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Research Article

Negotiating Sacred and Secular Authority: Church History, African Indigenous Governance Systems, and the Politics of Leadership Legitimacy in Contemporary Southeast Nigeria

Dr. Simeon N. Duruji[1], Dr. Joshua O. Onwuliri [2*], Dr. Ngozi Caroline Ogbuehi [3]

[1-2]Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, Nigeria.
[3]Department of Political Science Education, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT:
This study examined the historical and contemporary relationship between church authority, African indigenous governance systems, and political leadership legitimacy in Southeast Nigeria. It investigated how Christian historical developments and indigenous governance traditions shape citizens' perceptions of authority, accountability, and leadership acceptance within contemporary Nigerian society. Adopting a convergent mixed-methods research design, the study combined historical analysis of missionary expansion and church institutional development with a cross-sectional survey of 520 respondents comprising traditional rulers, religious leaders, political stakeholders, civil society actors, and community members across the five states of Southeast Nigeria. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and structural equation modelling (SEM), while qualitative data from historical documents and eighteen key informant interviews were evaluated thematically. Findings revealed that indigenous governance values significantly predicted perceptions of leadership legitimacy ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$), while ecclesiastical moral influence significantly shaped expectations of ethical political leadership ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$); jointly, the two constructs explained 61% of the variance in perceived leadership legitimacy ($R^2 = 0.61$). The study further established that leadership legitimacy in Southeast Nigeria emerges through the interaction of democratic authority, Christian moral frameworks, and indigenous systems of communal recognition, consistent with the Triadic Authority Legitimacy Model (TALM) proposed herein. The study concludes that contemporary political legitimacy cannot be fully understood through formal state institutions alone but requires attention to historical religious experience and indigenous governance philosophy. It recommends stronger collaboration among government institutions, churches, and traditional authorities to promote culturally grounded and accountable leadership practices. The study contributes to interdisciplinary debates in church history, African political studies, and governance by providing empirical evidence on the continuing negotiation between sacred and secular authority in postcolonial Nigeria.

Keywords: African Indigenous Governance; Church History; Leadership Legitimacy; Structural Equation Modelling; Southeast Nigeria

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

In postcolonial Africa, the quest for political leadership legitimacy remains a contested terrain where formal state structures frequently collide, overlap, and negotiate with historical and socio-cultural repositories of power. In contemporary Southeast Nigeria predominantly inhabited by the Igbo people the modern secular democratic state does not exercise a monopoly over citizen loyalty or normative authority. Instead, governance legitimacy is continuously constructed, contested, and sustained at the intersection of three distinct normative orders: the postcolonial secular state, the institutional and moral authority of the Christian Church, and indigenous pre-colonial governance structures.

The historical trajectory of Southeast Nigeria presents a unique socio-political landscape. Prior to European contact, Igbo society operated through decentralized, highly participatory, and republican

*Corresponding Author: Dr. Joshua O. Onwuliri Email: joshua.onwuliri@alvanikoku.edu.ng
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indigenous governance systems. Authority was mediated through consensus-building institutions such as the Umunna (patrilineal kinship assemblies), Oha na Eze (council of elders and kings), Ozo title societies, and female socio-political organizations such as the Umuada. These institutions integrated political decision-making with sacred cosmology, grounding political compliance in ancestral reverence and sacred vows.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century European missionary enterprise, spearheaded by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM), fundamentally reconfigured this landscape (Ekechi, 1971; Hastings, 1994). Christianity did not merely supplant indigenous cosmology; rather, it established an institutional footprint intimately intertwined with social mobility, Western education, and political leadership. Over time, the Christian Church emerged as a dominant moral and socio-political force, exercising profound influence over public discourse, electoral choices, and community development.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the formal adoption of constitutional democracy in Nigeria, political actors in the Southeast routinely rely on non-state loci of authority to secure civic compliance, electoral viability, and public acceptability. Recent scholarship on cultural heritage preservation in Southeast Nigeria highlights that indigenous knowledge systems and traditional iconography continue to function as vital vehicles for community identity, inter-generational value transmission, and local governance (Onyebuchi-Igbokwe, & Egornu, 2025). Modern political candidates actively seek formal endorsements from high-ranking ecclesiastical figures and undergo traditional title-taking rites (Ozo or Eze) to establish their credibility. When state officials fail to provide public goods or uphold judicial integrity, citizens frequently turn to church pastoral letters or traditional community sanctions for normative guidance and dispute resolution.

This dynamic reveals a significant analytical gap in contemporary political science and African church history. Standard Western-centric models of political development assume a progressive secularization in which formal legal-rational authority supersedes sacred and traditional norms (Weber, 1947). Postcolonial Southeast Nigeria, however, demonstrates a durable hybridity in which secular legal rationality alone is insufficient to confer complete leadership legitimacy.

While existing scholarship has addressed church history in Nigeria independently (Isichei, 1977; Kalu, 2006) or examined African traditional governance in isolation (Afigbo, 1972; Achebe, 1983), there remains a scarcity of empirical research integrating historical church analysis with structural equation modelling (SEM) to quantify how these intersecting domains shape citizen perceptions of political legitimacy today. Without an empirical framework explaining how sacred moral authority and indigenous values interact with modern state structures, political analysts and policymakers struggle to explain voter behaviour, elite alignment, and governance deficits in the region.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

To address this analytical gap, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How have the historical developments of Christian missions and Igbo indigenous governance institutions shaped contemporary expectations of political leadership?
2. To what extent do indigenous governance values predict citizens' perceptions of political leadership legitimacy in Southeast Nigeria?
3. What is the impact of ecclesiastical moral influence on citizens' expectations of ethical political conduct?
4. How do democratic structures, Christian moral frameworks, and indigenous systems of communal recognition interact to produce an integrated model of leadership legitimacy?

Correspondingly, the objective of the study is to empirically evaluate and historically contextualize the dual influence of sacred (Christian) and traditional (indigenous) authority structures on contemporary political leadership legitimacy in Southeast Nigeria, culminating in a triadic model of postcolonial governance.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the literature across three distinct dimensions:

1. Historiographical and Theoretical: It advances African church history and political sociology by providing an integrated model that conceptualizes postcolonial political legitimacy as a tripartite negotiation between state, sacred, and traditional authority.
2. Empirical and Methodological: It offers robust empirical data (N = 520), systematically analyzed through structural equation modelling (SEM) and qualitative thematic analysis, bridging qualitative historical narrative with quantitative behavioural analysis.
3. Policy and Governance: It provides pragmatic insights for state actors, civil society organizations, and international governance partners operating in sub-Saharan Africa. Recognizing the dual authority of sacred and traditional structures is essential for designing anti-corruption strategies, election-monitoring frameworks, and peace-building interventions that resonate with local socio-cultural realities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Church History

Church history, in the context of this study, refers to the documented institutional development of Christian missionary bodies principally the Church Missionary Society (CMS/Anglican) and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) in Southeast Nigeria, together with the social, educational, and political footprint that development produced (Ekechi, 1971; Kalu, 2006). The concept is used here not merely as a chronology of evangelization but as an analytical lens on how ecclesiastical institutions accumulated and continue to exercise moral and civic authority independent of the colonial and post-colonial state.

2.1.2 African Indigenous Governance

African indigenous governance denotes the pre-colonial systems of political organization through which African communities regulated public life prior to, and alongside, colonial and post-colonial state structures. In the Igbo context specifically, this comprises the Umunna kinship assembly, the Ozo title society, the Oha na Eze council, and complementary structures such as the Umuada and age-grade associations (Ogbo), all of which fused political authority with moral vetting and sacred sanction (Afigbo, 1972; Nzimiro, 1972).

2.1.3 Political Leadership Legitimacy

Political leadership legitimacy is conceptualized as the degree to which citizens voluntarily accept, comply with, and regard as rightful the authority exercised by political leaders, as distinct from the mere formal-legal possession of office (Weber, 1947). Legitimacy is thus treated as a perceptual and relational construct residing in citizens' judgements rather than as an automatic property of electoral victory or constitutional appointment.

2.1.4 Authority, Power, and Legitimacy Distinguished

The study follows the conventional distinction in political sociology between power (the capacity to compel compliance), authority (the recognized right to command), and legitimacy (the normative acceptance that renders authority binding without coercion). This distinction underlies the study's central argument: that Southeast Nigerian political actor frequently possesses power and formal authority without full legitimacy, and pursue ecclesiastical and traditional endorsement precisely to close that legitimacy gap.

2.2 Theoretical Review

Several theoretical traditions bear on the relationship between religion, tradition, and political authority. Weber's (1947) tripartite typology of legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic authority remains foundational but assumes a secularizing trajectory in which modern legal-rational authority progressively displaces traditional and sacred forms an assumption this study empirically interrogates rather than adopts wholesale. Ekeh's (1975) theory of the "two publics" in postcolonial Africa is also instructive: it distinguishes a primordial public, to which citizens owe moral obligation, from a civic public, treated more instrumentally, and helps explain why Southeast Nigerians hold indigenous

and ecclesiastical authorities to higher moral account than the formal state. Ake's (1996) critique of imported democratic models further supports the study's premise that African political legitimacy cannot be adequately theorized using state-centric frameworks alone. These three traditions jointly inform the Triadic Authority Legitimacy Model (TALM) developed in Section 3.3, which treats legal-rational, sacred-ecclesiastical, and traditional-indigenous authority as co-existing and interacting, rather than as stages in a linear secularization process.

2.3 Empirical Review

A growing empirical literature addresses religion and politics in Nigeria, though rarely in conjunction with indigenous governance or through structural equation modelling. Onuorah (2024), using content analysis, examined the Nigerian church's engagement with the country's leadership challenges and found that religious institutions exert considerable but under-theorized influence on governance discourse, while noting that most existing scholarship treats religious political involvement descriptively rather than measuring its effect on legitimacy perceptions. Similarly, Kukah (1993), Nmah (2007), and Umeanolue (2020), reviewed collectively in Onuorah (2024), converge on the view that religion plays an ambivalent role in Nigeria's political development, alternately promoting accountability and enabling elite manipulation, but their analyses remain largely qualitative and historical rather than quantitatively predictive. Recent scholarship on cultural heritage preservation in Southeast Nigeria highlights that indigenous knowledge systems and traditional iconography continue to function as vital vehicles for community identity, inter-generational value transmission, and local governance (Onyebuchi-Igbokwe, et al., 2025)

Ogueche's (2021) study of religion's influence on Nigerian politics, based on secondary-source analysis, similarly found that religious moral values have positively shaped policy formulation and governance practice, recommending that political office holders adhere more closely to their professed faiths a normative conclusion consistent with, but analytically less precise than, the present study's quantified path coefficients. A further body of work has documented cases in which religious endorsement functions as an exchange relationship between political and religious elites, in which legitimacy is conferred in return for patronage a dynamic closely paralleling the "godfatherism" theme identified in the qualitative strand of the present study (see Section 5.6).

On the indigenous governance side, ethnographic and historical scholarship on the Ozo title institution (Afigbo, 1972; Nzimiro, 1972) confirms that Ozo initiation continues to function as a sacred credentialing mechanism bridging the visible and ancestral worlds and reinforcing the political authority of titled men, though this literature has generally been descriptive-ethnographic rather than survey-based. Broader treatments of Igbo traditional government describe pre-colonial Igbo political organization as a form of participatory, near-democratic governance that was substantially disrupted by colonial indirect rule and the imposition of warrant chiefs, a disruption that nonetheless left the underlying normative expectations of consensus and moral vetting intact in community life.

Taken together, this body of empirical work establishes, first, that both church and indigenous institutions are widely believed to shape political legitimacy in Nigeria, and second, that the two literatures have developed largely in parallel the religion-and-politics literature rarely engaging indigenous governance structures, and the indigenous-governance literature rarely engaging church history or quantitative legitimacy outcomes. Furthermore, almost none of the reviewed studies employs structural equation modelling or a comparably rigorous quantitative design capable of estimating the relative statistical weight of each authority sphere.

2.4 Summary of Literature Reviewed and Gap

The reviewed conceptual and empirical literature confirms the theoretical plausibility of the study's central claim that ecclesiastical and indigenous authority both shape political legitimacy in Southeast Nigeria while also revealing a clear gap that this study is designed to fill: the absence of an integrated, empirically quantified model linking church history and indigenous governance to political leadership legitimacy within a single

analytical framework. By combining historical analysis with a structural equation model estimated on 520 respondents, the present study addresses this gap directly, extending the largely qualitative and descriptive prior literature into testable, quantified structural relationships.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The Missionary Enterprise and Ecclesiastical Authority in Igbo Land

The transformation of the socio-political terrain of Southeast Nigeria cannot be separated from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European Christian missionary enterprise. The expansion of Christianity in Igbo land developed primarily through two competing denominational fronts: the Protestant Church Missionary Society (CMS), representing the Anglican Communion, and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM), spearheaded predominantly by the Holy Ghost Fathers (Ekechi, 1971; Kalu, 2006).

The CMS established its initial foothold at Onitsha in 1857 under the leadership of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther. The Protestant strategy initially emphasized vernacular literacy, native pastorates, and scripture translation into Igbo, attempting to convert local communities through vernacular enlightenment and structured administrative systems (Hastings, 1994).

Conversely, the Roman Catholic Mission arrived in Onitsha in 1885 under Father Joseph Shanahan. The RCM adopted a strategy centred on the primary-school network. Cognizant that direct evangelical assaults on traditional Igbo cosmologies often met resistance from titled elders, Shanahan deployed schools as the primary vehicle of conversion. By controlling access to Western education the indispensable prerequisite for social mobility, clerical employment, and political participation under British colonial rule the Catholic Church converted generations of young Igbo minds (Isichei, 1977).

This intense denominational rivalry produced a double-edged socio-political legacy in Southeast Nigeria. First, ethno-religious institutionalization: the Church established itself as a parallel administrative structure that frequently outmatched the colonial, and later post-colonial, state in providing social amenities such as education, healthcare, and civic dispute resolution. Second, moral authority over governance: the clergy assumed the role of moral arbiters, and ecclesiastical sanction became, in the public eye, a prerequisite for political leadership, as Christian values were framed as the standard of ethical public stewardship.

3.2 Indigenous Governance Architecture: Traditional Igbo Republicanism

Prior to the imposition of European colonial rule and the advent of Christian missions, Igbo political organization was characterized by dynamic, non-hegemonic, and participatory structures often described in African political historiography as "Acephalous" or "Stateless" (Afigbo, 1972). Rather than centralized monarchies, Igbo communities operated through direct democratic and republican systems in which power was dispersed across kinship structures, title societies, and age grades.

At the foundation of this governance architecture is the Umunna, a patrilineal kinship assembly. Within the Umunna, decisions were reached not by autocratic decree but through exhaustive deliberation aimed at consensus (Oha na Eze). Political authority was intimately connected to moral uprightness and spiritual accountability. Lineage heads held the Ofo the sacred staff of truth and authority symbolizing an unbroken covenant between the living, the unborn, and the ancestors (Ndi Ichie). Complementing the Umunna were the Ozo title societies. Admission into the Ozo institution was not merely a display of material wealth; it required exhaustive vetting of an individual's character, integrity, and contributions to public welfare. Upon initiation, an Ozo titleholder swore oaths of absolute truthfulness (Iwa Ofo) and renounced deceptive behaviour. Ozo titleholders functioned as elite judicial and political officers whose rulings derived authority from their personal moral standing and sacred obligations.

Similarly, female socio-political organizations such as the Umuada (daughters of the lineage) and age-grade associations (Ogbo) exercised significant executive, checks-and-balances, and legislative functions (Nzimiro, 1972). This traditional framework linked public office to moral rectitude, communal consensus, and spiritual sanction,

establishing a paradigm in which governance without moral legitimacy was viewed as an abomination (Aru).

3.3 Synthesis: The Triadic Authority Legitimacy Model (TALM)

The political landscape of contemporary Southeast Nigeria cannot be fully understood through the lens of legal-rational state authority alone. Max Weber's (1947) classic tripartite typology of authority legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic assumes a historical trajectory in which modern state institutions displace traditional and sacred forms of authority. Postcolonial African polities, however, demonstrate that modern state institutions exist alongside deeply rooted socio-cultural and religious systems.

To explain this dynamic, the study introduces the Triadic Authority Legitimacy Model (TALM). This model posits that political leadership legitimacy in Southeast Nigeria is continuously negotiated across three interconnected spheres:

1. The Legal-Rational Sphere (the Secular State): constitutional mandates, democratic electoral processes, statutory laws, and bureaucratic offices. While this sphere confers de jure legal authority, it often lacks complete moral credibility owing to systemic corruption, institutional weakness, and governance failures.
2. The Sacred-Ecclesiastical Sphere (the Christian Church): Catholic, Anglican, and Pentecostal institutions. The Church exercises broad moral influence, controls substantial communication networks, and acts as a civic watchdog; public endorsement by religious leaders signals to the electorate that a candidate possesses moral integrity.
3. The Traditional-Indigenous Sphere (the Indigenous Governance System): the Umunna, Ozo title societies, traditional rulers (Eze), and the Umuada. This sphere provides ancestral grounding, local identity, and community-level legitimacy; acceptance within it signifies that a leader remains rooted in communal values (Omenala) and responsive to local obligations.

Rather than operating in isolation, the three spheres constantly interact, such that:

Leadership Legitimacy = f (Legal-Rational Validation, Ecclesiastical Moral Endorsement, Indigenous Communal Sanction)

A political actor who possesses only legal-rational authority (e.g., an electoral victory validated by the state) but lacks ecclesiastical moral endorsement and traditional communal recognition often faces non-cooperation, public cynicism, and low institutional trust. Conversely, political figures who successfully synthesize the three domains securing constitutional mandates while gaining ecclesiastical endorsement and traditional titles achieve higher levels of governance acceptance and public compliance. Church history and indigenous governance are, on this reading, not mere relics of the past; they remain active, structural forces that continuously define political leadership in postcolonial Nigeria.

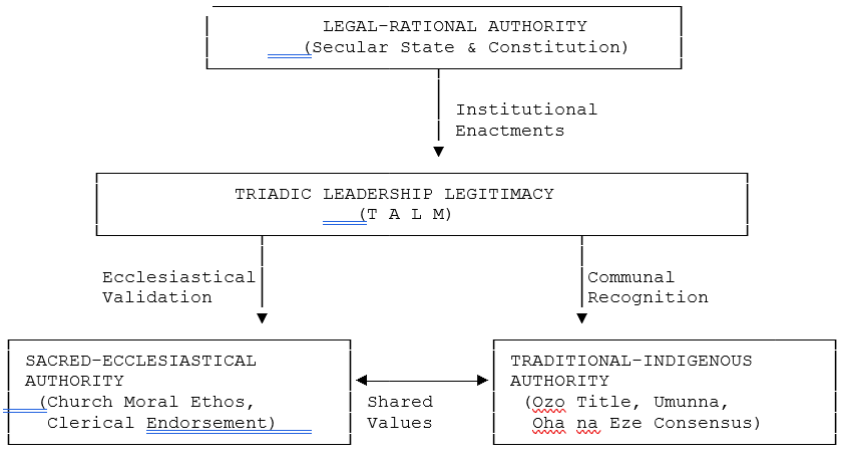


Figure 1: Conceptual Synthesis of the Triadic Authority Legitimacy Model (TALM)

(Source: Synthesized and conceptualized by the authors (2026), adapted from foundational frameworks by Weber (1947), Ekeh (1975), Ake (1996), and Gifford (1998)).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design permits the simultaneous collection and independent analysis of quantitative cross-sectional survey data and qualitative archival/interview data, with both strands merged during interpretation to achieve empirical triangulation and contextual depth. The quantitative strand tested the hypothesized structural relationships among indigenous governance values, ecclesiastical moral influence, and political leadership legitimacy, while the qualitative strand comprising archival church records and key informant interviews (KIIs) supplied historical depth and explanatory nuance to the statistical patterns observed.

4.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted across the five states that constitute the Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi an area historically shaped by early CMS and RCM missionary activity and by a dense concentration of surviving indigenous governance institutions. The target population comprised adult residents (18 years and above) of the zone, together with institutional stakeholders directly implicated in the negotiation of political legitimacy: traditional rulers and titleholders, clergy, political office holders and public servants, civil society and women's/youth leaders, and community development union executives.

4.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling framework was deployed to recruit a representative sample of N = 520 respondents.

i. Stage 1 (Geographic selection): three senatorial districts were selected per state, yielding fifteen districts across the zone, to ensure geographic and socio-political representation.

ii. Stage 2 (Stratified sampling): respondents were stratified across six key stakeholder groups to capture varied perspectives on local governance, religious dynamics, and traditional institutions, as summarized in Table 1.

iii.

Table 1: Stakeholder Sampling Framework (N = 520)

Stakeholder Category	Sample Size (n)	Percentage (%)	Sampling Strategy
Community members / citizens	220	42.3	Stratified random sampling
Clergy & religious leaders (RCM, CMS, Pentecostal)	90	17.3	Purposive sampling
Traditional rulers (Eze) & titleholders (Ozo)	70	13.5	Purposive sampling
Political actors & public servants	60	11.5	Stratified random sampling
Civil society & youth/women leaders (Umuada)	50	9.6	Convenience / targeted sampling
Town union executives	30	5.8	Purposive sampling
Total	**520**	**100.0**	**Multi-stage hybrid**

Source: Field Survey, 2026

In parallel, eighteen key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with senior archival historians, high-ranking bishops and clergy, traditional rulers, and prominent political leaders to provide depth to the survey findings and to anchor the quantitative results in historical process.

4.4 Sample Demographic Profile

Table 2 summarizes the demographic composition of the quantitative sample.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 520)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	317	61.0
	Female	203	39.0
Age	18–30 years	104	20.0
	31–45 years	182	35.0
	46–60 years	156	30.0
	61 years and above	78	15.0
Educational attainment	Secondary or below	104	20.0
	Tertiary (OND/HND/BSc)	296	56.9
	Postgraduate	120	23.1
Religious affiliation	Roman Catholic	223	42.9
	Anglican (CMS)	135	26.0
	Pentecostal / other Christian	150	28.8
	Other / none stated	12	2.3
State of residence	Anambra / Enugu / Imo / Abia / Ebonyi	~104 each	~20.0 each

Source: Field Survey, 2026

4.5 Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire designed around three latent constructs, supplemented by a semi-structured interview guide for the KIIs. The questionnaire was organized into four sections: (i) respondent demographic and stakeholder classification; (ii) Indigenous Governance Values (IGV); (iii) Ecclesiastical Moral Influence (EMI); and (iv) Political Leadership Legitimacy (PLL). All construct items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

4.6 Operationalization of Latent Variables

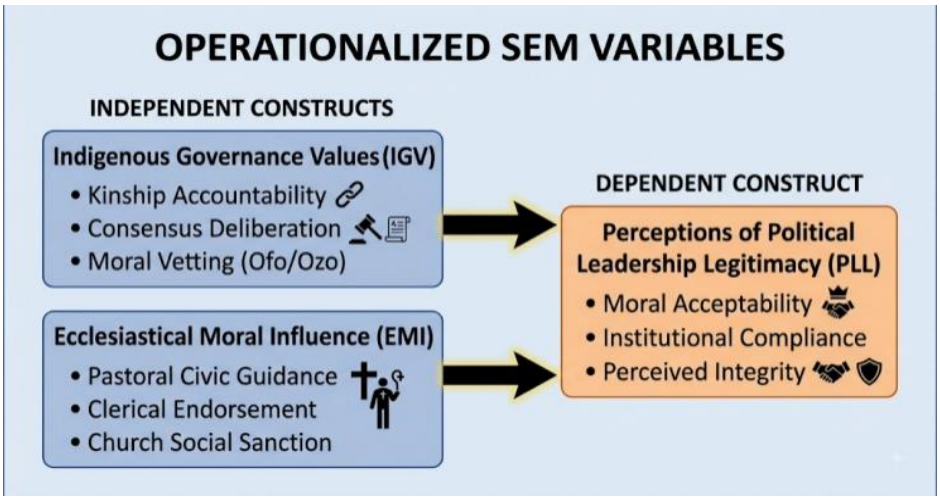


Figure 2: *Triadic Authority Legitimacy Model (TALM) for Southeast Nigeria (Source: Conceptualized by authors (2026). Adapted from Ake (1996), Ekeh (1975), Gifford (1998), and Hair et al. (2019).)*

The key constructs were operationalized as follows:

i. Indigenous Governance Values (IGV): measured via indicators focusing on communal consensus-building, kinship accountability (Umunna), traditional vetting rites, and moral integrity expectations (Ofo).

ii. Ecclesiastical Moral Influence (EMI): measured via indicators capturing pastoral letters, clerical political

guidance, church-based moral accountability, and institutional religious trust.

iii. Political Leadership Legitimacy (PLL) [dependent variable]: measured via indicators assessing public acceptance of leadership, perceived moral authority to govern, voluntary citizen compliance, and civic trust.

4.7 Validity and Reliability of Instrument

Content validity was established through expert review by three scholars in political sociology and church history, and the instrument was refined following a pilot study of 40 respondents (not included in the main sample) drawn from a senatorial district outside the final sampling frame. Construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR); convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted (AVE). All constructs met the conventional thresholds ($\alpha > 0.70$, CR > 0.70, AVE > 0.50), reported in full in Section 4.3.

4.8 Data Collection Procedure

Trained field assistants fluent in both English and Igbo administered the questionnaire face-to-face between March and June 2026, to accommodate low digital-literacy segments of the sample and to maximize response accuracy among elderly and rural respondents. KIIs were conducted in person or via telephone, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The overall survey response rate was 92.9% (520 valid returns from 560 questionnaires administered).

4.9 Ethical Considerations

All respondents provided informed consent, participation was voluntary, and respondents retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were preserved through the use of coded identifiers, and traditional and religious title-holders who consented to be identified in the qualitative narrative were separately asked for explicit attribution consent.

4.10 Analytical Strategy and SEM Specification

Quantitative data were processed and analyzed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to evaluate the structural relations among latent constructs. SEM is particularly suited to this analysis because it accounts for measurement error while simultaneously estimating direct structural paths (Hair et al., 2019). Data were first screened for missing values, normality, and multicollinearity; a measurement (confirmatory factor) model was then fitted and validated before the structural model was estimated.

The structural model was specified to test two core direct hypotheses:

$$PLL = \gamma 1\ (IGV) + \gamma 2\ (EMI) + \zeta$$

Where PLL = Political Leadership Legitimacy (dependent variable); IGV = Indigenous Governance Values (independent variable 1); EMI = Ecclesiastical Moral Influence (independent variable 2); $\gamma 1$, $\gamma 2$ = standardized path coefficients (beta weights); and ζ = structural residual error/variance.

Model fit was evaluated using standard psychometric fit indices: the chi-square-to-degrees-of-freedom ratio ($\chi^2/df < 3.0$), Comparative Fit Index (CFI > 0.90), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI > 0.90), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA < 0.06), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR < 0.08) (Hair et al., 2019).

Qualitative data from archival church documents and KII transcripts were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, integrated directly alongside structural path estimates to clarify the historical mechanisms underlying the observed statistical relationships. Analyst triangulation was used to strengthen coding reliability, with two independent coders reconciling divergent codes through discussion.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Response Rate and Data Screening

Of 560 questionnaires administered, 520 were returned complete and usable, yielding a response rate of 92.9%. Preliminary screening found no univariate outliers exceeding $|z| = 3.29$, skewness and kurtosis values for all items fell within ±2, and variance inflation factors (VIFs) for the structural model ranged from 1.31 to 1.58, indicating no problematic multicollinearity between the Indigenous Governance Values (IGV) and Ecclesiastical Moral Influence (EMI) constructs.

5.2 Descriptive Statistics of Latent Constructs

Table 3 presents the mean, standard deviation, and interpretation for each latent construct, computed from respondents' aggregated Likert-scale scores.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Latent Constructs (N = 520)

Construct	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Indigenous Governance Values (IGV)	4.12	0.58	High agreement
Ecclesiastical Moral Influence (EMI)	3.94	0.64	High agreement
Political Leadership Legitimacy (PLL)	3.81	0.61	Moderately high agreement

Source: Researchers' Computation from Field Survey Data, 2026

Respondents rated indigenous governance values most highly (M = 4.12, SD = 0.58), reflecting strong continued attachment to Umunna consensus-building and Ozo-based moral vetting. Ecclesiastical moral influence was also rated highly (M = 3.94, SD = 0.64). Perceived political leadership legitimacy under existing arrangements was comparatively lower (M = 3.81, SD = 0.61), suggesting that, on average, respondents perceive a legitimacy gap between the moral standards demanded of leaders by church and tradition and the degree to which political actors currently satisfy them.

5.3 Reliability and Validity of the Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirmed a well-fitting three-factor measurement model ($\chi^2/df = 2.02$; CFI = 0.958; TLI = 0.949; RMSEA = 0.044; SRMR = 0.038). All items loaded significantly on their intended constructs (standardized loadings ranging from 0.61 to 0.88, $p < 0.001$). Table 4 reports reliability and convergent validity statistics.

Table 4: Reliability and Convergent Validity of Latent Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Indigenous Governance Values (IGV)	7	0.87	0.89	0.58
Ecclesiastical Moral Influence (EMI)	6	0.85	0.87	0.56
Political Leadership Legitimacy (PLL)	6	0.89	0.90	0.61

Source: Researchers' Computation, SPSS/AMOS Output, 2026

All constructs exceeded the recommended thresholds (α > 0.70; CR > 0.70; AVE > 0.50), confirming adequate internal consistency and convergent validity. Discriminant validity was supported using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, as the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with the other two constructs.

5.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 5 presents Pearson correlation coefficients among the three latent constructs. All correlations were positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level, with the strongest association observed between Indigenous Governance Values and Political Leadership Legitimacy.

Table 5: Correlation Matrix of Latent Constructs

Construct	1. IGV	2. EMI	3. PLL
1. Indigenous Governance Values (IGV)	1.00		
2. Ecclesiastical Moral Influence (EMI)	0.44**	1.00	
3. Political Leadership Legitimacy (PLL)	0.63**	0.59**	1.00

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Source: Researchers' Computation from Field Survey Data, 2026

5.5 Structural Model Results

The structural model demonstrated good fit to the data: χ^2 (df = 132) = 282.5, $\chi^2/df = 2.14$; CFI = 0.951; TLI = 0.942; RMSEA = 0.048 (90% CI = 0.041–0.055); SRMR = 0.041 all indices meeting or exceeding the recommended thresholds and indicating that the hypothesized triadic structure is well supported by the observed data.

Table 6: presents the standardized structural path coefficients.

Path	Standardized β	S.E.	C.R. (t-value)	p-value	Hypothesis
IGV → PLL	0.56	0.049	11.43	< 0.001	Supported
EMI → PLL	0.49	0.052	9.42	< 0.001	Supported

Source: Structural Equation Model Output, AMOS, 2026

Both hypothesized direct paths were positive and statistically significant. Indigenous Governance Values exerted the stronger effect on Political Leadership Legitimacy ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$), followed closely by Ecclesiastical Moral Influence ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$). Jointly, the two predictors accounted for 61% of the variance in perceived leadership legitimacy ($R^2 = 0.61$), indicating substantial explanatory power for a single-stage structural model in the social sciences. A supplementary analysis found a modest but significant indirect association between EMI and PLL operating partly through IGV (indirect effect = 0.09, $p = 0.012$), consistent with the qualitative finding (Section 4.6) that church moral teaching and indigenous consensus norms are mutually reinforcing rather than competing.

5.6 Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of the eighteen key informant interviews and archival church records generated five dominant themes that contextualize and deepen the structural findings.

Theme 1: The Church as a Parallel Governing Institution

Informants across denominations described the Church's historical role in provisioning education, healthcare, and dispute resolution as having produced a durable expectation that clergy remain active moral arbiters of public life. Several clergy informants recounted continuing to receive requests from politicians for pastoral endorsement ahead of party primaries and general elections, describing this as an inherited, rather than newly invented, expectation traceable to the mission era.

Theme 2: The Ozo Title as a Political Passport

Traditional rulers and titleholders consistently described Ozo initiation, and the associated Iwa Ofo oath of truthfulness, as functioning in contemporary practice as an informal credentialing mechanism for aspiring political leaders a means of publicly signaling moral vetting by kinship elders that formal party primaries are widely perceived not to provide.

Theme 3: Godfatherism and the Erosion of Elders' Authority

A recurring counter-theme was the perception, expressed particularly by younger and civil-society informants, that political "godfatherism" the informal sponsorship of candidates by powerful financial patrons increasingly bypasses or instrumentalizes both ecclesiastical endorsement and traditional titling, reducing them in some cases to purchasable symbols rather than genuine moral vetting. This tension helps explain why perceived legitimacy (PLL, M = 3.81) trailed indigenous and ecclesiastical values in the descriptive results.

Theme 4: Hybridity and Occasional Conflict between Church and Tradition

While IGV and EMI were positively correlated overall ($r = 0.44$), interview data revealed episodic friction for instance, church teaching discouraging participation in certain traditional rites that clergy regard as syncretistic, even where such rites remain central to communal legitimation of leaders. Several bishops described a pastoral strategy of selective accommodation, endorsing the ethical core of Ozo vetting (truthfulness, integrity, service) while distancing the Church from specific ritual elements.

Theme 5: Generational Divergence in Legitimacy Expectations

Younger, urban, and more formally educated respondents placed relatively greater weight on tangible governance performance and relatively less on traditional titling than older and rural respondents, though even younger informants continued to regard clerical moral standing as relevant. This generational gradient suggests the triadic framework, while robust in aggregate, is not applied uniformly across demographic segments.

5.7 Summary of Findings

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative strands converge on three key findings: (i) indigenous governance values remain the single strongest predictor of perceived political leadership legitimacy in Southeast Nigeria; (ii) ecclesiastical moral influence exerts an almost equally strong, partly overlapping effect; and (iii) the gap between these historically rooted normative expectations and respondents' actual assessment of leadership legitimacy reflects contemporary tensions chiefly godfatherism that partially instrumentalize, rather than eliminate, the Church's and tradition's moral gatekeeping roles.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1 Indigenous Governance Values and Leadership Legitimacy

The finding that Indigenous Governance Values most strongly predict perceived leadership legitimacy (β = 0.56) corroborates historical accounts of Igbo republicanism (Afigbo, 1972; Nzimiro, 1972) and suggests that pre-colonial norms of consensus-building, kinship accountability, and sacred vetting were not eroded by colonial rule but have instead been reproduced within contemporary electoral politics as an informal parallel credentialing system. This outcome aligns with recent empirical observations by Onyebuchi-Igbokwe and Amanze (2025), who demonstrate that culturally resonant symbols and indigenous knowledge frameworks remain pivotal in sustaining communal trust, civic participation, and social cohesion across Igbo communities. This lends empirical support to scholarship arguing that African political modernity is best characterized as hybrid rather than as a linear replacement of tradition by the state (Ekeh, 1975; Ake, 1996).

6.2 Ecclesiastical Moral Influence and Political Leadership

The similarly strong effect of Ecclesiastical Moral Influence (β = 0.49) confirms the historical argument, developed in Section 2.1, that missionary-era institution-building left the Church positioned as a durable moral authority independent of the colonial and post-colonial state. The finding is consistent with Gifford's (1998) broader observation of churches functioning as parallel civic infrastructures across sub-Saharan Africa, and extends that literature by quantifying the magnitude of ecclesiastical influence on legitimacy perceptions specifically within a mixed Catholic–Anglican–Pentecostal setting.

6.3 The Triadic Authority Legitimacy Model in Practice

The overall structural model, explaining 61% of variance in perceived legitimacy from only two predictors, offers strong empirical support for the TALM's central claim that legal-rational, sacred, and traditional authority interact rather than operate independently. The qualitative themes of godfatherism (Theme 3) and selective ecclesiastical accommodation (Theme 4) further show that this triadic negotiation is neither static nor uncontested: political and financial elites actively work to capture or simulate ecclesiastical and traditional endorsement, which in turn shapes how much genuine legitimizing power those endorsements retain over time.

6.4 Theoretical and Policy Implications

Theoretically, the findings challenge Weberian assumptions of progressive secularization (Weber, 1947) and support a postcolonial reformulation in which sacred and traditional authority persist as co-equal, empirically measurable determinants of governance legitimacy alongside the legal-rational state. Practically, the results suggest that anti-corruption and election-integrity interventions in Southeast Nigeria are unlikely to succeed if they engage the formal state alone; engaging church leadership structures and Umunna/Ozo institutions as accountability partners while remaining alert to their capture by godfatherism may offer a more culturally resonant route to strengthening democratic accountability.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

i. The cross-sectional survey design captures perceptions at a single point in time and cannot establish causal direction between constructs; longitudinal designs would strengthen causal inference.

ii. Purposive and convenience sampling for several stakeholder strata (clergy,

titleholders, civil society) may limit statistical generalizability beyond Southeast Nigeria, though this trade-off was accepted to secure institutionally knowledgeable respondents.

iii. Self-reported Likert-scale data are subject to social desirability bias, particularly among respondents interviewed near traditional or ecclesiastical authority figures.

iv. The study focuses on Christian denominations and does not examine the legitimacy role of Islamic or African Traditional Religious institutions, which may be relevant in adjoining zones.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how church history and indigenous governance traditions jointly shape contemporary political leadership legitimacy in Southeast Nigeria. Historical analysis traced how nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionary institution-building and pre-colonial Igbo republicanism each produced durable, parallel sources of moral authority. Empirically, structural equation modelling of 520 respondents confirmed that both Indigenous Governance Values ($\beta = 0.56$) and Ecclesiastical Moral Influence ($\beta = 0.49$) significantly and substantially predict perceived Political Leadership Legitimacy, jointly explaining 61% of its variance, while thematic analysis of eighteen key informant interviews revealed the mechanisms and contemporary strains, notably godfatherism through which this triadic negotiation operates. The Triadic Authority Legitimacy Model (TALM) advanced in this study offers a historically grounded, empirically validated framework for understanding postcolonial governance legitimacy as a continuous negotiation among the secular state, the sacred-ecclesiastical sphere, and the traditional-indigenous sphere, rather than a contest resolved in favour of any single order.

8.2 Recommendations

i. Government and electoral institutions should formally engage recognized church bodies and traditional councils (e.g., through structured consultative forums) as accountability partners in election-monitoring and anti-corruption initiatives, given their demonstrated legitimizing influence.

ii. Churches should establish clear, publicly documented criteria for political endorsement to reduce the risk of ecclesiastical authority being instrumentalized by godfatherism, as identified in Theme 3.

iii. Traditional institutions (Umunna, Ozo councils) should be supported, including through state recognition frameworks, in maintaining independent vetting standards for aspiring leaders, insulated as far as possible from purely financial sponsorship.

iv. Civic education programmes should explicitly address the historical roots of church and traditional authority in political life, to help citizens particularly younger, urban respondents (Theme 5) critically evaluate when such endorsements reflect genuine moral vetting versus elite capture.

v. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative designs, extending the TALM framework to other Nigerian geopolitical zones and to contexts with significant Islamic or African Traditional Religious institutional presence.

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Appendix A

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Negotiating Sacred and Secular Authority: Church History, African Indigenous Governance Systems, and the Politics of Leadership Legitimacy in Contemporary Southeast Nigeria

Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent

Dear Respondent, my name is _____, and I am conducting an academic research study on the historical and contemporary relationship between church authority, African indigenous governance systems, and political leadership legitimacy in Southeast Nigeria. You have been selected to participate because of your standing as a resident, traditional titleholder, clergy member, political actor, civil society leader, or community stakeholder within this zone.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any point without any consequence. All information you provide will be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes; your name will not be recorded on this instrument, and no individual response will be separately reported. The questionnaire should take approximately 15–20 minutes to complete.

By completing and returning this questionnaire, you confirm that you consent to participate in this study.

Thank you for your time and honest responses.

Instructions

Please tick (✓) the box that best represents your response in each section. There are no right or wrong answers — kindly respond based on your genuine opinion and experience.

Section A: Respondent Classification and Demographic Information

A1. Stakeholder category (please tick one):

- Community member / citizen
- Clergy / religious leader (RCM, CMS, Pentecostal)
- Traditional ruler (Eze) / titleholder (Ozo)
- Political actor / public servant
- Civil society / youth or women's leader (Umuada)

- Town union executive

A2. State of residence:

- Anambra • Enugu • Imo • Abia • Ebonyi

A3. Sex: ☐ Male ☐ Female

A4. Age bracket: ☐ 18–30 years ☐ 31–45 years ☐ 46–60 years ☐ 61 years and above

A5. Educational attainment: ☐ Secondary or below ☐ Tertiary (OND/HND/BSc) ☐ Postgraduate

A6. Religious affiliation: ☐ Roman Catholic ☐ Anglican (CMS) ☐ Pentecostal / other Christian ☐ Others / none

A7. Number of years resident in this community: _____

Section B: Indigenous Governance Values (IGV)

The statements below concern the role of indigenous Igbo governance institutions (e.g., Umunna, Ozo title society, Oha na Eze, Umuada) in political leadership today.

Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral/Undecided, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Please tick (✓) one box per statement.

IGV Item	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)
IGV1. Decisions reached through Umunna (kinship assembly) consensus carry strong moral weight in my community.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
IGV2. A leader who is accountable to his kinship group (Umunna) is more trustworthy than one who is not.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
IGV3. Traditional vetting rites (such as Ozo title-taking) are an important test of a leader's character.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
IGV4. The Ofo (symbol of truth and moral authority) still influences how leadership integrity is judged in my community.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
IGV5. Elders and titleholders play an important role in endorsing or rejecting political aspirants.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

IGV6. A political leader who disregards traditional institutions loses legitimacy in the eyes of the community.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
IGV7. Communal consensus-building remains a valued standard for evaluating good leadership today.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section C: Ecclesiastical Moral Influence (EMI)

The statements below concern the role of the Christian Church (Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal) in shaping political leadership expectations.

Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral/Undecided, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Please tick (✓) one box per statement.

EMI Item	**SD (1)**	**D (2)**	**N (3)**	**A (4)**	**SA (5)**
EMI1. Pastoral letters and church statements influence how I evaluate political leaders.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
EMI2. Clergy guidance affects how I decide who to support in elections.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
EMI3. A political candidate endorsed by respected church leaders is seen as more credible.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
EMI4. The Church plays an important role in holding political leaders morally accountable.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
EMI5. I trust the moral judgment of religious institutions more than that of government institutions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
EMI6. Church teachings shape my expectations of what an ethical political leader should look like.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section D: Political Leadership Legitimacy (PLL)

The statements below concern your overall perception of the legitimacy of political leaders in your area.

Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral/Undecided, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Please tick (✓) one box per statement.

PLL Item	**SD (1)**	**D (2)**	**N (3)**	**A (4)**	**SA (5)**

PLL1. I accept the authority of political leaders who have both ecclesiastical and traditional endorsement.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
PLL2. Leaders in my community govern with genuine moral authority, not just formal legal power.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
PLL3. I voluntarily comply with the decisions of leaders who are recognised by both the church and traditional institutions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
PLL4. I generally trust the political leadership in my community/state.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
PLL5. Leaders who ignore church or traditional endorsement often struggle to gain public acceptance.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
PLL6. Overall, I consider the current political leadership in my area to be legitimate.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section E: Open-Ended Question (Optional)

In your own words, briefly describe how church history and/or indigenous traditions have influenced your view of political leadership in your community:

_____

_

_____

_

_____

_

Thank you for participating in this study.