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Ethnicity and Ascendance to Leadership Position in Selected Christian Denominations in Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated ethnicity and leadership ascendance in selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria. The study was motivated by persistent concerns that, despite the biblical principles of equality, unity, and impartiality, ethnic considerations continue to influence leadership emergence, succession, and governance within some Christian denominations in Nigeria. Six research questions and six corresponding null hypotheses guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised leaders and members of selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria. A sample of 369 respondents was selected using a multistage sampling procedure involving purposive, stratified, and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled Ethnicity and Leadership Ascendance Questionnaire (ELAQ). The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in religious studies, educational management, and measurement and evaluation. Its internal consistency was established using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.78 and deemed reliable. Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 29. Frequency counts and percentages were used to answer Research Question One, while mean and standard deviation were used to answer Research Questions Two and Three. The hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance using the chi-square test of independence, independent samples t-test, and simple linear regression. The findings revealed that the Yoruba ethnic group predominantly occupied leadership positions in the selected Christian denominations. The study further revealed that congregants generally held positive perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds, as long as those leaders demonstrated competence, integrity, spiritual maturity, and fairness. The hypotheses tested indicated a significant relationship between ethnic affiliation and leadership occupancy; ethnic factors significantly predicted leadership selection; there was no significant difference between male and female congregants' perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds; The study concluded that although Christian churches uphold biblical principles of unity, justice, and equality, ethnicity continues to influence leadership ascendance within the selected denominations. The study therefore recommends that Christian denominations institutionalise transparent and merit-based leadership selection procedures, strengthen succession planning, review governance policies to eliminate ethnic bias, promote leadership development across ethnic groups, intensify biblical teaching on unity and impartiality, and establish inclusive governance structures capable of fostering organisational cohesion and sustainable church leadership in Nigeria's multi-ethnic society.

Keywords: *Ethnicity, leadership ascendance, Christian denominations, church leadership, leadership selection.*

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership selection is a crucial aspect of any organisation, and it has been a subject of interest for scholars and researchers across various disciplines. Leadership issues are significant because they have implications for the effectiveness of missions carried out by the church (Ishola-Esan, 2021). The leadership selection process includes multiple stages of identifying leadership needs, searching for potential candidates, assessing qualifications and abilities, conducting interviews and evaluations, and making the final selection

decision. This selection process aims to ensure that the most appropriate and capable people are selected to lead the organisation and contribute to its success and long-term sustainability. However, recent years have seen a significant focus on the role of ethnicity in leadership selection (Emoghene & Okolie, 2020).

Emoghene and Okolie (2020) define ethnicity as a social formation predicated on culturally specific practices and unique symbols. Bolaji (2016) opines that ethnicity is a social concept that incorporates shared cultural practices, beliefs, and values among a group of people. Ethnicity, therefore, implies a situation in which people in a particular social group consider themselves or are considered by others to have common similarities that differentiate them from other groups in society. Nevertheless, Adeyanju and Bello (2017:18-19) also affirm that people can use ethnicity to discriminate against those they perceive as different. The authors emphasise that ethnicity significantly shapes the dynamics of politics.

Ethnic biases in leadership selection may lead to leadership homogeneity. Hence, subversion may result from perceived ethnic dominance. Furthermore, there is a lack of diversity within the apex leadership of the Christian denomination. This topic, therefore, deals with the influence of ethnicity on leadership ascendance in Christian denominations in South West Nigeria.

Christianity in Nigeria is one of the most widely practiced religions, with deep historical roots and significant influence on social life, culture, and governance. South West Nigeria, predominantly inhabited by the Yoruba ethnic group, is richly diverse in Christian expressions, ranging from established denominations (e.g., Anglican, Methodist, and Catholic) to indigenous Pentecostal and charismatic churches that have grown substantially in recent decades. As Christianity has expanded across the region, leadership roles within churches have become not only spiritual positions but also symbols of social influence and community authority.

Nigeria is a highly multi-ethnic society with over 250 ethnic groups, and even within the South West, where the Yoruba predominate, there are migrants and congregants from other ethnic backgrounds (Adeyeye, Abolade, & Oluwaseyi, 2025). Although Christian doctrine emphasises unity and equality before God, research suggests that ethnic identities can influence organisational practices and group dynamics within churches (Bolaji, 2016; Ngugi, 2019; Adeyeye, Abolade, & Oluwaseyi, 2025). In many Nigerian church contexts, particularly where membership is multi-ethnic, preferences for leaders who share the dominant ethnic identity often emerge – whether due to cultural affinity, language familiarity, or historical patterns of trust and influence. This form of ethnic favouritism in leadership selection can reflect broader social realities where ethnic considerations inform choices and group loyalties in social institutions.

Christianity in Southwest Nigeria traces back to early missionary efforts by groups like the Church Missionary Society (CMS), establishing Anglican dominance alongside other denominations such as Methodists and emerging Pentecostals. Regional and ethnic influences, particularly Yoruba cultural practices, have contextualised Christianity, fostering indigenous churches like Aladura that integrate local traditions. Pentecostal growth, including churches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) led by Yoruba figures such as Enoch Adeboye, further embedded ethnic ties in leadership structures. Others, such as the Assemblies of God Nigeria (AGN), have fuelled leadership crises through Igbo ethnic traits like competitiveness and individualism, with Igbo pastors holding top roles despite national spread, highlighting ethnic hegemony. While AGN originated in Igbo land, its expansion into the Yoruba Southwest via Igbo migrants illustrates inter-ethnic tensions in leadership ascension.

In Southwest Nigeria, Yoruba cultural tolerance and pluralism promote harmonious Christian-Muslim relations, yet ethnic favouritism persists in church governance. Pentecostal denominations often reflect founders' ethnic origins, with Yoruba-led churches like RCCG thriving locally due to cultural resonance. Political and social influences exacerbate the situation, as seen in demands for ethnic representation mirroring national ethnic-religious voting blocs.

Therefore, ethnic biases in leadership ascendance can provoke schisms, undermine meritocracy, and hinder ecumenical unity, as evidenced by AGN's constitutional gaps allowing same-ethnic dominance (Ihwighwu & Ottuh, 2022). Ethnic biases in leadership selection may lead to leadership homogeneity. Hence, subversion may result from perceived ethnic dominance. Furthermore, streamlined diversity within the apex leadership of the denomination will limit the exploration and maximisation of human and other resources from other regions. This bias is evidenced by interviewees who pointed to the "financial strength" and educational advantages of one region as key factors in leadership selection, consciously or unconsciously sidelining qualified candidates from other areas. Consequently, the denomination's ability to reach out to other ethnic groups across all the regions becomes limited. Ethnic biases and prejudices may lead to rivalry, inter-ethnic tensions, and ethnocentrism among regional bodies of local Baptist churches in Nigeria. Secondly, the denomination stands in the risk of ethnic bias in decision-making when leadership selection processes have been ethnically determined. Adamovic and Leibbrandt (2022) draw on implicit leadership theory to argue and confirm preponderant ethnic discrimination in the recruitment of leadership positions. Consequently, leaders appointed based on ethnic affiliation may be more likely to prioritise the interests of their ethnic groups over those of others. This risk is amplified by the reported practice of calculating which ethnic group is “due” to produce the president, a process that can elevate ethnic affiliation above other critical leadership qualities. As a result, such practices can lead to decisions that benefit one ethnic group at the expense of others, creating

pressure and conflict within the denomination. In the long run, the appointment of members of the board of directors of departments and organisations within the denomination may reflect the under-representation of ethnic groups considered minorities. Hence, the denomination may have to contend with regional agitations for self-determination due to perceived marginalisation and exclusion in the near future. Thirdly, an ethnically biased leadership selection process will act as a barrier to God's mission, which is the ultimate business of the church. Ultimately, the denomination will be unable to muster and marshal the manpower required for the continued evangelisation of unreached areas within the geographical boundaries of marginalised peoples. As Begeny et al. (2021) suggest, issues of discrimination and ethnically non-diverse leadership in multi-ethnic societies limit the full potential of their group members to contribute to the success and growth of the organisation. Subsequently, mission work becomes hindered or, in extreme cases, altered because of the misalignment of regional groups from the central leadership. As observed in some situations, when mission leaders from the perceived dominant group are posted as supervisory ministers to mission fields among the marginalised groups, the latter have been observed to be unfriendly or uncooperative (Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2022). Hence, the supervising ministers are perceived as outsiders representing the interests of their ethnic groups rather than the universal message of the Gospel.

The interplay of ethnicity and leadership ascendance commands dire consequences for denominational growth, survival, and mission accomplishment, making it impossible to trivialise. Fourthly, ethnicity shapes the perception of leadership qualities and capabilities in the sense that people often trust and support individuals from their ethnic group, consequent to a shared common background and cultural understanding. Adamovic and Leibbrandt (2022) opine that such biased evaluations result in skewed analyses of leadership outside of their ethnic groups. Thus, it leads to a preference for leaders who belong to the same ethnic group as the dominant Convention members.

Leaders appointed based on ethnicity may not be culturally sensitive to the identity needs and customs of other ethnic groups. Many issues may arise as a result of such insensitivity. Among others, Adeyeye and Afolabi (2024) highlight miscommunications, misperceptions, and suspicions as some issues arising hitherto. The impact of ethnicity within the church's diversity has remained a subject of ongoing discussion and analysis. While some argue that ethnic diversity can enrich mission work by providing different perspectives and approaches, others contend that it can also create challenges, such as language barriers or cultural misunderstandings. Therefore, leadership selection, covertly or overtly, must eschew ethnic considerations or colourations if allowed; in the long run, it may result in division and fragmentation within the denomination along regional and cultural lines. Evidently, when leadership selection processes are devoid of mechanisms to perpetuate one ethnic group in leadership positions, the resultant effect is a denomination that cares for and nurtures leadership, sharing genuine concerns to connect with member groups with a deeper understanding of their needs and challenges as distinct communities within the larger polity. When leadership selection espouses openness, accountability, and equity, the resultant diversity in emerging leadership can enhance the Convention's ability to reach different communities and effectively communicate the gospel message beyond ethnocultural barriers. If individuals from a particular ethnic group are predominantly ascending to leadership positions, it may create a perception of favouritism for some and exclusion of others among members of different ethnic backgrounds. As is common in many multicultural societies, nepotism and highhandedness may result, leading to eventual disintegration in extreme cases. Therefore, this situation hinders unity within the Convention and limits its effectiveness in mission work across Nigeria, which is typically multi-ethnic. Adeyeye's (2023) reports that ethnic biases may adversely affect the denomination’s overall effectiveness in fulfilling the church’s missions.

Christian churches are expected to reflect the spiritual principle of unity in diversity, where all believers, irrespective of ethnic background, have equal opportunity to serve and lead. However, in practice, ethnicity has increasingly become a significant factor in church leadership selection and ascendance, especially in contexts where congregations are ethnically diverse or where founders belong to dominant ethnic groups.

In Southwest Nigeria, the predominance of Yoruba members and leaders in many churches has raised questions about whether leadership opportunities are equitably accessible to non-Yoruba congregants, particularly in urban, multi-ethnic settings. Hence, understanding how ethnicity affects ascendance into leadership positions is vital for enhancing organisational fairness, promoting unity, and ensuring that spiritual authority aligns with the theological ideals of equity and service, according to Adeyeye, Abolade, and Oluwaseyi (2025). This situation creates the need for this study. This study will address the gap where ethnic dominance fosters conflicts, schisms, and unequal access to leadership roles, particularly favouring Yoruba or Igbo groups over others. This study therefore sets out to determine the influence of ethnicity on ascendance to leadership positions in selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria**.**

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to determine the influence of ethnicity on ascendance to leadership positions in selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria. The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. To identify the predominant ethnic groups occupying leadership positions in selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria.
2. To determine the extent to which ethnicity influences the selection and ascendance of leaders in Christian churches in South West Nigeria.
3. To examine congregants' perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds in Christian churches.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions were posed to guide this study:
1. Which ethnic groups predominantly hold leadership positions in selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria?
2. To what extent does ethnicity influence the selection and ascendance of leaders in Christian churches in South West Nigeria?
3. What are the congregants' perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds in Christian churches?

Hypotheses

These null hypotheses were formulated to guide this study and were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:
H01: There is no significant relationship between ethnic affiliation and occupancy of leadership positions in selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria.
H02: Ethnic factors do not significantly influence modern leadership selection processes.
H03: there is no significant difference in male and female congregants' perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds in Christian churches.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design is considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to collect data from a large population and describe existing conditions without manipulating variables. A descriptive survey design is suitable for this study because it seeks to examine perceptions, experiences, and institutional practices regarding ethnicity and leadership ascendance in Christian denominations. The study was conducted in Southwest Nigeria, a geopolitical zone comprising six states, namely Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti States. The population of this study consisted of forty-eight thousand (48000) Christian church leaders and congregants in selected denominations across Southwest Nigeria. The target population includes individuals who are directly or indirectly involved in leadership processes within the church. These include senior pastors and assistant pastors, elders and deacons, departmental leaders (youth, women, men, choir, evangelism units), lay leaders involved in church administration and ordinary congregants who participate in leadership selection processes. The justification for including both leaders and congregants is based on the fact that leadership ascendance in churches is not solely determined by top leadership structures but also influenced by congregational participation, perception, and informal voting or endorsement systems.

For the purpose of this study, the estimated target population across selected denominations in the six states is projected to be approximately 48000 respondents, distributed across churches in urban and semi-urban areas. The sample size for this study was one hundred and seventy (370). The Yamane (1967) formula for sample size determination was adopted, as it provides a simplified method for calculating representative samples from finite populations.

This study adopted a multistage sampling technique. At stage 1, a stratified sampling technique was employed. The population was first stratified based on church denomination type (mainline, Pentecostal, and indigenous churches) and role category (leaders and congregants). This ensured that each subgroup within the population was adequately represented. Stratification was necessary because leadership perceptions and ethnic dynamics may vary across denominational structures. At the second stage, a purposive sampling technique is employed. Purposive sampling was used to select specific churches that meet the criteria of having multi-ethnic membership, having structured leadership systems, and conducting formal or semi-formal leadership selection processes. This approach will ensure that the study focused on churches where ethnicity could realistically influence leadership ascendance. At stage three, the simple random sampling technique is used. Within each selected church, simple random sampling was used to select respondents among congregants and mid-level leaders. This ensured that every eligible participant had an equal chance of being selected, reducing sampling bias and improving representativeness.

The primary instrument for quantitative data collection is a structured questionnaire titled "Ethnicity and Leadership Ascendance Questionnaire (ELAQ)". The questionnaire is divided into sections designed to capture key variables of the study: Section A: Demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity, church role, and denomination); Section B: Ethnic composition of leadership in churches; Section C: Influence of ethnicity on leadership selection and promotion. The questionnaire uses a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree', to measure respondents' attitudes and perceptions. To ensure validity, the questionnaire was subjected to face and content validation by experts in the sociology of religion, educational management and measurement and evaluation from Paul University Awka. These experts examined the instrument for clarity, relevance, and the adequacy of items in addressing the research objectives. Their corrections and suggestions were incorporated into the final draft of the instrument to

ensure that it accurately measured the intended variables, particularly ethnicity and leadership ascendance.

The reliability of the instrument was established using the test-retest method. The questionnaires were administered to a small sample outside the study population at two different intervals. The responses were analysed using the Pearson coefficient to determine internal consistency. A reliability coefficient of 0.78 was considered acceptable for the study, in line with standard social science research practice. Data collected were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. For descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation were used to answer research questions. For inferential statistics, chi-square (χ^2) tests were used to examine categorical relationships, independent t-tests were conducted to assess group differences, and ANOVA was applied when comparing multiple groups. All hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to facilitate data analysis and ensure accuracy.

RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Gender (N = 369)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	206	55.8
Female	163	44.2
Total	369	100.0

Table 1 indicates that 206 respondents (55.8%) were male, while 163 respondents (44.2%) were female. This suggests that both male and female congregants were adequately represented, although males constituted a slightly higher proportion of the sample.

Table 2: Distribution by Age

Age (Years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18–29	84	22.8
30–39	118	32.0
40–49	95	25.7
50 years and above	72	19.5
Total	369	100.0

Table 2 shows the majority of respondents (32.0%) were aged 30–39 years, followed by those aged 40–49 years (25.7%). Respondents aged 18–29 years accounted for 22.8%, while 19.5% were aged 50 years and above. The age distribution indicates participation across different age groups.

Table 3: Distribution by Ethnic Group

Ethnic Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yoruba	211	57.2
Igbo	73	19.8
Hausa	24	6.5
Edo	18	4.9
Urhobo	15	4.1
Others	28	7.6
Total	369	100.0

The results in table 3 indicate that Yoruba respondents constituted the majority (57.2%), reflecting the demographic composition of Southwest Nigeria. Respondents from other ethnic groups also participated, ensuring diverse perspectives.

Research Question One: Which ethnic groups predominantly hold leadership positions in selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria?

Table 4: Distribution of Leadership Positions by Ethnic Group (n = 94 Church Leaders)

S/N	Ethnic Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Rank
1.	Yoruba	56	59.6	1st
2.	Igbo	17	18.1	2nd
3.	Hausa	4	4.3	5th
4.	Edo	6	6.4	4th
5.	Urhobo	5	5.3	6th
6.	Others	6	6.4	3rd
	Total	**94**	**100.0**	

Table 4 reveals that the Yoruba ethnic group accounted for the highest proportion of leadership positions (59.6%) in the selected Christian denominations. The Igbo ethnic group ranked second with 18.1%, while respondents from other ethnic groups collectively occupied a much smaller proportion of leadership positions. Hausa respondents constituted the smallest proportion (4.3%). The result shows a noticeable concentration of leadership positions among respondents of Yoruba ethnicity. Specifically, 56 respondents, representing 59.6%, were Yoruba, making the Yoruba the most represented ethnic group in the leadership sample. This was followed by the Igbo ethnic group with 17 respondents (18.1%).

Respondents classified as Edo accounted for 6.4%, while the other category also accounted for 6.4%. Urhobo respondents represented 5.3%, while Hausa respondents constituted the smallest proportion, with four respondents (4.3%).

The result indicates that leadership positions within the selected denominations were not evenly distributed across the ethnic groups represented in the study. The particularly high representation of Yoruba leaders is understandable to some extent given that the study was conducted in Southwest Nigeria, where Yoruba people constitute the dominant indigenous ethnic population. Therefore, demographic composition and the historical development of Christian institutions in the region may naturally contribute to more Yoruba leaders.

The study indicates that members of the Yoruba ethnic group predominantly occupy leadership positions in the selected Christian denominations. This pattern may be influenced by the geographical location of the churches, historical development of the denominations in Southwest Nigeria, demographic composition of congregants, and organisational leadership structures. Nevertheless, the presence of leaders from other ethnic groups indicates that leadership is not exclusively restricted to one ethnic group.

Research Question Two: To what extent does ethnicity influence the selection and ascendance of leaders in Christian churches in Southwest Nigeria?

Table 5: Mean Responses on the Influence of Ethnicity on Leadership Selection (N = 369)

S/N	Leadership Selection	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Ethnicity influences who becomes a church leader.	3.26	0.72	Agree
2	Members prefer leaders from their ethnic group.	3.11	0.84	Agree
3	Ethnic affiliation affects leadership promotion in churches.	3.18	0.78	Agree
4	Church leadership selection is based more on ethnicity than competence.	2.89	0.91	Agree
5	Ethnic considerations influence succession planning.	3.14	0.82	Agree
6	Some qualified candidates are overlooked because of ethnicity.	3.07	0.86	Agree
	Grand Mean	**3.11**	**0.82**	**High Extent**

The results in Table 5 show a grand mean of 3.11 (SD = 0.82), indicating that respondents agreed that ethnicity influences leadership selection and ascendance in the selected Christian denominations to a high extent. The highest-rated statement was that ethnicity influences who becomes a church leader (M = 3.26), while the lowest-

rated statement was that church leadership selection is based more on ethnicity than competence (M = 2.89). This suggests that respondents' strongest perception was that ethnic identity plays a role in determining who eventually occupies leadership positions. The relatively small standard deviation indicates that respondents' views were reasonably concentrated around this position.

The second important finding was that ethnic affiliation affects leadership promotion (M = 3.18, SD = 0.78). This suggests that respondents did not perceive ethnicity merely as a factor affecting initial appointment. Rather, they believed it could also affect an individual's progression through the leadership hierarchy.

Respondents also agreed that ethnic considerations influence succession planning (M = 3.14, SD = 0.82). This is important because succession represents the long-term continuity of church leadership. If ethnic identity becomes an informal criterion for identifying future leaders, members from minority ethnic groups may perceive the succession system as inaccessible or predetermined.

The statement that members prefer leaders from their own ethnic group recorded a mean of 3.11. This indicates that respondents perceived some degree of ethnic in-group preference among congregants. Such preference may arise from shared language, culture, familiarity, social networks, or perceived trustworthiness.

The statement that some qualified candidates are overlooked because of ethnicity recorded a mean of 3.07. This finding is important because it suggests that ethnicity may affect who is selected and who is denied leadership opportunities.

The lowest mean, although still within the agreement category, was recorded for the statement that church leadership selection is based more on ethnicity than competence (M = 2.89, SD = 0.91). This suggests that respondents did not believe that ethnicity completely overrides competence. Instead, the pattern indicates that ethnicity appears to operate as an additional or informal consideration alongside competence, spirituality, experience, and other leadership qualifications. Taken together, the findings indicate that ethnicity influences leadership ascendance to a high extent, but it would be inappropriate to conclude that church leadership is determined exclusively by ethnicity. The more plausible interpretation is that ethnic considerations operate subtly within otherwise formal leadership processes.

Research Question Three: What are the congregants' perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds in Christian churches?

Table 6: Mean Responses on Congregants' Perceptions of Leaders from Different Ethnic Backgrounds (N = 369)

S/N	Congregants perception	Mean	SD	Decision
1	I am comfortable being led by a competent church leader regardless of ethnic background.	3.48	0.64	Agree
2	Spiritual maturity is more important than ethnicity in choosing church leaders.	3.56	0.58	Strongly Agree
3	Leaders from other ethnic groups can effectively unite church members.	3.32	0.71	Agree
4	I trust church leaders from other ethnic groups to make fair decisions.	3.25	0.76	Agree
5	Ethnic background affects members' confidence in church leaders.	2.87	0.89	Agree
6	Churches should provide equal leadership opportunities to all ethnic groups.	3.61	0.55	Strongly Agree
7	Leadership appointments should be based on competence and spiritual calling rather than ethnicity.	3.68	0.49	Strongly Agree
8	Ethnic diversity in church leadership strengthens unity within the church.	3.39	0.67	Agree
	Grand Mean	**3.40**	**0.66**	**High Extent**

Table 6 shows that the respondents generally held positive perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds, with a grand mean of 3.40 (SD = 0.66), indicating a high level of agreement. The highest-rated item is "Leadership appointments should be based on competence and spiritual calling rather than ethnicity" (M = 3.68, SD = 0.49), followed by "Appointments should be based on competence and spiritual calling rather than ethnicity" (M = 3.68, SD = 0.49), followed by "Churches should provide equal leadership opportunities to all ethnic groups" (M = 3.61, SD = 0.55). These findings indicate that respondents strongly support merit-based and spiritually guided leadership rather than ethnic preference. The highest-rated statement was that leadership appointments should be based on competence and spiritual calling rather than ethnicity (M = 3.68, SD = 0.49). This is a particularly strong finding because it indicates that respondents recognise leadership as a responsibility requiring spiritual and professional qualifications rather than ethnic identity. The

low standard deviation also suggests substantial agreement among respondents.

The second-highest mean was recorded for the statement that churches should provide equal leadership opportunities to all ethnic groups (M = 3.61, SD = 0.55). This indicates strong support for equality of opportunity within church leadership structures.

Respondents also strongly agreed that spiritual maturity is more important than ethnicity in choosing church leaders (M = 3.56, SD = 0.58). This finding is especially important in a Christian context because it shows that what churchgoers expect from their leaders is very similar to what is traditionally expected of Christian leaders.

The finding that respondents were comfortable being led by a competent leader irrespective of ethnic background (M = 3.48) further reinforces the positive orientation toward multicultural leadership.

Similarly, respondents agreed that ethnic diversity can strengthen church unity (M = 3.39) and that leaders from other ethnic groups can effectively unite church members (M = 3.32).

The lowest mean was recorded for the statement that ethnic background affects members' confidence in church leaders (M = 2.87, SD = 0.89). Although respondents agreed with the statement, its relatively lower score indicates that ethnicity may not be the dominant factor determining members' confidence in leaders.

The overall pattern is therefore noteworthy. Respondents acknowledged the existence of ethnic influence while simultaneously expressing strong support for leadership that transcends ethnicity. This apparent contradiction is important: it suggests that the problem may not necessarily be a strong demand from ordinary congregants for ethnic leaders but rather the influence of informal ethnic networks or institutional practices within leadership-selection structures.

Hypothesis One ($H0_1$): There is no significant relationship between ethnic affiliation and occupancy of leadership positions in selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria.

Table 6: Chi-square Analysis of the Relationship between Ethnic Affiliation and Leadership Occupancy

Variable	χ^2	df	p-value	Decision
Ethnic Affiliation × Leadership Occupancy	21.864	5	0.001	Reject H01

The Chi-square analysis in Table 6 produced a calculated value of $\chi^2 = 21.864$, with 5 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.001, which is less than the 0.05 significance level. The chi-square result produced a calculated value of $\chi^2 = 21.864$, with 5 degrees of freedom, and a significance probability of p = .001. Because .001 is less than the predetermined significance level of .05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there is a statistically significant association between ethnic affiliation and occupancy of leadership positions in the selected Christian denominations. The finding implies that leadership occupancy does not appear to be independent of ethnic affiliation. Put differently, the probability of occupying a leadership position varies significantly across the ethnic categories represented in the study. This result provides inferential support for the descriptive finding in Research Question One, where Yoruba respondents constituted the largest proportion of church leaders. However, the chi-square result does not by itself establish causation. It shows association, not that ethnicity alone causes an individual to become a leader. Other variables, such as the ethnic composition of congregations, geographical location, denominational history, education, experience, spirituality, and leadership competence, may also contribute to the observed pattern.

Hypothesis Two (H02): Ethnic factors do not significantly influence modern leadership selection processes.

Table 7: Regression Analysis of Ethnic Factors and Leadership Selection

Variable	R	R^2	Beta (β)	T	p-value	Decision
Ethnic Factors Leadership Selection	0.521	0.271	0.521	11.69	0.000	Reject H02

The regression analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship (R = 0.521) between ethnic factors and leadership selection. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.271$) indicates that 27.1% of the variation in leadership selection processes is explained by ethnic factors. The regression coefficient was statistically significant (β = 0.521, t = 11.69, p < 0.001). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

The regression analysis produced an R value of .521, indicating a moderate positive relationship between ethnic factors and leadership selection. The R^2 value of .271 means that ethnic factors statistically account for

approximately 27.1% of the variance in leadership selection scores in this model. The remaining 72.9% is attributable to other factors not included in this particular regression model. The standardised regression coefficient (β = .521) indicates a positive association: as perceived ethnic influence increases, the predicted level of ethnic influence on leadership selection also increases. The obtained t-value of 11.69 was statistically significant, with $p < .001$. Since the probability value is below .05, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, the finding indicates that ethnic factors significantly influence leadership selection processes among the respondents. This is an important finding because it moves beyond respondents' descriptive perceptions. It provides statistical evidence that ethnicity is not merely mentioned as a theoretical concern but has a measurable relationship with perceived leadership-selection outcomes. This implies that ethnic factors significantly influence leadership selection processes in the selected Christian denominations.

Hypothesis Three (H03)

There is no significant difference in male and female congregants' perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds in Christian churches.

Table 8: Independent Samples t-test on Gender Differences in Perceptions

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	Df	p-value	Decision
Male	206	3.38	0.48				
Female	163	3.43	0.46	-1.08	367	0.281	Fail to Reject H03

Table 8 results show that male respondents had a mean perception score of 3.38 (SD = 0.48), while female respondents had a slightly higher mean score of 3.43 (SD = 0.46). Although the female respondents recorded a slightly higher mean, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. The t-test produced $t = -1.08$, $df = 367$, $p = .281$. Since $p = .281$ is greater than .05, the null hypothesis is not rejected. This means that there is no statistically significant gender difference in congregants' perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds. The result suggests that male and female congregants generally hold comparable views concerning ethnic diversity in church leadership. The slightly higher female mean should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of a meaningful gender difference because the statistical test indicates that the observed difference could reasonably have occurred by sampling variation. The finding is significant for church administration because it indicates that support for inclusive leadership is not confined to one gender. Both male and female congregants appear to value leadership qualities such as competence, fairness, integrity, and spiritual maturity.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings revealed that the Yoruba ethnic group predominantly occupies leadership positions in the selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria. This suggests that although Christianity teaches equality among believers irrespective of ethnicity (Galatians 3:28), leadership representation within the churches still reflects the socio-cultural realities of the environment in which the churches operate. Since the Yoruba ethnic group makes up most of the people who live in Southwest Nigeria, it is likely that more church leaders will come from this group. However, the finding also suggests that demographic dominance alone may not fully explain leadership patterns because respondents perceived that ethnicity still plays a role in determining who emerges as a leader.

This finding may be explained from the perspective of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals naturally identify with members of their own social group and often exhibit in-group preference when making important decisions. In church settings, members and existing leaders may consciously or unconsciously favour individuals who share similar linguistic, cultural, or ethnic identities because they are perceived as more trustworthy, culturally compatible, or easier to work with. Such preferences may influence nomination, endorsement, mentoring, and succession even when official church constitutions emphasise merit and spirituality.

The finding corroborates Nwosu and Okafor (2025), who reported that although constitutional provisions in the Nigerian Baptist Convention emphasise spiritual qualifications, subtle ethnic considerations continue to influence leadership emergence and succession. Their study demonstrated that informal ethnic networks sometimes shape support for leadership candidates, thereby affecting representation within denominational structures. Similarly, studies on indigenous church leadership in Nigeria have shown that leadership patterns frequently reflect the ethnic and geographical contexts in which denominations evolved, making local ethnic groups more visible in leadership structures than minority groups.

Nevertheless, the finding should not be interpreted as evidence of deliberate ethnic discrimination in every denomination. Rather, it reflects the interaction between historical church development, demographic composition, organisational culture, and social identity. The implication is that churches should consciously create leadership development opportunities for qualified individuals from

minority ethnic groups to strengthen inclusiveness and reinforce the biblical principle that leadership is fundamentally based on divine calling and spiritual competence rather than ethnic origin.

The study established that ethnicity significantly influences leadership selection and ascendance within the selected Christian denominations. Respondents agreed that ethnic affiliation affects nomination, endorsement, promotion, and succession processes. The regression analysis further confirmed that ethnic factors significantly predict leadership selection, indicating that ethnicity remains an important determinant of leadership emergence despite formal constitutional procedures. This finding demonstrates that leadership selection within religious organisations is not entirely insulated from the broader socio-political environment in Nigeria, where ethnicity continues to influence access to opportunities, public appointments, and institutional governance. Churches operate within society and are therefore susceptible to the same cultural dynamics that affect other organisations. The finding supports Nwosu and Okafor (2025), who observed that ethnic factors affect the selection of leaders within the Nigerian Baptist Convention despite official efforts to ensure fairness and transparency. The researchers argued that ethnic identity often operates subtly through informal consultations, endorsements, and voting behaviour, rather than through explicit constitutional provisions.

The finding is also consistent with Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, which explains that leaders often develop closer relationships with individuals perceived to share similar values, experiences, or identities. Such relationships may unintentionally create preferential access to leadership opportunities for members belonging to the dominant ethnic group.

From a theological perspective, however, this finding contradicts biblical principles of impartiality. Scriptures such as James 2:1–9 strongly discourage favouritism among believers, while Acts 10:34 declares that God shows no partiality. Consequently, the continued influence of ethnicity in leadership selection represents a tension between organisational practices and Christian doctrine. This suggests that churches should strengthen transparent nomination procedures, objective leadership criteria, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that leadership ascendance reflects spiritual qualifications and competence rather than ethnic affiliation.

The findings showed that congregants generally expressed positive attitudes toward leaders from different ethnic backgrounds provided such leaders demonstrated competence, integrity, fairness, humility, and spiritual maturity. Respondents strongly agreed that leadership appointments should be based on competence and divine calling rather than ethnicity, indicating that church members increasingly value merit over ethnic identity. This finding reflects the changing nature of contemporary Christianity in Nigeria, particularly in urban centres where churches have become increasingly multicultural. Members now worship alongside people from different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, making competence, spiritual credibility, and effective leadership more important than ethnic identity. The finding supports recent leadership research showing that followers evaluate leaders primarily on perceived competence, ethical behaviour, and organisational effectiveness rather than on demographic characteristics. It also aligns with studies on multicultural church leadership, which conclude that inclusive leadership strengthens organisational commitment and trust when leaders demonstrate fairness and servant leadership.

Moreover, the Independent Samples t-test revealed no significant difference between male and female respondents regarding their perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds. This suggests that attitudes toward ethnic inclusiveness transcend gender differences within the selected denominations. Both male and female congregants appear to recognise that effective church leadership depends primarily on spiritual maturity and leadership competence. The implication is encouraging for Christian organisations. It suggests that resistance to leaders from minority ethnic groups may be less widespread among ordinary congregants than is often assumed. Instead, the challenge may lie within institutional structures, nomination systems, and leadership succession mechanisms rather than among the general membership.

CONCLUSION

The study investigated ethnicity and leadership ascendance in selected Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria. Specifically, it examined the predominant ethnic groups occupying leadership positions, the influence of ethnicity on leadership selection and ascendance, congregants' perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds, the effects of ethnic influences on internal conflicts and schisms, the challenges associated with ethnic considerations in leadership selection and succession, and measures for fostering inclusive, non-ethnic-based leadership within Christian denominations. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. Data were collected from 369 respondents selected from different Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria using a structured questionnaire. The data were analysed using frequency counts, percentages, mean, standard deviation, chi-square, independent samples t-test, and simple linear regression at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study are summarised as follows: The study established that the Yoruba ethnic group constituted the largest proportion of church leaders in the selected Christian denominations. Although leaders from other ethnic groups were represented, leadership positions were predominantly occupied by members of the Yoruba ethnic group, reflecting the demographic composition of Southwest Nigeria and the historical development of many denominations within the region. Respondents

agreed that ethnicity influences leadership selection and ascendance to a high extent. Ethnic affiliation was perceived to affect nomination, endorsement, promotion, and succession processes. The regression analysis confirmed that ethnic factors significantly predicted leadership selection processes.

Congregants generally exhibited positive perceptions of leaders from different ethnic backgrounds, provided such leaders demonstrated competence, integrity, fairness, and spiritual maturity. Respondents strongly supported leadership appointments based on divine calling and competence rather than ethnic identity. Male and female respondents did not differ significantly in these perceptions. The study therefore concludes that ethnicity continues to influence leadership ascendance within Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria, but its influence is neither inevitable nor insurmountable. Churches that intentionally strengthen transparent governance, institutional accountability, servant leadership, diversity management, and biblical principles of justice and equality are more likely to minimise ethnic bias and promote leadership based on competence, spiritual maturity, and divine calling.

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