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Informal elite urbanism and Pentecostal city-making: Rethinking 'religious gentrification' in Lagos (Nigeria)

David Garbin[1], Taibat Lawanson[2] and Gareth Millington[3]

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Onike, a central Lagos neighbourhood, through the presence and expansion of the Pentecostal mega-church Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM). The paper engages with the concept of 'religious gentrification' to describe how MFM religious actors, operating as 'informal elites', reshape urban space through moral authority, political patronage and selective compliance with planning regulations. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with local residents and urban stakeholders, the study traces how MFM's territorial and moral projects reconfigure local space and affect everyday life in a context of (relative) religious plurality. By connecting theorisations of informal urbanism with debates on gentrification and religious urbanisation, the paper suggests that Pentecostal city-making in Lagos is both spiritual and entrepreneurial, producing new moralised urban orders without necessarily transforming entrenched urban inequalities. The article contributes to global urban theory by showing how non-state religious elites drive urban change in the Global South through hybrid moral–economic logics. It argues for a rethinking of urban informality and elite power beyond secular and neoliberal paradigms, situating African Pentecostal urbanism within wider debates on governance, spatial inequality and the moral politics of urban transformation.

Keywords

religious gentrification, Pentecostalism, informal elite urbanism, religious urbanisation, Lagos (Nigeria)

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摘要

本文通过分析五旬节派超大教会火与神迹山事工（Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, MFM）的设立与扩张所带来的影响，考察尼日利亚拉各斯（Lagos）中部奥尼克（Onike）街区的转型。本文运用“宗教绅士化”概念，描述 MFM 宗教行动者作为“非正规精英”，如何通过道德权威、政治庇护以及对规划法规的选择性遵守来重塑城市空间。本文基于民族志田野调查以及对当地居民和城市利益相关者的访谈，考察 MFM 的领地与道德工程在（相对）宗教多元的背景下如何重构地方空间并影响日常生活。通过将非正规城市主义的理论阐释与有关绅士化和宗教城市化的各类讨论相结合，本文指出，拉各斯五旬节派的城市营造既具有精神属性又具有创业属性，在不一定会改变根深蒂固的城市不平等的情况下，生成新的道德化城市秩序。本文通过阐明全球南方的非国家宗教精英如何依托杂合的道德经济逻辑推动城市变迁，丰富了全球城市理论。本文呼吁跳出世俗主义和新自由主义范式，重新反思城市非正规性与精英权力，将非洲五旬节派城市主义置于关于治理、空间不平等以及城市转型道德政治的更广泛讨论之中。

关键词

宗教绅士化、五旬节运动、非正规精英城市主义、宗教城市化、拉各斯（尼日利亚）

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Introduction

In Onike, a Lagos neighbourhood, Joshua[1] used to be known as an ‘area boy’, a term describing young men who engage in various forms of informal, often illicit, activities and who hang around in public spaces and street corners, often performing odd jobs for compensation within the boundaries of their local areas. While historically ‘area boys’ have occupied a distinct place within Lagos’ territorialised urban youth culture (Omitoogun, 1994), today they tend to be perceived as a public nuisance, often accused of threatening other residents and visitors with violence. Joshua, however, is now a born-again Christian, and is keen to dissociate himself from this reputation and more generally from his ‘past life of smoking Indian hemp, drinking heavily, and worshipping idols’ as he put it.

Joshua’s conversion should not be seen in isolation. It is, in fact, part and parcel of the urban changes that have occurred in Onike since the Pentecostal church MFM (Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries) established its headquarters there in the 1990s and subsequently acquired a large amount of property and land in the neighbourhood, gradually turning Onike into a religious enclave in the midst of the dense urban fabric of the Lagos metropolis. MFM’s (omni)presence in the area is now striking, and its expansion has been spectacular, accelerating in the last 10 years, a period during which the church has redeveloped more than 25 plots within a small perimeter comprising six or seven streets.

Reflecting the important role played by religious groups in transforming African cities (De Boeck, 2013; Garbin et al., 2022), the presence of MFM in Onike constituted one of the case studies of a wider project on religious urbanisation in Africa[2] which focused on the production and use of religious urban space in Lagos and Kinshasa, interrogating how religious notions of the ‘ideal city’ may be brought into tension with existing

planning and governance regimes. While many of our Lagos stakeholders were talking about the exclusionist impact of spectacular gated 'prayer camps' developed on mostly rural land at the periphery of the city, there was also a widespread perception (in particular among non-state planners or urban researchers) that the intra-urban presence of large Pentecostal churches like MFM was akin to forms of 'religious gentrification', pushing people out through rising land value, increased traffic, the changing character of the area and noise pollution. The use of this term, in particular by planners, is significant. However, while religious gentrification captures something important about the exclusionary effects of MFM's expansion, we want to question in this article to what extent it can fully capture the moral, spiritual, political and regulatory logics through which religious actors consolidate territorial authority.

The term 'religious gentrification' itself sits awkwardly within the urban studies literature, where gentrification – which has recently broadened from its Euro-American origins to encompass a wider range of urban configurations globally (Atkinson and Bridge, 2005; Lees et al., 2015) – is rarely associated with religion-driven socio-spatial change. Indeed, Ley and Martin's (1993) argument that gentrification is intrinsically linked to secularisation, because middle-class newcomers have weaker religious ties, still tends to steer researchers away from seeing gentrification as a process that could itself be religiously driven. Even work that nuances this 'secularisation thesis', like Cimino's (2011), still casts religion as *responding to*, rather than driving, gentrification. His Brooklyn study finds that gentrification 'has played an invigorating role in the [local] religious ecology' (2011: 166), with congregations adapting to it by occupying distinct 'niches'. In Hong Kong, likewise, Yip and Lee (2025) find churches drawn into redevelopment but on developers' terms as they remain subordinate to property capital, and their spaces more often shrink than expand, unlike the expansionary, church-driven dynamic we trace in Onike.

Closer to our own case, a smaller and more recent literature has begun to treat religious actors as *agents* of gentrification rather than its objects. The term itself originates with Weng (2019), who coined 'religious gentrification' to capture urban renewal and religious revival as a co-articulated process, showing how faith-based development in Jakarta reconfigures neighbourhood landscapes and moral orders while deepening class and religious exclusion. In the urban Israeli context, Luz (2022: 218) defines religious gentrification as a form of exclusionary displacement that 'defies ordinary top-down urban planning hierarchy'. He shows that religious actors – conventionally placed low in the presumed hierarchy of urban influence – exploit an emerging 'heterarchy' of planning to deter non-believers from entering, or to push them out of, a neighbourhood (Luz, 2022: 231). We retain this emphasis on the 'disproportionate' spatial agency of religious actors, while departing from Luz's account in ways we set out in our final section.

In the Nigerian context, gentrification has typically been examined as driven by 'revanchist' forms of state-based or state-backed urban modernisation often leading to the demolition of informal settlements and the forced relocation of the urban poor and marginalised communities (Ajayi et al., 2019; Nwanna, 2015), but the potential role played by religious actors in these processes remains unexplored. Where religious urbanisation in mega-city Lagos has been studied, it is largely through the production of new landscapes by Pentecostal churches on peripheral developments such as the iconic 'Redemption City'[3] of the RCCG (Redeemed Christian Church of God; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2019; Becker et al., 2014;

Ukah, 2016). In this paper we argue that, while it is important to pay attention to these, often spectacular, forms of peripheral enclaving, there is also a need to interrogate the interface of religion and urbanisation at a smaller scale, and in more built-up and central parts of the urban landscape, and this with a view to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how cities across the globe are evolving in pace with revivalist (Christian) movements. In doing so, we argue that the notion of 'religious gentrification' captures the change generated by MFM in Onike only in part, and that the case points as much or even more to the central importance of 'informal elite urbanism' in a context of plurality.

This approach draws upon Roy's pioneering conceptualisation of informal urbanism as an 'organizing logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself' (Roy, 2005: 148). Unlike Roy's emphasis on state actors producing 'informality from above', we focus on how religious elites deploy moral authority alongside financial and political capital to achieve territorial ambitions through selective compliance with regulatory regimes. This extends informality scholarship by demonstrating how non-state actors can function as informal urban elites, producing patterns of transformation that mirror state-led or market-driven processes while operating through distinctive religious logics.

Our case study area, Onike, is a mixed-use neighbourhood on the Yaba axis of Lagos Mainland, bordering the large campus of the University of Lagos, and is well connected to Lagos Island and the wider metropolis. Land in Onike was gradually sold off plot by plot from the 1960s, and settlement densified over subsequent decades into the closely built neighbourhood it is today. Like much of metropolitan Lagos, Onike lies within the low-lying coastal plain of the Lagos Lagoon and is predisposed to flooding – so much so that MFM itself had to sandfill several of the marshy plots it acquired before building on them.

The study draws on two phases of fieldwork in Onike, conducted between July and October 2018 and between March and July 2023. In each phase, street mapping involved transect walks across Onike streets to identify all buildings and plots owned by MFM. Mapping was carried out using Epicollect + software and produced a census recording ownership status, current use, apparent construction phase and visible indicators of planning compliance. Mapping ran concurrently with in-depth, semi-structured interviews (22 in total) spanning local residents and landlords, market traders, roadside workers, MFM members and staff, estate agents and officers from LASURA (Lagos State Urban Renewal Agency) and LASPPPA (Lagos State Physical Planning Permit Authority).[4]

To interrogate the relationship between religious urbanisation, informal urbanism and religious gentrification, we focus on two features specific to the Pentecostal presence in inner Lagos: the remoralisation of space, bound up with its control and securitisation, and the plurality of religious and other actors who share it. We show, however, that this process leaves existing inequalities largely intact. On this basis, we assess how far 'informal elite urbanism' offers a productive frame for the Onike case, and how far the lens of 'religious gentrification' applies. First, though, some contextualisation about the church and the local area is needed.

Global church, local space

With hundreds of branches across Africa and across the African/Nigerian diaspora in Europe and North America, MFM is one of the fastest-growing Nigerian Pentecostal mega-churches. The church's unique identity and its appeal stem from its distinct worship

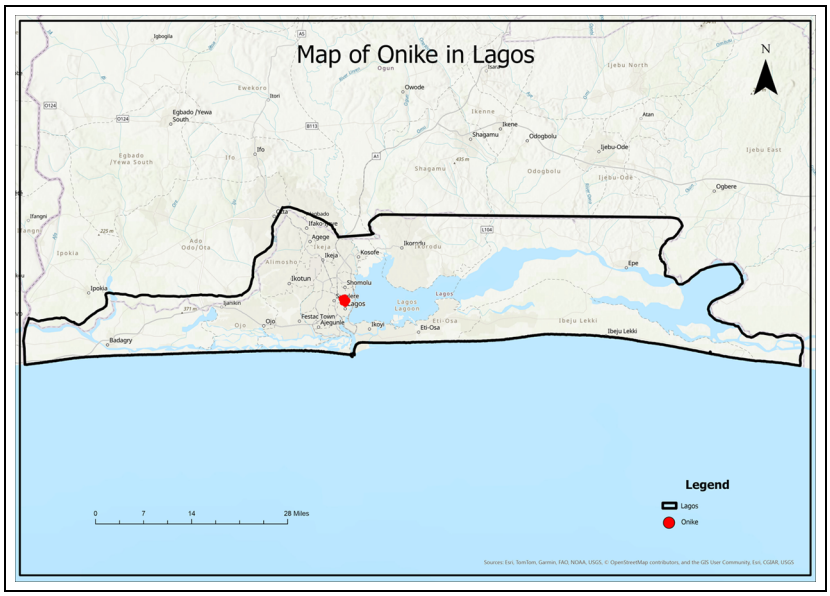


Figure 1. Map of metropolitan Lagos (encompassing 20 Local Government Areas) with the location of the Onike neighbourhood.
Source: The authors.

style, based on the so-called theology of 'spiritual warfare' aimed at 'physically and spiritually fighting the evil forces causing individual, social, and spiritual afflictions' as Butticci (2013: 244) put it.

In the 1990s, as the 'Pentecostal revolution' (Marshall, 2009) and its promises of prosperity and remoralisation swept through the inexorably growing mega-city, MFM established dozens of branches across Lagos, and created its own self-sufficient suburban 'Prayer City', following the RCCG 'Redemption City' model of enclaved religious space. It now contains a mixture of residential, commercial, educational, health and praying facilities for large crowds seeking to 'channel the power of the Holy Spirit' to gain deliverance and blessings (Butticci, 2013).

The creation of this peripheral space did not diminish the role and importance of Onike's MFM presence in the city itself, which grew in pace with the overall expansion of the church in Lagos, Nigeria and beyond. At the heart of this overall growth is a strategy of expansive territorial coverage relying on the production of (Pentecostal) urbanity at various scales, with 'church planting' at its core. Indeed, one of the keys to the success of Nigerian mega-churches like the MFM or RCCG is to have managed to create a fruitful coexistence between the intimacy of parish-based membership on the one hand and the 'aesthetics of persuasion' (Meyer, 2010) of their imposing sites of worship on the other hand, sites that can provide the periodic experience of mass collective effervescence and the more permanent affordance of living within a self-contained and ordered 'sacred city'. For mega-churches, large praying infrastructures are also essential insofar as they act as a 'spatial fix' (Harvey, 2001), visibly materialising the sacred capital (tithes, donations) which they

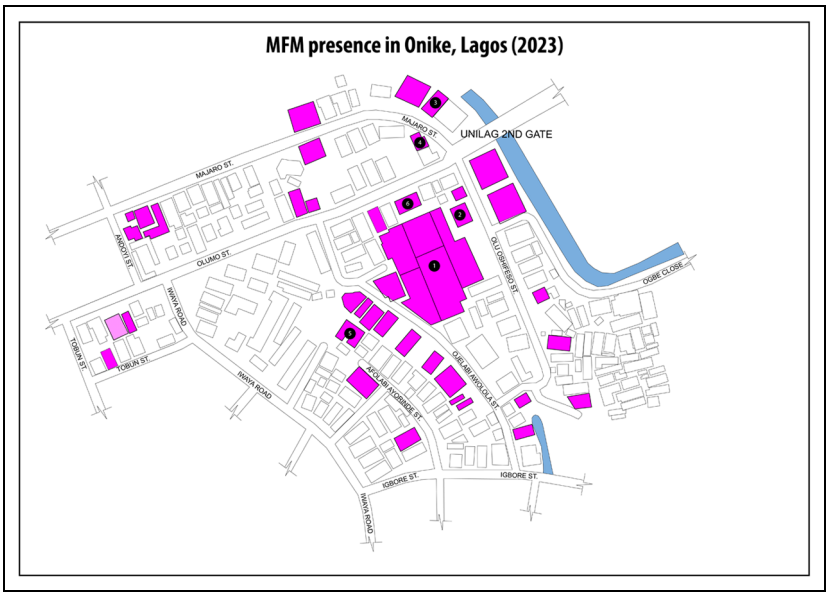


Figure 2. Map of MFM's presence in Onike, showing all plots and properties owned by the church as of 2023. These include the main prayer hall (1), a hospital (2), a music school (3), a multi-storey bookshop (4), a secondary school (5) and a large guesthouse for international visitors (6), as well as parking lots, playgrounds, private residences for pastors, etc.
Source: The authors.
MFM: Mountain of Fire and Miracles.

channel from members and those attending services.

The church's presence in Onike is experienced in a range of ways across the 30 or so plots the church has acquired and redeveloped since 1994 (see Figure 2). The church imprint is evident across the entire neighbourhood through signature red brick and glass detailing on new buildings, as well as the cream and purple colours the church uses to brand all its buildings – a particular aesthetic which is well known by most Lagosians.

Since the early 2010s, MFM has intensified its strategy for land/property acquisition.[5] In addition to the purchase of existing properties, the church has also appropriated public space, closing down portions of streets and pathways, for instance, to develop the main church auditorium, a situation that exacerbated the area's flood vulnerability. The current situation, where over a couple of decades or so, MFM has grown in piecemeal fashion to own over a third of property in Onike – without attracting institutional or state attention or concern – points to the ways in which 'informal elite urbanism' operates locally, largely through blind spots in the design, planning and development of Lagos, as we shall see. Comparable patterns appear elsewhere in the city, including in Gbagada with the Deeper Life Church and in Oregun with Christ Embassy.

Apart from the shift from residential use to religious-related activities, we also noted a transition from what could be considered 'core' religious uses to general/commercial land use functions, such as an event centre, music school, health centre, guesthouses,

children's playground, auto-mechanic workshop or book shop, all of which are owned and operated by MFM. In fact, of the 11 buildings/sites acquired since 2015, only 3 are used for core religious functions (such as place of worship or religious education), pointing to the church's desire to consolidate its presence through ancillary services, while at the same time engendering a 'totalising' way of life in Onike centred around the economies, activities and ethos of MFM. This is illustrated by the fact that the church has developed a music school (which provides training in both popular and classical music modes) and a book shop that not only sells religious books for adults and children, DVDs of Christian films and recordings of services, but also merchandising for the church football team. As Coleman and Chattoo (2020: 91) argue, the purpose here is not only to 'demonstrate the church's ability to expand into and transform parts of the "unruly" city but also to impart lessons on a new lifestyle centered around rational consumption, personal growth, and morally endorsed entertainment' (Figure 2).

Transformation and remoralisation

An emphasis on security features prominently in the narratives that highlight the church's efforts to revitalise the infrastructure of the area and its moral fabric. For many residents, the reordering MFM initiated was positively received, and several of our interlocutors, including non-MFM ones, even the most critical voices, acknowledged that the neighbourhood had become meaningfully safer since the church's arrival, citing visible patrols and gates that were manned and closed at night. One local non-MFM stallholder (selling phone cards) described how the church has changed the area dramatically since it first arrived:

> This ministry organised and have committed a lot to this area. Before now, you would not have been able to walk safely in this area. There were lots of crimes, stealing, rape, and so on. But when the Ministry came in, about 20 years ago, things changed. Most of the young people in this environment were not interested in studying or gained admission to Unilag [University of Lagos] which is just here … But when this Ministry came here and prayed for the environment, there was a change.

This emphasis on moral transformation and crime was also central to the narrative of Eze, a 35-year-old man and an active church member who works in one of its affiliated shops. He explained:

> The result of the church being here has actually affected most people here positively. Although, we will still definitely have some 'thug-like' people around. It takes time … You cannot expect the miracle to happen suddenly. It's a gradual thing as far as we want to win souls … That is one of the ideas that the GO ['General Overseer'] inculcated in order to make all those street boys come close to God.

Eze also elaborated on the transformation of 'area boys', explaining the critical role of addressing alcohol abuse:

> We have a problem with strong alcohol, *ogogoro* [local gin]. When they drink it, they just find, just find it easy to start making trouble everywhere, just fighting, fighting like thugs. That's the area of the area boys I'm talking about. Not in any another area … They just want to fight and fight. That's the kind of area boys I'm talking about. So, now they're being preached to so they're reducing all those things down to the minimum level.

This moralising impact is exemplified through individuals like Joshua, who was himself a former 'area boy' before his connection with MFM transformed his life. His

journey with the church was shaped not only by MFM's local presence but also deepened by what he perceived as a profound experience of divine intervention. Indeed, during a failed attempt to migrate to Europe through Libya, Joshua found himself detained by the Libyan police. He explained that the sacred water, or 'manna water', blessed by the church and central to MFM's faith practices, protected him during this ordeal. While others in captivity faced severe violence, he was spared and ultimately managed to escape, and he interpreted his 'miracle' as a testament to the power of the manna water and, by extension, the church. Upon returning to Lagos, Joshua made a more decisive commitment to the church, attending services regularly and (informally) assisting with security tasks and managing parking for MFM churchgoers.

This whole process of remoralisation can be seen to reflect a moral 'reordering' of both individual lives and urban space, echoing O'Neill's (2015) study of Pentecostalism in post-Civil War Guatemala. In the case of MFM, the production of redeemed subjects is closely connected to the remaking of urban space, as illustrated by Joshua when he spoke about the area prior to MFM's arrival:

> Before MFM this street was not this busy, the area was very swampy. You know there were lots of witches and wizards, and crime. But since the church came in, lots of things have changed. Many of the area boys, they have become born again. We were part of the gangs and got lots of respect. The gangs still respect us but they know we are not part of that life anymore. You know this place is close to the University of Lagos where there are lots of cults [student fraternities sometimes associated with secret societies]… There used to be lots of cults in this area, but none of that anymore since MFM.

Here the trope of the 'swamp' is revealing, not only because of its liminal, porous and thus unpredictable nature, but also because water is often associated with the destructive, bewitching energies of marine spirits in many West African contexts (Butticci, 2013). As Katsaura (2019: 515) argues, MFM recasts Lagos through a 'spiritual ecology' that is shaped by a complex interplay between human, spirit and material beings. From this perspective, MFM's theology of deliverance can be seen as an attempt to 'stabilise' an urban space inhabited by competing spiritual and material forces. For the leader of MFM ('General Overseer' (GO) Daniel Olukoya), the city is thus 'under the demonic power of the queen of the coast … [including] marine, war, slavery, masquerade and vagabond spirits' (Olukoya, 2009, cited in Katsaura, 2019: 515). MFM's project in Onike thus unfolds within a spiritual geography potentially porous to malevolent forces and the control of the environment, and anxiety over this permeability shows the extent to which the idea of a 'second mapping' (Robbins, 2014) impacts Pentecostal place-making.

The campus of the University of Lagos, adjacent to Onike, is also 'remapped' by Joshua as an area conquered by 'occult economies' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999) where 'cults' (i.e. secret societies) are rumoured to perform sacrificial violence and encourage drug use and sexual promiscuity. Such remappings, grounded in local idioms of spiritual warfare, position MFM as a bulwark against both visible and invisible threats. Yet, as we show in the next section, the redemptive promise of such Pentecostal spatialisation does not always extend to a more equitable redistribution of resources or opportunities.

Sacred urbanism and the reproduction of inequalities

The staging of rebirth and instantiations of renewal that are central to Pentecostal

practice in Nigeria lead not only to the production of redeemed individuals and spaces, but also to 'a life-and-death struggle to wrest people, places and destinies from the satanic enemy' as Marshall (2009: 95) explains. In this sense, Pentecostal urbanism does not simply aim at spiritual salvation; it involves an attempt to reorder space, subjectivity and moral economy through specific techniques of governance.

But in Onike, the church's ambitions for renewal also exist in articulation with the reproduction of pre-existing social hierarchies. Thus, Joshua and the other former 'area boys' we spoke with described a deeply ambivalent relationship with the church. They expressed appreciation for MFM's local moral influence and acknowledged the changes in their own lives, but they also spoke of feeling rather overlooked, ignored even, by the church leadership, especially when it came to material support or inclusion in formal roles within the church locally. As Femi (25), a close friend of Joshua, put it:

> There is no pastor who doesn't know us in this church. They know we used to be area boys, and that now we are born again. But they don't help us … Jesus Christ was not like that

Despite the visibility of their transformation and involvement in church life, these local youth felt excluded from meaningful opportunities, such as paid employment within the church's formal structures ('we would like to be employed and have proper uniforms', as Femi put it), remaining instead on the margins, 'hustling' as informal security guards or parking attendants. Moreover, as Femi remarked, the GO maintained a conspicuous distance, often 'acting like he doesn't see us when he is nearby'.[6] Here, we see how Pentecostal remoralisation, while effective in reshaping subjectivities and narratives as well as enabling moral 're-identification', does not necessarily unsettle the deeper structures of symbolic and socio-economic marginality embedded in Lagos's urban fabric. The key mechanism at work here is what we might call 'conditional incorporation' as the church's moral reform initiatives absorb former 'area boys' into the orbit of the institution without granting them full membership and visibility in its (moral) economy of recognition and reward. This moral transformation is, from MFM's perspective, a success story since these 'area boys' are no longer a threat, they provide free labour and their conversion functions as evidence of the church's redemptive power. From the perspective of the youth themselves, however, conversion and moral reform have not unlocked material security. Here, we return to O'Neill's (2015) account of the Pentecostal 'soft security' regime in post-civil war Guatemala, where the moral reform of former gang members serves simultaneously as community 'benefit' and as a technology of governance, rendering volatile populations legible, manageable and self-governing without addressing the material conditions that produced their vulnerability. In Onike, the effect is spatial as well as social. A neighbourhood that was once 'ungovernable' is made orderly and investable in part through the moral labour of the very people who remain its least economically empowered residents.

If the area boys' position reveals how moral reform extracts labour without conferring reward, the distribution of the church's material patronage exposes a parallel logic at work. This was illustrated in the account of Tolu, a young street mechanic operating in the area. While Tolu acknowledged the GO's periodic acts of generosity – such as distributing cash in person to local residents – he also suggested that these expressions of 'bigmanship' did little to alter the unequal access to resources on the ground. For instance, he recalled how during

a recent allocation of 100,000 naira,[7] he received only 1000, while more prominent local figures claimed the lion's share. This, he added, was how the church 'works around here'. What emerged was a picture of moral patronage structured through existing social hierarchies, with generosity filtered through networks of elders, church officials and intermediaries, reinforcing stratification rather than challenging it. It is also clear that Tolu's limited capacity to challenge MFM's presence meant he received proportionally less patronage than those wielding greater local power and influence (and considered potentially more disruptive).

Thus, even in sites of spiritual renewal, access to material benefits remained uneven, refracting broader patterns of inequality through the lens of religious authority. These dynamics echo Osinulu's (2014) analysis of spatial and social organisation at the peripheral 'Redemption Camp [City]' of the RCCG, where religious power similarly shapes hierarchies of access, belonging and visibility. Osinulu shows how performative hierarchies are not only preserved but amplified within Pentecostal space where rituals of seating, housing allocation and access to leadership are governed by accreditation and patronage. Quoting RCCG Pastor Adeboye's (2008) assertion that 'average people generally drink from waters which outstanding people pass on as leftovers', Osinulu argues that Pentecostal sacred space reproduces, rather than subverts, the structures of scarcity and distinction that define urban life. As he notes:

> What RCCG has constructed is not a utopian alternative to the rigours of Lagos's urbanism … The social structure of the city is maintained and even reinforced on the grounds of the camp. (2014: 132)

This reproduction of hierarchy is here not incidental but intrinsic to the ritualisation of space. In the case of MFM, the transformation of Onike appears to follow a similar pattern. What emerges is not a rupture with the secular city but its *spiritual double*, a refraction of Nigerian unequal socio-spatial configurations into a Pentecostal idiom. The 'alter-city' (Garbin and Mokoko Gampiot, 2022) of Pentecostal modernity may offer hope, protection, security and moral reform, but only within the confines of what we would call here a 'recast' inequality.

Informal elite urbanism in a context of plurality

In Lagos, the influence of Pentecostal megachurches like MFM represents a striking form of what can be termed 'informal elite urbanism' – a process through which powerful actors, often outside (though sometimes not completely) of traditional state institutions, reshape urban space by strategically navigating and/or redefining regulatory regimes.

Whereas urban informality in the Global South has traditionally been associated with poorer populations and linked to practices of subsistence, survival and everyday improvisation (see Lombard and Horn, 2024), more recent scholarship has drawn attention to the ways in which informality also functions as a terrain of elite power (Ghertner, 2015; Pow, 2017, Roy, 2005). Ananya Roy (2005) famously argued that informality should not be seen as an exception to urban planning, but as a core modality of governance, as one that is actively produced 'from above' by state actors through selective legalisation, regulatory gaps or, perhaps more importantly, shifting definitions of legitimacy. While Roy's analysis focused primarily on the state's role in orchestrating informality, here we extend her insight by showing how non-state religious elites, such as MFM, also act as powerful agents of

informalisation. Here, we echo Moatasim's (2019) work on Islamabad (Pakistan), showing how rich elite citizens, not just developers or state actors, actively initiate and organise informal development, often in contradiction with urban planning frameworks. In Lagos, similar processes are at play and prosperous Pentecostal megachurches such as MFM are not merely *passive* beneficiaries of lax enforcement; rather, they operate as informal urban elites in their own right – shaping land markets, infrastructure and spatial governance through a combination of political patronage, moral authority and informal practices.

More than this, MFM operates as a broker: an increasingly professionalised intermediary mediating between the property, financial and planning sectors on one side and its religious community on the other. It translates economic and financial capital into moral and spiritual capital, and lends legitimacy to the rationalisation, enclosure and transformation of contested urban space into sanctified religious 'assets'. Crucially, this process rests on the deference that a large and prominent Pentecostal church commands within Nigeria's 'Pentecostal Republic' (Obadare, 2018). Powerful though it is, MFM is thus not the sole author of Onike's transformation, but the most influential node in a wider network of actors remaking the neighbourhood.

It is worth clarifying the relationship between informal elite urbanism and religious urbanisation as analytical frames, since both run through this article. Religious urbanisation, as developed in scholarship on African cities (Becker et al., 2014; Garbin et al., 2022; Ukah, 2016), refers to the broad ensemble of processes through which religious actors produce, transform and claim urban space in a context of contested spatial governance. It is, in essence, both a descriptive and interpretive framework for understanding what religion does to cities and what cities do to religion (Rüpke, 2020). Informal elite urbanism is not specific to religion, but MFM's religious urbanisation is enabled by its capacity to act as an informal urban elite, and its effectiveness as an 'elite' actor depends on its religious authority.

The Lagos urban planning system is distributed across multiple agencies, including the LASPPPA and the Lagos State Building Control Agency (LABCA), both agencies of the Ministry of Physical Planning and Urban Development. These overlapping jurisdictions, coupled with chronic bureaucratic delays, create a bureaucratic gap enabling actors like MFM to proceed with construction *before* obtaining planning permits and construction approval, and before regulatory enforcement can occur. Again, while such gaps are, in theory, 'accessible' to a broad range of actors, they are particularly advantageous to more powerful ones like MFM, whose aggressive strategies of property acquisition and neighbourhood transformation can, in Lagos, mobilise (and convert) significant financial, moral and above all political capital.

Some of our research drawing on evidence from the local district office in Yaba reveals that many of MFM's land use conversions and building projects were carried out without proper authorisation. An example is the site now occupied by the music school, which obtained planning approval as a residential building rather than for the institutional land use its function required. Planning officers we interviewed deplored the fact that Pentecostal churches like MFM often abandon the formal approval process when the required documentation proves too onerous, applying instead for residential or building-renovation permits whose requirements are easier to meet. As one LASPPPA officer put it, 'they wouldn't be able to meet the special application regulations and approval order to which churches belong'.

Another officer explained that some Pentecostal churches (including MFM) circumvent regulations by applying for residential permits, using the names of individuals or previous property owners rather than the institution itself. This allows them to avoid the additional scrutiny and documentation required for religious buildings. Moreover, out of the six open applications we found in MFM's name, four were incomplete – some dating back over 6 years – yet the corresponding buildings have already been completed and are in full use.

This selective compliance reflects a strategic exploitation of regulatory ambiguity. MFM typically purchases dilapidated residential structures, secures demolition permits and then applies for new development approvals – thus sidestepping Lagos's legal prohibition on change of land use. In many cases, the built structures differ substantially from the approved plans, yet enforcement is minimal. The long delay between planning approvals (by LASPPPA), construction permits and development control (by LABCA) – further hampered by a manual reporting process – creates a window of opportunity in which significant unauthorised construction can occur. As Hull (2012) has argued in the Pakistani context, such bureaucratic practices produce a 'material (paper) regime' that becomes a key feature of urban governance.

These practices have concrete spatial effects. Certain streets (such as Remi Abuh and Ajanaku) have effectively been erased from the city's public realm – converted into church property and fenced off. In the case of Remi Abuh Street, the church incorporated it into the main auditorium, which blocked key drainage channels and exacerbated flood vulnerability in the entire neighbourhood. On Ajanaku Street, pedestrian access routes to residential homes were removed to create space for a car park. Despite the disruption to urban flow, noise pollution and commercial saturation during large gatherings, there has been no effective resistance from state authorities, local government or even the residents' association. This muted response reflects MFM's growing political influence and its role as a local patron, funding (partial) roadworks (mostly where church buildings are concentrated), security and community services – practices that aimed to win popular consent (especially among newly arrived residents) and thereby forestall regulatory intervention.

In this sense, MFM's urban strategy is not unlike the bold encroachments described by Moatasim (2019) in her study of Islamabad. MFM acts as a kind of hybrid actor, navigating formal and informal systems while pursuing both spiritual and territorial ('entitled', as Moatasim calls it) forms of authority. The result is a distinct mode of Pentecostal urbanism that reshapes neighbourhoods through selective compliance, informal alliances and moral legitimation. This selective compliance with (and/or selective enforcement of) planning and safety regulations can have tragic consequences, as shown by the collapse of the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN) guesthouse in 2014, which killed over 100 people (including foreign pilgrims, many from South Africa). Although the law required automatic forfeiture of the property, this Pentecostal mega-church faced no meaningful sanctions and Lagos State Governor Babatunde Fashola's widely publicised condolence visit to SCOAN, rather than signalling accountability, highlighted the moral and symbolic capital that major Pentecostal leaders command in the political realm (Obadare, 2018).

A plural (but dominated) space

Unlike peripheral Pentecostal campuses such as Prayer City or Redemption City, Onike is

a socially complex urban environment shaped by higher levels of religious plurality, residential diversity and also longstanding informal claims to space. While MFM exercises a significant degree of spatial and symbolic influence through fencing, territorial signage/visibility and moral policing, this authority operates through a series of negotiations and accommodations within a field of coexisting actors – ranging from Muslim residents and student populations to landlords or local traders.

One of the key differences with peripheral self-contained religious camps is that the neighbourhood includes what could be seen as rival churches, such as a small parish of RCCG (established in a resident's courtyard), alongside two longstanding mosques and a variety of local economic actors, many of whom do not subscribe to MFM's religious or moral order. Indeed, many of those who locally fix cars, sell food or trade in other goods are Muslim, and yet they serve the everyday needs of MFM members, creating a network of economic interdependence that cuts across religious boundaries. This does not mean, however, that MFM abstains from proselytising among its non-Christian neighbours. One Muslim local trader we interviewed recounted a pastor's attempt to convert him by offering a blank cheque, which he refused, laughing:

> He put a blank cheque and gave me a biro [pen] and said write any amount I want. I told them no. It's not because of money I would convert!

This exchange illustrates how MFM's authority in Onike is perceived as tied to both spiritual and economic power, but also how there are limits to its religious influence in a plural setting where belief 'cannot be bought'. Azeez, another Muslim who has worked in the area as a mechanic since the 1980s, offered a similar account: MFM senior members had invited him to join 'plenty of times', but every time they come he 'simply says he's working and they move on'. He confirmed there was no meaningful tension between MFM and his local mosque (whose leaders had not been approached to sell).

So in a way, the church may dominate in scale and visibility, but its local dominance seems to be neither absolute nor uncontested. The porous boundaries of the enclave allow for religious fluidity, but not without friction. As one MFM member recounted:

> Some families are now coming for prayers … the wife and daughter used to sneak in. The father didn't know. Now some of the children have joined us and families may not know or agree.

That said, several of our interlocutors attended multiple churches or moved between them situationally. One long-term area resident, for instance, described attending services at the Christ Apostolic Church in a neighbouring area while also participating in MFM's early morning Yoruba-language services, moving between congregations without apparent 'theological anxiety'. Other residents and members of other congregations (including the RCCG parish) described participating in MFM's Wednesday 'manna water' service while continuing to attend their own churches on Sundays. As mentioned earlier, this service is one of MFM's most distinctive ritual offerings, a significant source of its cross-denominational appeal.

This pattern of multi-congregational practice echoes Janson's (2021: 189) account of 'the porosity of religious boundaries and the fluidity of religious subjectivities' that characterise everyday lived religion in Lagos. This is an urban religiosity characterised less by doctrinal exclusivity than by (pragmatic) participation across institutional boundaries

and which can be driven by the particular needs a given congregation can meet, whether spiritual, linguistic or social, at a specific time or place. The presence of an RCCG parish operating from a resident's courtyard is itself an expression of this logic: rather than producing direct competition or friction, it reflects the densely layered character of Lagos's urban religious landscape, in which multiple congregations coexist by serving partially distinct but frequently overlapping publics. It is worth noting, however, that unlike in other parts of Lagos, RCCG's local presence in Onike is largely inconsequential to the neighbourhood's religious dynamics, as it is MFM that overwhelmingly sets the terms of the religious landscape here, with other congregations occupying the urban 'interstices' rather than offering any meaningful counterweight.

However, the material consequences of MFM's presence have sparked some level of discontent, especially among long-term residents we spoke to. Our fieldwork revealed that the church impacts neighbourhood activities at least twice a week (for Wednesday and Sunday services) with what is perceived by some locals as excessive noise and traffic. This impact is also felt in the surrounding communities of Iwaya, Akoka and the University of Lagos campus. The church claims that services at the MFM headquarters in Onike are the largest single congregations in Africa with attendance of over 120,000 at single meetings (Olukoya, 2003). MFM's Pentecostal influence dominates the rhythms of Onike and, ironically, while Pentecostals often stress the power of the Holy Spirit to 'unblock' the path to prosperity and success, their practices are viewed by some as a detrimental force creating congestion and obstruction. A student (male, 20s) at the nearby University of Lagos described the effect of Wednesday and Sunday gatherings:

> The moment they [MFM worshippers] get out, pedestrians block everywhere and there is no movement of vehicles … When a non-church member wants to get out, he might spend 30–45 minutes just to get to the gate!

Despite some infrastructural 'concessions', for instance, roadworks supported by MFM, and increased securitisation, the cost of cohabitation has led many to relocate. Estate agents describe a process akin to 'blockbusting', as the cumulative burden of noise, congestion and moral surveillance compels non-members to sell. One surveyor explained:

> Many people left the area when the church started … when the noise and traffic was too much they were just forced to sell.

Yet this reterritorialisation does not benefit all members equally. Ironically, some MFM adherents struggle to find affordable housing within the very neighbourhood the church has helped to revalorise. As one member (male in his 40s) put it:

> What makes me angry is the way the rents are here. It's on the high side, the rents are expensive. Because it's a church environment and it's Lagos. They believe everybody wants to come closer to the church which is in this area … so we have to pay the price.

One of the key reasons for rising rents and property prices in Onike is that MFM frequently makes offers well above market rates for plots and buildings in and around the area, as documented in our fieldwork and interviews with local estate agents. These purchasing practices have contributed to the revalorisation of land and the gradual remaking of the neighbourhood's social composition. As MFM's proximity to government and elite networks grows, so too do its ambitions for spatial dominance.

Yet, these ambitions are continually negotiated and constrained by the social complexity of Onike – a neighbourhood where plural identities and livelihoods persist despite encroachment.

Concluding points: Religious urbanisation and 'gentrifying' dynamics in question

As noted at the beginning of the paper, the spatial and social transformations underway in Onike may bear some resemblance to processes of gentrification, as have been identified as such by some urban planners, consultants or researchers keen to critically assess the role played by religious urbanisation in mega-city Lagos. However, what is occurring cannot be subsumed neatly under the category of 'gentrification' as conventionally defined in Euro-American urban literature. Rather, it speaks to a more intricate set of dynamics unfolding across interrelated spatial scales and multiple temporalities, in which religious institutions act not simply as moral authorities, but as spatial entrepreneurs embedded within wider regimes of informality, state fragmentation and speculative urbanism.

As such, their role challenges the dominant frameworks through which neoliberal urbanisation is typically theorised – especially those that foreground state (re)territorialisation and market liberalisation as the principal engines of urban transformation (Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Peck et al., 2013). While these processes remain significant, the Lagos case illustrates how religious institutions operate as key intermediaries within what we might call a religio-political economy, where governance gaps, fractured regulatory authority and deeply spiritualised moral economies converge to produce new urban forms.

As Obadare (2018) and Ukah (2011) have shown, Pentecostal churches in Nigeria maintain close linkages to political and economic power, and increasingly deploy a 'market-friendly' aesthetic and corporate mode of governance. This form of religiously driven spatial transformation (in an area valued for its central location) bears certain similarities to what has been theorised as gentrification. According to Savage et al. (2003), gentrification typically involves a fourfold process: displacement, aesthetic and infrastructural transformation, the influx of residents with distinct lifestyle preferences and the revaluation of property. In Onike, some of these features are undeniably observable. Yet, there are also key differences. For one, the process is driven not primarily by private market actors or aesthetic logics, but by institutions whose legitimacy is grounded in moral and spiritual claims. Moreover, the displacement of low-income or informal actors is not merely an economic effect, but is often underwritten by extra-economic force – through spiritual authority, moral discourses and the selective application of regulatory power (Gillespie, 2016; Ghertner, 2015).

These differences also distinguish our case from existing accounts of 'religious gentrification'. Unlike Luz's (2022) study of a religious Jewish middle class displacing lower-status residents in Acre, urban change in Onike has not entailed the replacement of one residential class by a higher-status one; former lower-class residents such as the 'area boys' have instead been incorporated into an 'MFM-ised' neighbourhood in which it is a particular brand of Pentecostalism, rather than any class faction, that seeks dominance. In this respect, our case sits closer to Karaman's (2013: 3413–3414) reading of religiously inflected urban change in Istanbul as 'urban neoliberalism with Islamic characteristics', in which an Islamist political

rationality and a neoliberal programme advance in alignment; one might speak, by analogy, of an urban neoliberalism with neo-Pentecostal characteristics, in which state and churches do not so much collaborate as tolerate and quietly enable one another, each enhancing its legitimacy while pursuing distinct ends. Like Shmaryahu-Yeshurun (2025: 2396–2397), who shows how ethno-national and religious renewal projects rely on the capitalist logic of gentrification, we favour a 'flexible and focused' perspective that dispenses with unnecessary qualifiers; consistent with this, we remain 'agnostic' as to whether Onike amounts to gentrification proper, holding that it exhibits some, but not all, of its characteristics.

A key aspect here is that neighbourhood change is driven not by an incoming, wealthier population but by a single religious institution's steady accumulation of land and (mostly non-residential) buildings, which itself drives up prices. A second, related aspect concerns the fact that Pentecostal mega-churches act not so much as captors of the Nigerian state, but rather as a 'legitimating force' situated between state and civil society, as Obadare (2018: 15) puts it. MFM's capacity to accumulate land, enclose streets and build ahead of – or without – authorisation is therefore best understood not as the reward for a discrete political transaction per se, but as an ordinary dividend of the 'Pentecostal Republic', reflecting the deference that prominent Pentecostal institutions command.[8] For this reason, we would like to position the Onike case within larger discussions linking religious urbanisation and 'informal elite urbanism'. This suggests the need to approach these changes not as simple variations of Western gentrification, but as part of a more complex genealogy of urban transformation, one in which the terrain of land, legitimacy and belonging is being reconfigured by religious actors operating at the intersection of (elite) informality, entrepreneurialism and state dynamics. As Ghertner (2015) warns, transplanting gentrification theory 'wholesale' onto cities of the Global South risks flattening these specific dynamics. In short, while the effects of religious urbanisation may 'mimic' some features of gentrification, they are grounded in a distinct religio-political logic. Religious actors, like MFM, embody a hybrid position: at once entrepreneurial and moral, informal and institutional, spiritual and speculative. It is this hybridity, rather than any direct analogy with Western processes, that defines the urban transformation we observe in Onike.

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Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University of Kent Research Ethics Committee (approval number SRCEA ID 194) on 13 Dec 2017. Project title: *Religious urbanisation and infrastructural lives in African mega-cities: moral economies of development in Kinshasa and Lagos.*

Consent to participate

Written and/or oral informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with

the approved ethical guidelines of the University of Kent Research Ethics Committee.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the conceptualisation and design of the study.

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Data availability statements

Due to the ethnographic nature of the research and the impossibility of fully anonymising certain field materials collected at the Mountain of Fire and Miracles (MFM) site in Lagos, the underlying qualitative data cannot be shared publicly. Summary data and anonymised excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Notes

1. To protect participants' anonymity, all names in this article are pseudonyms. Certain identifying details have also been altered.
2. See https://rua-project.ac.uk.
3. Initially called 'Redemption Camp' (the name change signalling both its transformation into a more permanent enclave and the vision of city-making it embodies).
4. Interviews were conducted in English and Yoruba. Archival research at the town planning office gave access to internal, non-public plans and records, which could be consulted but not reproduced. Triangulating these sources underpins the article's claims.
5. While the local presence of the church dates back to 1994, our census suggests that close to 70% of all MFM properties have been acquired in the last decade. To document this rapid expansion, in 2018 we conducted a comprehensive transect walk of the neighbourhood to map MFM-owned/managed properties using Epicollect + software, identifying 28 individual buildings. We updated this spatial inventory in 2023, documenting 22 existing properties (some having been merged since 2018), 8 under construction and several vacant plots acquired by the church.
6. This echoes accounts from some non-MFM members, who observed that many Pentecostal pastors conduct themselves like 'celebrities', moving through the streets surrounded by bodyguards or 'human shields'.
7. Around 250 US Dollars at the time of fieldwork.
8. Pentecostal mega-churches enjoy a level of political and regulatory deference not extended in the same way to more established mainstream denominations. Planners highlighted to us the contrast with St. Dominic's Catholic Church in the same area, noting that it Had obtained all appropriate planning approvals for the church building and commercial approvals for its bookshop.

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