

Moral Authority and Leadership in Pluralistic Mindanao: A Hermeneutic Study of Congressman Rufus B. Rodriguez and Archbishop Jose A. Cabantan

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ABSTRACT

Leadership in culturally diverse and historically complex societies requires moral credibility beyond formal authority. This study examined how Congressman Rufus B. Rodriguez and Archbishop Jose A. Cabantan constructed and enacted moral authority within Mindanao's multicultural and interfaith setting. Using a qualitative hermeneutic design and reflexive thematic analysis of elite interviews with political, religious, academic, and civic stakeholders, the study identified four interrelated dimensions of leadership: moral presence, responsibility and accountability, intercultural engagement, and the negotiation between idealism and pragmatic governance. Findings show that legitimacy emerged primarily from relational credibility, ethical consistency, and dialogical engagement across difference. Moral authority was sustained when leaders demonstrated integrity, transparency, and commitment to communal well-being. The study contributes to Philippine leadership scholarship by offering a contextually grounded account of how moral legitimacy operates in plural environments where political and ecclesial spheres intersect, with implications for leadership formation and governance practice.

Keywords: moral authority; plural leadership; governance; intercultural dialogue; Philippine leadership; Mindanao

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in pluralistic societies is shaped by moral contestation, cultural diversity, and institutional complexity. In contexts where political authority, religious identity, and historical memory intersect, leaders are evaluated not only on administrative competence but also on moral credibility and symbolic legitimacy. This dynamic is particularly evident in Mindanao, a region characterized by interreligious diversity, colonial history, and continuing aspirations for peace and social cohesion.

Mindanao's sociocultural fabric brings together Christian, Muslim, and Lumad communities within a shared yet historically sensitive landscape. Political and ecclesial leaders operate within overlapping expectations of governance, moral guidance, and intercultural mediation. In such a setting, legitimacy cannot be assumed solely by virtue of position; it must be constructed, enacted, and continually negotiated through character, public accountability, and engagement across difference.

While leadership scholarship has examined ethical leadership, servant leadership, and public-service governance, fewer studies have explored how moral authority is constructed and interpreted within plural and postcolonial environments where political and religious spheres intersect. Much of the literature emphasizes institutional structures or organizational performance, often underemphasizing the symbolic and intercultural dimensions of legitimacy in culturally complex regions. There remains a need for contextually grounded analyses that illuminate how leaders embody moral presence and sustain trust in diverse societies.

Recent scholarship on leadership legitimacy in plural societies suggests that authority is often relationally constituted rather than structurally granted. Studies of leadership in postcolonial and multicultural settings note that legitimacy frequently emerges through negotiated recognition across diverse social groups rather than

through institutional authority alone (Nkomo, 2011; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Research on intersections between religious and political leadership further indicates that moral authority becomes particularly salient where governance structures coexist with strong cultural or faith-based expectations (Lederach, 1997). Leaders in such settings often function as interpreters of communal meaning, bridging institutional roles and moral expectations. Symbolic leadership studies likewise emphasize that legitimacy is reinforced when leaders are perceived as embodying collective aspirations and historical memory (Schein, 2010).

This study therefore examined how moral authority is constructed and enacted in a plural leadership context. Specifically, it aimed to analyse how leaders embody moral credibility, explore how legitimacy is sustained across cultural and religious difference, and interpret how leaders negotiate tension between idealism and governance constraints.

This study contributes to leadership scholarship by offering a contextually grounded empirical account of how moral authority is enacted and recognized within a plural and postcolonial environment. Rather than treating legitimacy as institutional or performance-based, the study demonstrates how leadership credibility in culturally diverse societies emerges relationally through symbolic resonance, intercultural engagement, and interpretive trust. By examining leadership in Mindanao's interreligious and historically layered context, the study provides empirical evidence that moral authority operates as a negotiated social achievement rather than a structural attribute, thereby extending leadership scholarship from the Global South.

Although leadership scholarship has increasingly examined legitimacy, ethics, and governance performance, much of the literature remains centered on institutional design or individual leader traits. Fewer studies explore how moral authority is interpreted and socially recognized within culturally plural environments where political, religious, and historical narratives intersect. In such settings, legitimacy is not merely evaluated through outcomes or compliance with norms but through the perceived moral intelligibility of leadership action. The absence of contextually grounded analyses examining how leaders embody credibility across plural constituencies represents a significant gap. This study addresses that gap by interpreting leadership legitimacy as a relational achievement constructed through presence, accountability, intercultural engagement, and responsible judgment.

The need for such analysis is particularly pronounced in the Global South, where governance often unfolds amid layered histories, plural cultural identities, and evolving institutional arrangements. Leadership in these contexts is frequently evaluated not only through administrative performance but through symbolic resonance with communal narratives and aspirations. By examining leadership in Mindanao, this study contributes empirical insight into how moral authority operates within plural societies shaped by historical conflict, religious diversity, and ongoing efforts toward social cohesion.

Recent leadership scholarship in Southeast Asia reinforces the relational and culturally embedded nature of authority in plural societies. Studies of governance and leadership in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines indicate that legitimacy is often sustained through interpersonal trust, moral credibility, and responsiveness to community expectations rather than institutional position alone (Heryanto, 2019; Montiel & Noor, 2009; Thompson, 2016). Research on postcolonial leadership environments likewise shows that leaders frequently operate within layered moral narratives shaped by religion, historical memory, and social diversity, requiring interpretive sensitivity rather than purely managerial competence (Case, 2015). These regional insights support the present study's emphasis on moral authority as a relational achievement constructed through dialogue, accountability, and intercultural engagement.

Theoretical Orientation

Ethical leadership scholarship emphasizes that credibility arises from integrity, consistency, and moral character (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Servant leadership perspectives similarly argue that authority is grounded in service and attentiveness to human dignity (Greenleaf, 2008). In public governance contexts, leadership is framed as moral stewardship, emphasizing accountability, transparency, and responsibility toward the common good (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011).

Symbolic leadership scholarship proposes that leaders function as meaning-makers who embody communal aspirations. Authority is reinforced through narrative, symbolic action, and visible commitment to shared values (Schein, 2010). In culturally diverse and conflict-affected settings, legitimacy is strengthened when leaders demonstrate openness, reconciliation, and solidarity (Montiel & Noor, 2009). Contemporary scholarship similarly highlights that symbolic representation and narrative identity are central to sustaining legitimacy in complex societies (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). These perspectives provide the conceptual grounding for examining how leadership is enacted and interpreted in Mindanao’s diverse context.

This study was informed by a hermeneutic orientation to leadership. Drawing from Gadamerian hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1975), leadership is approached as an interpretive practice situated within historical and cultural horizons. Moral authority is therefore understood as something continually interpreted and negotiated rather than statically possessed.

Taken together, these perspectives frame leadership legitimacy not as a fixed property of office but as a relational and interpretive accomplishment emerging through interaction, recognition, and responsibility within plural social contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic design to interpret how moral authority is constructed and socially recognized within a pluralistic context. The focus was not on measuring leadership outcomes but on understanding meaning as expressed in lived narratives and stakeholder reflections.

Participants and Context

The study centered on the leadership of Congressman Rufus B. Rodriguez and Archbishop Jose A. Cabantan. Elite interviews were conducted with political, religious, academic, and civic stakeholders selected through purposive sampling based on their direct engagement with or informed observation of the leaders’ public roles. The broader study involved thirteen participants, including two primary leaders and eleven elite stakeholders representing political, religious, academic, and civic sectors. The study was situated in Mindanao, Philippines, a region marked by religious diversity, historical conflict, and ongoing peacebuilding initiatives. The sociocultural setting shaped leadership expectations and interpretations of legitimacy, making it a significant context for examining moral authority in plural governance environments.

Table 1. Profile of Participants in the Study

Participant Code	Leadership Sector	Position / Role	Primary Locale	Mode of Participation
PP1	Secular–Political	Congressman (National Legislator)	Cagayan de Oro City, Misamis Oriental	Face-to-face interview
PP2	Ecclesial–Religious	Archbishop (Metropolitan Archbishop of Cagayan de Oro)	Cagayan de Oro City, Misamis Oriental	Face-to-face interview
EP1	Local Governance / Political	Counselor (Centrist Democratic Movement Leader)	Urban barangay, Cagayan de Oro City	Face-to-face interview

EP2	Local Governance / Legal	Barangay Captain and Lawyer	Urban barangay, Cagayan de Oro City	Face-to-face interview
EP3	Ecclesial / Parish & Media	Parish Priest; Radio Broadcaster (“Food for the Soul”)	Zamboanga City	Face-to-face interview
EP4	Ecclesial / Education & Dialogue	Parish Priest; School Director (Notre Dame of Siasi); IRD Worker	Siasi, Sulu / Tawi-Tawi Vicariate	Written responses (questionnaire)
EP5	Ecclesial / Parish Ministry	Parish Priest (Multi-faith Parish Context)	Western Mindanao (Zamboanga Peninsula)	Face-to-face interview
EP6	Religious Life / Higher Education	School President; Religious Sister (OND)	Isabela City, Basilan	Face-to-face interview
EP7	Religious Life / Congregational Leadership	Religious Sister; Formator (HDC)	Mindanao (multi-diocesan apostolate)	Face-to-face interview
EP8	Dialogue & Peacebuilding	President, Silsilah Dialogue Movement; Founder, Emmaus Dialogue Movement	Zamboanga City	Face-to-face interview
EP9	Community Development / Academics	Community Organizer; Development Worker / Academic	Mindanao urban setting (Bukidnon)	Face-to-face interview
EP10	Higher Education / Organizational Leadership	Former Dean / Educational Leader	Cagayan de Oro City, Liceo de Cagayan University	Reflective written responses and interview
EP11	Ecclesial–Episcopal Leadership	Diocesan Bishop (Bishop of Iligan)	Iligan City, Lanao del Norte	Written responses (questionnaire)

The diversity of participants enabled triangulation across political, ecclesial, educational, and civic leadership perspectives within Mindanao’s plural sociocultural environment.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews explored leadership identity, moral authority, intercultural engagement, and the negotiation between idealism and pragmatism. Interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit leadership narratives, ethical reflections, and stakeholder interpretations of legitimacy.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis informed by a hermeneutic orientation. Although the broader research included additional questions, the analysis generated four interpretive clusters reflecting the

convergence of meaning within the data. The hermeneutic circle guided interpretation through iterative movement between individual narratives and the broader sociocultural context.

To clarify the interpretive process, an example of analytic movement from narrative to theme is provided. One participant described leadership as “walking with the people before directing them.” During initial coding, this statement was noted as relational accompaniment and moral proximity. When read alongside similar expressions emphasizing presence, listening, and shared experience, these codes were grouped into an interpretive cluster reflecting leadership as relational presence. Through hermeneutic reflection, this cluster evolved into the broader theme of **moral presence and human groundedness**, interpreted as the condition through which legitimacy becomes intelligible to communities. This process illustrates how meaning emerged not through mechanical coding but through dialogical interpretation moving between textual parts, participant narratives, and the wider sociocultural context of Mindanao.

Such analytic movement reflects the hermeneutic circle in practice: individual statements were interpreted in relation to the whole narrative corpus, while the developing thematic structure continuously reshaped the understanding of each individual account. The themes therefore represent interpretive syntheses rather than objective categories, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis and Gadamerian hermeneutics.

Researcher Reflexivity

Because hermeneutic inquiry recognizes that interpretation is shaped by the researcher’s historical and cultural horizon, reflexive awareness formed an integral part of the analytic process. As a Mindanaoan educator and community member, the researcher approached the study with familiarity with the region’s sociocultural dynamics, leadership narratives, and interfaith realities. This proximity enabled deeper sensitivity to contextual nuance while also requiring continuous interpretive vigilance.

To maintain reflexive transparency, the researcher engaged in repeated transcript review, reflective journaling, and dialogue with academic mentors during the analytic process. These practices helped ensure that interpretations emerged through interaction with the data rather than through the imposition of prior assumptions. Instead of attempting to eliminate subjectivity, the study treated reflexivity as a methodological resource that deepened contextual understanding while maintaining interpretive discipline, consistent with hermeneutic traditions that view understanding as historically situated and dialogically formed.

Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent. The analysis focused on professional leadership dimensions and sought faithful representation of participant perspectives.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure interpretive rigor, the study employed triangulation across participant sectors, iterative review of interview transcripts, and reflexive engagement with emerging themes. The hermeneutic approach emphasized fidelity to participant meanings while situating interpretations within broader sociocultural context. These strategies enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis and reflect widely recognized qualitative standards emphasizing credibility, transparency, and interpretive coherence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A hermeneutic approach was particularly suited to this inquiry because moral authority is not directly observable as a measurable variable but emerges through interpretation, recognition, and shared meaning. Rather than seeking causal explanation, the study aimed to illuminate how leadership legitimacy is constructed within narrative interaction between leaders, stakeholders, and sociocultural context. This interpretive orientation enabled the analysis to capture the symbolic and relational dimensions of leadership that are often overlooked in purely behavioral or institutional studies.

Interpretive Sufficiency of the Sample

Although the study involved thirteen participants, this number was sufficient for hermeneutic inquiry because the goal was depth of interpretation rather than statistical representation. Interpretive saturation was reached when subsequent interviews no longer introduced fundamentally new moral narratives, symbolic patterns, or leadership interpretations but instead reinforced previously identified dimensions of presence, accountability, intercultural engagement, and responsible judgment.

Hermeneutic research seeks richness of meaning rather than breadth of frequency, and the inclusion of leaders across political, ecclesial, academic, and civic sectors enabled triangulation of perspectives within Mindanao's plural context. The convergence of themes across diverse sectors indicated interpretive sufficiency, suggesting that the analysis captured a coherent structure of meaning rather than isolated personal opinions. This approach aligns with qualitative scholarship emphasizing that adequacy in interpretive research is determined by thematic depth, contextual resonance, and conceptual coherence rather than sample size alone.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Leadership as Moral Presence and Human Groundedness

Participants described leadership as grounded in moral presence rather than positional authority. Integrity, authenticity, and relational attentiveness were central. Archbishop Cabantan noted that leadership "starts with presence," emphasizing credibility before command. Legitimacy emerged from character and relational trust.

This interpretation is reinforced by participants' own narratives. As Archbishop Cabantan explained, "Leadership always starts with presence. Before people believe our words, they recognize our sincerity." Similarly, one civic leader described leadership as "walking with people before directing them," suggesting that credibility is first relational before it becomes institutional. These accounts indicate that legitimacy emerges from perceived moral proximity rather than positional authority.

Theme 2: Leadership as Responsibility, Service, and Public Accountability

Leadership was framed as stewardship and responsibility. Congressman Rodriguez emphasized public trust and accountability, while religious and civic leaders underscored transparency and ethical consistency. Moral authority was sustained through alignment between values and action.

Participants consistently linked authority to responsibility rather than privilege. Congressman Rodriguez emphasized that "public office is a public trust," underscoring that leadership credibility depends on integrity and stewardship. Likewise, a religious leader observed that moral authority "comes from witness, not command," indicating that legitimacy is sustained through visible ethical consistency rather than formal status.

Theme 3: Leadership in a Multicultural and Interfaith Mindanao

Participants highlighted dialogue, immersion, and respectful engagement across religious and cultural divides. Legitimacy was strengthened through listening, reconciliation, and solidarity. Intercultural competence was central to leadership credibility in Mindanao's diverse setting.

The importance of intercultural responsiveness was evident in participants' reflections on dialogue and coexistence. Archbishop Cabantan noted that leadership in Mindanao requires "interreligious dialogue grounded in common concerns such as peace, care for the earth, and good governance." Participants across sectors described legitimacy as emerging from the ability to listen across difference and cultivate trust among communities shaped by distinct historical experiences.

Theme 4: Leadership as Balancing Idealism and Pragmatism

Leadership involved negotiating between moral principles and institutional realities. Participants viewed this tension as responsible judgment rather than inconsistency. Effective leadership required maintaining core commitments while adapting to practical constraints.

Participants also described leadership as an ongoing negotiation between aspiration and constraint. One leader reflected that effective leadership requires “holding on to what is right while understanding what is possible,” suggesting that moral authority is strengthened not by rigid consistency but by responsible judgment. This perspective portrays tension not as inconsistency but as the ethical space in which leadership decisions gain meaning.

Interpreted philosophically, these findings suggest that moral authority is less a property of leadership than a relational achievement emerging through interaction. From a hermeneutic perspective, authority arises when leaders are recognized as credible interpreters of shared meaning rather than merely occupants of institutional roles. Moral authority thus unfolds dialogically, shaped by the encounter between leader, community, and context, and sustained through responsiveness rather than status.

Table 2. Thematic Summary and Interpretive Dimensions

Theme	Core Meaning	Interpretive Dimension
Moral Presence and Human Groundedness	Leadership rooted in integrity, authenticity, and relational presence	Character as foundation of legitimacy
Responsibility and Public Accountability	Leadership as stewardship, service, and ethical consistency	Moral authority through responsibility
Intercultural and Interfaith Engagement	Dialogue, immersion, and solidarity across difference	Legitimacy through relational encounter
Negotiation between Idealism and Pragmatism	Balancing principles with institutional realities	Moral judgment under complexity

Together, these themes illustrate that moral authority operates as a relational and interpretive achievement rather than a static attribute of position.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings suggest that leadership legitimacy in plural environments appears to be sustained less by institutional authority itself than by the intelligibility of leadership action within shared moral horizons. Stakeholders evaluated leaders not only through outcomes or procedural compliance but through the extent to which leadership decisions resonated with narratives of responsibility, justice, and communal identity. Moral authority therefore emerged when leaders were recognized as credible interpreters of collective meaning rather than merely administrators of power.

Viewed philosophically, this repositions leadership as an interpretive and relational practice grounded in ethical presence, intercultural engagement, and responsible judgment under complexity. Authority appears not as a fixed attribute but as a continually negotiated recognition shaped through encounter between leader, community, and context. Leadership in plural societies thus unfolds not through the resolution of tension but through the disciplined inhabiting of it, where credibility is sustained by responsiveness, coherence, and moral intelligibility.

The findings further indicate that moral authority in Mindanao operates as a relational and interpretive practice shaped by credibility, accountability, intercultural engagement, and responsible judgment under complexity.

Legitimacy was grounded in character before position, reinforcing ethical leadership scholarship that emphasizes integrity and relational trust (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Greenleaf, 2008).

Public accountability functioned as moral stewardship rather than mere administrative compliance, consistent with Philippine governance scholarship emphasizing integrity and trust-building in public institutions (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011). Intercultural engagement was likewise central to sustaining legitimacy in a region shaped by historical intergroup tensions (Montiel & Noor, 2009).

The tension between idealism and pragmatism emerged not as a failure of consistency but as an inherent feature of governance. Moral authority was strengthened when leaders navigated this tension transparently and responsibly. Leadership in conflict-affected regions often depends on dialogical legitimacy and relational trust rather than institutional authority alone (Lederach, 1997; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011).

The study contributes to Philippine leadership scholarship by offering an empirically grounded account of how moral authority operates in plural sociocultural environments. Similar patterns have been observed in Global South leadership scholarship, where legitimacy is frequently constructed relationally across historical and cultural plurality rather than institutionally presumed (Nkomo, 2011).

Viewed comparatively, the findings extend ethical leadership scholarship by illustrating that integrity alone is insufficient to sustain legitimacy in plural contexts. While existing models emphasize moral character and consistency (Brown & Treviño, 2006), the Mindanao case suggests that authority is equally dependent on intercultural responsiveness and dialogical presence. Leadership credibility was evaluated not only through personal integrity but also through the capacity to engage difference without erasing it. This interpretation aligns with relational leadership perspectives that conceptualize leadership as socially constructed through interaction rather than individually possessed.

The study also contributes to postcolonial leadership scholarship by demonstrating that legitimacy in historically layered societies emerges through alignment with communal narratives, memory, and aspiration. Leaders were interpreted as credible when they symbolically resonated with the region's moral and historical experience, suggesting that authority in such contexts is mediated through shared meaning rather than administrative control. This reinforces the view that leadership legitimacy is interpretive and culturally embedded rather than universally transferable.

Finally, the findings suggest that the tension between idealism and pragmatism is not merely a governance constraint but a defining condition of moral leadership in plural societies. Leaders were not expected to eliminate this tension but to inhabit it responsibly. Leadership, in this sense, is not the resolution of contradiction but the ethical management of competing demands. Such an understanding supports philosophical perspectives that view leadership as a practice of judgment under complexity rather than rule application.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that moral authority in plural societies is sustained through the convergence of character, relational engagement, and context-sensitive judgment, positioning leadership legitimacy as an interpretive and dialogical achievement.

Implications for Leadership Formation in Plural Societies

These findings carry important implications for leadership formation in culturally diverse societies. Leadership education may need to move beyond technical governance competencies to incorporate intercultural dialogue, ethical reflection, and narrative awareness as central components of preparation. Leaders operating in plural contexts must not only manage institutions but also sustain relational credibility across communities shaped by differing expectations and historical experiences. Training that cultivates listening, interpretive sensitivity, and ethical consistency may therefore strengthen leaders' capacity to sustain legitimacy within complex social environments.

At the institutional level, governance systems operating in plural settings may benefit from recognizing legitimacy as relational rather than purely procedural. Policies that promote transparency, participatory dialogue,

and intercultural engagement may strengthen public trust more effectively than administrative efficiency alone. By acknowledging the interpretive dimension of leadership authority, institutions can foster environments in which legitimacy is cultivated through communication, responsiveness, and visible ethical commitment.

Leadership development initiatives in faith-based and civic organizations should likewise emphasize dialogical engagement across difference as a core leadership competence. The findings suggest that the capacity to sustain trust across cultural and religious boundaries is central to legitimacy in plural environments.

Taken together, these implications indicate that leadership formation in plural societies must prioritize moral intelligibility, intercultural responsiveness, and interpretive judgment as foundational competencies rather than supplementary skills.

Practical Implications for Leadership Formation and Governance

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the study offers practical implications for leadership development in Mindanao and comparable plural societies. Leadership training institutions may benefit from integrating intercultural dialogue, ethical reflection, and narrative awareness into their formation programs, recognizing that legitimacy in diverse contexts depends not only on administrative competence but on relational credibility and moral intelligibility. Programs that cultivate listening, contextual judgment, and ethical consistency may therefore strengthen leaders' capacity to sustain trust across communities shaped by different histories and expectations.

For governance bodies, the findings suggest that institutional legitimacy may be reinforced when transparency, participatory engagement, and culturally sensitive communication are treated not as procedural requirements but as moral practices. Policies that encourage dialogue, public accountability, and symbolic responsiveness to community concerns can enhance trust more effectively than technical efficiency alone. By acknowledging leadership as an interpretive and relational practice, institutions may foster governance cultures in which credibility is continually cultivated through responsible presence rather than presumed through authority.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is interpretive and contextually grounded within Mindanao's plural sociocultural environment. While the findings offer insight into how moral authority operates within this setting, they may not be directly transferable to all governance contexts. Future research may extend this analysis through comparative studies across regions, institutional cultures, or leadership traditions to examine how moral authority is constructed in differing sociopolitical environments. Quantitative or mixed-method research may also explore how dimensions such as intercultural engagement, accountability, and symbolic credibility relate to public trust and governance outcomes. Such inquiry may deepen understanding of leadership legitimacy across diverse societies.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

From a broader interpretive standpoint, the study demonstrates that leadership legitimacy in plural societies is sustained not through institutional authority alone but through the continual enactment of meaning within relational contexts. Moral authority becomes intelligible when leaders are recognized as responsible interpreters of shared aspirations rather than merely occupants of formal roles. Leadership thus operates as a dialogical practice through which credibility, accountability, and intercultural engagement converge to sustain public trust.

Leadership in Mindanao emerges as a relational moral practice rather than a function of formal authority. Legitimacy is sustained through integrity, intercultural engagement, and accountable judgment within complex social realities. The findings indicate that moral authority is enacted through presence, dialogue, and responsibility across difference. The study offers a contextually grounded account of how moral authority is constructed and sustained in plural societies, contributing to leadership theory, governance practice, and intercultural engagement scholarship in the Global South.

By grounding leadership legitimacy in relational interpretation rather than structural authority, the study offers a framework for understanding governance in culturally diverse societies where credibility must be continually enacted rather than assumed.

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