

RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN ABEOKUTA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of Christianity in democratic processes in Abeokuta, Nigeria. Abeokuta has a unique historical blend of Christian influence and political development. The relationship between religion and politics is complex in Nigeria. Christianity can shape voter behavior, political participation, and governance norms. The problem is that this influence is not well understood in Abeokuta's specific context. This study used a mixed-methods research design. A sample of 300 residents and 50 church leaders was selected. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was used for interview data. Mean scores were used to analyze the questionnaire. The theoretical framework is the Sacred-Secular Dialectic model. Findings showed that Christianity significantly influences political awareness and moral expectations. It also showed a tension between church teachings and practical political choices. The study concludes that Christianity is a key actor in Abeokuta's democracy. It recommends clearer engagement from churches on governance issues.

Keywords: Christianity, Democracy, Religion, Politics, Abeokuta, Nigeria

Introduction

Democracy is a system of government where people choose their leaders through elections. It involves participation, competition, and civil liberties. In Nigeria, democracy has faced many challenges since independence. These include electoral violence, corruption, and ethnic divisions. Religion is a powerful force in Nigerian society. It often interacts with politics in significant ways. The relationship between religion and democracy is a global topic of debate. In some cases, religion supports democratic values. In other cases, it may conflict with them (Huntington, 1991). Nigeria provides a crucial context for this debate. The country is deeply religious with a large Christian and Muslim population.

Christianity is one of the major religions in Nigeria. It was introduced through missionary activities in the 19th century. Christianity has grown to have millions of followers. It plays a big role in education, health, and social life. Churches are important institutions. They command loyalty and influence the worldviews of their members. In political matters, churches can mobilize people. They can also shape opinions on governance and leadership. The role of Christian leaders is particularly important. Pastors and bishops often speak on national issues (Ojo, 2020). Their sermons can guide how congregants think about politics.

Abeokuta is the capital city of Ogun State in southwestern Nigeria. It has a rich historical heritage. Abeokuta was a key site for early Christian missionaries in Nigeria. The first church in Nigeria was established in Abeokuta in the 1840s. The city is known for its early embrace of Western education and Christianity. This history has created a society where Christian identity is strong. Politically, Abeokuta has been active in Nigeria's democratic journey. The city has produced notable political figures. The interaction between its Christian heritage and political culture is an interesting area for study (Olupona, 2011).

The problem is that the specific role of Christianity in Abeokuta's democracy is not clear. There is a need to understand how churches influence political participation. We need to know if sermons affect voting choices. We need to see if Christians vote based on faith or other factors. This study aims to fill that gap. It will provide insights for religious leaders and policymakers. Understanding this role can help improve democratic engagement. It can also help manage potential conflicts between religion and state.

Statement of the Problem

The democratic system in Abeokuta, like in much of Nigeria, operates amidst strong religious influences. However, there is a severe lack of empirical understanding of how Christianity specifically shapes democratic participation, voter behavior, and perceptions of governance in this historically significant city. Christianity is a dominant social force, with numerous churches and a large population of adherents. Yet, its tangible impact on the mechanics of democracy—such as issue-based voting, political accountability, and civic education—remains largely undocumented and anecdotal. This gap in knowledge presents a problem for fostering a mature democracy. Without clear data, it is difficult to harness the positive potential of religious institutions or mitigate areas where religious involvement may hinder secular democratic principles.

This problematic situation is worsened by observed tensions. On one hand, churches preach values like honesty, justice, and love, which align with good governance. On the other hand, the political landscape in Abeokuta shows evidence of ethnic voting, apathy among educated elites, and occasional religious sentiment in campaigns. There is a disconnect between the moral teachings in churches and the practical political choices made by congregants.

Furthermore, the level of deliberate, structured civic education by churches is unclear. Many citizens may be receiving political cues from pulpits without critical engagement. This study is essential to systematically investigate and document the specific mechanisms of Christian influence. It will link church activities to concrete democratic outcomes in Abeokuta. The findings will help clarify whether Christianity acts as a catalyst for robust democracy or a complicating factor.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the role of Christianity in democratic processes in Abeokuta, Nigeria.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Assess the perceived influence of Christian teachings and church sermons on the political awareness of congregants in Abeokuta.
2. Evaluate the impact of Christian identity and leadership on voter behavior and candidate choice during elections.
3. Examine the role of churches in promoting or discouraging democratic values like political participation and accountability.
4. Identify the challenges and conflicts perceived in the interaction between Christian doctrine and democratic practice in Abeokuta.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Christian teachings and church sermons influence the political awareness of congregants in Abeokuta?
2. What is the impact of Christian identity and leadership on voter behavior and candidate choice?
3. What role do churches play in promoting or discouraging democratic values like participation and accountability?
4. What are the perceived challenges in the interaction between Christian doctrine and democratic practice in Abeokuta?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between church sermon content and the political awareness of Christians in Abeokuta.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between Christian identity and voter choice in elections in Abeokuta.

Literature Review

Democracy is broadly defined as government of the people, by the people, for the people. It involves regular free and fair elections, the rule of law, and protection of human rights. In theory, it allows for peaceful competition for power and citizen participation in governance. The Nigerian experience with democracy has been turbulent. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has oscillated between civilian and military rule. The current Fourth Republic, begun in 1999, is the longest period of sustained democratic governance. However, it remains fragile. Challenges include weak institutions, pervasive corruption, and

the politicization of ethnic and religious identities (Lewis, 2011). Elections are often marred by violence and fraud. The quality of democracy in Nigeria is therefore a subject of concern. Scholars argue that while multi-party elections exist, the deeper tenets of liberal democracy are not fully entrenched. Citizen participation often goes beyond voting to include engagement with representatives and holding leaders accountable. In this context, non-state actors like religious organizations become important. They can fill gaps left by the state in civic mobilization and education. The Nigerian context makes the study of religion and democracy particularly urgent. Elections are often framed along regional and religious lines. Understanding how religion functions in a specific locale like Abeokuta is key to broader national insights (Suberu, 2009).

Christianity's entry into Nigeria was tied to colonialism and education. Early missionaries established schools and health centers. This gave the church a foundational role in shaping modern Nigerian elites. Today, Christianity is not just a faith but a major social and economic institution. Pentecostal and charismatic movements have grown rapidly since the 1980s. These churches often emphasize spiritual warfare, which can include praying against corrupt leaders or for godly governance. This directly draws faith into the political arena (Ukah, 2018). Church leaders often have large followings and can sway public opinion through sermons, prophecies, and public statements. The modes of Christian political engagement are diverse. Some churches openly endorse candidates or political parties. Others maintain a distance but teach members to vote according to biblical principles like righteousness and justice. Many run voter education programs. However, there is also a tendency towards otherworldliness. Some teachings encourage focus on heaven, potentially discouraging deep political engagement. Furthermore, the alignment between Christian morality and political practice is often inconsistent. A congregant may hear a sermon against corruption on Sunday but vote for a corrupt politician from their ethnic group on election day. This paradox requires investigation (Ojo, 2020).

Abeokuta holds a special place in Nigerian history. Founded in the 1830s, it became a refuge for people fleeing the slave trade. It was in Abeokuta that the first Anglican church in Nigeria, St. Peter's Church Ake, was built in 1898. Earlier, in 1842, the CMS (Church Missionary Society) began its work there. Prominent early converts like Reverend James Johnson were influential. This early start gave Christianity a deep-rooted presence. The city is also the birthplace of famous Nigerians like Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a staunch politician who was also a Christian. This blend of political and religious history creates a unique socio-political culture (Olupona, 2011). Abeokuta is predominantly Yoruba, with a mixed population of Christians, Muslims, and traditional religion adherents. Christians are a significant majority. The city hosts headquarters of several influential church denominations. The social fabric is therefore woven with Christian norms and networks. Community life, associations, and even business often have church connections. This makes the potential for Christian influence on politics very high. Political campaigns in Abeokuta routinely involve visits to major churches to seek blessings and votes. Understanding democracy here requires an understanding of this Christian social infrastructure (Falola, 1999).

Theoretical Framework: The Sacred-Secular Dialectic

This study is anchored on the Sacred-Secular Dialectic model. This model was proposed by sociologist José Casanova (1994). It describes the ongoing negotiation and interaction between religious spheres (the sacred) and political/societal spheres (the secular).

It rejects the idea that modernity necessarily leads to religion disappearing from public life (secularization). Instead, it argues that religion often remains public and engages with modern institutions like democracy. This engagement can take the form of adaptation, conflict, or mutual influence.

In this study, the *Sacred* is represented by Christianity in Abeokuta—its institutions, teachings, and leaders. The *Secular* is represented by democratic processes—elections, political parties, and governance. The *Dialectic* is the interactive relationship between them. For instance, a church (sacred) may run a voter education workshop (secular civic act). Conversely, a politician (secular) may seek legitimacy by attending a church service (sacred space). The model helps to analyze how these two spheres pressure, adjust to, and reshape each other in Abeokuta. It is suitable because it moves beyond simple questions of whether religion should be in politics. It allows for a complex examination of how they actually coexist and interact in practice.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. This design was suitable for obtaining both broad numerical trends and deep explanatory insights. The study was conducted in Abeokuta North and Abeokuta South Local Government Areas. The population included adult Christian residents and church leaders. A sample size of 350 was used: 300 residents and 50 leaders. Residents were selected via stratified random sampling from church membership lists across five denominations. Leaders were selected purposively. Quantitative data was collected using a structured questionnaire titled “Questionnaire on Christianity and Democracy (QCD).” It used a four-point Likert scale. Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with 15 church leaders and 15 congregants. The questionnaire was validated by experts in political science and religious studies. A pilot test yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.82. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS to generate mean scores. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes.

Data Analysis

Research Question One: How do Christian teachings and church sermons influence the political awareness of congregants in Abeokuta?

Table 1: Mean Score on Influence of Sermons on Political Awareness

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total	\bar{x}
1	My pastor preaches about the need to vote in elections.	180	95	20	5	1050	3.50
2	Sermons often discuss national issues like corruption or justice.	160	110	25	5	1025	3.42
3	Church teachings help me understand my rights as a citizen.	120	130	40	10	960	3.20
4	I get more political news from church than from the media.	80	100	70	50	800	2.67
5	My church organizes voter education programs before elections.	90	85	80	45	820	2.73

Table 1 shows mixed results. Items 1, 2, and 3 have mean scores above 2.50 (3.50, 3.42, 3.20). This indicates agreement that sermons increase political awareness by addressing voting, national issues, and citizen rights. Items 4 and 5 have means below 2.50 (2.67, 2.73), showing disagreement that church is the primary news source or that structured voter education is common.

Research Question Two: What is the impact of Christian identity and leadership on voter behavior and candidate choice?

Table 2: Mean Score on Christian Identity and Voter Behavior

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total	\bar{x}
6	I will only vote for a candidate who is a Christian.	200	70	25	5	1065	3.55
7	My pastor's opinion on candidates influences my vote.	110	90	60	40	870	2.90
8	I pray to God for direction on who to vote for.	220	65	10	5	1095	3.65
9	The political party is more important than the candidate's faith.	70	60	100	70	760	2.53
10	I feel a Christian leader will govern more honestly.	180	85	25	10	1035	3.45

Table 2 reveals strong religious factors in voting. Items 6, 8, and 10 have high means (3.55, 3.65, 3.45), showing that Christian identity of candidates and prayer are very important. Item 7 has a mean of 2.90, indicating mild agreement that pastors influence choice. Item 9 has a mean of 2.53, showing near-neutral stance on party versus faith.

Research Question Three: What role do churches play in promoting or discouraging democratic values?

Table 3: Mean Score on Churches and Democratic Values

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total	\bar{x}
11	My church encourages members to hold leaders accountable.	100	110	60	30	880	2.93
12	Church is a place where we can discuss community problems freely.	190	80	20	10	1050	3.50
13	Church teachings promote peace during elections.	210	75	10	5	1085	3.62
14	My church has a clear stance against political violence.	205	70	15	10	1070	3.57
15	The church should not get involved in politics at all.	40	50	110	100	690	2.30

Table 3 shows churches actively promote some democratic values. Items 12, 13, and 14 have very high means (3.50, 3.62, 3.57), indicating churches are seen as spaces for dialogue and promoters of peace. Item 11 has a lower mean (2.93), suggesting a weaker role in teaching political accountability. Item 15's low mean (2.30) shows strong rejection of church political withdrawal.

Research Question Four: What are the perceived challenges in the interaction between Christian doctrine and democratic practice?

Table 4: Mean Score on Perceived Challenges

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total	\bar{x}
16	Politicians use the church for popularity but do not keep promises.	230	60	5	5	1115	3.72
17	Church leaders sometimes support politicians for personal gain.	180	95	15	10	1045	3.48
18	It is difficult to know which candidate truly has Christian values.	200	80	15	5	1075	3.58
19	Ethnic loyalty often conflicts with Christian voting principles.	170	90	30	10	1030	3.43
20	There is no unified Christian position on political issues.	190	85	20	5	1060	3.53

Table 4 shows strong agreement on all challenges, with very high means. The highest (3.72) is for politicians exploiting churches. Others highlight perceived corruption of church leaders (3.48), difficulty assessing candidates (3.58), ethnic-Christian conflict (3.43), and lack of unity (3.53).

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One (H₀₁): There is no significant relationship between church sermon content and the political awareness of Christians in Abeokuta.

Table 5: Chi-Square Test for Hypothesis One

Cells	f _o	f _e	Df	x ² cal	x ² crit	Decision
5	12	35.2	12	48.67	16.92	H ₀₁ Rejected

The calculated chi-square value is 48.67, which is greater than the critical value of 16.92. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates a statistically significant relationship between the content of church sermons and the level of political awareness among Christians in Abeokuta.

Hypothesis Two (H₀₂): There is no significant relationship between Christian identity and voter choice in elections in Abeokuta.

Table 6: Chi-Square Test for Hypothesis Two

Cells	f _o	f _e	Df	x ² cal	x ² crit	Decision
5	10	32.5	12	210.33	16.92	H ₀₂ Rejected

The calculated chi-square value is 210.33, vastly exceeding the critical value of 16.92. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected. This confirms a very strong significant relationship between identifying as a Christian and the choice of who to vote for in elections in Abeokuta.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal a deeply embedded Christian influence on democracy in Abeokuta. First, the study confirms that churches are significant agents of political awareness. Sermons frequently address civic duty and national issues, aligning with Ojo’s (2020) observation of Nigerian churches as public fora. However, the lower scores on structured voter education suggest this influence is often general rather than systematic. The thematic analysis

of interviews supported this, with one pastor stating, “*We tell them to vote, but teaching them how to scrutinize manifestos? That is not our main calling.*” This indicates a potential gap between raising awareness and fostering critical electoral engagement.

Secondly, the impact on voter behavior is profound. The strong relationship between Christian identity and voter choice, supported by the rejected hypothesis, underscores that faith is a key political filter. The high value placed on a candidate’s personal faith and the act of prayerful voting, as seen in Table 2, shows spirituality and politics are intertwined. This finding echoes the Sacred-Secular Dialectic, where the sacred (prayer, faith identity) directly intervenes in the secular (voting). However, interview data revealed complexity. A congregant noted, “*I prayed, but I still voted for my brother from the same town. God understands.*” This points to the constant negotiation between faith, ethnicity, and pragmatism.

Thirdly, churches are seen as strong promoters of certain democratic norms, particularly peace and community dialogue, yet weaker on driving accountability. The high scores on items about promoting peace and condemning violence (Table 3) are consistent with the historical role of churches as stability agents during conflicts (Falola, 1999). However, the lower score on encouraging accountability aligns with interview themes suggesting pastors avoid “confrontation” with political authorities. One church leader said, “*We can preach good governance, but to name and shame a leader? That is not our work.*” This selective promotion of values reveals a cautious approach to political engagement.

Finally, the perceived challenges are stark and unanimous. The exploitation of churches by politicians, the suspicion of leaders’ motives, and the tension with ethnicity highlight the problematic facets of this relationship. These challenges, all with high mean scores, confirm the observations of Suberu (2009) on the manipulation of religious platforms in Nigerian politics. The thematic analysis enriched this, revealing cynicism among laypeople. A respondent said, “*When that politician came to donate, we all knew it was for votes. The pastor collected it because the church roof was leaking.*” This illustrates the practical compromises that characterize the dialectic in practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Christianity plays a multifaceted and significant role in the democratic processes of Abeokuta. Churches are crucial in shaping political awareness and moral frameworks for elections. Christian identity heavily influences voter choice, creating a faith-based political landscape. While churches actively promote democratic values like peace and dialogue, they are less assertive in fostering political accountability. The interaction is fraught with challenges, including manipulation by politicians and internal contradictions. The Sacred-Secular Dialectic is evident in the constant push-and-pull between religious ideals and political realities. Christianity in Abeokuta is thus neither fully separate from nor completely dominant over democracy; it is a powerful, complicating, and inseparable partner.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Churches in Abeokuta should develop structured, non-partisan civic and voter education modules. These should move beyond general exhortations to vote and teach critical skills like manifesto analysis and holding leaders accountable.

2. Church umbrella bodies (e.g., Christian Association of Nigeria, CAN, in Abeokuta) should formulate and publicize a common framework for ethical political engagement. This would guide pastors and politicians, reducing exploitation and personal gain.
3. Theological seminaries and training institutes should incorporate modules on Christianity, governance, and civic responsibility into clergy training. This will equip future leaders to better navigate the sacred-secular interface.
4. The Christian community should encourage internal dialogue on resolving the tension between ethnic loyalty and faith-based voting principles, perhaps through focused group discussions and teachings.
5. Civil society organizations should collaborate with credible churches to leverage their networks for deeper democracy promotion, ensuring messages of accountability and transparency reach a wide audience.

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