Mapping religious racism: territorial exclusion of Afro-Brazilian religions in Natal, Brazil

LUIZ UGEDA & KARINE SANCHES

Ugeda, L., & Sanches, K. (2026). Mapping religious racism: Territorial exclusion of Afro-Brazilian religions in Natal, Brazil. Fennia, 204(2), XX–XX. https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.181058

This article examines the territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian religious terreiros in the Metropolitan Region of Natal, Brazil, based on the geocoding of 121 worship spaces identified through ethnographic research conducted by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN). The study combines spatial analysis, census data and content analysis of legal-administrative instruments within a theoretical framework grounded in Durkheim's concept of the social fact, Brunhes' notion of the geographic fact and the Brazilian School of Geographic Administrative Law. The findings reveal a consistent spatial pattern: terreiros are predominantly concentrated in peripheral urban areas characterized by lower income levels and higher proportions of mixed-race (*pardo*) and Black populations, while their presence remains comparatively limited in central and economically valued sectors of the city. These spatial patterns suggest that the territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces is associated with socio-spatial inequality and differentiated forms of territorial recognition. The article argues that religious marginalization in Natal cannot be understood solely as a symbolic or cultural phenomenon, but also as a geo-legal structure materially embedded in urban organization, territorial regulation and institutional visibility. By integrating geocoding, thematic cartography and territorial analysis, the study demonstrates how geoinformation may contribute to identifying spatial patterns associated with religious racism, peripheralization and differentiated forms of territorial legitimacy. The findings contribute to international debates concerning religion, race, territory and urban inequality, while also reinforcing the relevance of geospatial analysis for understanding the territorial dimensions of religious freedom and institutional recognition.

Keywords: Religious racism, geoinformation, terreiros, Geographic administrative law, spatial justice.

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URN:NBN:fi:tsv-oa181058
DOI: 10.11143/fennia.181058

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Introduction: Spatial inequalities and institutional invisibility of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces

Intolerance toward Afro-Brazilian religions in contemporary Brazil is manifested not only through symbolic aggression or individual acts of discrimination, but also through territorial and legal-administrative dynamics that reproduce historical inequalities. Previous studies have already demonstrated that Afro-Brazilian religious spaces tend to be concentrated in socially vulnerable and peripheral areas, reflecting patterns of racial and urban inequality in Brazilian cities (Castanha 2018; Giumbelli 2008; Prandi 1998). In the case of African Diaspora Religions *(Religiões de Matriz Africana, RMAs),* these dynamics acquire clear spatial contours: worship spaces, 'terreiros', are frequently rendered institutionally invisible, spatially marginalized, or indirectly constrained within urban environments formally marked by religious diversity. The term *terreiro* refers to a worship space of Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Candomblé, Umbanda and related traditions. More than a temple in the conventional sense, it is a collective religious, cultural and territorial space where ritual practices, community life, ancestral memory, healing practices, initiation, sociability and forms of Afro-descendant belonging are materially reproduced (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Conceptual representation of the Afro-Brazilian terreiro as a territorial institution.

Although the territorial presence of Afro-Brazilian religions has been examined from anthropological, sociological and cultural perspectives, less attention has been devoted to understanding how territorial organization itself may operate as a mechanism of selective legal recognition. In this context, the absence of specific urban and administrative frameworks addressing Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities cannot be interpreted merely as a regulatory gap, but rather as part of differentiated forms of territorial recognition. This article therefore approaches religious racism not only as a social or cultural phenomenon, but as a geo-legal structure embedded in the spatial organization of the city.

The article is grounded in a phenomenological geo-legal perspective inspired by Durkheim's conception of religion as a social fact, by the classical geographic notion of the geographic fact developed by Brunhes, and by the Brazilian School of Geographic Administrative Law, particularly through the articulation between territory, norm and spatial organization proposed by Santos and Ugeda. From this perspective, Afro-Brazilian terreiros are understood as collective territorial expressions whose spatial distribution reflects historically constituted forms of institutional recognition, normative selectivity and urban organization. Empirically, the article investigates the spatial distribution of 121 Afro-Brazilian terreiros in the Metropolitan Region of Natal, Brazil (Rio Grande do Norte), using geocoded primary data produced by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), combined with demographic information from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The methodological approach integrates geocoding techniques, spatial analysis, thematic cartography and interpretative analysis of legal and urban planning instruments, including land-use regulations and administrative norms affecting formal territorial inclusion. The central hypothesis of the study is that the concentration of terreiros in peripheral and socially vulnerable areas is not accidental, but reflects historically structured forms of territorial marginalization associated with racialized processes of urban organization and selective spatial recognition. By combining geoinformation, territorial analysis and Geographic Administrative Law, the article seeks to demonstrate how the material exercise of religious freedom may be spatially conditioned within contemporary urban environments.

Finally, although focused on the Brazilian context, the findings contribute to international debates concerning the spatialization of religious inequality, institutional territorial validation and the relationship between law, race and urban space. In this sense, the article argues that understanding religious freedom also requires understanding the territorial conditions through which visibility, permanence and legitimacy are unevenly distributed across the city.

Theoretical framework: religion, territory and geo-legal recognition

This article adopts a phenomenological understanding of religion grounded in Durkheim's conception of the social fact, particularly as developed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1965). Within this perspective, religious phenomena are not interpreted merely as individual manifestations of belief, but as collective forms of social organization endowed with symbolic, normative and territorial expression.

Durkheim's contribution is particularly relevant insofar as it allows religion to be analyzed as a collective phenomenon whose spatial manifestation reflects historically structured forms of social organization. In the case of Afro-Brazilian religions, territoriality exceeds the dimension of worship itself, since the terreiro also constitutes a space of ancestry, memory, sociability and collective permanence (Prandi 1998; Prandi 2001). The territorialization of religious practices therefore expresses socially structured forms of collective life whose material existence depends on concrete territorial conditions. From this perspective, the spatial marginalization of terreiros cannot be reduced to isolated manifestations of intolerance. Rather, it reflects processes of institutional recognition and territorial organization affecting socially constituted forms of religious life. The absence of spatial recognition directly conditions the material reproduction of Afro-Brazilian religious collectivities within the urban environment.

The territorial dimension of this study is informed by the classical geographic notion of the geographic fact (*fait géographique*), particularly as developed by Brunhes (1956) within the French geographical tradition. In this perspective, geographic phenomena are understood not merely as abstract spatial distributions, but as concrete territorial manifestations resulting from the interaction between society, material organization and spatial permanence. Geographic facts therefore correspond to observable expressions materially inscribed within the territory through processes of occupation, circulation, concentration and differentiation. Brunhes understood geographic facts as socially produced realities that acquire material visibility through spatial organization. Rather than conceiving territory as a passive backdrop, this approach interprets space as a concrete manifestation of collective practices and historically structured forms of organization. This perspective later

influenced classical traditions of human geography associated with Vidal de la Blache (1922), Sorre (1943) and George (1946), all of whom emphasized the relationship between social life, spatial permanence and territorial differentiation. From this perspective, the territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian terreiros constitutes a geographic fact insofar as it expresses materially observable forms of social organization, urban occupation and spatial differentiation. The concentration of religious spaces in specific sectors of the city reflects historically structured territorial processes that become empirically identifiable through geocoding, thematic cartography and spatial analysis.

The articulation between Durkheim's conception of the social fact and Brunhes' understanding of the geographic fact is particularly relevant to this study. If religious practices may be understood as collective social phenomena, their territorial distribution likewise constitutes a concrete spatial manifestation materially observable within urban organization. In this sense, the spatialization of Afro-Brazilian religions allows the identification of territorial regularities associated with race, income and peripheralization, transforming religious territoriality into an empirically analyzable geographic phenomenon. The use of geoinformation and spatial analysis therefore seeks not merely to describe territorial distributions, but to identify concrete spatial regularities embedded within broader processes of urban organization and inequality. Mapping, in this context, operates as an instrument for revealing how collective religious practices become materially organized across urban territory. The concentration of terreiros in peripheral sectors of Natal thus constitutes a geographic fact associated with differentiated forms of territorial organization, spatial recognition and socio-spatial inequality.

The relationship between territory, geoinformation and institutional organization has increasingly become the object of international governance frameworks concerned with the strategic role of spatial information in public administration and territorial management. Within the United Nations system, initiatives such as the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management reinforce the understanding that geospatial information is not merely a technical resource, but part of the material infrastructure through which states organize, regulate and interpret territorial realities. In this sense, territorial organization cannot be dissociated from the production of visibility, administrative recognition and institutional decision-making processes.

This perspective establishes an important dialogue with Santos' (1994) conception of space as a system of objects and actions structured through technical, normative and social relations. Significantly, Santos himself combined legal and geographic formation, allowing his work to articulate spatial organization, institutional structures and social inequality within a broader phenomenological interpretation of territory. From this perspective, territory cannot be reduced to physical extension alone, since spatial organization simultaneously reflects infrastructure, circulation, regulation, technique and differentiated forms of social recognition. Building upon these foundations, the Brazilian School of Geographic Administrative Law (*Direito Administrativo Geográfico*) proposes that law should also be understood as a mechanism of territorial organization and spatial recognition (Ugeda 2017). Rather than conceiving law and territory as separate domains, this approach emphasizes that legal-administrative structures actively participate in defining which territorial presences, spatial practices and forms of occupation become institutionally visible and territorially legitimate within urban space.

The concept of *geo-legal structure* employed in this study refers to the articulation between territorial organization, legal-administrative regulation and spatial recognition (see Figure 1). Building on the Brazilian School of Geographic Administrative Law, particularly the formulation developed by Ugeda (2017), it describes the articulation between territorial organization, legal-administrative regulation and spatial recognition. This approach is situated within a broader interdisciplinary field that includes law and geography, law and economics, the Italian tradition of *geodiritto* and the French tradition of *géographie du droit*. In this perspective, territory is not understood as a merely physical surface, but as a legally, economically and administratively organized space in which norms, institutions, infrastructures and spatial representations contribute to defining which presences become visible, legitimate and protected.

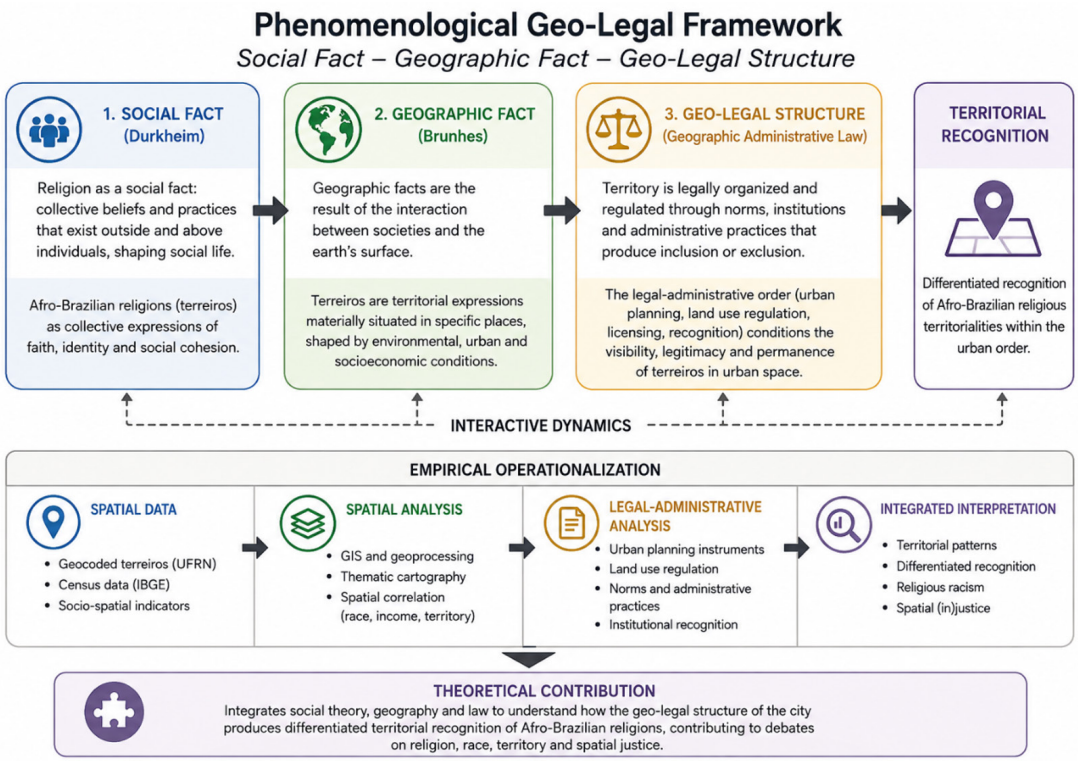

Fig. 2. Integrated geo-legal analytical framework (by authors).

In operational terms, a geo-legal structure may be understood as the set of legal, administrative and spatial arrangements through which territory becomes institutionally organized, represented and recognized. In this perspective, urban space is simultaneously material and normative, reflecting the interaction between spatial distribution, institutional visibility and differentiated forms of territorial legitimacy. Territorial organization therefore operates not only through physical occupation, but also through legal classifications, administrative procedures, geoinformation systems and planning instruments that condition which territorialities become institutionally recognized. The geo-legal perspective establishes a dialogue with traditions examining the relationship between law and spatial organization. The French *géographie du droit* (Forest 2009), as well as subsequent contributions by Allemand and Dantonel-Cor (2020), highlight the need for legal systems to account for territorial differentiation. Similarly, Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann (2016) emphasize how rights and obligations are materially embedded within concrete social and spatial contexts. Together, these approaches reinforce the understanding that territorial organization and normative structures are materially interconnected, producing differentiated territorial outcomes through spatial forms of recognition and regulation.

Spatial segregation refers to the unequal distribution of social groups across urban territory, where access to space, infrastructure and public services is conditioned by factors such as income, race and cultural identity. Territorial injustice emerges when access to land and its associated rights becomes unevenly distributed, restricting the capacity of certain groups to occupy, use and reproduce space under conditions of institutional legitimacy. In the case of Afro-Brazilian terreiros, these processes affect not only territorial location, but also their incorporation into urban planning instruments and legal-administrative structures.

Within this framework, urban instruments such as zoning regulations, land-use licensing, land regularization, territorial planning policies and geoinformation systems operate not merely as technical devices, but as mechanisms conditioning differentiated forms of territorial recognition. The absence of specific legal frameworks addressing Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities contributes to processes of institutional invisibility and selective spatial recognition, particularly within peripheral urban sectors (Maricato 2001; Giumbelli 2008). Geographic Administrative Law therefore provides an interpretative basis for understanding how legal selectivity acquires territorial expression. In the case of Afro-Brazilian religions, the unequal spatial distribution of terreiros reflects not only socioeconomic asymmetries, but also differentiated conditions of territorial legitimacy within the urban order. Religious racism may therefore also be understood as a phenomenon materially embedded in territorial organization and institutional spatial recognition.

Mapping Afro-Brazilian terreiros and territorial recognition in Brazil

The mapping of Afro-Brazilian terreiros in Brazil is part of a historical trajectory of academic, cultural and political recognition of Afro-descendant religious territorialities. One of the earliest systematic initiatives dates back to the 1970s in the state of Bahia, where efforts to identify and document Candomblé terreiros contributed to their subsequent recognition as cultural heritage sites. Closely associated with anthropological research, these initiatives supported processes of patrimonialization that transformed certain terreiros into officially recognized ancestral territories within the urban fabric of Salvador.

This Bahian experience established an important relationship between territory, memory and cultural heritage, contributing to the recognition of terreiros as spaces of historical continuity and collective identity. However, this symbolic and cultural recognition has not always been translated into effective territorial protection. Although the Brazilian legal system formally guarantees religious freedom through the 1988 Federal Constitution (Article 5, sections VI and VIII) and Law (No. 7,716/1989), studies have shown that Afro-Brazilian religions continue to experience differentiated conditions of legal protection and institutional vulnerability. As Rodrigues Júnior (2012) argues, conflicts involving religious freedom frequently reveal selective patterns of recognition concealed under the discourse of legal neutrality.

In the broader Northeastern context, the development of systematic mappings has been fragmented and uneven. While Bahia consolidated a relatively robust tradition of documentation and heritage recognition, other states such as Pernambuco, Ceará and Rio Grande do Norte have experienced more recent and discontinuous initiatives, often driven by universities, local associations and anthropological research groups rather than by structured public policies. Although normative advances, such as the Estatuto da Igualdade Racial, formally recognize the cultural rights of Afro-Brazilian communities, their implementation has not resulted in a coherent territorial framework capable of ensuring the effective protection of terreiros across different urban contexts.

Recent studies conducted in metropolitan regions such as Recife, Fortaleza and Belo Horizonte have expanded the analytical scope by integrating spatial analysis, urban studies and the sociology of religion. These works consistently demonstrate that terreiros are predominantly concentrated in peripheral urban sectors characterized by lower income levels and higher proportions of Black and mixed-race populations. In metropolitan contexts such as Belo Horizonte, Castanha (2018) demonstrates that Afro-Brazilian religious spaces frequently occupy conditions of precarious territorial integration and limited institutional visibility.

The literature also increasingly associates the territorial presence of terreiros with dynamics of informality, peripheralization and differentiated public visibility. As Giumbelli (2008) argues, religious expressions occupy distinct modalities of presence within Brazilian public space, with certain practices becoming institutionally consolidated while others remain marginal or unstable within official representation systems. Similarly, Prandi (1998) observes that Afro-Brazilian religions historically occupied an ambivalent social position, simultaneously tolerated and marginalized within Brazilian urban society.

Research on institutional discrimination has further demonstrated that Afro-Brazilian religious expressions are frequently relegated to conditions of partial visibility within public policies and administrative structures. As Araújo (2017) suggests, discriminatory dynamics affecting Afro-Brazilian populations extend beyond explicitly religious conflicts and become embedded within institutional practices affecting public recognition and social inclusion. In this context, the limited incorporation of terreiros into official cartographic systems and urban planning instruments contributes to reinforcing conditions of territorial invisibility and marginalization.

Within this evolving state of the art, mapping increasingly emerges not merely as a descriptive practice, but also as a mechanism of territorial visibility and institutional recognition. The absence of consistent mapping initiatives and coordinated territorial frameworks is therefore not simply a technical limitation, but part of a structural condition affecting the public visibility and territorial recognition of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces.

Religious intolerance, peripheralization and territorial marginalization

Religious intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions is neither isolated nor recent. It constitutes a long-term process of racialization rooted in the colonial formation of Brazilian society and reproduced throughout the historical development of Brazilian urbanization. Contemporary manifestations – including 'spiritual warfare' discourses and the symbolic delegitimization of terreiros – form part of persistent forms of religious racism affecting Afro-Brazilian religious communities. These processes also possess a clear territorial dimension, since terreiros are frequently displaced from central urban areas, concentrated in peripheral zones and subjected to precarious territorial conditions.

This territorial configuration is closely associated with processes of urban expansion, irregular occupation and peripheralization. Historical patterns of Brazilian urbanization frequently disregarded Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities, treating them as incompatible with dominant models of urban development. As Castanha (2018) demonstrates in the Belo Horizonte Metropolitan Region, the recognition of terreiros often depends upon unstable and informal interactions with public authorities, exposing uneven patterns of spatial legitimacy. Similarly, Rodrigues (2020) shows that symbolic and physical violence affecting terreiro communities becomes embedded within everyday urban dynamics, reinforcing their marginal territorial position within the city.

Religious marginalization in Brazil is also intertwined with historical processes of cultural whitening and assimilation. As Prandi (1998) argues, religious syncretism and the dilution of African elements within Afro-Brazilian religions were not solely adaptive processes, but also reflected patterns of social assimilation and marginalization. In this context, the territorial invisibility of terreiros and the denial of African identity operate as interconnected mechanisms shaping both the perception and territorial location of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces. Historical studies further demonstrate that Afro-Brazilian religiosity has long been subjected to ambivalent processes of incorporation and incomplete recognition. According to Sanchis (1995), religious syncretism in the Luso-Brazilian context developed through forms of cultural incorporation that simultaneously enabled persistence while limiting full institutional legitimacy. In urban contexts, this condition contributes to the peripheralization of terreiros and their limited incorporation into formal planning and territorial management structures.

The literature also increasingly associates religious intolerance with differentiated conditions of public visibility and territorial belonging. Brazilian public space may be understood as structured through differentiated modalities of religious presence, in which some expressions become institutionally consolidated while others remain marginal or unstable within systems of public recognition (Giumbelli 2008). Comparative studies reinforce these interpretations by demonstrating that religion frequently operates as a marker of racial and territorial differentiation across multiple contexts. Across different contexts, religion frequently intersects with broader processes of racialization and spatial exclusion, producing differentiated conditions of belonging and territorial legitimacy (Froio 2018; Razack 2021). Religion may also function as a mechanism through which inclusion and exclusion become spatially organized across national and urban contexts (Han 2016; Kastoryano 2020). Together, these studies suggest that religious intolerance cannot be interpreted solely as a symbolic or cultural phenomenon. Rather, the literature increasingly demonstrates that

Afro-Brazilian religious marginalization is also territorially expressed through processes of peripheralization, institutional invisibility and differentiated spatial legitimacy affecting the urban presence of terreiros.

Territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian terreiros and patterns of recognition

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, spatial analytical research design aimed at examining the territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian religious terreiros in the Metropolitan Region of Natal. The methodological approach combines geocoded primary data, census indicators, thematic cartography and content analysis of legal-administrative documents in order to identify territorial patterns associated with race, income and urban peripheralization.

The research is interdisciplinary in nature, articulating anthropology, geoinformation and Geographic Administrative Law. The anthropological dimension is present in the primary dataset produced by UFRN, based on fieldwork and ethnographic identification of terreiros. The geoinformation dimension derives from the spatial treatment of these data through geocoding, overlay analysis and thematic cartography, following the understanding that geographic information science can reveal spatial patterns not immediately visible through conventional descriptive approaches (Goodchild 2007). The legal-administrative dimension is developed through the interpretative analysis of urban and regulatory instruments affecting land use, territorial classification and institutional recognition. In this respect, the study draws on qualitative legal research methods and content analysis to examine normative omissions, administrative categories and forms of territorial invisibility (Bardin 1977; Gustin et al. 2020). This combination allows the research to move between empirical spatial evidence and legal-territorial interpretation. By combining these methodological layers, the study seeks to understand how territorial organization relates to differentiated conditions of spatial visibility and territorial recognition affecting Afro-Brazilian religious spaces. The research design is therefore not limited to locating terreiros on a map, but aims to interpret their spatial distribution in relation to urban, demographic and legal-administrative structures (Ugeda 2017).

Dataset and geocoding procedures

To empirically examine the territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian religions, this study focuses on the Metropolitan Region of Natal, drawing on a dataset produced by the Department of Anthropology at UFRN. This research identified and mapped 121 terreiros of Afro-Brazilian religious tradition, constituting one of the most comprehensive primary data sources currently available for the region. The selection of this dataset is particularly relevant given the scarcity of systematically collected and validated data on Afro-Brazilian religious spaces in Brazil, a limitation frequently observed in studies concerning religious diversity, urban marginality and institutional visibility.

The UFRN database was produced through ethnographic fieldwork, including field visits, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. These procedures enabled not only the geographic identification of the terreiros, but also the documentation of their social, cultural and territorial characteristics. This combination of ethnographic validation and spatial identification is methodologically relevant because terreiros are often absent from official registries and cartographic systems, making community-based and field-based data essential for territorial analysis.

Geocoding was used to convert the location of each terreiro into spatial coordinates suitable for analysis within Geographic Information System (GIS). Following Goodchild (2007), geographic information science is understood here as a methodological framework capable of identifying spatial patterns that are not immediately observable through conventional descriptive approaches. By linking geocoded data on terreiros with census variables such as income levels and ethnoracial composition, the study examines how Afro-Brazilian religious spaces are distributed within the metropolitan urban structure. The geocoded dataset was subsequently overlaid with census tract information obtained

from IBGE, allowing the spatial comparison between the location of terreiros and selected sociodemographic indicators. This procedure made it possible to identify patterns of concentration, proximity and territorial association between Afro-Brazilian religious spaces, income levels and self-declared ethnoracial composition. The analysis remains primarily exploratory and spatial-descriptive, rather than inferential, since the objective is to identify territorial patterns and interpret their geo-legal significance.

The main methodological limitation concerns the partial visibility of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces in official databases. Because terreiros are frequently underrepresented in administrative records and public geoinformation systems, the UFRN dataset plays a central role in enabling spatial analysis. At the same time, this limitation is not merely technical: it also reflects the broader condition of institutional and cartographic invisibility examined in this article.

Spatial analysis and cartographic classification

The spatial analysis integrates geocoded data on Afro-Brazilian terreiros with thematic cartography and census information obtained from IBGE. The census tract was adopted as the main unit of spatial aggregation, allowing the location of terreiros to be compared with selected sociodemographic indicators, particularly self-declared ethnoracial composition and per capita household income. Spatial overlays were performed in a GIS environment to examine the relationship between the distribution of terreiros and territorial patterns of income, race and urban peripheralization.

The cartographic procedures followed the principles of thematic mapping and exploratory spatial analysis, in which geographic variables are represented in classes in order to identify spatial concentration, differentiation and association patterns (Goodchild 2007; Kitchin & Dodge 2011). The selected census variables were spatialized across census tracts and compared with the geocoded location of the 121 terreiros. This procedure made it possible to identify areas where Afro-Brazilian religious spaces overlap with higher proportions of self-declared pardo and Black populations and with lower levels of per capita income.

The classification of census variables was carried out through thematic intervals defined according to the distribution of each variable in the study area. The purpose of the classification was not to establish causal inference, but to enable visual comparison between the spatial distribution of terreiros and selected indicators of socio-spatial vulnerability. The maps should therefore be read as instruments of exploratory spatial interpretation rather than as statistical models of causality. The methodological approach also considers the limitations associated with official geoinformation systems and public spatial datasets. As Crompvoets and colleagues (2018) and Janssen (2011) observe, Spatial Data Infrastructures (SDIs) frequently present limitations regarding the incorporation of socially sensitive or institutionally marginalized territorial data. In this context, the limited presence of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces within official cartographic systems constitutes an empirical challenge for territorial analysis.

By combining geocoding, census data and thematic cartography, the study identifies spatial patterns associated with concentration, peripheralization and socio-spatial vulnerability. Geocoding therefore operates as a methodological instrument for territorial identification and spatial correlation within the analytical framework adopted in this research.

Content analysis of legal and administrative instruments

Content analysis of legal and administrative frameworks was conducted following Bardin's methodological approach (1977), particularly through thematic categorization and interpretative examination of normative content associated with territorial regulation and urban organization. The analysis sought to identify patterns of normative omission, selective recognition and institutional absence affecting Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities within the Metropolitan Region of Natal.

The examined material included zoning regulations, land-use legislation, urban master plans, territorial management instruments, licensing frameworks and administrative regulations associated with the organization of urban space in Natal. Particular attention was devoted to identifying whether

Afro-Brazilian religious spaces were explicitly incorporated into official territorial categories, urban classifications or legal-administrative structures governing land occupation and spatial recognition. The analytical categories employed in the content analysis included: (i) explicit territorial incorporation of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces; (ii) references to land-use compatibility and zoning categories; (iii) incorporation of terreiros into cultural heritage or territorial protection instruments; (iv) administrative treatment of religious spaces within urban planning frameworks; and (v) the presence or absence of cartographic representation within official territorial systems.

The methodological approach also considers the relationship between geoinformation systems, cartographic representation and territorial visibility. In this sense, the absence of terreiros from official spatial databases and institutional mapping systems was examined as an empirical indicator of differentiated conditions of territorial recognition and administrative visibility. This perspective dialogues with broader discussions concerning Spatial Data Infrastructures (SDIs) and territorial governance, particularly regarding the selective incorporation of socially sensitive territorial data into official geoinformation systems (Janssen 2011; Crompvoets et al. 2018). From this standpoint, institutional cartographic absence does not merely represent a technical limitation, but may also reflect differentiated conditions of administrative visibility affecting specific territorialities.

The territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian terreiros in Natal

This section presents the empirical analysis of the spatial distribution of Afro-Brazilian terreiros in the Metropolitan Region of Natal based on geocoded data and its correlation with sociodemographic indicators. The analysis combines spatial mapping and census information to identify territorial distribution patterns associated with Afro-Brazilian religious spaces.

Figure 3 presents the geocoded distribution of the 121 Afro-Brazilian terreiros identified in the Metropolitan Region of Natal. The map reveals a territorial concentration predominantly located in the North and West Administrative Regions, especially along the left bank of the Potengi River. Although terreiros are distributed across multiple sectors of the metropolitan area, greater territorial density is observed in peripheral zones associated with consolidated urban occupation and higher demographic concentration. The concentration of terreiros along the northern bank of the Potengi River is particularly significant. This area corresponds to sectors historically incorporated into Natal through peripheral urban expansion processes and characterized by lower land values and weaker access to urban infrastructure. The spatial clustering observed in these districts suggests that Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities have developed primarily within urban margins rather than within the city's historically valued central sectors.

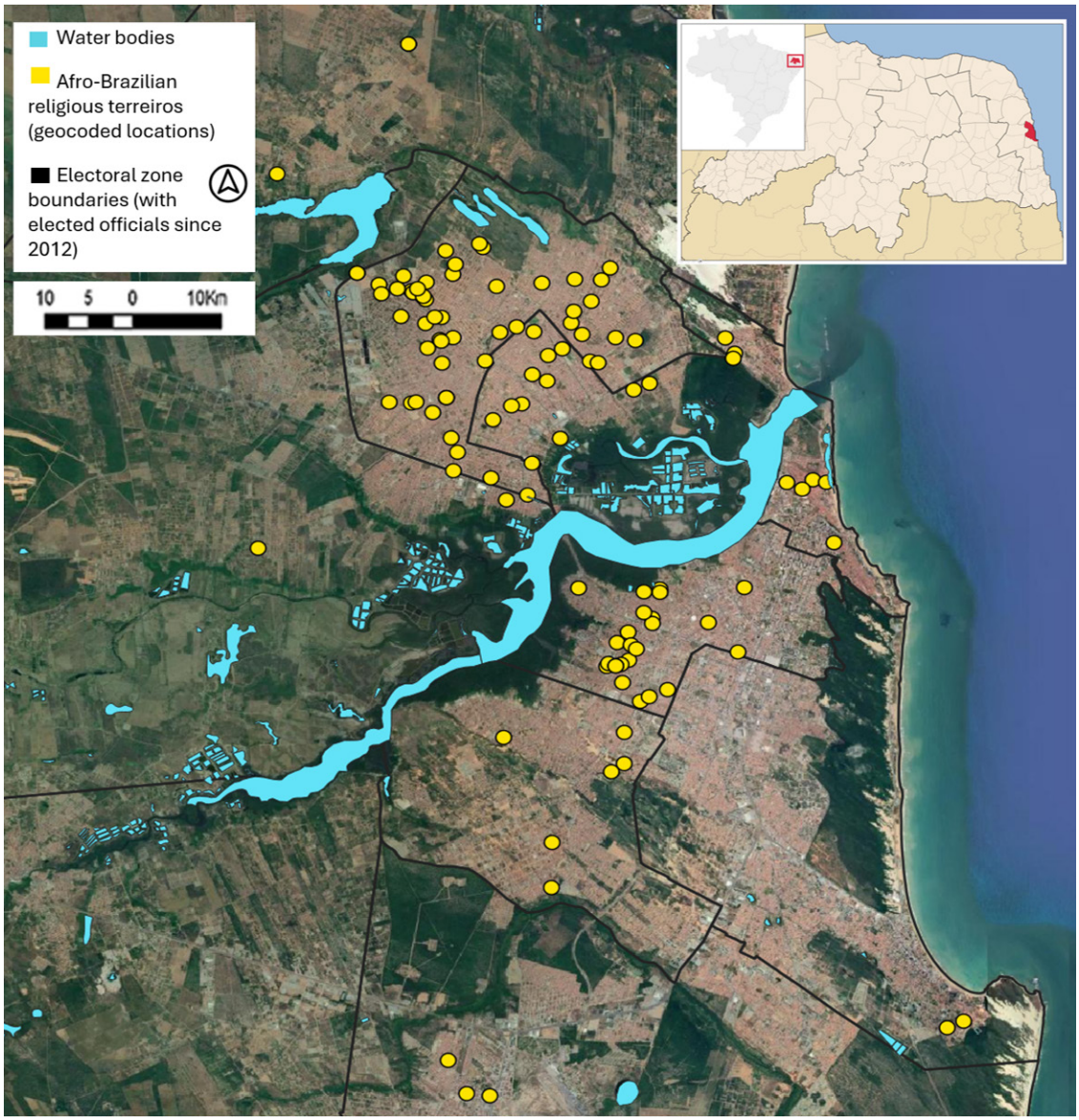

Fig. 3. Geocoded terreiros in Natal.

Figure 4 spatializes the distribution of the brown (mixed-race) population, showing spatial overlap between geocoded terreiros and census tracts with higher concentrations of this population group. The darkest areas on the map – representing percentages above 63% – largely coincide with sectors where Afro-Brazilian religious spaces are located. The overlap between terreiros and census tracts with higher proportions of mixed-race residents is not merely demographic. It indicates that Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities remain embedded within territories historically associated with racialized urban occupation. The map suggests that religious presence follows broader patterns of racial distribution within the metropolitan region.

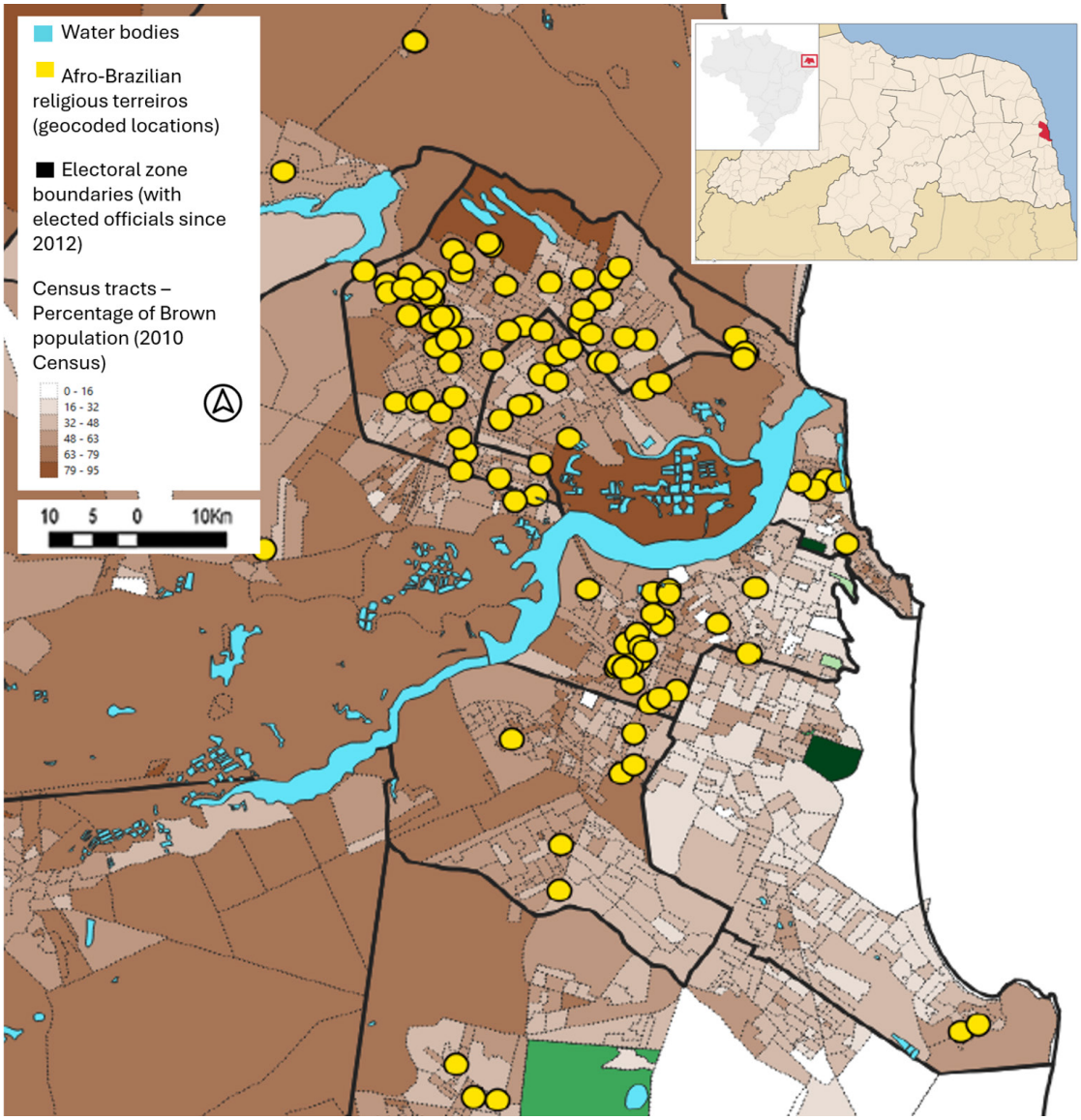

Fig. 4. Mixed-race population in Natal (in percentage terms).

Figure 5 presents the spatial distribution of the Black population. Although the overall density is lower than that observed for the mixed-race population, census tracts with higher percentages of Black residents (above 17%) also overlap with the territorial distribution of geocoded terreiros. Although the absolute proportion of Black residents is lower than that of mixed-race residents in Natal, the spatial coincidence between terreiros and areas with higher Black population densities reinforces the historical relationship between Afro-Brazilian religious practices and Afro-descendant territorial presence. This finding supports interpretations that connect religious racism to broader processes of racialized territorial organization.

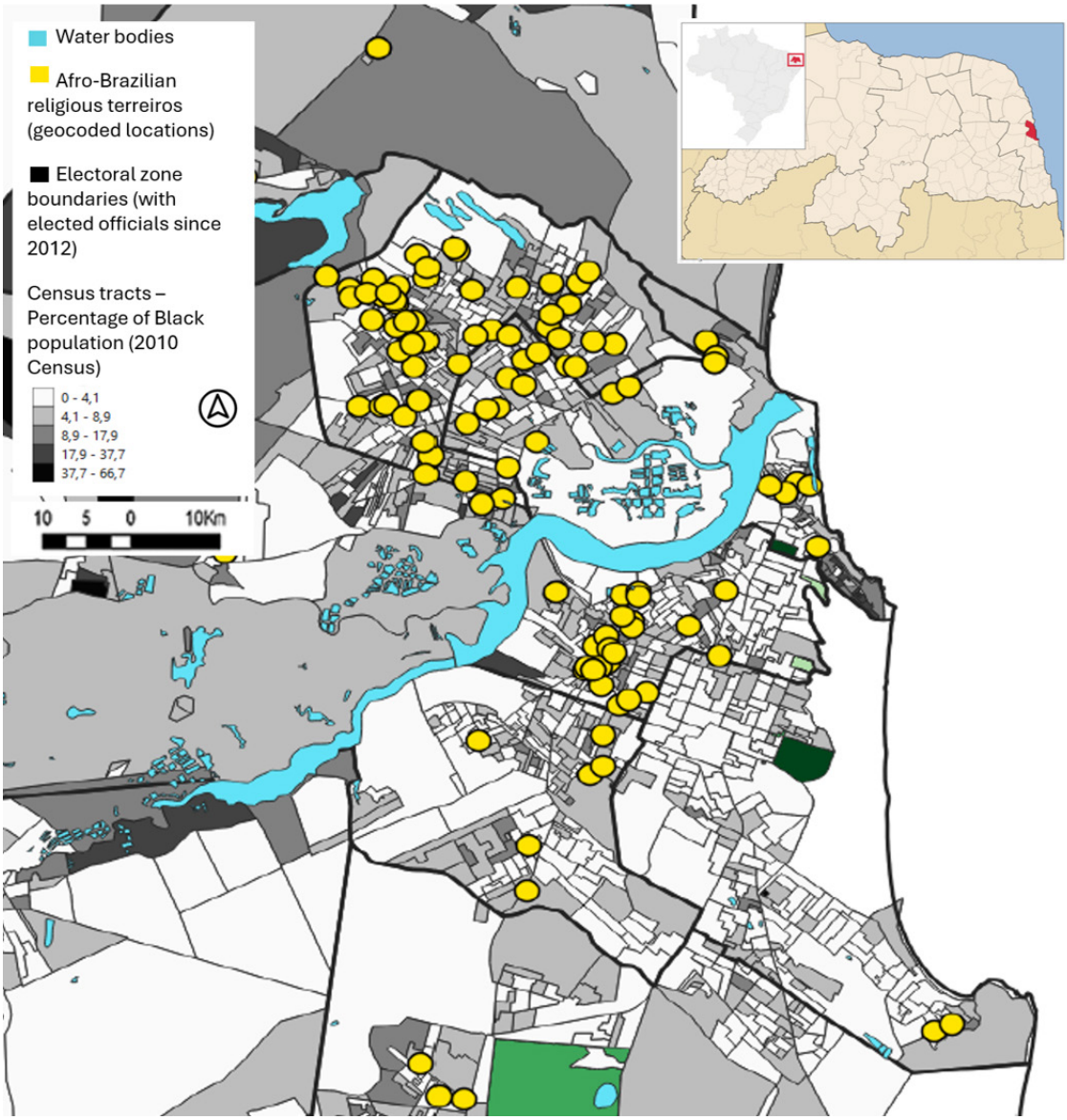

Fig. 5. Black population in Natal (in percentage terms) (Produced by authors).

Figure 6 illustrates the spatial distribution of the white population. Census tracts with higher proportions of white residents present comparatively limited overlap with the location of geocoded terreiros when compared with the spatial patterns observed for mixed-race and Black populations. Particularly noteworthy is the relative absence of terreiros in census tracts with the highest concentrations of white residents. While the data do not imply causality, the pattern reinforces the existence of differentiated territorial geographies in which Afro-Brazilian religious spaces remain underrepresented in socially privileged urban sectors.

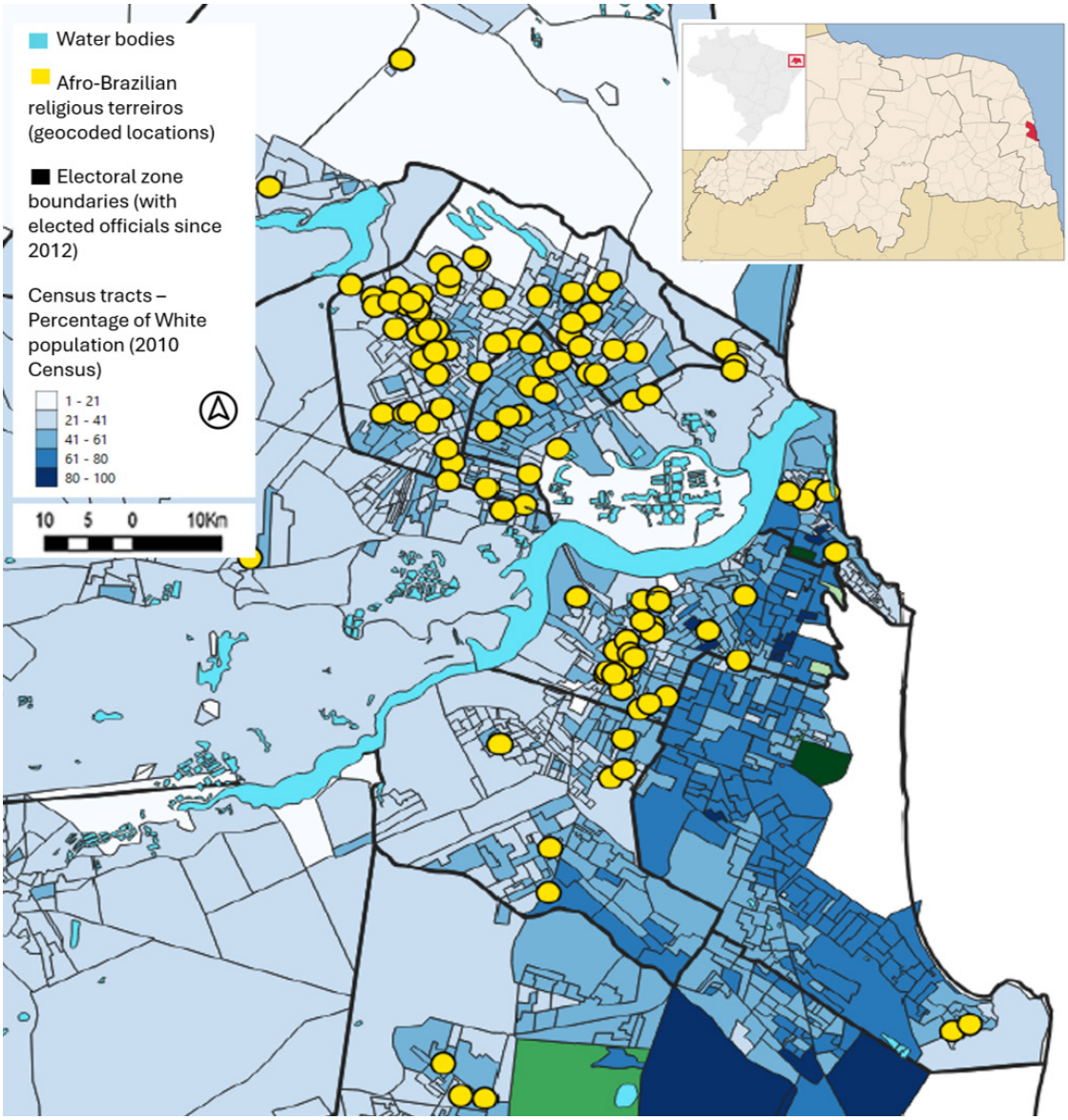

Fig. 6. White population in Natal (in percentage terms) (Produced by authors).

Figure 7 presents the spatial distribution of per capita household income. The geocoded terreiros are predominantly located in census tracts characterized by lower income levels, particularly in areas where average household income does not exceed three minimum wages. Higher-income sectors show comparatively limited overlap with the territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces. This income map reveals perhaps the most consistent territorial pattern identified in the study. Terreiros are concentrated predominantly in lower-income sectors, while affluent neighbourhoods display a markedly lower density of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces. This distribution suggests that religious territoriality is strongly associated with broader structures of socio-spatial inequality, reinforcing the argument that religious marginalization is territorially embedded within urban organization.

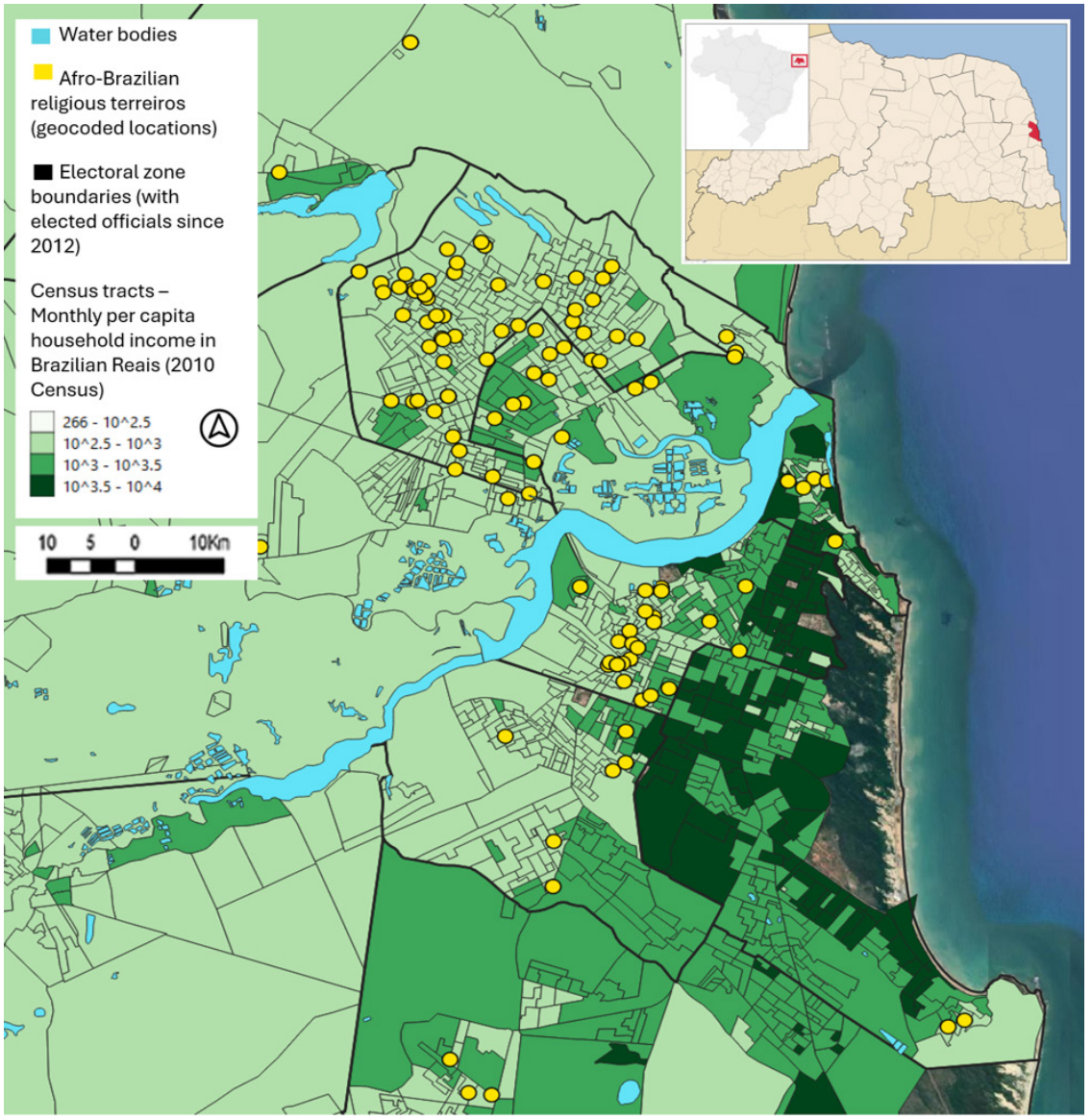

Fig. 7. Monthly per capita household income in Brazilian Reais (Census 2010) (Produced by authors).

The maps produced reveal a consistent territorial distribution pattern. Afro-Brazilian terreiros are predominantly concentrated in the North and West sectors of Natal, particularly along the left bank of the Potengi River. These areas also correspond to census tracts characterized by higher proportions of self-declared pardo (mixed-race) population and lower levels of per capita household income. To further connect the empirical findings with the theoretical framework developed in this article, Table 1 summarizes the interpretation of each spatial pattern through the concepts of social fact, geographic fact and geo-legal structure.

Tab. 1. Interpreting the territorial distribution of terreiros through the geo-legal framework.

Figure	Social Fact (Durkheim)	Geographic Fact (Brunhes)	Geo-Legal Structure / Territorial Recognition
Figure 3 – Distribution of terreiros	The spatial concentration of terreiros demonstrates that Afro-Brazilian religious practices constitute collective forms of social life materially reproduced within the territory.	The observed distribution constitutes a geographic fact insofar as it spatially expresses historical processes of urban occupation and territorial permanence.	The predominance of terreiros in peripheral areas suggests differentiated conditions of territorial recognition and institutional incorporation affecting these religious territorialities.
Figure 4 – Mixed-race (pardo) population	The coincidence between terreiros and areas with higher proportions of mixed-race residents highlights the relationship between collective identity, racial belonging and the social reproduction of religious communities.	The spatial pattern reveals the territorial inscription of historically racialized processes of urban occupation.	The concentration of terreiros within racialized territories suggests that territorial recognition remains conditioned by historically unequal urban structures.
Figure 5 – Black population	The presence of terreiros in areas with higher densities of Black residents reinforces their role as spaces of memory, ancestry and Afro-descendant collective continuity.	This spatial overlap constitutes an observable geographic fact linking religious practices to Afro-descendant territorialities.	The pattern suggests that the effects of religious racism are associated with broader processes of racialized territorial organization.
Figure 6 – White population	The limited presence of terreiros in predominantly white areas indicates differentiated conditions of social visibility and religious belonging.	The distribution reveals a territorial differentiation between areas of higher white concentration and areas where Afro-Brazilian religious spaces are located.	The pattern reinforces the existence of differentiated mechanisms of territorial recognition, through which certain religious expressions remain underrepresented in socially privileged urban sectors.
Figure 7 – Income	The concentration of terreiros in lower-income areas demonstrates how collective religious practices are reproduced within contexts marked by socioeconomic vulnerability.	The observed pattern expresses a consistent spatial relationship between religious territoriality and urban inequality.	The distribution suggests that religious marginalization is not merely symbolic, but territorially embedded within the structures regulating and valuing urban space.

The analysis of the maps reveals that Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities operate simultaneously as social facts, geographic facts and geo-legal phenomena. The observed spatial patterns demonstrate that the territorial distribution of terreiros is associated not only with race and income, but also with differentiated conditions of territorial recognition and institutional visibility within the urban structure of Natal.

Discussion

Religious racism and territorial organization

The findings of this study indicate that the concentration of Afro-Brazilian terreiros in peripheral and underserved urban areas reflects patterns of socio-spatial inequality embedded within the urban structure of Natal. The spatial concentration of these religious spaces in sectors characterized by lower income levels and higher proportions of Black and mixed-race populations demonstrates that religious territoriality is materially associated with processes of urban segregation and peripheralization. This territorial configuration cannot be interpreted as random or merely contingent. Rather, it reflects historically constituted forms of urban organization through which access to central and economically valued areas remains unevenly distributed (Fernandes 2008). In this sense, the spatial distribution of terreiros reproduces historical processes of Brazilian urbanization in which peripheralization operates as a structural mechanism of inequality (Maricato 2001).

The observed spatial patterns also reinforce the relationship between religious marginalization and racialization processes affecting Afro-Brazilian populations. As Costa (2010) argues, the ideology of whitening historically shaped the regulation and perception of Black cultural and religious presence in Brazil. Similarly, Prandi (1998) demonstrates that Afro-Brazilian religions occupied an ambivalent social position throughout Brazilian urban development, simultaneously tolerated and marginalized within dominant structures of public recognition. The territorial concentration of terreiros in peripheral urban sectors therefore reflects more than socioeconomic asymmetry alone. It indicates differentiated conditions of territorial visibility and spatial legitimacy affecting Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities. In this context, urban space operates not merely as a backdrop for intolerance, but as a material dimension through which exclusion becomes spatially organized and reproduced.

Comparative perspectives reinforce this interpretation. Han (2016) and Kastoryano (2020) demonstrate that religion frequently functions as a marker of racial and cultural differentiation across multiple national contexts, shaping differentiated conditions of inclusion, visibility and territorial belonging. In the Brazilian case, these processes acquire a specific spatial expression through the territorial peripheralization of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces. The findings therefore suggest that religious intolerance cannot be understood solely as a symbolic or cultural phenomenon. Rather, religious racism becomes territorially expressed through differentiated patterns of urban occupation, peripheralization and socio-spatial vulnerability materially embedded within the organization of urban space itself.

Territorial recognition and geo-legal structure

The findings also suggest that the territorial invisibility affecting Afro-Brazilian terreiros is embedded within differentiated mechanisms of spatial regulation and territorial recognition. In this sense, religious racism cannot be interpreted solely as a symbolic or cultural phenomenon, but also as a geo-legal structure materially embedded within urban organization and legal-administrative regulation. As Rodrigues Júnior (2012) argues, the Brazilian legal regime of religious freedom is formally egalitarian but materially selective, frequently failing to address the territorial conditions through which rights are effectively exercised. The absence of specific legal frameworks addressing Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities, combined with barriers associated with licensing procedures, land regularization and urban integration, contributes to differentiated regimes of territorial legitimacy affecting the material exercise of religious freedom.

Urban instruments such as zoning regulations, land-use licensing and territorial planning frameworks therefore operate not merely as technical devices, but as mechanisms conditioning differentiated forms of spatial recognition. The omission of terreiros from planning instruments and administrative territorial categories contributes to forms of institutional invisibility affecting their incorporation into the formal urban order (Maricato 2001; Giumbelli 2008). This process also reflects selective forms of public recognition. As Giumbelli (2008) demonstrates, Brazilian public space is structured through differentiated modalities of religious presence, within which certain religious expressions become institutionally consolidated while others remain marginal or unstable within systems of public visibility and territorial legitimacy.

The unequal spatial distribution of terreiros therefore reflects not only socioeconomic asymmetries, but also differentiated conditions of territorial recognition embedded within legal-administrative organization itself. In this sense, territorial organization becomes materially associated with differentiated forms of institutional visibility, normative legitimacy and spatial recognition. International scholarship reinforces the relationship between religion, race and territorial organization in the reproduction of social hierarchies. Studies such as Baigell (1990), Barkun (2014) and Dong (2016) demonstrate that territorial control frequently intersects with symbolic and religious differentiation, producing differentiated conditions of inclusion and exclusion across distinct social contexts. Although the Brazilian case presents specific historical and institutional characteristics, these perspectives contribute to situating Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities within international debates on spatial inequality and territorial legitimacy.

Within this framework, Geographic Administrative Law contributes to understanding how legal selectivity acquires territorial expression. The geo-legal structure identified in this study therefore refers not only to formal legal norms, but also to the spatial organization of institutional recognition itself, through which certain territorialities become administratively incorporated while others remain situated within conditions of normative precariousness and selective visibility.

Mapping, visibility and geoinformation

This process of territorial visibility is closely linked to the availability of primary spatial data. The initiative of UFRN in producing and systematizing data concerning Afro-Brazilian terreiros plays a central role in enabling this type of territorial analysis, particularly within a context where official datasets remain limited. The incorporation of these religious spaces into geocoded territorial analysis expands the empirical basis for understanding the spatial dynamics of Afro-Brazilian religions and their position within the urban structure of Natal.

The findings also reinforce discussions concerning geoinformation systems and territorial representation. As Kitchin and Dodge (2011) argue, cartographic representation is not entirely neutral, but influenced by institutional priorities and differentiated forms of territorial visibility. In the case of Afro-Brazilian religions, the limited incorporation of terreiros into official mapping systems contributes to conditions of institutional invisibility affecting territorial recognition and spatial legitimacy. This perspective also dialogues with discussions on Spatial Data Infrastructures (SDIs) and territorial governance. As Crompvoets and colleagues (2018) and Janssen (2011) observe, official geoinformation systems frequently present limitations regarding the incorporation of socially sensitive or institutionally marginalized territorial data. In this context, the absence of terreiros from official spatial databases cannot be interpreted merely as a technical limitation, but also as part of differentiated forms of territorial representation.

As Rodrigues (2020) suggests, episodes of religious intolerance are sustained not only through direct acts of violence, but also through institutional and representational mechanisms that precede material aggression. In this sense, the absence of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces from official geoinformation systems contributes to reinforcing conditions of symbolic and territorial invisibility. Mapping therefore transcends descriptive representation and becomes an important mechanism for documenting territorial presence and supporting claims for visibility and institutional recognition. By incorporating Afro-Brazilian religious spaces into spatial analysis, geoinformation contributes to revealing territorial patterns that frequently remain obscured within conventional urban

representations. The spatialization of terreiros thus acquires analytical significance by allowing the identification of how race, religion, territory and institutional visibility become materially articulated within urban organization. In this sense, cartography operates not merely as a technical instrument, but also as part of the territorial and institutional processes through which spatial validation and spatial legitimacy are socially constructed.

Conclusion: Towards institutional visibility for Afro-Brazilian religious terreiros in Metropolitan Natal

This article examined the territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian religious terreiros in the Metropolitan Region of Natal through a geo-legal and spatial analytical approach integrating geocoded primary data, census indicators and territorial analysis. The findings revealed a consistent spatial pattern: terreiros are predominantly concentrated in peripheral urban sectors characterized by higher social vulnerability, higher proportions of mixed-race and Black populations and lower levels of per capita income.

The study demonstrates that the territorial distribution of Afro-Brazilian religious spaces cannot be interpreted as random or merely contingent. Rather, the spatial configuration identified in Natal reflects broader processes of socio-spatial inequality and differentiated territorial recognition embedded within the organization of urban space itself. The limited presence of terreiros within central and economically valued urban sectors indicates that religious marginalization is also territorially structured through differentiated conditions of institutional visibility and spatial legitimacy. From a theoretical perspective, the article contributes to expanding geo-legal approaches to territorial organization by articulating the concepts of social fact, geographic fact and geo-legal structure within the analysis of Afro-Brazilian religious territorialities. The study also contributes to the Brazilian School of Geographic Administrative Law by demonstrating how legal-administrative organization, urban regulation and territorial acknowledgment materially interact in the spatial distribution of religious spaces. Methodologically, the research highlights the relevance of integrating geocoding, census data, thematic cartography and content analysis of legal-administrative instruments in the examination of territorial inequality. The use of primary geocoded data produced by UFRN made it possible to spatialize Afro-Brazilian religious spaces and identify territorial patterns that remain insufficiently represented within official geoinformation systems and conventional urban analysis.

The findings also reinforce the importance of expanding reliable territorial datasets concerning Afro-Brazilian religious communities. Within contexts where official geoinformation systems frequently fail to incorporate marginalized territorialities, mapping initiatives acquire strategic relevance for documenting territorial presence and supporting institutional visibility. Internationally, the study contributes to discussions concerning religion, race, territory and spatial inequality by demonstrating how religious marginalization may become materially embedded within urban organization and territorial governance. The Brazilian case illustrates how differentiated conditions of territorial recognition affect the material exercise of religious freedom and the institutional incorporation of minority territorialities within the urban order.

Finally, the article suggests that future research and public policy discussions should increasingly incorporate territoriality as a central dimension of religious practice and religious freedom. Expanding the integration between geoinformation, territorial governance and legal analysis may contribute to advancing more comprehensive understandings of how urban space conditions differentiated forms of visibility, recognition and territorial legitimacy within contemporary cities.

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