

Religious Diversity and Tolerance in the Performance of Traditional Festivals in Òṣun State, Southwestern Nigeria: A Multidisciplinary Perspective

Kamal Olaniyi Lamidi PhD

Department of Political Science

Federal University Dutse, Nigeria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2484-6224>

kamal.lamidi@fud.edu.ng

&

Toheeb Aderemi Raji

Department of English

University of Ibadan, Nigeria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8282-3981>

rajiaderemii5@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores how traditional festivals in Southwestern Nigeria function as spaces for expressing religious diversity and fostering tolerance among different faith communities. The region, predominantly occupied by the Yoruba people, is known for its religious plurality where adherents of traditional religion, Islam, and Christianity often coexist and participate in shared cultural expressions. Through a cultural and performance-based lens, the study examines festivals such as Òṣun-Òṣogbo, Egungun, and Sàngó to understand how they accommodate multiple religious perspectives while preserving indigenous values. Drawing on qualitative data, case studies, and theoretical frameworks on religious pluralism and performance theory, the research reveals that traditional festivals not only celebrate communal identity but also provide platforms for interfaith dialogue and mutual respect. Despite occasional tensions, these cultural events play a crucial role in sustaining peaceful co-existence and negotiating religious boundaries. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need to preserve these inclusive cultural spaces as models for promoting tolerance in Nigeria's diverse society.

Keywords: Religious tolerance, Religious Diversity, Yoruba People, Performance theory, Festival. religious pluralism

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most religiously diverse countries in Africa, with Islam, Christianity, and traditional African religions making up the major faith systems practiced across its various regions. In many parts of the country, this diversity has given rise to interreligious tensions, sometimes resulting in violent conflict and political instability. However, the Southwestern region of Nigeria predominantly occupied by the Yoruba people, presents a unique case where religious diversity has largely been managed through tolerance, mutual respect, and cultural interweaving by exhibiting their level of tolerance in some traditional festival performances.

Religious tolerance is an act of accommodating other people's religion. This brings about peaceful co-existence among the people of a particular society with different religious belief. Most societies are made up of different religion and the acceptance and accommodation of each can bring about peaceful coexistence without any conflict. Religious tolerance is essential for a peaceful society, where people are allowed to worship their religion without any discrimination, (Oyetoro & Talabi, 2023 p33). This denotes that it is crucial for a peaceful society in which individuals are free to practice their religion without facing any discrimination. More so, it is a major factor in determining a nation's economic development and peaceful coexistence.

Religious diversity refers to the coexistence of multiple religious beliefs, practices, and traditions within a particular society or geographic region. It recognizes the presence of different faiths such as Christianity, Islam, traditional religions, and the ways in which individuals and communities interact with and respect each other's beliefs. Religious diversity promotes the idea that no single religion holds a monopoly on truth and encourages peaceful coexistence, dialogue, and mutual understanding among different religious groups. In culturally rich societies like Nigeria, religious diversity is both a reflection of historical development and a challenge that requires ongoing tolerance and inclusiveness. (Oyetoro & Talabi, 2023 p34) contends that "religious diversity has always been a cornerstone of human civilization, and it continues to be a fundamental part of our society today. It has become imperative to embrace religious tolerance as a tool for national development with the increasing diversity of religious beliefs."

Religious intolerance according to Omotosho & Ajayi, (2020) is often a source of conflict in many parts of the world, and it has negative effects on various aspects of a country such as social, economic and political stability. Oyetoro & Talabi (2023: p34) further explains that religious intolerance undermines national development in several ways: it creates factionalism and division among the people, which can lead to unstable social systems. It also discourages progress towards democracy and good governance.

The Yoruba people are renowned for their religious openness and syncretism. It is not uncommon to find individuals and families that combine traditional religious practices with Islamic or Christian beliefs. This attitude of religious fluidity is reflected in various aspects of their cultural life particularly in the performance of traditional festivals. These shared beliefs can be seen or observed in most of the southwestern states in Nigeria, most especially, Oyo, Osun, Ogun and Lagos state.

Festival is an annual celebration, traditionally done to bring people together. It mostly accommodates people of different beliefs by offering them a shared identity. Raji (2024:3) asserts that “festival these days have gone beyond the ritual, religion and cultural values. It brings people together and engenders feeling of joy, unity, harmony and peace.” According to Falaasi (1987), festivals “happens within an exceptional frame of time and space” they are a “time out of time”. Ukuma (2014: p3), contends that the seasonality of these festivals could be annual, bi annual, quarterly, or as the case may be according to the historic communal calendar of the people. However, festivals, such as the *Òṣun-Òṣogbo* Festival, *Egungun* Festival, *Olojo* Festival, and *Sàngó* Festival, serve not only as spiritual expressions rooted in indigenous belief systems but also as community events that transcend religious lines. During these festivals, Christians, Muslims, and traditional worshippers often come together to celebrate a common heritage through dance, music, ritual, and communal feasting.

The persistence of such traditions in the face of modern religious ideologies poses important questions about the nature of religious tolerance and co-existence. How do different religious adherents negotiate their identities within these festivals? What mechanisms of inclusion and mutual respect are at play? And to what extent do these festivals function as platforms for interfaith dialogue and peaceful co-existence?

This study seeks to explore the dynamics of religious diversity and tolerance as seen in the performance of traditional festivals in Southwestern Nigeria. The paper aims to highlight how indigenous cultural practices can serve as effective instruments for fostering interreligious harmony by focusing on the performative, symbolic, and participatory aspects of these festivals. The study examines the social, historical, and spiritual significance of these festivals, offering insights into how traditional cultural expressions continue to mediate interfaith relationships in a rapidly modernizing society.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using ethnographic methods to explore religious diversity and tolerance in traditional festival performances in *Òṣun* state, Southwestern Nigeria, with a major focus on two towns which are *Òṣogbo* and *Ede*. Data collection involves interviews with key informants including traditional leaders, religious practitioners (Muslim, Christian, and traditional), and community members. Participant observation is also employed

during major festivals such as the *Òṣun Òṣogbo*, *Egungun*, and *Sàngó* festivals. Secondary sources including books, journal articles, and archival materials are also analysed. Thematic analysis is used to interpret the data, focusing on interfaith interactions, shared cultural spaces, and mechanisms of coexistence observed during the festivals.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two interrelated theoretical frameworks known as Religious Pluralism and Performance Theory. Religious Pluralism, as advanced by scholars like Diana Eck, provides a framework for understanding how multiple religious beliefs can coexist within a shared social space. In the context of *Òṣun State*, this theory helps explain how diverse religious groups such as Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists interact and accommodate each other during traditional festivals such as *Òṣun-Òṣogbo*, *Egungun*, and *Sàngó* festivals. Pluralism emphasizes active engagement, mutual respect, and the constructive negotiation of religious differences, all of which are evident in these performances.

Performance Theory, particularly as developed by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, focuses on rituals and festivals as cultural performances that reinforce communal identity, values, and beliefs. Traditional festivals serve as performative spaces where religious identities are expressed, negotiated, and harmonized. This theory allows us to view festivals not just as cultural expressions but as dynamic events that promote inter-faith dialogue and social cohesion in a pluralistic society. Therefore, these theories provide an insightful lens for analysing how religious diversity is tolerated, performed, and celebrated in *Òṣun state's* traditional festivals.

Literature review

Fayenuwo and Iwuh (2024) assert that modern corporate management styles often overlook the traditional, well-structured systems behind indigenous African festivals. The study explores the *Egungun* and *Sàngótími* festivals of Ede, an ancient Yoruba town, highlighting their historical ties to royalty and cultural identity. Despite lacking formal institutions, these festivals have maintained order through ancestral structures. The study investigates their organization, hierarchy, and administration, using interviews with community leaders, guild heads, and royal descendants. The findings of the research reveals that the festivals' management closely aligns with modern management principles, offering insights into effective planning, publicity, and coordination rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and long-standing cultural practices.

Kuyebi (2008), explores whether *Òṣun*, a Yoruba deity, remains the same in both the Old World (Yorubaland) and the New World (Americas). Using a descriptive structural approach, the researcher analyses Yoruba myths, symbolic elements, and religious practices the study focuses on *Òṣun's* myths, annual festivals, and contemporary worship across both regions. The study examines

how symbolic representations such as colours, animals, numbers, and rituals, sustain Òṣun worship globally. Drawing on extensive experience in regions and religious studies, the researcher argues that Òṣun is consistently revered across cultural geographies, emphasising continuity in spiritual identity and tradition despite diasporic transformations.

Oyetoro and Talabi (2023) opine that religious tolerance is crucial for national development, fostering peaceful co-existence among diverse religious groups. The study explores its significance using an explorative method, emphasizing how tolerance enhances social, economic, and political stability. It outlines the dangers of intolerance and the benefits of unity, integration, and mutual respect. Drawing on ethnographic insights from Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos state in Nigeria, the study highlights strategies such as education, dialogue, and legal frameworks to promote inter-religious harmony. Ultimately, it argues that religious tolerance is essential for sustainable growth, national cohesion, and the overall development of a multi-religious society like Nigeria.

Dowd (2016) explores how religious diversity influences religious tolerance in developing countries, focusing on Nigeria. While Nigeria may seem intolerant from afar, the study reveals significant regional differences. Using survey data from four areas, it finds that religious observance fosters greater respect for religious freedom in more diverse and integrated communities. Interviews show that religious leaders in these areas more actively promote tolerance. The findings suggest that religious segregation, not diversity, undermines tolerance. The essay highlights the need to consider local and individual-level dynamics to better understand religion's societal impact.

From the above, it can be observed that although religious diversity and religious tolerance have been subjected to critical studies. However, there are apparent paucity of researchable material on the examination of religious diversity and tolerance from festival performances. Therefore, this paper intends to examine religious diversity and tolerance in the performance of traditional festivals in Òṣun state, Southwestern Nigeria.

Analysis of Religious Diversity and Tolerance in the Performance of Traditional Festivals

Religious diversity and tolerance have remained one of the major issues explored by researchers today in order to determine the level of tolerance and accommodation of each other's religion in our immediate society. Therefore, this section analyses the level of religious diversity and tolerance in the performance of traditional festivals by using Òṣun Òṣogbo Festival, Egungun Festival and Sàngó Festival in Ede, Òṣun state as a case study.

Òṣun-Òṣogbo Festival: A Symbol of Unity Among Religious Groups

The Òṣun Òṣogbo Festival, held annually in Òṣogbo, Òṣun state, is one of Nigeria's most internationally recognized traditional festivals. It is dedicated to

the river goddess Òṣun. This sacred event draws thousands of people from across religious and cultural lines.

The first major public event of the Òṣun Òṣogbo Festival is *Iwopopo*, the traditional clearing of the main road in Òṣogbo, held on a Monday, twelve days before the festival's grand finale. On this day, the Ataoja, accompanied by his wives, chiefs, the Òṣun priestess, and other devotees, leads a procession from his palace to Gbaemu, located at the town's center. At designated spots, the Ataoja, adorned with his full regalia, receives communal gifts from his subjects (Oyeweso, 2013: p4).

Following this is *Atupa Olojumerindinlogun*, the second pre-festival ritual, and held nine days before the finale. It is conducted at the Ataoja's palace and it features the lighting of the sixteen-point lamp and participation from Òṣun devotees, (Raji 2019). As the traditional songs are going on, the king (Ataoja), his wives and chiefs dance round the lamp three times and return to the palace after which the Òṣun devotees come out to dance round the lamp like the king did before the Arugba (the virgin calabash carrier) in company of her maids. They take their turn going through the same steps.

The most notable of these are the days designated for sacrifice for the house or palace of the previous Ataoja (Ojo Ogboni), for the wives of the previous Ataoja (Ojo Ayaba Isale), for all of the previous Ataoja and their crowns (Ojo Ibori and Iboade), and for the special day when the Ataoja feeds all of his chiefs, family members, and the general public while also giving alms to the underprivileged members of society, (Oyeweso, 2013).

The Òṣun Òṣogbo Festival is celebrated annually, and before the day of the grand finale, all of these traditional festivities take place. It is evident that Arugba is an important part of this grand finale. It is thought that she carries the sacrifice down to the sacred grove, where she is known as the Votary Maid. As customary during the celebration, the Arugba is seen carrying a symbolic calabash that holds the objects or materials that will be offered at the shrine. The ancestor of Òṣogbo is said to have received this calabash from the goddess Òṣun, who commanded a virgin woman to bring it to the grove on the day of the celebration, Oyeweso (2013:6). This means that any woman who is required to bear the sacrifice needs to be a virgin, (Raji 2019). Since Òṣun is considered a woman of purity, her virginity represents purity. The Arugba is closely watched by *Olose* (whip boys) on her approach to the grove because they think it is bad luck for her to bump into a stump with her leg. Thus, the smooth journey of the Arugba from the palace to the forest is crucial to the festival's success.

On the final day of the Òṣun-Òṣogbo Festival, when the *Arugba* carries the sacred calabash to the grove, a significant event that traditionally takes place on a Friday. it coincides with *Jummah*, the weekly congregational prayer observed by Muslims. Notably, the central mosque in Osogbo is situated along the

pathway leading to the sacred grove and it is very close to the Ataoja's palace. Despite this overlap, no conflicts have been recorded. Observations show that some Muslims actively participate in the festival without attending the *Jumma* prayer, while others join the celebration after the prayer session. The return of the *Arugba* typically draws a massive crowd, cutting across the three major religions in the region, symbolizing peaceful co-existence and shared cultural identity.

Therefore, the annual festival of divinities in Òṣogbo is usually an affair that concerns the whole community of worshippers. It is often elaborated and last for about two weeks. The festival is fixed base on the age-old traditional practice of calculating the sacred calendar (Raji 2019: p4). Despite its deep roots in Yoruba traditional religion, the festival enjoys the active participation of Muslims, Christians, and even foreigners, creating an inclusive atmosphere where spirituality, culture, and community intersect. However, it was observed that religious diversity is not only acknowledged but celebrated, with adherents of various faiths contributing to the festivities in different ways, from local dignitaries attending rituals to Christian and Muslim families partaking in communal feasts and cultural displays. The festival functions as a space where religious identities co-exist peacefully, revealing how shared cultural heritage can foster unity in diversity.

Egungun Festival: Negotiating Religious Space and Representation

The Egungun Festival, observed in many Yoruba towns such as Ibadan, Ede, and Oyo, is a masquerade celebration rooted in ancestor worship. It involves elaborate performances where masked figures, believed to embody the spirits of the departed, dance through the streets, offering blessings and warnings. Ègúngún serves social, spiritual, and moral functions, reminding the living of their lineage, values, and communal responsibilities. While the festival originates from Yoruba indigenous beliefs, it takes place within communities that are now religiously heterogeneous. Therefore, the Egungun festival from one of the aforementioned festivals is explored from a town known as Ede in Osun state.

The religious landscape of Ede town in Òṣun state reflects a remarkable level of tolerance and coexistence among different faiths. Historically, the town's foundation is deeply rooted in traditional religious practices, a legacy of the broader cultural and political evolution of the Yoruba people dating back to the Oyo Empire. According to Nolte and Ogen (2017: p17), Ede's religious topography demonstrates the spatial distribution of Islam, Christianity, and indigenous beliefs. This diversity is evident in the town's structure, which accommodates all three major religions. Notably, the central mosque, situated directly in front of the King's palace, Timi Agbale Olofa Ina is a key landmark in the heart of the town, positioned within the central market known as Oja Timi (Timi's Market) with some churches very close to the area.

In the core heart of Ede, there are numerous traditional deities and masquerades, which include *Sàngó, Obatala, Ipedi, Ajagemo, Egungun, Òṣun* and *Oya*. The Egungun masquerade is one of the most prominent traditional deities in Ede, which is celebrated annually and has gained popularity today. Oyeweso (2017: p35) contends that “it is believed that people’s ancestors reincarnate through the Egungun masquerade, and this explains why they speak in an unnatural guttural tone.” The Egungun worship is usually done in the form of a festive celebration with the accompaniment of song, dance and the general parading of the town with bright costumes. It is observed that the celebration takes place in the space of seven days, mostly in the month of April. At this point, numerous masquerades come out from their abode to be celebrated. Oyeweso (2017: p35) also posits that “...various statues come out to perform and pray for the people.” The most prominent among the Ede masquerades is the *Áándú*, otherwise known as the Egungun Oba. It is mostly regarded as the most essential and powerful masquerade in Ede.

Áándú is one of the prominent *éégúnńlá* (great masquerades) featured during the *Egúngún* festival in Ede. Deeply embedded in the town’s cultural heritage, *Áándú* holds a special status, as he is the only masquerade permitted to sit on the *Timi*’s throne during his palace performance. Fayenuwo & Iwuh, (2024) assert that this symbolic act highlights *Áándú*’s embodiment of royal spirit and accords him the respect reserved for kings. Indigenous tradition holds that *Áándú* represents the spirit of a beloved Ede prince, believed to be Prince Mope, brother of the town’s first monarch. His spirit, cherished by the *Tìmi*, was immortalized through this revered masquerade, (Fayenuwo & Iwuh, 2024). Although there are some others, Egungun or Masquerade in Ede, which are still in existence today, such as *Àlùpè, Àtèrè, Ìyèkiyè, Ànìkulápò, Òndòrù, Gbàjèrò, Àlápámòrò, Èlẹ́fúnlójú, Èpètè, Tééré bíÀbéré, Àlápàlà, Olúkòtún, DàgbèròLátéjù, Rìbìrìbì, Àrèsèwòsùn*. However, it was accounted that there are over four hundred

Despite the introduction of both Islam and Christianity into the central part of Ede town, their growing influence has contributed to a decline in traditional religious practices. Many households have shifted from indigenous worship to either of the two introduced religions. According to one of the correspondences, “my family house in Ede was originally known as *Ile Osadeyi*, a name derived from the *Orisa Deyimole* (deity withheld). However, with the advent and spread of these new religions, the name evolved into what is now known as *Ile Aremuyo*. These names have an historical incident which surrounds them.”

However, it is the opinion that “the topography reflects not only the apparent dominance of Islam but also the important roles played by Christianity and traditional practices, (Nolte and Ogen 2017:18).” This implies that the traditional structure on which Ede town is built has not been washed away. Therefore, all these religions intersect with each other and bring about peaceful coexistence among the populace of Ede. As such, the Egungun Festival has

become a site where religious negotiation occurs. “It is important to note that historically, African Traditional Religion showed more tolerance to the foreign religions. Islam and Christianity, however, were not tolerant of the traditional religion of Ede people, (Efuntade, 2022:33).

Egungun is regarded as a deity associated with peace and social harmony in Ede town. Traditionally, Egungun in Ede appears for specific purposes, such as offering prayers and performing rituals aimed at restoring peace, combating epidemics, promoting communal development, and attracting positive transformations within the society. Although, some Christian and Muslim residents view the festival through the lens of their religious doctrines, sometimes choosing not to participate directly. However, the general atmosphere remains one of tolerance, where spatial and symbolic boundaries are respected, and participation is often voluntary. The festival exemplifies how communities manage religious difference through social agreements, maintaining respect for tradition while accommodating divergent beliefs.

Sàngó Festival: Cultural Pride and Religious Harmony

Sàngó Festival is celebrated in places like Oyo, Koso and Ede, the Sàngó Festival honours Sàngó, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning and a revered historical figure in Yoruba mythology. Over the years, the festival has evolved from a strictly religious ritual into a grand cultural event that attracts people of diverse religious backgrounds. It features drumming, chants, processions, and reenactments of historical legends associated with Sàngó.

The worship of Sàngó in Ede cannot be overemphasized, as it is one of the deities that serves as a traditional bedrock on which the town is built upon. The worship of Sàngó can be done at any time. Sàngó is usually worshiped daily, weekly, and annually; these periods of worship have not changed over time, (Ajibade 2017: p13). This suggests that the worship of Sàngó has largely remained consistent with its traditional development. Daily rituals are typically performed within the homes of devotees, where libations, often dry gin are poured on the deity's altar, and bitter kola nuts are placed at the shrine following prayers. This method also applies to weekly observances, though these tend to be more elaborate and may involve broader participation from other community members. Ajibade (2017) notes that “those initiated into Sàngó worship must observe specific taboos, such as refraining from smoking cigarettes and eating certain animals like *Ago* (a type of rat), *Esuro* (red-flanked duiker), and *Ewa sese* (cowpeas).” Additionally, it is customary to slaughter a chicken during worship, with its blood offered on the altar while the meat is consumed afterwards.

It is observed that the Sàngó festival in Ede lasts long and takes the space of nine days to be conducted. Two days before the start of the seven-day public festival, the Iya Sàngó, one of the most important priestesses of the deity, fetches water from the Òşun river for the cleansing of the *Edun Ara*, Sàngó

thunderstone, and Sàngó's cloth. The first day of the event marks the presence of numerous sacrifices offered at the palace of the Oba of Timi, prayers for peace and prosperity are made, and prayers against all forms of terrestrial manipulation are duly observed by the Timi of Ede. After this event, the Iya Sàngó and other Sàngó priests and priestesses, and other members who are faithful to the Sàngó worship, head to the shrine at Odo Sàngó to offer prayers and perform rituals. There, the Iya Sàngó carries the Sàngó Calabash and goes ahead to fetch water from the Odo Sàngó. After fetching the water, the Iya Sàngó meets Timi and his entourage on the other side of the river, and they all dance back to the town. The water brought is used to wash the Edun Ara, and a ram is killed, and the blood is splashed on the Edun Ara.

On the second day of the celebration, Timi of Ede offers his own sacrifice to the Sàngó using a cow and a ram, which are also eaten, along with meals of *Amala* served with *Gbegiri* or bean soup. Ajibade (2017: p78) lists other sacrifices related to Sàngó, such as cowries, goats, sheep, oxen, fowls, and bitter cola. The festival's third through seventh days are mostly dedicated to Ede Town residents dining, dancing, and performing magical feats. It is important to understand that the Sàngó priests occasionally place mortars on their chests and ask heavy men to pound on them while performing feats.

Oyeweso (2017: p42) asserts that “the continued and fervent worship of Sàngó in Ede takes place within a community that is predominantly Muslim and has a significant Christian presence. This is not perceived as an issue by many individuals, who believe that the various religious groups each have valuable contributions to offer the community. They maintain that the collective efforts of these groups can foster peace, unity, and harmony within the town.

People from various religious backgrounds actively participate in the Sàngó Festival in Ede town, particularly as spectators. For example, one respondent, a Muslim from a Sàngó lineage, explained that the festival remains an integral part of their family tradition, as some members still faithfully observe the celebrations. This highlights that not all households in Ede have completely abandoned indigenous practices in favour of Western religions like Islam or Christianity. Instead, many continue to uphold the worship of Sàngó as a vital ancestral obligation. Ajala and Nolte (2017) submit:

“... certainly, the participation of Muslim and especially Muslim Oba, in the Sàngó festival and thereafter in Muslim prayers, indicates that religious boundaries could be crossed. However, the Jumma service also allowed the Muslims to assert their ‘return’ to Islam at the end of the festival. Thus, while the visit to the mosques at the end of the Sàngó festival suggested that the boundaries between different forms of religious practice could be crossed, they did not imply that the boundaries between them were insignificant. As long as each religion was practiced in its own place and time, the

integrity of individual religions was not challenged, and multiple religious practice was civic rather than transgressive. (pg71)”

However, for many attendees, the festival is less about religious worship and more about affirming Yoruba identity and heritage. For instance, it brings about peaceful co-existence and tolerance of other religions. A vivid example can be seen in one of the Sàngó song gathered in Ede by Ajibade (2017: p84)

Yorùbá version	English translation
Méjèèjìlā ò máṣe	We shall practice the two
Méjèèjìlā ò máṣe	We shall practice the two
KátíMòsálásídé	When we return from the mosque
Kátísòsídé	When we return from the church
Kátúnwádò ò Sàngó	We should also go to Sàngó’s brook
(shrine)	
Méjèèjìlā ò máṣeé	We shall practice the two
Méjèèjìlā ò máṣeé	We shall practice the two

From the excerpt above, it can be inferred that Sàngó worship accommodates religious tolerance. It suggests that both Christians and Muslims can also be devotees of Sàngó. The song affirms the legitimacy of engaging in practices often criticized as syncretic, presenting the dual observance of faiths as valid in contrast to the views of Muslims and Christians who argue that true monotheism demands the rejection of Sàngó worship.

The capacity of Sàngó worshippers to interact with adherents of other religions in public settings is not significantly constrained by doctrinal limitations. Rather, it is shaped by the degree of recognition or space granted to Sàngó within such interactions. The inclusive nature of Sàngó worship is evident during the Sàngó festival. Therefore, it serves as a platform for cultural unity rather than religious exclusivity. Both Muslims and Christians, alongside traditionalists, take pride in Sàngó as part of their shared ancestry, and often join in the festivities. In this way, the Sàngó Festival reflects how cultural pride can bridge religious differences and promote peaceful coexistence.

Reflection on Findings from Case Studies

The case studies of the Òṣun-Òṣogbo, Egungun, and Sàngó festivals reveal a recurring pattern of religious coexistence and cultural tolerance in the performance of traditional festivals in Southwestern Nigeria. These festivals, though rooted in indigenous religious practices, have evolved into communal spaces where diverse religious adherents, Muslims, Christians, and Traditionalists interact peacefully. These festivals often promote mutual respect, shared identity, and dialogue among religious groups rather than breeding conflict. The participation of people from various faiths shows a deep cultural understanding that transcends doctrinal differences. This finding challenges the assumption that religion is always a source of division; in these contexts, it becomes a platform for negotiation, expression, and harmony.

The Significance of Festivals in Promoting Peaceful Co-existence

Traditional festivals serve not only as cultural preservation mechanisms but also as instruments of social integration and conflict mitigation. Their performative and communal nature fosters inter-religious understanding through shared space, symbols, and experiences. For instance, the rituals, music, dance, and oral performances offer a familiar cultural ground that encourages empathy and unity. Moreover, these events often facilitate dialogue, not just among religious groups but also between generations and classes. The symbolic and festive atmosphere reduces religious tension, allowing participants to focus on common ancestry, local heritage, and community well-being. Therefore, the festivals act as soft power tools that reinforce peace building efforts in religiously plural societies.

Comparison with Interfaith Practices in Other Parts of Nigeria

Compared to the Middle Belt and Northern regions of Nigeria where interfaith relations are often strained by ethno-religious violence, Southwestern Nigeria presents a relatively harmonious model of co-existence. In the North, festivals and religious events are often segregated, and tensions between Christian and Muslim communities have led to recurring conflicts. In contrast, the Yoruba socio-cultural framework tends to accommodate religious pluralism, allowing individuals to belong to multiple religious traditions within the same family or community. This inclusive worldview has enabled traditional festivals to thrive as inter-religious meeting points, rather than exclusive religious domains. While challenges still exist, the South west offers valuable lessons in inter-faith diplomacy, using culture as a unifying force rather than a divisive one.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that traditional festivals in Southwestern Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba serve as vital platforms for promoting religious diversity and tolerance. The paper has shown how festivals like Òṣun-Òṣogbo, Egungun, and Sàngó create inclusive cultural spaces where Muslims, Christians, and traditional worshippers engage in shared expressions of identity and heritage by drawing on theoretical insights from religious pluralism and performance theory. These festivals, while rooted in indigenous practices, accommodate diverse beliefs and foster mutual respect, contributing significantly to peaceful coexistence. Although inter-religious tensions may arise, but the role of festivals in bridging faith communities and reinforcing communal harmony remains significant. To address Nigeria religious divisions, preserving and supporting these culturally embedded models of tolerance becomes essential for building a more inclusive and cohesive society.

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