ROLE OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN AN INFORMAL MARKETPLACE IN SIERRA LEONE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how religion and spirituality influence trust, economic behavior, and interpersonal dynamics in an informal marketplace in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Drawing on ethnographic interviews, participant observation, symbolic analysis, and theoretical frameworks from anthropology and the informal economy, the research explores how spiritual protection, moral identity, secrecy, and religious affiliation shape decision making in unregulated trade spaces. The study focuses on Abacha Market in Freetown, where traders operate in highly competitive environments marked by economic uncertainty, close social interaction, and limited formal regulation.

Through insights gathered from Christian vendors, Muslim traders, customers, and members connected to the Poro society, this research argues that informal markets are governed not only by economic logic, but also by deeply rooted moral and cosmological systems. Practices such as the use of anointing oil, Quranic verses, charms, ritual prayers, and symbolic objects are examined as strategies for protection, trust building, and economic survival. The thesis also explores how fear, jealousy, secrecy, and beliefs surrounding spiritual harm influence social relationships, competition, and perceptions of success within the marketplace.

By analyzing the intersection of spirituality and business, this study contributes to scholarship on informal economies by demonstrating how spiritual systems function as invisible institutions of economic regulation, social order, and cultural meaning. Ultimately, the research challenges purely material explanations of market behavior and highlights the importance of understanding informal economies through their social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital, is home to an expansive informal marketplace where economic life and social life are deeply interwoven. In places such as Abacha Street Market, everyday exchange is shaped not only by prices and supply chains but also by relationships, reputations, and moral expectations around 'proper' conduct in trade (Granovetter, 1985; Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971). Religion and spirituality are prominent in this setting: vendors routinely invoke prayer, blessings, and protective practices as resources for endurance, legitimacy, and success under conditions of uncertainty and competition.[1]

Sierra Leone is widely described as religiously plural, with Islam and Christianity both highly visible in public life. Recent estimates place the population at roughly 77% Muslim and 22% Christian, with a smaller proportion practicing animist or other traditions (U.S. Department of State, 2024).[2] In the market context, these affiliations are not merely private beliefs; they may also function as signals of identity and trustworthiness that organize social interaction and economic cooperation (Putnam et al., 1993). At the same time, spiritual explanations for misfortune—sometimes articulated through idioms of jealousy, hidden aggression, or witchcraft—can shape how vendors interpret risk, competition, and sudden loss (Geschiere, 1997; Gershman, 2016).

Yet, practices are highly syncretic and interwoven with indigenous beliefs. Secret societies like the Poro for men and Sande/Bundu for women remain influential, preserving culture and regulating social life through secret knowledge and initiation rituals that continue to shape communities today. Even as people profess Islam or Christianity, many consult traditional

healers, wear protective amulets, or adhere to ritual restrictions, demonstrating how spiritual and material concerns intertwine.

The setting for this study is a largely informal economy. The informal economy encompasses petty traders, market women, street vendors, artisanal miners, and others operating outside formal regulatory frameworks. It dominates the country's economic landscape, employing over 85% of the workforce, primarily in petty trade and agriculture, and contributing around 35–40% of GDP (International Labour Organization, 2024; United Nations Development Programme, 2025).[2] In practical terms, this means business transactions occur in settings governed by personal relationships, community norms, and trust rather than formal contracts or state oversight. Here, religion and spirituality provide crucial social glue and a moral framework.

Anthropologists have long noted that across Africa, modern economic life and mystical beliefs are deeply entangled. Jean and John Comaroff (2000) describe 'occult economies' as the deployment of magical means for material ends, where spiritual practices pursue wealth amid neoliberal uncertainties. Peter Geschiere (1997) shows how witchcraft discourses explain success or failure in postcolonial contexts, challenging assumptions that modernity secularizes economic life.

In Sierra Leonean market life, local idioms such as sara and 'african spirituality' may be used to describe ritual practices or hidden spiritual techniques believed to attract favor, protection, customers, or commercial success.[3] Within this moral and spiritual landscape, witchcraft is not treated simply as superstition, but as a socially meaningful explanation for misfortune, envy, unexplained wealth, illness, or sudden business decline. In anthropological terms, witchcraft refers to the perceived use of unseen supernatural power to harm others, obstruct their progress,

or, in some accounts, acquire wealth through morally suspect means (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Geschiere, 1997). In this sense, accusations of witchcraft are often less about fantasy than about anxiety over hidden power, inequality, and the uncertain sources of success in everyday life.

These beliefs have important social and economic consequences. Gershman (2016) argues that widespread witchcraft beliefs are associated with lower levels of interpersonal trust, charitable giving, and collective participation, because people may fear that others can use spiritual means to harm them or resent their success. In market settings, this can weaken the social capital on which informal trade depends, making cooperation more fragile and competition more suspicious. At the same time, witchcraft fears may also perform a regulatory role by pressuring successful individuals to share profits, assist kin, or avoid excessive displays of wealth, since visible accumulation can attract accusations of selfishness or occult enrichment. Witchcraft beliefs, therefore, do not simply divide communities; they can both fracture trust and enforce moral expectations of redistribution and social accountability.

In this setting, this thesis examines how religion and spirituality shape everyday habits, relationships, and ways of interpreting economic life within an informal marketplace in Sierra Leone. Here, religion refers to organized systems of belief and practice through which people relate to sacred power, moral order, and communal identity, often expressed through prayer, ritual, worship, and shared symbols (Geertz, 1973). Spirituality, by contrast, is used more broadly to describe lived engagements with divine, ancestral, or unseen forces that are understood to influence everyday life, including protection, favor, discernment, and misfortune (Marshall, 2009; Rudnyckyj, 2010). In practice, these categories often overlap: traders may call on God, invoke blessings, interpret setbacks through spiritual meanings, or rely on morally

charged ideas about protection and danger in ways that are both religious and spiritual.[4] This study therefore approaches market activity not simply as economic behavior, but as conduct shaped by ethical commitments, sacred understandings, and cosmological interpretations of success, risk, and social obligation.

This research is driven by an overarching question: What role do religion and spirituality play in the functioning of an informal marketplace in Sierra Leone? To address this, it investigates several sub-questions. First, in what ways are religious and spiritual beliefs and practices manifested in the daily operations of the market? Second, how do these practices influence social relationships and trust among market participants? Third, how do spiritual beliefs and institutions intersect with informal governance and dispute resolution in the marketplace? Fourth, what are some marketing strategies that are used aside from the influence of religion and spirituality?

This research examines the cultural and spiritual frameworks that support informal economic activity, frameworks that are often minimized in development and business analyses that focus primarily on poverty, entrepreneurship, or formal rules. By taking vendors' narrated experience seriously—how they explain luck, loss, trust, danger, and success—this thesis contributes to anthropological and sociological approaches that treat 'the economy' as an institution embedded in social life and moral worlds (Granovetter, 1985; Polanyi, 1944). It also provides insights that may be relevant for practitioners who engage market traders without always accounting for the social and spiritual dimensions that shape economic decision-making.

The thesis statement asserts that religion and spirituality are integral to the informal marketplace's social fabric in Sierra Leone, shaping trust and relationships, guiding individual and collective behavior, and providing frameworks for interpreting success and hardship.

Understanding these dynamics deepens what we know about informal economies at work: exposing ethical layers and deeper meanings beneath transactions.

One of the most influential discussions of religion and economic life comes from the sociologist Max Weber. In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber argued that religious beliefs can shape economic conduct by influencing how people understand work, discipline, thrift, and success (Weber, 1905/2002). Focusing especially on ascetic Protestant traditions, Weber suggested that believers came to see labor as a moral calling and disciplined self-restraint as a virtue. This ethic encouraged careful use of time, commitment to work, and restraint in consumption, thereby linking religious conviction to wider patterns of economic behavior. Weber's importance for this thesis lies less in whether his argument applies directly to Sierra Leone than in the broader insight that religion can shape the moral logic through which economic life is organized and interpreted.

To investigate these questions, the thesis adopts a qualitative, interview-based approach with an oral-history sensibility, treating vendors' accounts as situated narratives that reveal how people interpret and manage economic life through spiritual and moral frameworks. Field engagement occurred over five months at Abacha Market in western Freetown, Sierra Leone. Participant observation involved repeated immersion in everyday routines and interactions across the trading day (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Semi-structured interviews with 26 participants (15 women and 11 men), including stall owners, hawkers, customers, a market chairman, an imam, and Poro elders, were conducted in Krio, English, Temne, and Limba with translation support. A detailed field diary recorded observations and recurring themes. Data were thematically coded to identify patterns across interviews and observations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While limited to one site, the depth offers insights into West African informal markets.

1. For foundational discussions of embeddedness, moral economy, and how economic action is structured by social relationships and norms, see Granovetter (1985), Scott (1976), and Thompson (1971).

2. U.S. Department of State (2024), 2023 International Religious Freedom Report: Sierra Leone; International Labour Organization (2024), Sierra Leone Decent Work Country Programme II (2023–2027); United Nations Development Programme (2025), Baseline Study of the Informal Economy in Sierra Leone.

3. In this thesis, terms such as sara and "African science" are used as locally meaningful expressions rather than as fixed analytical categories. "Witchcraft" is likewise used in the anthropological sense of socially recognized beliefs about hidden spiritual harm, occult causation, or morally suspect forms of power, not as a claim that such forces can be empirically verified.

4. In this thesis, the distinction between religion and spirituality is used as an analytic aid rather than as a rigid separation. In everyday market life, participants may not sharply distinguish between formal religious practice, moral discipline, spiritual protection, and other engagements with unseen power.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW: RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND ECONOMIC LIFE

2.1 Introduction

Religion and spirituality play important roles in shaping social and economic life in many parts of the world. In societies where informal economies dominate everyday livelihood, religious beliefs and spiritual practices often influence how people interpret success, competition, trust, and misfortune. Rather than existing as separate spheres, religion and economic activity frequently intersect in ways that shape how individuals conduct business and evaluate economic outcomes.

Anthropologists studying West Africa have long observed that economic life is embedded within broader cultural and spiritual frameworks. These frameworks influence how individuals understand wealth, protection, and social relationships within the marketplace. In many communities, religious identity, ritual practices, and spiritual protection are understood as practical tools that individuals use to navigate uncertain economic environments.

This chapter reviews existing scholarship on religion and economic life, focusing particularly on West African contexts. It examines three main areas of literature: the relationship between religion and economic behavior, anthropological studies of spiritual economies and occult competition, and ethnographic research on secret societies such as the Poro. Together, these bodies of literature provide important context for understanding how spirituality and economic strategies may intersect in informal marketplaces.

2.2 Religion and Economic Behavior

One of the most influential discussions of religion and economic life comes from the sociologist Max Weber. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argued that religious beliefs could shape attitudes toward work, discipline, and economic success (Weber, 1905/2005). According to Weber, certain Protestant doctrines encouraged values such as hard work and delayed gratification, which contributed to the development of capitalist economic systems in Europe.

Although Weber's theory focused primarily on Western societies, his work established an important foundation for later research. Scholars increasingly recognized that religious systems do not only guide personal morality but can also shape economic behavior and social organization.

In many societies, religion functions as a framework through which individuals evaluate trustworthiness, moral behavior, and social responsibility. Religious affiliation may signal honesty or ethical commitment, which can influence economic relationships between traders and customers. As a result, religious belief systems may help structure networks of trust in environments where formal institutions are weak or absent.

However, Weber's model does not fully explain how economic activity functions in societies where spiritual forces, ritual practices, and beliefs about supernatural power are central to everyday life. Anthropologists studying Africa have therefore expanded the discussion by examining how spiritual interpretations of success and misfortune influence economic behavior.

2.3 Spiritual Economies and Occult Competition in Africa

Anthropological research on Africa has highlighted how economic competition is often interpreted through spiritual frameworks. In many communities, economic success or sudden wealth may be associated with supernatural forces, spiritual protection, or hidden forms of power.

Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) describe this phenomenon as part of what they call "occult economies," in which economic outcomes are interpreted through spiritual explanations. In contexts where economic opportunities are limited or unevenly distributed, individuals may suspect that successful traders have gained advantages through supernatural means.

Geschiere (1997) makes a similar point: talk and belief around witchcraft often flare up when economic and social life is shifting, especially where inequality is sharp and day-to-day conditions feel uncertain. When that happens, growing wealth can be read in moral or spiritual terms, so that achievement is sometimes explained as the result of concealed, otherworldly powers rather than straightforward effort or luck. Still, those ideas should not be folded into formal cultural and social institutions like the Poro society. Poro is not "witchcraft"; it functions as an organized framework for social order, the passing on of knowledge, and the exercise of cultural authority in Sierra Leonean society.

Rather than dismissing these interpretations as irrational, anthropologists emphasize that such beliefs reflect broader concerns about inequality, morality, and trust. In environments where economic outcomes are unpredictable, spiritual frameworks provide ways for individuals to make sense of misfortune, competition, and unexpected success.

These interpretations are particularly relevant in informal marketplaces where traders operate in proximity and compete for the same customers. In such settings, spiritual beliefs may influence how individuals interpret economic success and how they attempt to protect their businesses.

2.4 Informal Markets and Social Trust

The informal economy plays a central role in many African societies. Unlike formal markets regulated by legal institutions, informal marketplaces are often governed by social relationships, reputation, and community norms.

Guyer (2004) argues that economic exchange in West Africa is deeply embedded in social networks that extend beyond simple market transactions. Traders frequently rely on long-term relationships with customers and suppliers, which create systems of trust and mutual obligation.

Similarly, research on informal economies has shown that traders often extend credit to customers, build personal relationships with regular buyers, and maintain networks of cooperation within competitive environments. These practices allow markets to function even in the absence of formal contracts or institutional protections.

In these contexts, trust becomes a crucial component of economic activity. However, trust is not only built through economic reputation. Cultural signals such as religious identity, moral behavior, and spiritual authority may also influence how individuals evaluate potential business partners.

2.5 Secret Societies and Spiritual Authority in West Africa

Another important dimension of social organization in West Africa involves secret societies. These institutions play significant roles in shaping systems of authority, knowledge, and moral regulation within many communities.

Among the better-known secret societies in Upper Guinea, the Poro stands out. Spread across Sierra Leone and Liberia, it is a male initiation society most closely associated with the Mende and Temne, though it appears among other groups as well. More than a set of rituals, the Poro works as an organized social institution: it arranges initiation ceremonies, passes on shared cultural knowledge, and helps affirm moral expectations and political standing inside the community. Its reach does not stop at the ceremonial sphere. In many places, the Poro also acts as a practical framework for governance and social control, with a hand in leadership selection, settling disputes, and keeping community life ordered. Seen from that angle, it is not best understood as witchcraft; it is a recognized institution with deep historical roots, woven into the region's social and cultural life.

Anthropological research shows that Poro initiation rituals mark the transition from youth to adulthood and serve as mechanisms for transmitting cultural knowledge and community values. During initiation, members learn moral responsibilities, social expectations, and symbolic meanings embedded within community traditions.

Within the Poro society, secrecy sits at the core of how things are arranged. The point is not only what is kept out of sight, but it is also the way withholding and revealing knowledge becomes a social practice that sorts people into roles, ranks, and forms of belonging. Admission is managed through initiation, and what a person is allowed to learn unfolds step by step, tied to

standing and movement through the society's stages. Because knowledge is metered out like this, the line between those inside and those outside stays sharp, and differences between newer members and senior ones are kept visible. Bellman (1984) argues that secrecy in Poro ritual does real work in setting hierarchy and controlling how information travels through the community. Authority rests with senior members, not just based on age, but because they can reach and guard more developed layers of symbolic and cultural understanding. So, secrecy is less a matter of simple hiding than a way to keep order in place, renew respect, and carry tradition forward. That arrangement of knowledge and power does not stop at ritual occasions either; it spills into everyday social life and even shapes wider economic dealings in the community.

Scholars have also emphasized that secret societies historically played important political roles. Little (1965) observed that Poro institutions often functioned as systems of local governance responsible for dispute mediation and community regulation. More recent scholarship by Ferme (2001) and Shaw (2002) highlights how secrecy, ritual authority, and hidden knowledge continue to shape social power and community relationships in Sierra Leone.

These studies demonstrate that secret societies are not simply religious organizations but complex institutions that influence political authority, moral regulation, and social relationships.

2.6 Linking Spirituality and Economic Strategy

Despite extensive research on religion and spiritual belief in Africa, relatively little scholarship has examined how these belief systems influence the everyday economic strategies of traders operating in informal marketplaces. Most studies of occult economies focus on large-scale political or economic transformations, while research on secret societies primarily examines

ritual processes and initiation ceremonies. As a result, there remains a limited understanding of how spirituality and religious belief shape daily economic practices.

This thesis addresses this gap by examining how traders in an informal marketplace in Sierra Leone interpret the relationship between spirituality, religion, and business competition. Through interviews and ethnographic observation, the study explores how individuals integrate religious belief, spiritual protection, and practical economic strategies in their everyday business activities.

Existing scholarship demonstrates that spirituality and secrecy often shape social authority in West African communities, but these dynamics also extend into everyday economic life. In informal marketplaces where traders operate in proximity and compete for the same customers, economic success is not always interpreted purely in terms of business skill or market forces. Instead, traders frequently understand prosperity, customer attraction, and business failure through spiritual frameworks. Protective rituals, religious symbols, and spiritual consultations may therefore function alongside practical business strategies such as relationship building, price negotiation, and credit exchange.

In this sense, spirituality does not stand in opposition to economic rationality but rather operates as part of a broader system through which individuals attempt to manage uncertainty and competition. Anthropologists have shown that in many African contexts, spiritual practices provide interpretive frameworks for understanding both success and misfortune in environments where economic outcomes are unpredictable (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Geschiere, 1997). At the same time, institutions of secrecy such as the Poro society illustrate how hidden knowledge

and ritual authority can structure social relationships and systems of power within communities (Bellman, 1984; Ferme, 2001).

These perspectives suggest that spiritual practices may serve practical functions within everyday economic activity. Traders may seek spiritual protection against competitors, interpret sudden business losses through supernatural explanations, or rely on religious symbols to signal moral credibility to customers. Such practices are not necessarily viewed as contradictory to conventional business strategies but rather as complementary tools for navigating uncertain economic environments.

In many market environments, traders face intense competition and uncertain economic outcomes. In such contexts, individuals may draw on spiritual practices as additional strategies for managing risk and protecting their businesses. Spiritual protection practices such as prayer, ritual symbols, and consultations with spiritual leaders may function alongside practical economic strategies such as building customer relationships, offering credit, and negotiating prices. From this perspective, spirituality and economic rationality are not necessarily contradictory. Instead, they operate together as complementary systems through which individuals attempt to navigate uncertain economic environments.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter sets the study within theoretical structures that support the questions driving the research. Exploring locations where religion meets spirituality and casual economic transactions in Sierra Leone, the thesis brings in three key theoretical framework. All combined: (1) Spiritual Economies and Religious Capital, (2) Trust and Social Embeddedness in Informal Economies, and (3) Symbolic Anthropology and Secrecy. Those setups help us understand religion and spirituality planted squarely in the middle of how informal markets really work, not shoved off to the sides.

3.1 Spiritual Economies and Religious Capital

The concept of spiritual economies refers to how religious beliefs and rituals influence material economic practices. Scholars like Rudnyckyj (2010) have described spiritual economies as systems in which moral and religious commitments are enmeshed with economic behavior. In the case of Sierra Leone, where faith is a fundamental part of social identity, this framework helps us understand how traders interpret their financial success or failure through a spiritual lens. Spiritual economies allow for an analysis of how divine favor, moral uprightness, and blessings are perceived as determinants of economic outcomes (Marshall, 2009).

The notion of religious capital—drawn from Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital—holds serious influence here. Religious capital includes knowledge of religious texts, participation in rituals, and affiliation with religious networks, all of which can enhance one's reputation and trustworthiness in a marketplace (Iannaccone, 1990). In Freetown's Abacha Market, for example,

traders may choose to buy from or lend to someone based on their perceived piety, creating informal credit systems rooted in religious identity.

3.2 Trust and Social Embeddedness in Informal Economies

Granovetter's (1985) concept of social embeddedness is crucial for understanding how economic exchange operates in informal markets. Rather than treating economic actors as isolated individuals who make decisions independently of their social world, Granovetter argues that economic action is embedded in ongoing networks of relationships. In other words, people do not buy, sell, lend, or cooperate in a vacuum; they do so within concrete social ties that shape expectations, obligations, and trust. This is especially relevant in informal marketplaces, where transactions often depend less on formal contracts or legal enforcement than on reputation, repeated interaction, and knowledge of the other person's character. In such settings, trust is not simply a personal feeling but a social achievement built through ongoing relationships and shared norms (Granovetter, 1985).

This perspective helps explain why informal markets in Sierra Leone cannot be understood only through prices or supply and demand. In many cases, traders rely on personal familiarity, community reputation, and social networks to reduce uncertainty and assess risk. Marcel Fafchamps (2004), writing on market institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa, similarly shows that exchange in many African market settings depends heavily on trust, reputation, and relational information, especially where formal enforcement mechanisms are weak or costly. Religious identity may become one important trust marker within this environment, not because shared faith automatically guarantees honesty, but because belonging to the same mosque, church, or moral community can strengthen familiarity, mutual accountability, and confidence in another

person's conduct. Religious belonging, then, can operate as one among several social signals through which trust is negotiated in everyday exchange (Fafchamps, 2004).

At the same time, spiritual beliefs may also shape how traders interpret obligation, wrongdoing, and the consequences of deception. In contexts where religion and spirituality are woven into everyday life, dishonest behavior may be seen not only as a social or economic violation but also as a moral and spiritual one. Fear of divine punishment, ancestral displeasure, curses, or other forms of spiritual consequence can therefore reinforce norms of reciprocity and restraint, particularly where official regulation is limited or uneven. This does not mean that all trust is produced by fear, nor that every transaction is governed by spiritual sanction. Rather, it means that moral and spiritual ideas may form part of the wider normative environment in which economic behavior is judged and regulated. In this respect, the market can be understood through the idea of a moral economy, in which economic practice is shaped by nonmarket values such as fairness, obligation, social responsibility, and legitimate conduct (Scott, 1976).

Taken together, Granovetter, Fafchamps, and Scott help show that informal market exchange is never purely economic. It is sustained through social relationships, moral expectations, and locally meaningful forms of accountability. In Sierra Leone's marketplace, religion and spirituality may therefore matter not simply as private belief systems, but as part of the social infrastructure through which trust is built, reputations are formed, and economic behavior is evaluated.

3.3 Symbolic Anthropology and Secrecy

The symbolic meanings attributed to rituals, religious language, and sacred symbols are essential to understanding how spirituality operates in daily market interactions. Clifford Geertz's (1973) concept of thick description provides a methodological and interpretive lens for unpacking the layered meanings behind actions such as blessing one's stall, invoking God during negotiations, or displaying religious imagery at a place of business. Geertz argued that culture is best understood as a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms, and that the task of the researcher is to interpret these symbols in context rather than simply cataloguing behavior. In this light, the informal market is not just an economic space but also a ritualized space imbued with sacred meaning. When a trader recites Psalm 23 over her stall each morning, or a butcher carries a Quranic verse sewn into his apron, these are not incidental habits; they are symbolic acts through which people express, reinforce, and negotiate their relationship to divine power, moral community, and economic uncertainty. Thick description allows this study to move beyond surface-level observation and to ask what such practices mean to the people who perform them, what social work they accomplish, and how they connect to broader patterns of trust, identity, and authority in the marketplace.

The study also draws on the anthropology of secrecy, particularly Bellman's (1984) work on the Poro society among the Kpelle of West Africa. Bellman analyzes how secrecy functions not as the mere concealment of information but as a communicative practice that structures social relationships, distributes power, and marks boundaries between insiders and outsiders. In the context of the Poro, initiates gain access to restricted knowledge, ritual symbols, and moral codes that are deliberately withheld from non-members. This framework is directly relevant to the Sierra Leonean marketplace, where the Poro and its female counterpart, the Sande (Bondo),

continue to shape social hierarchies and moral authority. Secret societies do not merely preserve indigenous spiritual traditions; they exercise genuine influence in social, political, and economic spheres. The codes they follow, the rituals they perform, and the symbols they share build an unseen framework that conditions social relations, including business ties. Peter Albrecht (2016) extends this analysis by showing how the Poro functions as a networked form of authority that blurs the boundaries between formal and informal governance, conditioning access to power, resources, and community standing. Incorporating this framework allows the analysis to examine how hidden knowledge and secrecy distribute power and credibility in ways that flow directly into trade relations, market hierarchies, and the informal resolution of disputes.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology used to explore the role of religion and spirituality in Sierra Leone's informal market economy. The study employs a qualitative, ethnographic approach informed by an interpretivist outlook on knowing. This methodology is appropriate given the study's aim of exploring subjective experiences and embedded practices rather than testing a specific hypothesis.

4.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study uses a qualitative, ethnographic research design. Ethnography, with its roots in anthropology, depends on sustained, firsthand attention to how people live, what they do, and the meanings they attach to those actions in the ordinary places where daily life unfolds (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It differs from surveys or experiments in a basic way: the point is not to take a ready-made hypothesis and test it under controlled conditions. What matters instead is entering a social world, often for a long stretch of time, and learning how the people there make sense of their own surroundings. The reasoning is inductive. Rather than forcing external labels onto the setting from the start, the researcher builds an account gradually, watching what people actually do, listening to the ways they describe and justify their choices, and following the regularities that show themselves as days pass and interactions repeat. Participant observation sits at the center of this method. It requires being physically present in the research site and joining in, at least in part, with everyday routines and activities (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). That participation is not the same as trying to "go native" or present oneself as a full insider. It is closer to taking up a position near enough to witness natural, unscripted exchanges, while still staying far enough back to think carefully and critically about what is

being seen. Participant observation is especially useful because it catches things interviews often skim over or never reach at all: small rituals, shifts in posture and gesture, moral phrasing, how space is used, how timing matters, and the low-level strains or frictions that give daily life its feel.[7] Along with observation, ethnographic work usually draws on semi-structured interviews, casual conversations, and the steady production of field notes and other records. Put together, these materials make it possible to trace not only what people do, but how they explain it, and what they understand their actions to mean. That concern with subjective meaning is one of the clearest differences between ethnography and more distanced styles of social research. For this thesis, ethnography fits particularly well because it can show how religion and spirituality work within informal market life. Spiritual practice, moral judgment, trust, and fear tend to be lived and felt before they are formally stated, and they are often communicated through everyday talk, gesture, and ritual instead of explicit declarations. The approach is also adaptable. As fieldwork develops, the researcher can pursue unexpected openings, adjust questions, and push an inquiry further as new details come into view. In settings where religious practice, market conduct, and social power are tangled together, sometimes in ways that remain partly hidden, that adaptability is not optional, it is necessary. Ethnography keeps the study tied to the actual grain of market life, rather than to a rigid plan fixed entirely in advance (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

4.2 Field Site: Freetown, Sierra Leone

Figure 4.1: A typical informal market scene in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The image shows vendors selling goods under umbrellas on a busy street, with shoppers moving between stalls. This represents the vibrant, open-air trading environment where this research was conducted

Set on a mountainous peninsula on West Africa's Atlantic edge, Freetown is Sierra Leone's capital, its main port, and its largest city. The town began in 1792 as a place for formerly enslaved people to settle, and over time, it has expanded into a large urban center with more than 1.3 million residents (Britannica, n.d.).[8] It is also the country's political hub, a financial and economic anchor, and a key cultural center. Much of that importance ties back to the deep-water harbor, one of the biggest on the continent, long tied to trade both within Sierra Leone and beyond it (Britannica, n.d.). No single group dominates the city's population. Instead, Freetown

is markedly mixed, ethnically, culturally, and religiously, with each ethnic community making up less than about a quarter of residents. People from all the country's major groups live and work here, including Mende, Temne, Limba, Fula, Krio, and others. Islam is the majority religion, yet Christian communities are prominent, and local traditions remain visible in public life as well. Freetown is often characterized as religiously tolerant: Muslims and Christians share neighborhoods, do business with one another, and move through the same social spaces, while interfaith families are common (U.S. Department of State, 2024). That everyday mixing matters for this project. Religious identity is present in ordinary routines, but it does not usually function as a hard boundary, which makes the city an especially useful place to examine how religious belonging, spiritual practice, and economic activity meet and influence each other. A large share of daily business runs through informal trade. Street markets, open stalls, roadside sellers, and mobile hawkers shape the city's economic scene. In neighborhood after neighborhood, traders offer everything from food and fabric to clothing, electronics, and household goods. Informal trading is largely women's work, especially around the central business district, and it supports not only household incomes but also the city's wider food distribution (African Cities Research Consortium [ACRC], n.d.).

Fieldwork for this study centers on an outdoor market zone along Sani Abacha Street in downtown Freetown, referred to in this thesis as Abacha Market.[9] Abacha Street is among the city's busiest informal trading corridors. Each morning, hundreds of vendors, mostly women, arrive to set out their goods, bargain, buy stock, and sell throughout the day. It has been called "more than just a marketplace," instead described as "a lifeline for thousands of families" (Hidden Voices Africa, n.d.). The work offers livelihoods, although earnings can be low and uncertain. At the same time, the street operates as an important distribution point, moving goods

and affordable food out across the city (ACRC, n.d.). Politics also enters the space. Abacha Market has repeatedly been caught up in government efforts to move traders as part of city management campaigns, disruptions that have hit livelihoods and, by extension, food security. This is why the site fits the research questions so well. In one place, it gathers a crowded and highly visible informal economy, routine side-by-side life among Muslim, Christian, and traditional religious identities, and public acts of prayer, blessing, and other spiritual practices woven into ordinary selling and buying. It also brings into view the pressures that come with market life under economic uncertainty, trust and rivalry, jealousy, and the sense that moral accountability is always in the air. As this thesis argues, on Abacha Street, faith and trade do not sit in separate compartments; they are lived together as part of the same daily reality.

4.3 Participants and Sampling

This thesis relied on two non-probability sampling approaches that work well together, purposive sampling and snowball sampling. In qualitative work, especially ethnography and interview-based studies, the point is usually not statistical generalization. Instead, the aim is to speak with people who can offer detailed, grounded insight into the issue being examined. With purposive sampling, sometimes called purposeful or judgment sampling, the researcher selects participants intentionally, using characteristics tied directly to the research questions (Patton, 2002). Random sampling is built to mirror a wider population in statistical terms, but purposive sampling works differently. It seeks out individuals who are especially likely to have close knowledge of the subject or direct experience with it. Because qualitative research puts weight on depth over breadth, this approach helps the researcher concentrate on "information-rich" cases, cases that can clarify key dynamics of the study in ways a random selection often cannot (Patton, 2002).[10]

Here, purposive sampling was used to identify five key informants. Two main criteria guided selection: (1) the person's degree of religious or spiritual engagement, and (2) their position in the marketplace. Using these criteria meant each participant was able to speak from experience about how faith, spiritual practice, and economic life meet in everyday market settings. The five participants selected were a Poro society member who was also an elder trader, two long-time female vendors (one Muslim and one Christian), a young Muslim butcher, and a devout Christian shopkeeper with an established and publicly visible religious identity. Taken together, these participants were not meant to stand in for all market traders. They were chosen to bring variation in religious identity, gender, age, market role, and links to spiritual practice.

After the initial five interviews, snowball sampling was used to reach people beyond that first group. Snowball sampling works through referrals: participants recommend, or introduce the researcher to, others who also have relevant knowledge or experience (Noy, 2008). This technique tends to matter most in settings where trust must be earned, where topics are sensitive, or where the relevant individuals are hard to identify through formal lists or public records.[11] It fit this study because issues like spiritual protection, suspicions of witchcraft, Poro membership, and ritual practices are not always shared openly with outsiders. A trusted introduction made it easier for new participants to feel at ease and talk about what they had seen or lived. Through these referrals, the study included additional traders, customers, and community members, bringing in more voices and widening the range of perspectives. Neither purposive sampling nor snowball sampling yields a statistically representative sample, and this study does not claim generalizability to all market traders in Sierra Leone. These methods were chosen for a different reason: they match the central purpose of qualitative interview research, which is to produce a

close, context-sensitive understanding of how people experience and interpret the phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2013).

4.4 Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were generated through a combination of semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation, consistent with established qualitative and ethnographic practice (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In qualitative research, data collection is not a single event but an ongoing, iterative process in which the researcher refines questions, follows emerging themes, and deepens understanding over time. Each method contributes something distinct: semi-structured interviews provide space for participants to narrate their experiences and reasoning in their own words; informal conversations capture spontaneous reflections that may not emerge in a formal interview setting; and participant observation allows the researcher to notice patterns of behavior, spatial arrangements, material objects, and social dynamics that participants themselves may not articulate directly.[12]

Semi-structured interviews are one of the most widely used methods in qualitative research. Unlike fully structured interviews, which follow a fixed set of questions, semi-structured interviews use a flexible guide that allows the researcher to explore topics in depth, follow up on unexpected statements, and adapt the conversation to the participant's own concerns and language (Bryman, 2016). In this study, interviews were conducted face-to-face in the market setting, in Krio, English, Temne, or Limba, depending on each participant's preference, with translation assistance where needed. Conducting interviews on-site allowed the researcher to observe the physical and social context in which participants work, pray, negotiate, and interact,

enriching the data with details that a decontextualized interview could not capture. In addition to individual interviews, the study draws on generalized patterns observed across informal markets in West Africa, informed by existing ethnographic literature on the region, to provide context for the specific accounts gathered. This contextual framing is important because it situates participants' narratives within broader, documented patterns of spiritual and economic life in the region rather than presenting them as isolated or unusual cases (Ferme, 2001; Geschiere, 1997).

The following examples illustrate the kinds of data generated through these methods. They are presented here not as exhaustive evidence but as characteristic accounts that reflect key themes pursued throughout the analysis.

Christian Vendors and Anointing Practices

One participant, a devout Christian woman who sells goods in the market, described using multiple anointing oils obtained from her church, each designated for a specific purpose: one to attract customers, another to protect against unseen spiritual attacks, and a third applied to her children's foreheads to promote mental sharpness. A male Christian shopkeeper offered a complementary account, explaining that the cross displayed in his stall functions not merely as a religious symbol but as a form of spiritual protection against hidden harm. These accounts illustrate how material objects and ritual practices drawn from organized religion can be incorporated into everyday commercial life as practical resources for protection, success, and well-being. In the broader literature, the use of anointing oil in African Christianity has been described as a "point of contact in spiritual warfare," bridging formal religious symbolism and everyday spiritual need (Kgatle, 2023).

Muslim Traders, Spiritual Consultation, and Moral Boundaries

A young Muslim butcher described how traders in his line of work sometimes consult a moray man (a local spiritual specialist) when business declines. After the consultation, the practitioner typically concludes with a prayer such as "May Allah make it happen," blending ritual intervention with an invocation of Islamic faith. The same participant explained that when business fails unexpectedly, traders may suspect that someone has used spiritual means to cause harm, prompting a search for protective countermeasures or ways to reverse the perceived curse. These accounts are consistent with scholarship showing that in many West African market settings, spiritual consultation and Islamic practice are not experienced as contradictory but as complementary strategies for managing uncertainty (Geschiere, 1997; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000).

By contrast, a Muslim woman who sells cosmetics while wearing a hijab described a different moral orientation. She explicitly rejects the use of juju because she considers it incompatible with Qur'anic teachings. Instead, she builds customer loyalty through personal relationships, honest dealing, and flexible credit arrangements known locally as "tross" (informal deferred payment). Her daily routine is structured around prayer, and she frames her commercial ethics in explicitly Islamic terms. This account illustrates how religious conviction can function not only as a source of spiritual protection but also as a framework for moral self-regulation in economic life, shaping how a trader defines legitimate versus illegitimate business conduct. Research on Islamic business ethics in West Africa similarly documents how faith-based moral commitments can structure traders' commercial decisions, relationships, and self-presentation (Amin & Yusuf, 2019).

Krio Proverbs and the Moral Language of the Market

Participants frequently invoked Krio proverbs to express moral norms circulating in the marketplace. One widely cited example is "Wae yu yams white, cover am" — roughly, "when your yam is white, cover it" — meaning that success should be kept out of sight.[13] The logic behind this proverb reflects a widespread moral sensibility: visible prosperity can attract envy, spiritual jealousy, and even accusations of occult enrichment. In this context, concealment is not dishonesty but a form of social and spiritual self-protection. This pattern is well documented in the anthropological literature on West Africa, where displays of wealth may provoke suspicion and where discretion functions as a strategy for managing moral risk (Ferme, 2001; Gershman, 2016).

Protective Objects: Charms, Jege Bundles, and Talismans

Several participants described the use of protective objects in the marketplace, including charms, "jege" bundles (small packets wrapped in beads or cloth), and talismans inscribed with Arabic script. These objects serve different functions: some are understood to ward off spiritual harm, while others are believed to attract customers or commercial favor. Participants noted that such items are typically hidden from public view, tucked into the edges of market stalls, sewn into clothing, or carried on the body. The concealment of these objects is itself meaningful: it reflects both the power attributed to secrecy and the social risks of being seen to rely on spiritual technology, which may invite suspicion, moral judgment, or accusations of witchcraft. The anthropological literature on Sierra Leone emphasizes how meaning in social life is frequently organized around what is hidden, and how secrecy itself can be a source of power, protection, and vulnerability (Bellman, 1984; Ferme, 2001).

4.5 Ethical Considerations

This research follows oral history methodology and ethical protocols for collecting personal narratives and lived experiences. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants before interviews. Pseudonyms are used throughout to maintain confidentiality and protect participant identities.[5] The study respected cultural norms and employed non-intrusive inquiry into sensitive topics (like secret society practices). Participants were informed of their right to decline answering any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time. Cultural sensitivity and respect for local customs guided all aspects of data collection and interpretation.

4.6 Reflexivity and Positionality

As a researcher with cultural ties to Sierra Leone but currently based outside the country, I operate as both insider and outsider. Conducting in-person interviews in a spiritually charged market environment posed unique challenges. I was mindful of the sensitivity of the topics discussed and the trust required to access personal narratives about spiritual practice, competition, and hidden knowledge. Some fear arose during this process, particularly when informants shared stories of spiritual harm, secrecy, and competitive sabotage. I was reminded of how spiritually charged and precarious the market environment is, where proximity breeds rivalry. I also acknowledge the use of AI assistance (Grammarly) in structuring and drafting content, while retaining full editorial control to reflect my voice and experience.

4.7 Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged openly, both to help the reader assess the findings and to clarify what the study can and cannot claim.

First, the sample is small and non-random. The study draws on in-depth interviews with a limited number of participants, selected through purposive and snowball sampling rather than through probabilistic methods. This means that the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all market traders in Sierra Leone or to informal markets elsewhere. However, this limitation is inherent to the design and purpose of qualitative research, which prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth of coverage. The goal of qualitative inquiry is not to produce findings that apply universally, but to generate detailed, context-sensitive insight into how people experience and interpret a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). In qualitative research, the relevant standard is not generalizability in the statistical sense but transferability: whether the study provides enough contextual detail for readers to assess how the findings might apply to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).[14]

Second, the study is shaped by the researcher's own positionality. Qualitative research of this kind is inevitably influenced by the researcher's background, cultural knowledge, social position, and interpretive lens. In ethnographic and interview-based work, the researcher is not a neutral data-collection instrument but an active participant in the production of knowledge (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This study was conducted by a researcher with cultural familiarity with Sierra Leone, which provided advantages in terms of language access, trust-building, and contextual understanding. At the same time, cultural familiarity can also create blind spots: the researcher may take for granted patterns or meanings that an outsider would question more explicitly.[15] To manage this, the researcher maintained a reflexive field diary, returned to the data multiple times during analysis, and made interpretive choices as transparent as possible in the presentation of findings (Creswell, 2013).

Third, ethical and cultural constraints limited access to certain practices. Some of the spiritual and ritual activities discussed in this thesis, particularly those connected to secret societies such as the Poro, are by their nature restricted to initiated members and are not open to outside observation or detailed inquiry. Participants were sometimes willing to discuss the general significance of these practices but declined to describe specific rituals, symbols, or internal governance structures in detail. This is not a failure of the research design but a reflection of the social reality being studied: secrecy is not merely an obstacle to data collection but is itself a central feature of how power, authority, and knowledge are organized in this context (Bellman, 1984; Ferme, 2001). The study, therefore, works with what participants were willing to share, and it treats silences and boundaries of disclosure as analytically meaningful rather than simply as gaps.

Fourth, the study's reliance on interview data means that findings reflect participants' accounts and self-interpretations rather than independently verified behavior. What people say about their practices in an interview may differ from what they do in unobserved moments. This is a well-recognized limitation of interview-based qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). The use of participant observation alongside interviews partially mitigates this concern, since the researcher was able to observe some of the behaviors and material practices (e.g., displayed religious symbols, prayer routines, spatial arrangements) that participants also described verbally. Nevertheless, the study's primary contribution lies in how participants narrate, interpret, and make sense of the relationship between faith and market life, which is itself a legitimate and important form of evidence within an interpretive, oral-history-oriented framework.

Fifth, language mediation introduces a degree of interpretive distance. Interviews were conducted in Krio, English, Temne, and Limba, with translation assistance where needed. Any

act of translation involves interpretation, and some nuances of meaning, humor, or idiomatic expression may be lost or altered in the process. The researcher's working familiarity with Krio and English helped reduce this risk, but it cannot be eliminated.

Despite these limitations, the methodology reflects a carefully designed qualitative approach that prioritizes grounded insight, cultural familiarity, and respect for participants' own frameworks of meaning. The study does not claim to offer a comprehensive or representative account of all market traders in Sierra Leone. What it offers instead is a detailed, interpretive analysis of how a particular group of traders understands, practices, and negotiates the relationship between religion, spirituality, and economic life in one of Freetown's most active informal trading spaces. The findings presented in Chapter 5 build directly on these accounts, supported by vivid examples and key informant testimony.

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5. All participant names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. Quotations from research participants come from the author's original fieldwork and are presented directly in the text in accordance with APA 7th edition guidance on quoting research participants.

6. In Sierra Leone, syncretic practices—blending elements of Islam, Christianity, and indigenous spiritual traditions—are common and do not necessarily indicate contradiction or confusion in belief. Many participants moved fluidly between religious frameworks.

7. Participant observation is especially useful because it catches things interviews often skim over or never reach at all: small rituals, shifts in posture and gesture, moral phrasing, how space is used, how timing matters, and the low-level strains or frictions that give daily life its feel.

8. Freetown began in 1792 as a place for formerly enslaved people to settle, and over time, it has expanded into a large urban center with more than 1.3 million residents (Britannica, n.d.).

9. Fieldwork for this study centers on an outdoor market zone along Sani Abacha Street in downtown Freetown, referred to in this thesis as Abacha Market.

10. Because qualitative research puts weight on depth over breadth, this approach helps the researcher concentrate on "information-rich" cases—cases that can clarify key dynamics of the study in ways a random selection often cannot (Patton, 2002).

11. This technique tends to matter most in settings where trust must be earned, where topics are sensitive, or where the relevant individuals are hard to identify through formal lists or public records.

12. Each method contributes something distinct: semi-structured interviews provide space for participants to narrate their experiences; informal conversations capture spontaneous reflections; and participant observation allows the researcher to notice patterns of behavior, spatial arrangements, material objects, and social dynamics that participants themselves may not articulate directly.

13. One widely cited example is "Wae yu yams white, cover am"—roughly, "when your yam is white, cover it"—meaning that success should be kept out of sight.

14. In qualitative research, the relevant standard is not generalizability in the statistical sense but transferability: whether the study provides enough contextual detail for readers to assess how the findings might apply to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

15. Cultural familiarity can also create blind spots: the researcher may take for granted patterns or meanings that an outsider would question more explicitly.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS — RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND THE MARKETPLACE

5.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents key discoveries from my time in the field; examining ways religion and spirituality play out within an informal market in Sierra Leone. I carried out main interviews with a Muslim butcher, various Christian sellers, plus one source tied to the Poro society, and I collected observations along with local proverbs too. A portrait comes through of faith and spiritual habits threaded deep into routine business dealings. Roughly 77 percent of Sierra Leone's people follow Islam, another 22 percent Christianity; still, their religious ways lean syncretic, blending often with native spiritual customs. That market serves as a sharp, compact glimpse into such fusion, where merchants invoke both God and spirits for wealth or safety. By theme, I've arranged these insights, touching on protective rituals; spiritual rivalry and envy; faith-based identity and reliability; effects from the Poro secret group; and my personal reflections as the investigator. Altogether, such elements reveal an informal bazaar working not only as a trade spot but as a charged arena for spiritual clashes. People bargain for achievement and endurance via open actions, hidden powers alike.

5.2 Ritual Protection and Market Survival

Most sellers at the market firmly think their business ups and downs tie right back to spiritual causes,[16] so plenty of them make a point to chase after some ritual safeguards for themselves and what they sell. They talked about all sorts of habits meant to block bad luck or those "spiritual attacks" they dread, things that might show up as dragging sales, ruined stock, or

weird mishaps no one can explain. Take the anointing oil, for instance.[17] People who follow Christianity usually stash tiny vials of blessed oil straight from their church, and they quietly smear it on their stands or items first thing each day; one woman dealing in fruits and veggies described how she rubs it across her setup while calling out a prayer: "God bless this business, no bad heart no go kam na ya" (God bless this business, no evil heart shall come here). She figures that the whole routine builds up a kind of holy barrier around her wares, keeps curses from sticking at all.

Charms, those little jege things. Plenty of traders lug them around or dangle them for safety; often just tiny leather sacks or tied-up packets stuffed with holy bits. Take Almamy, that Muslim meat cutter, who flashed me a wee pouch knotted to his apron's inner side: tucked inside, a shred of paper scribbled with lines from the Quran. "Na me jege dis – me protectshon," he tossed out in Krio, meaning this trinket shielded him. Habits like these run rampant. Folks hunt down mori men, those Islamic guides scraping by on scripting Quran bits or pleas into talismans. The name mori man springs from Mende for Muslim, and way back, these scribblers served up help to Muslims and Christians alike. Almamy mentioned dropping by one to snag a blessing for his cleaver and the pouch he hauls; to him, any thriving butcher hides "some secret thing backing him." Scripture and prayer blend in too. I spotted loads of stalls with sayings like "Allah is Great," or Bible scraps scribbled on cardboard, stuck up in their spots.

One fish seller shared how she chants Psalm 23 each day at her stand before buyers show: convinced God's words chase off bad vibes, "The Lord is my shepherd… He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Muslim owners could mumble Ayat al-Kursi, guarding verse from the Quran, or spin tapes of holy chants. All these points lead to the shared faith that pleas can bless the shop space. As a trader summed it: "We dae mek God kam na di

markit wit wi" (We let God come to the market with us). Healers and "moray men" step in for tougher spots; if sickness hits a seller over and over or trade crashes without warning, they turn to old-style curers or spirit workers, called "moray man" in Krio sometimes (probably kin to mori man). These types blur lines between faith and local ways: maybe blending Quran chants with plants and fortune-telling to spot ghostly woes. A fruit peddler admitted that, after bad luck piled up, she sought a nearby spirit fixer, who handed over a guarding charm to plant beneath her booth. "Den say na spiritual attack, so mi for do protection" (They said it was a spiritual attack, so I needed protection), she laid out. A bustling side hustle thrives in charms and rites near the market, quietly backed by the idea that stopping trouble beats fixing it, especially against sorcery.

5.3 Islamic Belief and Spiritual Consultation

In all those stories, what keeps popping up is how folks pin weird troubles on some kind of spiritual battle. Traders here figure rivals or folks with grudges could try tying down their shops with spells or hidden tricks. Getting by in business means keeping your spirit toughened up, they say. Wins don't come just from sweat or chance: no, those tie right into blessings from above or solid shields against harm. And when things go sour, a setback or tough break, it seldom feels like pure accident; more like a weak spot in your defenses got exposed. Take Alhaji, a butcher: he told about this one time his whole stock of meat went bad by midday, which struck him as odd even in the sticky heat. "If ar forget for say me prayers, bad piple go able fet me business," he put it, meaning if prayers slip his mind, evil types might latch onto his trade. Views like that really steer how people go about their days. Come early morning, you spot sellers whispering their pleas while arranging goods; some sneak in drops of holy water at each stall

edge. To them, the market buzzes with deals you see, yet hangs under this unseen haze of spirit clashes: always watch out, keep up the rites.

Figure 5.1 a typical store selling all kinds of things food food items, ranging from, palm oil, rice, candies groundnut etc

5.4 Competition and Spiritual Jealousy

Fear of jealousy driven by spirits stands out big too, especially among those hawking the same stuff cheek by jowl in tight alleys. Sure, they chat friendly enough on the outside, but plenty confess this gnawing worry deep down, that a neighbor might sneak in some mystic hit to knock

them low. Envy gets treated dead seriously; folks believe it can wreck a livelihood, or worse, take lives.

That old Krio saying kept coming back in talks: "Wae u yams white, koba am." Translates to "when your yam is white, cover it." White-fleshed yams stand for luck or gains, so the line warns to keep successes under wraps, dodge stirring up spite. Sellers trot this out to say why they shrug off big days or skip bragging on earnings. Vendor B chuckled that if asked about trade, "Ah go say 'e nor bad' even if ah don sell boku" (I'll just say "not bad" even if I sold a lot). Acting humble isn't for show alone: it's how you dodge risks. Pull in envy, and you're asking for grief.

Quite a few folks shared tales they figured pointed to spirit meddling:

- A cloth seller shared how, right after setting up her stall, this older rival kept prying into her daily earnings and profit.[15] Not long afterward, she spotted odd powders, some kind of foul herbal mix, scattered close to her wares. "Ah bin fraid," she confessed: truly scared. That week, her business dipped, and sickness hit her hard. Jealousy, she figured, had stirred up a ghostly assault against her. So she turned to a pastor for prayers over the spot, and from then on smeared blessing oil around the area each dawn. Plus, she got sly about sharing sales numbers, dodging any loose talk on cash with those other traders nearby.
- A woman peddling fruits and veggies talked up her feud with another lady hawking the same stuff only a couple of spots over. "If customers crowd mi table, some go watch me bad yai," Hawa explained, pointing out the rival's bitter glare. To Hawa, that fierce grudge worked much like an evil gaze; it shot out harmful vibes from the spirit world. Once, following a morning rush at Hawa's setup, the competitor handed over a mango

drink out of nowhere as some sort of truce gesture. Hawa took it politely but dumped the thing in secret later on. Worry nagged at her that it carried a hex to wreck her fortune or bring on illness. Vendors often swap bites and sips like that, yet suspicion always lurks, the fear it hides dark charms inside.

- The Muslim meat cutter Almamy, brought up before, described a habit among folks in his line: they refuse to pass coins straight across the meat block to buyers, making sure the person grabs it off the surface instead. "You nor sabi udat na witch," he warned (you can't tell who's got witchery in them). The belief holds that a spiteful type might snag that direct touch with cash or flesh to weave bad magic into your trade; by skipping the handoff, they aim to snap any hidden tie. Though it came off as folklore to me, Almamy insisted plenty followed it in their work.

The notion that competitors may resort to spiritual warfare is not unique to this market. Anthropologists have noted that throughout Africa, entrepreneurial success often invites accusations of sorcery. In that marketplace of ours, I spotted this whole setup playing out strongly. A vendor who thrives has to tread carefully, staying afloat without flashing too much shine that stirs up deadly grudges. One shopkeeper, a Christian, put it plainly: "Hevribodi kin glad for progress, but the heart nor dae die pa jealous." (Everybody likes progress, but the heart doesn't die from jealousy; people just can't shake off envy). So she and the rest try hard to soothe those watching eyes: doling out scraps of earnings as charity; chalking up wins to divine favor instead of sharp wits; or hiding their prized white yam, tucking away triumphs to dodge notice.

Even with all that caution, dread of hidden strikes hangs heavy. The market buzzes like some chilly battlefield of spirits, where grins and chatter hide a sharp watchfulness. A seller might cheer her neighbor's fat deal, yet inside she's whispering pleas against dark forces turning

on her. This tense air spins a loop, you see. Worry over envy sparks guarding rites, which then cement notions of ghostly perils. As Vendor C laid it out raw, "Na di jealousy go kill man pas gun" (envy slays quicker than bullets). Overblown, sure: but that line nails how vivid the menace of spirit-born spite looms for folks scraping by in those stalls.

5.5 Religious Identity and Economic Trust

Uprightness and devotion as trade tools: plenty of sellers boast about coming off as reverent, swearing it boosts their standing. Take this small-time dealer, a committed Muslim; she drops into her prayers (salat) smack at her spot when the hour hits, customers hanging or not. Instead of chasing off buyers, she figures this habit proves her honesty and steadiness. "If posin see say you dae pray, them go trust you small," she noted. People lean toward trusting you extra if they catch you in prayer. Someone true to the Almighty, in her eyes, skips the swindles in dealings. Buyers wandering the lanes often hail sellers with faith-laced words, "As-salaam-alaikum" or "Praise God!" Those swaps spark fast ease and confidence if echoed back. A Christian shopper could lean toward the lady who slips in "God bless you" per transaction, viewing her as warm-souled; a Muslim might pick the one matching their greetings from the faith. These quiet leans build bonds that cross divides too, it's normal hearing Muslim sellers toss out "Insha'Allah, Ar go see you tumara" and Christian folks answer "Amen." Language like that knits an ethical link; smoothing deals along.

Traders sometimes flash their religious ties right out in the open to pull in some trust; signboards and shop names throw in those holy nods, like "Allah Provide Enterprise," "By Grace Fashion," or "In God We Trust Shop." I spotted a fruit stall with this huge sticker of a cross and the words "Jesus is Lord" stuck on its umbrella. Nearby, another one showed off Arabic script

declaring the shahada. When I quizzed one vendor about her "Jesus is Lord" sticker, she grinned and explained, "That one deh for tell people say ar go church, ar honest." Her Christian symbol broadcast to buyers that she sticks to those upright ways: no rigged scales, straight prices, honest trades. Muslim sellers could hang a prayer bead or a Mecca snapshot as their quiet nod to principles. Branding like that goes beyond plain ads; it draws on the shared pull of faith ties.

Not every trader buys into charms and rites the same way. Some flat-out claimed that real character and belief trump any safeguard item for thriving in trade. Take this hawker I talked to, we'll name him Sahr; he roams the market paths each day, tray loaded with odds and ends. Sahr, a young Christian guy, shared a take that stood apart from the fixed-spot sellers. He told me, "Mi nor get time for juju. If ah treat customers right n' show me honest face, then dat go bring blessing". Traits such as truthfulness, dependability, warmth: those were his big points. Known as a solid Christian, involved in his congregation, aiding folks, that got people extending credit or sending fresh buyers his way. In his eyes, trust grows from steady right actions, not spells. Sahr even doubted those leaning on brews or talismans: "If you heart clean, you nor need all that." His outlook captures a group of sellers who bank on devotion and good name as their market shield.

This doesn't mean Sahr and his kind dodge the usual scares around them; he admitted, half-kidding, that "God protect me from witch oh." At the core, though, he figures divine goodwill comes from clean living and piety, not mere ceremonies. In Sierra Leone, both Christian and Muslim teachings stress giving, candor, and group bonds; those ideas shape the off-the-books economy for sure. Trust circles often line up with worship groups: folks from the same church might shop at each other's spots, or a Muslim store owner could offer terms to a mosque mate, betting on their common honor code for payback. One Muslim meat cutter

recalled how in Eid times he allowed some to grab cuts on promise and settle up after, "because we are all brothers in Islam." Such kindness, he adds, circles back when times get tight: "So na lek blessing to me business".

Religious identity acts like a kind of trust money in the marketplace; yeah, that stood out plain. Folks show off their beliefs deliberately, and it sends a message of reliability. Then, religious lessons pass along a setup for telling right from wrong in trades. You cheat a person, you've committed a wrong; aid someone, and a higher power notices with favor. Such thinking runs right next to the fear-laced ideas about sorcery: perhaps it eases those worries a bit. Take a seller who quietly fears an envious hex, yet out loud pushes truthfulness as top rule, drawn from faith lessons early on. Both live in the market scene, the do-unto-others idea and the wary glance at malice, each staking out space in this knotted ethical mix.

5.6 Secrecy, Power, and Poro Influence

One unexpected discovery in my work, touchy as well, turned up the quiet yet solid role of the Poro secret group in daily market dealings. Bakarr, a Poro member, shared unusual views on how this old setup brushes against regular open doings. Poro forms an all-men hidden brotherhood, holding a key spot in cultural power across many Sierra Leone spots, mainly with Mende, Temne, and related groups. Lots about Poro stays wrapped in mystery; Bakarr's take, though, sheds some clarity on how their spirit watches and casual rulings slip into a lively trading spot.

Bakarr joined the Poro five years back and got initiated in his Kailahun district. He talked about that forest initiation, where they push hard on moral lessons and how to survive. "Dem teach we for be good man–lek good usband, good padi, n for fet n protect wi people," as he put it; translating, they guide you toward becoming solid husbands, loyal pals, fighters who

guard their own. Those moral bits form the heart of Poro. Young guys pick up self-control, honor toward older folks, bravery, and duties to the group. Back in regular life after the bush time, they haul those ideas along. "You never go against" the stuff drilled in there, Bakarr insisted. Now shift to the market scene: a vendor who's in Poro sticks to some honor code, skips stealing or breaking deals, not only from his own beliefs or faith but because those values sank deep. Brothers in the society, scattered around the community, they keep tabs on each other; quietly, you know.

Then there's this spiritual shield and watchful eye thing: Bakarr broke down how initiation hands out hidden body marks. Usually, tiny scars are packed with herbs or whatever. These spots, he swore, act like safeguards and some kind of spirit detector. "Wen pesin wan hurt me, di mark deh behind me bodi kin itch me": if anyone's plotting harm through unseen ways, that back mark starts itching to tip him off. He even let me glimpse one in private, this little scar shaped like a butterfly on his shoulder blade. Claimed it as a standard mark for his local group. Marks vary, picked sometimes by the guy himself or his kin, each loaded with its own symbols. Hearing this floored me. Points to Poro folks thinking they've got an internal alarm for ghostly threats. If it's real, a market seller in society could pick up on someone cursing him or spot trouble brewing close by that needs fixing. Sure, Bakarr's itchy scar comes off as otherworldly, yet it ties into this wider notion; the Poro watches its own, and through them, the whole village.

Bakarr laid it out straight: the Poro society watches over the community without a break. "Poro get eye na evri place", meaning Poro has eyes everywhere. He gave this vivid case. Through Sierra Leone's civil war, stretching from 1991 to 2002, Poro heads set up defenses for villages and, as he put it, "help end di war" with talks and spirit-based methods. Folks attribute mystical feats to Poro and similar hidden groups during fights, such as jamming weapons or

changing bullets to liquid, even if those tales stay unproven stories. Once calm returned, that alert gaze turned toward routine troubles. Like theft in the marketplace, neighborhood quarrels, all sorts of misdeeds, group insiders handle them discreetly, out of sight. Bakarr described the process: when a repeat offender shows up, say a crook targeting sellers over and over or someone thought to hex others into illness, Poro might conduct a private session or deliver a caution. At times, they place symbolic hints at a booth or entrance. Arrangements of leaves that puzzle outsiders, sketches in charcoal; signs tied to Poro alone. Just the insiders grasp their full sense, but if the person aimed at gets it, the warning hits home: "We know what you did. Stop, or face consequences." This form of watchful spirit oversight works next to formal rules, not clashing with them. People mentioned pilfered items that oddly reappeared after those alerts; trouble-stirrers who abruptly mended their ways, probably scared of Poro's next step.

Secrecy and the edges of what we know: A lot of Poro's sway hides from those not in the fold. Bakarr chatted freely on some points, the ethical guidelines, the guarding symbols, but when I pushed for specifics, he grinned and replied, "Ah nor wa tok dat one": I shouldn't bring that up. He drew firm boundaries. Wondering if Poro steps into squabbles among women at the market, since only men join, I asked how fights with spouses or kin of members play out. His response stayed fuzzy. Poro finds paths to "balance the community," he noted, and women occasionally seek their counterpart group, Sande or Bondo, for issues in women's spheres. Mystery fuels part of Poro's strength. Those outside can only speculate on its true scope.

What stood out, though, was how plenty of folks in the market figured Poro lingered somewhere behind the scenes. One trader who followed Christ lowered her tone and shared with me: some big, important men here belong to Poro (Vendor D). She suggested those figures might pull strings from society if real trouble hit the market's calm or their own dealings. Bakarr

pointed out that holding any key spot means you join up, success slips away. This points to climbing ranks, say as a market head or union boss, often tying into Poro for its ties and sway. Everybody knows without saying: chiefs, merchants, officials slip into the group, and that link demands deference. At times dread too.

Within this trading space, when fights drag on without open fixes, whispers hint at hidden settlements. Stories floated about a young guy in the market nabbed for swiping money from a stall: instead of cops, elders stepped in—one whispered as Poro-linked—and handled it under wraps. Soon, the kid vanished from town. Details stayed fuzzy, but folks muttered lines like Poro taught him proper, with a knowing grin. Such air keeps not every judgment in plain sight; still, a quiet faith holds that old forces balance things out.

Reflecting on what can and cannot be known: As a researcher, I became acutely aware that I was scratching the surface of a deep well of indigenous knowledge. The Poro society embodies the "underneath of things"—layers of meaning and control that outsiders (and even ordinary insiders) are not fully privy to. Bakarr's trust in sharing what he did was an exceptional privilege, yet it also made me mindful of boundaries. I deliberately avoided probing certain rituals or secrets once I sensed discomfort, both out of respect and for my own safety. There are risks in knowing too much or in misrepresenting what one does not fully grasp. This section of the findings is therefore both rich and cautious: it highlights Poro's presence in the marketplace milieu through moral guidance, protective roles, and conflict resolution, but it acknowledges that much of this influence is cloaked. What remains clear is that the power of Poro looms in the collective psyche; it is a source of both social order and supernatural sanction, silently woven into the fabric of market life.

5.7 Reflexivity and Personal Experience

Conducting this research was not only an intellectual journey but an emotional one. As the primary researcher, I found myself traversing feelings of fear, surprise, awe, and deep reflection in the process of gathering these stories. It is important to acknowledge my subjective experience as part of an ethnographic approach; my own reactions became clues to understanding the lived reality of those I studied. In many moments, I became viscerally aware of the danger and complexity of belief in the informal market.

In the early days of fieldwork, I must admit I felt a degree of fear moving through the market with the knowledge that people seriously suspected each other of witchcraft and occult aggression. When I heard traders casually talk about "casting spell", "poisoned greeting", or "Bad heart", a chill went down my spine. One afternoon, I was interviewing a group of women at a stall when suddenly a nearby vendor started shouting in Temne and gesticulating angrily, and a small crowd gathered. I learned that she had found a peculiar object wrapped in red cloth behind her stall and was accusing an unknown rival of planting juju. The intensity of her rage and fear was palpable; others stood back, equally fearful that whatever it was might "activate." In that moment, I felt my own heart pound. Was I in danger just standing nearby? I wasn't sure what that object truly was, but everyone's reaction told me it was something bad. I quietly stepped away, feeling a bit shaken. This incident made the abstract idea of "spiritual attack" brutally concrete for me. I realized that for the vendors, this was not superstition to scoff at; it was as real as someone pulling a knife. My empathy for their vigilance grew, as did a cautious respect for the unseen minefield that the market represented.

Surprise and cultural relativism: I was often surprised by whom I believed. For example, I had assumed that older, less-educated folks might adhere more to witchcraft beliefs, and

younger, educated ones might be more "rational" or solely religious. This stereotype was swiftly dispelled. I met a university-educated shopkeeper who told me, with complete conviction, that his half-sister had ruined their father's business through sorcery born of jealousy. On the other hand, I spoke with an elderly trader who said she "left all to God" and didn't worry about juju at all. The distribution of belief was not as predictable as I thought. This taught me about the complexity of belief systems, how individuals pick and mix elements from tradition, religion, and personal experience. I frequently had to check my own biases. At times, I found myself mentally doubting a story (for instance, Bakarr's claim of his scar itching to warn of harm sounded fantastical to me as an outsider). But I learned to suspend judgment and instead ask, "What does it mean that he believes this? What does it do for him?" By adopting this empathetic lens, I gained a richer understanding. Bakarr's belief in the scar's power, for example, isn't about the physiology of itching; it's about feeling secured by one's culture and ancestors.

Personal risk and ethical boundaries: Times came when I sensed real danger, or at least felt wide open. Discussing secret groups counts as off-limits stuff; mishandle it, and backlash might follow. Often, I'd chat about Poro and sorcery in tucked-away market spots, dropping my tone low. Once, a cluster of guys lingered nearby, appearing to watch while I talked with someone on "bad heart folks" around the stalls. Could've been my nerves jumping. Still, it sharpened my sense as an outsider, pushing me to shield myself plus those sharing tales. Post-chat with Bakarr, heading back, I kept glancing behind—not from any hint of threat (he acted kind all through), but probing those shadowy layers stirred an eerie crossing. Sleep dodged me that night; kept looping stories of Poro bending bullets, decoding omens. A deep respect hit too for how firm their convictions ran, turning the otherworldly almost tangible, even slipping into my thoughts a

touch. Research muddled the gap between examining faith and dipping, just briefly, into that mindset myself.

Shifting to shared feelings and understanding: Hanging out longer with sellers, dread eased into something like kinship. We'd chuckle together, share meals (wary of the setting, sure), even join in prayers. One Sunday morning, tagged along with a pair of Christian merchants to their pre-open gathering in the market; belted out a Krio song, asked for safety and good days ahead. Not one for bold shows of piety, yet I caught myself murmuring the tune, drawing ease from the routine. Come Friday, I watched the Jummah session at a tiny mosque next door with Muslim traders. Such moments spotlighted the grace and group power in their rituals. Fear of shadowy powers lingered, no doubt. But hope bloomed real, along with backing each other via belief. The market is a "spiritual war zone," yeah, but also a circle of faithful types who, crossing faith lines, grasp the core: "we fight not just against flesh and blood." Their heavy lean on higher powers in routine days humbled me; way beyond my own habits at stores or jobs. Made me ponder my outlook, how it could look barren or exposed from where they stand, missing that sacred backbone.

Reflexivity in ethnographic research pushes me to treat my own feelings as actual evidence. That fear I felt showed me a slice of life under witchcraft's shadow, draining you, always demanding sharp awareness. Surprise hit when attitudes caught me off guard, teaching against lumping folks into "traditional" or "modern" boxes; existence just ignores those lines. As I spotted the drive for safety and fairness lurking beneath all that spiritual talk, empathy built up, especially in spots where official setups, police, or courts or coverage plans routinely let down those scraping by. No safety net for your tiny shop? Then, leaning on God to chase off ruin, as some Pentecostals put it, hands you the guts to push on. The market started looking to me like a

group holding together via thick threads of visible ties and those hidden ones, too. Initial nerves gave way to solid admiration for how these sellers view their world; that shift hit hard. While putting down these observations, my spot stays clear in mind: just a learner dipping in who ducks out whenever, but the people I talked to? They grind through it daily. Skepticism sits easily for me as some fancy option; they skip it because spotting life's spirit side keeps them afloat. By slipping into their steps even briefly, a faint sense of their world flickered on: that slim divide splitting body from soul, calling for cautious moves yet laced with expectation.

From a researcher's standpoint, these findings illustrate the integral role of belief systems in economic life. What might superficially be viewed as irrational practices (like burying a charm under a shop) or mere tradition (like saying "Insha'Allah" about a business deal) have tangible social functions: they create meaning, manage risk, enforce norms, and build networks of support. The informal economy, often characterized by uncertainty and lack of formal protections, is here buttressed by a rich informal system of spiritual protection and moral order.

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15. One cloth seller's account of finding powdered substances near her stall illustrates how material objects can become evidence of suspected spiritual aggression in the marketplace.

16. The pattern of attributing business misfortune to spiritual causes, and seeking ritual remedies, is widely documented in anthropological literature on African markets and is not unique to Sierra Leone.

17. The use of anointing oil as both spiritual defense and daily business practice reflects how sacred objects acquire economic significance in informal trade settings (Kgatle, 2023).

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION: SPIRITUALITY, PROTECTION, AND ECONOMIC LIFE

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 5 and places them within broader discussions about religion, spirituality, and economic life in West Africa. The interviews and observations collected for this study show that spirituality is not simply a private system of belief among traders in Sierra Leone. Instead, spiritual practices function as practical tools that individuals use to navigate uncertainty, competition, and vulnerability within the informal marketplace.

Participants repeatedly described spirituality as a form of protection that can influence business outcomes. Rather than viewing religion and economic activity as separate spheres, traders often understand them as interconnected forces that shape everyday life. In this context, spiritual belief becomes one of the many strategies individuals use to protect their businesses, maintain social relationships, and interpret success or misfortune.

6.1 Spiritual Protection as Economic Strategy

The findings reveal that many traders engage in protective rituals that they believe can enhance business success and ward off spiritual attacks. Christian vendors apply anointing oil to their stalls, Muslim traders carry jege charms containing Quranic verses, and vendors from various backgrounds consult spiritual specialists when business difficulties arise. These practices reflect

what Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) describe as "occult economies," where spiritual means are deployed for material ends.

However, rather than viewing these practices as irrational or opposed to economic rationality, the data suggest that traders perceive spiritual protection as complementary to conventional business strategies. Vendors who use anointing oil or charms also engage in practical activities such as price negotiation, relationship building with customers, and credit arrangements. From the traders' perspective, spiritual practices provide an additional layer of security in an uncertain economic environment where formal institutions offer little protection.

This interpretation aligns with Rudnyckyj's (2010) concept of spiritual economies, in which moral and religious commitments are integrated with economic behavior. In Sierra Leone's informal market, spiritual practices are not separate from business strategy but rather embedded within it. The economic rationality of informal traders includes spiritual considerations alongside material calculations.

6.2 Jealousy, Competition, and the "Evil Eye"

A particularly striking finding concerns the widespread fear of spiritual jealousy among traders. Many participants reported concerns that competitors might use supernatural means to harm their businesses. This fear is captured in the Krio proverb "Wae u yams white, koba am" (when your yam is white, cover it), which advises individuals to conceal success to avoid attracting malicious envy.

These concerns reflect broader patterns documented in anthropological research on witchcraft and envy in Africa. Geschiere (1997) argues that witchcraft beliefs intensify during

periods of economic change, particularly when individuals accumulate wealth in contexts of scarcity. Similarly, Gershman (2016) demonstrates that witchcraft fears erode interpersonal trust and cooperation, creating social costs that hinder economic development.

The data from this study support these findings but also reveal complexity. While fear of spiritual jealousy creates tension and mistrust among traders, it also reinforces social norms of humility and redistribution. Successful vendors often downplay their achievements, engage in charitable giving, and attribute success to divine favor rather than personal skill. These behaviors function as strategies to mitigate envy and maintain social relationships within the marketplace.

In this sense, beliefs about spiritual jealousy operate as informal mechanisms of social regulation. They discourage excessive displays of wealth and encourage redistribution, functioning as a form of informal social insurance (Platteau, 2009). However, these same beliefs also create barriers to trust and cooperation, potentially limiting economic growth and market efficiency.

6.3 Religious Identity as Social Capital

The findings also demonstrate that religious identity functions as a form of social capital in the informal marketplace. Traders who publicly display religious symbols, engage in visible prayer, or use religious greetings signal moral trustworthiness to potential customers. This observation aligns with theories of religious capital (Iannaccone, 1990) and social embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985), which emphasize how social relationships and cultural signals shape economic transactions.

In environments where formal contracts and legal protections are weak, religious identity provides a proxy for trust. Customers may prefer to transact with vendors who share their faith or who demonstrate religious commitment through visible practices. Similarly, traders extend credit and build long-term relationships with customers from the same religious community, relying on shared moral frameworks to ensure reciprocity.

Importantly, the data suggest that religious identity operates across faith boundaries in Sierra Leone's syncretic religious environment. Muslim and Christian traders engage in respectful exchanges, using religious greetings from both traditions. This interfaith cooperation reflects Sierra Leone's historical tradition of religious tolerance and demonstrates how religious identity can facilitate rather than hinder economic exchange (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

6.4 Secret Societies and Hidden Authority

The discussion of the Poro society reveals another dimension of how spiritual authority intersects with economic life. The Poro society functions not only as a ritual institution but also as a network of authority that extends into everyday governance and dispute resolution. As Bakarr's testimony suggests, Poro membership provides access to hidden knowledge, spiritual protection, and social networks that can influence marketplace dynamics.

This result fits with what scholars have already written about secret societies in Sierra Leone and across the Upper West African region. Poro is more than a concealed ritual group. It is a male initiation society that, over time, has carried social, moral, and political weight, setting terms of belonging, ordering hierarchy, and controlling who can reach certain kinds of knowledge. Bellman (1984) describes how Poro secrecy is conveyed through ritual speech, symbols, and metaphor, making hidden knowledge a core feature of how authority gets made and

then kept in place. Ferme (2001), working in Sierra Leone as well, links secrecy and concealment to power, suspicion, and the everyday ways people read social life around them. From there, Albrecht (2016) frames Poro as a networked form of authority, one that shapes access to security, justice, and local decision-making, and in doing so softens any clean divide between formal governance and informal rule.

The present study adds to that line of work by showing that Poro influence can also matter in the setting of informal economic activity. Participants indicated that Poro's importance is not confined to ceremonies or village affairs. It can also touch market relationships, even if only indirectly, through reputations, shared ideas about legitimate authority, and the practical line people draw between insiders and outsiders. Seen this way, Poro enters economic life not only when someone intervenes outright, but through the broader moral and social surroundings in which trust, credibility, and fear are worked out.

Yet that same secrecy sets real limits on research. Much of what participants offered was incomplete, secondhand, or left open to interpretation, and direct observation of Poro activities was neither feasible nor ethically appropriate. Still, it would be a mistake to treat this only as an absence of data, because secrecy is one of the ways Poro authority functions. Restricted knowledge, controlled access, and selective disclosure are part of the institution's social power. Future work could take up the link between secret societies and economic life through comparative oral histories, longer-term ethnographic engagement, or community-based methods. Even then, ethical and practical constraints will continue to cap access to knowledge that, by design, is not meant to be fully public.

6.5 The Dual Nature of Spiritual Belief: Protection and Vulnerability

Perhaps the most important insight from this study is the recognition that spiritual beliefs create both protection and vulnerability for market participants. On one hand, rituals, charms, and prayers provide traders with a sense of agency and control in uncertain economic environments. These practices offer psychological comfort and social support, helping individuals manage anxiety and build confidence.

On the other hand, beliefs in witchcraft and spiritual attack also generate fear, suspicion, and mistrust. Traders who suspect competitors of using supernatural means may withdraw cooperation, avoid social interaction, or engage in defensive spiritual practices that consume time and resources. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which fear of spiritual harm leads to protective rituals, which in turn validate the belief that such harm is real and imminent.

This dual nature reflects a broader tension in West African spiritual economies. While spiritual practices provide meaning and social cohesion, they can also fragment communities and undermine the trust necessary for economic cooperation. Understanding this complexity is essential for development practitioners and policymakers working in contexts where spiritual belief shapes economic behavior.

6.6 Implications for Informal Economy Development

The findings have important implications for efforts to support informal economy development in Sierra Leone and similar contexts. First, development interventions should recognize that economic behavior is embedded in cultural and spiritual frameworks. Programs that ignore these frameworks risk misunderstanding trader motivations and failing to build trust with local communities.

Second, interventions might engage with religious and spiritual leaders as partners in promoting trust, cooperation, and ethical business practices. Given that religious identity functions as social capital in the marketplace, faith-based organizations could play important roles in facilitating microfinance, business training, and dispute resolution.

Third, addressing the negative consequences of witchcraft beliefs requires sensitive approaches that respect local belief systems while promoting social cohesion. Rather than dismissing these beliefs as superstition, interventions might work with communities to strengthen alternative mechanisms of trust and conflict resolution that reduce reliance on occult interpretations of misfortune.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis investigated the role of religion and spirituality in shaping economic behavior, trust, and social relationships within an informal marketplace in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Through ethnographic interviews and participant observation, the research explored how traders integrate spiritual practices with everyday business strategies, how religious identity functions as social capital, and how beliefs about witchcraft and occult competition influence marketplace dynamics.

The findings demonstrate that spirituality is deeply embedded in the informal economy. Traders engage in protective rituals such as applying anointing oil, carrying jege charms, and consulting spiritual specialists. These practices are not viewed as contradictory to economic rationality but rather as complementary strategies for managing uncertainty and competition. Religious identity serves as a signal of trustworthiness, facilitating transactions in environments where formal contracts and legal protections are weak. At the same time, fears of spiritual jealousy and witchcraft create tensions that can undermine trust and cooperation among traders.

The research also revealed the continued influence of secret societies such as the Poro, which function as hidden networks of authority that extend into marketplace governance and dispute resolution. While much about these societies remains concealed from outsiders, their presence shapes how traders understand power, protection, and social relationships within the market.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to several theoretical frameworks. First, it extends the literature on spiritual economies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Rudnyckyj, 2010) by demonstrating how spiritual practices function as practical economic strategies in informal markets. Rather than viewing spirituality and economic rationality as opposing forces, the research shows how they operate together within integrated systems of meaning and action.

Second, the study contributes to theories of social capital and trust (Putnam, 1993; Granovetter, 1985) by illustrating how religious identity functions as a form of social capital in contexts where formal institutions are weak. Religious affiliation, visible piety, and shared moral frameworks facilitate economic exchange by providing proxies for trustworthiness and mechanisms for informal contract enforcement.

Third, the research engages with anthropological literature on secrecy and hidden knowledge (Bellman, 1984; Ferme, 2001) by showing how secret societies like the Poro continue to influence contemporary economic life. While existing research has focused primarily on ritual and political dimensions of secret societies, this study demonstrates their relevance for understanding informal economic governance.

7.3 Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications for development policy and business practice in Sierra Leone and similar contexts:

For Development Practitioners: Development programs aimed at supporting informal economies should recognize that economic behavior is embedded in cultural and spiritual frameworks. Interventions that ignore these frameworks may fail to build trust or achieve

intended outcomes. Programs should engage with religious and spiritual leaders as partners in promoting ethical business practices, facilitating credit systems, and resolving disputes.

For Microfinance Institutions: Microfinance programs should consider how religious identity and spiritual beliefs influence borrowing and lending decisions. Group lending models that leverage existing religious networks may be more effective than programs that ignore these social structures. Additionally, understanding concerns about spiritual jealousy can help explain why some borrowers are reluctant to display success or participate in public celebrations of business achievement.

For Market Associations and Governance: Efforts to strengthen market governance should recognize the role of informal authorities, including religious leaders and secret society members. Rather than attempting to replace these authorities with formal institutions, hybrid governance models that integrate traditional and modern forms of authority may be more effective and culturally appropriate.

For Business Training Programs: Business training programs should acknowledge spiritual practices as legitimate concerns of traders rather than dismissing them as superstition. Training that helps traders distinguish between controllable business factors and uncontrollable external forces (whether spiritual or material) may reduce anxiety and improve decision-making without disrespecting local belief systems.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the research was conducted in a single marketplace in Freetown, which limits the generalizability of findings to other contexts in Sierra Leone or West Africa more broadly. Comparative research across different markets, regions, and ethnic groups would help identify which patterns are specific to this context and which reflect broader regional dynamics.

Second, the study relied primarily on interviews and participant observation, which provide rich qualitative data but cannot establish causal relationships between spiritual beliefs and economic outcomes. Future research might employ mixed methods approaches that combine ethnographic observation with survey data or experimental designs to test specific hypotheses about how spiritual practices influence business performance, trust, and cooperation.

Third, access to information about secret societies was necessarily limited by ethical constraints and the secretive nature of these institutions. While participants shared valuable insights about Poro influence, much remains unknown about how these societies function in marketplace contexts. Future research might explore alternative methods for studying hidden networks, such as social network analysis or longitudinal observation that builds trust over extended periods.

Fourth, this study focused primarily on the perspectives of traders rather than customers, suppliers, or other marketplace actors. Future research should examine how different stakeholders perceive the role of spirituality in economic life and how these perceptions shape market dynamics.

7.5 Concluding Reflections

At the outset of this research, I posed the question: What role do religion and spirituality play in the functioning of an informal marketplace in Sierra Leone? The answer that emerged is complex and multifaceted. Religion and spirituality are not separate from economic life but deeply woven into its fabric. They provide frameworks for interpreting success and misfortune, tools for managing uncertainty and competition, and mechanisms for building trust and social relationships.

The informal marketplace in Freetown is simultaneously a site of commerce and a spiritual arena. Traders navigate not only economic calculations but also cosmological concerns about divine favor, spiritual protection, occult competition, and hidden authority. These dimensions of marketplace life are not exotic curiosities but fundamental aspects of how economic activity is organized and understood.

For scholars and practitioners working in similar contexts, the central lesson is the importance of taking spiritual belief seriously as a social and economic force. This does not require endorsing beliefs or practices but rather recognizing that spirituality shapes how individuals understand the world, make decisions, and interact with others. Development interventions, business programs, and policy initiatives that ignore these dimensions risk failure because they miss essential features of the social and economic landscape.

At the same time, acknowledging the role of spirituality in economic life should not romanticize informal economies or ignore their challenges. Beliefs in witchcraft and occult competition can undermine trust, fragment communities, and create barriers to cooperation. The

goal is not to preserve all traditional practices unchanged but to understand how they function so that interventions can work with rather than against local cultural frameworks.

As Sierra Leone continues to develop and urbanize, the relationship between spirituality and economic life will undoubtedly evolve. However, the deep integration of religious belief, ritual practice, and economic strategy documented in this study suggests that spirituality will remain a central feature of informal markets for the foreseeable future. Understanding these dynamics is essential for anyone seeking to support economic development, promote social cohesion, or simply comprehend the lived reality of the millions of people who earn their livelihoods in West Africa's vibrant informal economies.

Finally, this research has personal significance beyond its academic contributions. Conducting this study brought me into intimate contact with the fears, hopes, and strategies of people navigating precarious livelihoods in uncertain times. Their willingness to share their stories, despite the sensitivity of the topics discussed, reflects a generosity and courage that I deeply respect. This thesis is, in part, an attempt to honor their experiences by representing them faithfully and by using their insights to contribute to broader conversations about economic life, cultural belief, and human resilience.

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