

THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN SOME CULTURAL FESTIVALS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Christian participation in some cultural festivals in Nigeria remains a contested issue within African Christianity, particularly where such festivals are deeply intertwined with indigenous religious beliefs, ritual sacrifices, ancestral veneration, and spiritual symbolism. This study examines the negative effects of Christian involvement in selected Nigerian cultural festivals, with particular attention to their theological, ethical, and pastoral implications. The introduction to the study situates the problem within the broader encounter between Christianity and African traditional religion, noting that while culture is an essential vehicle of identity and social cohesion, certain festival practices conflict with core Christian doctrines of monotheism, salvation in Christ, and exclusive allegiance to God. The persistence of syncretism, identity confusion among believers, and weakened Christian witness in pluralistic communities constitutes the central problem addressed by this research. The purposes of this paper include: to critically analyzing the theological incompatibilities between Christian faith and ritual elements embedded in some cultural festivals; to assess the moral and spiritual consequences of Christian participation in such festivals; and to contribute to ongoing African theological discourse on contextualization, inculturation, and faithful Christian engagement with culture. Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach. It employs theological analysis grounded in biblical exegesis, African Christian theology, and historical and phenomenological examinations of selected Nigerian cultural festivals. Secondary data from scholarly literature and ethnographic studies are analyzed to identify recurring patterns of religious syncretism and their effects on Christian belief and practice. The paper attempts to offer constructive biblical warning for Nigerian Christians and church leaders against participation in cultural festival that compromises Christian faith, identity and faithfulness.

Keywords: Cultural Festival, Participation, Syncretism, Idolatry, and Christian Identity

Introduction

In African traditional culture, detaching festivals from the people seems to be a pointless exercise. This is because of the common belief that people without culture are people without history, and festivals form a major part of African culture. Coming from a background of festivals play a great deal of human socialization, many Christians therefore feel it is necessary to identify with their culture by participating in their festivals. Therefore, for many Nigerian ethnic groups, cultural festivals play a significant role in their social, religious, and communal lives. Through rituals, symbols, music, dance, and ancestral memories, these festivals

frequently act as channels for maintaining indigenous identity, spreading communal ideals, and bolstering social cohesiveness. Cultural festivals are intricately entwined with traditional religious worldviews, cosmology, and spiritual practices for many cultures, making them more than just leisure celebrations.¹ Unfortunately, a growing number of Christians in Nigeria are juggling their devotion to Christianity with their participation in cultural celebrations that contain

¹Chidiebere Ekweariri and Edi Onyinyeche. "Indigenous Dress as a Prerequisite for Cultural Preservation in Traditional African Festival: 2011 Ozuruimo in Focus." *EJOTMAS: Ekpmoma Journal of Theatre and Media Arts.* Vol. 5, Nos 1&2 (2016): 266.

elements at odds with biblical theology as Christianity.

These festivals are celebrated or performed in commemoration of one event or the other, and sometimes they are celebrated in honour of a particular god, goddess or a deified ancestor.² Christian involvement in cultural festivals has sparked ongoing theological discussion among Nigerian Christianity in recent time. Some Christians contend that many festivals retain ritual,³ sacrificial, and spiritual aspects that are at odds with Christian doctrines of salvation, holiness, and unwavering loyalty to Christ, while others see such participation as a neutral cultural expression or a valid way of cultural engagement and contextualization.⁴ In a religiously diverse and culturally diverse culture like Nigeria, this conflict presents significant issues regarding syncretism, Christian identity, discipleship, and the integrity of Christian witness. Important issues about faith compromise and Christian identity are brought up by this intersection. On the one hand, Christians' refusal to take part in cultural events may indicate a break with their heritage and group traditions, which could weaken ties to one another. Conversely, Christians participation in the cultural festivity may raise question about Christian identity and integrity in a pluralistic society like Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the widespread involvement of Christians in cultural festivals across Nigeria,

². James Mari Ogbemudia. "The Impact of Christianity on the Ohen Festival of Ikao in Edo State, Nigeria." *The Noun Scholar* Vol, 3 Num 2, (DECEMBER, 2023): 181

³. Chioma P. Onuorah."From ritual to renewal: Religious festivals as catalysts for national unity in Nigeria." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10860. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.vl81.10860>

⁴. I. N. Onwuatuwegwu. "Christianity And Cultural Preservation: Reimagining the New Yam Festival In Igbo-African Milieu." *Multidisciplinary Journal of Current Research and Review*, vol. 8, num 2, (2025): 36. 36–47. Retrieved from <https://aspjournals.net/Journals/index.php/mjccr/article/view/1110>

there is insufficient critical theological reflection on the negative effects of such participation on Christian faith and practice. In many cases, cultural festivals incorporate invocations of deities, ancestral veneration, ritual sacrifices, masquerade cults, and symbolic actions that presuppose spiritual realities contrary to biblical revelation. When Christians participate, whether actively or passively, these practices may blur the boundaries between Christian worship and traditional religious observances, leading to doctrinal confusion and syncretism.

Furthermore, participation in such festivals has been observed to weaken Christian ethical distinctiveness, undermine church discipline, and create internal conflicts within congregations.⁵ Younger Christians, in particular, may struggle to discern the limits of cultural accommodation, resulting in compromised faith commitments and distorted theological understanding. The problem is compounded by the lack of clear pastoral guidance and contextual theological frameworks to help Nigerian Christians distinguish between cultural identity and religious allegiance. Consequently, the church's witness, spiritual vitality, and theological coherence are often adversely affected.

Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this paper is to examine the negative effects of Christian participation in cultural festivals in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

- a. Identify religious and spiritual elements within Nigerian cultural festivals that conflict with core Christian beliefs.
- b. Analyze the theological and ethical implications of Christian involvement in such festivals.

⁵. Mattias Gassman. 'Christianity and Graeco-Roman Paganism', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et, 2022 al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ChristianityandGraecoRomanPaganism>

- c. Examine how participation in these festivals contributes to syncretism, weakened Christian identity, and compromised witness.
- d. Offer theological insights that can guide Nigerian Christians toward faithful cultural engagement without undermining biblical convictions.

By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to broader scholarly discussions on religion-culture interaction, syncretism, and identity negotiation within African contexts.

Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, drawing from theology, religious studies, and African cultural analysis. The study employs:

- a. Biblical and theological analysis to evaluate Christian doctrines relevant to worship, holiness, and spiritual allegiance.
- b. Literature review of scholarly works on African traditional religion, Nigerian cultural festivals, contextual theology, and Christian ethics.
- c. Descriptive analysis of selected Nigerian cultural festivals to highlight religious symbols, rituals, and practices.
- d. Contextual theological reflection to assess the implications of Christian participation within the Nigerian socio-religious environment.

The qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology adopted for this study is appropriate because the subject of Christian participation in cultural festivals in Nigeria involves complex religious meanings, theological interpretations, and lived experiences that cannot be adequately examined through quantitative methods alone. Cultural festivals are embedded within symbolic rituals, beliefs, and communal practices that require careful interpretation rather than numerical measurement. A qualitative approach, therefore,

allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how such festivals function religiously and culturally, and how Christian participation in them affects faith, identity, and practice.

Biblical and theological analysis is essential to this study because the central concern is the compatibility or incompatibility of certain cultural festival practices with core Christian doctrines. Issues such as worship, holiness, syncretism, and exclusive allegiance to Christ are fundamentally theological in nature. Employing biblical exegesis and theological reflection enables the study to evaluate cultural practices against the normative authority of Scripture and historic Christian teaching, rather than relying solely on sociological or anthropological descriptions.

By integrating theological reflection with cultural analysis, the study aims to contribute to ongoing discourse on Christianity and culture in Africa and to provide a framework for discerning faithful Christian engagement in culturally complex settings.

What is a Festival?

Festival is an event, a social phenomenon, encountered in virtually all human cultures.⁶ Etymologically the term *festival* derives ultimately from the Latin *festum*. But originally Latin had two terms for festive events: *festum*, for public joy, merriment, revelry, and *ferrie*, meaning abstinence from work in honour of the gods.⁷ Festival is a recurring ritual that allows gods, the living, and the dead to communicate.⁸

⁶. Alessandro Falass. "Festival: Definition and Morphology." Pg 1. Accessed December 23, 2025. <https://webhelper.brown.edu/joukowsky/courses/cityan/dfestival09/files/9722047.PDF>

⁷. Falass. "Festival: Definition and Morphology." Pg 1. Accessed December 23, 2025. <https://webhelper.brown.edu/joukowsky/courses/cityan/dfestival09/files/9722047.PDF>

⁸. Stephen Ogheneruro Okpadah. "A Study of Festival Theatre to Fekstival Theatre: Emuodje Fekstival of Ekakpamre in Southern Nigeria as a Paradigm." *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 12, 1, (2018):42.

A variety of creatures and deities, including powerful gods and goddesses, hills, mountains, trees, rocks, valleys, rivers, spirits, and deified ancestors, are the focus of festivals. These celebrations are held to honor or placate these ancestors, gods, or spirits. Ekweariri and Edi, Oyin and Irele support this claim by stating that every festival is associated with a supernatural being or a deified ancestor, which can be considered religious at its core and source of inspiration.⁹

According to Abdul Rasheed Adeoye,¹⁰ ritual holidays are therefore founded on the commemoration of certain heroes, their actions, and events of great significance. The uniqueness of the traditional African festival can be explained by the fact that it is an occasion for the meeting of gods and humans as well as an occasion for the reunion and communion of the living with their ancestors.¹¹ Because these gods and deities are revered and sacrosanct during some of these festivals, the time of their festivities is typically viewed as a peaceful time when any kind of dispute or confrontation is considered sacrilegious.¹² Some people therefore capitalizing on the moral expectations of the people during this festival conclude that these festivals since they promote moral atmosphere during the celebration should be embraced by Christians. They pick the moral aspect of the culture and brandish the festivals as good events. And the goodness is defined from the cultural standpoint, not from the biblical standpoint, that would not only consider the outcome but the

source and the purpose. Some denominations like the in some host communities do organized food fair as celebration of the festivals to reduce tension between Christians and the idol worshippers.¹³ Possibly, this is done in an attempt to contextualize Christianity.

Nigerian festivals have a long history and draw sizable crowds each year as they honor a distinctive facet of the country's culture. This is due to the fact that entertainment is one of the main reasons people attend these festivals and celebrations. An environment of camaraderie and joy is always established throughout their celebrations because most festivals are often celebrated with dance ceremony, eating and drinking. This gives individuals from all walks of life a place to gather at a designated location and take part in the festivals as viewers or participants, claim Ekweariri and Edi.¹⁴ Additionally, they asserted that the majority of festivals are community-based and that, regardless of how they are seen, they integrate characteristics of theater, including the subject, characters, audience, location, clothing, makeup, acting, singing, and dancing.¹⁵ Furthermore, most festivals in Nigeria are usually marked with lots of merrymaking, where relatives and old friends meet to cerebrate. There, alcohol are shared in sufficient quantity to the end that drunkenness is ensured. Such gatherings often promote licentiousness and immorality. However, the common belief is that the joyous occasion honours the fertility god, highlighting the importance of the festival as a way for new grandmothers to express gratitude and celebrate the arrival of their first grandchild. It is important however to note that there are two different types of festivals: religious and

⁹. Chidiebere and Onyinyeche. "Indigenous Dress as a Prerequisite for Cultural Preservation in Traditional African Festival: 2011 Ozuruimo in Focus." EJOTMAS: *Ekpoma Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*. Vol. 5, Nos 1&2 (2016): 267.

¹⁰. AbdulRasheed Adeoye. (Year/Book/Article title), p.

¹¹². Quoted in: *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, September 2018.

¹¹. Stephen Ogheneruro Okpadah. "Fleksival Theatre: Emuodje Fleksival of Ekakpamre in Southern Nigeria as a Paradigm." *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 12, num. 1, (September 2018): 43, 42-56

¹². Ogbemudia. "The Impact of Christianity on the Ohen Festival of Ikao in Edo State, Nigeria." *The Noun Scholar* Vol. 3 Num 2, (DECEMBER, 2023): 181.

¹³. A. Ibrahim. "Christianity and cultural Practices in Ebiraland: A survey." *African Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 15, num 3, (2020): 22-35

¹⁴. Chidiebere and Edi. "Indigenous Dress as a Prerequisite for Cultural Preservation in Traditional African Festival: 2011 Ozuruimo in Focus." EJOTMAS: *Ekpoma Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*. Vol. 5, Nos 1&2 (2016): 264

¹⁵. Chidiebere and Edi. "Indigenous Dress as a Prerequisite for Cultural Preservation in Traditional African Festival: 2011 Ozuruimo in Focus." EJOTMAS: *Ekpoma Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*. Vol. 5, Nos 1&2 (2016): 268

cultural. Religious festivals are held to honour deities or to perform religiously significant rituals. Cultural festivals commemorate momentous events or heroes of the community, or celebrate joyous occasions such as harvest-time and change to benign season.¹⁶ However, the line between them is so thin or does even exist as all of them have some rituals associated with them. It is easy then for one to flow from cultural to religious and from religious to cultural. The question then, should Christians participate in these festivals just because they are social beings and are members of the community?

Analysis of Selected Nigerian Cultural Festivals

African societies are delineated with their cultural practices. These cultural practices encompass their mode of dressing, the language with which communication is effected, the kind of food they eat, the system of governance, and so on. Beyond the socio-cultural, political and the economic gamut, is the spiritual plane. The spiritual facet does not only control the other planes, it is also manifested in festivals. Festival has the cultural constituents of a people, manifested in it, hence, festival is found in culture as much as culture is found in festivals. The implication of the above assertion is that festival is predicated on the culture of a people.¹⁷

Man as a material being in a material world, fears what he perceives as immaterial, for it cannot be contained or dominated. This defensive impulse is to concretize, to make the invisible visible, the infinite finite, and the superhuman human.”¹⁸ Thus, ritual holidays give visibility to the invisible. These customs are

artistic in their expression. Theatrical elements abound in the ritualistic display. Drama is actually found in the rituals that are carried out.

New Yam Festivals

In Cross River and Enugu States of Nigeria, every September, some communities there celebrate the New Yam Festival. During this ceremony, sacrifices are made to the god of fertility, thanking the idol for granting good yield. The belief is that if that ceremony is not conducted, the community will experience poor yield in the next season.¹⁹ According to Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, new yams could not be eaten until some had been offered to these powers (gods, goddesses, and ancestors). The New Yam Festival, which marked the start of the season of plenty and the new year, was anticipated by men and women of all ages.²⁰ Instead of give God the praise for good harvest, glory is given to idols. After the ritual sacrifices made, social celebration of dancing, drinking, and eating take place.²¹ How can one participate in the social eating and dancing in honor of the gods without participating in the worship? Invariably, that is impossible, because the purpose of the dancing, eating and drinking is to honour the gods. Selecting one out of the three does not invalidate the purpose. A Christian participating in these festivals may mix Christian faith with traditional religion, leading to syncretism, which the Bible strongly condemns. By participating, it is a declaration that the fertility of the land comes from the idol worship. The Bible teaches that all good things come from above, and God is the sustainer of life (Psalm 104:27-30; Isa. 46:3-4).

The Masquerade Festival In Akwa Ibom

¹⁶. Okpadah. “Flekstival Theatre: Emuodje Flekstival of Ekakpamre in Southern Nigeria as a Paradigm.” *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 12, num. 1, (September 2018): 45

¹⁷. Okpadah. “Flekstival Theatre: Emuodje Flekstival of Ekakpamre in Southern Nigeria as a Paradigm.” *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 12, num. 1, (September 2018): 43.

¹⁸. Ibid, 45. This explains why traditional African religions have to represent their gods in a material form.

¹⁹. Nwanaju Uzoma. “Festivals In African Communities and Their Future Prospects.” *Asian Journal of Social Science and Management Technology*. Vol. 6, Iss. 5, (September-October, 2024): 75

²⁰. Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann (2008): 29-41

²¹. Uzoma. “Festivals In African Communities and Their Future Prospects.” *Asian Journal of Social Science and Management Technology*. Vol. 6, Iss. 5, (September-October, 2024): 76

Festivals in African communities therefore primarily educate community members on their customs and common heritage and further prepare the young for a better and more informed adulthood.²² The Masquerade festival is a cult festivity that trains young people on bravery skill as they enter into adulthood. It may not be very possible to exclude ritual from such festival as rituals often form an inseparable part of African festivals.²³

Peter O. Okafor sees the cultural festivals as a neo-paganism, which is a modernization of the pagan cult and practices to render them attractive to modern people particularly the youths.²⁴

In the ancient African religious traditions, the pagan priest lived in the bush separated from the ordinary people because spirits and humans do not interact. The priest is a representative of the spiritual world, the world of the deities. Physically, he looked haggard and dressed shabbily. Nonetheless, a large number of people who pretend to be contemporary pagan priests now reside in luxurious homes, wear elegant clothing, and even own pricey vehicles. Additionally, some construct upstairs shrines and decorate them exquisitely. Some of them even bear names seen in the Bible. The goal is to modernize their neo-pagan rituals and customs by making them appealing and in line with contemporary society. This modern lifestyle has made some people see priests who conduct rituals during festivals as brothers. It does not look devilish to associate with such people.

²². Nwanaju Uzoma T. "Festivals In African Communities And Their Future Prospects." *Asian Journal of Social Science and Management Technology*. Vol. 6, Iss. 5, (September-October, 2024). 74. 71-79

²³. Nwanaju Uzoma T. "Festivals In African Communities And Their Future Prospects." *Asian Journal of Social Science and Management Technology*. Vol. 6, Iss. 5, (September-October, 2024). 74

²⁴. Peter Onyekwelu Okafor. "The Church and The Challenge of Neo-Paganism in South-Eastern Nigeria." *A Journal of Contextual Theology* Vol. 6 (Dec. 2020): 2, Julian Chukwuemeka Ibe and Nicholas Chinaemelum Alutu. "Neo-Paganism And Religious Syncretism In Southeast Nigeria: Implications For The Church In Igboland." *An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 11. No. 6, (2025): 3.

Biblical Principles That Guide Christian Participation

The Bible strongly warns against idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14; Exod. 20:3-5). How can Christians participate in the dancing festival ceremonies where idols are glorified without participating in their worship? The deception the devil uses to confuse and lure Christians into such activities is the belief that the festivals unite the community and promote moral behaviour during the season. That means the idol is comfortable with immoral behaviour out of season. The Bible warns Christians not to participate in idol worship and also participate in the Lord's table. Meaning that God will not allow Christians to fellowship with idol worshippers in the name of social functions that promote occasional righteousness, yet violate continuously biblical principles.

A look into the Bible reveals that the Israelites, too, had both religious and cultural festivals. In the Old Testament, God Himself instituted seven religious festivals for the Israelites. They are laid down in Leviticus 23 as the: Feast of Passover; Feast of Unleavened Bread; Feast of the First fruits; Feast of Pentecost (also called Feast of Harvest and Feast of Weeks); Feast of Trumpets; Day of Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles (also known as Feast of Ingathering). Christians are not bound to observe them because they are only a shadow of the things to come (Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 10:1). These festivals foreshadowed the salvation that was to be given through Jesus Christ, the downpour of the Holy Spirit, and Christ's gospel call. All these have been fulfilled through Jesus Christ. Hence, Christians do not need to keep these feasts anymore. If Christians are not to keep those Old Testament Festivals that even had better religious coloration, why then should Christians be involved in festivals that promote paganism?

Festivals in Honour of Idols

Moving on to the New Testament, it is observed that neither Jesus nor the apostles established any festivals. Therefore, Christianity as such has no festivals. Needless to say, Christians are strictly forbidden from participating in festivals

dedicated to false gods. It is an abomination to God. In Leviticus 18:3-30, God issued the injunction against doing things according to the way the Canaanites were doing things. The Jews were not to do any of such abominable things. God called those pagan festivals abominations.

Discussion

In Colossians 2:8, the Bible warns against being spoiled by the “tradition of men.” Again in 1 Corinthians 10:18-22, the Bible warns against having “fellowship with demons” and instructs Corinth Christians that “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons.” It is not until one takes the initiative or actively participates in the sacrifice before he/she violate the principle of not partaking of the table of the demons. Encouraging such activities, even by identifying with idol worship, will amount to worshipping idols. In 2 John 10, the Bible warns against exchanging pleasantries with a false teacher in a way that will encourage him to continue with his teaching. If a Christian is warned against even greeting a false teacher, how then will a Christian participate in the pagan festival without violating biblical command?

The command to Christians to separate themselves from the practices of pagan religions receives even stronger emphasis in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. In Jeremiah 10:2, God warns that his children should not learn the way of the Gentiles. What happened in Exodus 32:5-10 has shown that God does not want His people to honour Him in the way of the Gentiles. God is to be honored only in the way He Himself has set out.

Christianity affirms exclusive devotion to the one true God (Exod. 20:3; Deut. 6:4). Many pagan festivals involve rituals, sacrifices, libations, or invocations directed toward traditional gods or spirits as mentioned. Christian participation in these acts may constitute a practical denial of biblical monotheism and violate the first commandment.

Such involvement risks syncretism, where Christian faith is blended with non-Christian religious beliefs.²⁵

Participating in pagan festivals also compromises one's Christian identity and witness. According to 1 Peter 1:15-16, Christians are called to live as a unique and holy people. The credibility of Christian testimony may be weakened, and non-Christians may become confused by public participation in festivities that are known to incorporate pagan practices. Such acts may imply that a commitment to Christ does not necessitate a clear departure from prior religious allegiances in African countries where Christianity and African traditional religion coexist. Therefore, Christians are not allowed to adopt a pagan festival, even if it is masked it with a Christian name, force Christian virtues into its customs and celebrations, and then celebrate it in honour of Christ.

Conclusion

Christianity itself is a religion without festivals, because Jesus did not institute any. Yet the Lord did not condemn the celebration of cultural festivals. Hence, it is not wrong to participate in festivals that are not religiously pagan in nature. But it's crucial to understand that paganism permeates all facets of life, from conception to demise. Pagan elements are inherent in some African cultures, and cultural festivals are likely to incorporate pagan customs. Christians must avoid superstition and paganism when commemorating any cultural festivals. Their unwillingness to participate in the celebrations would inevitably raise concerns and give the impression that they are uninterested, unadjusted, or even excessive and intolerable. However, they must never sacrifice their values to appease people. Rather, Christians should keep in mind that their God is envious and that

²⁵. Larry W. Hurtado. “Observations on the “Monotheism” Affirmed in the New Testament.” Pg 13 <https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/monotheism-in-nt-lausanne.pdf>

He has selected them to be unique and holy in order for them to exalt and declare His name. The New Testament declares that we are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that we may continue to proclaim the praise of God. With all these identifications, it will be absurd for a Christian to involve themselves in celebrating pagan culture in the name of a festival.

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