

## THE ROLE OF RELIGION AS A TOOL IN SHAPING CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE IDOMA PEOPLE

**IGE, S. ABIODUN, Ph.D**

*Department of Religious Studies  
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba Kogi State  
pastorige@yahoo.com*

&

**OKWORI JAMES**

*Postgraduate Student of Religious Studies  
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba Kogi State  
okworijames03@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

*The Idoma people have been exposed to various religious influences, including indigenous beliefs, Christianity, and Islam, which have the potential to shape their cultural identity. However, little research has been conducted to understand the specific role of religion in this regard. The problem addressed in this study is the lack of comprehensive knowledge regarding the extent to which religion functions as a tool in shaping cultural identity among the Idoma people. The study aims to shed light on the dynamics of religious practices and their impact on the Idoma people's cultural traditions, practices, and values. The research employs qualitative methods such as interviews to gather in-depth information about the religious and cultural practices of the Idoma people. The research also incorporates a historical analysis of the Idoma people and their religious transformation over time. Therefore, this study investigates the historical and sociocultural background of Idoma people, exploring the religious beliefs and practices that contribute to their cultural identity, and analyzing the impact of religion on their social, economic, and political life. The study shows that religion is significant in shaping the cultural identity of the Idoma people. It also reveals the interdependence between religious beliefs and cultural practices, highlighting how religious rituals, symbols, and values contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage among the Idoma people. The study recommends that there is a need for the Idoma people to embrace and preserve their cultural heritage while adapting to changing religious dynamics.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Sociology, Cultural Identity, Idoma People,

### **Introduction**

Religion plays a significant role in shaping cultural identities around the world. It serves as a framework for individuals and communities to interpret and understand the world, guiding their behaviors, beliefs, and practices. Cultural identity refers to the shared values, traditions, customs, and beliefs that define a particular group or community. Religion, as a cultural system, influences and shapes various aspects

of cultural identity, including language, art, music, dress, food, and social interactions. Idoma people's cultural identity is deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs and practices, reflecting the fusion of traditional African religious systems and Christianity. These religions emphasize a connection with ancestral spirits, the forces of nature, and the overall harmony of the universe (Ezeanya12). Through rituals, ceremonies, and communal gatherings, Idoma people reinforce their cultural values, transmit historical narratives, and foster a sense of belonging within the community. Idoma people have a rich cultural heritage that traces back to ancient times. They are part of the larger Idoma ethnic group, predominantly found in the middle belt region of Nigeria. Historically, Idoma people practiced African traditional religion characterized by animism, ancestor worship, and rituals centered on nature. However, with the advent of colonialism and the introduction of Christianity, their religious landscape underwent significant changes.

Christianity, particularly the Catholic Church, has played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural identity of the Idoma people. The missionaries' arrival in the late 19th century brought about a transformation in religious practices and beliefs. Christianity replaced or modified certain traditional practices, integrating them into a Christian framework. The adoption of Christian rituals and the introduction of Western education had a profound impact on the Idoma people's cultural identity. Christian beliefs and practices, as propagated by various missionary groups, have gained popularity within the community, leading to a gradual shift away from African traditional religion (Ezeanya18). This religious transformation has implications for the Idoma people's cultural practices, as aspects of their indigenous beliefs are assimilated, reinterpreted, or abandoned altogether. Religious beliefs are central to cultural identity, as they provide a moral and ethical framework for behavior and social norms. Idoma people's religious beliefs, influenced by both African traditional religion and Christianity, shape their cultural values. These values include respect for elders, communal living, hospitality, and a strong emphasis on family and kinship ties. Religious teachings also guide their understanding of gender roles, marriage customs, and rites of passage.

Rituals and festivals are essential cultural practices that reinforce social cohesion and identity. Idoma people engage in various religious rituals and festivals that reflect their cultural identity. Traditional rituals such as the annual "*IgedeAgba*" festival, which celebrates the harvest and ancestral reverence, coexist with Christian celebrations such as Christmas and Easter. These religious observances serve as a means of preserving cultural traditions and strengthening community bonds. Religion plays a significant role in shaping social interactions and community cohesion among the Idoma people. Churches serve as not only religious centers but also as important social hubs where community members gather for worship, fellowship, and other communal activities. These interactions

strengthen social ties and promote cultural exchange. According to Ato, religion acts as a "cultural mirror" that reflects and reinforces the beliefs, practices, and customs of a community (45).

This paper therefore discusses the interplay between religion and cultural identity. It gives a brief history of the study area. Also, it examines the religious beliefs and practices of people. In essence, the paper focuses on the role of religion as a tool in shaping cultural identity among the Idoma people.

### **Brief History of Idoma People**

Idoma is the name by which the people of the Idoma ethnic group of Otukpo, Okpokwu, and Ado Local Government Areas of Benue State refer to themselves and their language and are understood as such by other Nigerian people (YakubuAboki 4). He further instates that, the Idoma occupy a belt of territory that stretches from the Southern banks of the Benue River to the northern fringes of Igboland. They have as their neighbors the Tiv and Egedde to the east, the Igala to the west and the Eza and Nsukka Igbo to the south ( Erim cite by YakubuAboki 4).

According to Igboaka (12), the Idoma is one of the ten largest ethnic groups in Nigeria dispersed in several states in the country. The Idoma people live primarily in the western region of Benue State in Nigeria, and some are also found in Taraba, Cross Rivers, Enugu, Kogi, and Nasarawa states in Nigeria. The Idoma languages are Igede, Arago, Agatsu, Eturo, Ete, Akweya (Akpa), and the Idmoids of the Borta-Niger tribe, including Benue, Nasarawa, Kogi, Enugu, and Yala in the north. It falls into the Akweya subgroup of words, Cross River State. The Akweya subgroup is closely related to the Yatye-Akpa subgroup. Most of the territory lies inland south of the Benue River, approximately 72 kilometers east of its confluence with the Niger River. The Idoma are known to be 'warriors' and 'hunters' in their ranks, but they are hospitable and peace-loving. Much of Idoma's land remained largely unknown to Westerners until the 1920s, preserving much of Idoma's colorful traditional culture.

Idoma's population is estimated at 3.5 million. The Idoma people have a traditional ruler called Ochi Idoma who is the head of the Idoma Regional Traditional Council. It was introduced by the British. Each community has its traditional chiefs, such as Ado Ogbadivo of Orokam, and Chief D.E. Enenche. Ochidoma Palace is located in Otukupo, Benue State.(<https://academic.accelerator.com/encyclopedia/idoma-people>). Agriculture in the rainy season and hunting in the dry season define the Idoma economy. Therefore, both small and large markets alternately take place in different districts. In addition, crafts, including cotton textile weaving and dyeing, as well as blacksmithing, have flourished in the general area. In other words, the people of Idoma are majorly warriors, farmers, and hunters, and they are known to be hospitable and peaceful (<https://naijabibliography.com/history-culture/history-and-culture-of-the-idoma->

people/). Idoma people celebrate numerous festivals and ceremonies throughout the year, which serve as occasions for community gatherings, cultural displays, and religious observances. One of the most prominent festivals is the Agatu Festival, celebrated in honor of the ancestors, with masquerades, traditional dances, and feasting. Other festivals include Igedeagbafestivsl, Ijalekwu, Ojo, Agatu Fishing Festival, and Awume Festival.

### **Religious beliefs and practices of Idoma People**

Before the advent of Christianity and Islam, Idoma people like most Africans were African traditional religious worshippers. African traditional religion is the indigenous religion of the people of Africa. Anizoba and Johnson (21) observed that like most communities in Africa, the Idoma people from Nigeria and Benue State have a lot in common with other traditional societies, even though certain cultural traits still slightly distinguish them from other cultures. Similarly, Anothy asserts that the Idoma people hold a unified religious belief, but their spiritual practices vary from lineage to lineage and community to community. One unifying belief is their understanding of God (*Owoicho*), the Supreme Being, the Creator of all things (6).

According to Salihu (199), hierarchically, this Creator has established intermediaries—Ancestors (*Alekwu*), Spirits (*alelekwu*), Earth goddesses (*Aje*), and other objects inhabited by spirits. Traditional religious beliefs and practices have been an integral part of Idoma culture. They believe in a supreme deity called *Owo* (*Owoicho*), who is considered the creator of the universe. Ancestral worship is also prevalent, where ancestors are revered and believed to intercede on behalf of the living. *Egba O' Gbo – Owoicho* is the Idoma word for religion denoting something of God ( OnmokeSlyvester 126).

Ijiga Pius (30) opined that:

"Idoma religion recognizes the existence of a supreme being: *Owoicho* as the creator of all that is and the belief in other spiritual beings and forces that saves. E.g the *Alekwu* ancestral spirits, as intermediary and agents between *Owoicho* and Ache' *Ogbegba*-worshippers such recognition forms Idoma pillar of religion".

The Idoma worldview includes belief in spirit, belief in magic and medicine, and ancestral curses, among others. It is also believed in Idoma cosmology that some mystic forces in the universe can be tapped and utilized to bring about some effects, good and bad (Omoredge 20).

### **Interplay between Religion and Cultural Identity**

An attempt to define religion has been proven abortive over time, this is because of its complex nature and due to different experiences of people. That notwithstanding, Sociologist Emile Durkheim defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and

forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (44). Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging and connection that individuals and communities feel towards a particular culture or cultural group. It is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various factors and experiences, shaping an individual's understanding of who they are and how they relate to the world around them (<https://different-level.com/religion-as-cultural-identity-addressing-misconceptions-and-examining-attitudes/>).

Religion, as a fundamental element of human experience, has long been recognized as a significant factor in shaping and influencing cultural identity formation. Geertz described religion as a cultural system of symbols, which establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations and naturalize conceptions of a general order of existence (91). Steven Harrison says this interrelationship between religion and cultural identity can be observed in various contexts and is influenced by a range of factors, including historical, social, and political dynamics. As so many different factors are at play in determining identity, cultural identity must, however, be seen as in flux (Vroom 118).

One prominent scholar who has extensively examined the interplay between religion and cultural identity is Geertz. In his seminal work "The Interpretation of Cultures," he argues that religion is a vital component of culture and plays a crucial role in defining the meaning and significance of social life (87). He suggests that religious beliefs and practices provide individuals with a sense of identity and purpose, and they help shape the collective identity of a community or society. Religion plays a pivotal role in establishing moral values and organizing social interactions. The religious expressions of individuals serve as a crucial element of cultural identity by offering a framework for understanding the world. More than this, religion provides limits by establishing moral guidelines and organizing social interactions. Religion can also influence various aspects of a person's life, including their art, literature, music, architecture, and even dietary preferences. Consequently, when individuals identify with a specific religion, they often align themselves with the cultural heritage, traditions, and values associated with that religion, contributing to their sense of cultural identity. For instance, Hinduism, with its rich tapestry of rituals, festivals, and traditions, profoundly influences the cultural identity of millions of people in India and other parts of South Asia. Similarly, Islam, emphasizing prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage, forms an integral part of the cultural fabric of many Middle Eastern and North African societies (Mihaela <https://different-level.com/religion-as-cultural-identity-addressing-misconceptions-and-examining-attitudes/>).

### **Role of Religion as a tool in shaping Cultural Identity among Idoma People**

Religion and culture are two distinct phenomena, but they are closely related to one another. Since it has been around, religion has shaped people's and communities' way of life. Through its many values and beliefs, it gives purpose to people's lives. The function that culture plays, on the other hand, has made it a potent tool in any human community. It is the totality of all that a person in a society represents. The Idoma cultural identity has been significantly shaped by religion, and it continues to do so. Here are the various ways that religion shapes cultural identity.

#### **1. Religious Influence on Socialization and Values**

The Idoma, an ethnic group in Nigeria, has a rich cultural heritage that is deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs and practices. The Idoma people are predominantly practitioners of African Traditional Religion (ATR), with a strong belief in spirits and ancestral worship.

The process of socialization within the Idoma community is heavily influenced by religious beliefs. It is a norm that from a young age, Idoma children are taught the importance of religious rituals and traditions. This is because; parental faith which supports the trust emerging in the newborn has throughout history sought its institutional safeguard in organized religion. All religions have in common the periodical childlike surrender to a provider or providers who dispense earthly fortune as well as spiritual health” (Erikson 225). These practices serve as a way to reinforce cultural norms, foster community cohesion, and instill a sense of identity amongst the younger generation. For instance, religious ceremonies such as initiation rites and festivals provide opportunities for community members to come together, share stories, and cultivate a collective consciousness.

Esther Joseph vividly stated that:

“Religion influences socialization and values because it is an institution for socialization that is responsible for training people about certain beliefs which they conform to. The place of worship is a place that encourages people to imbibe the values embedded in Religion. People learn good behaviours from what they are taught at their Religious centers and this is able to guide their lifestyle all through life. Religion influences socialization because most of the ancient cultural practices by the primitive people are being modified by Religion. An example is the stop of the killing oftwins, the spread of Christianity and its influence on educational growth, Islam and the Sharia judicial system”etc (Interview).

The Idoma people view adherence to religious values as essential for maintaining harmonious relationships within the community and living a virtuous life. In addition, Religion also shapes Idoma values by enforcing specific moral codes and ethical behavior within the community. It is through the process of socialization that individuals get to know the “do's and don'ts” of society. Socialization is an

initiation into the heart of society (Etim 139). For instance, the Idoma people believe in the existence of deities and spirits who oversee human affairs and enforce righteous conduct. Etim continues by saying that the sanction system has to do with the rewards and penalties that society stipulates for individuals according to performance and merit (139).

## 2. Cultural Preservation and Transmission

The need for culture to be preserved and transmitted through generations cannot be overemphasized. In the face of civilization, modernization, and globalization, it becomes expedient for the preservation and transmission of Idoma culture.

According to Mitchell Whitaker, cultural transmission can be defined as the transmission of preferences, ideas, beliefs, and norms of behavior as a result of an interaction between biological predispositions and social interaction between and within generations. Cultural transmission occurs when those elements of culture are passed from one generation to the next (1).

Religion often influences cultural norms and moral values. It can play a role in shaping behaviors and practices within a society, contributing to the preservation and transmission of cultural traditions and ethical principles. Religion plays a vital role in Cultural preservation and transmission; this can be achieved in diverse ways. Geertz argues that religion is a vital component of culture and plays a crucial role in defining the meaning and significance of social life (87). Religious rituals, ceremonies, and festivals often serve as cultural expressions deeply rooted in tradition. These practices can be a means of transmitting and preserving cultural values and beliefs. For instance, Idoma festivals like *Ojo*, and *Ijalekwu* are not only religious but also cultural celebrations that reinforce the importance of tradition and community. Religious architecture, temples, mosques, churches, and religious artifacts often serve as significant cultural symbols. The preservation of these structures and objects is vital in maintaining a connection to cultural heritage. According to Olorshe, the Alekwu mask in Idoma serves as a means of connection to people's religious and cultural identity. As long as it exists, it continues to help the older generation to transfer the knowledge, history, and stories behind the Alekwu mask which in turn helps in the preservation of their culture (Interview). In addition, religious rituals and ceremonies are important in cultural transmission. Idoma people have Cultural and religious festivals, these festivals are often celebrated occasionally.

They reinforce cultural norms and values. For instance, the Idoma practice of coming together during *the Ojo* festival not only fulfills a religious obligation but also reinforces the values of love and social cohesion, which are integral to their traditional religion (Enekole, Interview). Oral tradition also plays a crucial role in preserving African languages. Many African languages are endangered, and the use of oral tradition has helped to preserve them. Through storytelling, songs, and other forms of oral communication, African languages are kept alive and passed on to future generations. As NgugiwaThiong'o notes, "Oral tradition is one of the

most effective ways of preserving African languages" (12). Thus, oral tradition serves as a tool for language preservation and helps to maintain linguistic diversity in Africa. Ngugiwa Thiong also emphasizes the importance of oral tradition in African literature and cultural heritage. He argues that the oral tradition is the "cultural memory bank" of African societies and that it plays a vital role in preserving and transmitting African cultural values and beliefs (13-18).

### 3. Social Cohesion and Identity Formation

Social cohesion refers to a process "... of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities, in wealth and income and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise facing shared challenges and that they are members of the same community" ( Jensen 23).

Social cohesion is the connectedness among individuals of social groups that facilitates collaboration and equitable resource distribution at the household, community, and state levels (Tony 45). It is increasingly recognized that religion is not merely an individual matter, but a social force that has an important impact on society Andre Van et al. (10). Religion has long been acknowledged as a significant factor in determining social cohesiveness and the development of identities for both individuals and groups. It has a major impact on uniting people, establishing shared values, and fostering a feeling of purpose among them. Religion is too so powerful that it can help to reshape and recreate community identity. Geertz, suggests that religious beliefs and practices provide individuals with a sense of identity and purpose, and they help shape the collective identity of a community or society.

Religion frequently identifies a set of common ideals that govern the conduct and attitudes of its adherents. These ideas foster unity by emphasizing values like kindness, fairness, forgiveness, and love. For example, the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) all hold to the concept of monotheism and adhere to several moral precepts found in their sacred texts, such as the Ten Commandments in Judaism and Christianity. These common values and ideas give people a foundation upon which to relate to one another and create social ties (Smith 25). Among the Idoma there is popular belief in ancestors ( Alekwu) as the living dead. They believe that though they are dead but are still active in the affairs of the people thus, the ancestors are held in high esteem because they believe in them. This shared belief among the Idoma can bring them together as one people (Victor Seo, interview). Idoma traditional religion also believes in the existence of one God which can be accessed via other channels. By having similar beliefs, they can have a common ground upon which they can unite together. Also, Bellah wrote that:

"Religious rituals and collective practices improve social cohesiveness by bringing communities together via a shared experience. Participating in religious rituals such as prayers,



festivals, and ceremonies strengthens the sense of community within a religious community Idoma land. These procedures frequently entail group engagement, encouraging harmony and unity within the group” (186–187).

#### 4. Cultural Revitalization and Adaptation

In a simple term, cultural revitalization can be defined as the process of bringing back some aspect of people's cultural practices that are dead or lost. According to Wallace, a revitalization movement is a "deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (265). The Idoma people have used religion as a means of cultural revitalization to adapt to a new culture, which has in turn brought life back to some areas of their lives.

Through the performance of religious rituals and ceremonies, religion can promote cultural revival. These rituals frequently entail collective participation, which promotes a sense of community and camaraderie among a cultural group. For instance, in Hinduism, the festival of lights known as Diwali not only serves as a time for religious observance but also for the strengthening of social ties and the revival of long-standing customs (Smith 142).

Rejuvenation and adaptation of culture are also facilitated by religious ethical precepts. Values like compassion, justice, and respect for others are frequently emphasized in these teachings. These principles can act as a compass to encourage constructive social change and cultural advancement. For instance, Moltmann asserts that cultural movements centered on social justice have been impacted by Christian teachings that emphasize love for one's neighbor and compassion for the least fortunate (76).

Idoma traditional religion is not exempt from this, emphasizing respect for elders, hard effort, integrity, and the sanctity of life—all of which have been instilled in the Idoma community by elders as core religious principles. Because their religion and culture are intertwined, this has helped the Idoma culture over time.

In addition, religion can also serve as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage. Numerous religious scriptures, such as the Torah in Judaism and the Quran in Islam, contain moral lessons, rites, and historical accounts that are intricately entwined with the cultural identity of a society. Cultural knowledge and traditions can be preserved and resurrected by studying and disseminating these holy texts. Although the Idoma people's traditional religion lacks sacred writings or scriptures, it has continued to alter and modify people's lives through oral tradition. Oral tradition is a powerful weapon in every traditional African civilization, as was already said. Through this conduit, knowledge, wisdom, and history are passed down. Every time a story about an occasion like the fishing

festival is told, it helps the next generation understand the importance and meaning of that facet of culture.

### **Conclusion**

Among the Idoma people, religion significantly influences cultural identity. It acts as a motivating factor that affects people's beliefs, values, behaviors, and general worldviews. The religious activities of the Idoma people, particularly the entrance of Christianity and the ancient African religious system, have helped to preserve their cultural history and values. The Idoma people's deep spiritual ties to their ancestors, veneration of gods and spirits, and involvement in religious events and rituals have all contributed to the preservation of their distinctive cultural identity over the years. The arrival of Christianity has had both beneficial and negative consequences on the Idoma cultural identity, as some traditional behaviors have been assimilated into Christian doctrine.

### **Recommendation**

Along with the introduction of newer or foreign religions, encourage the Idoma people to maintain their traditional religious traditions and beliefs. By doing so, they can embrace religious pluralism while preserving their cultural identity.

- Encourage knowledge and understanding of the traditional religion of the Idoma people, including its background, principles, and rituals. To maintain a strong sense of cultural identity, emphasize the value of recognizing and appreciating their cultural background.
- Encourage religious leaders to incorporate cultural teachings and practices into religious rituals and gatherings. This can help reinforce cultural identity among the Idoma people while allowing for the coexistence of religion and cultural traditions.
- Promote research and documentation of the religious practices, rituals, and beliefs of the Idoma people. This will help ensure that their cultural identity is accurately preserved and understood by future generations.
- Encourage community involvement in religious and cultural activities. This can include festivals, ceremonies, and community gatherings where cultural traditions are openly celebrated, fostering a sense of collective identity and pride.

Emphasize the importance of passing down religious and cultural knowledge to younger generations. Encourage intergenerational dialogue and activities that promote the understanding and preservation of cultural and religious values among the Idoma people.

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### Oral Interview

S/N	Name	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation	Relationship
1	Esther Joseph	35	Igala	Lecturer	Lecturer
2	Olorshe James	28	Idoma	Student	Friend
3	Enekole	30	idoma	Businessperson	Friend
4	Victor Seo	43	Idoma	Civil Engineer	Neighbour