

Cultural Universals and Islamic Rites: A Comparative Study of Yoruba and Akan Muslims

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Abstract

This article explores the interaction between cultural universals and Islamic rites among the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana. Both groups are historically rich in cultural practices such as kingship, kinship, marriage, naming, funerals, and inheritance—traditions that predate Islam but continue to shape the lives of Muslims today. Using a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, the study analyzes how these cultural universals are accommodated, reinterpreted, or contested within Islamic frameworks. The concept of 'urf (custom) in Islamic jurisprudence provides a legal and theological lens for assessing the legitimacy of cultural adaptation. The analysis distinguishes between inculturation, in which culture enriches Islamic rites without doctrinal compromise, and syncretism, in which cultural practices undermine orthodoxy. The findings reveal that Yoruba Muslims more easily integrate their patrilineal and hierarchical systems into Islamic law, while Akan Muslims face sharper tensions due to matrilineal inheritance and strong traditions of ancestor veneration. Reformist movements critique many cultural practices as bid'ah (innovation), whereas Sufi traditions accommodate cultural forms within Islamic spirituality. The article concludes that Islam in West Africa demonstrates remarkable flexibility, as it not only adeptly integrates indigenous cultural universals into the faith, but also uphold universal norms. The Yoruba and Akan experiences prove that Islam in Africa is not a foreign transplant but a living faith deeply intertwined with cultural identity, a conclusion consistent with recent studies on lived Islam and cultural contextualization in West Africa (Busari, 2024a; Nolte, 2022).

Keywords

Yoruba Muslim; Akan Islam, Cultural universals, inculturation, Islamic Rites

Introduction

The encounter between Islam and African indigenous cultures has produced some of the most dynamic forms of religious expression on the continent. In West Africa, particularly among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria and the Akan of the Ashanti Region in Ghana, the fusion of Islamic rites with pre-existing cultural

universals has resulted in a religious experience that is both uniquely African and authentically Islamic. The challenge, however, lies in determining how far cultural forms can be accommodated within the Islamic framework without compromising orthodoxy. This tension between culture and religion has been the subject of theological, anthropological, and sociological debates for decades (Sanneh 1997; Brenner 2001; Halidu, 2024).

The Yoruba and Akan peoples are among the most culturally influential groups in West Africa. The Yoruba are known for their elaborate social institutions, such as kingship, chieftaincy, and age-grade associations, while the Akan maintain strong traditions of matrilineal inheritance, elaborate funerary rites, and communal forms of marriage and child-naming. Many of these practices predate the coming of Islam but continue to shape the lived religious experience of Muslims within these societies (Peel 2016; Sarbah 2010). Recent scholarship confirms that these inherited practices are not merely survivals but are actively reinterpreted by contemporary Muslim communities in response to reformist and global Islamic discourses (Busari, 2024b; Arikewuyo & Abubakar, 2025). Thus, an exploration of cultural universals among the Yoruba and Akan provides an important entry point for understanding the ways in which Islamic rites are contextualized, contested, and reshaped in Africa.

From an Islamic perspective, the incorporation of cultural forms is not inherently problematic. Classical jurists have long recognized *ʿurf* (custom) as a legitimate source of law, provided that it does not contradict the Qurʿan or Sunnah. Ibn al-Qayyim, for example, argued that local customs could inform legal rulings when the revealed texts are silent, so long as the customs do not lead to sin or innovation (*bidʿah*) (Kamali 1991). This principle allowed Islam to adapt to diverse cultural environments as it spread across Asia, Africa, and beyond. Yet, the flexibility of *ʿurf* is balanced by Islam’s claim to universal norms that transcend cultural boundaries, especially in matters of worship (*ʿibādāt*) and core rituals such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, marriage contracts, inheritance, and funeral rites (Esposito 2018).

Therefore, the problem is not whether Yoruba and Akan Muslims possess cultural universals –every society does – but whether those universals align with or distort Islamic rites. For instance, the Yoruba emphasis on elaborate kingship rituals has sometimes clashed with Islamic notions of egalitarian leadership, while the Akan

practice of grand funerals raises questions about ostentation, extravagance, and theological propriety in Islam (Adu-Gyamfi et al. 2013; Loimeier 2013). At the same time, both societies have successfully Islamized elements of their cultural traditions, such as naming ceremonies, circumcision, and community solidarity, in ways that enrich their religious identity without violating Islamic principles.

This study is significant for three reasons. First, it contributes to the growing literature on Islam in Africa by highlighting the comparative dimensions of Yoruba and Akan Muslim experiences. Much scholarship has focused on either the Yoruba or the Akan in isolation, but few works bring them into dialogue (Peel 2000; Sarbah 2010). While recent studies increasingly examine Yoruba Muslim practices in contemporary Nigeria, comparative analyses that place Yoruba and Akan Muslim experiences in direct dialogue remain limited (Nolte, 2022; Busari, 2024a). Second, it advances the theoretical debate on culture and religion by applying the anthropological concept of cultural universals to an Islamic context. This approach allows for a systematic analysis of how cultural constants—such as language, kinship, marriage, and funerals—are interpreted within Islamic frameworks. Third, it engages the theological discourse on inculturation versus syncretism. While inculturation refers to the contextual adaptation of Islam to local cultures, syncretism suggests a blending that dilutes or compromises Islamic orthodoxy. The distinction is critical for evaluating the legitimacy of cultural practices among Yoruba and Akan Muslims (Trimingham 1962; Hunwick 1997).

Methodologically, this study employs a comparative approach, drawing on ethnographic accounts, historical records, and Islamic jurisprudential sources. It relies on both secondary literature and primary fieldwork findings from existing studies on Yoruba and Akan Muslims. The analysis is interdisciplinary, bridging anthropology, history, and Islamic studies to provide a holistic understanding of the subject. The argument is that cultural universals among the Yoruba and Akan not only persist under Islam but also shape the distinct character of Islamic rites in West Africa. At the same time, Islamic jurisprudence provides criteria for assessing which cultural elements may be accommodated and which must be reformed or rejected.

In summary, Yoruba and Akan cultural universals – ranging from kingship and chieftaincy to marriage, funerals, and naming ceremonies – intersect with Islamic rites in ways that demonstrate both harmony and tension. By situating these

practices within the framework of *urf* and the broader debates on inculturation, this study contributes to both the anthropology of religion and the theology of Islamic adaptation in Africa.

Conceptual Framework

Islam and Culture

Islam presents itself as a universal religion with timeless principles, yet it has historically accommodated cultural expressions in diverse societies. The Qur'an acknowledges cultural diversity as part of divine design:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَنْفَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another (Q. 49:13).

Anthropologists define cultural universals as elements common to all societies—language, kinship, rituals, art (Brown 1991). Recent theorists of lived religion argue that cultural universals are not static traits but are continuously re-enacted through ritual practice and social negotiation (Shaikh, 2021; Moosa, 2020). For Yoruba and Akan Muslims, these universals remain embedded in Islamic life, raising the question of how Islam negotiates them without losing its identity.

Urf in Islamic Jurisprudence

In Islamic law, *urf* is recognized as a source of consideration, provided it does not contradict the Qur'an, Sunnah, or consensus (*ijmā'*). *Maliki* jurists, dominant in West Africa, emphasize that customs could be incorporated into rulings where scriptural sources are silent (Kamali 1991). According to Al-Qarafi, who noted that rulings may change with changing times, places, and customs, a principle that allowed Islam to adapt globally (Hallaq 2009).

Inculturation versus Syncretism

Inculturation refers to contextual adaptation that enriches Islam without compromising doctrine, while syncretism suggests blending that undermines Islam (Sanneh 1997; Hunwick 1997). Yoruba drumming at festivals may be seen as inculturation, while invoking deities in prayer constitutes syncretism. Akan dual naming ceremonies illustrate inculturation, but ancestral libations at funerals risk syncretism. Contemporary discussions of lived Islam emphasize this distinction as

a dynamic process rather than a fixed boundary, especially in African Muslim contexts (Shaikh, 2021)

Cultural Universals and Islamic Rites

Islam provides its own rituals for life stages: *‘aqīqah* for naming, *nikāh* for marriage, *janāzah* for funerals. Yoruba and Akan societies had equivalents long before Islam. Some overlap easily, such as naming, while others, like funerals or kingship, pose challenges. The framework thus requires assessing cultural universals through the lens of *‘urf* and distinguishing inculturation from syncretism.

Yoruba Cultural Universals in Islamic Context

Language and Identity

Yoruba Muslims indigenize Islam by using Yoruba for sermons, hymns, and *Sufi* poetry, fulfilling Qur’anic principles of *da’wah* in local tongues وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ

We sent not a messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them. (Q. 14:4) (Peel 2016).

Kingship and Chieftaincy

The Yoruba *Oba* is traditionally sacred, “second to the gods.” Islam desacralizes the role but preserves cultural prestige. Muslim *Obas* incorporate Islamic prayers, though reformists condemn divination and ritual seclusion (Loimeier 2013).

Marriage and Family

Yoruba marriage customs, bride prize, negotiations are preserved, while Islamic *nikāh* ensures witnesses and *mahr* (Ogunba 2012). Recent analyses show that Yoruba Muslim families increasingly negotiate these marital customs in light of Islamic legal consciousness and modern social pressures (Busari, 2024a). Polygyny exists in both systems, though Islam moderates cultural excess by requiring justice

فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْوُلُوا

...but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess; that is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course. (Q4:3)

Naming and Birth Rituals

Traditional naming with divination is replaced by Qur'anic recitations, while feasting and praise-poetry remain. This blend exemplifies inculturation, aligning with the *'aqīqah* (Ikotun 2014).

Funeral and Burial Rites

Traditional funerals are elaborate, but Islam prescribes simplicity. Yoruba Muslims combine Islamic burial with *fidāu* prayers and family feasts. Reformists condemn extravagance (Q. 17:27). Similar tensions between religious reform and cultural obligation continue to shape contemporary Yoruba Muslim funerals, particularly in urban settings (Busari, 2024a)

Inheritance and Property

Patrilineal Yoruba inheritance aligns more closely with Islam; though Islamic law expands women's rights (Fadipe 1970; Q. 4:11–12).

Ritual Universals

Pre-Islamic rituals center on *Ifa* and *òrìṣà*. Yoruba Muslims reframe them with Qur'anic healing and reliance on God's decree. *Sufi* orders adapted these practices, while reformists reject them (Brenner 2001).

Akan Cultural Universals in Islamic Context

Belief in the Supreme Deity

Nyame as Supreme Deity is reinterpreted as Allah, resonating with Qur'anic attributes (Sarbah 2010). Unlike traditional worship, Islam rejects intermediaries (Q. 39:3).

Marriage and Kinship

Akan marriage emphasizes family alliances. Akan Muslims integrate *nikāh* requirements but navigate matrilineal kinship structures that complicate paternal guardianship (Owurasah 2015).

Childbirth and Naming

Akan *abadinto* (eighth-day naming) overlaps with Islamic *'aqīqah*. Dual naming (Akan day names + Islamic names) illustrates inculturation. Reformists oppose ancestral invocations (Sarbah 2010).

Funeral and Ancestors

Elaborate Akan funerals conflict with Islamic simplicity. Akan Muslims substitute libations with Qur'anic prayers but retain communal feasts. Reformists condemn extravagance (Adu-Gyamfi et al. 2013). Recent scholarship indicates that Akan

Muslim communities are among the most contested arenas of reformist critique due to the persistence of ancestor-centered funeral expectations (Halidu, 2024)

Inheritance

Matrilineal inheritance contradicts Qur'anic prescriptions (Busia 1951). Contemporary studies suggest that legal pluralism and selective compliance with Islamic inheritance law remain common among Akan Muslims (Nolte, 2022). Some Akan Muslims fully adopt Islamic law; others maintain hybrid systems.

Social Cohesion

Communalism aligns with Islamic *Ummah* (Q. 49:10). Akan Muslims reframe communal solidarity through mosque networks and Sufi orders.

Ritual Universals

Traditional deities and libations are replaced with Qur'anic supplications and *Eid* festivals. Sufi tolerance and reformist critique shape contemporary practice (Hunwick 1997; Brenner 2001).

Comparative Analysis

Yoruba and Akan Muslims converge in naming, marriage, and language adaptation. Both contextualize Islam through *'urf*, balancing orthodoxy and culture. Divergences lie in kingship (Yoruba patrilineal vs. Akan matrilineal), inheritance (Yoruba aligns more easily with the Qur'an), and funerals (Akan practices are more elaborate and ancestor-centered). Reformist critiques are strong in both contexts, but cultural resilience ensures continuity (Loimeier 2013; Sarbah 2010). These patterns align with recent comparative research showing that patrilineal societies tend to integrate Islamic legal norms more seamlessly than matrilineal systems (Busari, 2024a); Nolte, 2022)

Theological and Legal Debates

Maliki jurisprudence legitimizes *'urf* but warns against *bid'ah*. Yoruba *fidāu* prayers and Akan funeral feasts are contested: defenders view them as cultural solidarity, while critics view them as innovations. *Sufi* leaders historically accommodated cultural practices, indigenizing Islam through poetry, drumming, and communal rituals (Brenner 2001). Reformist movements such as *Izala*, or the *Salafiyyah* Movement in Nigeria and *Wahhabi*-inspired groups in Ghana condemn these as deviations (Loimeier 2013). Recent studies demonstrate that Reformist-Sufi tensions continue to shape Muslim ritual life in West Africa, particularly

around funerals, festivals, and healing practices (*Journal of Religion in Africa Editorial Collective*, 2024). The divide reflects competing visions of Islam: contextual vs. purified.

Ancestor veneration is particularly contested. Yoruba Muslims largely replace it with Qur'anic prayers, while Akan Muslims negotiate stronger ancestral traditions. Reformists label all ancestral invocations *shirk*, while others distinguish cultural remembrance from worship. Inheritance debates are sharper among Akan Muslims due to matrilineal systems conflicting with explicit Qur'anic law (Q. 4:11–12). Yoruba reforms primarily expanded women's rights within patrilineal systems. The inculturation–syncretism distinction remains central. Where practices enrich Islamic life without doctrinal compromise, they are inculturation. Where they undermine monotheism or divine law, they are syncretism.

Conclusion

The Yoruba and Akan illustrate how Islam engages cultural universals with both flexibility and boundaries. Cultural forms are not inherently opposed to Islam; many are sanctified under ‘urf. Yet where they conflict with the Qur’an and Sunnah—such as sacral kingship, matrilineal inheritance, or ancestor worship—Islam requires reform. Recent scholarship on lived Islam in Africa confirms that the negotiation between cultural universals and Islamic orthodoxy is ongoing rather than settled (Busari, 2024a; Shaikh, 2021). The Yoruba and Akan cases therefore speak not only to historical adaptation but also to contemporary debates on contextualization, reform, and religious authenticity (Nolte, 2022; Halidu, 2024).

This study highlights three key insights. First, Islam permits cultural plurality as part of divine design (Q. 49:13), and Yoruba and Akan Muslims have enriched Islamic practice through contextual adaptation. Second, cultural practices that contradict explicit Islamic injunctions must be reformed, as seen in Akan inheritance and Yoruba funerals. Third, the line between inculturation and syncretism is negotiated differently across contexts, producing diverse expressions of African Islam. Theologically, Islam’s universality does not demand cultural uniformity. The Yoruba and Akan experiences demonstrate that Islam in Africa is authentically Islamic yet distinctly African. Practically, this calls for a balanced theology of contextualization: affirming cultural forms where they enrich faith, while rejecting those that compromise doctrine.

In conclusion, Yoruba and Akan Muslims embody the creative tension between faith and culture. Their practices reveal Islam not as a foreign transplant but as a living religion deeply intertwined with African universals. This synthesis, while contested, shows that Islam’s encounter with culture need not be a zero-sum game; rather, it can produce a faith both faithful to its sources and vibrantly rooted in its local soil.

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