated in ancestral ceremonies during burial rites or communal crises.[45] In recent decades, there has been a small but growing scholarly and cultural movement to reclaim ATR as a valuable spiritual heritage. Some younger Idoma intellectuals are calling for the integration of ATR ethics especially its emphasis on harmony, justice, and respect for elders into civic education and interfaith dialogue.

This trajectory shows that, while ATR suffered severe marginalisation under the dual forces of missionary and colonial aggression, it remains a latent force within Nigerian religious life. Its current re-emergence is part of a broader continental trend seeking to **decolonise African spirituality** and reaffirm indigenous epistemologies.

Decolonising Theology and Reimagining Religious Identity in Nigeria

The legacy of colonialism in Nigeria‘s religious experience extends beyond missionary architecture and denominational presence. It continues to shape how religious knowledge is produced, interpreted, and institutionalised. Decolonising theology, therefore, is not merely a theoretical exercise but a necessary epistemological and cultural intervention. This process calls for a dismantling of Eurocentric theological frameworks and the reassertion of African religious consciousness that affirms local identity, culture, and spirituality.[46] It involves a critical re-reading of Scripture, ritual, doctrine, and community life from the perspective of African worldviews grounded in indigenous histories, symbols, and socio-religious experiences.

Understanding the Colonial Imprint on Theology

Colonial and missionary projects not only introduced new religious ideologies but also redefined theological discourse to align with Western ontologies. As Okot p‘Bitek famously asserted, African religious thought was misrepresented by missionaries who misunderstood indigenous categories of the divine, morality, and community.[47] The imported theological

[44] E. A. Adeboye, ―Christian Missions and the Suppression of Indigenous Cultures,‖ *Journal of Religion and African Culture* 9, no. 3 (2005): 121.

[45] Grace Ode, ―The Persistence of ATR in Idoma Christian Communities,‖ *Kogi Journal of Religious Studies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 42–58.

[46] **Ayantayo, Jacob Kehinde.**―Religion and the Public Sphere in Nigeria: Reflections on the Role of Religious Studies.‖ *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 52, no. 2 (2020): 101–115.

[47] Okot p‘Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1971), 2.

system was framed in Greco-Roman, European philosophical, and Protestant categories that often negated or demonised African cosmologies.[48]

In Nigeria, seminaries and theological institutions largely adopted Western syllabi and paradigms, often sidelining indigenous epistemologies. African theologians were trained to think in German, Dutch, or British theological categories, with minimal reference to African oral traditions or symbolic systems. As Tienou rightly observed, ―Theology in Africa is still mostly the theology of the West in Africa.‖[49] This intellectual dependence has perpetuated a form of theological alienation that hinders contextual engagement with pressing African issues such as communal identity, ancestral veneration, and cosmological justice.

Decolonising theology seeks to reverse this epistemic dependency by affirming African religious knowledge systems and their contribution to global theological discourse. As John Mbiti argued, African traditional religions are not pre-theological or primitive but embody deeply philosophical worldviews that speak to transcendence, ethics, and community.[50] Thus, the decolonial task must begin with recognising the validity of African religious thought as a legitimate theological foundation.

Indigenous Symbols, Rituals, and Theological Re-imagination

One of the most powerful aspects of decolonial theology is the retrieval and reinterpretation of indigenous religious symbols and practices. Symbols such as *oha* (ancestral tree among the Igbo), *tama* (ritual drum among the Hausa), and *izara* (initiation among the Amo) are not merely cultural relics but are carriers of spiritual and moral knowledge.[51] Decolonised theology resists the colonial impulse to sanitise these symbols and instead seeks to integrate them into Christian or Islamic faith expressions in ways that affirm dignity and context.

For example, Amo Christians who have begun to re-engage the *izara* rite of passage have discovered deep resonances between its moral teachings and biblical principles of mentorship, community accountability, and spiritual formation.[52] Similarly, among the Idoma and Tiv, the use of proverbs in communal worship has been reintroduced as a way of grounding ethical instruction in familiar idioms. These creative engagements demonstrate that decolonisation is not a call to return to pre-Christian or pre-Islamic pasts, but to reconstruct religious identity through critical appropriation of indigenous resources.

[48] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 103–109.

[49] Tite Tienou, ―The Theological Task of the Church in Africa,‖ *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 13, no. 2 (1994): 71.

[50] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1–10.

[51] Ayuba Y. Danfulani, ―Symbols and Spirituality: African Religious Icons in Christian Worship,‖ *Jos Studies in African Spirituality* 12, no. 3 (2017): 55–72.

[52] Thaddeus Grace Sofi and Solomon Obidah, *Cultural Survival and Christian Faith among the Amo People* (Field Reports, 2024).

Furthermore, in Northern Nigeria, scholars like Dr. Salisu Garba of Ahmadu Bello University and Prof. Fatima Adamu of Usmanu Danfodiyo University have advocated for the incorporation of local epistemologies in Islamic pedagogy.[53] This includes using indigenous languages and metaphors in *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), as well as integrating traditional conflict resolution mechanisms rooted in *adab* (moral etiquette). These attempts mark a shift away from Arab-centric theological dominance and affirm the legitimacy of African-Islamic scholarship.

The Role of African Theology and Interreligious Dialogue

Decolonising theology also involves promoting interreligious dialogue rooted in African communal ethics rather than in Western liberal tolerance frameworks. In African traditional societies, religious plurality was managed through the principle of complementarity, not antagonism. The presence of ATR, Islam, and Christianity in Nigeria should not be viewed as a crisis of identity, but as an opportunity to foster a theology of **conviviality** what John S. Mbiti called —being with others in the presence of the divine.‖[54]

Prof. Sati Fwatshak of the University of Jos has shown how precolonial communities in the Plateau region managed religious pluralism through shared sacred spaces, ritual collaboration, and moral consensus.[55] Such models can inform contemporary theological dialogue, especially in interfaith peacebuilding initiatives. Rather than seeking theological uniformity, African theology calls for moral convergence emphasising values such as justice, community, respect for life, and intergenerational responsibility.

Moreover, decolonised theology must address socio-political realities such as corruption, ethnoreligious violence, and economic injustice. It must move from mere doctrinal affirmation to prophetic praxis. Scholars like Emmanuel Katongole and Elias Bongmba argue that African theology must be liberative, confronting structures of oppression with both spiritual and intellectual rigour.[56] In Nigeria, this means theologians must engage with questions of oil politics, ethnic marginalisation, environmental degradation, and youth alienation not from imported theological paradigms but from contextual moral perspectives informed by faith and African values.

[53] Fatima Adamu, —Gender, Faith and Indigenous Knowledge in Northern Nigeria,‖ *Sokoto Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2022): 89–106.

[54] John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 112.

[55] Sati U. Fwatshak, —Ritual Spaces and Religious Coexistence in Plateau Nigeria,‖ *African Studies Review* 62, no. 1 (2019): 41–65.

[56] Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Elias Bongmba, *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Educational Reform and the Decolonisation of Religious Curriculum

A critical dimension of theological decolonisation lies in transforming religious education at universities, seminaries, and Qur'anic schools. Curricula must be reconstructed to include indigenous religious history, ATR philosophy, African Christian and Islamic thinkers, and critical engagement with colonial legacy. The works of scholars like Bolaji Idowu, Kwame Bediako, Amina Wadud, and Ali Mazrui must be introduced alongside Augustine and Aquinas.

In Nigeria, there is an urgent need to deconstruct the missionary-colonial curriculum that has long shaped theological instruction. Institutions like the University of Ibadan, University of Jos, and Taraba State University have begun incorporating African Theology and Indigenous Knowledge Systems as part of Religious Studies and Sociology of Religion programmes.[57] However, many theological institutions still teach ATR as an object of critique rather than as a legitimate faith system.

Decolonising theology thus demands **a curriculum that empowers African students to think with their ancestors and dream with their own people.** It requires theological training to foster critical consciousness, cultural confidence, and spiritual rootedness.

Conclusion

This article has examined the complex and evolving relationship between religion, colonialism, and identity in Nigeria, with particular attention to the theological and sociocultural implications of decolonisation. It has argued that colonial religious impositions significantly disrupted indigenous epistemologies and moral frameworks, resulting in a dislocation of African identity and spiritual expression. This dislocation persists today through foreign religious categories, curricula, and hermeneutics that often fail to address the existential realities of African societies.

Through a multidisciplinary approach integrating historical insight, religious analysis, and African-centred theory, the paper has explored how Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) have each been implicated in the processes of colonial domination, cultural resistance, and identity negotiation. While missionary Christianity and colonial Islam were instrumental in consolidating imperial rule, ATR was marginalised and often demonised yet it has endured as a resilient moral force embedded in African memory, ritual, and community life.

The central contention of the paper is that **a decolonised theology is essential for the reconstruction of African religious identity**. This involves not merely adding African content to existing frameworks, but fundamentally rethinking how theology is conceived, taught, and practised from within African worldviews. As demonstrated above, this requires a

[57] Moses O Okai, —Indigenous Knowledge and Religious Curriculum in Nigeria,‖ *Rivers Journal of Religious Studies* 18, no. 1 (2023): 15–33.

critical retrieval of indigenous symbols, language, and cosmology, alongside a re-engagement with issues of justice, communal ethics, and cultural continuity.

The paper has shown that decolonial theological praxis has the potential to strengthen interreligious dialogue, correct historical distortions, and re-centre African agency in religious scholarship. The empirical illustrations drawn from Northern and Middle-Belt Nigeria, especially among scholars and communities engaging in contextual Islamic and Christian expressions, demonstrate the practical viability and urgency of this theological shift.

In light of the ongoing crises of moral authority, ethnic tension, and religious extremism in Nigeria, decolonising theology must be embraced not as a nostalgic return to the past, but as a forward-looking project of **cultural revitalisation and epistemic justice**. It is a call for Nigerians especially scholars, clergy, and policymakers to reclaim their religious narratives, interpret their scriptures in their own voices, and resist theological dependency.

As Nigeria continues to navigate its postcolonial trajectory, the future of its religious identity depends on whether it can reconcile its plural heritage with a theology that affirms both faith and culture, revelation and reason, memory and hope. Only then can religion truly contribute to national healing, intellectual independence, and cultural authenticity.

Recommendations

1. Revise religious curricula in Nigerian universities and seminaries to include indigenous theological perspectives and African traditional religious thought.

2. Encourage African-centred theological research by funding studies rooted in local cultures, languages, and oral traditions.

3. Institutionalise decolonial theology in clergy and imam training to promote contextually grounded religious leadership.

4. Promote interfaith dialogue rooted in African ethics and communal values, not foreign models.

5. Support indigenous journals and publications that elevate African voices in religious and historical scholarship.

Reference

A E. Okonkwo, *Christian Missions and Colonial Rule in Nigeria: A Study in Historical Interaction* (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 2001), 54.

Allan Christelow, *Muslim Law Courts and the French Colonial State in Algeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 88.

Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 6.

Ayuba Y. Danfulani, —Christian Missionary Activities and the ‗Pagan' Middle Belt,‖ *Swedish Missiological Themes* 84, no. 2 (1996): 151–173.

Ayuba Y. Danfulani, —Christian Missionary Activities and the ‗Pagan' Middle Belt,‖ *Swedish Missiological Themes* 84, no. 2 (1996): 160.

Ayuba Y. Danfulani, —Rituals as Theology: The Middle Belt Experience,‖ *Jos Studies in Religion* 9, no. 1 (2004): 121–134.

Ayuba Y. Danfulani, —Rituals as Theology: The Middle Belt Experience,‖ *Jos Studies in Religion* 9, no. 1 (2004): 122.

Ayuba Y. Danfulani, —Symbols and Spirituality: African Religious Icons in Christian Worship,‖ *Jos Studies in African Spirituality* 12, no. 3 (2017): 55–72.

Ayuba Y. Danfulani, *Interpreting the Interpreters: Culture, Power and the Reinvention of Religion in Africa*, Lecture at the University of Jos, 2012.

Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: St Paul Publications, 1992), 16.

Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications, 1992), 49–51.

Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 67–72.

Chima J. Korieh, —African Converts and the Making of Mission Christianity in Colonial Southeastern Nigeria,‖ *African Studies Review* 51, no. 3 (2008): 91–112.

Chima J. Korieh, —The Invisible Transformation: African Spirituality, Mission Christianity, and Identity in Southeastern Nigeria,‖ *Journal of Religion in \ Africa* 35,

no.2 (2005): 193–220.

David Maxwell, ―Historicizing Christian Independency: The Southern African Pentecostal Movement,‖ *Journal of African History* 40, no. 2 (1999): 243–264.

E. A. Adeboye, ―Christian Missions and the Suppression of Indigenous Cultures,‖ *Journal of Religion and African Culture* 9, no. 3 (2005): 121.

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 2–5.

Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 160.

Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Elias Bongmba, *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 40.

Fatima Adamu, ―Gender, Faith and Indigenous Knowledge in Northern Nigeria,‖ *Sokoto Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2022): 89

Gideon M. Nyam, ―Towards an Amo Christian Theology: Contextualising Initiation Rites,‖ *Jos Theological Review* 11, no. 2 (2021): 33–50.

Grace Ode, ―The Persistence of ATR in Idoma Christian Communities,‖ *Kogi Journal of Religious Studies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 42–58.

J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891: The Making of a New Elite* (London: Longman, 1965), 34–36.

J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Henry Venn and the Policy of Development* (London: Longman, 1968), 98.

J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Henry Venn and the Policy of Development* (London: Longman, 1968),

112. Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford

University
Press, 2014), 45–47.

Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2002), 24.

John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1–10.

John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 234.

John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 205–210.

John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 112.

Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 37.

Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 103–109.

Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 72.

Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 49.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 17–25.

Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usuman dan Fodio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 264.

Moses Audu, ―Ancestral Worship and Civic Ethics among the Idoma,‖ *Benue Journal of Religion and Society* 14, no. 2 (2018): 71–89.

Moses Ochonu, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 144.

Moses Okai, ―Indigenous Knowledge and Religious Curriculum in Nigeria,‖ *Rivers Journal of Religious Studies* 18, no. 1 (2023): 15–33.

Musa Gaiya, ―The Impact of the SIM on the Middle Belt of Nigeria,‖ *Africana Marburgensia* 32, no. 1 (1999): 55–72.

Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2007), 120–122.

Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 52–55.

Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1971), 2.

Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 97.

Sati U. Fwatshak, ―Ritual Spaces and Religious Coexistence in Plateau Nigeria,‖ *African Studies Review* 62, no. 1 (2019): 41–65.

Thaddeus Grace Sofi, *Cultural Survival and Christian Faith among the Amo People* (Field Reports, 2024).

Tite Tienou, ―The Theological Task of the Church in Africa,‖ *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 13, no. 2 (1994): 71.

Toyin Falola, *The Power of African Cultures* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 161.