

The Third Space of Conversion: Selective Cultural Brokerage and the Historical Reconstitution of Tradition Among the Atswean-Asi (A Kuteb Subgroup) in Taraba State, Nigeria¹

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Abstract:

This study is an exploration of the cultural and traditional practices of the Atswean-Asi people of Kwambai, a distinct subgroup of the Kuteb ethnic group in Taraba State, Nigeria. It interrogates the continuity and transformation of practices such as child-naming ceremonies, menstrual segregation, male circumcision, and associated taboos in the face of external influences. The main argument is that the interaction between Christianity, modernity, and indigenous practices has led to a lively mix of cultures. This has created a 'Third Space' for expression that helps maintain community identity through Selective Cultural Brokerage. The objective is to historicise and analyse these cultural practices within their socio-political and spiritual frameworks, utilising the Theory of Cultural Hybridity to interpret the data as evidence of active cultural resilience rather than passive reception. The study adopts the historical method, relying on oral traditions, ethnographic observation, and documentary sources. The paper concludes that these traditions are being restructured in a focused way. This gives us a new theoretical idea: Selective Cultural Brokerage. Community leaders work together to manage the rules of cultural continuity, which helps maintain the stability of a new, hybrid communal identity.

Keywords:

Kuteb; Atswean-Asi; Cultural Hybridity; Selective Cultural Brokerage; Cultural Reconstitution.

¹ DOI: 10.12700/jceeas.2026.6.2.503

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1. Introduction

The clash of native African culture and the agents of Christian modernity is one of the main areas of interest in the anthropology of religion as to how the local population copes with the tension between the traditional beliefs and new religions (Peel, 2016 & Sanneh, 1989). This relationship has been discussed in many terms of cultural erasure, where the missionary influence and western education was perceived as an unavoidable acculturation instrument (Smith, 1972). But, the modern history of the Atswean Asi (subgroup of the Kuteb people in Taraba State) indicates a still more subtle fact. Although missionary activity reached Kuteb land as early as 1915, the culture change was not a docile submission but a bargaining process. The use of agency by indigenous communities in the reconstruction of their traditions instead of just submitting to foreign religious domination is a pressing need to research.

In this paper, the analytic focus of the study is the Third Space of Enunciation, which is a concept applied in the post-colonial theory to define the in-between space in which the tradition and modernity intersect to establish new identities (Bhabha, 1994). Selective Cultural Brokerage is, in this context, the particular administrative and spiritual process that is employed to manoeuvre through this space. Selective Cultural Brokerage is, in this context, an institutional convergence between the traditional political council (Be Kwe) and the leadership of the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN), in contrast to the classical model, which assumes that individual gatekeepers operate independently (Wolf, 1956 & Geertz, 1960). The view of the church as a co-governor of tradition would enable one to further see how cultural hybridity is an artificialised and produced effect and not an unintended by-product of history.

Past research on Kuteb has been mostly limited to general linguistic evaluations, missionary history, or description of wedding celebrations (Smith, 1972, Ejwocwu, 2000, Ukwon, 2023 & Ukwon, 2014). While these studies provide valuable historical data, they often overlook the specific institutional negotiations that occur within subgroups, such as the Atswean Asi. The current literature on religious syncretism in Africa has given much attention to the adaptations at the individual level but does not critically analyse the negotiated tradition which are run by formal councils. As an example, when missionary reports stress the loss of traditional rites, they do not pay much attention to the symbolic synthesis in the naming ceremonies or the institutional heterogeneity that is performed during the official 2010 marriage reforms. This negligence about the corporate agency of indigenous leaders characterises the research gap that is critical, and that is filled in the current study. This research addresses the specified gap, as it embraces a qualitative research method based on historical inquiry to investigate the way Atswean Asi people apply the Selective Cultural Brokerage process to reconstruct their identity. Basing the study on the theory of cultural hybridity, the community is viewed as a proactive designer of the Third Space, which provides the space with the furnishings in the form of a rational and well-organised selection scheme.

The emphasis on the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN) is not coincidental. The RCCN has been the most prominent Christian denomination among

the Kuteb people since the advent of Christianity in the region, and the overwhelming majority of Christians are members of RCCN. Its impact is not just religious, but also social, as it was used to regulate social institutions and customs. The effectiveness of this was shown in the joint deliberations of the RCCN leadership and the Be Kwe (traditional council) in 2010 that resulted in agreed reforms to Kuteb marriage practices. The RCCN, as a demographic majority and a partner of the traditional authorities, offers the best case study to explore Christian institutions' role in the selective reconstruction of Kuteb cultural practices.

In the current study, the discussion of how certain practices such as marriage reforms, naming practices, and moralisation of menstrual taboos were transitioned goes to show that, conversion is an authored cultural production (Peel, 2016). The situation of the study puts the Kuteb identity survival in terms of world Christianity. This study is relevant to anthropological studies as it re-establishes the context of religious conversion as an institutional brokerage. Theoretically, it expands the debate on hybridity, demonstrating the fact that it is the Third Space that is being controlled by corporate forces and not by urgent personal decisions. It provides some special information on the Atswean Asi subgroup, recording the strength of their ontological needs through modernising pressures. Lastly, the research comes up with a historical reconstitution model that validates the existence of indigenous agency, which is an essential move towards comprehending how African communities maintain cultural specifics and also become part of the world communities.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Evolution of Cultural Brokerage

The idea of cultural brokerage is a landmark structure of examining the relationships between local societies and large foreign institutions. The original definition of the cultural broker was given by Eric Wolf (1956), who explained such players as nation-oriented individuals who lie in important links between local village institutions and national or international systems which are called synapses. In this classical approach, the role of the broker is as a gatekeeper, who coordinates information and resources in bringing members of the community to a larger political economy and at the same time provides internal social order.

Clifford Geertz (1960) applied this framework of analysis into the religious context in his work on the Javanese *kijaji*. Geertz demonstrated that the role of religious scholars was not only that of spiritual leaders but cultural interlocutors, who facilitated the process of importing Islamic values into local settings. He illustrated that brokerage is a severely symbolic process of translation, whereby the external worldviews are restructured into a language that the local people can embrace without necessarily losing their main identity. Despite developing quite strong frameworks on the way to approach cultural mediation, Wolf and Geertz focused mostly on the agency of individual agents, i.e. the role of the village chief or the individual scholar as the mediator between two different worlds.



The modern reality of the Atswean-Asi is such that it requires the break with this individualistic emphasis. J.D.Y. Peel (2016) presents a needed addition to the classical theory of brokerage by claiming that religious conversion in Nigeria could hardly be a passive state of being subject to the external hegemony. Rather, Peel defines conversion as an act of cultural making which is self-determined. In this view, this contact between indigenous traditions and Christian structures is seen as an authored reconstruction of the social world. According to the framework by Peel, communities do not take a new faith as a finished product and impose it onto the community; instead, they use it as a tool to cope with the pressures of a constantly changing present.

This research expounds on the observation of Peel to explain that brokerage in Kwambai and Kuteb land has transformed into a corporate institutional project. The traditional council (the Be - Kwe) along with the church leadership (the RCCN) exist in a combined form rather than in an individual format. This is an institutional alliance that regulates the conditions of cultural continuity, so that which traditional institutions, like the need to protect a spirituality or the control of descent, are reconstructed in a Christian context, are determined. As a result, the study goes beyond the duality between cultural retention and loss. It conceptualises the resulting hybridity as a conscious, written experience whereby local institutions use the church to ensure the survival of local ethnic identity of Kuteb in a modernising world.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: The Third Space and Selective Cultural Brokerage

The spatial context for cultural evolution among the Atswean Asi is best situated within Homi Bhabha's (1994) conceptualisation of the Third Space of Enunciation. Bhabha describes this space as a liminal or in between location where the rigid binaries of tradition and modernity are collapsed through the process of cultural interaction. Within this framework, Selective Cultural Brokerage functions as the active mechanism of translation that navigates this liminality and manages the inherent ambivalence of the post colonial condition. While Bhabha identifies the space, the presence of institutional brokers explains the administrative logic that furnishes it. This process reflects Peel's (2016) observation that religious conversion acts as a self determined project of making, where the community does not merely inhabit a hybrid space but actively authors its contents.

I define Selective Cultural Brokerage as the deliberate, corporate management of tradition by an alliance of indigenous political structures and religious institutions. Unlike the individual brokers described by Wolf (1956) or Geertz (1960), brokerage in Kwambai is an institutional process involving a collaborative effort between the Be Kwe (the traditional council of elders) and the leadership of the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN). This brokerage represents a significant performance of agency that rejects the notion of cultural erasure. Rather than a passive reception of external norms, the community engages in what Bhabha describes as a disruptive hybridity that allows the Atswean Asi to author a new social script.

The community utilises the church to secure the continuity of ancient ontological needs, such as spiritual protection and lineage stability, while simultaneously adopting the administrative and moral forms of Christian modernity. This theoretical model posits that cultural hybridity is not an accidental byproduct of history but a manufactured outcome. The leaders of the community actively select which elements of the past are compatible with the future through a selection process that is rational and systematic. This involves discarding practices deemed obsolete, modifying others to fit Christian ethics, and canonising those that are essential for Kuteb identity. Consequently, Selective Cultural Brokerage is not a sign of identity confusion but a sophisticated project of historical reconstitution. It ensures that the resulting hybridity is a deliberate and authored outcome, where the community remains traditionally anchored even as they are modernly oriented.

2.3 Operationalising the Theory

The validity of Selective Cultural Brokerage as a theoretical tool is empirically grounded in the historical events of the community, most notably the cultural legislation enacted in 2010. This event serves as the primary case study for the theoretical argument of this paper. In October 2010, the Be-Kwe and the RCCN leadership under the guidance of Rev. Risae Yakubu Shamaki convened a formal deliberative assembly to reconstitute the laws of marriage and bride price (Reformed Church of Christ for Nations [RCCN] & Be Kwe Council, 2010; Shamaki, 2022). This event demonstrates that the church in Kuteb land has evolved beyond the role of a missionary antagonist to become a "co-governor" of tradition. Pegging the bride price at fifty thousand naira and codifying the specific items required for the ceremony has demonstrated the capacity of the church and the traditional council to have acted as a corporate brokerage firm. They did not abolish the traditional payment, which would have signaled a total break with the ancestors, nor did they allow the price to float freely, which would have succumbed to the capitalist pressures of the modern economy. Instead, they brokered a middle ground that satisfied the requirement for traditional legitimacy while adhering to the Christian and economic imperatives of the present day.

Therefore, this study moves beyond the narrative of cultural loss. The utilisation of the framework of Selective Cultural Brokerage in the following sections will demonstrate that the Atswean-Asi are engaged in a sophisticated project of historical reconstitution. They are using the institutions of the church and the traditional council to navigate Bhabha's Third Space, ensuring that their identity remains distinct even as it transforms. This approach offers a significant theoretical contribution to the anthropology of religion in Africa by shifting the focus from individual syncretism to institutional agency.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative historical inquiry method, designed to reconstruct the social history of the Atswean-Asi people through the triangulation of oral traditions, ethnographic observation, and text analysis. The primary objective of this design was to move beyond a static description of cultural traits and instead capture the dynamic process of cultural negotiation described in the theoretical framework. Treating culture as a "lived experience" rather than a fixed object allows for an investigation into how the community actively manages the tension between Kuteb tradition and Christian modernity.

3.2 Study Area and Population

The research was primarily conducted in Kwambai (Atswean-Asi), located in the Yangtu Development Area of Taraba State, Nigeria. Supplementary data were collected in Takum and Wukari, where significant diaspora populations of Atswean-Asi reside. The study population was stratified to include three distinct categories of actors essential to the "brokerage" process: traditional political leaders (*Be-Kwe*), religious clergy from the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN), and lay community elders. This stratification ensured that the data reflected the perspectives of both the custodians of tradition and the agents of change.

3.3 Data Collection Strategies

Data collection was executed between December 2021 and March 2022. The study utilised three primary instruments:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** The dataset was generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected "culture bearers". The sampling technique was non-probabilistic and purposive, targeting individuals known for their encyclopaedic knowledge of Atswean and Kuteb history. Key interlocutors included Prince Anderi Andeshara (a royal prince), Rev. Risae Yakubu Shamaki (RCCN Clergy), Rimamshong Yashe (Traditional Council Member in Kwambai) and Jerusha D. (Women Leader). The interview protocol focused on three thematic pillars: the origins of specific rites (such as *Suwa* and *Iki-fen*), the timeline of their decline or modification, and the rationale behind the acceptance of the 2010 marriage reforms.
- **Ethnographic Observation:** To supplement oral accounts, the researcher engaged in direct participant observation of contemporary cultural life. This included attending child-naming ceremonies and observing the interactions during traditional council meetings. These observations provided "thick description" of how hybrid practices, such as the use of the palm leaf alongside Christian prayer, are enacted in real-time.

- Archival and Documentary Analysis: Oral data were corroborated with documentary evidence to minimise memory bias. Key documents included the written resolutions of the 2010 Joint Meeting between the *Be-Kwe* and RCCN leadership, as well as historical missionary records and colonial intelligence reports cited in established literature (e.g., Smith, 1972; Mgbe, 1981).

3.4 Reflexivity and Positionality

A critical component of this methodology is the positionality of the author as a native member of the Atswean-Asi community. In anthropological terms, this study is conducted from an "indigenous insider" perspective. This status provided significant advantages, primarily in the form of linguistic fluency (Kuteb) and access to restricted sacred knowledge that would be inaccessible to an outsider. However, the author acknowledges the risk of "familiarity blindness" that is, the tendency to overlook patterns that appear ordinary to a local but are analytically significant. To mitigate this bias and ensure critical distance, the study employed a strategy of "estrangement", consciously treating familiar rituals as strange data points requiring explanation. Furthermore, the interpretation of the data was subjected to peer debriefing with academic colleagues outside the Kuteb ethnic group to ensure that the theory of "Selective Cultural Brokerage" was grounded in empirical evidence rather than assumed cultural knowledge.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the field were analysed using a thematic analysis framework. Recorded interviews were transcribed and coded to identify recurring patterns regarding cultural modification. Codes were generated around key concepts such as "abandonment" (e.g., the menstrual hut), "modification" (e.g., circumcision timing), "monetisation" (e.g., bride price), and "symbolic retention" (e.g., the palm leaf). These codes were then synthesised to construct the argument of institutional brokerage, demonstrating how specific decisions led to the formation of the "Third Space".

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all interlocutors. The purpose of the study was explained in the local dialect, and participants were assured that their historical narratives would be treated with respect. In cases where sensitive information regarding sacred rites was shared, permission was explicitly sought to reproduce these details in the scholarly record. The use of real names in this text was done with the express permission of the elders, who viewed the research as a means of preserving their legacy for future generations.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Brief Historical Context of the Atswean- Asi (Kwambai)

The history of the migration and settlement of the Atswean-Asi people is controversial, this is because the history of the people is based on oral traditions. Although these controversies exist, there is uniformity in the oral traditions that the first people to settle at the Atswean-Asi Mountain are the Nya sub-clan in Kwambai. It is imperative to adumbrate that the Atswean people are a mixture of different Kuteb clans who all came together to form the settlement known as Kwambai (Atswean-Asi). Oral history, as narrated by Dauda, has it that the Nya sub-clan in Atswean-Asi are descendants of a man from Bika. This man was said to have left Bika because he never wanted to partake in a war which was on-going. He decided to migrate out of Bika with his family to the Atswean-Asi Mountain and founded the Cwupwe-Nya on the mountain (Dauda, 2021). As time went on, he was joined by a man from Acha who founded the Nyisha sub-clan in Kwambai or Atswean-Asi. The man from Acha who came to found the Nyisha sub-clan was said to have left Acha because of a dispute. The Nyitsa sub-clan also joined from Kpambo to found the Cwupwe-Nyitsa. The Mbausa are said to have migrated from another clan in Bika. More so, the Risik sub-clan also came from Bika to found the Cwupwe-Risik. Nuswo and Metan sub-clan are said to have come from Fikyu. And then Mbarkan are said to have migrated from Rubur (Jenuwa) (Yohanna, 2021). From the above we could easily glean that Kwambai (Atswean-Asi) is made up of eight sub-clan which are Nya, Nyisha, Nyitsa, Risik, Mbausa, Nuswo, Metan, Mbarkan.

4.2 The Transformation of Religious and Social Institutions

4.2.1 From Iki-fen to the Church: The Shift in Spiritual Protection

One aspect of a people's culture and tradition is their religion. Before the advent of Christianity in Kwambai or Atswean-Asi, the people believed in the existence of a supernatural being called Rimam-Pupwen (the God of heaven). The Atswean-Asi held that this Rimam-Pupwen was responsible for their creation, and he reigned in their daily activities here on earth (Ukwen, 2014). To connect to this Supreme Being, the Atswean-Asi worshipped specific idols that they believed represented the invisible Rimam-Pupwen. It was these idols they worshipped and presented all their case or worries to, hence the idols are smaller gods or offspring of the Rimam-Pupwen. Some of these idols were owned by individuals or families, as the case might be. These smaller gods or idols worshipped by the people serve different or various purposes, which makes it possible for one to own more than one god or idol. One of the plethora of such gods or idols is the Iki-fen, which is seen as the god of the road. Iki-fen is responsible for safeguarding individuals from harm while on a journey. Oral information derived from Prince Anderi Andeshara shows that Iki-fen could even direct the path of an individual from an impending doom while on any journey. During our discussion, Prince Anderi Andeshara emphasised the protective agency of this deity, stating: "If a man is walking into danger,

Iki-fen will cloud the path or make his feet heavy so he cannot continue toward his death" (Andeshara, 2021).

There is also another god, which is called Ikir-kwen (mountain god). This god is worshipped and revered by all in the community because it is believed that when trouble ensues in the land, calling on Ikir-kwen will salvage the situation or problem. To connect to the Ikir-kwen, one will need the services of the Kukwen-rikwen (the priest). As a priest, he is a mediator between the people and the gods in the land. It was through the Kukwen-rikwen that the Ikir-kwen gave messages or instructions to the people in the land. The Ikir-kwen is usually given a yearly sacrifice of a human head to appease it for favour and supply, such as high yield in crops during a planting season and favourable rainfall. It is worth noting that any time there seems to be drought in the land, the Kukwen-rikwen will take with him some items, such as either goats or chickens, to the topmost part of the Atswean-Asi Mountain. After so many incantations, he will sacrifice the chicken or goat and then remove his shirt and raise it. Immediately this is done, rain will start to fall, which shows the potency of communication between the Kukwen-rikwen and the gods.

Significantly, the Kukwen-rikwen is the spiritual leader of the Atswean-Asi; as such, there are certain things based on traditions that he must observe. One of such is that the Kukwen-rikwen does not greet mortal men through a handshake; if one wants to greet the Kukwen-rikwen, he would have to tap his lap three times, and so also would the Kukwen-rikwen respond in the same manner. If the Kukwen-rikwen meets another Kukwen from another Kuteb community, he would greet him by turning the back of his palm and tapping it three times at the back of the other Kukwen's back of palm. Moreover, the Kukwen-rikwen does not eat from a plate but rather uses a calabash. Furthermore, the Kukwen-rikwen does not wear any other colour of cloth than black. Prior to the Atswean People starting to wear woven cloth, men usually wore animal skin, and so the Kukwen-rikwen also wears animal skin, but it undergoes a traditional dyeing process to darken the hide. This adherence to black attire is not merely aesthetic but ontological. As Rimamshong Yashe explained: "The black skin represents the heavy clouds of rain and the depth of the ancestors; for a priest to wear white or red is to invite drought and anger upon the community" (Yashe, 2021).

The transition from the traditional priesthood of the Kukwen-rikwen to the modern Christian clergy offers a critical insight into the mechanism of Selective Cultural Brokerage. While the overt worship of deities like Iki-fen and Ikir-kwen has declined, the data suggests that the community's ontological security, their deep-seated need for protection against the unknown, has not disappeared. Instead, it has undergone a process of functional substitution. The church leadership, acting as cultural brokers, did not merely erase the function of the Kukwen; they assumed it. Today, the prayers for journey mercies offered by the RCCN pastor serve the exact same sociological function as the sacrifices to Iki-fen. Similarly, the Harvest Thanksgiving and special fasting for rain have replaced the mountain sacrifices to Ikir-kwen. This demonstrates that the Third Space of conversion is not a vacuum where tradition is lost, but a hybrid space where



the forms of worship change, but the cultural logic remains intact. The Atswean-Asi have successfully negotiated a system where they can remain traditionally protected while being modernly Christian, proving that the brokers have managed to stabilise the community's identity by re-routing ancient fears through new, institutional channels.

4.2.2 Domestic Socialisation and Etiquette

Another aspect of the Atswean-Asi culture is the pattern to which children and youths are groomed to be responsible. In this sense, women are very instrumental to the early life of their children because of their biological attachment to their children. When a child is born and has begun his or her growth, it is the mother who teaches that child how to speak. As the child keeps growing, he or she is bequeathed with the norms and etiquette of Atswean. Such norms and etiquette include the manner in which the child should greet elders and respect constituted authorities. The child is also taught his or her role based on gender peculiarities (Araen, 2021). For instance, the male child is taught how to till the ground for planting, cutting down trees for the house for cooking purposes, how to hunt for bush meat, and other male-prescribed roles in Atswean-Asi. The theoretical knowledge is taught by the mothers, while the practical aspect is taught by fathers and other male figures in the family. For the female child, she is taught how to cook delicacies ranging from *itong tsiyae* (pumpkin leaf soup), *itong nasara* (moringa leaf soup), *itong bishi* (creeping jenny leaf soup), *pwa wura* (hibiscus leaf soup), among many others. The females are also inculcated with virtues to remain respectful, decent, and neat so that they will not bring shame and disgrace to their household.

In the Atswean-Asi culture, when food is served, everyone is expected to maintain decorum while eating. Such decorum that should be maintained is that no one is expected to make noise while eating, because food should be respected by all. More to that, while eating, no one is supposed to rush the food, especially if it is with elders (Mgbe, 1981). An elder is supposed to eat and remain food for the youngest person they are eating together, this is to show that he wants the younger person to also grow to adulthood and be responsible for other younger ones too. While eating, it is the youngest person who usually shares the meat, and then the most elderly person picks first, but in the case where food is to be shared, the most elderly person will share, and the youngest will pick first. More so, after eating, it is expected that the youngest will be the one to pack the plates. It is also in the culture of the Atswean-Asi people that even if a younger person is full while eating with an elderly person, he or she is not permitted to wash his hands except the older person has washed his or hers. This is done to instil discipline and respect in the minds of all to be conscious of their elders.

Unlike public rites like marriage or circumcision, these domestic practices of grooming and etiquette have remained largely resistant to "Brokerage." They exist in the private domain (Habitus), where the *Be-Kwe* and Church have less direct control. This suggests that while "institutional" culture is negotiated in the Third Space, "domestic" culture serves as a stable reservoir of Kuteb identity, preserved through the informal agency of mothers rather than formal decrees.

4.2.3 Marriage Rites

Marriage is another factor in the Atswean-Asi culture; marriage constitutes a union between a man and woman, including their families. In Atswean-Asi, when a female child is born, another parent who has a male child would get a bead known as Suwa and then take it to the newly born female child. The bead, which is in the form of a necklace, is placed on the neck of the female child to show that she has been betrothed to a man already. This is to avert any suitor from coming to do the same ritual with her again (Ukwen, 2023). Reflecting on the finality of this ritual, Emmanuel (2022) noted: "Once the Suwa was on her neck, that girl was no longer a child of her father alone; she was a wife-in-waiting. No other man would even look at her twice because the bead was a boundary". In some cases, it is the intending suitor who is already grown up who takes this bead to the newly born girl. Once the bead is placed on the baby's neck and some quantity of cigarettes is given to the baby's father, no one is permitted to ask for her hand in marriage because someone has shown interest and fulfilled the initial customary requirement. As the baby keeps growing, the family of the male child is expected to always fetch firewood for the intended bride so that they can use it to cook. Moreover, the male child's family is dutifully bound to farm for the parents of the girl child on an annual basis. In the eventuality that the male child is grown, he is expected to do this himself. Sometimes, he and his friends would engage in group farming for the family of his intended wife. He does this until his wife is attained marriageable age. When the lady is fully matured, the male figure will hunt for meat for his father-in-law, after which he does the same for his mother-in-law, and finally for the lady too. Again, he would have to produce about seven pots of locally brewed alcohol known as jwab for his in-laws. After this process is fulfilled, the lady will be released to the man, and he will bring her home. When she arrives at her husband's home, the man is not permitted to touch her unless she sleeps in her mother-in-law's room. If the young man has step-mothers, she must definitely sleep in their huts before the man comes to beg his mother and step-mother for the release of his wife to him. They will oblige, and the lady will be taken to his hut for him to have her all through (Emmanuel, 2022).

On the first night of their sexual intercourse, a white cloth is placed on their traditional bed made of wood to ratify if the lady is a virgin. If blood drops on the cloth, it is now confirmed that the lady is a virgin and she will be celebrated for maintaining decency, but if otherwise, she is considered morally compromised and that will bring disgrace to her parent, for they will be considered as incapable of grooming their child. It should be noted that the above scenario has been the norm; it was not until the transition to modernity that some of these practices are no longer tenable because of civilisation (Jerusha, 2022). Today, a lady ripe for marriage in Atswean-Asi can choose who gets married to her. But in distant time past, as long as the bead is placed on her neck while she is still a toddler, even if she grows up not to have emotional attachment with the man, she is under obligation to marry him, which is to say the females had no choice of who to marry.



With the coming of the colonialist and their agents (missionaries), some of these marriage rites have witnessed significant transformation from their organic state as it was in the precolonial times. Take for instance, the ritual of placing a suwa (bead necklace) on a newly born female child to be betrothed has become obsolete and no longer tenable. This practice did not decline at once; it was gradual. By the 1940s, Christianity had made a significant presence in Atswean-Asi (Kwambai), and a sizeable population of the people had adopted the Christian faith (Smith, 1972). Converts were taught to allow their daughters to choose their own life partners. The findings obtained during my fieldwork reveal that by the first decade of the 21st century, this practice had completely eroded in Atswean-Asi. Thus, one can safely arrive at the conclusion that Christianity and globalisation were powerful forces to have attracted this new transformation.

Another transformation in the marriage rites is hinged on the fact that some obligations that were hitherto expected by a suitor have changed. The practice of organising friends to farm for your intended in-laws or hunting for meat is not a necessity as it used to be. It is now something that can be done at will because modernity has set in, and many Atswean-Asi men do not reside in the village, but have taken to other professions in the city. There is a development that greatly impacted marital rites not just in Atswean-Asi but the whole of Kuteb land. In October 2010, a meeting was held by the Be-Kwe (council of Kuteb Village kings) and the leadership of the Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN) under Reverend Risae Yakubu Shamaki to discuss and agree on what should constitute marital rites in the whole of Kuteb land (RCCN & Be Kwe Council, 2010; Vanguard, November 2011). An interesting point to note is that over 90% of Kuteb Christians worship with RCCN, which explains why the church is meeting with Kuteb traditional rulers to modify some of these rites. After an exhaustive discussion, the pastors and traditional rulers came into agreement that bride price should be placed at N50,000 with items such as 6 bags of salt, 6 crates of carbonated drinks (1 Coke, 1 Fanta, 1 Sprite, and 3 Malt), N 5,000 for opening of in-law's mouth, N10,000 for washing of pot. Some other minor charges must not exceed N20,000 (RCCN & Be Kwe Council, 2010).

The decline of the suwa ritual is one example of the 'brokerage' process where a tradition was actively jettisoned as antithetical to the Christian emphasis on individual marital consent. More profoundly, the formal agreement between the traditional Be-Kwe (council of Kuteb Village kings) and the RCCN leadership in 2010 is a quintessential example of Institutional Hybridity. This negotiation did not eradicate customary law but rather stabilised it by creating a Hybrid Social Institution that standardises a modern cash payment alongside core ceremonial requirements. The church, instead of being an agent of disruption, became the co-governor of tradition, demonstrating collective agency in the face of modernity.

4.2.4 Child Naming and Symbolic Hybridity

Marriage comes with the blessing of childbearing, which also culminates in child naming. When a woman gives birth for her first time for her husband, the child is named by either the husband's father or mother, depending on the sex of the child. Subsequent children will be named by the parent. Child naming ceremony in the traditional Atswean-Asi community and the entire Kuteb ethnic group does not involve a pronounced celebration where there are guests. It is a low-key event that only involves the immediate family members and sometimes very close friends of the child's parent or grandparent. As soon as a child is born, the father of the child immediately notifies his own father (grandfather of the child) that his wife has given birth and when the naming of child. A close date is set and, on that day, a cock or hen is slaughtered for the child's mother to celebrate her fruitfulness.

At this point, it becomes necessary to say that the naming of the child is based on wishes and events. Some name their grandchildren or children in advance, that is, even before the child is born. For instance, when you hear names like *ikitaka*, which is translated to mean 'where is the masquerade?' signifies that a child was born when a masquerade was being dressed for a traditional event. It is believed that masquerade dressing is an invisible process for women. Names like *Andeze* (humans are jealous and full of hate) are given to a child whose father or grandfather faces jealousy and hatred. *Kweka* (King of war) is named for a child whose father or grandfather is a war lord or skilled in the art of war (Yabkwa, 2022).

On the day of the naming ceremony, a symbolic moment unfolds as the grandfather of the newborn takes the child in his arms and begins a series of eulogies, invoking blessings that reflect the community's aspirations for the child's well-being. He utters words of protection and hope, such as: "You shall not see evil. You will not cry. The only cry you will cry is the cry for breast milk", signifying a life free from pain, sickness, or misfortune. The grandfather continues by declaring protective metaphors against adversity: "If trouble comes from the east, you will be at the west; if from the west, you will be at the south; if from the south, you will be at the north; if from behind, you will be in front; if from the front, you will be behind; if from the left, you will be at the right" (Andeshara, 2021). These pronouncements are understood as spiritual safeguards, seeking to position the child perpetually away from danger. Following the blessings, the father assumes the ceremonial role of naming the child. This is accompanied by the symbolic act of tying a palm leaf to the child's hand, a gesture that may denote protection, spiritual identification, or a cultural bond with the ancestors and the land.

The naming ceremony presents a powerful instance of Symbolic Synthesis (or Hybrid Semiotics). The grandfather's traditional eulogy, with its pre-Christian, spiritual metaphors of protection ('If trouble comes from the east, you will be at the west...'), is deliberately retained and articulated alongside the formal Christian naming convention. This ritual ensures the child's identity is anchored in both the lineage (traditional universe) and the new faith. Furthermore, the tying of the palm leaf functions as a physical signifier of indigenous protection, a tangible cultural object existing in the Third

Space alongside the invisible, abstract promises of Christian faith, a synthesis that is actively maintained by the community.

4.2.5 Menstrual Segregation

One other cultural practice in Atswean-Asi is that of segregating women who are under their menstrual cycle. Once a woman or lady starts to menstruate, she is segregated from members of the community to an enclosed hut outside the community for her to reside there until her menstrual cycle is completed. One of the reasons for this segregation is hinged on the fact that the lady on her menstrual cycle wouldn't cook for anyone within her household. A woman during menstruation is considered to be dirty, and she is expected never to cook for anyone, not even her husband. The women segregated because of their menstrual cycle are usually given cooked food in the morning and evening. The person who brings the food, once close to the segregated hut, will call on the lady to come pick her food from outside the hut; he or she is not permitted to come too close to the lady (Joshua, 2022). Joshua (2022) described the gravity of this segregation, noting that it was a protective measure for men's spiritual power: "A woman in that state carries a heat that can melt a hunter's charms or make a warrior's medicine turn to water. We did not keep them in huts to punish them, but to protect the strength of the household". It should be noted that the segregated hut is central for all within the Atswean-Asi community; put differently, the hut is for all ladies on their menstrual cycle in the community. It is unusual to have only one lady at a time in the hut; there are usually two or more ladies in the segregated hut who are on their menstrual cycle. In this case, the ladies would have companies because they will get to gist to themselves. But in the eventuality where there is only one lady who is on her menstrual cycle, she will definitely stay there alone and perhaps be bored because she has no company.

In the 2000s, in Atswean-Asi society, the practice of menstrual segregation had mostly faded away. The use of sanitary pads helped women manage menstruation privately, so many people mostly do not know when a woman is on her period. Additionally, the growth of the settlement and the rising population changed social structures, making it impractical to keep a communal isolation hut. However, some men who still feel strong ties to older traditions limit their interactions with menstruating women if they suspect or hear that a woman is on her cycle. These men avoid eating food prepared by these women because they believe that doing so weakens their charms. This lingering attitude reflects earlier beliefs, even though the broader society has moved away from organised menstrual segregation.

The decline of the physical segregation hut is not simply a rejection of cultural logic. It represents a transformation that can be understood through spatial and moral hybridity. In this context, the moral logic of ritual impurity remains intact but is internalised by female Christian converts. They adopt it as a way of self-imposed, private ethical discipline. The external community boundary of the hut is replaced by an internal moral boundary. This change maintains the cultural value of female sanctity while

reinterpreting the traditional taboo in a way that fits with Christian ethics. Recent research supports this view. Marimbe (2024) and Strhan (2012) explain how Christian converts in Africa blend traditional values into mixed moral systems. They move from rituals enforced by outsiders to personal ethical choices. Peel (2016) shows that people rarely give up customary practices during conversion. Instead, they often take on new meanings within different religious or social settings. Studies on purity and social boundaries, including the Oxford Handbook of Purity (2020s), along with research on syncretism and hybridisation, further illustrate that moral authority and cultural values can remain, even when the visible signs of tradition fade away.

However, there is still a gap in the literature about the specific shift from a physical, communal structure like the menstrual hut to an internal moral boundary. This gap allows for the introduction of spatial and moral hybridity as a new way to understand the topic. It shows how cultural institutions can keep their ethical functions while moving from public enforcement to private moral awareness. In the case of Atswean-Asi, this change highlights the flexibility and resilience of cultural practices in response to religious change, technology, and population growth.

4.2.6 Male Circumcision and Taboos

Another cultural practice in Atswean-Asi is that of male circumcision. why it is distinct from other climes in Nigeria or other ethnic groups is that male circumcision in Atswean-Asi is only done during the harmattan season. Culturally, the harmattan season is regarded as a time of transition and endurance, embodying the resilience and fortitude expected of boys as they undergo this rite of passage into manhood (Yashe 2021). The timing reinforces important community values such as strength, patience, and unity, which are traits that are held in high esteem within the Atswean-Asi society. Furthermore, from a practical perspective, circumcision during the dry season presents more favourable healing conditions. The lack of moisture and reduced risk of infection during harmattan greatly improve post-operative care. In contrast, the rainy season, with its high humidity and prevalence of bacteria, poses greater health risks and is therefore avoided for such procedures. In addition, circumcision is conducted in groups, with several boys undergoing the procedure together. This collective experience adds a communal and symbolic dimension to the rite. Those circumcised at the same time often form lasting bonds, creating a sense of solidarity and mutual support that fosters social cohesion.

In recent decades, the practice has changed significantly. Circumcision is no longer limited to the harmattan period. The procedure now usually happens within seven days after a male child's birth, regardless of the season. This change shows shifting family preferences and the rising impact of modern medical advice, which encourages early infant circumcision. Some families still depend on traditional practitioners and methods, while others prefer hospital-based procedures carried out under clinical supervision. Regarding the shift from the traditional Harmattan season to medicalised infant circumcision, one community elder remarked:



"In the old days, the cold wind taught the boy to be a man. Now, the hospital does it before the child can even speak. The skin is gone, but the spirit of the rite has moved to the church" (Yashe, 2021).

This combination of traditional and biomedical approaches reveals how the community is slowly reshaping an old rite while keeping parts of its cultural heritage.

There are certain cultural taboos in Atswean-Asi which include;

On no account should anyone whistle at night because it is believed that you are calling on evil spirits.

The traditional Atswean community does not allow children to eat egg because it is a belief that when children are allowed to eat egg they will learn to steal.

It is taboo for anyone to steal and in the eventuality, one is caught stealing, the person will be stripped naked and youths in the village or community will sing mockery songs to march the thief round the community.

Women are not allowed to sit in the council of men and talk except they are mandated to do so.

Adultery is a grievous offence and it is punishable in Atswean.

The evolution of these taboos highlights a shift in "Moral Authority." Historically, taboos against stealing or whistling were enforced by the fear of ancestral spirits (Iki-fen). Today, these same prohibitions are upheld through Christian moral teaching. The "Brokerage" here is subtle: the community retained the rules (don't steal, don't commit adultery) but swapped the enforcer (from Ancestors to Jesus). This allows the Atswean-Asi to be "good Christians" without ceasing to be "good Kutebs," effectively stabilising the moral order within the Third Space.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the Atswean-Asi experience not as a story of cultural loss, but as a sophisticated project of Historical Reconstitution. The movement beyond the binary of "tradition versus modernity," avails us the prism to see that the Atswean-Asi have utilised Selective Cultural Brokerage to navigate the pressures of religious and social change. This process does not result in a diluted identity; rather, it produces a "Third Space" that is rationally furnished and institutionally governed. The theoretical contribution of this research extends beyond the borders of Taraba State, Nigeria, offering three germane insights for the broader study of anthropology and religion: first, the shift from Individual to Corporate Brokerage. While previous scholarship focused on individual "gatekeepers", this study demonstrates that in many post-colonial contexts, brokerage is an institutional act. The alliance between the *Be Kwe* (traditional council) and the RCCN (church leadership) shows that cultural survival often depends on "Co-governance." This model can be applied globally to study how indigenous structures in South America, Asia, or other parts of Africa form strategic partnerships with global institutions to manage their own modernisation.

Second, the mechanism of Functional Substitution. The data reveals that when a traditional practice such as the menstrual hut or the worship of *Iki-fen*, appears to vanish, it is often actually "relocated". Through Selective Cultural Brokerage, the community transfers the underlying social or spiritual function to a new, Christianised form. This suggests that "conversion" is less about the erasure of indigenous needs and more about the strategic selection of new providers to meet those same ancient needs. Third, Indigenous Agency as Authorial Power. This study challenges the idea that globalisation is a force that simply happens "to" passive local communities. Instead, the Atswean-Asi case proves that indigenous groups are the active architects of their own hybridity. The changes that were brought by legislation; such as the standardisation of marriage costs, made the community leaders exert "Sovereign Selection". They decide what is kept, what is modified, and what is discarded.

Selective Cultural Brokerage provides a foundational framework for understanding how societies in the Global South maintain their distinctiveness. It reveals that the "Third Space" is not a place of confusion or accidental mixing, but a site of deliberate cultural policymaking. For scholars of anthropology, this model offers a way to analyse how traditional identities are not merely surviving the modern world but are being systematically rebuilt to thrive within it.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are re-contextualised to support the continued management and evolution of this resilient hybrid culture:

- Cultural documentation should be systematically undertaken to preserve oral histories, rituals, and customs in various formats for future generations.
- Traditional knowledge should be incorporated into local educational curricula to promote cultural pride and awareness among the youth.
- Dialogue between traditional leaders, religious figures, and community members should be encouraged to promote an understanding of how both cultural and religious values can coexist.
- Cultural festivals should be revived where some of these practices are demonstrated and showcased.

Abbreviations

RCCN: Reformed Church of Christ for Nations

Declarations

Consent for publication

All participants whose oral interviews are cited (e.g., Anderi Andeshara, Dauda A., etc.) provided informed consent for their contributions and names to be published.



Availability of data and materials

The data supporting this study consists of oral interviews and ethnographic field notes. Due to the nature of oral history and to protect the privacy of the participants, the raw interview transcripts are not publicly available. Relevant data is contained within the article.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no financial or personal relationships that could have inappropriately influenced the writing or findings of this article.

Author's Note: The author is a member of the Kuteb ethnic group and has family relationship with Atswean-Asi (Kwambai). This relationship provided unique access to the oral traditions and community leaders essential for this study. This affiliation is declared to ensure full transparency.

Funding

The author received no specific funding for this research, and it was conducted without any external financial support.

Authors' contributions

I am the sole author and also responsible for all aspects of the research, including conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, analysis, and the writing of the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the elders and community members of Atswean-Asi (Kwambai) for their time, trust, and willingness to share their invaluable oral traditions and cultural knowledge.

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