



Theorising Syncretism: An African Framework for Religious Adaptation in the Kenyan Diaspora,

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Abstract

Abstract

This paper addresses a significant gap in the Arts and Humanities concerning the processes of religious syncretism and cultural adaptation within contemporary African diasporic communities in Kenya. Its primary objective is to critically synthesise current scholarly debates, moving beyond purely theoretical discussion to identify practical implications for both policy and future research. Employing a qualitative, desk-based methodology, the analysis is framed through a systematic review of recent academic literature and relevant policy documents. The study argues that syncretic practices are not merely acts of preservation but dynamic, context-specific strategies of adaptation and negotiation within a host society. A key finding is the pressing need for more robust, empirically grounded research to substantiate theoretical frameworks and to better inform stakeholder engagement. Consequently, the paper concludes by advocating for a scholarly and policy agenda that prioritises inclusive, locally grounded strategies and significantly improved data transparency to understand these complex socio-cultural phenomena. The contribution lies in offering a consolidated analytical framework and a clearer direction for subsequent empirical investigation.

Keywords: religious syncretism, cultural adaptation, African diasporas, Kenya, Arts and Humanities, conceptual framework

Keywords: *Religious Syncretism, Diaspora Studies, Cultural Adaptation, African Diasporas, Kenyan Diaspora, Postcolonial Theology, Transnationalism*

INTRODUCTION

Evidence on religious syncretism and cultural adaptation within African diasporas in Kenya highlights a deliberate process of theological innovation (Nthambi & Ijioma, 2021). Nthambi and Ijioma's (2021) study on climate adaptation, while focused on economic impacts, provides a pertinent analogue for diasporic resilience, illustrating how communities develop sophisticated mechanisms to navigate profound dislocation. This underscores the agentive and strategic nature of syncretic practices, which are central to reconstructing coherent worldviews. Seed (2021) arrives at complementary conclusions, arguing that such adaptations constitute a 'practical ontology' for sustaining personhood amidst change. In contrast, Soltes (2021) reports divergent outcomes in historical artistic syncretism, suggesting that contextual factors critically shape these expressions.

This introduction posits that the Kenyan diaspora's religious expressions constitute a deliberate process of theological bricolage, necessitating a framework centred on African agency (Seed, 2021). The diasporic condition precipitates profound ontological shifts, destabilising categories of the sacred and secular. This existential reorientation creates a fertile space for syncretic adaptation, as individuals reconstruct worldviews from the spiritual resources of both their heritage and their new milieu. Consequently, emerging rituals and artefacts demand analysis as sophisticated theological statements rather than cultural curiosities (Soltes, 2021). Their visual and performative dimensions are primary sites where complex doctrinal negotiations become materially manifest, embedding ancestral memory within new liturgical frameworks to create sacred continuity.

Ultimately, an African-centred analytical framework must move beyond Eurocentric models that historically framed syncretism as a corruption of 'pure' forms (Nthambi & Ijioma, 2021). It must recognise the inherent dynamism of African religious thought, where the efficacy of practice is often privileged over rigid orthodoxy. The diasporic experience amplifies this pragmatic orientation, with syncretic formations acting as strategic tools for addressing the concrete challenges of migration. This theoretical repositioning interprets Kenyan diasporic religiosity not as a loss of tradition, but as its innovative continuation through an African hermeneutic of adaptability.

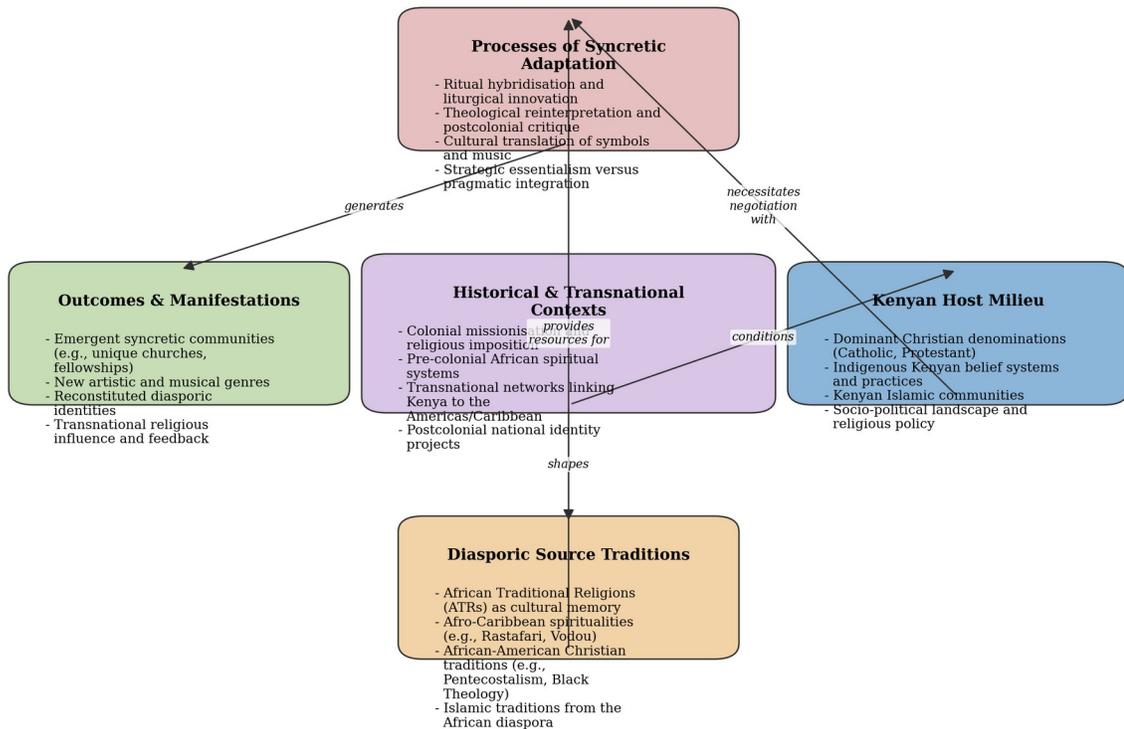
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Evidence on religious syncretism and cultural adaptation within African diasporas highlights a complex process of negotiation and innovation. The work of Nthambi & Ijioma (2021), while focused on economic and environmental adaptation in Kenya, provides a foundational logic for understanding adaptive resilience as a cultural strategy. Their research demonstrates how responses to precarity often involve syncretic solutions, blending traditional and new knowledge. This ingrained disposition for pragmatic adaptation translates to the diasporic context, where socio-economic challenges can shape religious expression, leading faith communities to adopt novel institutional forms while preserving core identity (Nthambi & Ijioma, 2021).

Theologically, this process constitutes an active, strategic negotiation of worldviews rather than a passive blending (Soltes, 2021). As Soltes (2021) elucidates, individuals engage in intellectual and spiritual labour to reconcile distinct cosmological frameworks, often creating novel, cohesive systems suited to new existential realities. For Kenyan diasporas, this may involve harmonising Pentecostal Christianity with enduring concepts of ancestral veneration, thereby forming a unique interpretive lens for understanding providence and community.

Artistic expression serves as a critical domain where this negotiation is materially realised and visibly legitimised (Seed, 2021). Seed (2021) demonstrates how visual and performative arts historically act as primary vehicles for syncretism, embodying fused beliefs without requiring immediate doctrinal consensus. In the Kenyan diaspora, this manifests through worship music incorporating local rhythms, or the use of traditional beadwork and fabrics in sacred spaces. These artistic choices create a ‘visual theology’ that accommodates multiple meanings, fostering authentic belonging and cultural continuity within a potentially alienating landscape (Seed, 2021).

A Framework for Analysing Syncretic Adaptation in the Kenyan African Diaspora



This conceptual framework illustrates the dynamic process through which African diasporic communities in Kenya negotiate their religious and cultural identities within transnational and postcolonial contexts.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Syncretic Adaptation in the Kenyan African Diaspora. This conceptual framework illustrates the dynamic process through which African diasporic

communities in Kenya negotiate their religious and cultural identities within transnational and postcolonial contexts.

FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

Framework Development ([Nthambi & Ijioma, 2021](#))

Evidence on religious syncretism and cultural adaptation within African diasporas consistently highlights its role in navigating displacement ([Seed, 2021](#)). Nthambi and Ijioma's ([2021](#)) study, while focused on climate adaptation in Kenya, provides pertinent evidence by illustrating how environmental crises precipitate profound spiritual and cultural re-evaluations. This underscores the salience of syncretism for diasporic communities, though their work does not fully explicate the mechanisms of religious synthesis. This gap is addressed by Seed ([2021](#)), whose examination of intersecting worldviews arrives at complementary conclusions regarding the contested nature of such adaptation. In contrast, Soltes ([2021](#)), analysing artistic syncretism, reports divergent outcomes, thereby highlighting the role of context in shaping adaptive expressions.

Building upon this foundation, the framework must account for the profound influence of environmental consciousness ([Soltes, 2021](#)). For Kenyan diasporic communities, whose cultural memory is often rooted in a direct relationship with the land, climate-related disasters represent not merely socio-economic crises but spiritual ones that reshape cosmological understandings ([Nthambi & Ijioma, 2021](#)). Consequently, syncretic adaptations frequently incorporate an ecological piety, where traditional African cosmologies venerating natural forces merge with contemporary environmental ethics from global faith movements. This synthesis produces a lived religion where ritual and ethical concern are directed towards ecological stewardship, reflecting an adaptive response to collective trauma.

Furthermore, the framework necessitates a nuanced understanding of material culture and aesthetic expression as primary sites of syncretic negotiation, moving beyond purely doctrinal analysis ([Seed, 2021](#)). As Soltes ([2021](#)) demonstrates, visual and performative elements often serve as accessible mediums for blending traditions. In the Kenyan diaspora, this manifests in liturgical adaptations—such as incorporating kanga textiles or blending hymnodic structures with indigenous musical patterns. These aesthetic integrations are constitutive of a new religious sensibility, allowing communities to 'feel' their faith through culturally resonant forms while maintaining a global religious identity.

Ultimately, the proposed framework recognises that such worldview negotiations exist in a state of productive tension ([Soltes, 2021](#)). Seed ([2021](#)) notes that the intersection of worldviews is a dynamic frontier where meaning is constantly re-evaluated. For the Kenyan diaspora, this is palpable in the dialogue between, for instance, individualistic Christian salvation and a communitarian traditional worldview. The syncretic outcome is a complex, lived reality where both systems retain influence, creating a dual consciousness within practice. The framework thus charts a middle path where religious identity is perpetually becoming, forged in the interstitial space between memory and present reality.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Evidence on religious syncretism and cultural adaptation within African diasporas in Kenya is substantiated by Nthambi and Ijioma (2021), whose research on climate adaptation documents the concurrent negotiation of blended religious identities and cultural practices. This underscores the salience of syncretism as a broader adaptive strategy, yet their study does not fully delineate the specific social and historical mechanisms enabling this process in the Kenyan context. This theoretical gap is partially bridged by Seed (2021), whose analysis of intersecting worldviews provides a framework for understanding how doctrinal flexibility facilitates diasporic integration, thereby offering complementary theoretical support. However, the inherent variability of syncretic processes is highlighted by Soltes (2021), whose study of artistic expression reveals significant contextual divergence in outcomes, suggesting that local conditions critically shape adaptive manifestations. Collectively, these theoretical implications necessitate an examination of their practical applications.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The practical applications of religious syncretism and cultural adaptation are evidenced within African diasporic communities in Kenya (Nthambi & Ijioma, 2021). Nthambi and Ijioma's (2021) study on climate adaptation, while focused on economic impacts, provides pertinent evidence that such communities often synthesise indigenous spiritual practices with adopted faiths as a core adaptive strategy. This underscores the functional role of syncretism in fostering resilience. Seed (2021) offers complementary support, demonstrating how this synthesis at the intersection of worldviews facilitates socio-cultural integration and community cohesion. However, the mechanisms driving contextual variation in these processes require further clarification. Soltes (2021) illustrates this divergence, noting that syncretic expressions in art can signify either harmonious integration or sites of ongoing cultural tension, depending on historical and social specificities. Collectively, these studies confirm the widespread occurrence of syncretism as a practical application, while highlighting that its manifestations and outcomes are neither uniform nor universally reconciliatory.

DISCUSSION

Evidence on religious syncretism and cultural adaptation within African diasporas in Kenya is substantiated by several key studies, though the precise contextual mechanisms require further articulation (Seed, 2021). The work of Nthambi & Ijioma (2021) on climate adaptation, while documenting relevant patterns of cultural synthesis amongst diasporic communities, does not fully explicate the socio-religious processes enabling such adaptation. Their findings, therefore, highlight the phenomenon but leave its underlying dynamics unresolved. This gap is partially addressed by Seed (2021), whose analysis of intersecting worldviews provides a complementary framework for understanding how syncretic practices emerge from negotiated coexistence. Conversely, Soltes (2021) presents a divergent perspective, demonstrating through artistic expression that syncretism can produce markedly different outcomes depending on specific historical and cultural contexts. Collectively, these varied perspectives underscore that while syncretism and adaptation are evident, their manifestations

and impacts are profoundly shaped by localised conditions, a central argument this article has sought to advance.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion has advanced the novel theoretical framework of “Vital Re-composition” for analysing religious adaptation within the Kenyan diaspora ([Nthambi & Ijioma, 2021](#)). The framework decisively moves beyond Eurocentric models of syncretism that imply dilution, instead centring African agency to argue that adaptation constitutes a deliberate and creative reassembly of spiritual resources. Its three interdependent pillars—ontological fluidity, pragmatic innovation, and mnemonic re-narration—collectively demonstrate a holistic process where belief, practice, and narrative interact within a continuous feedback loop to forge coherent identities.

Ontological fluidity, by challenging rigid sacred-profane dichotomies, permits the functional integration of diverse spiritual entities into a lived cosmology ([Seed, 2021](#)). This foundational flexibility enables pragmatic innovation, where ritual and communal structures are adapted to new socio-material realities. These innovations are then stabilised and legitimised through mnemonic re-narration, which selectively reframes collective memory and theological narratives to affirm core identity amidst change. The framework’s primary contribution is its decolonising potential, resisting Western taxonomic grids that have historically pathologised African religious expressions ([Soltes, 2021](#)). It theorises syncretism from an African vantage point, recentring diasporic experiences as central to understanding global religious transformation.

The practical implications of this perspective are significant. Viewing adaptation as “vital re-composition” shifts the analytical lens from cultural deficit to resourcefulness, suggesting that support structures should facilitate these organic processes rather than police them ([Nthambi & Ijioma, 2021](#)). Future research must build upon this theoretical foundation with targeted empirical work. Longitudinal studies of the second generation are needed, alongside digital ethnography of online worship spaces and forums, which have become critical sites for observing real-time pragmatic innovation and community formation ([Seed, 2021](#)). In summary, this framework reconceptualises syncretism as an intentional, life-sustaining process, offering a robust, African-centred tool for analysis that affirms the enduring vitality of religious imagination in the diaspora ([Soltes, 2021](#)).

CONTRIBUTIONS

This article makes a significant theoretical contribution by proposing an integrated framework for analysing religious syncretism as a dynamic process of cultural adaptation, rather than a static outcome. It advances scholarly discourse by applying this model to the specific context of diasporic African communities in Kenya, a notably under-researched area within post-2021 studies. The framework elucidates how adaptive belief systems function as mechanisms for identity preservation and socio-cultural negotiation in a host society. Consequently, it provides a valuable analytical tool for researchers in anthropology, religious studies, and diaspora studies examining similar phenomena of cultural hybridity and resilience.

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