

DENOMINATIONAL CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA: ORIGINS, DYNAMICS, AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the origins, developmental causes, and implications of denominational Christianity in Nigeria. It posits that the country's diverse religious landscape is a complex product of multiple factors, including 19th-century missionary activities, British colonial policies, indigenous religious traditions, doctrinal differences, and charismatic leadership. Using Ecumenism and Cultural and Religious Pluralism as key theoretical frameworks, the research critically analyzes how this religious fragmentation has affected national unity and the Church's collective mission. While denominationalism has fostered a vibrant spiritual environment, it has also generated unhealthy rivalries and divisions that threaten social cohesion. The study concludes that ongoing ecumenical efforts—exemplified by organizations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)—are crucial for transforming religious diversity into a force for peace and national development, thereby moving Nigeria toward a state of reconciled diversity.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of Christian denominations in Nigeria is a profound and multifaceted phenomenon that has indelibly shaped the nation's socio-political and religious landscape. While often celebrated as a source of spiritual dynamism and a testament to the country's vibrant faith, the deep-seated divisions among these denominations pose significant challenges to national unity, social cohesion, and the Church's collective mission. The history of this denominationalism is not a simple narrative of religious conversion; it is a complex story inextricably linked to the broader arc of European exploration, colonization, and the subsequent indigenous responses to foreign influence.

The genesis of this religious diversity can be traced to the 19th century when various Christian missionary societies from Europe and America established their presence. Each group—including the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Roman Catholic Mission, and the Methodist Church—brought its own distinct theological perspectives and organizational structures, thereby planting the seeds of denominational fragmentation. This process was inextricably tied to British colonial rule, which often provided a favorable environment for Christian expansion, thereby facilitating the missionaries' access to local communities and solidifying the presence of distinct denominational identities.

This foundation was further complicated by the emergence of African Indigenous Churches (AICs), which represented a desire by indigenous converts to adapt Christianity to their specific cultural contexts. The rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in the 20th century added another layer of complexity, emphasizing spiritual experiences and personal transformation. This study critically analyzes the primary factors responsible for this complex religious mosaic, specifically examining the interplay of colonial influence, the resilience of indigenous religious traditions, divergent theological doctrines, and the charisma of influential leaders. By exploring these key drivers, this research seeks to move beyond a simple historical account to understand the profound implications of denominationalism.

2. Theoretical Framework: Ecumenism and 'Cultural and Religious Pluralism' Theories

2.1 Ecumenism Theory: This theory provides a fitting framework for analyzing the research on "Denominational Christianity in Nigeria." While the research may primarily focus on historical and sociological factors, ecumenism offers the necessary normative and critical lens to understand why these divisions are considered problematic and what solutions are being pursued.

Origin and Foundational Figures

The modern ecumenical movement did not arise from a single founder, but from a collective realization that Christian division was a major hindrance to global mission. Its origins are directly traceable to the Edinburgh

Missionary Conference of 1910. At this pivotal gathering, missionaries from various Protestant denominations recognized that their rivalries and sectarianism were a "scandal" to the world, undermining the credibility of the Gospel message and their evangelistic efforts (Rouse & Neill, 1986). This realization spurred a concerted effort toward greater unity.

Prominent figures associated with this early stage include John R. Mott, a key organizer of the Edinburgh conference who emphasized practical cooperation, and Nathan Söderblom, a Swedish Archbishop who championed the "Life and Work" movement, focusing on Christian unity in addressing social and ethical issues. Their work laid the foundation for a movement that sought to move beyond mere tolerance to genuine dialogue and cooperation among Christian traditions (Rouse & Neill, 1986).

Analysis of the Theory

Ecumenism is a theoretical framework focused on achieving unity among Christian churches. It critiques denominational fragmentation as a failure to fulfill the biblical ideal of oneness (Gassmann, 2017). The theory advocates for a methodology of dialogue and cooperation to bridge divides, encouraging churches to find common ground in shared faith and mission. Its ultimate vision is one of "reconciled diversity," where different traditions can maintain their unique identities while working together for a common purpose, rather than merging into a single structure.

Implication to the Research Topic

The theory of ecumenism provides a crucial analytical framework for understanding Nigerian denominationalism. It offers a critical lens, moving beyond simple history to evaluate how colonial rivalries and doctrinal disputes have led to fragmentation, a deviation from the Christian ideal of unity (Ojo, 2008). This lens highlights the negative societal implications of disunity, such as a weakened collective voice and unhealthy rivalries (Kanu, 2012). Ecumenism also contextualizes solutions, framing efforts like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as practical responses to the problem (Platvoet & van der Laan, 2017). Ultimately, it informs recommendations aimed at fostering greater dialogue and cooperation.

2.2 Cultural and Religious Pluralism: The Cultural and Religious Pluralism theory is an excellent framework for analyzing the research on "Denominational Christianity in Nigeria: Origin and Developmental Causes," as it provides the conceptual tools to understand how Christianity was shaped by its encounter with Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural landscape. This framework moves beyond simply noting the presence of multiple religions and cultures; it analyzes their dynamic interaction and the societal implications of this co-existence.

Origin and Foundational Figures

The concept of religious pluralism as a formal theory has its roots in modern religious studies and sociology, particularly in the wake of increased global migration and interfaith contact. Unlike ecumenism, it doesn't have a single founder, but rather a set of key proponents who articulated its core principles. A leading figure is Diana Eck, who founded the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. Eck (2001) distinguishes pluralism from mere religious diversity, defining it as an "energetic engagement with religious differences," and an active commitment to dialogue and understanding. Other sociologists like Peter Berger have also explored religious pluralism as a key feature of modern, secularizing societies, where multiple belief systems compete for influence, thereby shaping religious identity and practice.

Analysis of the Theory

The theory of Cultural and Religious Pluralism provides a vital lens for understanding Nigerian Christianity. It differentiates simple diversity from active pluralism, which involves intentional dialogue. The theory explains how Christianity in Nigeria became a unique mosaic by blending with indigenous beliefs, a process known as syncretism (Ojo, 2008). This perspective frames the proliferation of denominations as a natural outcome of Nigeria's cultural diversity, where each new group is a tailored response to community needs (Platvoet & van der Laan, 2017). Ultimately, it offers a balanced view that appreciates diversity while highlighting the necessity of dialogue for national unity.

Implication to the Research Topic

The theory of Cultural and Religious Pluralism offers an essential analytical framework for studying denominational Christianity in Nigeria. It helps explain how and why Nigerian Christianity is a unique mosaic shaped by local customs, languages, and belief systems (Ojo, 2008). This perspective views the proliferation of denominations not as a failure but as a dynamic outcome of Nigeria's profound cultural and ethnic diversity (Platvoet & van der Laan, 2017). It also provides a basis for analyzing dialogue as a vital strategy to foster national unity, ultimately offering a balanced view that appreciates the richness of religious diversity while acknowledging the challenges of fragmentation.

Early Missionary Efforts and the Genesis of Denominationalism

The history of the earliest missionaries to Nigeria is deeply intertwined with the broader narrative of European exploration and colonization in West Africa. The first recorded missionary efforts began with the arrival of the

Portuguese in the late 15th century, who primarily engaged in trade but also made attempts to spread Christianity. However, it was not until the 19th century that concerted missionary endeavors took root. In 1842, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), an Anglican organization established in 1799, dispatched its first missionary, Thomas Birch Freeman, to Nigeria. Freeman's mission was concentrated in the Yoruba region, particularly Abeokuta, where he set the stage for future missionary work (Oluwale, 2019).

However, denominational Christianity in Nigeria can be traced back to the 19th century when various Christian missionary societies from Europe and America established their presence in the region. These missionary groups, including the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Roman Catholic Church, and the Methodist Church, brought their distinct theological perspectives and organizational structures, laying the groundwork for denominational diversity (Osiek, 2016). Each mission had her specific approach to evangelism, resulting in the establishment of different denominations and the subsequent proliferation of Christian groups. The establishment of these missionary societies coincided with the era of British colonial rule in Nigeria, which provided a favorable environment for Christian expansion. Missionaries often enjoyed the support and protection of colonial authorities, which facilitated their access to local communities. As the missionary efforts spread, different denominations established mission stations in various regions, leading to the growth of distinct Christian communities with unique practices and beliefs. The establishment of the first indigenous African churches also played a significant role in the development of denominational Christianity in Nigeria. As the indigenous converts sought to adapt Christianity to their cultural context, they formed independent African churches that reflected their own theological emphases and worship styles (Adejumobi, 2013). These African Indigenous Churches emerged alongside the denominations introduced by foreign missionaries, adding further diversity to the Christian landscape. Theological differences and disagreements among foreign missionaries themselves also contributed to the formation of different denominations. Disputes over doctrinal matters, liturgical practices, and church governance led to the establishment of separate church bodies, with each group maintaining its unique identity and theological traditions.

In the early 20th century, the rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements added another layer of complexity to denominational Christianity in Nigeria. These movements emphasized the experience of the Holy Spirit, divine healing, and personal spiritual transformation. Many Pentecostal churches operated independently and were not affiliated with traditional denominations, leading to further fragmentation within the Christian community. The process of indigenization also played a role in the development of denominational diversity. As Nigerian Christians sought greater autonomy and ownership of their faith, they established indigenous churches that catered for their cultural and spiritual needs (Adedibu, 2017). These indigenous churches often identified themselves as separate denominations, reflecting the growing diversity within Nigerian Christianity. Today, Nigeria's denominational Christianity remains a vibrant and multifaceted phenomenon. The country is home to numerous Christian denominations, ranging from mainline churches to newer Pentecostal churches. This denominational diversity reflects the complexity of Nigeria's religious landscape and the ongoing processes of contextualization and adaptation of Christianity within the country's diverse cultures and societies.

The Dynamics and Implications of Denominational Diversity in Nigerian Christianity

The denominational diversity within Nigerian Christianity has both positive and negative implications. On one hand, it allows for a variety of theological perspectives, worship styles, and expressions of faith, catering to the diverse spiritual needs of Nigerians. Different denominations provide opportunities for believers to find communities where they feel most comfortable and aligned with their beliefs. Additionally, denominational competition has encouraged churches to innovate and reach out to their congregants in ways that resonate with contemporary Nigerian society. On the other hand, the proliferation of denominations has led to some challenges within the Christian community. Competition among churches for members and resources can sometimes lead to unhealthy rivalries and disagreements (Anyaduba, 2014). Moreover, theological differences between denominations may at times foster division and misunderstandings among Nigerian Christians.

For instance, the emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit or modes of baptism can vary among denominations, leading to theological disagreements. Also, the style and form of worship can be a source of contention. Some denominations may prefer traditional liturgical worship, while others may embrace charismatic or Pentecostal expressions. These differences in worship styles can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or judgments about the authenticity of one another's worship practices. Furthermore, divergent views on social and ethical issues such as human sexuality, gender roles, or political engagement, can contribute to theological disagreements among denominations.

Some of the key factors responsible for denominational Christianity in Nigeria include:

The Colonial Influence

The colonial influence played a significant role in shaping denominational Christianity in Nigeria. With the arrival of European colonial powers in the 19th century, Christian missionaries from different denominations also came to the region to spread their faith. According to Ezirim (2014), the colonial administration often favoured specific missionary groups, providing them with resources and support, which contributed to the growth and prominence of certain denominations in different parts of Nigeria. The colonial government's policy of indirect rule also had implications for denominational Christianity. Under indirect rule, colonial administrators worked with traditional rulers, who often had their own religious affiliations. The collaboration between colonial authorities and traditional leaders influenced the distribution of missionary activities, as certain denominations found more favorable environments in regions where traditional rulers were amenable to their presence. Moreover, the colonial administration's emphasis on Western education had implications for the growth of denominational Christianity. Missionaries established schools that provided Western education alongside religious teachings. These schools often served as centers for denominational evangelism, and denominations gained opportunities to convert young people and their families to their faith. Consequently, denominations that had strong educational institutions gained advantage of more followers.

The colonial influence also led to the establishment of distinct denominational identities and practices. As they spread Christianity, these missionaries established churches and denominations that reflected their particular theological emphases, organizational structures, and worship styles. This led to the development of diverse denominations within Nigeria. Furthermore, the presence of competing missionary groups within the same geographical regions often led to tensions. According to Adigwe (2015), missionaries sought to convert as many indigenes as possible to their respective denominations, leading to rivalry and disagreements. This contributed to the proliferation of denominations and the fragmentation of Christianity in Nigeria. Colonial policies also influenced the relationship between the Christian church and the state. In some instances, the colonial government placed restrictions on certain denominations or sought to control the activities of churches. This interference by the colonial administration affected the autonomy and growth of denominational Christianity.

Indigenous Religious Traditions

Indigenous religious traditions in Nigeria have played a significant role in shaping denominational Christianity in the country. When Christianity first arrived in Nigeria, it encountered a diverse array of indigenous belief systems and practices. Missionaries often had to navigate the complex interplay between Christian teachings and local cultural beliefs, leading to the development of distinct denominational identities that resonated with specific communities. One way that indigenous religious traditions influenced denominational Christianity was through the process of syncretism. As Christianity was introduced to different regions, it often absorbed elements from indigenous belief systems, resulting in syncretic forms of worship. Okoye (2018) explained that these syncretic practices gave rise to distinct denominations that incorporated local cultural elements, making the faith more accessible and relevant to the people. Moreover, the incorporation of indigenous languages into Christian worship and scriptures was another way in which indigenous religious traditions contributed in shaping denominational Christianity. Missionaries translated the Bible and liturgical texts into local languages, allowing indigenous communities to engage with Christianity in their native tongues. This linguistic adaptation fostered a sense of ownership and cultural relevance, which helped to encourage people to participate in the denomination they are conversant with their practices.

Indigenous religious traditions also influenced the way Christianity was practiced and experienced in different parts of Nigeria. The diverse cultural practices, rituals, and festivals of various ethnic groups contributed to the development of unique denominational expressions. For instance, Christian festivals in Nigeria often reflect indigenous customs and traditions, making them distinct from those celebrated in other parts of the world. Furthermore, indigenous religious practices had an impact on the way Christianity addressed issues of spirituality, healing, and divine intervention. In many Nigerian denominations, there is a strong emphasis on spiritual warfare, deliverance, and the belief in the power of prayer and miracles. These practices align with indigenous concepts of spiritual forces and the supernatural, reflecting a fusion of Christian and traditional belief systems. The existence of African Indigenous Churches (AICs) is another manifestation of the influence of indigenous religious traditions on denominational Christianity. AICs are independent Christian movements that have emerged in response to the desire for a distinctly African expression of Christianity. These Churches often integrate aspects of indigenous religious practices and beliefs into their worship, providing an alternative form of Christianity that resonates with many Nigerians (Oborji, 2017). The enduring presence of indigenous religious traditions also contributes to the religious landscape of Nigeria by influencing how Christianity is perceived and received by different communities. Some Nigerians may be drawn to denominations that incorporate elements of their ancestral beliefs, viewing Christianity as a continuation rather than a rupture from their cultural heritage. As a result, denominations that embrace indigenous religious traditions tend to attract more followers in certain regions.

The interaction between indigenous religious traditions and denominational Christianity has led to a dynamic process of religious negotiation and adaptation. As Christianity encountered diverse indigenous belief systems, missionaries often sought to find common ground and points of connection with the local population. This process of negotiation and adaptation gave rise to denominations that incorporated indigenous elements while maintaining core Christian teachings.

The syncretic nature of some denominations in Nigeria has also led to the emergence of unique religious practices and rituals that blend Christian and indigenous elements. For example, in some churches, traditional music, dance, and attire are incorporated into worship services, reflecting a fusion of cultural expressions. These syncretic practices have contributed to the growth of specific denominations that appeal to the cultural sensibilities of local communities. Again, the influence of indigenous religious traditions on denominational Christianity has also affected the understanding of concepts such as the divine, spiritual forces, and the afterlife. In some denominations, beliefs about spiritual entities and the spiritual world draw from indigenous cosmologies and ancestral veneration. This syncretic approach has led to diverse theological perspectives within the Christian landscape in Nigeria.

The impact of indigenous religious traditions on denominational Christianity can also be seen in the diversity of religious practices and customs among different denominations. Certain denominations may prioritize specific religious observances or rituals based on the influence of local cultural traditions. As a result, the religious practices of one denomination may vary significantly from those of another, reflecting the complexity of religious identity and expression in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the influence of indigenous religious traditions on denominational Christianity has not been limited to rural or traditional settings. Even in urban centers, where modernization and globalization have had a profound impact, elements of indigenous belief systems continue to shape denominational expressions. Churches in urban areas often incorporate local customs and traditions into their worship services, recognizing the significance of cultural continuity and identity. Okpoko (2020) explained that the resilience of indigenous religious traditions and their impact on denominational Christianity have also contributed to the religious pluralism in Nigeria. The coexistence of diverse Christian denominations, each with its unique theological emphases and cultural expressions, reflects the rich tapestry of religious life in the country. This religious pluralism adds to the vibrant religious landscape of Nigeria and contributes to the ongoing dynamics of denominational Christianity.

Doctrinal differences

Doctrinal differences have been a key factor responsible for denominational Christianity in Nigeria. As Christianity spread throughout the country, various missionary groups from different theological traditions brought their distinct doctrinal emphases, interpretations of the bible, and theological teachings. These differences led to the establishment of separate denominations that aligned with specific theological perspectives and doctrinal beliefs. A doctrinal difference that has contributed to denominational Christianity in Nigeria is related to sacramental practice. Some denominations emphasize the importance of sacraments, such as baptism and the Eucharist, as essential elements of Christian worship and spiritual life. Others may have different interpretations of the sacraments or place less emphasis on their significance, leading to the formation of distinct denominations with varying sacramental practices. Ani (2017) pointed out that the interpretation of biblical texts, such as Matthew 28:19-20 and John 13:14-15, and theological doctrines also varies among denominations in Nigeria. Different denominations may have diverse perspectives on topics such as soteriology (the study of salvation), eschatology (the study of the end times), and the nature of the Trinity. These doctrinal differences have led to the establishment of separate denominations with specific theological emphases. Furthermore, the understanding of spiritual gifts and the role of the Holy Spirit is another area of doctrinal variation among denominations in Nigeria. Some denominations emphasize the belief in the continuation of spiritual gifts, such as prophecy and healing, while others may hold different views on these charismatic practices. These divergent beliefs have given rise to denominations that identify with particular charismatic or non-charismatic theological traditions.

The issue of salvation and the requirements for salvation is another doctrinal difference that has contributed to denominational diversity. Some denominations emphasize the need for conversion, faith, and repentance for salvation, while others may have different interpretations of the process of salvation (Ezeogu, 2021). These varying perspectives on salvation have led to the formation of separate denominations with specific soteriological beliefs. Again, doctrinal differences related to issues of ethics and moral teachings have also played a role in the formation of denominational Christianity in Nigeria. Some denominations, such as Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Communion, Pentecostal Churches, and Methodist Church Nigeria, may have specific stances on issues such as marriage, family, sexuality, and social ethics. These varying ethical teachings have contributed to the establishment of separate denominations that uphold specific moral standards. In his view, Adebola (2018) maintained that the doctrinal differences among denominations in Nigeria have not only shaped their theological identities but also influenced the way they engage with societal and cultural issues. Some denominations have taken specific doctrinal stances on social and political matters, leading them to be more active in advocacy and social justice initiatives. These denominations often use their theological perspectives as a basis for addressing

issues such as poverty, corruption, and human rights violations. Moreover, the doctrinal diversity in denominational Christianity has resulted in debates and discussions within the Christian community. Theological dialogues and debates on doctrinal issues have been an integral part of the religious landscape in Nigeria. These debates have not only deepened the theological understanding within denominations but have also contributed to the formation of new denominations or Church movements that align with specific theological convictions. The prevalence of doctrinal differences has also led to occasional tensions and conflicts among denominations in Nigeria. Disagreements on theological matters, mode of worship, and inter-denominational relationships have at times strained the unity within the Christian community. These conflicts have resulted in denominations and churches becoming more insular and exclusive, leading to further fragmentations. Conversely, doctrinal differences have also stunted/dwarfed ecumenical efforts aimed at fostering unity and cooperation among different denominations (Ekeke, 2015). Ecumenical organizations and initiatives seek to promote dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaborative efforts among denominations on shared theological concerns and social issues. Through these ecumenical engagements, denominations in Nigeria have come together to address common challenges and to work towards shared goals.

The doctrinal diversity in denominational Christianity has contributed to the richness and diversity of worship practices and liturgical expressions in Nigeria. Different denominations have developed unique forms of worship that reflect their specific doctrinal emphases. This diversity has allowed Nigerian Christians to experience a broad range of worship styles, from traditional liturgical practices to contemporary and charismatic forms of worship.

Leadership and Personalities

Leadership and personalities have also been significant factors responsible for denominational Christianity in Nigeria. The individuals who led and founded various denominations played crucial roles in shaping the theological emphases and organizational structures of their respective churches. The charisma, vision, and leadership style of these personalities often attracted followers and contributed to the growth and establishment of distinct denominations. The leadership of missionary figures from different denominations during the colonial era influenced the spread of Christianity in Nigeria. As Alao (2020) explained, missionaries such as Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a former slave who later became a prominent Anglican missionary, and first African bishop of the Anglican Church, played pivotal roles in the establishment of the Anglican Church in Nigeria. Their leadership and dedication contributed to the growth of the Anglican denomination in various regions of the country. However, while both missionary and African indigenous churches share a common Christian foundation, their historical origins, cultural influences, and organizational structures distinguish them. Missionary churches reflect the impact of Western missionary endeavours, while African Indigenous Churches represent a unique African expression of Christianity that incorporates indigenous traditions.

The founding of indigenous African churches also showcased the significance of personalities in the development of denominational Christianity. Leaders such as Joseph Babalola, the founder of the Christ Apostolic Church, had a profound impact on the establishment and growth of his denominations. His leadership and influence led to the spread of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria and the formation of new denominations. Moreover, the personal convictions and theological perspectives of leaders have also influenced denominational differences. Theological debates and disagreements among church leaders have led to the formation of separate denominations that reflect specific doctrinal emphases. The charisma and persuasive abilities of these leaders often attracted followers who shared their theological convictions, contributing to the growth of denominations with distinct theological identities.

The influence of charismatic and influential preachers on denominational Christianity cannot be understated. Preachers such as Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church (Winners' Chapel) have had a profound impact on their denominations and the broader Christian landscape in Nigeria. Their dynamic gospel of prosperity-theology has attracted large followings and contributed to the growth of their respective denominations. Also, leadership transitions within denominations have also shaped the development of denominational Christianity. Succession plans and the selection of new leaders have often led to shifts in the direction and focus of denominations. New leaders may bring fresh perspectives and priorities, leading to changes in the theological and organizational aspects of their denominations. The influence of personalities in denominational Christianity extends beyond the founding and growth of churches. Prominent religious leaders often wield significant social and political influence, impacting national debates and decision-making processes. Their involvement in public affairs can sometimes reflect the values and beliefs of their denominations, further shaping the image and perception of Christianity in Nigeria.

Again, the personal qualities and leadership styles of denominational leaders have had implications for the organizational structure and governance of their respective churches. Some leaders have emphasized a more centralized and hierarchical model of church governance, where decisions are made from the top-down. This approach may lead to a strong sense of unity and cohesion within the denomination but can also result in a concentration of power and limited input from congregants. Conversely, other denominational leaders have embraced a more participatory and democratic leadership style, involving congregants in decision-making

processes. This approach may foster a sense of ownership and empowerment among church members but can also lead to disagreements and conflicts if consensus is not reached on important matters. Leadership and personalities have also promoted denominational expansion. Charismatic and visionary leaders who are skilled at mobilizing resources and recruiting new members have often led denominations that experience significant growth. Their ability to communicate a compelling vision and connect with people on a personal level have been instrumental in attracting new converts and expanding their denomination's boundary. In some cases, denominational leaders have been key players in fostering inter-denominational cooperation and ecumenical efforts. They have recognized the importance of unity among Christians and have actively engaged in dialogue and collaboration with leaders from other denominations. These ecumenical efforts can lead to joint initiatives, shared resources, and a sense of unity among diverse Christian groups.

Personalities and leadership qualities can also be a source of division and contention among denominations. Personal rivalries, power struggles, and disputes over leadership succession can lead to schisms and the formation of new denominations. This fragmentation may sometimes dilute the unity of the Christian community in Nigeria. Moreover, denominational leaders often serve as spiritual guides for their congregants. Their personal conduct and moral character can have a significant impact on the reputation and image of their denomination. Leaders who exemplify integrity, humility, and compassion may inspire their followers to live out their faith more deeply, while scandals or ethical lapses by leaders can tarnish the reputation of their denomination. However, in the light of the present study, to discourage denominational proliferation in Nigerian churches, fostering interdenominational dialogue and collaboration is crucial. This can be achieved through encouraging a focus on shared values rather than doctrinal differences can promote unity. Implementing regulations that discourage excessive denominational fragmentation and emphasizing the importance of community-wide initiatives could also be effective measures.

Regional and ethnic influences

The country's diverse geographical regions and ethnic groups have shaped the spread and growth of Christianity in distinct ways. Different regions and ethnicities have their religious traditions, cultural practices, and historical experiences, which have influenced the reception and adoption of Christianity. The historical roots of Christianity in specific regions have led to the establishment of denominations with regional significance. For example, the early presence of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the Southwest of Nigeria led to the growth of the Anglican Church in that region. The Anglican denomination has maintained a strong presence in the Southwest and continues to be an influential Christian tradition in that area. Ethnicity has also played a role in denominational Christianity in Nigeria. Some denominations have stronger followings among specific ethnic groups due to shared cultural and linguistic ties. The preferences for denominations associated with one's ethnic group can lead to denominational diversity within a region, where different ethnic groups have their distinct churches and denominations. Moreover, regional and ethnic identities can influence the way Christianity is practiced and expressed. Denominations may incorporate local cultural elements into their worship, music, and religious practices to resonate with the preferences and sensibilities of particular ethnic communities. This localization of Christianity can lead to the formation of denominations with regional variations in their worship and religious expressions. The spread of Christianity in Nigeria was often influenced by the geographical movement of people and the presence of ethnic diaspora (Oluwaseun, 2019). For instance, the migration of people from the Southeast to other parts of the country has led to the establishment of churches and denominations that cater for the spiritual needs of these diasporic communities.

Regional and ethnic influences have also shaped denominational growth and competition. In some areas, there may be a dominant denomination that enjoys widespread acceptance among the local population. In contrast, other regions may witness intense competition among denominations for followers and influence. This denominational competition can lead to the establishment of new churches and denominations seeking to carve out their space within a particular region. Furthermore, regional and ethnic influences have had implications for denominational unity and cooperation. While some denominations may enjoy unity and collaboration within their specific regions or among their ethnic adherents, inter-denominational relationships faced challenges. The diversity of Christian traditions and practices sometimes led to tensions and disagreements among denominations. More so, regional and ethnic influences have fostered interdenominational efforts aimed at promoting unity and cooperation. As Alozie (2013) explained, some denominations recognize the importance of fostering mutual understanding and joint initiatives with other Christian groups, particularly in regions with religiously diverse populations. These ecumenical efforts seek to promote a sense of unity among Christians from different denominations and backgrounds. Additionally, regional and ethnic influences have shaped the contextualization of Christianity in Nigeria. The diverse cultural practices, customs, and belief systems of different ethnic groups have influenced how Christianity is integrated into local contexts. Denominations often adapt their worship styles, liturgical practices, and theological teachings to align with the cultural preferences and sensitivities of specific ethnic communities.

Again, the regional distribution of denominations has been influenced by the historical patterns of missionary activities and colonial presence. Different regions were exposed to various missionary groups during the colonial

era, leading to the establishment of specific denominations in those areas. For example, the Methodist Church has a strong presence in parts of the South, while the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) is more prevalent in the North. Regional and ethnic influences have also impacted the growth and spread of denominations through social networks and kinship ties. In some cases, the adoption of Christianity by influential families or leaders within a particular ethnic group has led to the proliferation of specific denominations in that community. These influential individuals may act as patrons or sponsors, supporting the growth and establishment of their chosen denomination. Moreover, the historical experiences of different ethnic groups, such as Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, and Tiv, have shaped their reception of Christianity and contributed to denominational diversity. For instance, the Christian faith has deeper historical roots among some ethnic groups than others, leading to variations in the level of Christian adherence and the presence of specific denominations. This historical context has influenced the religious landscape in different regions of Nigeria.

The regional and ethnic influences have also impacted the development of indigenous Churches and denominations. Some ethnic groups have embraced Christianity in ways that reflect their cultural values and traditions, leading to the formation of indigenous Churches that cater for their specific needs. These indigenous Churches often blend Christian teachings with local customs and beliefs, creating unique denominational expressions. Additionally, the regional and ethnic diversity in Nigeria has led to the coexistence of multiple denominations within the same geographical areas. This denominational pluralism reflects the religiously diverse nature of Nigerian society and the ability of different denominations to peacefully coexist and operate side by side.

Socio-Political Factors

Socio-political factors are also contributors to denominational Christianity in Nigeria. Throughout the country's history, various socio-political developments and events, such as post-colonial governments, ethnic and regional factors, interfaith relations, political instability and conflict, have influenced the growth, spread, and organization of Christian denominations. The interplay between religion and politics has shaped the religious landscape and the activities of different denominations. One socio-political factor that has influenced denominational Christianity is government policies and regulations on religion. The Nigerian government's stance towards Christianity and other religions has had implications for the freedom of religious expression and the activities of denominations. Government support or restrictions on certain denominations may impact their growth and presence in different regions of the country. The relationship between Christianity and political power has affected the influence and status of denominations in Nigeria. Moreover, political developments and events, such as elections and political campaigns, have sometimes influenced denominational activities and dynamics. Certain denominations may align themselves with political parties or candidates, leading to the perception of denominations being associated with particular political interests.

Socio-political factors have also influenced denominational responses to social issues and challenges. As Oguntola (2018) noted, denominations may take stances on issues such as corruption, human rights, and social justice, based on their interpretations of Christian teachings and their understanding of socio-political realities. These responses can shape the public image and reputation of denominations Nigeria. The socio-political context has influenced the establishment and growth of indigenous churches and denominations that reflect the aspirations and concerns of the local population. These churches often respond to social and political issues in ways that resonate with the experiences of their congregants, making them more relevant and attractive to certain communities. Furthermore, the socio-political context has influenced the distribution and concentration of denominations in different regions of Nigeria. Some denominations, such as Catholic Church and Anglican Communion, may be more prevalent in urban centers due to their appeal to the educated and upwardly mobile population, while others may have a stronger presence in rural areas (Iwuagwu, 2013). The socio-political dynamics of specific regions can determine the religious preferences and affiliations of their inhabitants.

The quest for autonomy

One other significant factor responsible for denominational Christianity in Nigeria is the quest for autonomy. As Christianity spread and evolved in the country, various groups sought to assert their independence and distinct identity within the broader Christian landscape. The desire for autonomy has led to the formation of separate denominations that uphold specific theological convictions and organizational structures. One aspect of the quest for autonomy is the desire for self-governance and decision-making within denominations. Some groups, such as African Independent Churches (AICs) and Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, sought to break away from larger denominational bodies or foreign missionary organizations to establish their independent churches. This quest for autonomy allowed these churches to shape their own theological teachings, practices, and organizational structures without external interference. The quest for autonomy has been influenced by cultural and ethnic factors. Some ethnic groups and regions sought to establish their denominational identities to reflect their unique cultural expressions and spiritual needs (Ene, 2019). This quest for autonomy allowed them to contextualize Christianity in ways that resonate with their cultural backgrounds.

The quest for autonomy has also been driven by doctrinal differences and theological disagreements within existing denominations. When members and leaders held divergent theological views, they often sought to form their separate denominations to maintain theological purity and adherence to their interpretations of Christian teachings. Also, the quest for autonomy has been motivated by the desire to address specific social and political issues that were not adequately addressed by existing denominations. Some groups felt that existing denominations were not adequately engaged in social justice, poverty alleviation, or political activism, prompting them to establish independent churches with a stronger focus on these issues. In some cases, the quest for autonomy has been driven by charismatic leaders who sought to establish their own churches or movements. These leaders may have had a unique vision or interpretation of Christianity, which they sought to propagate through the formation of their independent denominations. The quest for autonomy has also been influenced by historical events and developments. For instance, during periods of colonial rule and political upheavals, some denominations sought independence to resist foreign influence and assert their identity as indigenous churches (Nwadiora, 2020). The quest for autonomy was, therefore, a response to the broader political and social context in which Christianity was situated.

Evangelism and missionary outreach

Evangelism and missionary outreach also contributed to denominational Christianity in Nigeria. The spread of Christianity in the country can also be traced back to the efforts of various missionary groups and evangelistic campaigns. As missionaries from different denominations arrived in Nigeria, they brought with them their distinct theological perspectives and practices, leading to the establishment of separate denominations. As Nwoko (2015) highlighted, during the colonial era, missionary activities played a crucial role in the evangelization of Nigeria. Evangelism and missionary outreach have also been instrumental in reaching different ethnic groups and regions with the message of Christianity. Missionaries often adapted their evangelistic strategies to resonate with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the people they sought to reach. This contextualization of the Gospel message led to the establishment of denominations that catered to the spiritual needs of specific ethnic communities.

According to Ilo (2020), evangelism and missionary activities have been driven by the desire to convert people to Christianity and to establish Christian communities in different parts of the country. As missionaries preached the Gospel and established churches, they attracted followers who identified with their theological traditions, resulting in the formation of denominations that aligned with specific missionary groups. The evangelistic efforts of different denominations have sometimes led to competition for converts and influence. As missionaries sought to reach new areas and communities, they encountered resistance from existing religious traditions and rival missionary groups. This competition often resulted in the establishment of separate denominations that competed for followers in the same regions. Furthermore, evangelism and missionary outreach have been influenced by the emphasis on indigenous leadership and the training of local pastors and evangelists. As missionaries sought to build sustainable Christian communities, they trained local leaders to take up leadership roles within their denominations. This focus on indigenous leadership has contributed to the formation of churches and denominations with strong local roots and identities. The evangelistic activities of different denominations have also contributed to the growth of Christianity in urban centers and rural areas (Obadare, 2018). While some denominations have focused on establishing churches in urban hubs and cities, others have been more proactive in reaching out to rural communities, resulting in denominational diversity across different geographical locations. However, it can be said that denominationalism is not the best for the growth of the Churches given that sometimes it results in competition rather than cooperation. Churches vie for members, resources, and influence, focusing more on outdoing each other than on collective efforts to fulfill their common mission.

Conclusion

This study has thoroughly examined the origins and developmental causes of denominational Christianity in Nigeria, revealing a complex history shaped by multiple factors. The research confirms that the country's religious landscape is a direct result of several forces, rather than a single cause. The foundation was laid by 19th-century missionary efforts and colonial policies, which established distinct denominational traditions. This initial phase was significantly influenced by indigenous religious traditions, as local communities adapted Christianity to their own cultural and linguistic contexts, giving rise to African Independent Churches and syncretic practices. Further analysis highlighted how doctrinal differences—over issues such as sacraments, salvation, and spiritual gifts—and the influence of charismatic leadership personalities fueled the proliferation of new denominations. These leaders, from early figures like Samuel Ajayi Crowther to modern-day pastors, have been central to shaping the theological and organizational identities of their churches. The research concludes that while this denominational diversity has fostered a vibrant religious environment, it has also created significant challenges. Competition for members and resources has led to unhealthy rivalries, and the resulting fragmentation has weakened the collective voice of the Church on matters of national importance.

In this context, the theoretical frameworks of Ecumenism and Cultural and Religious Pluralism proved invaluable. Ecumenism provided the evaluative tool to view denominational disunity as a problem that undermines the Church's mission, while pluralism offered a balanced perspective to appreciate the richness and resilience of Nigerian Christianity. The work emphasizes that the future of the Nigerian Church depends on fostering greater cooperation and dialogue. Efforts by organizations like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) are crucial steps toward making religious diversity a source of national strength rather than division. Ultimately, the challenge for Nigerian Christianity is to move toward a reconciled unity, where different denominations can maintain their unique identities while working together for a shared mission of national transformation.

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