

# The Symbiosis Between Traditions And Islam Among The Igala People Of Central Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Traditions and Religion have been an integral part of human existence. Human beings anywhere in the world have developed traditions and religion that guide their existence and daily conducts. This helped to modified and guide relationship between them and their fellow human on one side, and also streamlined their relations with God and other spiritual beings which occupied a special place in their understanding of the world. The introduction of a new revealed religion (Islam) even though of significant impact in the lives of the people, the people's traditions and cultural belief system anchored on traditional religion still persisted. It is in line with this development that this paper set out to study the symbiosis between traditions and Islam among the Igala people of Central Nigeria Region.

## Introduction

The Igala who occupied a triangular tract of land located at the Eastern flank of the Rivers Niger-Benue are found in the north central region of Nigeria. The name represents the language and the name of the people. They speak a language classified under kwa group of languages.<sup>1</sup> A language affiliated to a vast group of languages like the Yoruba, Idoma, Ijaw, Ebira and many others.<sup>2</sup> Politically, the Igala have a centralized political system with the personality of the Attah as the head. Under the Attah were various other traditional political heads such as the Igala-Mela (Nine king makers) and various other chiefs known as *Onuh* at the districts. The Igala-Mela headed by the *Achadu* by tradition were the king makers and so regarded as the Autochthonous owner of the land. They exacted greater authority on the Attah as they acted as check on the authority of the Attah by holding important positions in Attah's palace as well as providing useful advice to the Attah on important and sensitive issues. The chiefs (*Onuh*) were in charge of the various vassals, they collect tributes, settle various cases at that level except homicide and were expected to report to the Attah from time to time.

The elaborate political arrangement was guided by the religious and socio-cultural tenets of the land. The Attah and his people practiced traditional religion long before the advent of the two modern religions of Islam and Christianity. The people's day to day activities were ordered by the dictate of the gods and various deities they worshipped.

## Traditional Belief System.

Traditionally, the people believed in the supreme God known as *Ojo-Chamachalla* who ordered all things. Beside God, they worshipped various gods and venerated spirits and ancestors. These they did through the instrumentality of the deities represented in various forms like Ant hills, Carve objects, rivers, molded objects and so on. These gods and ancestors were venerated through various sacrifices carried out by the chief priest (*Atama*) believed to be the go-between the gods and the people. Animal sacrifices in form of cock, he-goat, ram and various other items were used as sacrifice to the gods.<sup>3</sup>

These gods served different purposes and functions. While *Erane* shrine, *Ogedde* festival, *Otegwu* festival and so on represented the gods and deities of the land others like *Kpakachi*, *Alijenu*, *Ebo-oji* and so on represented family and personal gods. Symbol of such gods were

located in front of the compound, at the back of the compound or at other designated places. Beside the family and personal gods, the people also worshipped or venerated some natural phenomenon like thunder. Natural calamities like barrenness, strange illness, steal birth and so on were associated with the anger of the gods. When such misfortunes occurs the gods were appeased through sacrifices and so on. This type of belief system was corroborated by Ogbenike. According to him “In the African world view the universe is composed of both the visible and invisible, and that between God and human beings there are other beings that populate the universe. These beings are spirit”.<sup>4</sup>

In all of these, the masquerades played very crucial and important roles in the life of the people. Traditional Igala society had various masquerades, some were used to appropriate or appease the gods, some were regarded as spiritual masquerades, while others were meant to entertain the people during traditional festivals.<sup>5</sup> Notable amongst spiritual masquerades were the long masquerade (Egwu-Afia) believed to be the symbol of their departed ancestors. Such masquerade did not perform on ordinary days but on designated days of the year to commemorate and celebrate their departed ancestors.<sup>6</sup> Other spiritual masquerades in the land included the *Olagenyi* Masquerade, *Akpala-Eche*, *Amuda* and a few others believed to perform spiritual functions in the land including land cleansing, exposing the secrets of evil doers, witchcraft and also used to exposed and punished those secretly involved in one evil or the other. Terrible pronouncement were usually made by these masquerades and it was believed that such pronouncement usually come to pass.<sup>7</sup> Other categories of masquerades in the land were the Royal masquerades such as *Ekwe*, *Agbanabo*, *Abilifida* and so on. The royal masquerades were expected to perform on important royal functions or ritual ceremonies organized by the Attah. The royal masquerades enjoyed an important pride of place in the land, no individual no matter how highly placed was expected to either keep or have a semblance of the royal masquerades.

The worshipping of the gods, veneration of the ancestors and the institution of masquerades all collectively played unique roles in the traditional religious, political and judicial systems as the people relied upon the system even during the coronation of new Attah long before the advent of Islam and Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Other socio-cultural practices of the people include birth and naming ceremonies, marriage institution and Burial ceremonies. Before the people had contact with Islam birth and naming ceremonies

carried elaborate ritual ceremonies. When a woman gave birth the arrival of the baby was announced through some kind of cultural ovation normally said by the eldest woman at the scene of birth as men were not expected anywhere close to such places. The ovation sent a message of joy and happiness to the entire members of the household. This was followed with the arrival of the baby and the mother from *Ogbe* (*back of the house or other designated place*), the father of the new child or any of the eldest man in the house took the child and made some incantations that ended with a prayer for protection and what was expected of the child when he or she became an adult. But if the new born baby died during the course of birth, then the ovation would not be heard but rather the eldest woman walked out with a face showing some signs of sorrow. And if the woman giving birth died in the process, the announcement was usually through wailing.<sup>8</sup> Culturally, child naming was an event that attracted families, friends and neighbours. During naming which was usually after eight days though not sacrosanct, farming activities were suspended as the family and those invited were served various native meals and delicacies of the area. It was never a requirement for any animal to be sacrificed during naming, as most of their meat needs were sourced for through hunting. Besides, most other traditional requirements in form of divination to ascertain who may have reincarnated in the child were carried out after fourteen days.<sup>9</sup> Seton corroborate this in his statement by saying "...the Igala share this belief with most other tribes out here, and in the same form. i.e. that the spirit of an ancestor is reborn in a child, and the child will be called his name".<sup>10</sup>

Marriage was and still an important institution in Igala land. Marriage institution was revered and systematic processes were involved in sourcing for a wife to be. This process involved almost all the members of the family because traditionally the Igala believed in the sanctity of their generations. Therefore, the character and behavior of the family's of either the wife to be or the husband to be determined the eligibility or otherwise of the whole arrangement. Marriage proper was consummated after several visits of the groom's family to the bride's family, traditionally after seven years. According to Seton:-

When a youth reaches marriageable age (sixteen to eighteen) he looks about for a wife. Having found a girl he likes (it is rather curious that she may be quite a child and not available for some time), he tells his father, who goes to arrange matters with the girl's father. If the latter agrees to the proposal, the father buys his son a hoe, a matchet and a dane gun, and takes him to the house of his future father-in-law. The youth remains with the father-in-law about seven years, farm for him,

and if required, fight for him. He does not or is not supposed to sleep with the girl while there...<sup>11</sup>

This period (*Aleka'ago*) as it is traditionally call was also to serve as observatory period to ascertain whether or not the groom is capable of feeding and providing the needs of the bride. The period was also a means of assessing the level of acceptability of either the mother in-law or the father in-law as it was traditionally believed that marriage is not only between the groom and bride, but also members of the immediate family.<sup>12</sup> Unlike what happens in the current generation where elaborate ceremonies which sometimes involve borrowings are carried out, traditional Igala marriage system was low keyed. The bride after every aspect of bride price was satisfied which in most cases was paid or carried out through extensive labour on the bride's father's farm was escorted to the husband family's house in the evening. In some cases the groom was provided a place in the father inlaw's house and given plots of land where he could erect his house and that of the farm where he could farm and take care of his wife and their offspring.<sup>13</sup>

Death and burial ceremonies form part of the culture of every society. In traditional Igala society death and burial ceremonies were accorded very serious significance. In the people's world view, death is a transition from life on earth to the spiritual realm. Therefore the dead were given serious ceremonial rites of passage. However in according such rites, the age of the deceased was taken into cognizance. For instance, the death of person(s) within the age bracket of one to fifty was categorized as untimely death and as a result such corpses were interred within one to two days and without much ceremony. According Mohammed "The funeral ceremony for ordinary citizen included burying the body of the dead in the grave three days after death...the men and women had to shave their heads during the fourteen days of mourning, and would not dress or wash properly during the period".<sup>14</sup> But the burial of an aged was greeted with much rituals and burial ceremonies. Like what obtains in modern days the corpse of an aged deceased could be kept for days depending on his or her status in the community. Such corpses were treated with traditional embalmment method and kept in waiting until all the rituals and rites of passage were observed. Within days set aside, the grave was prepared in waiting and covered to prevent domestic animals, lizards and other creeping animals from falling into it. Also within the waiting period, several sacrifices of cock, he-goats and in some cases dogs if the deceased was a successful hunter were sacrificed almost on daily basis until the final interment.

On the final burial day proper, families, in-laws, friends and neighbours with women especially the aged ones grouped in various section to sing the funeral dirge (*Oye*), while the men also gathered in front of the deceased house or room making incantation. Dane guns are severally fired into the air to signify that the deceased has commenced his or her transitional journey to the spiritual world.<sup>15</sup> Mohammed corroborated this in his statement "...the great spiritual and social importance the Ebira attached to the funeral ceremonies of their deceased elders. The burial rites were elaborate and expensive. These consisted of singing, drumming and the firing of a gun just like the Igala's".<sup>16</sup> Chief mourners (usually the blood brother of the deceased) dressed mostly in white robe (*Achi Okpe*) woven by traditional weavers, invoke the spirit of the departed ancestors to receive the new ancestor to their fold. Several other prayers were held before the body is finally committed to mother earth. One thing that was significant in all these ritual process was the fact that women had little role to play except if the deceased was a woman, then all activities involving ritual bath and dressing would had to be undertaken by women. But in actual interment women were not involved.<sup>17</sup>

As a way of addressing health and other spiritual challenges, the Igala people had devised means through which issue that borders on health and such challenges were tackled. In almost every community in Igala land traditional herbal healers and birth attendants abound. People in this category claimed to have in-depth knowledge of medicinal herbs capable of addressing such health challenges. In what appeared to be a cult, practitioners hardly divulge the secret of their knowledge to anyone. In most cases it is believed to be hereditary (i.e. from father to son as the case may be) therefore, various families were identified with a particular healing power peculiar to them and so those in need of solution to such health challenges go to such families. Practitioners in this category include but not limited to traditional bone setters, traditional birth attendants and those who claim to have solutions to problems of afflictions from witchcrafts. Those in this category hardly complete their herbal processes in the presence of their patients or anyone at all except members of the immediate family.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Advent of Islam in Igala Land.**

The advent of Islam in Igala land followed dual and piece meal process. The location of the kingdom on the Niger-Benue waterways prone her to several commercial contacts with various ethnic groups, including the Nupe, Borno and Hausa from the northern part of the country which

had contact with Islam several centuries back. Trade was and remained one of the most important occupations of the people. The establishment of local and international markets especially that of Ejule and Eggah at Idah long before the jihad where Hausa horse traders and many other ethnic groups frequented encouraged inter- group interactions. Beside, the activities of itinerant Muslim scholars from the same axis who moved about propagating Islam and winning converts around the Niger – Benue confluence area Igala land inclusive, trade was also instrumental to the spread of Islam in the area. Even though Islam at this period was accepted peripherally, the impact of the itinerant Muslim scholars cannot be underestimated. This they were able to achieve because of their posture of tolerance in some aspects of the people traditional religious practice. Also at the pre-jihad period, preaching and conversion was entirely limited to the ordinary citizens of the land or Kingdom especially those involved in commercial transactions which took place during the period. Proselytization of Islamic religious activities as earlier noted was limited to the citizens as no conscious efforts were made to introduce the religion in the palace of the Attah and also among some other vassal chiefs because of their strong belief in traditional religious system and the various traditional practices associated with their religion. A.R. Mohammed explains that:-

In Igala land, the introduction of Islam followed the most common one, i.e. by way of migrant Muslim settlers, probably dating to about two centuries before the 19<sup>th</sup> century Dan Fodio jihad. However, conversion to Islam in Igala land started from the ordinary people, leaving out the political elites, the Attah and their sub-chiefs who resisted change until after the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

The above indicates that contact with the ordinary peoples was piece meal and the degree to which Islam gained ground among the indigenous population was predicated on the level of contact established. For instance, there were high degree of contacts and settlements of itinerant Muslim scholars and traders among the indigenous population especially in northern and eastern parts of Igala land. This relationship effectively took place long before the Uthman Dan Fodio Jihad 1804. Evidence of such early contacts was the adulteration of the socio-cultural lives of the people. A clear manifestation of this was demonstrated in the dressing pattern, names and a reflection of this in some cultural practices of the people especially the recitation of Bismillah (An Arabic recitation to commence the beginning of something), combining tradition and Islamic practice in medicine making and so on.<sup>20</sup> In the two axis (northern and eastern axis of Igala land), were retinue of dye pits ostensibly believed to have been introduced to the area

especially Ankpa area (Emekutu)<sup>21</sup> and Omalla area (Bagana) by Muslim merchants who came to the area through the River Benue using Bagana- Nassarawa routes with their items of trade.<sup>22</sup> Also the celebration of annual *ogani* festivals peculiar to Angwar (a settlement carved out for Hausa Muslim scholars and merchants as stranger settlement beginning from around c.1890s ) was also a pointer to the fact that Muslim migrants to the area had actually percolated the people's culture. This celebration has become a legacy of all the peoples who trace their genealogy to any of the Angwars either in Idah the traditional headquarter of the people or Ankpa on the eastern axis of Igala land.<sup>23</sup> In the course of which inter-ethnic marriages were consummated and the religion infused into the people even long before Uthman Danfodio Jihad of 1804 as earlier alluded.

The gradual infiltration of Muslim traders and Clerics into Idah the traditional headquarters of Igala land gained momentum when the Muslim clerics began to offer themselves as Mallams to be consulted for prayers and provided magical services to the Attah. Though the exact date could not be ascertain, the migrant Muslim clerics beginning perhaps from around the late eighteenth century claimed to have the solutions to many of the spiritual or societal problems and also capable of forestalling evils in the land. This claims of course endeared them to the minds of the rulers who at this time were in need of any possible intervention that could give them an edge over their enemies in the face of mounting tension from their invaders especially the Kwararafa Kingdom that wanted to colonize the land as their vassal. This statement was clearly attested to as Hunwick rightly stated that "...in one way or another, the religion of the outsiders began to interest either the ruler or his court circles. In the early stages only such ideas or practices as might supplement or augment local beliefs and practices would be made use of, in particular the use of talisman and charms for protecting the kings and his soldiers or for use against enemies or producing rain".<sup>24</sup> This practically showed the inadequacies of the traditional religion in the land in the face of mounting political crises.

A cursory look at the development may prompt one to ask that in view of the people's traditions and culture and also going by the various ceremonies that coloured the traditional religion, could mere answer to spiritual or societal problems alone be responsible for the level of acceptance and converts recorded in the land? if the answer to this is not in the affirmative then, what could have been the driving impetus that propelled the indigenous population to accept the new faith?.



Answer to this important question is not far fetch. Islam appeared to have demonstrated high level of simplicity and brotherhood of the faithful. Among the Igala, communal relationship was cherished and collective responsibility was demonstrated in most of their activities. In Igala land what was termed close relations went beyond the nuclear to the extended families and even to distant relations as everyone was branded as either brother or sister. Besides, the practice of polygamy coupled with the belief that the new faith has solutions to their problems as earlier stated endeared the religion to the heart of the people. Also, the use of horses by those in authority (i.e. Attah, chiefs and those in charge of tradition) which added glamour to the throne, borrowed aspect of royal regalia or costume like the use of red Moroccan caps, and the combination of traditional practices with Islam may have accounted for large scale acceptance of Islam by the people. This explanation conforms to Peel's observation that, "To be really attractive, an identity must be such that people can see themselves adopting it without too much of a break with the past".<sup>24</sup> In line with this explanation, Mohammed clearly explain what was termed gradual but systematic incursion of Islam into the Attah's court:-

The practical expression of deficiency in their belief system by the ruling class and their subsequent search for complement from the representatives of Islam within the communities, no doubt weakened the attachment of ordinary citizens to their traditional religion. They must have watched its continued decimation with great interest. They also followed the example of their rulers whenever they were in doubt about the capability of the ancestral spirit to protect them against misfortunes. In the process they might get converted to Islam.<sup>25</sup>

Also pertinent to this discussion is the theory postulated by Horton, who in trying to explain reason(s) for easy conversion and acceptability of the new faiths (Islam and Christianity) by the people, hinges his explanation on the advent of modern communication skills made possible through revolution in transport and communication technology. According to him:-

Certain changes involving various features of modern situation that confront traditional African cosmology help to expose the people to the wider world. These changes include or encompass massive development of commerce of Nation State whose most important consequences were dramatic improvement in communication with accompanying economic and political developments that override the boundaries between the various microcosms.<sup>26</sup>

Given this theoretical explanations, it follows then that the ancient traditions practiced by the modern peoples may have actually failed to adequately meet the need of modern day demands. Therefore, seeking alternative ways of solving their problems and the need to also flow along

with modern development offered by the two revealed religions of Islam and Christianity became essentially necessary.

### **Impact of Dan Fodio Jihad and British Colonialism on the Spread of Islam in Igala Land.**

Prior to British colonial interest in Igala land, the people had developed contact with various European trading merchants who operated on the Niger-Benue water ways before formal British colonial onslaught in the land in 1900. Between 1830 and 1899 various British, French and German companies operated on the Niger- Benue waterways and also extended to the hinterland. The trading transactions brought together various ethnic groups who converged on the river banks for the purposes of buying and selling of their goods. Among these merchants were Muslims whose interactions left a lasting legacy on the peoples and communities as quite a number of their business partners got converted to Islam. This clearly showed the roles of the Rivers Niger- Benue in fostering inter-group relations and by extension encouraged the spread of Islam. As rightly noted by Ajayi “The Igala Kingdom dominated the trade on the Niger waterways in the middle position towards the north of the confluence and as far south as Aboh”.<sup>27</sup> This confirmed the fact that trade aided the spread of Islam to Igala land long before the 1804 Dan Fodio Jihad. Despite the natural check provided by the rivers Niger and Benue on jihadist incursion into Igala land, its spillover effect was however felt.

As earlier stated the 1804 jihad did not reached Igala land, but by about the 1860s one of their disciples from Nupe, Etsu Masaba had began his military and religious onslaught in Lokoja and its environment. His actions led to dislocation of towns and villages as people moved to other areas for safety and security. The resultant effect of this was rapid population movement from across the western and northern part of the confluence to the eastern part where Igala land is located. The influx of refugees into Igala land to settle among the indigenous population many of whom may have been converted from the various areas they fled from accounted for the reason why Islam became more popular among the ordinary citizen than it were, among the ruling class. Crowther rightly observes that “due to the activities of Masaba nearly all the right bank of the Niger from opposite Adamugu to the confluence had scarcely a village to be seen, while the left bank (eastern flank) was full of new and extensive towns and villages which were not there in 1841”.<sup>28</sup> The observation no doubt clearly provided an explanation why unlike other regions of northern Nigeria where Islam first started as the official religion of the ruling class, in

Igala land the reverse was the case. Areas impacted by the activities of the refugees according to Mohammed include Abejukolo in Ife district of northern Igala land, Dekina, Gbobe, Itobe, Gboloko and Bagana.<sup>29</sup> The penetration of Islam and its impact was further demonstrated in 1837 when Crowther observed that “it appears to him that there had been an increase in the number of Arabic schools both at Idah and Gbobe since their last visit”.<sup>30</sup>

### **Colonialism and its Influence on the Spread of Islam.**

Even though the presence of Islam was felt among the people long before the advent of colonialism, colonialism and its administrative apparatus assisted a great deal in the spread of Islam among the people and also among the ruling class. The Igala people practiced a centralized political administration and their ruler the Attah wielded a strong political and spiritual authority that was supreme in the land. The respect, control and supremacy of the Attah were anchored on the people’s belief in their culture and traditional religion. The Attah before colonialism had the power of life and death in some cases over their subjects and so were respected by all.<sup>31</sup> However, the coming of British colonialism in the area helped in stopping most of the practices of the Attah that were not akin to British modern laws of equal justice and fundamental human rights. Equally the well organized Caliphate and Emirate systems Lord Frederick Lugard the first Governor-General of British colonial Nigeria met in the north, won his admiration as they provided the enabling environment for colonialism to thrive. This thus endeared Islam to the mind of the colonialist as they worked against anything that could disrupt such arrangement perhaps not because of their love for the religion, but as a protection of British colonial interest.<sup>32</sup> This high level of trust Islam enjoyed from British colonialist was reflected in most of British colonial occupations in West Africa. A reflection of British attitude to Islam in Ghana as reported by Watherston as quoted by Crowder helped to demonstrate this allusion. He explains that Islam as a religion was “eminently suited to the native which was helping to spread civilization, encouraging a much more descent life and given an impetus to trade”.<sup>33</sup> This statement help to illuminate the reason(s) why Islam appeared to assumed the status of official religion among the latter Attah of Igala. At least it was an indication that the ruling class had accept and keyed into colonial principles of good governance and loyalty. According to Mallam Yusuf Ocholi, the acceptance of Islam properly by the ruling class stemmed from the colonial authority’s move to stamp their authority in the land.<sup>34</sup> This was gradually actualized with the

balkanization of Igala division into two different protectorates. While Idah the administrative and cultural headquarter of Igala land and Ojoko district were merged with Onitsha in the Southern Protectorate, other outlying districts of Dekina and Ankpa were merged with the Northern Protectorate in 1906,<sup>35</sup> for a singular reason that such was necessary for effective colonial administration. This balkanization went along way in reducing the power and supremacy of the Attah. Beside, since some area of the Southern Protectorate were alien to a centralized system of administration, Attah being a leader from a centralized system found most of their operations in the Southern Protectorate very strange in terms of political administration. With complaints and agitations, Idah with its other adjoining districts were re united with the other Igala districts in Northern Protectorate in 1908.<sup>36</sup> Igala land also witnessed the imposition of alien Muslim rulers on the people. This deliberate act of removing Non-Muslim rulers from the throne on flimsy excuses and replacing them with Muslim non-native rulers as the case of Dekina, Ankpa, Ojoku<sup>37</sup> and so on was a deliberate, but highly unconscious efforts aimed at encouraging Islam among the rulers. The reason for this action was a fall out of the British experience in the northern part of Nigeria, where the people were well organized under a central leadership with a framework of Islamic model of taxation under an Emirate system. This experience informed British colonialist action since the Igala were under a centralized political system coupled with the fact that Islam had already entered Igala land before the colonial period. Therefore, encouraging the rulers to accept Islam in a way was indirectly a subtle way of enforcing the ideals of British colonialism in the area.

Above all, was the institution of Assembly for chiefs in Northern Nigeria under the Richard constitution of 1946<sup>38</sup> of which Attah was a member. The congregation of northern chiefs under colonial authority helped to foster inter-group relations and inter-cultural borrowings as reflected in the traditional rulers dressing pattern which in most cases had to do with the tying of turban and wearing of flying gowns which was and is still typical of Muslim rulers in the north, but was adopted by Attah and some other non Muslim rulers in the north. Equally, the adoption of new traditional titles which were not akin to the Igala traditional political system was another pointer to the high levels of interactions and borrowings. Titles such as Madaki, Wakili and so on were a function of the influence of Islam on the traditional system foisted by the coming of colonialism.<sup>39</sup> A high level of symbiosis between Islam and traditions in Igala land was a scene narrated by Mr. Charles Patridge a colonial officer in 1904. He recorded

how perhaps for the first time the Muslim Holy Book the Quran was used to make peace in Attah's palace.<sup>40</sup> This essentially was a demonstration of not only the gradual acceptance of Islam among the ruling class, but also a symbiosis of tradition and Islam during and even after colonialism. Mr. Patridge explained thus:-

...the next point was to make peace between Akwina and Ondoma Korobad, the most powerful of the disappointed candidates, and then to induce him and Aku Neddi to acknowledge the Atta elect. On 14<sup>th</sup> October (1904) I spent an hour and a half squatting in Akwina's little audience room, together with Ondoma Korobad and few other natives, my orderly acting as interpreter and eventually they agreed to swear juju together. Akwina's Yoruba husband produced a beautiful copy of the Koran, which was laid in our midst on a goat skin, and a kola-nut broken up into small pieces was placed on the top. First the old princess and then the chief, knelt down and took a solemn oath of mutual peace and then ate the kola-nut. Then we all placed our right hands on the Koran as witness.<sup>41</sup>

A reflection of the symbiosis between Igala tradition and Islam played out during the coronation of new Attah in 1904. The new Attah (Ocheje Onakpa) was described in his ceremonial attire by Mr. Patridge thus "riding on a white horse and dressed in a robe of alternate broad stripes of scarlet and yellow, and on his head a huge white turban latticed with black cloth and stuffed with numerous juju charms"<sup>42</sup> What this attire and all other activities surrounding the need to make peace among members of the royal palace and the new Attah signify was that even though Islam may not have been accepted in its true terms, the royal house as at this period had begun to patronize Muslim Clerics may be because of various attractions and also to augment the shortcomings inherent in traditional religion and practice.

### **Symbiosis between Islam and Traditions in Igala Land.**

As earlier stated, traditional Igala society holds strong belief in life after death. The veneration of ancestors and traditional practices and claims to have solutions to most of their societal problems through their belief system persisted even after Islam had been introduced to the people. In line with this, Miachi holds that "there is a considerable measure of interrelationship between the three domains of life, an interrelationship and interaction that are central to the continued existence and sustenance of the living and the control of which is the prerogative of the ancestors, with their overwhelming power and authority".<sup>43</sup> Given this explanation, there was an evidence of the combination of Islam with traditions in Igala land which was and still been practice especially in rural communities of the Igala land. The

combination of both was reflected in clear term when an identified Muslim was also deeply involved in traditional divinations. Such practice is clearly against the doctrine of Islamic religion. Equally, several custodians of traditional masquerades in the land were also identified supposed Muslim adherents.<sup>44</sup> Beside, hard core traditionalist gave Muslim names to their children even though they are not Muslim themselves. There are several instances where you find Non Muslims bearing names like Suleman, Ibrahim, Musa and so on. Non Muslims have also imbibed the idea of circumcision after eight days of birth and equally organized naming ceremony to reflect the Muslim style of organizing naming ceremony. These practices create an atmosphere of confusion to a first time visitor to the land. Among the Igala rural settlements for instance, most households kept or have what is referred to as *ebo-oji* (personal gods). This is practiced simultaneously with Islam. In like manner, Muslims are fully involved in most traditional burial and ritual rites. This creates an atmosphere of contradiction. Various ceremonies including funeral dirge and traditional firing of guns to signify the transition of the deceased to ancestral world are still been carried by Muslims who claimed the deceased was a relation that needed to be accorded a proper burial if the deceased was a non Muslim. Women even in Muslim homes are still been subjected to several taboos associated with tradition (i.e sharing common bath buckets, etc). This situation is contrary to Islamic teachings and practice. This makes it difficult for anybody to have a clear cut identification of whom is actually a Muslim and who is a traditionalist.<sup>45</sup>

However, one thing that was interesting and unique was the ability of these two religions to co-exist without rancor. According to Muslim cleric Mallam Usman Audu “the high degree of tolerance that existed between Musim and traditionalist engendered peace and good neighbourliness”.<sup>46</sup> He further stressed that the tolerance and acceptability of early Mallams in the area despite some people’s mingling of traditions with Islam provided an enabling ground for winning more converts to Islam in Igala land.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the above analysis of the people background history, their traditions and traditional belief system no doubt provided for the piece-meal and systematic approach towards introducing the religion of Islam to the people of the area. Also the influence of geography occasioned by the natural highway of commerce, the rivers Niger and Benue helped to induced a

relationship that was nurtured on trade and transaction which brought quite enormous number of peoples and merchants that ushered in a relationship through which a platform for the propagation of Islam was made possible. The patience, tolerance and acceptability of the ways the people chose to mingled Islam with their traditional worship system without any radical or fundamental approach to stop them by the Muslim brotherhoods at the earlier period was instrumental to the gradual acceptability and spread of Islamic religion in Igala land. This understanding created a unique symbiosis between the two religions. Even though there are no clear statistics to show the degree of acceptability and spread of Islam in Igala land, there are indications that Islam has more adherents in the land than Christianity. This may not be unconnected with the simplicity, brotherhood and as earlier stated high level of tolerance from earlier Muslin scholars who visited the land.

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