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## Between faith, fear, and survival: Syncretistic protective practices among Nigerian Christians under violent persecution

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### ABSTRACT

The intensification of violent persecution against Christian communities in Nigeria especially in the Middle Belt, North West and North Eastern regions has generated acute theological and pastoral crises concerning divine protection, fear, and survival. In contexts of persistent insecurity, displacement, and perceived state failure, some Nigerian Christians have adopted indigenous protective practices believed to confer immunity against physical harm. In response to persistent insecurity, displacement, kidnapping for ransom and targeted killings, some church leaders and members have increasingly resorted to traditional protective practices often believed to confer immunity against gunshots or physical harm and also encouraged Christians to fortify themselves traditionally. This phenomenon raises critical questions about syncretism, Christian identity, and survival theology within African Christianity. This article examines such syncretistic protective practices as a form of survival-oriented religiosity shaped by fear, trauma, and existential vulnerability. Drawing on African religious worldviews, contextual theology, and biblical theology of suffering and protection, it argues that these practices should be interpreted less as conscious doctrinal deviation than as diagnostic indicators of pastoral and theological inadequacy in addressing lived insecurity. While acknowledging their pragmatic logic, the article critically evaluates their implications for Christian identity, pastoral authority, and theological coherence. It concludes by proposing the contours of an African theology of protection that is biblically grounded, pastorally credible, and responsive to contexts of violent persecution.

**Keywords:** Syncretism, Christian persecution, African theology, Nigeria, insecurity, survival theology, contextual Christianity.

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### 1. Introduction

Religion in Africa has historically functioned not only as a system of belief but as a practical resource for survival, protection, and meaning-making in contexts of vulnerability. African religious epistemologies assume that credible religion must demonstrate efficacy in addressing concrete

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existential threats, including illness, misfortune, and violence.<sup>2</sup> In contemporary Nigeria, the escalation of violent attacks against Christian communities has intensified expectations that Christianity should offer not only spiritual consolation but tangible assurance of protection.

Across regions affected by sustained insecurity, Christian life has increasingly been shaped by fear, trauma, and exposure to lethal violence. Churches, clergy, and predominantly Christian communities have been recurrent targets, producing profound anxiety regarding the reliability of divine protection and pastoral care. Within this context, some Christians have adopted or incorporated indigenous protective practices alongside Christian rituals, generating renewed debates about syncretism, religious authenticity, and theological fidelity.

This article examines syncretistic protective practices among Nigerian Christians as a contextual religious response to violent persecution. Its primary theoretical intervention is to interpret these practices not primarily as theological aberrations or apostasy, but as survival strategies emerging from existential insecurity and pastoral-theological gaps within Nigerian Christianity. By situating these practices within African religious worldviews and a biblical theology of suffering and protection, the study argues that syncretism in this context functions as a diagnostic category revealing unresolved tensions between doctrine, lived fear, and pastoral praxis.

## 2. Violence, insecurity, and religious expectation in Nigerian Christianity

Nigeria remains one of Africa's most religiously vibrant societies, with Christianity occupying a central place in public life, moral discourse, and communal identity. Yet persistent insecurity—manifesting in armed attacks, communal violence, and mass displacement—has disproportionately affected Christian communities in several regions.<sup>3</sup> For many believers, everyday existence is marked by uncertainty, vulnerability, and the constant anticipation of violence.

Within African religious consciousness, violence is rarely understood as merely physical. Harm is commonly interpreted as possessing spiritual dimensions that demand religious explanation and ritual response,<sup>4</sup> when state institutions appear unable to guarantee security, religious systems are expected to compensate by offering alternative forms of protection. The recourse to ritualized protection among Christians must therefore be interpreted within a broader African logic in which religious credibility is inseparable from perceived efficacy in the face of existential threat.

## 3. Conceptual and theoretical framework

### 3.1 Syncretism reconsidered: Functional rather than ideological

In classical Christian theology, syncretism has often functioned as a pejorative category denoting theological compromise or deviation from orthodoxy. African religious scholarship, however, increasingly treats syncretism as a dynamic process of negotiation arising from sustained interaction between religious traditions within concrete social contexts.<sup>5</sup> African Christianity itself emerged historically through engagement with indigenous cosmologies, producing hybrid practices that resist rigid doctrinal categorization.

This study distinguishes between ideological syncretism, involving explicit theological fusion, and functional syncretism, characterized by selective ritual borrowing driven by existential need rather than doctrinal conviction. The protective practices examined here largely reflect functional syncretism, shaped by fear and survival imperatives rather than conscious theological synthesis.

### 3.2 African worldview and the theology of protection

African cosmologies emphasize the permeability of spiritual and material realities and the communal nature of life, suffering, and protection.<sup>6</sup> Power is mediated ritually, and protection is understood as both spiritual and physical. Within this framework, religion that fails to address fear and insecurity risks being experienced as pastorally irrelevant.

<sup>2</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1–5.

<sup>3</sup> Asonzeh Ukah, “Religious Violence and the Fragility of the Nigerian State,” *Studies in World Christianity* 26, no. 2 (2020): 111–130.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 67–69.

<sup>5</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 105–110.

<sup>6</sup> Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 170–175.

Christian theology that neglects this worldview may unintentionally create a vacuum in which alternative protective systems regain credibility.

### 3.3 Survival theology as an analytical category

This article employs survival theology as a descriptive analytical category to interpret religious practices shaped primarily by fear, trauma, and the instinct for self-preservation. Survival theology privileges immediate efficacy over doctrinal coherence and explains why believers may affirm Christian identity while simultaneously engaging alternative protective resources. It is not proposed as a normative theological model but as a heuristic for analyzing lived religion under extreme conditions of threat.

## 4. Syncretistic protective practices: Forms and logics

Documented practices among Nigerian Christians include the discreet use of indigenous charms beneath Christian clothing, ritual bathing combined with prayer and fasting, the ritualization of anointing substances incorporating traditional elements, and prophetic utterances functioning in quasi-incantatory ways.<sup>7</sup> in some cases, believers consult both pastors and traditional ritual specialists, reflecting a dual strategy of protection rather than religious abandonment.

Biblical texts concerning divine protection (e.g., Psalms of refuge, narratives of sacred objects, and cosmic-conflict motifs) are often selectively appropriated to legitimate these practices. However, such interpretations tend to instrumentalize biblical symbols rather than engage their theological logic, revealing a tension between confession of divine sovereignty and ritualized power-seeking shaped by fear.

## 5. Biblical-theological evaluation

A robust biblical theology complicates instrumentalized notions of protection. While Scripture affirms God as protector (Ps 91; Ps 46), it simultaneously resists mechanistic guarantees of immunity. Jesus' refusal of miraculous self-protection (Matt 4:5–7) and his acceptance of suffering challenge ritualized conceptions of divine power. Likewise, New Testament persecution theology frames suffering not as divine absence but as participation in Christ's own vulnerability (Rom 8:17; 1 Pet 4:12–16).

Biblical lament traditions further legitimize fear and protest without collapsing into magical control (Ps 13; Ps 22). The turn toward syncretistic protection thus reflects not biblical ignorance but a pastoral failure to integrate lament, suffering, and trust into lived discipleship under threat.

## 6. Pastoral and theological implications

Syncretistic protection reshapes Christian identity by subtly relocating trust from divine agency to ritual mediation. It also exposes fractures in pastoral authority, particularly where church leadership lacks resources for trauma-informed care and theological engagement with fear.<sup>8</sup> Publicly, such practices complicate Christian witness by blurring the distinction between faith-based trust and ritualized power competition.

## 7. Toward an African theology of faithful survival

The persistence of survival-driven syncretism calls for an African theology of protection that is biblically grounded, pastorally credible, and contextually honest. Such a theology must integrate Christological vulnerability, lament, communal solidarity, and non-instrumental trust in God, while addressing the psychological and social realities of violence.

## 8. Conclusion

Syncretistic protective practices among Nigerian Christians under violent persecution should be interpreted not simply as doctrinal deviation but as adaptive survival strategies emerging from existential insecurity and unresolved pastoral-theological tensions. Read diagnostically, these practices

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<sup>7</sup> Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Charisma and Control in African Christianity," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29, no. 1 (1999): 75–89.

<sup>8</sup> J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 142–148.

expose the urgent need for theological frameworks capable of sustaining faith amid fear without resorting to ritualized control. The future credibility of African Christianity depends on its capacity to articulate a theology of protection that is faithful to the gospel while responsive to lived realities of violence and vulnerability.

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