International Journal of Multidisciplinary in Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN: 3107-9385 | Volume 2 Issue 4, 35-42, October-December 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.64137/31079385/IJMHSS-V2I4P103

Received: 10/09/2026 Revised: 02/10/2026 Accepted: 07/10/2026 Published: 10/10/2026

Original Article

The Anthropology of Sacred Power: Protestantism, Urban Authority, and Political Imagination in Kinshasa

PITSHOU MOLEKA
Managing African Research Network (mRAN) / Earth System Governance, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

ABSTRACT: *Christianity in African cities is not confined to a private domain of belief. Churches participate in social assistance, education, media, moral regulation, family life, economic exchange, and public debate. However, the vocabulary used to describe their influence remains divided among religious authority, charisma, symbolic capital, social networks, civil society, and political patronage. This article develops sacred power as an analytical concept for examining how legitimacy grounded in relationships to the sacred becomes consequential across social domains. Sacred power is defined as the socially recognized capacity to translate sacredly grounded legitimacy into forms of authority that affect judgment, relationships, institutions, resources, and collective action. It is neither a synonym for religious office nor a claim that religious actors automatically possess power. It is a relational, contested process sustained through recognition, embodiment, performance, institutionalization, mediation, circulation, conversion, and challenge. The article develops this argument through a critical reading of anthropological and interdisciplinary scholarship, with Kinshasa as its principal analytical setting. Research on Pentecostal media, gender, embodied practice, and spirituality in the Democratic Republic of the Congo shows how sacred authority is made visible through bodies, technologies, organizational routines, and urban relationships. The article distinguishes churches' direct political activity from their more diffuse role in shaping the moral categories through which authority is evaluated. It argues that sacred power offers a comparative framework for tracing how religious legitimacy is produced, mobilized, converted, and contested across church, household, media, economy, civil society, and political institutions. The framework is conceptual rather than the result of a new, bounded ethnographic study; its propositions require further testing through comparative field research.*

KEYWORDS: *Sacred Power, Anthropology of Religion, Protestantism, Pentecostalism, Kinshasa, Authority, Urban Anthropology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Power is often easiest to identify when it has a formal institutional address. Governments legislate, courts adjudicate, police enforce decisions, political parties organize electoral competition, and bureaucracies administer public resources. However, social life also depends on authorities who hold no constitutional office and possess no formal coercive mandate. A religious leader may be consulted in a family dispute; a prayer group may shape judgments about marriage or illness; a pastor's public assessment may affect a politician's reputation; and a testimony circulated online may alter how a congregation interprets success, suffering, or responsibility. These practices raise an anthropological question: how does authority become socially recognizable, and how does that recognition acquire consequences beyond the setting in which it first emerged?

This article addresses that question through the concept of sacred power. Sacred power is the socially recognized capacity to translate legitimacy grounded in relationships to the sacred into consequential forms of authority. The definition is deliberately social and relational. It does not affirm or deny theological claims about divine agency. Instead, it asks how people, institutions, and audiences recognize particular claims as sacredly grounded, and how such recognition affects practical relationships and collective life.

Sacred power overlaps with religious authority, charisma, symbolic capital, and political influence, but it is not identical to any of them. Religious authority usually refers to a recognized capacity to interpret doctrine, conduct ritual, teach, Discipline, or represent a religious tradition. Charisma focuses on attributing exceptional qualities to a person. Symbolic capital concerns the power attached to socially recognized distinction. Political power concerns the capacity to shape collective decisions, public institutions, and resource distribution. Sacred power focuses instead on the process through which legitimacy associated with the sacred becomes usable as authority within and sometimes beyond religious institutions.

This distinction matters because religious office does not guarantee social influence, and influence does not always rest on formal office. A pastor may possess an ecclesiastical title but lack credibility among congregants. A prophet may be widely followed while remaining institutionally marginal. A women's prayer leader may exercise substantial authority without occupying the senior ranks of a church hierarchy. Conversely, a religious institution may acquire public standing through its

This work is an open access and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 License
(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

history, networks, or perceived moral independence even when its leaders do not intervene directly in partisan politics. Sacred power becomes analytically visible when sacred claims are recognized, acted upon, resisted, or converted into effects in social life.

The argument builds on Weber's analysis of legitimate authority and charisma [1], Bourdieu's account of symbolic power and capital [2], and Asad's critique of treating religion as a timeless, autonomous sphere [3]. It also draws on Ellis and ter Haar's insistence that political analysis take African religious thought seriously rather than dismissing it as an epiphenomenon of material interests [19, 20]. Research on Pentecostalism further shows that religious practices, political identities, and public authority can be mutually constitutive rather than belonging to separate spheres [4, 10, 11, 12].

The article's contribution is not the general claim that religion matters to politics. That proposition is already well established. Its contribution is to specify a mechanism: sacred legitimacy becomes socially consequential through processes of recognition, embodiment, performance, institutionalization, mediation, circulation, conversion, and contestation. These processes provide a basis for investigating the movement of authority across settings without presuming that religious influence is always beneficial, democratic, or durable.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a conceptual and interpretive article, not a report of a newly completed ethnographic fieldwork project. Kinshasa serves as the principal analytical setting because published scholarship documents Pentecostal Christianity's entanglement with media, gender, embodiment, urban sociality, and spiritual practice in the city. The analysis brings this scholarship into dialogue with wider anthropological and interdisciplinary work on authority, religion, and politics. It does not claim that the selected studies represent all Protestant or Pentecostal communities in Kinshasa, nor does it treat the city as culturally or religiously homogeneous.

The method is a critical synthesis organized around a conceptual problem. First, the article distinguishes sacred power from neighboring concepts. Second, it examines how urban settings make religious legitimacy consequential through social relations and material infrastructures. Third, it analyses the circulation of authority across institutional boundaries, with particular attention to political imagination, gender, and media. Finally, it identifies propositions that could guide comparative ethnographic research.

The evidence is therefore secondary and interpretive. Claims about specific practices in Kinshasa draw on published research, especially the ethnographic work of Pype [6, 7, 8] and scholarship on Pentecostal spirituality in the DRC [5, 9]. Broader theoretical claims draw on established scholarship on power, religion, and politics. The distinction between documented findings and the article's conceptual inferences matters: sacred power is proposed as a framework for investigation, not as an empirically validated universal law.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. FROM RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY TO SACRED LEGITIMACY

Religious authority and sacred power are closely related, but the distinction clarifies what each concept lets researchers see. Religious authority refers to recognized roles and capacities within a religious tradition. These may include interpreting scripture, leading worship, administering rites, teaching doctrine, offering pastoral counsel, or making decisions for an institution. Sacred power becomes relevant when the legitimacy attached to such activities has consequences for relationships and decisions beyond the immediate performance of religious duties.

Sacred legitimacy is not simply declared; it must be recognized. A leader may describe a calling as divine, but audiences interpret that claim through local histories, doctrinal expectations, moral conduct, perceived efficacy, institutional reputation, and personal experience. Recognition criteria are not uniform. Some followers may prioritize healing or prophecy; others ethical consistency, doctrinal knowledge, generosity, administrative competence, or the ability to mediate conflict. The same leader may be trusted by one group and questioned by another. Sacred power is therefore relational rather than an attribute that can be inferred from a title or self-description.

This relational emphasis extends Weber's account of charisma. Charisma is sustained through recognition and can be weakened when followers no longer regard a leader's qualities as exceptional or efficacious [1]. Sacred power, however, need not be charismatic or attached to a single person. It may adhere to an office, a congregation's history, a ritual, a sacred text, a church building, a healing testimony, or a collective practice. It can survive a particular leader's departure if it becomes embedded in organizational routines and shared memory. It can also collapse when institutional continuity fails to preserve the credibility on which recognition depends.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital helps explain why recognition can become a resource. Socially acknowledged distinction may facilitate access to networks, opportunities, and decision-making spaces [2]. Sacred power narrows the

analytical focus to legitimacy grounded in relationships to the sacred and asks how that legitimacy becomes operational. A religious reputation may produce trust; trust may facilitate cooperation; cooperation may strengthen an organization; and organizational visibility may bring leaders into contact with political or economic actors. None of these transitions is automatic. The point is to identify the conditions under which one form of legitimacy acquires effects in another setting.

Asad's genealogical approach also cautions against treating religion as a self-contained sphere with stable boundaries [3]. Institutions, disciplines, bodies, histories, and political arrangements shape sacred authority. The sacred is not analytically useful because it exists outside society, but because social actors recognize particular relationships, objects, practices, and claims as sacredly significant. Anthropology can study the effects of such recognition without reducing religious life to disguised economic interest or endorsing religious truth claims as empirical explanations.

The distinction between sacred power and religious authority is consequently one of scope. Religious authority may remain internal to a congregation. Sacred power asks whether and how the legitimacy associated with religious life affects family decisions, gender norms, economic exchange, public reputation, media visibility, political evaluation, or collective action. It also asks when such transfer fails, provokes resistance, or undermines the credibility it began with.

3.2. KINSHASA AS AN URBAN FIELD OF SACRED AUTHORITY

Kinshasa is not simply a geographical container for churches. It is an urban field shaped by neighborhood ties, family obligations, commerce, migration, popular culture, communication technologies, religious institutions, and political uncertainty. De Boeck's work on Kinshasa emphasizes improvisation, urban imagination, and everyday practices through which residents inhabit and remake the city [17]. This perspective is useful for studying sacred power because religious institutions participate in the social production of meaning, relationships, and practical support under conditions that residents may experience as unstable or unpredictable.

Churches can offer places of assembly, counseling, teaching, mutual aid, and public performance. They can connect households to wider networks and provide vocabularies through which people interpret illness, financial hardship, family conflict, insecurity, aspiration, and hope. These activities should not be romanticized as substitutes for public services, nor should all churches be assumed to perform them equally. Their significance lies in the ways religious institutions become woven into the practical and interpretive lives of urban residents.

Pype's ethnography of Pentecostal media in Kinshasa shows how religious drama brings theology into conversation with gender, morality, technology, and everyday urban concerns [6]. Her later study of mobile communication and Christian femininities demonstrates that churches do not merely respond to technological change; they also participate in classifying certain uses of technology and forms of femininity as morally acceptable or unacceptable [7]. Her study of Pentecostal dance further examines how embodied movement creates and sustains relationships among worshippers and materializes religious community through shared practice [8]. Taken together, these studies show that sacred authority is not produced only through doctrine or formal leadership. It also emerges through media, bodies, relationships, and repeated practices.

This supports the idea of an urban epistemology: the practical interpretive resources through which residents make sense of events, evaluate people, and decide what counts as credible knowledge. Religious institutions may contribute to this epistemology by circulating moral categories, stories of transformation, accounts of misfortune, and expectations concerning responsibility or success. These interpretations coexist with other sources of knowledge, including family experience, professional expertise, popular culture, political discourse, and digital information. The anthropological task is to investigate their interaction rather than presume religious interpretations dominate urban life.

Sacred power becomes politically consequential when religiously grounded judgments enter public evaluation. A church may influence how followers understand corruption, generosity, justice, leadership, prosperity, or social responsibility without endorsing a candidate or becoming a formal political organization. Such influence is indirect but not therefore insignificant. It can shape the criteria through which public figures are judged, the reputations that circulate through networks, and the forms of conduct regarded as legitimate.

Recent scholarship reinforces the need to study these relations without assuming a single model of African Pentecostalism. Bondo's analysis of Pentecostal spirituality in the DRC examines supernatural encounter, charismatic gifts, missionary commitment, and ritual practice as important elements of contemporary religious life [5]. His later prospective analysis discusses the movement's doctrinal dimensions and raises concerns about personality cults and changing forms of authority [9]. These are theological and missiological analyses rather than comprehensive ethnographies of Kinshasa, but they provide a locally relevant account of debates over spirituality, authority, and institutional change. The anthropological contribution is to examine how people interpret, embody, and negotiate these claims in particular social settings.

3.3. CHURCHES AS INSTITUTIONS THAT MAKE AUTHORITY

Churches are often described through the services they provide: worship, education, counseling, charity, health initiatives, humanitarian assistance, and community formation. These functions matter, but they do not exhaust the institutional work of religious organizations. Churches also establish the procedures through which people become recognizable as pastors, prophets, teachers, counselors, elders, or public representatives. Ordination, leadership training, ritual performance, disciplinary rules, succession practices, financial arrangements, and public recognition can transform individual reputations into institutional authority.

In this sense, the church is not merely a transmitter of doctrine; it is an institution that makes authority socially intelligible. Its procedures define who may speak, which forms of knowledge are valued, how disputes are handled, and what counts as legitimate leadership. These arrangements vary considerably between denominations and congregations. Some depend heavily on formal hierarchy; others rely on networks, founder authority, congregational recognition, or combinations of these. An adequate anthropology of sacred power must examine these arrangements in context rather than impose a single organizational model.

Institutionalization helps explain why sacred power cannot be reduced to charisma. A leader's reputation may attract a following, but durable organizations require resources, routines, property arrangements, communication systems, succession mechanisms, and shared memories. Charismatic claims may be stabilized through institutional structures, while institutional authority may be renewed through performances of spiritual efficacy or moral credibility. Tensions arise when personal authority and organizational continuity pull in different directions. Succession can reveal whether a church's legitimacy rests primarily with its founder, a recognized office, a doctrinal tradition, or a wider community.

Institutionalization also makes sacred power contestable. Followers may question a leader's credibility when public teaching conflicts with private conduct, financial practices appear opaque, predictions fail, or religious authority is used to justify coercion or abuse. Research on the abuse of spiritual authority among some African neo-Pentecostal leaders has shown why sacred claims must be analyzed alongside questions of rights, vulnerability, and accountability [23]. Bondo's discussion of personality cults in contemporary Congolese Pentecostalism similarly highlights concerns about the concentration of authority around individual leaders [9]. These studies do not establish that such problems characterize all Pentecostal churches. They demonstrate the importance of investigating how claims to sacred legitimacy are protected, challenged, or exploited.

The concept of sacred power therefore directs attention to institutional conditions that sustain or constrain authority. How transparent are decisions? Who can challenge leaders? How are resources allocated? What happens when followers withdraw recognition? Which voices are excluded from decision-making? Such questions make it possible to examine religious institutions neither as inherently emancipatory nor as necessarily authoritarian, but as organizations in which authority is produced and contested.

3.4. THE CIRCULATION AND CONVERSION OF SACRED POWER

Sacred power becomes particularly significant when legitimacy moves beyond the congregation. A religious leader's reputation may generate trust; trust may facilitate relationships; relationships may mobilize labour or resources; resources may strengthen an institution; and institutional visibility may create access to public or political actors. This sequence is an analytical possibility, not a universal pathway. Each transition can fail, and a gain in one domain can undermine legitimacy in another.

The process can be represented as sacred legitimacy, recognition, trust, relational networks, institutional capacity, visibility, and public authority. This formulation is not intended as a linear law. It is a heuristic for asking how religiously grounded credibility travels and what conditions make that movement possible. For example, visibility may broaden a church's reach while exposing it to new forms of scrutiny. Political access may increase an institution's influence but also lead followers to suspect that its moral independence has been compromised. Economic resources may expand social assistance while raising questions about commercialization and accountability.

I use the term authority conversion for the process through which legitimacy accumulated in one social setting becomes usable as authority in another. The concept draws on Bourdieu's analysis of capital and fields but emphasizes the practical mechanisms of transfer. The question is not simply whether religious actors possess resources; it is how a particular kind of recognition is translated into decisions, relationships, or institutional access elsewhere. A respected pastor may be invited to mediate a family dispute, speak at a public event, counsel a business leader, or participate in a political consultation. In each case, the basis of the invitation and the limits of the authority being recognized require empirical examination.

Research on Pentecostal politics provides comparative illustrations. Hasu's study of Pastor Josephat Gwajima in Tanzania traces the relationship between spiritual warfare, religious mediation, and the making of a Pentecostal political figure [21]. Østebø's analysis of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed examines the relationship between Pentecostal identity, prosperity

discourse, positive thinking, and political self-presentation [10]. Fontana's analysis of political Pentecostalism examines how a transnational Christian network can intervene in political life while presenting itself through religious and theological categories [11]. These cases differ in their national contexts and political arrangements; they should not be treated as direct equivalents of Kinshasa. Their comparative value lies in showing that religious legitimacy can enter political life through multiple institutional routes.

The wider literature also establishes that African religious thought cannot be reduced to a private motivation operating behind supposedly secular politics. Ellis and ter Haar [19, 20] show why explanations of political action must include religious ideas and practices. Marshall's analysis of Nigerian Pentecostalism describes forms of political spirituality that shape subjects and ideas of sovereignty [4], while McCauley's study of Ghana examines Pentecostalism as an informal political institution and investigates its relationship to political allegiance [12]. These works support examining institutional and social mechanisms rather than assuming religious influence is either direct or merely symbolic.

For Kinshasa, authority conversion generates specific empirical questions. Which forms of sacred legitimacy are recognized outside churches? Who mediates the movement between religious and public settings? Which networks make conversion possible? What institutional procedures authorize it? Who benefits, and who is excluded? Does conversion create public accountability, mutual assistance, patronage, hierarchy, or political capture? The concept is useful only if these questions remain open to evidence. Sacred power is not inherently democratic or authoritarian; its consequences depend on the relationships and institutions through which it is mobilized.

3.5. SACRED POWER AND POLITICAL IMAGINATION

Political influence begins before formal participation in elections, parties, or public administration. It also develops through the categories people use to imagine legitimate authority, justice, corruption, prosperity, suffering, responsibility, and social transformation. Religious institutions may contribute to these categories through sermons, ritual, testimony, pastoral counseling, organizational practice, and public communication. Their influence should not be assumed in advance; it must be examined alongside other sources of moral and political interpretation.

It is useful to distinguish direct political activity from formative political influence. Direct activity includes endorsing candidates, mobilizing voters, lobbying officials, joining consultations, or publicly advocating policy positions. Formative influence operates through the standards people use to evaluate political conduct. A sermon condemning corruption may contribute to a moral classification of public misconduct without constituting a campaign intervention. Teaching about service, generosity, justice, or responsibility may shape expectations of leaders. Narratives of spiritual warfare may provide interpretive resources for crisis, although their meanings and political consequences will differ among congregations and individuals.

The distinction avoids two opposing errors. The first is to treat churches as political only when they act like parties or lobby groups. The second is to interpret every religious practice as a disguised political intervention. Sacred power may have political consequences without being reducible to politics. A congregation can shape public judgment through the moral language it circulates. However, the effects of that language depend on how members interpret it, how it intersects with lived experience, and whether it becomes connected to organized action.

Comparative research shows that Pentecostal political engagement can take diverse forms. Bompani's research on the Ugandan Pentecostal movement examines religious loyalties, identities, and motivations for political action [13]. Kgatle's work develops a Pentecostal political theology in relation to prophecy and politics in South Africa [14]. Fontana [11] examines a post-confessional Christian network that seeks political relevance, while Østebø [10] explores the political uses of Pentecostal rhetoric in Ethiopia. These studies demonstrate variation rather than a single continental pattern. They also suggest that political influence depends on historical and institutional conditions, not simply on the presence of Pentecostal belief.

In Kinshasa, an anthropology of political imagination would investigate how religious narratives intersect with everyday judgments about public officials, economic hardship, insecurity, social mobility, and collective futures. It would ask how congregants distinguish spiritual explanations from political explanations, how religious leaders negotiate their relationships with public institutions, and how followers accept, reinterpret, or reject political messages from religious authorities. Sacred power offers a framework for this inquiry by focusing on how credibility is produced and the conditions under which it becomes publicly consequential.

3.6. GENDER AND THE EMBODIED PRODUCTION OF SACRED AUTHORITY

Sacred power is embodied. Authority becomes recognizable through voices, clothing, gesture, emotional expression, sexuality, family relations, movement, and public visibility. Gender is therefore not an additional variable that can simply be appended to a theory of sacred authority. It is one of the processes through which authority is performed, interpreted, distributed, and constrained.

Pype's research in Kinshasa provides an important basis for this argument. Her study of mobile phones and Pentecostal-charismatic femininities shows how technologies became part of moral debates about appropriate conduct, sexuality, and public identity [7]. Her work on Pentecostal media drama similarly demonstrates how religious narratives shape urban understandings of morality and social life [6]. These studies reveal that religious communities can offer women opportunities for participation and recognition while also defining boundaries around acceptable femininity.

Women may exercise authority as prayer leaders, counselors, teachers, organizers, entrepreneurs, media personalities, and influential members of congregational networks. Such authority may depend less on formal office than on spiritual reputation, relational competence, moral credibility, or the capacity to mobilize people and resources. The absence of a senior ecclesiastical title does not necessarily mean the absence of consequential authority. At the same time, informal influence should not be mistaken for institutional equality. Women may exercise practical authority while remaining excluded from decisions about finance, succession, doctrine, or senior leadership.

Sacred power is thus ambivalent in gendered settings. Religious institutions may enable new forms of agency and recognition while regulating dress, sexuality, marriage, motherhood, technology use, and public behavior. The same organization can offer women a platform for leadership while establishing restrictive standards by which their conduct is judged. These tensions must be investigated empirically rather than resolved through general claims that Pentecostalism either liberates or oppresses women.

The analytical distinction between formal office and socially consequential authority is especially valuable here. A woman may shape household decisions, organize prayer networks, mediate disputes, influence reputations, or mobilize community assistance without occupying the highest ecclesiastical rank. Conversely, public visibility may not confer decision-making power. Research should therefore trace not only who holds titles, but who speaks, who is heard, whose judgments are accepted, who controls resources, and who can challenge decisions. Sacred power makes visible the uneven relationship between recognition, participation, and institutional control.

3.7. MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF SACRED POWER

Religious authority increasingly circulates through radio, television, mobile phones, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, livestreams, recorded sermons, and digital prayer groups. These media extend the reach of religious communication beyond the physically assembled congregation, but they do more than transmit messages. They influence which voices become visible, which performances are repeated, how audiences participate, and what kinds of authority can be recognized at a distance.

Ibrahim's theoretical review of Pentecostalism and media in Africa argues that analyses of religion and technology need to account for both user agency and the agency of media platforms [15]. Digital platforms are not neutral channels. Their technical design, recommendation systems, interaction formats, and commercial incentives can shape circulation and visibility. At the same time, religious actors and audiences interpret and adapt these tools according to their own aims and social circumstances. Sacred power in mediated environments is therefore produced through an interaction between religious practices, communication infrastructures, and audience responses.

Pype's research in Kinshasa demonstrates why mediation must be understood broadly. Her study of Pentecostal commoning through dance examines how bodies, movement, and shared performance help materialize religious community [8]. Her earlier work on media drama and mobile phones shows how audiovisual and digital technologies become entangled with moral formation and urban femininity [6, 7]. These studies remind us that religious authority circulates not only through verbal doctrine but also through gesture, sound, images, repetition, affect, and bodily participation.

Digital media can expand a local leader's audience, allow a testimony to circulate beyond the congregation where it originated, and connect dispersed communities. They can also expose leaders to public criticism, intensify competition for visibility, and make authority more dependent on attention metrics. A widely viewed sermon may be interpreted as evidence of influence, but reach is not the same as trust, and popularity is not equivalent to legitimacy. Online visibility can strengthen sacred power, leave it unchanged, or damage it when audiences question a performance's authenticity.

The central question, then, is not simply how churches use social media. It is how media environments change the conditions under which sacred authority becomes credible. Who controls the channels through which religious messages circulate? Which performances are amplified? How are digital audiences involved in validating or challenging religious claims? What happens when a leader's online persona conflicts with local experience? These questions matter most where religious communication crosses national boundaries and links urban congregations with diasporic publics. The anthropology of sacred power must treat media as part of the infrastructure of authority rather than as an external instrument added to an otherwise unchanged religious institution.

3.8. SACRED POWER AS RELATIONAL, MATERIAL, CONVERTIBLE, AND CONTESTABLE

The preceding analysis suggests that sacred power is best understood as a dynamic configuration rather than a fixed possession. It is relational because it depends on recognition; embodied because authority is enacted through bodies and practices; institutional because organizations stabilize some claims to legitimacy; material because buildings, money, transport, technologies, and other resources give authority practical reach; mediated because recognition circulates through communicative infrastructures; convertible because sacred legitimacy may become consequential in other social fields; and contestable because every claim to legitimacy remains open to evaluation and challenge.

These dimensions are interdependent. A leader may gain recognition through a public performance, but the durability of that recognition may depend on institutional support. An institution may possess material resources, but those resources may not generate sacred legitimacy if followers regard its conduct as morally compromised. Media visibility may extend authority while making contradictions more visible. Political access may increase an institution's influence but also expose it to accusations of partisan capture. Sacred power therefore operates through feedback and reversal as well as accumulation.

The DRC literature offers a useful setting for investigating these relationships. Bondo's analysis of Pentecostal spirituality identifies supernatural encounter, charismatic gifts, missionary commitment, and embodied ritual practices as significant elements of contemporary Pentecostal life [5]. His later discussion considers the movement's doctrinal dimensions and warns of the potential for personality cults [9]. These theological interpretations do not settle how congregants experience or evaluate authority. Instead, they point toward ethnographic questions about how claims of spiritual efficacy are assessed, how followers interpret leadership, and how organizational practices shape the relationship between charismatic claims and institutional accountability.

Sacred power should not be romanticized. It can sustain solidarity, mutual assistance, moral criticism, conflict mediation, and collective action. It can also support hierarchy, exclusion, patronage, gender inequality, financial exploitation, or concentrated authority. Which outcomes emerge depends on institutional arrangements, social inequalities, accountability mechanisms, and followers' ability to question leaders. The concept is analytically valuable precisely because it does not predetermine whether sacred authority is beneficial or harmful.

The idea of authority conversion also needs to remain open to reversal. Religious legitimacy may facilitate political access, but political association can damage religious credibility. Financial resources may expand an institution's capacity, but perceived commercialization can weaken its moral standing. A leader may gain visibility while losing trust among a local congregation. The process is therefore recursive: authority can accumulate, transfer, challenge, and be lost. Empirical work should examine the conditions that sustain these movements rather than assume a linear growth of influence.

3.9. TOWARD A COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SACRED POWER

The central proposition can now be restated: sacred power is the socially recognized capacity to translate sacredly grounded legitimacy into consequential authority across social domains. Its contribution does not lie in asserting that religion matters to politics, gender, media, or urban life. Rather, it offers a framework for tracing how sacred legitimacy becomes socially effective and for examining the conditions under which its effects endure, change, or fail.

This framework suggests a comparative research agenda. Researchers can investigate how sacred claims are made, which audiences recognize them, how recognition is embodied and institutionalized, what material and media infrastructures support their circulation, and how legitimacy is converted into practical authority. They can also examine the counter-processes through which recognition is withheld, challenged, or withdrawn. These questions can be explored across different Christian traditions, Islam, African Independent Churches, traditional authorities, humanitarian organizations, and digital religious movements, provided that comparisons attend to historical and institutional differences rather than treating all sacred systems as equivalent.

Kinshasa is particularly useful for such work because religious institutions operate within a dense urban field in which family relationships, neighborhood networks, media, commerce, public institutions, and religious practice intersect. However, the framework should not be confined to Kinshasa or assumed to apply the same way elsewhere. Comparative research would need to specify how histories of church-state relations, urban infrastructures, religious competition, class, gender, and political institutions affect the production and circulation of sacred legitimacy.

Future empirical studies could follow a religious leader across settings, tracing how congregants, family members, media audiences, civic organizations, and political actors recognize authority. They could examine a single controversy to understand how legitimacy is defended or withdrawn. They could compare the formal authority of church offices with the practical influence exercised through informal networks. They could also investigate how women and younger congregants gain or are denied recognition, and how digital platforms alter the visibility of religious claims. Such studies would test whether the proposed dimensions identify comparable processes across different contexts or require substantial revision.

The framework's principal analytical commitment is to follow authority rather than presume it. Instead of asking only whether churches are political, researchers can investigate how religious institutions make authority recognizable. Instead of assuming that sacred legitimacy automatically produces influence, they can examine the networks, practices, and infrastructures that make conversion possible. Instead of treating religious power as inherently emancipatory or oppressive, they can trace its effects and the conflicts surrounding it.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has proposed sacred power as a distinct analytical concept for examining how legitimacy grounded in relationships to the sacred becomes socially consequential. The concept shifts attention from the formal possession of religious authority to the processes through which authority is recognized, embodied, institutionalized, mediated, circulated, converted, and contested. It does not assume that religious claims are universally accepted, that churches possess uniform influence, or that sacred power produces predictable political outcomes.

The analysis of Kinshasa, grounded in published work on Pentecostal media, gender, embodied practice, and spirituality in the DRC, shows why religious authority cannot be understood through doctrine or formal office alone. Sacred legitimacy emerges through relationships, performances, institutions, bodies, and communication infrastructures. It may influence public life directly through political participation or indirectly by shaping the moral categories through which authority is evaluated. These effects remain contingent on social recognition and can be strengthened, transformed, or undermined.

The concept's principal contribution is to change the question. Rather than asking simply whether religion has power, an anthropology of sacred power asks how sacred legitimacy becomes authority in social life, across which boundaries it travels, who benefits from its conversion, and how it is contested. This approach offers a basis for comparative research on the intersections of religion, urban life, gender, media, and politics without collapsing these domains into one another. The sacred is not treated as an isolated realm outside ordinary social relations, but as one of the ways people produce, circulate, evaluate, and challenge legitimate authority.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No acknowledgments are applicable.

REFERENCES

[1] M. Weber (1978). Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.).
[2] P. Bourdieu, J. B. Thompson, G. Raymond, Language and symbolic power (Vol. 138). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[3] T. Asad, "Genealogies of Religion," Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam. JHU Press. 1993, doi: 10.1353/book.16014.
[4] Marshall, Ruth. Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009
[5] M. G. Bondo, "Spirituality in Pentecostalism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: A Missiological Reflection on Constitutive Elements," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies, vol. 80, no. 1, Art. no. a9752, May 2024, doi: 10.4102/hts.v80i1.9752.
[6] K. Pype, "The MAKING of the PENTECOSTAL MELODRAMA," June 2012, doi: 10.3167/9780857454942.
[7] K. Pype, "Blackberry Girls and Jesus's Brides," Journal of Religion in Africa, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 390–416, Aug. 2016, doi: 10.1163/15700666-12341106.
[8] K. Pype, "Pentecostal Commoning Through Dance: An Ethnography of Spiritual Mobilities, Pentecostal Infrastructures, and the Body From Kinshasa's Churches," Journal of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 33–46, Jan. 2022, doi: 10.1080/27691616.2022.2042044.
[9] M. G. Bondo, "Pentecostalism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: A Glance at the Past, Present and Future through the Lens of Three Fundamental Dimensions," HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies, vol. 82, no. 1, Art. no. a11036, Jan. 2026, doi: 10.4102/hts.v82i1.11036.
[10] T. Østebø, "The Religion of Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed: Pentecostalism, Prosperity Gospel and the Power of Positive Thinking," The Journal of Modern African Studies, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 63–84, Mar. 2025, doi: 10.1017/s0022278x25100955.
[11] L. L. B. Fontana, "Engaging Political Pentecostalism: A Probe into the Political Theology of a Post-Confessional Christian Network," Religions, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 63, Jan. 2025, doi: 10.3390/rel16010063.
[12] J. F. McCauley, "Pentecostalism as an Informal Political Institution: Experimental Evidence from Ghana," Politics and Religion, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 761–787, July 2014, doi: 10.1017/s1755048314000480.
[13] B. Bompani, "'The Memory of Persecution Is in Our Blood': Documenting Loyalties, Identities and Motivations to Political Action in the Ugandan Pentecostal Movement," The Journal of Modern African Studies, vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 479–501, Dec. 2022, doi: 10.1017/s0022278x2200009x.
[14] Mookgo Solomon Kgatle, Prophecy and Politics in South African Pentecostalism. 2023. doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-49159-7.
[15] M. Ibrahim, "Pentecostalism and Media in Africa: Theoretical Explorations of Power and Agency of Media Platforms and Their Users," Religion Compass, vol. 17, no. 1, Dec. 2022, doi: 10.1111/rec3.12452.
[16] C. Banda, "Rejecting Christ's Freedom? Sacralization and Personalization in African Neo-Pentecostal Prophetism," Religions, vol. 15, no. 9, p. 1107, Sept. 2024, doi: 10.3390/rel15091107.

[17] F. De Boeck, “INHABITING OCULAR GROUND: Kinshasa’s Future in the Light of Congo’s Spectral Urban Politics,” Cultural Anthropology, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 263–286, Apr. 2011, doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1360.2011.01099.x.
[18] F. De Boeck and S. Baloji, “Suturing the City,” Mar. 2025, doi: 10.11116/9789461666314.
[19] S Ellis, G Ter Haar. (2004). Worlds of power: Religious thought and political practice in Africa.
[20] S. Ellis and G. Haar, “Religion and Politics: Taking African Epistemologies Seriously,” The Journal of Modern African Studies, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 385–401, July 2007, doi: 10.1017/s0022278x07002674.
[21] P. Hasu, “Politics of Spiritual Warfare,” Journal of Religion in Africa, pp. 1–32, Oct. 2022, doi: 10.1163/15700666-12340242.
[22] B. Meyer, “Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches,” Annual Review of Anthropology, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 447–474, Oct. 2004, doi: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.33.070203.143835.
[23] D. Orogun and J. Pillay, “The Abuse of Spiritual Authority among Some African Neo-Pentecostals and Its Impact on Human Rights,” Stellenbosch Theological Journal, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, doi: 10.17570/stj.2022.v8n1.a17.