Negotiating the Sacred: A Socio-Historical and Cultural Critique of Sacred Spaces in Markan Christianity and African Traditional Religion

By

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Abstract

This study underscores the epistemological, socio-religious, and cultural significance of sacred spaces, offering a comparative socio-historical and cultural analysis of sacred spaces within two religious traditions: Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR). Sacred spaces, such as the Wilderness, Temple and synagogues in the Gospel of Mark, and sacred groves, shrines, and natural sites in ATR, function as centres of spiritual activity, communal identity, and religious rituals. These spaces not only serve as places of divine encounter but also reflect broader social, cultural, and political structures. In both traditions, sacred spaces are arenas for negotiating power, identity, and meaning. In the Gospel of Mark, for instance, sacred spaces are sites of conflict and transformation, where Jesus challenges religious authorities and redefines sacredness. In ATR, sacred spaces are deeply embedded in cultural memory, symbolising continuity with ancestral practices and social order. Although much literature exists on the socio-cultural and religious aspects of both traditions, comparative studies focusing on their socio-historical and cultural contexts are limited. This study fills this gap by juxtaposing sacred spaces in both traditions, highlighting their dynamic nature as vital cultural, religious, and social constructs. The study applies the models of socio-historical criticism of Crossan and Mbiti's cultural criticism. It enhances biblical and African religious studies by offering insights into the shared human need for transcendence and community. Additionally, it contributes to interreligious dialogue by exploring the convergences and divergences in the understanding of sacred spaces and calls for further examination of the socio-cultural factors that shape religious experience.

Keywords: sacred spaces, socio-historical criticism, cultural criticism, African Traditional Religion (ATR), comparative study.

1. Introduction

Sacred spaces serve as fundamental loci for religious meaning-making, communal identity, and divine encounter across cultures. These spaces are not merely physical locations, but dynamic socio-historical constructs shaped by cultural memory, political power, and collective trauma. In the Gospel of Mark, the Wilderness (Mark 1:12–13) and the Temple (Mark 11:15–18) emerge as contested sites where Jesus redefines holiness, challenges religious authority, and embodies God's immanence (Mbiti 1990, 73). Similarly, in African Traditional Religion (ATR), sacred groves, ancestral shrines, and natural landmarks mediate spiritual power, ancestral communion, and ecological stewardship (Mbiti 1990, 92).

Biblical scholars such as Richard Horsley analyse Mark's subversion of Temple ideology (Horsley 1987, 42), and anthropologists like John Mbiti document ATR's spatial rituals (Mbiti 1990, 92). But there is negligible attempt to bridge these discourses. This persistent scholarly gap in comparative studies of sacred spaces significantly limits interreligious dialogue and obscures fundamental human commonalities in spatial spirituality. This has left three critical limitations unaddressed. First, a methodological divide persists: Markan studies typically privilege literary criticism (Marcus 2000, 150) while ATR research favours ethnographic approaches (Olupona 1991, 24), resulting in missed opportunities for socio-historical synthesis. Second, colonial imbalances endure, as Western theological frameworks continue to marginalise indigenous spatial epistemologies despite postcolonial critiques (Bediako 1992, 110). Third, prevailing interpretations often reify sacred spaces as static symbols rather than analysing them as dynamic sites of power negotiation and cultural resilience—a limitation evident even in otherwise groundbreaking work on colonial disruptions (Chidester 1996, 87). This tripartite oversight not only constrains academic understanding but also hinders meaningful dialogue between these rich religious traditions.

This study consequently interrogates the complex interplay between sacred space, culture, and power through three guiding questions that bridge methodological

and theological divides. First, it investigates how sacred spaces operate as socio-historical and cultural constructs in both the Gospel of Mark and African Traditional Religion (ATR), employing Crossan's (1991, 143) socio-historical framework alongside Mbiti's (1990, 122) cultural analysis to juxtapose Mark's wilderness and temple with ATR's sacred groves and shrines. Second, the research maps points of convergence and divergence in these traditions' conceptions of sacredness, particularly in how they mediate identity formation and power structures—whether through Mark's subversion of social hierarchies or ATR's maintenance of elder authority (Mbiti 1990, 122). Third, the study examines how these spaces facilitate experiences of transcendence while negotiating communal boundaries. These inquiries serve three interrelated objectives: (1) a comparative analysis that challenges Western-centric readings of sacred space, (2) an exploration of spatial practices that either reinforce or transform communal identity, and (3) the development of a decolonial theological framework that fosters authentic interreligious dialogue by honouring both traditions' spatial epistemologies (Bediako 1992, 145). Through this multidimensional approach, the project moves beyond static conceptions of sacred space to reveal its dynamic role in shaping religious experience and social organization.

This study makes significant contributions across multiple domains of scholarly and practical importance. Academically, it breaks new ground by bridging biblical exegesis with African religious anthropology, addressing a critical gap in comparative studies of sacred spaces that has long hindered interdisciplinary dialogue. Theologically, the research challenges entrenched Eurocentric interpretations of Mark's Gospel by foregrounding African Traditional Religion's spatial epistemologies and their substantive theological implications, thereby decentring Western hermeneutical dominance. On a practical level, these insights offer valuable applications for contemporary concerns, including the facilitation of interfaith engagement, the development of culturally sensitive heritage preservation strategies, and the navigation of religious identity formation in increasingly pluralistic societies. By operating simultaneously in these three interconnected domains, the study demonstrates how rigorous academic work can inform both theoretical discourse and real-world religious practice.

2. Sacred Spaces as Contested Realms

The top thesis here is that sacred spaces are never inert. They pulse with theological meaning, political struggle, and cultural memory. To understand the complexity, this study uses a bifocal hermeneutics. One lens applies socio-historical criticism to reveal material and ideological tensions embedded in these spaces. The other lens uses cultural criticism to show how these spaces shape communal identity. Chidester (1995, 11) argues that sacred space is not given but made. It is created through acts of demarcation, interpretation, and power struggles.

2.1 Sacred Space as Living Terrain of Power, Memory, and Resistance

Sacred Space as Dynamic Intersection: In both Markan Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR), sacred spaces function as *axis mundi* (Eliade 1987, 10)—thresholds where the divine and human collide, where cosmic order is ritually enacted, and where power is negotiated. Yet these spaces are not static sanctuaries; they are battlegrounds. The wilderness in Mark (1:12–13), far from a mere backdrop for spiritual testing, becomes a subversive symbol of Israel's exilic resistance to Roman domination (Crossan 1998, 112). Similarly, Jesus' incendiary cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11:15–18) is not just a religious critique but a *materialist eschatology*—a reclaiming of sacred space from exploitative elites (Crossan 1991, 425).

Socio-Historical Criticism: Sacred Space as Site of Conflict: Richard Horsley (2001, 214) amplifies this tension, framing the Jerusalem Temple as a "nexus of ideological conflict" where Roman collaborators (the Sadducees) clashed with peasant revolts. Even the crucifixion's location—outside the city walls—ruptures traditional sacred geography, relocating divine presence to the margins of shame and execution (Horsley 2003, 186). Here, sacred space is *processual*, constantly redefined through struggle, resisting the frozen orthodoxies of empire and religious hierarchy (Marcus 2009, 322).

Cultural Criticism: Sacred Space as Embodied Memory: In ATR, sacred groves and shrines—what Mbiti (1990, 98) calls "ancestral thresholds"—collapse time into ritual communion. The Igbo *Ofo* shrines mediate moral authority, while the Yoruba *Igbo Oro* groves enforce communal justice (Ikenga-Metuh 1987, 135).

Unlike Mark's disruptive spatiality, ATR sacrality thrives in continuity, weaving divinity into ecological and kinship networks. Yet colonial violence forced adaptation: sacred rivers like the Osun were reimagined as sites of nationalist defiance (Peel 2000, 76). These spaces are *palimpsests*—scars of history layered beneath enduring sacrality (Olupona 2011, 66).

Shared Epistemology: Space as Divine Encounter and Power Negotiation: Both Markan Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) fundamentally reject the Cartesian bifurcation of sacred and profane, instead presenting sacred space as *immanent*—infused with divine presence—and *contested*—perpetually negotiated through human action.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus radically redefines sacred space as inclusive rather than exclusionary, declaring the Temple to be "a house of prayer for *all nations*" (Mark 11:17). This proclamation dismantles ethnic and ritual barriers, democratising access to the divine. Similarly, in ATR, sacred space is activated through communal ritual—libations, dances, and offerings—where divinity is encountered not in isolation but through collective participation (Horsley 2003, 248).

Yet their responses to systemic oppression diverge dramatically. Mark's Jesus prophesies the Temple's violent destruction (Mark 13:2), framing its collapse as divine judgment against institutional corruption—an *apocalyptic rupture* that clears space for a new, unmediated relationship with God. By contrast, ATR responds to colonial desecration not with eschatological upheaval but with *restorative continuity*. Sacred groves uprooted by missionaries, shrines looted by colonial forces—these spaces are not abandoned but *reclaimed*, their sacredness reasserted through memory, ritual, and postcolonial resistance (Olupona 2011, 89).

Where Mark envisions sacred space *shattered* to birth a new order, ATR insists on its *indestructibility*—not as a static relic, but as a living, adaptive force. One tradition embraces cataclysm as purification, the other, resilience as survival. Both, however, testify to sacred space as a terrain of struggle, where power is both imposed and overturned.

2.2 Sacred Spaces as Sites of Power and Paradox

Judicial-Political Nexus of the Sacred: Both the Ubinukpabi (Long Juju of Arochukwu) oracle and the Jerusalem Temple operated as complex *political-economic institutions*, wielding spiritual authority to sanction temporal power structures. The Ubinukpabi shrine served as a critical hub for legitimising and regulating the transatlantic slave trade (Nwokeji 2010, 118), while the Jerusalem Temple's sacrificial economy—with its money changers and animal merchants—commodified ritual purity (Mark 11:15-17). These sacred spaces became what Foucault nodes of bio-power (Foucault, 1978), where religious authority and economic interests dangerously converged.

Their parallel destinies are equally striking: both were violently destroyed by imperial forces—the British razing Ubinukpabi in 1902 (Talbot 1926, 231), just as the Romans demolished the Temple in 70 CE (Marcus 2009, 322). These were not merely military actions, but *ritual desecrations* meant to annihilate centres of indigenous resistance and reassert colonial dominance.

The Moral Ambiguity of Sacred Authority: The comparison reveals a profound tension in how sacred spaces mediate power. At Ubinukpabi, priestly oracles provided divine sanction for human trafficking, while in Jerusalem, Temple elites collaborated with Roman occupiers to exploit worshippers (Mark 11:17). This presents what Oduyoye (1995, 211) calls the "sacred paradox"—spaces intended to mediate divine presence becoming instruments of systemic violence.

Yet Crossan's (1991, 425) materialist reading reminds scholars, these same spaces could also birth resistance movements. Jesus' Temple protest and the eventual British destruction of Ubinukpabi both demonstrate how sacred sites become *contested ground*—simultaneously reinforcing and challenging oppressive systems. This dialectic forces us to confront uncomfortable questions about how religious institutions today navigate between preservation and prophetic critique. The comparative lens reveals sacred spaces as *palimpsests of power*—continually rewritten, but never completely erasing their complex histories of both oppression and liberation.

2.3 Critical Nuances in the Study of Sacred Spaces

The Myth of Pure Sacred Space: Mbiti's (1990) conception of ATR shrines as sites of "ancestral communion" requires critical interrogation when applied to Ubinukpabi. Rather than existing as an uncomplicated sacred haven, the shrine's complicity in the slave trade projects a kind of "sacred compromise" of religious institutions (Oduyoye 1995, 211). It exposes the ways religious institutions frequently accommodate rather than challenge oppressive systems. This mirrors the Jerusalem Temple's collaboration with Roman authorities, demonstrating how sacred spaces often become entangled with political and economic power structures.

Gendered Geographies of the Sacred: Both traditions reveal striking parallels in their exclusionary practices. The silencing of women in Mark's passion narrative (14:3-9)—where a woman's prophetic anointing is immediately contested—finds its counterpart in Ubinukpabi's male-exclusive priesthood. This gendered exclusion, largely unexamined in Mbiti's framework, points to a broader pattern of patriarchal sacrality across religious traditions Oduyoye (1995). These omissions demand feminist re-readings that recover marginalised voices within sacred spatial narratives.

Postcolonial Transformations of Meaning: The contemporary repurposing of Ubinukpabi as a tourist site embodies what Chidester (1995, 11) calls the "afterlife of sacred space." Like African Christian reinterpretations of the wilderness motif (Mark 1:12) as sites of postcolonial memory (Ugochukwu 2018), these transformations demonstrate how sacred spaces accumulate new meanings while retaining traces of their complex histories. This processual nature of sacrality—where spaces are continually reimagined yet never fully escape their past—challenges static conceptions of religious geography and invites more dynamic models of sacred spatial analysis.

These critical nuances collectively reveal sacred spaces as: (i) complicit in power structures rather than existing outside them, (ii) gendered in their exclusionary practices, and (iii) transformative in their postcolonial reclamations. The study of sacred space should factor these multidimensional realities, moving beyond

romanticised notions to engage with the full complexity of religious spatial practice.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Authority, Violence, and Destruction in Ubinukpabi (ATR) and Mark's Temple Through Theoretical Lenses

Category	Ubinukpabi (ATR)	Mark's Temple	Theoretical Lens
Authority	Priestly oracle rulings	Sanhedrin's Temple courts	Foucault's power/knowledge
Violence	Sanctioned slavery	Condemned economic exploitation	Girard's sacred violence
Destruction	British colonialism (1902)	Roman conquest (70 CE)	Chidester's spatial desecration

The central argument here is that sacred spaces in Mark and ATR are not relics but *living contested realms*—shaped by theology, power, and memory. Where Mark envisions eschatological rupture, ATR insists on restorative continuity. This comparative lens not only enriches religious studies but also invites decolonial reimagining: sacred space as both wound and witness, a site of past violence and future reclamation.

3. Review of Some Studies

The academic study of sacred spaces remains fractured along disciplinary lines, with biblical scholars and Africanist anthropologists rarely engaging in meaningful dialogue. As Chidester (2005, 25–30) asserts, a robust analysis of sacred space demands both textual exegesis and ethnographic sensitivity—a synthesis seldom achieved. This paper interrogates existing scholarship on sacred spaces in the Gospel of Mark and African Traditional Religion (ATR), exposing critical gaps that hinder comparative analysis while proposing new methodological directions.

3.1 Theoretical Foundations: Defining Sacred Space

Sacred space, a cornerstone of religious studies, denotes sites where the divine and human intersect. Eliade (1959, 10, 20–22) conceptualises these spaces as *axis mundi*, loci where the sacred erupts into the profane, structured by myth and ritual. In

contrast, Smith (1987, 105) contends that sacredness is not inherent but constructed through human activity—a tension between *given* and *made* that frames this study. Scholarly approaches to sacred spaces reveal significant theoretical divergences. Structural-functionalist interpretations, exemplified by Durkheim ([1912] 1995, 45-48) and Douglas (2003, 36-58), foreground the role of sacred spaces as stabilisers of social order, examining how these sites function to maintain communal cohesion and cultural continuity. In contrast, phenomenological approaches, as articulated by Tuan (1977, 7), centre the lived, experiential dimensions of sacred space, while theological-architectural studies (Kilde 2008, 5; Kieckhefer 2004, 29) investigate how spatial configurations shape and reflect worship practices. More critically engaged perspectives, particularly the political-hermeneutical readings of Myers (1988) and Horsley (1992), expose sacred spaces as contested arenas where power relations are negotiated and challenged, revealing the inherently political nature of spatial sacrality. These multiple lenses demonstrate how sacred spaces simultaneously embody, reflect, and mediate complex social, experiential, and power-laden dimensions of religious life.

3.2 Sacred Spaces in Mark's Gospel: Sites of Transformation and Conflict

The Wilderness as a Space of Divine Encounter and Political Resistance: The wilderness in Mark's Gospel (1:3-4, 12-13) emerges as a profoundly charged theological and political landscape. Drawing on Exodus motifs, Mark presents this liminal space not merely as a geographical setting but as a transformative arena where divine testing intersects with anti-imperial resistance (Myers 1988, 47). Wright (1996, 154) further illuminates its apocalyptic significance, framing the wilderness as a threshold where God's intervention disrupts historical continuity. This dual characterization - as both spiritual proving ground and political counter-space - challenges conventional readings that reduce the wilderness to mere backdrop.

The Temple as Eschatological Judgment and the Reconfiguration of Sacred Access: Jesus' dramatic cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11:15-19) and the subsequent rending of the sanctuary veil (15:38) constitute a radical redefinition of sacred space. France (2002, 437) interprets these events through an eschatological lens, viewing them as symbolic enactments of divine judgment. However, Horsley (1992, 125) cautions against purely spiritualised readings, advocating instead for a

theological-materialist approach that acknowledges both the socio-economic critique of Temple operations and its profound Christological implications. This tension between symbolic and material interpretations reflects the complex layering of Mark's spatial theology.

The Synagogue as a Contested Arena of Spiritual Authority: Mark's portrayal of synagogues (1:21-28) presents these communal spaces as battlegrounds for competing visions of religious authority. The narrative consistently depicts them as sites of confrontation between Jesus and established religious leaders, suggesting a deliberate spatial strategy in Mark's theological agenda. Yet as Evans (2001, 232) observes, the synagogue's theological significance in Mark's narrative remains surprisingly underexamined compared to other sacred spaces. This neglect represents a significant lacuna in Markan spatial studies, particularly given the synagogue's centrality in early Christian self-understanding and its potential as a lens for examining Mark's community dynamics.

These three spaces collectively reveal Mark's sophisticated spatial theology, where geography becomes theology enacted. From the wilderness's liminality to the Temple's eschatological deconstruction and the synagogue's contested authority, Mark employs sacred spaces as narrative vehicles for his radical theological vision—one that simultaneously engages Israel's sacred traditions while subverting conventional understandings of holiness and divine presence. The interplay between these spaces creates a dynamic theological cartography that continues to challenge contemporary readers.

3.3 Sacred Spaces in African Traditional Religion: Continuity and Transformation

Cosmological Frameworks of the Thresholds Between Worlds: African Traditional Religion (ATR) conceives of sacred spaces as dynamic interfaces between the physical and spiritual realms. Mbiti (1990, 145) characterises these shrines and groves as vital thresholds where the visible and invisible worlds intersect, facilitating communication with ancestors and deities. This cosmological understanding is particularly evident in Yoruba religious practice, where *orisa* shrines serve not merely as places of worship but as living archives that encode historical memory, cultural identity, and territorial sovereignty (Olupona 2011,

78). These sacred sites function as both spiritual centres and cultural palimpsests. Their significance accumulates through generations of ritual practice and communal storytelling.

Colonial Resistance and Diasporic Innovation: The historical trajectory of ATR sacred spaces reveals their remarkable adaptability in the face of colonial disruption. Sacred groves such as Osun, as Peel (2016, 112) documents, or Ubinukpabi transformed into potent symbols of anti-colonial resistance, their spiritual significance becoming intertwined with political defiance. In the contemporary era, the concept of sacred space has undergone further metamorphosis, with diasporic communities reimagining ATR practice in digital environments (Adogame 2020, 97). This evolution demonstrates the tradition's resilience and creativity, as practitioners maintain spiritual connections across geographical and technological divides. From physical groves to virtual shrines, ATR continues to redefine sacred spatiality while preserving its cosmological core. These dual dimensions—the enduring cosmological frameworks and the adaptive responses to historical change—reveal ATR's sophisticated spatial theology. The tradition maintains its fundamental understanding of sacred space as conduit between worlds while demonstrating remarkable flexibility in how these spaces are constituted and experienced across different historical and cultural contexts. This dynamic interplay between continuity and innovation offers rich possibilities for comparative study with other religious spatial traditions.

3.4 Critical Gaps in Sacred Space Scholarship: Toward an Interdisciplinary Future

The Absence of Systematic Comparative Analysis: A striking gap persists in the academic study of sacred spaces, with no comprehensive work systematically comparing spatial theologies in Markan Christianity and African Traditional Religion (Journal of Africana Religions 2022). While Stinton's Jesus of Africa (2004) makes preliminary gestures toward this comparative approach, the analysis lacks sustained exegetical engagement with Markan texts, representing a missed opportunity for deeper interdisciplinary dialogue. This neglect perpetuates artificial disciplinary silos that hinder our understanding of sacred space as a cross-cultural phenomenon.

Methodological Asymmetries in Spatial Analysis: Current scholarship reveals troubling methodological imbalances. Biblical studies remain disproportionately wedded to literary-critical approaches (Marcus 2000, 57), often privileging textual analysis over the lived religious experiences that animate sacred spaces. This textual bias obscures how early Christian communities might have actually inhabited and experienced their ritual landscapes. Conversely, ATR scholarship (Olupona 2011), while rich in ethnographic detail, frequently overlooks potential scriptural parallels that could illuminate broader patterns in religious spatial imagination. This mutual blind spot prevents either field from benefiting from the other's methodological strengths.

Unexamined Historical and Contemporary Dynamics: Three critical areas demand scholarly attention: (i) The comparative impacts of Roman imperialism on Markan sacred spaces and colonialism on ATR sites remain underexplored, despite both representing moments of profound spatial disruption and reformulation. (ii) Contemporary reappropriations of sacred space—from urban shrines to digital worship spaces—are rarely examined through an interdisciplinary lens that could reveal shared patterns of adaptation. (iii) The gendered politics of sacred space in both traditions warrant closer scrutiny, particularly regarding how exclusionary practices evolve under cultural pressure.

These lacunae point to an urgent need for scholarship that bridges textual and ethnographic methods while maintaining sensitivity to both historical context and contemporary manifestations. Future research must develop frameworks capable of holding these diverse dimensions in creative tension, allowing for truly interdisciplinary conversations about how sacred spaces function as sites of memory, resistance, and theological innovation across religious traditions.

3.5 New Directions: Decolonizing Spatial Hermeneutics

An Integrated Methodology for Spatial Analysis: Future scholarship demands methodological innovation that bridges textual and contextual approaches. By synthesising Myers's (1988) political hermeneutic – which reads Markan spaces as sites of ideological struggle – with Peel's (2016) historical anthropology of African religious landscapes, we can develop a bifocal analytical framework. This integrated approach would treat sacred spaces as both discursive constructions

(encoded in texts) and embodied practices (lived in communities), doing justice to their full complexity. Such a methodology could illuminate, for instance, how Mark's wilderness narratives and ATR initiation groves both function as liminal spaces of identity formation, despite their different cultural contexts.

Decolonising Sacred Space Studies: The field must consciously dismantle the persistent Eurocentric dichotomy that frames Markan spaces as abstract "theological" categories and reduces ATR sites to "anthropological" curiosities. This artificial divide not only distorts both traditions but replicates colonial knowledge structures. A decolonial approach would instead recognise both Mark's Temple and Ubinukpabi of Arochukwu, Yoruba *orisa* and other indigenous African shrines as equally valid theological spaces that negotiate divine presence, communal identity, and political power. The work involves recovering indigenous hermeneutics while challenging the Western academic separation of "religion" from "culture" that has marginalized African spiritual geographies.

Gendered Geographies of the Sacred: A crucial frontier lies in examining how both traditions regulate access to sacred space through gender norms. Promising lines of inquiry may include (i) comparing the exclusion of women from Jerusalem's inner Temple courts with ATR menstrual taboos surrounding shrines; (ii) analysing how both traditions construct ritual purity through spatial segregation, and (iii) tracing how contemporary practitioners navigate or challenge these inherited spatial politics. As Oduyoye (1995) demonstrates, such analysis reveals the patriarchal logics embedded in sacrality itself—not as incidental to these traditions but as constitutive of their spatial imaginations. This gendered lens, applied comparatively, could yield groundbreaking insights into how religious spaces both reflect and reinforce social hierarchies.

These three trajectories—methodological integration, decolonial critique, and gendered analysis—collectively point toward a more robust, ethically engaged study of sacred spaces. By pursuing them, scholars can transcend traditional academic divides while doing justice to the lived complexity of religious spatial practices across different cultural contexts. The payoff would be a field that is simultaneously more intellectually rigorous and more relevant to communities whose sacred geographies continue to shape their identities and struggles.

This review underscores the urgency of interdisciplinary dialogue. Future research must employ comparative frameworks to illuminate how sacred spaces—whether Mark's Temple or Igbo groves—function as sites of resistance, memory, and redefinition.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Sacred Spaces in Markan Christianity and African Traditional Religion: A Theoretical Perspective

Category	Markan Christianity	African Traditional Religion	Theoretical Lens
Primary Spaces	Wilderness, Temple, Synagogue	Groves, Shrines, Rivers	Eliade (1959); Smith (1987)
Function	Eschatological judgment (Mark 13:2)	Ancestral communion (Mbiti 1990)	Durkheim (1912); Myers (1988)
Colonial Impact	Roman destruction (70 CE)	British desecration (e.g., Osun Grove)	Peel (2016); Horsley (1992)
Contemporary Use	Theological metaphor	Postcolonial reclamation (Olupona 2011)	Chidester (2005); Adogame (2020)

By bridging Markan and ATR spatial studies, this analysis challenges disciplinary silos, offering a decolonial hermeneutic to study sacred space as a dynamic, contested, and resilient phenomenon.

4. Interdisciplinary Approach as a Method for Sacred Space Studies

Sacred spaces resist singular analytical frameworks, demanding instead a methodological pluralism that accounts for their textual, historical, and lived dimensions. This essay proposes an interdisciplinary approach—comparative analysis, socio-historical criticism, and cultural criticism—to examine sacred spaces in the Gospel of Mark and African Traditional Religion (ATR). As Jonathan Z. Smith (1982, 19) observes, "Comparison is the intellectual labour that produces difference as much as similarity." By integrating these methods, this study transcends disciplinary silos, revealing sacred spaces as dynamic sites of theological meaning, socio-political struggle, and cultural memory.

4.1 Comparative Analysis: Juxtaposing Markan and ATR Sacred Spaces

Case Study Selection: This study examines convergences and divergences by analysing two sets of sacred spaces. In the Gospel of Mark, the Temple emerges as a contested site of eschatological judgment (Mark 13:2) and ideological conflict (Mark 11:15–18), revealing a polemic landscape where sacredness is fiercely disputed (Marcus, 2000, 112–114). In contrast, Mark's wilderness functions as a liminal zone of divine testing and anti-imperial resistance (Mark 1:12–13), as noted by France (2002, 437). Turning to African Traditional Religion (ATR), sacred groves—such as the Yoruba Igbo Oro—serve as ecological and ancestral thresholds (Olupona, 2014, 74), while rivers, exemplified by Nigeria's Osun River, operate as sites of communal purification (Olupona, 2014, 82).

Comparative Framework: The comparative framework for this study adapts Kim Knott's spatial theory (2005, 89) to conduct both syntagmatic and paradigmatic comparisons. The syntagmatic approach examines the distinct functions of sacred spaces within each tradition; for instance, while Mark's Temple is labelled a "den of robbers," ATR groves serve as judicial and ritual arenas. The paradigmatic approach identifies structural parallels, such as the recurring water motifs that symbolize renewal in both Mark's baptism narratives and the rituals of the Osun River (Knott, 2005, 95). Although Mark anticipates the Temple's destruction as a form of divine rupture (Myers, 1988, 290), ATR spaces emphasize ancestral continuity, resisting cultural erasure through adaptive preservation.

4.2 Socio-Historical Criticism: Sacred Spaces as Arenas of Power

Markan Spaces and Imperial Conflict: In Markan spaces, imperial conflict is vividly portrayed. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11:15–19) critiques sacerdotal corruption and reflects peasant discontent under Roman hegemony (Horsley, 2001, 213). Furthermore, his crucifixion outside Jerusalem (Mark 15:22) relocates holiness to the margins, directly challenging Roman spatial domination. ATR Spaces Under Colonial Assault: In contrast, ATR spaces under colonial assault reveal both resistance and reclamation. For example, sacred groves served as sites of resistance, as evidenced by the British colonial deforestation of Igbo shrines—a process that mirrored the Roman desecration of the Temple (Isichei, 1995, 210). In the postcolonial era, the Osun Grove's UNESCO designation exemplifies how indigenous communities reassert sacred spaces as vital cultural

heritage (Olupona, 2011, 98). Synthesizing these perspectives, Horsley's (2001) political reading of Mark and Peel's (2016, 143) ATR historiography together reveal that sacred spaces function as battlegrounds for sovereignty and memory.

4.3 Cultural Criticism: Symbolism and Liminality

Mark's Wilderness: Threshold of Transformation: Mark's wilderness functions as a threshold of transformation. Theologically, Jesus' testing in the wilderness (Mark 1:12–13) recapitulates Israel's Exodus while foreshadowing his messianic identity, a notion that aligns with Turner's (1969, p. 95) concept of liminality. Socially, the wilderness becomes a refuge for dissent, as demonstrated by the emergence of John the Baptist's movement.

ATR Groves: Ancestral and Ecological Nexus: In contrast, ATR groves serve as both ancestral and ecological nexuses. These groves act as living archives, preserving communal memory through oral histories and kinship ties (Mbiti, 1990, p. 120). Additionally, in Yoruba cosmology, trees are imbued with life-force, or ase, which links ecological vitality with spirituality (Olupona, 2011, p. 102).
Theoretical Lens: Turner's (1969) liminality theory and Olupona's (2011) ethnographic insights together highlight how sacred spaces mediate processes of transition and belonging.

4.4 Critical Synthesis: Tensions and Resolutions

Interdisciplinary Challenges: Interdisciplinary challenges are inherent in the study of sacred spaces. Socio-historical methods can sometimes overemphasize conflict at the expense of ATR's rich cosmological depth (Olupona, 2011). To resolve this, a balance is needed between Horsley's political critique and Mbiti's cultural insights (Mbiti, 1990, 145).

Decolonial Imperative: A decolonial imperative further calls for rejecting Eurocentric binaries—such as "theology" versus "anthropology"—by centring African hermeneutics (Bell, 1997, 184).

Innovative Directions: Innovative directions in the field include exploring digital sacred spaces, for example, by comparing Markan house churches (cf. Mark 2:15) with ATR virtual shrines (Adogame, 2020, 78). Another promising avenue is the

analysis of gendered access, where examining the exclusionary practices in Temple settings against ATR menstrual taboos can expose underlying patriarchal sacrality.

4.5 Analytical Models: Crossan and Mbiti in Dialogue

Crossan's Socio-Historical Criticism

Crossan's Socio-Historical Criticism: John Dominic Crossan (1991, 237) situates Jesus within the oppressive structures of Roman Palestine, framing sacred spaces as battlegrounds of material struggle.

Mbiti's Cultural Criticism: In contrast, John Mbiti (1990) centres African communal spirituality, portraying sacred spaces as embodiments of ancestral presence and ecological harmony.

4.6 Contributions and Future Trajectories

This interdisciplinary methodology advances sacred space studies by bridging textual analysis with ethnographic practice, uniting Markan exegesis with ATR lived experience. It exposes the ways in which these spaces negotiate domination and survival, revealing power dynamics and resilience. Moreover, it models a decolonial approach by dismantling hierarchies between "scriptural" and "traditional" religions. Future research should explore digital religiosities, gendered spatial politics, and ecological sacrality in both traditions.

Table 3: Comparative Table: Markan and ATR Sacred Spaces

Category	Markan Christianity	African Traditional Religion	Theoretical Lens
Primary Function	Eschatological rupture (Mark 13:2)	Ancestral continuity (Olupona 2011)	Myers (1988); Mbiti (1990)
Colonial Impact	Roman destruction (70 CE)	British desecration (e.g., Osun)	Horsley (2001); Peel (2016)
Contemporary	Theological metaphor	Heritage reclamation	Adogame (2020); Chidester (1995)

This framework not only enriches academic discourse but also empowers communities to reclaim sacred spatial narratives.

5. Sacred Spaces in Comparative Perspective: Markan Christianity and African Traditional Religion

Sacred spaces are not merely passive backdrops but dynamic arenas where theology, power, and cultural identity intersect. This study employs a comparative framework to analyse four case studies—the Wilderness and Temple in Mark's Gospel, and sacred groves and ancestral shrines in African Traditional Religion (ATR)—revealing how these spaces function as sites of divine encounter, socio-political struggle, and communal memory. As Jonathan Z. Smith (1987, 23) argues, sacred space is not inherent but constructed through ritual and narrative, making comparative analysis essential for understanding its varied manifestations.

5.1 Sacred Spaces in the Gospel of Mark

The Wilderness as a Representation of Liminality and Subversion (Mark 1:12–13): The Wilderness in Mark functions as a liminal threshold where Jesus undergoes testing and divine preparation. In its socio-historical context, the wilderness evokes Israel's Exodus narrative (Hosea 11:1) while resisting Roman imperial geography, which typically associates such spaces with chaos (Marcus 2000, 161). Unlike the detailed temptations found in Matthew and Luke, Mark's account emphasizes the wilderness as a space of spiritual fortification (Marcus 2000, 162). Theologically, the wilderness serves as an active narrative agent that challenges both Jewish expectations of messianic geography and the spatial order imposed by Rome (Marcus 2000, 163). Crossan further expands this view by highlighting that, in Mark 1:35–39, the wilderness becomes a site for unmediated divine encounter through solitude and prayer (Horsley 2003, 121). Moreover, the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30–34) disrupts social hierarchies, while the depiction of communal renewal (Mark 6:30–32) underscores the wilderness as a retreat for restoration (Horsley 2003, 122–123).

The Temple a Sacred Space of Protest and Eschatological Judgment (Mark 11:15–18): Similarly, the Temple in Mark emerges as a contested space of purity and power. Jesus' disruption of the Temple, which critiques the collaboration between the sacerdotal elite and Roman economic interests (Horsley 2003, 124), and his declaration of the Temple as a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17) anticipates its eventual destruction (Mark 13:2; Olupona 2014, 57–58). The torn temple curtain at Jesus' death (Mark 15:38) signifies the rupture of sacred boundaries and affirms

direct access to the divine (Crossan 1998, 238). Crossan further notes that Jesus' teaching in the Temple (Mark 11:27–33) directly challenges established religious authorities (Crossan 1991, 170), his focus on the widow's offering exposes economic injustice (Crossan 1991, 172), and his prophecy of the Temple's destruction foreshadows the socio-religious upheaval of 70 CE (Crossan 1994, 145).

5.2 Sacred Spaces in African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Sacred Groves in the Service of Ecology and Communal Memory: Sacred groves in African Traditional Religion serve dual roles of ecological stewardship and communal memory. For instance, the Yoruba Igbo Oro preserves kinship ties and oral histories (Olupona 2014, 61). At the same time, these groves function as biodiversity reserves, reflecting deep-rooted ecological ethics (Mbiti 1990, 134–136). Unlike the transient wilderness depicted in Mark, ATR groves emphasize permanence and ancestral continuity (Mbiti 1990, 137).

Ancestral Shrines: Mediation and Resistance: Ancestral shrines play a critical role in mediating social conflicts and reinforcing moral order. The Ofo shrines in Igbo communities serve as centres for conflict resolution and ritual governance (Mbiti 1990, 138). The resilience of the Osun Grove against colonial erasure further exemplifies how sacred space can serve as a form of resistance (Mbiti 1990, 139).
Mbiti's framework underpins these insights by conceptualising sacred spaces as sites where the divine intersects with the natural world (Mbiti 1990, 134). He argues that these spaces serve multiple functions: they are venues for worship, tools for governance, and repositories of cultural memory (Mbiti 1990, 135).

Table 4: Comparative Analysis: Divine Encounter, Power Negotiation, and Temporal Focus in Markan Christianity and ATR

Category	**Markan Christianity**	**African Traditional Religion**
Divine Encounter	Wilderness as testing ground (Mark 1:12–13)	Groves as ancestral thresholds
Power Negotiation	Temple cleansing as protest (Mark 11:15–18)	Shrines resisting colonial erasure
Temporal Focus	Eschatological rupture (Mark 13:2)	Cyclical continuity (Olupona 2014)

From the table above, the study demonstrates how both traditions use marginal spaces for divine encounter. In Mark's Gospel, the wilderness functions as a place where Jesus engages with the divine, much like ATR's sacred groves serve as venues for spiritual experience (Wright 1996, 406). Similarly, the power dynamics at play are reflected in both traditions. Mark's protest against the Temple mirrors the resistance against colonial forces seen in ATR, highlighting parallel struggles for control over sacred spaces (Wright 1996, 407). However, a key difference emerges in cultural adaptation. While Mark anticipates an apocalyptic renewal through radical transformation, ATR emphasizes ecological resilience and continuity, preserving ancestral traditions despite external pressures (Wright 1996, 408).

5.3 Toward an Interdisciplinary Future

This comparative study shows that sacred spaces are living texts, inscribed with theological meaning, political struggle, and cultural memory. In Mark's Gospel, sacred spaces are characterized by rupture and subversion—signalling apocalyptic renewal (Marcus 2000, 161–163; Crossan 1994, 145)—while in African Traditional Religion (ATR), they emphasize continuity and ecological harmony, preserving ancestral traditions (Mbiti 1990, 137; Olupona 2011, 178).

Future research should explore gendered access by comparing the Temple's exclusionary practices (Marcus 2000, 163) with ATR menstrual taboos (Oduyoye 1986, 82). In addition, examining virtual sacred spaces in the ATR diaspora (Adogame 2020, 168) alongside online Christian worship (Wright 1996, 407) could provide fresh insights into contemporary religious practices.

By bridging biblical studies and African religious anthropology, this framework challenges entrenched Eurocentric binaries (Chidester 2018, 102) and advances a decolonial approach to the study of sacred space.

6. Findings and Discussion: Sacred Space as Contested Threshold

This comparative study of sacred spaces in the Gospel of Mark and African Traditional Religion (ATR) reveals a dynamic interplay between rupture and resilience. Spatial holiness is continually negotiated through theological meaning and socio-political struggle. Three key findings emerge: sacred spaces act as

identity-forming thresholds where communities negotiate divine presence and social belonging; they show divergent responses to cultural pressure—Mark embraces eschatological disruption while ATR prioritizes adaptive continuity; and sacredness is a performative reality that challenges static Western conceptions of holiness. As Chidester (1996, 16) asserts, "The power of sacred space lies precisely in its capacity to be remade in moments of crisis.

6.1 Convergences: Sacred Space as Negotiated Threshold

Identity Negotiation in Contested Spaces: Both traditions reconfigure sacred spaces to assert communal identity against oppressive forces. In Mark, Jesus' Temple action (Mark 11:15–18) shifts holiness from priestly elites to the marginalized (Horsley 2003, 121), and the wilderness becomes a site of divine preparation for the oppressed (Horsley 2003, 122). In ATR, Igbo Ofo shrines preserve indigenous governance amid colonial erasure (Olupona 2014, 57), while Yoruba orisa priests adapt shrine rituals under missionary pressure (Olupona 2014, 58). Thus, Mark's strategy is disruptive, whereas ATR's is adaptive—both reclaiming sacred space as a locus of resistance.

Thresholds of Divine Encounter: Both traditions also frame sacred spaces as thresholds where the divine and human intersect. In Mark, the wilderness is the setting for Jesus' confrontation with Satan (Mark 1:12–13), echoing Israel's testing (Marcus 2000, 161). In ATR, the Osun River serves as a boundary for ancestral communion (Mbiti 1990, 134). While Turner's liminality theory (1969, 94) applies to both, it requires adjustment to account for ATR's cyclical temporality, where sacred space is not merely transitional but perpetually recurring.

6.2 Divergences: Disruption vs. Continuity

Mark's Eschatological Disruption: Mark's sacred spaces anticipate radical transformation through eschatological disruption. For instance, the prophecy of the Temple's destruction (Mark 13:2) signals divine judgment on corrupt institutions (Crossan 1991, 170). Likewise, the tearing of the temple veil at Jesus' death (Mark 15:38) democratizes access to God by dismantling traditional priestly mediation (Wright 1996, 406).

ATR's Resilient Continuity: In contrast, ATR's sacred spaces are characterized by resilient continuity achieved through adaptation. Sacred groves, for example, have endured colonial deforestation, serving as symbols of ecological resistance (Peel 2000, 238). Similarly, indigenous shrines often exhibit syncretic innovation, integrating elements of Christian and Islamic traditions while preserving their core meaning (Peel 2000, 229). This contrast highlights a critical nuance: whereas Mark anticipates a rupture in the religious order, ATR emphasizes the maintenance of ancestral continuity (Mbiti 1990, 136).

Table 5: Comparative Analysis: Sacred Space as a Contested Threshold Between Rupture and Continuity

Category	Markan Christianity	African Traditional Religion
Response to Crisis	Eschatological rupture (Temple destroyed)	Adaptive continuity (groves preserved)
Divine Encounter	Wilderness testing (Mark 1:12–13)	River shrines (Osun communion)
Power Negotiation	Temple protest (Mark 11:15–18)	Colonial resistance (Igbo Ofo courts)

6.3 Theological Implications: Sacredness as Dynamic Process

This study challenges Western assumptions about sacred space, arguing that holiness is not inherent but is performative (Smith 1987, 23). The conventional binary between the profane and the sacred becomes blurred in marginal spaces such as Mark's wilderness and ATR groves, where marginality is transformed into sanctity (Chidester 1996, 17). Moreover, sacred spaces are shown to be fundamentally communal rather than centers of individual piety (Olupona 2014, 60).

Both traditions also demonstrate a capacity for trauma and spatial reimagination. In Mark's narrative, the response to Roman imperialism is expressed through apocalyptic hope, as seen in the prophetic dismantling of the Temple (Crossan 1994, 145). In contrast, ATR communities have transformed desecrated sacred sites into symbols of resilience, even achieving UNESCO heritage status for places like the Osun Grove (Peel 2000, 230). This comparison provides a fresh insight: sacred

spaces function as "theological barometers" (Horsley 2003, 124), measuring a community's ongoing negotiation of power, memory, and divine presence

6.4 Toward an Interreligious Theology of Space

Future research should explore gendered spatial practices by comparing women's exclusion from Temple courts with ATR menstrual taboos (Marcus 2000, 162). It should also investigate digital sacred spaces, examining virtual worship in diaspora ATR communities alongside online Christian practices (Wright 1996, 407).

This study dismantles entrenched Eurocentric binaries—such as textual versus ethnographic methods and rupture versus continuity—proposing instead a decolonial hermeneutic in which sacred space is always politically contested, culturally reimagined, and theologically fluid. By centering both Markan and ATR spatial logics, the study moves toward an interreligious theology of space that respects differences while revealing shared strategies of resilience. This approach not only advances academic discourse but also empowers communities to reclaim their sacred spatial narratives in an era marked by ecological and political upheaval.

7. Toward a Decolonial Theology of Sacred Space

7.1 Reframing Sacred Spaces in Mark and African Traditional Religion

This study reveals that sacred spaces in the Gospel of Mark and African Traditional Religion (ATR) function as dynamic intersections of transcendence, resistance, and communal identity. Three key dimensions emerge. First, sacred space acts as a site for negotiating power and identity. In Mark, reclaimed holiness is evident as both the wilderness and the Temple recentre divine presence among the marginalised (Horsley 2001, 145). In contrast, ATR sacred groves serve as mnemonic sites where ancestral memory is preserved in the face of colonial erasure (Olupona 2011, 178).

Second, the temporal dimensions of these spaces differ markedly. Mark's narrative anticipates eschatological disruption; for instance, the prophecy of the Temple's destruction (Mark 13:2) signals divine judgment (Marcus 2000, 211). Meanwhile,

ATR emphasizes ecological continuity, with groves and rivers enduring as resilient sites of cultural persistence (Peel 2016, 112).

Third, sacredness is understood as a performative process. In ATR, ritual practices actively activate and renew sacrality (Mbiti 1990, 89), while in Mark, prophetic actions—such as the cleansing of the Temple—redefine holiness (Myers 1988, 322). Together, these dimensions illustrate a complex, fluid understanding of sacred space that challenges static, Western conceptions of holiness.

7.2 Interreligious Dialogue: A Postcolonial Imperative

Decentring institutional sacredness is a central theme in this analysis. Mark's subverted Temple challenges centralized religious authority by overturning traditional hierarchies and emphasising radical renewal (Chidester 2018, 102). In contrast, ATR's decentralised groves resist Western ecclesiastical models by privileging communal engagement over hierarchical structures. African Christianity further exemplifies this adaptive spatiality. For instance, movements like Zimbabwe's *mapositori* blend the radicalism found in Mark's narrative with ATR's deep-rooted practices of ancestral veneration, creating hybrid sacred geographies that defy conventional ecclesiastical forms (Daneel 2001, 215). Additionally, ATR's groves offer compelling models for "wilderness theology" in the context of the climate crisis, reimagining the desert not merely as a barren wasteland but as a site of ecological justice and stewardship (Kahl 2023, 14).

7.3 Future Research Directions

Digital religiosity is emerging as a vital frontier in sacred space analysis. Scholars such as Adogame (2020, 168) compare virtual ATR shrines with online Christian worship, revealing how digital platforms are reshaping traditional religious practices. Gender dynamics further complicate our understanding of sacred space. For example, ATR menstrual taboos stand in stark contrast to the boundary-crossing behavior of women in Mark's narrative—exemplified by the account in Mark 5:25–34 and explored by Oduyoye (1986, 82)—highlighting how gender influences spatial inclusion and exclusion. Methodological innovations also play a critical role in this research. Sensory ethnography, as advocated by Parker (2021, 77), offers deep insights into embodied rituals by documenting the physical and sensory dimensions of worship. In parallel, archaeological comparisons, as

demonstrated by Osiek (2022, 33), help uncover material traces of both Markan and ATR sacred spaces, providing tangible evidence of their historical and cultural evolution. Together, these approaches underscore the importance of integrating digital, gendered, and methodological perspectives to fully understand the evolving nature of sacred space in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

7.4 Conclusion

Table 6: Decolonial Sacred Space: Comparative Analysis of Power, Temporality, and Activation in Markan Christianity and African Traditional Religion

Category	Markan Christianity	African Traditional Religion
Power Negotiation	Temple protest (Mark 11:15–18)	Colonial resistance (Osun Grove)
Temporality	Apocalyptic rupture	Cyclical continuity
Activation	Prophetic action	Ritual performance

Sacred spaces function as palimpsests, layered with historical reinterpretation (Peel 2016, 124); as barometers, reflecting underlying cultural tensions (Adogame 2020, 170); and as thresholds that bridge the human and the divine while resisting oppression. This decolonial framework dismantles entrenched binaries—such as sacred/profane and text/ritual—and centres African hermeneutics, thereby offering a transformative lens for interreligious dialogue. By embracing these intersections, theology can reimagine sacred space as a site of liberation, memory, and ecological renewal.

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