© SEP 2025 | IRE Journals | Volume 9 Issue 3 | ISSN: 2456-8880

Governing the Unplanned Pilgrimage: From Faith-Based Sprawl to Planned Sacred Urbanism in Peri-Urban Nigeria

PAUL OLUWADAMILOLA OWOYEMI
Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Faculty of Environmental Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria

Abstract-* *The proliferation of mega-religious tourism hubs in peri-urban regions of the Global South represents a distinctive urban form that challenges conventional planning paradigms. This study presents a 30-year longitudinal analysis of the Mowe-Ibafo corridor in Nigeria, a quintessential "sacred corridor" transformed by four major religious camps (RCCG, MFM, NASFAT, Deeper Life). Employing mixed-methods research including GIS-based spatial analysis (1990-2020), structured surveys (n=400), ethnographic fieldwork, and institutional analysis, we document a pattern of "unplanned pilgrimage", rapid, organic growth generating significant economic benefits but severe sustainability externalities. Key findings reveal: (1) a 54.3 km² expansion of built-up area with corresponding 26.1 km² loss of forest/wetland; (2) a sevenfold increase in local income alongside 50,000% escalation in land values; (3) chronic infrastructure deficits during peak events with traffic volumes increasing 300%; and (4) a governance vacuum characterized by minimal institutional coordination. In response, we propose an integrated four-pillar Sustainable Religious Tourism Governance Framework comprising: Spatial Governance (Planned Religious Tourism Districts), Economic Inclusion (Formalized Vendor Ecosystems with Benefit-Sharing), Environmental Stewardship (Event-Specific Management Plans), and Infrastructural Synchronization (Adaptive, Event-Ready Systems). The framework advocates transitioning from incidental faith-based urbanism to planned sacred urbanism through polycentric governance mechanisms. This research contributes to sustainable tourism and urban studies by providing both empirical evidence of faith-led urbanization dynamics and a practical governance model applicable to similar contexts across the Global South.

Keywords: ***Sacred Urbanism; Sustainable Tourism Governance; Peri-Urban Development; Religious Tourism; Mega-Church Urbanization; Nigeria; Spatial Planning; Stakeholder Framework***

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Emergence of Sacred Urbanism in the Global South

The 21st century has witnessed the global rise of what might be termed "sacred urbanism", the transformation of urban and peri-urban landscapes through the spatial and economic dominance of large-scale religious institutions (Adedibu, 2019; Hancock & Srinivas, 2020). Nowhere is this phenomenon more pronounced than in sub-Saharan Africa, where Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and reformist Islam have established not merely places of worship but expansive "prayer cities," "redemption camps," and "faith complexes" that function as alternative urban nodes (Garbin, 2019; Janson, 2020). These sites attract millions of domestic and international pilgrims annually, generating complex socio-spatial transformations that challenge conventional urban planning frameworks.

The Mowe-Ibafo corridor along Nigeria's Lagos-Ibadan Expressway epitomizes this trend. Within a 30-kilometer stretch, this peri-urban axis hosts four of West Africa's largest religious camps: the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) Redemption Camp (established 1980s), Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) Prayer City (1989), Nasrul-Lahi-l-Fathi Society (NASFAT) Prayer Ground (1995), and Deeper Life Bible Church Camp (1973). Collectively, these institutions draw between 500,000-1,000,000 visitors during peak events, effectively creating temporary cities that strain local infrastructure, reshape land markets, and reconfigure social dynamics (Owoyemi, 2025; Olukole, 2022).

1.2 Research Gap and Theoretical Positioning

While scholarly attention has grown regarding the socio-economic impacts of religious tourism (Bello & Bello, 2017; Ezenagu et al., 2021) and the political economy of mega-churches (Ukah, 2016), critical gaps persist in three areas. First, there is limited longitudinal, spatially-explicit analysis of land use/cover changes specifically attributable to religious tourism infrastructure. Second, the governance challenges of integrating these powerful non-state actors into formal planning systems remain under-theorized. Third, despite recognition of sustainability issues (Shinde & Olsen, 2020), few studies propose comprehensive, implementable management frameworks.

This study addresses these gaps through the theoretical lens of polycentric governance (Ostrom, 2010) applied to sacred urbanism. We contend that the sustainability challenges of religious tourism hubs stem not merely from scale but from governance failures in managing the interface between autonomous religious institutions, host communities, market forces, and state planning agencies.

Our research questions are: (1) What are the spatial, economic, and social trajectories of religious tourism-driven urbanization over a 30-year period? (2) What governance arrangements currently exist, and why do they prove inadequate? (3) What integrated framework could facilitate sustainable management of such sacred corridors?

Figure 1. Research Gap and Theoretical Positioning

II. METHODOLOGY: A MIXED-METHODS LONGITUDINAL APPROACH

2.1 Study Area: The Mowe-Ibafo Sacred Corridor

The study area comprises contiguous settlements of Mowe, Ibafo, Magboro, and Loburo within Obafemi-Owode Local Government Area, Ogun State (6°44'-6°54'N, 3°22'-3°30'E) (Figure 1). Strategically located approximately 35 km from Lagos, Nigeria's economic capital, the corridor serves as both commuter belt and spiritual destination for the Lagos mega-city region (estimated population 25 million). The area represents a classic peri-urban interface experiencing multiple, overlapping transformations: Lagos spillover, transportation corridor development, and faith-led urbanization.

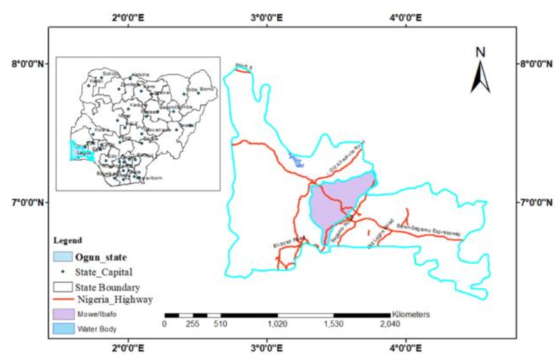

Figure 2: Geographical context of the Mowe-Ibafo corridor showing major religious camps and spatial relationship to Lagos metropolitan region.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis Framework

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, integrating quantitative spatial-temporal analysis with qualitative socio-economic investigation (Table 2).

Table 2: Methodological Framework and Data Sources

Component	Methods/Tools	Data Sources	Period	Analysis
Spatial Analysis	Remote Sensing & GIS	Landsat 5/7/8 (30m); Google Earth Pro	1990, 2000, 2010, 2020	Supervised Classification; NDVI/NDBI; Change Detection

Economic Analysis	Structured Surveys; Document Analysis	400 questionnaires; Business registers; Land records	2021-2022	Descriptive & Inferential Statistics; Time-series comparison
Governance Analysis	Ethnography; Institutional Analysis	45 interviews; Policy documents; Meeting observations	2021-2022	Thematic Analysis; Stakeholder Mapping
Infrastructure Assessment	Traffic Counts; Field Surveys	Manual counts; Infrastructure inventories	Peak/Off-peak 2022	Capacity-Demand Analysis; Gap Assessment

2.2.1 Spatial Analysis: Cloud-free Landsat images were classified using Maximum Likelihood algorithm into five LULC classes. Accuracy assessment yielded Overall Accuracy of 88% (Kappa=0.84). Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) and Built-up Index (NDBI) were calculated to assess environmental change.

2.2.2 Socio-economic Surveys: A sample of 400 residents/business owners was determined using Taro Yamane formula at 95% confidence level. Stratified random sampling ensured representation across the four camp zones.

2.2.3 Governance Ethnography: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with religious leaders (n=12), local government officials (n=8), community leaders (n=15), and business owners (n=10). Participant observation during three major religious events provided insights into operational dynamics.

2.2.4 Infrastructure Assessment: Traffic counts were conducted at four strategic points during regular weeks and major religious events (RCCG Holy Ghost Service, MFM Power Must Change Hands). Physical infrastructure was inventoried and mapped against population estimates.

III. RESULTS: THE ANATOMY OF UNPLANNED PILGRIMAGE

3.1 Spatial Transformation: The Making of a Sacred Corridor

The geospatial analysis reveals a dramatic reconfiguration of the Mowe-Ibafo landscape between 1990-2020 (Figure 2). The built environment expanded radially from the religious camps, following and eventually surpassing the linear growth pattern along the expressway.

Table 3: Land Use/Cover Change Dynamics (1990-2020)

LULC Class	1990 Area (km^2)	2000 Area (km^2)	2010 Area (km^2)	2020 Area (km^2)	Net Change (km^2)	% Change	Annual Rate (%)
Built-up	325.61	364.12	376.72	379.95	+54.34	+16.7	0.56
Forest/Wetland	442.90	428.43	420.53	416.85	-26.05	-5.9	-0.20
Farmland	414.80	412.99	407.68	403.85	-10.95	-2.6	-0.09
Bare Surface	169.41	151.12	148.72	151.54	-17.87	-10.6	-0.35
Water Body	123.47	125.54	122.54	123.99	+0.52	+0.4	+0.01

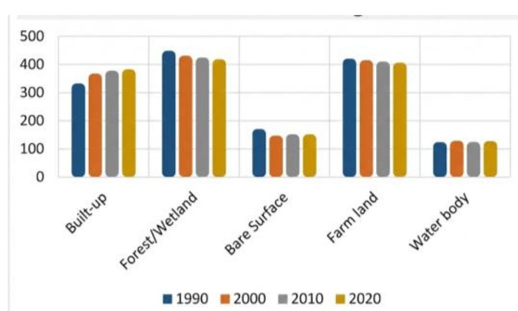

figure 3: LULC change from 1990-2020

Three distinct spatial phases emerged

1. Incipient Phase (pre-1990): Dominantly agrarian landscape with isolated religious facilities.
2. Nodal Expansion (1990-2010): Concentric growth around camps; ribbon development along expressway.
3. Corridor Maturation (2010-2020): Inter-nodal filling and corridor thickening; emergence of specialized religious service economies.

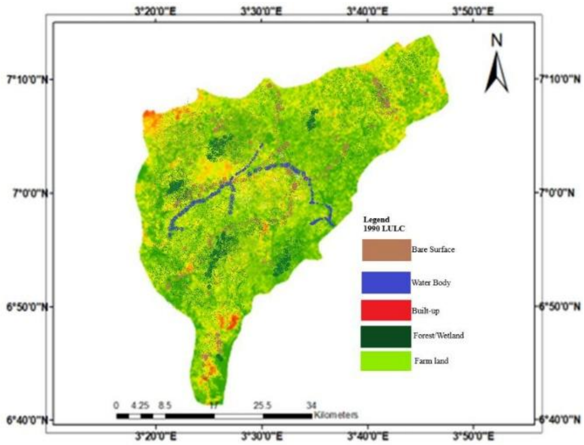

Figure 4.1: 1990 LULC

Source: Authour's analysis, 2025

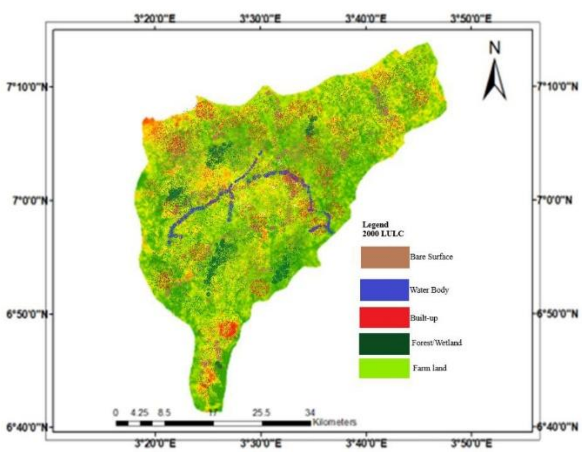

Figure 4.2: 2000 LULC

Source: Authour's analysis, 2025

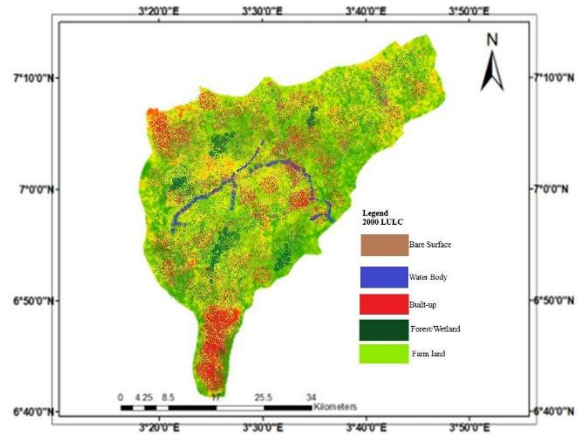

Figure 4.3: 2010 LULC

Source: Authour's analysis, 2025

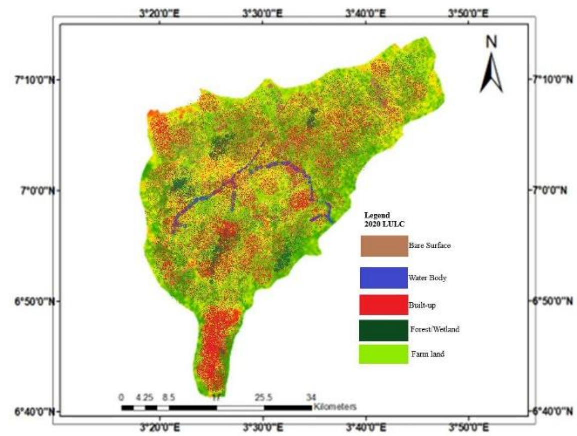

Figure 4.4: 2020 LULC

Source: Authour's analysis, 2025

Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4:Time-series LULC maps showing built-up expansion

The environmental cost is quantified through vegetation index analysis. NDVI values declined by 32% in proximity to camps, while NDBI increased by 185%, confirming the vegetation-impervious surface trade-off ($r = -0.87$, $p < 0.001$).

3.2 Economic Transformation: The Dual Economy of Sacred Urbanism

The economic survey reveals a complex dual economy comprising formal religious institutional economies and extensive informal support economies (Table 4).

Table 4: Economic Impact Matrix: Formal vs. Informal Economies

Dimension	Formal Religious Economy	Informal Support Economy	Synergies/Conflicts
Employment	Direct: 5,000-8,000 (clerical, security, maintenance)	Indirect: 25,000-40,000 (trading, transport, hospitality)	Seasonal complementarity but job insecurity in informal sector
Land Market	Institutional land acquisition (500-1,000 ha per camp)	Speculative subdivision; Rent inflation (500-50,000%)	Capital gains for landowners; Displacement of original settlers
Business Structure	Corporate services (banking, media, publishing)	Micro-enterprises (90% < 5 employees)	Asymmetrical power relations; Limited backward linkages
Income Distribution	Regular salaries (middle-class)	Irregular, event-dependent earnings (precarious)	Growing inequality; Gini coefficient increased from 0.38 to 0.52

Key findings include:

- Employment Multiplier: Each direct religious job supports 4-5 indirect positions, primarily in food vending (38%), transportation (29%), and accommodation (18%).
- Land Value Escalation: Land values within 2km radius of camps increased from approximately ₦1,500/plot in 1990 to ₦750,000-₦2,500,000 in 2022—a 50,000% increase, vastly outpacing regional averages.
- Temporal Economy: Business cycles synchronize completely with religious calendars, creating "hyper-weeks" (Thursday-Sunday) and "dead weeks" (Monday-Wednesday).

3.3 Infrastructure and Environmental Stressors

The infrastructure assessment reveals severe capacity gaps exacerbated by the temporal concentration of visitors (Table 5).

Table 5: Infrastructure Stress Index During Peak Religious Events

Infrastructure System	Regular Capacity	Peak Demand	Deficit (%)	Major Consequences
Road Network	15,000 vehicles/day	45,000-60,000 vehicles/day	200-300%	Gridlock (6-8 hour delays); Accident increase (300%)
Waste Management	50 tons/day	200-300 tons/day	300-500%	Illegal dumping; Drainage blockage; Public health risks
Water Supply	2.5 million liters/day	8-10 million liters/day	220-300%	Rationing; Groundwater over-extraction
Electricity	15 MW	25-30 MW	67-100%	Load shedding; Generator dependence (noise/air

				pollution)
Sanitation	5,000 persons/facility	20,000-30,000 persons/facility	300-500%	Open defecation; Groundwater contamination

Environmental monitoring revealed:

- Waste Generation: 2.5kg/person/day during events vs. 0.5kg regular rate
- Water Quality: Fecal coliform levels in local streams increased from 200/100ml to 2,400/100ml post-major events
- Air Quality: PM2.5 levels near expressway reached 180 μg/m³ during gridlock (WHO limit: 25 μg/m³)

3.4 Governance Analysis: The Institutional Vacuum

The governance ethnography uncovered fragmented, often contradictory institutional arrangements (Figure 3). Four key governance failures were identified:

1. Planning Jurisdiction Ambiguity: Religious camps operate as "enclaves" with ambiguous status between private property, public assembly spaces, and quasi-municipal entities.
2. Regulatory Avoidance: Major camps utilize their national prominence and political connections to circumvent local building codes, environmental regulations, and business licensing.
3. Stakeholder Asymmetry: Power imbalances between resource-rich religious organizations and under-resourced local governments inhibit meaningful negotiation.
4. Temporal Governance Gap: No mechanisms exist for managing the transition between regular operations and peak event modes.

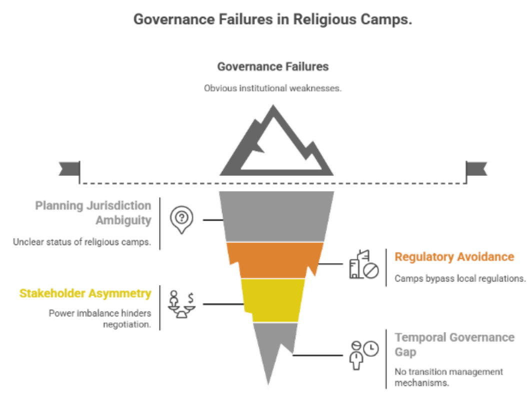

Figure 5: Mapping of stakeholder relationships, showing weak coordination between religious institutions, government agencies, and host communities.

IV. THE SUSTAINABLE RELIGIOUS TOURISM GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

4.1 Conceptual Foundation: From Unplanned to Planned Sacred Urbanism

Drawing on polycentric governance theory and sustainable tourism principles, we propose an integrated framework to transition from "unplanned pilgrimage" to "planned sacred urbanism." The framework rests on four interdependent pillars, each addressing identified sustainability gaps

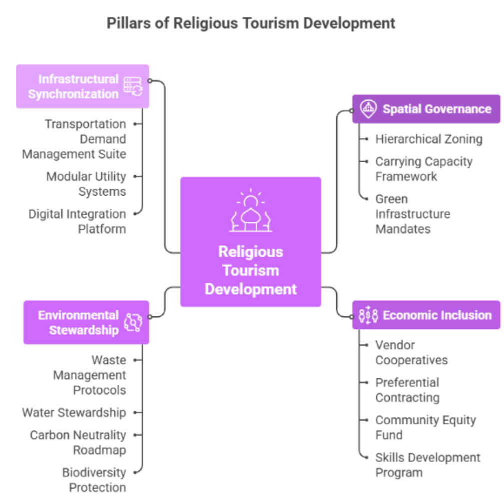

Figure 6: Integrated framework showing four governance pillars and their interconnections.

4.2 Pillar 1: Spatial Governance through Planned Religious Tourism Districts (PRTDs)

Core Innovation: Statutorily designated zones with tailored planning regulations for areas dominated by religious tourism infrastructure.

Implementation Mechanisms:

1. Hierarchical Zoning: Three-tier spatial structure:
   - Core Worship Zone: Primary assembly areas with capacity-based size regulations
   - Support Service Zone: Controlled commercial/hospitality development
   - Buffer/Transition Zone: Green belts and low-density residential areas
2. Carrying Capacity Framework: Event size limits based on infrastructure capacity assessments
3. Green Infrastructure Mandates: Minimum 30% green space within PRTDs; ecological corridor preservation

Table 6: PRTD Zoning Specifications and Regulations

Zone Type	Permitted Uses	Density Limits	Green Space Requirement	Infrastructure Standards
Core Worship	Main auditoriums; Prayer grounds; Administrative offices	Floor Area Ratio: 1.5	25% (including permeable surfaces)	Dedicated utilities; Advanced waste management
Support Service	Hotels; Restaurants; Religious merchandise; Banks	FAR: 2.0; Height: 5 stories	20%	Integrated transport access; Stormwater management
Buffer/Transition	Residential; Schools; Clinics; Parks	FAR: 0.8; Height: 3 stories	40% (primarily as green belts)	Connection to municipal services

4.3 Pillar 2: Economic Inclusion through Formalized Vendor Ecosystems

Core Innovation: Transform precarious informal economies into regulated, benefit-sharing systems.

Implementation Mechanisms:

1. Vendor Cooperatives: Register and organize informal workers into sector-specific cooperatives (food, transportation, accommodation)
2. Preferential Contracting: Religious institutions allocate 30% of service contracts to local cooperatives
3. Community Equity Fund: 2.5% levy on major event revenues pooled for community development projects
4. Skills Development Program: Vocational training aligned with religious tourism value chain

Projected Outcomes:

- Formal employment increase from 15% to 45% of religious tourism jobs
- Local procurement increase from 20% to 60% of institutional spending
- Community fund generation of ₦200-₦500 million annually

4.4 Pillar 3: Environmental Stewardship through Event-Specific Management Plans (E-SMPs)

Core Innovation: Mandatory, certified environmental management for all events exceeding 10,000 participants.

Key Components:

1. Waste Management Protocols: Four-stream segregation; Composting of organic waste; Strategic placement of recycling stations
2. Water Stewardship: Temporary water treatment plants; Rainwater harvesting mandates; Waterless sanitation options
3. Carbon Neutrality Roadmap: Event carbon budgeting; Verified offset programs (1 tree per 10 participants)
4. Biodiversity Protection: No-development buffers around ecological sensitive areas; Native species landscaping requirements

Table 7: E-SMP Standards and Compliance Metrics

Parameter	Standard	Monitoring Method	Compliance Incentive
Waste Diversion	60% from landfill	Weighbridge tracking	Reduced waste levy
Water Consumption	≤50 liters/person/day	Metering	Water efficiency certification
Energy Intensity	≤2 kWh/person/event	Sub-metering	Green event certification
Transport Emissions	40% non-SOV access	Mode share surveys	Priority parking for carpools

4.5 Pillar 4: Infrastructural Synchronization through Adaptive Systems

Core Innovation: Infrastructure designed for variable capacity with seamless mode-switching capabilities.

Implementation Strategies:

1. Transportation Demand Management Suite:
- Park-and-Ride Network: 5 strategic lots with 15,000 capacity total
- Event Shuttle System: Dedicated lanes; 200 high-capacity buses
- Dynamic Traffic Management: AI-powered signal optimization; Variable message signs
2. Modular Utility Systems:
- Containerized Water Treatment: Temporary plants activated for events
- Mobile Power Grids: Solar+battery microgrids supplementing main supply
- Pop-up Sanitation: Rapid deployment toilet blocks with treatment units
3. Digital Integration Platform: Real-time visitor management app with capacity alerts, transit information, and digital ticketing

V. DISCUSSION: IMPLEMENTATION PATHWAYS AND SCALABILITY

5.1 Overcoming Governance Barriers

The proposed framework faces significant implementation barriers, primarily stemming from institutional path dependence and power asymmetries. Three implementation pathways are proposed:

Pathway A: Incremental Adoption (5-7 years)
- Start with voluntary memoranda of understanding
- Pilot projects in least controversial areas (waste management)
- Gradual regulatory integration

Pathway B: Policy-Driven Transformation (3-5 years)
- State-level religious tourism development regulations
- Creation of Corridor Management Authorities with statutory powers
- Conditional permitting tied to framework adoption

Pathway C: Community-Led Initiative (Ongoing)
- Host communities form collective bargaining units
- Leverage social license to operate as negotiation tool
- International certification pressure (Green Faith Tourism Standard)

5.2 Theoretical Contributions and Policy Implications

This research makes three significant contributions:

1. Conceptual: Advances theory of "sacred urbanism" by providing empirical longitudinal evidence and proposing a governance framework for its sustainable management.
2. Methodological: Demonstrates value of mixed-methods, longitudinal approaches for studying complex religious tourism transformations.
3. Practical: Provides implementable framework with specific mechanisms, metrics, and implementation pathways.

Policy implications extend beyond Nigeria to similar contexts across Africa, Latin America, and Asia where religious tourism drives peri-urban transformation. Key transferable principles include:
- The PRTD model as adaptable zoning instrument
- The vendor cooperative/community fund benefit-sharing mechanism

- The E-SMP as scalable environmental management tool

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions
Study limitations include: (1) single case study design, though with deep longitudinal analysis; (2) rapidly changing religious institutional landscapes; (3) limited data on international visitor dimensions.

Future research should:
1. Conduct comparative analysis across multiple sacred corridors (Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Brazil)
2. Investigate digital transformation opportunities for religious tourism management
3. Explore climate change resilience strategies for religious tourism infrastructure
4. Examine gender dimensions of religious tourism economies

VI. CONCLUSION

The Mowe-Ibafo corridor stands as a powerful testament to the transformative potential, and peril, of religious tourism in the Global South. Over three decades, what began as isolated prayer camps has evolved into a full-fledged sacred corridor, generating substantial economic opportunity while imposing severe environmental and infrastructural costs. This pattern of "unplanned pilgrimage", organic, market-driven, institutionally fragmented growth, represents both a development opportunity and a governance challenge of increasing urgency.

Our proposed Sustainable Religious Tourism Governance Framework offers a pathway from sprawl to sustainability through four integrated pillars: spatially intelligent planning, economically inclusive systems, rigorous environmental stewardship, and adaptively synchronized infrastructure. The framework recognizes religious institutions as powerful urban actors requiring specific governance arrangements that balance autonomy with accountability, spiritual mission with social responsibility, and growth with sustainability.

Implementation will require innovative polycentric governance arrangements that bridge the current institutional vacuum. This necessitates political will, institutional capacity building, and perhaps most importantly, a reconceptualization of the relationship between faith, space, and sustainability in the 21st century city. As religious tourism continues to grow globally, the lessons from Mowe-Ibafo, and the framework proposed here, offer valuable insights for managing the sacred in sustainable, inclusive, and resilient ways.

The pilgrimage may be spiritual in destination, but its path must be planned with earthly wisdom. In bridging the sacred and the sustainable, we find not contradiction but necessary harmony for the cities of tomorrow.

REFERENCES

[1] Adedibu, A. A. (2019). City profile: Redemption City, Nigeria. *Cities*, 95, 102398.

[2] Bello, Y. O., & Bello, M. B. (2017). Exploring the relationship between religious tourism and economic development of a host community. *International Journal of Business and Management Invention*, 6(9), 41-51.

[3] Ezenagu, N., Ojo, M. A., & Adeniji, I. A. (2021). Religious tourism and economic empowerment in peri-urban Nigeria: A case study of the Redemption Camp. *Tourism Planning & Development*, 18(4), 387-405.

[4] Garbin, D. (2019). Sacred urbanism: Pentecostal cartographies of space, power and identity in Kinshasa. *Urban Studies*, 56(15), 3210-3227.

[5] Hancock, M., & Srinivas, S. (2020). Religious infrastructure and urban spatial economy: Materializing the sacred in the African city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 44(5), 853-873.

[6] Janson, M. (2020). *Islam, Youth, and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama'at*. Cambridge University Press.

[7] Olukole, T. O. (2022). The morphology of prayer cities and urban expansion in south-western Nigeria. *African Geographical Review*, 41(2), 234-250.

[8] Ostrom, E. (2010). Beyond markets and states: Polycentric governance of complex economic systems. *American Economic Review*, 100(3), 641-672.

[9] Owoyemi, D. P. (2025). *Assessment of Contribution of Religious Tourism to Spatio-Economic Change in Mowe/Ibafo (1990-2020)* [Unpublished M.Sc. Thesis]. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

[10] Shinde, K. A., & Olsen, D. H. (2020). *Religious tourism and the environment*. CABI.

[11] Ukah, A. (2016). Building God's city: The political economy of prayer camps in Nigeria. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 40(3), 524-540.

[12] World Health Organization. (2021). *WHO global air quality guidelines: Particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), ozone, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide*. World Health Organization.