

Hybridity and Religion: A Critical Analysis of Syncretism in Nigeria's Holy Aruosa Cathedral

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Abstract

This study examines the Holy Aruosa Cathedral in Benin City, Nigeria, as a unique example of religious syncretism that blends traditional Edo spirituality with Christian elements introduced in the 16th century. Often misunderstood or reduced to stereotypes, the cathedral represents cultural resilience and spiritual innovation, providing insight into the adaptive nature of the Edo people. Using a qualitative case study approach, data was collected through oral interviews with clergy, congregants, and community leaders, as well as participant observation of worship service and archival materials. By analysing oral histories and the Book of Saint Aruosa, the paper explores the origins, structure, and enduring role of the cathedral in preserving cultural identity, fostering community, and challenging conventional narratives of syncretism. The findings underscore the importance of local perspectives in understanding how faith and culture intertwine, demonstrating how the cathedral continues to embody the dynamic integration of Nigerian heritage with external religious influences.

Keywords: Syncretism, Book of Saint Aruosa, Holy Aruosa Cathedral, Religion

Introduction

The religious landscape of post-colonial Nigeria is characterized by complexity, resilience, and adaptability. Nigerian societies have demonstrated a remarkable ability to incorporate new religious elements without completely abandoning indigenous belief systems. Religious syncretism, the blending of indigenous spirituality with introduced religions like Christianity and Islam, has been especially significant in the country. This fusion of religious practices is not a sign of losing tradition but rather an

affirmation of cultural identity and continuity, even in the face of external influences. Syncretic religious systems in Nigeria often blend ancestral veneration, communal ethics, and indigenous cosmologies with selected elements of foreign religious structures.

For instance, the arrival of Portuguese missionaries in the 15th and 16th centuries marked a turning point in the religious history of the Edo people in Benin City, Nigeria. According to Idon Friday (personal interview, March 21, 2025), these missionaries introduced

Christianity, but rather than leading to mass conversion, their influence sparked the development of a unique synthesis of indigenous Edo religious practices and Christian teachings. The establishment of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral in 1517, under Oba Esigie's reign, formalized this blend of beliefs. The cathedral was not designed to erase the spiritual identity of the Benin Kingdom, but rather to create a space where the old and new religious traditions could coexist. This fusion reflected a broader socio-political strategy to preserve the kingdom's cultural autonomy and spiritual resilience amidst growing European influence.

Today, the Holy Aruosa Cathedral remains a living example of this religious and cultural fusion. Its rituals, governance, and community roles embody a balance between the traditional and the divine, the ancestral and the contemporary. The cathedral stands as a stronghold of cultural preservation, educational promotion, and spiritual leadership, offering a unique perspective on how Nigerian societies navigate their identity in an increasingly globalized world. This article examines the origins, ideological foundations, administrative structure, and contemporary significance of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral. By exploring its religious practices, syncretic traditions, and social roles, we can gain a deeper understanding of how the cathedral embodies the dynamic integration of

Nigerian cultural heritage with foreign religious influences.

Conceptual Clarification

Syncretism

Syncretism refers to the process through which elements of different religious traditions are combined to form a new, hybrid system of belief. According to Stewart and Shaw (1994), syncretism involves "the creation of new cultural forms and meanings through the interaction of previously distinct traditions." In African contexts, syncretism often emerged as a response to colonialism, missionary activity, and indigenous resilience. In the case of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral, syncretism is evident in how traditional Edo religious ideas and symbols were merged with Christian doctrines to form a uniquely Benin religious expression. Rather than simply adopting foreign beliefs, the people of Benin indigenized Christian elements, making them compatible with local cosmologies and spiritual systems.

Book of Saint Aruosa

The Book of Saint Aruosa is a sacred text that outlines the doctrines, rituals, prayers, and philosophical teachings of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral. Though it is not widely studied in mainstream theology, it plays a crucial role in the liturgy and theology of the Aruosa faith in Benin City. It serves as a written codification of an oral religious tradition

that predates colonial contact. The book is central to the community's spiritual life, offering insight into the ways traditional Edo values are preserved and expressed through religious practice. It also affirms the autonomy and legitimacy of indigenous spirituality in a written form, which is significant in the face of historical marginalization.

Holy Aruosa Cathedral

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral is a religious institution located in Benin City, Nigeria, believed to have been formally established in the 16th century during the reign of Oba Esigie. It is regarded as one of the earliest examples of a religious institution in Africa that blends Christianity with indigenous beliefs. Unlike conventional churches established by European missionaries, the Holy Aruosa Cathedral was developed under the authority of the Oba (king) and operated within the traditional political and spiritual framework of the Benin Kingdom. It represents a localized and decolonized form of Christianity, tailored to reflect the customs, worldview, and social order of the Edo people. The Cathedral remains a key site for religious worship, cultural preservation, and royal rites.

Religion

Religion can be defined as a system of beliefs, practices, and moral values that connect human beings to the sacred or

the divine. Clifford Geertz (1973) describes religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations... by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence.” In African traditional settings, religion is not separated from daily life; it is woven into social structures, kingship, agriculture, and family life. In the context of Benin, religion functions not only as a spiritual guide but also as a cultural and political force. The establishment of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral illustrates how religion in Africa can adapt, resist, and innovate in response to external pressures while maintaining indigenous identity.

Historical Background of Holy Aruosa Cathedral

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral, located in the heart of Benin City, is one of Nigeria's oldest religious institutions and holds a unique position in the historical and spiritual tapestry of the Benin Kingdom (Egharevba, 1968). While its current structure may appear modest compared to European cathedrals, its origins trace back to the early 16th century and are deeply rooted in the ancient traditions of the Edo people.

The foundation of Aruosa as a spiritual institution was laid during the reign of Oba Esigie (c. 1504–1550), a period marked by significant cultural, political, and religious transformations. This era

coincided with the arrival of Portuguese missionaries and explorers in the region. The interaction between the Benin Kingdom and the Portuguese played a critical role in the development of the cathedral. However, it is essential to clarify that Aruosa was not simply a product of European missionary activity. Instead, it represented a fusion of indigenous beliefs and the monotheistic principles introduced by the Portuguese (McCaskie, 1987).

Historically, the Aruosa religion existed in Benin prior to European contact, with the worship of Osanobua, who is regarded as the Supreme Being by the Edo people. The advent of the Portuguese served to enhance and formalize certain elements of this existing faith rather than to replace it. Oba Esigie, a progressive ruler, saw an opportunity to merge the two spiritual systems and thus supported the establishment of the Holy Aruosa as a state religion that would reflect both traditional Edo theology and Christian influence.

The cathedral itself became both a political and religious symbol, directly tied to the monarchy. It was and remains under the patronage of the Oba of Benin, who is seen not only as a temporal ruler but also a spiritual leader (Chief Eweka Osaige, personal interview, March 19, 2025). Worship at the Holy Aruosa Cathedral involves a distinctive liturgy

conducted in the Edo language, and its teachings draw heavily from the Edo interpretation of divine law and morality.

Over the centuries, the Holy Aruosa Cathedral has functioned as a central religious institution in Benin. It has survived the upheavals of colonialism, political transitions, and modern religious shifts while maintaining its identity. Its endurance underscores the resilience of Edo culture and the significance of syncretic traditions that have enabled the religion to adapt without losing its roots (Igbafe, 1979). Central to this historical evolution was the compilation of the Book of Saint Aruosa. According to Iyamu Grace (personal interview, March 21, 2025), The text remains pivotal in worship and doctrine, serving as a bridge between the past and present, between the ancestors and the congregation. It represents a canon of indigenous wisdom interwoven with Christian ethics, emphasizing moral conduct, community solidarity, and reverence for both divine and ancestral spirits.

Today, the Holy Aruosa remains a living monument to the spiritual and historical ingenuity of the Benin people, reflecting a rich legacy of faith, governance, and cultural diplomacy that stretches back over 500 years.

Administration of the Cathedral

The administrative structure of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral reflects its deep cultural roots and its connection to the traditional governance of the Benin Kingdom. Unlike mainstream Christian churches where clerical authority is centralized in bishops or external bodies, the Holy Aruosa operates within the traditional political-religious framework of the Edo people, maintaining close ties to the palace and the Oba of Benin (Idon Friday, personal interview, March 21, 2025).

The Chief explained that at the top of the cathedral's administrative hierarchy is the Ohen-Osa, or Chief Priest, who functions as the spiritual head of the institution. The Ohen-Osa is not an independent religious figure but serves directly under the authority of the Oba. In fact, the Oba is regarded as the highest spiritual figure in the Aruosa faith, believed to be divinely appointed and considered the earthly representative of Osanobua, the Supreme Being. This positions the Ohen-Osa more as a custodian and interpreter of religious rites rather than a central authority figure, with the Oba retaining ultimate control over matters of doctrine, ritual, and leadership appointments (Chief Omoregie Eghosa, personal interview, March 19, 2025).

He later added that supporting the Ohen-Osa is a council of elders and temple

functionaries, drawn from respected families and lineages within the Benin Kingdom. These individuals assist in the daily administration of the cathedral, overseeing rituals, maintaining the sacred space, and guiding members of the congregation. Each of them has specific roles, from handling sacred texts like the Book of Saint Aruosa, to organizing festivals and conducting ceremonies such as purification rites, ancestral veneration, and royal blessings. (Chief Omoregie Eghosa, personal interview, March 19, 2025).

One of the defining features of Aruosa's administrative system is its integration into the traditional court system. The Oba's palace and the Aruosa Cathedral are spiritually and administratively intertwined, reflecting the theocratic nature of pre-colonial Benin society where religion and governance were inseparable (Iyamu Grace, Personal Interview, March 21, 2025). This connection ensures that decisions made at the cathedral resonate with the broader political and cultural goals of the Benin Kingdom.

Another unique aspect of the Aruosa administration is its use of indigenous language and symbolism in all forms of worship and governance. Services are conducted in Edo language, and religious terms, titles, and chants are all deeply rooted in local cultural expressions. This indigenized approach to administration

not only preserves cultural heritage but also reinforces the authenticity of Aruosa as a religion born of the people, not imposed from outside.

Although colonial and post-colonial encounters introduced external pressures, especially from Western Christian denomination, ⁵the administrative system of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral has remained resilient. The structure continues to be guided by ancestral principles, oral tradition, and royal authority, ensuring that the religion maintains its original character and relevance within the modern city of Benin.

Additionally, the cathedral has embraced digital innovations. From online platforms for worship to the digitization of the Book of Saint Aruosa, these developments signify the institution's commitment to modernization while preserving sacred traditions. Social media is used not only for evangelism but also to educate younger generations on Edo history, rituals, and festivals.

The Cathedral and Syncretism

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral is often described as a prime example of religious syncretism in Africa, and for good reasons. Its very foundation reflects how indigenous spiritual beliefs, and foreign religious influences can merge to form a unique, localized system of worship. The religious culture embodied

in Aruosa is neither entirely Christian nor wholly traditional, it is a blend of both, constructed in a way that allowed the Edo people to retain their spiritual identity while embracing selected elements of Christianity (Uwaifo, 2020).

To understand this blend, it is essential to look back at the historical moment that gave rise to Aruosa. During the reign of Oba Esigie in the early 1500s, Portuguese explorers and missionaries arrived in the Benin Kingdom. With them came Christian ideas, particularly those centred on monotheism, moral codes, and scriptural teachings (Osadolor, 2021). However, instead of fully adopting these foreign doctrines, the Benin court which was led by a wise and diplomatically astute Oba who chose to adapt and reinterpret these teachings through the lens of Edo cosmology.

This adaptation did not involve a rejection of Edo religion. On the contrary, it preserved core concepts such as the worship of Osanobua (the Supreme Being), ancestral reverence, and spiritual balance, while integrating Christian-like teachings and structures. The resulting institution, the Holy Aruosa Cathedral, became a space where both traditions could coexist. Services are conducted in the Edo language, and rituals draw heavily from pre-Christian practices. However, references to Jesus Christ and moral parables which are similar to Christian teachings also

appear, showing how these two systems were harmonized rather than replaced.

What makes the Holy Aruosa Cathedral especially unique is how this religious syncretism was not enforced from outside, as was common with missionary efforts during the colonial era. Instead, it was crafted internally, under royal authority, and on terms set by the people themselves. In this way, syncretism in Aruosa was not a passive blending, but an intentional cultural strategy to assert spiritual independence while engaging with global religious ideas (Chief Omoregie Eghosa, personal interview, March 19, 2025).

The Book of Saint Aruosa, the central sacred text of the cathedral, also illustrates this syncretic character. It contains teachings that parallel Christian moral values but are presented through idioms, symbols, and spiritual logic native to the Edo worldview. Rather than simply translating the Bible, the book represents a distinctly Benin articulation of religious thought, grounded in local experience and memory.

This syncretism extends beyond belief into practice and governance. The Oba of Benin, regarded as both a spiritual and temporal leader, presides over the religious institution, and the priesthood under the Ohen-Osa is answerable to the traditional monarchy. This administrative structure, rooted in ancient governance models, coexists with religious rites that

echo both Christian and traditional forms. For instance, liturgical garments, call-and-response worship formats, and notions of divine authority mirror Christian churches, yet their meaning is interpreted through the customs of the Benin people.

In essence, the Holy Aruosa Cathedral stands as a monument to the adaptability and resilience of Edo spirituality. It shows how syncretism which is often misunderstood as a dilution of faith can instead serve as a powerful tool of cultural affirmation. Rather than being overwhelmed by foreign religions, the Benin Kingdom responded by shaping a system that absorbed what was useful and redefined it through indigenous values. This created a uniquely African religious identity that survives to this day.

Social Responsibilities of the Cathedral

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral, beyond its religious function, holds a deeply embedded role in the social life and development of the Benin Kingdom and its people. Since its establishment in the 16th century, it has served not only as a spiritual centre but also as a key social institution, actively participating in the moral, cultural, and communal well-being of its adherents. As with many traditional African religions, the distinction between the sacred and the secular is fluid, and this makes the

Aruosa Cathedral a vital player in the day-to-day affairs of the community.

One of the most visible social responsibilities of the cathedral is preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. Through its religious practices, the cathedral serves as a living archive of Edo customs, language, and worldview. It is one of the few institutions in Nigeria where indigenous religious teachings are consistently conveyed in the local language, thereby reinforcing cultural identity. Ceremonies, songs, oral traditions, and even the Book of Saint Aruosa reflect a rich legacy of values that have been passed down for generations. In this way, the cathedral functions as a guardian of history, ensuring that younger generations remain connected to their roots even in the face of modernity and globalization (Matthew Benjamin, personal interview, March 20, 2025).

He also explained that the cathedral also plays a strong moral and ethical role within the community. Its teachings, drawn from both Edo spirituality and adapted Christian principles, focus heavily on communal harmony, respect for elders, honesty, justice, and personal responsibility. The Holy Aruosa does not limit itself to abstract theology instead it applies these values in practical ways, guiding individuals in how to live honorably and responsibly within society. By doing so, it nurtures not only

religious devotion but also social cohesion and a shared sense of duty among its followers (Matthew Benjamin, personal interview, March 20, 2025).

In terms of leadership, the Aruosa Cathedral stands out for its integration with the traditional political structure of the Benin Kingdom. The close relationship between the Oba of Benin and the cathedral means that the institution often acts as a bridge between spiritual leadership and civic governance. During times of conflict or social unrest, the leaders of the cathedral, especially the Ohen-Osa (chief priest), may be called upon to mediate disputes, offer counsel, or bless state functions. This reinforces the idea that the cathedral is not removed from society but is instead deeply involved in shaping its moral and political direction (Osaige Samuel, personal interview, March 23, 2025).

Another vital responsibility is the provision of communal support and unity. Through collective worship, festivals, and public prayers, the cathedral fosters a sense of belonging and unity among the people. Events like the annual Igue Festival or other royal ceremonies held in partnership with the cathedral are more than religious gatherings, they are major social events that strengthen the bonds within the community. These ceremonies create opportunities for people to reconnect

with their lineage, renew their commitments to societal values, and express shared aspirations (Iyamu Grace, personal interview, March 21, 2025).

Additionally, the Holy Aruosa Cathedral has historically taken on roles like those of a traditional welfare institution. In times past, it was not uncommon for the cathedral to assist the needy, mediate family disputes, or offer spiritual remedies for sickness and hardship. While this role has evolved with the growth of modern institutions, the cathedral still functions as a place of refuge for those seeking not just religious advice but emotional and communal support.

Education is another sphere in which the cathedral has contributed, albeit informally. The cathedral provides spiritual education rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, training new priests, temple officials, and lay members in the doctrines and history of Aruosa. This educational process involves both textual study such as learning from the Book of Saint Aruosa and oral tradition, including stories, proverbs, and chants that communicate core principles. This form of knowledge transfer is crucial in maintaining the continuity of traditional wisdom, especially in an era where formal education systems often overlook indigenous perspectives. (Nnamdi, 2002)

In recent times, the cathedral's social responsibilities have expanded to include

cultural advocacy and awareness. As modern religious movements continue to grow and global cultural shifts influence youth identity, the cathedral has become a voice for cultural preservation and religious pluralism. Through its continued presence and public engagement, it asserts the validity and richness of African spiritual systems, challenging the notion that development and modernity require abandoning traditional faiths. (Nnamdi, 2002).

Religious Practices of the Cathedral

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral stands as one of the most unique religious institutions in Nigeria, not only because of its historical background but also due to the special religious practices it maintains. These practices are deeply rooted in the traditional beliefs of the Benin people and have been blended with elements of Christianity in a way that respects both the past and present spiritual needs of the community.

At the center of religious life in the cathedral is the worship of Osanobua, the Supreme Being in Edo religion. Osanobua is believed to be the creator of everything and the source of all life, wisdom, and order. In Holy Aruosa, prayers are offered directly to Osanobua, without the mediation of saints or a trinity like in many Christian churches. This monotheistic belief is part of what sets the cathedral apart, it preserves the traditional Edo understanding of one true

God, long before Christianity arrived in the region (Okafor,2020)

In addition to Osanobua, the Holy Aruosa Cathedral also honours ancestors (known as Edion) and other spiritually significant figures, such as past kings (Obas) who have been elevated to divine status. These ancestral spirits are respected and remembered during worship, as they are believed to offer guidance and protection to the living. The inclusion of ancestral reverence in the church's religious life is a clear sign of how the cathedral has combined Edo spiritual heritage with formal religious practice.

One of the most defining features of worship at Holy Aruosa is the use of the Edo language during all religious activities. This includes prayers, sermons, and chants. Unlike many churches that conduct services in English or use foreign religious texts, Aruosa ensures that all its teachings and rituals are done in the native language. This makes the message more relatable to the local people and helps preserve the cultural identity of the Benin community.

The Book of Saint Aruosa is the main spiritual text used in the cathedral. This book is not the Bible, and its origin is unique. According to oral tradition and church beliefs, the teachings in the Book of Saint Aruosa were given by God directly to the people of Benin. It contains moral instructions, proverbs,

advice on how to live a good life, and rules on how to maintain peace in the community. Rather than focusing on biblical stories or foreign prophets, the book speaks directly to the values and history of the Edo people. It is used by the priests to teach during services and is seen as a guide to both spiritual and communal life (Omuemu Benjamin, personal interview, March 23, 2025).

The head priest of the cathedral, known as the Ohen-Osa, plays a leading role in all religious functions. He leads prayers, interprets messages from the Book of Saint Aruosa, and serves as a spiritual father to the congregation. The Ohen-Osa is supported by a council of elders and junior priests, many of whom are chosen based on their experience, moral character, and connection to the traditions of the land (Iyamu Grace, personal interview, March 22,2025).

The structure of worship in the cathedral often includes prayers, songs, drumming, and symbolic rituals. Traditional instruments are used to create rhythms during services, and participants often dress in traditional attire. Libations may be poured during special rituals, particularly those that involve honoring ancestors or asking for divine blessings.

Another important aspect of Holy Aruosa's religious life is its participation in festivals and events that involve the Oba of Benin and the royal palace. The cathedral works closely with the palace,

especially during sacred times like the Igwe Festival and other state ceremonies. During these events, special prayers are offered for the kingdom, and rituals are performed to renew spiritual strength and ensure peace in the land. This relationship shows how deeply connected the church is to the cultural and political heart of Benin. (Ezema Emmanuel, personal interview, March 23, 2025).

Religious life at Aruosa also includes personal and family rituals, such as naming ceremonies, marriages, and funerals. Each of these is treated with spiritual importance. For example, when a child is born, prayers and blessings are offered to Osanobua and the ancestors to protect the child. Marriages are blessed by the church to bring harmony between the couple, and funerals involve rituals to help the soul of the departed move peacefully into the ancestral world.

A special feature of the cathedral is its role in spiritual consultation and guidance. People from the community often visit the church not just to worship, but to seek advice on personal or family problems. The priests may offer prayers, read from the Book of Saint Aruosa, or perform small rituals to help the person find peace or healing. These sessions are private and based on trust, showing how the cathedral functions as both a religious and social support system

(Omuemu Benjamin, personal interview, March 23, 2025).

It's important to note that the Holy Aruosa Cathedral does not actively seek to convert others, unlike many missionary churches. Instead, it focuses on preserving the traditions and spiritual wisdom of the Edo people. The church does not preach aggressively or claim exclusive spiritual truth; rather, it offers a space for people who want to connect with their roots and worship God in a way that honours their heritage. The religious practices of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral are a remarkable example of how tradition and modern faith can work together. Through language, rituals, moral teachings, and ancestral connections, the cathedral continues to serve as a spiritual home for the Edo people. It does not just preach religion instead it lives and expresses the culture, identity, and deep spirituality of a people with centuries of history.

Conclusion

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral is a powerful symbol of cultural resilience and spiritual innovation in post-colonial Nigeria. By blending Christian and Edo religious traditions, it has created a unique space that preserves ancestral identity while adapting to modern needs. As both a religious and cultural institution, it reflects the strength of syncretism in maintaining heritage, educating future generations, and

fostering community. The cathedral stands as a lasting testament to the Edo people's ability to embrace change without losing their roots.

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