Àgídìgbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities Vol. 13 No. 1, 2025 E-ISSN: 3043-4475 pp.327-347

"How Worldly Should We Get to Win the World?": Autoethnographic Reflections on Sacred and Mundane Entanglements in Nigerian Gospel Music Discourse

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of religion and popular culture by examining how the connections between the sacred and secular are portrayed in public discourse surrounding Nigerian gospel music. Studies exploring gospel music in Nigeria have examined its growth, style, classifications, and significance in facilitating spirituality in everyday life. As a form of Christian popular culture, gospel music influences and is influenced by secular art forms. This interaction has generated several criticisms from both within and outside the Christian fold. Despite the longstanding tensions relating to the entanglement between gospel music and secular popular expressions, how these controversies are encountered, framed, and discussed in public discourse has not received scholarly investigation. Based on years of observation and sacred public conversations, including sermons and social media comments, this study aims to answer the following question: How are the concepts of spirituality and 'worldliness' framed in the public discourse on gospel music practices in Nigeria? What are the possible explanations for the interaction between the sacred and the secular in Nigerian gospel music? What do these public discourses mean for understanding how the 'boundaries' of Christianity and its artistic forms, including gospel music, are stretched, collapsed, constructed, reconstructed, mediated, and negotiated through the structures of popular culture in Nigeria? The study reveals that symbolic entanglements, fandom and celebrity culture, as well as labour and religious economy, frame the discourse regarding the perpetual interactions between gospel music and secular entertainment. It concludes that the public controversies regarding the extent to which religious actors, including preachers and gospel musicians in Nigeria and Africa, will go (including mobilising secular popular culture) to win the world are limitless.

Keywords: Gospel music, Christian popular culture, Nigerian gospel musicians, Public discourse, Sacred and Secular entertainment

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Introduction

In a sermon delivered during a programme known as "Loveworld Special Season" on October 14, 2022, Pastor Christ Oyakhilome – the founder of Christ Embassy, one of Nigeria's Pentecostal megachurches – read the book of Matthew Chapter 12, verses 43 to 45 to query the connections between music, spirituality (exorcism), and 'symbolisms' in of popular culture. The preacher warns his congregation to be circumspect and take action against evil spirits and demons that may manifest through music in their lives and churches:

> One of the areas you must be very careful is *in music… symbolisms…music*! I have warned and you need to take this seriously. You know, there are people who tell us the reason they are into a certain kind of music is because that's what the young people are interested in, or those group of people are interested in. Hold on! [screaming…] *How worldly should we get to win the world*? How worldly should we be to win the world? How far should we go to get their attention? *We have to be like them to do so*? That is a confession of your *spiritual bankruptcy*…. If the Apostles said we have to be like the Pharisees just to win them… that's not what Paul is saying when he talked about being like a Jew. That's not what he meant… [in deep breath with furious facial expression]. We reach people all the time, there are things we do to get their attention, but we don't have to now be like them. *We don't have to have their music for them to listen to our music. We don't have to dance like them for them to think we are dancing for God*. The reason I am telling you this is about *symbolisms*. There are dances that people have, and they are doing them in churches, *but these dances are demonic*. They are inspired by demons, and they are being danced in churches by so-called music leaders and music…whatever they call themselves. What is actually happening is this, these are offerings that are been offered to Satan through symbolisms, and demons thrive on these offerings. You have to understand. Demons feed on worship…. *Get back to true and divine worship, don't copy the world*. Music is for worshipping and praising God…. don't use it for your ego, *don't use it for your so-called career*[1]. [Emphasis mine]

The sermon excerpts (quoted at length because of its centrality to the issues discussed in this article) highlights the longstanding disagreements and tensions among church leaders, particularly Pentecostal pastors, and church and gospel musicians regarding the deepening relationship between Christianity and popular entertainment, culture, music, dance, fandom, and symbols in Nigeria. More importantly, the comments compel a scholarly examination of how the entangled connections between two realities- the sacred and the profane ('the world') in Nigerian gospel music- are encountered, constructed, sustained, challenged, and circulated in public conversations among Christians. Historically, gospel music has been associated with various forms of popular entertainment. For example, around the 1900s, gospel music moved beyond the church to the secular arena as record labels and club owners patronised gospel musicians in Gospel Nightclubs in major cities in America (Boyer, 1979, p. 10). The

engagements of American gospel musicians in secular contexts were questioned in public conversations. Recent developments in the Nigerian Christian landscape suggest that popular culture continues to hold sway over Christian popular arts, particularly in gospel music. Like their counterparts in America and elsewhere, Nigerian gospel musicians have been recentl criticised for their brazen engagements with popular culture, music and dance. For church leaders including Pastor Chris Oyakhilome (hereafter Pastor Chris), the boundaries between Christianity, gospel music, and popular entertainment seem to be fluid, hence their caution about the extent to which churches and gospel musicians must go to win the 'world'.

Figure 1: The poster of a musical event organised by Celestial Church of Christ, Ketu, Lagos

An event organised by a parish of the Celestial Church of Christ, one of the earliest African indigenous (Pentecostal) churches, located in Ketu, a suburb of Lagos, featured three popular musicians during their Ankara/Praise Night (Figure 1). The artists included Alhaji Wasiu Pasuma, a popular Fuji musician and Yoruba Muslim; May Shua, a young female hip-hop singer from Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, known for her hit record "Bad Gyal" and a cover performance of Tupac Shakur's "Hit Me Up"; and a controversial hip-hop musician popularly known as "Portable" (aka Habeeb Okikiola Badmus), who describes himself as "Ika of Africa" (the wicked one of Africa) and is known for his vulgar lyrics, (almost) nude dance, and verbal (and in some cases) physical assaults on people, including prominent individuals in society. Although the church programme faced public flak, particularly from Nigerian Christians, the invitation

of three secular singers to 'officiate' at a Christian gathering such as Ankara/Praise Night – a scenario that, in my opinion, fits Achille Mbembe's idea of postcolonial dramaturgy (2001) – is a stark illustration of the (un)conscious alliance between the sacred and the ordinary. The event alludes to the confession of Pastor Chris about some of the "things we do to get their attention." Furthermore, the questions raised by Pastor Chris (and many other Pentecostals, as I will later discuss) in the opening vignette problematise the arguments of some gospel musicians about the inevitability of borrowing, adapting, and appropriating popular creative ideas and practices to preach the gospel through music.

The public commentaries by pastors and the perspectives of Christian creatives and gospel musicians necessitate scholarly investigation to unpack the complexities and paradoxes, boundaries, and extremes that emerge at the intersection of religion and popular culture and entertainment. In doing so, I explore the interplay between spirituality and popular culture and its portrayal in public discourse surrounding Nigerian gospel music. To this end, I pose the following questions: How are the ideas of spirituality and 'worldliness' framed in the public discourse on gospel music practices in Nigeria? What are the possible explanations for the interaction between the sacred and the secular in Nigerian gospel music? What do these public discourses mean for understanding how the 'boundaries' of Christianity and its artistic forms, including gospel music, are stretched, collapsed, constructed, reconstructed, mediated, and negotiated through the structures of popular culture in Nigeria?

I seek to present some arguments in this article. First, since the domain of the sacred is not entirely devoid of the mundane, exploring religious music, such as gospel music, provides an excellent way to understand the intersection of the holy and unholy in Christian contexts. I argue that gospel musicians in Nigeria (and perhaps in other regions) are aware of their position not only within the Christian creative spaces but also in the broader popular music ecosystem, both locally and globally, which makes them active religious cum creative 'entrepreneurs'. This perception by gospel musicians frames the intricate relationship between gospel music and mass culture, as referenced in Pastor Chris' homily. Such a 'bond' is further fostered by the neoliberal capitalist framework of the music industry (Ayorinde and Ajose, 2022; Leon, 2014), suggesting the ongoing exchanges between religion, Christianity, and popular entertainment. Second, music as a social and cultural production reveals how culture and society influence its performance, practice, and practitioners. Hence, I argue that while gospel musicians may appear spiritually 'broke' (in the estimation of Pastor Chris), their creative initiatives and transactions, including compositions, dances, songs, and public performances, are significantly enriched by the affordances of popular cultures and media, which interestingly are also mobilised by Pentecostal preachers themselves. (See Ibrahim, 2023; Meyer, Marshall-Fratani, 1998; Obadare, 2022; Ukah, 2005)

Music and religion are inseparable phenomena. Hence, this work contributes to the growing body of scholarship exploring the interconnectedness of religion and popular culture through the lens of gospel music in Nigeria. It invites scholars of music, particularly Christian music,

religious studies, and popular culture, as well as Church leaders and gospel musicians, to rethink the nexus between music, religion, and society and consider an inclusive mode of reading the entanglement of music, mass culture, and Christianity. This article provides analytical and interpretative approaches that privilege interdisciplinary exploration of religious music and offers new perspectives on the longstanding public discourse and debates on gospel music and everyday spirituality in present-day Nigeria.

My discussion and analysis in this article are informed and shaped by data gathered over the years in Nigeria's Christian and musical landscapes. Specifically, the evidence is collected from public discourses such as preaching and sermons among Pentecostals, along with general opinions on gospel music in Nigeria. I followed trending comments on Nigerian gospel music made by pastors, gospel musicians, social media influencers, and general users on various online platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube. Interestingly, the tensions surrounding the amalgamation of Christianity and popular entertainment, as witnessed in gospel music practices, are not only prevalent in Nigeria but also manifest in Christian public conversations in other African countries, including Ghana and Kenya. Additionally, personal conversations with church leaders, clergy, gospel musicians, and some of my students in a class on Music in/and Religion provided useful insights for discussion and analysis. Being aware that my position as a musician-musicologist and a Christian believer may shape my discussion and some submissions in this article, I remain objective.

Gospel Music in Nigeria: Matters Arising in Literature

There is an increasing body of scholarship on gospel music in Africa, and studies exploring the genre in Nigeria have focused on its emergence, growth, and transformation. These works have attempted to define and discuss the genre's categories, stylistic features, and performance practices since its history in the Nigerian music space (Adedeji, 2009; Ajose, 2018, 2025; Ayorinde and Ajose, 2022; Emielu and Donkor, 2019; Ojo, 1988). Historically, gospel music is traceable to the singing activities of African slaves during their work in plantation fields in America. Its growth has been closely associated with the church, particularly with the revival movements of the 1800s in North America (Boyer, 1978, 1979).

The term 'gospel music' has been viewed and described by scholars and popular writers who note that the concept is elusive and dynamic. Ojo (1998) notes that the term is too sweeping; however, he defines it as "a distinct kind of music composed and rendered by men and women who call themselves Christians" and refers to their music as "ministration of the Good news in songs" (p. 211). For Adedeji (2015, p. 2), gospel music is described as "one of the Christian music genres, the contents of which are traditionally and theologically evangelistic, i.e. aimed at preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to others for the purpose of saving their souls. " Ojo's definition points to the identity of the practitioners and the creative process of the genre, while Adedeji's description emphasises its lyrical features and missional functions. Despite their divergent approaches to the study of gospel music, both authors

assert that gospel music emerged in Nigeria through an attempt by church musicians to produce music for non-liturgical use and outdoor evangelistic purposes. Adedeji (2004) further stressed the value of gospel music when he observed how churches use music to attract people to listen to their message during outdoor evangelistic programmes. This observation affirms Pastor Chris's earlier comments that "we reach people all the time, there are things we do to get their attention." In a study on public (street) evangelism, Ajayi (2019) explained that songs are strategically used to commence street preaching by 'street evangelists, ' noting that "singing of songs comes as the first 'ritual' Christian street sermon" (p. 149). Though the author focused on a discourse analysis of the messages preached on the street, the study illuminates the potential for Christian and gospel music to mobilise and attract the public and shape urban religiosity.

The convergence of popular culture and spirituality in the context of gospel music has been a critical area of inquiry in Nigeria (Adeola, 2020a, 2020b; Ayorinde & Ajose, 2022). Obadare (2022) explores how the affordances of popular entertainment, such as music and comedy, impact the religious economy. The author explains how Pentecostal Churches mobilise secular musicians and comedians to promote spiritual 'vitality' on the one hand and negotiate the religious market on the other. He argues that the practice of "inviting entertainers into churches in order to stimulate the congregation is an attempt either to hold onto that congregation (the market share, if you will) or to expand it by poaching 'customers' from the competition" (p. 98). His examples and analysis reveal the paradox and reality of the coalition of the sacred and the mundane in the Pentecostal movement. One of Obadare's arguments is that the union of the sacred and the profane in Christian popular music is largely predicated on its economic significance.

The evidence and arguments presented by Obadare offer fascinating insights and raise further questions. For instance, it was reported that the purpose of inviting Pasuma was primarily for an 'evangelistic' reason – 'we want to use you to change some people's hearts' (in the Pastor's conversation with Pasuma). However, beneath the evangelisation drive lies an unspoken agenda, as suggested by Obadare (a position that I share): religious marketisation and public patronage. The question then is: how does Pasuma's invitation to help 'evangelise' challenge the established definitions and functions of gospel music, as hinted at by Adedeji, Ojo, and others? If we take Pastor Chris's questions very seriously, how does featuring a secular musician in a Christian event signal the extent to which the church can go to win the 'world'?

In her exploration of Christian music in Kenya, ethnomusicologist Kidula (2010) discussed how Kenyan Christians mobilise religious music to attract followers to the Christian faith. The author explained how Kenyan gospel music provides its practitioners with a framework to draw on old musical forms to reach new audiences. She argued that Kenyan gospel musicians intentionally adopt and adapt popular musical materials for spiritual and commercial purposes. In a comparative study of Ghanaian and Nigerian gospel music, Emielu and Donkor (2019)

provide a historical account of how popular entertainment has been utilised in Christian settings. They narrated how a Methodist Church in Lagos mobilised secular highlife music (described as highlife without alcohol) to evangelise and retain its youth. The authors argue that while the performance context of 'secular highlife' and 'gospel highlife' differs, the musical content remains the same. Corroborating the idea of 'sameness' supports Adeola's (2020) conclusion that Nigerian gospel musicians and popular musicians operate within the same 'transcultural field' and are therefore affected and influenced by the same realities of existence.

These literatures highlight the motivations and strategies for engaging secular entertainment in Christian activities in Nigeria. For example, the mobilisation of popular music and musicians to retain new members while simultaneously winning new converts, especially youths. Though these approaches not only facilitate the intersection of the sacred and secular, it remains unclear how they continue to generate and shape dissenting opinions regarding the relationship between spirituality and secularism in the public discourse on gospel music in contemporary Nigeria. This article seeks to emphasise and examine how the divides between the Christian and 'worldly' are constructed in public conversations through preaching and social media comments. In the next section of this article, I present three prominent themes in the public discourse by preachers, gospel musicians, and their fans regarding the entanglement of the sacred and secular in Nigerian gospel music. I conclude by posing further questions that I believe will continue to (un)settle these debates concerning the intersection of the holy and the profane in Christian arts broadly and gospel music specifically.

Symbolic entanglements

One area that has generated much tension in the public conversation on Christian popular entertainment is the manifest confluence of holy and secular symbols. These symbols can be sonic, visual or expressive, as in dance and movements, and physical space. Many pastors, gospel musicians and the general public (Christians and non-Christians) are divided on what type of music and/or dance should be permitted in Christian musical productions. Interestingly, both sides have biblical explanations to support their arguments. The 'Purists' (describing those with 'holiness' background) maintain that anyone "…who bears the vessels of the Lord must remain holy,"[2] invoking James 4:4 that friendship with the world is enmity with God. Similarly, Christian and gospel music is viewed as a type of sacred 'object' used for divine purpose and must be kept 'pure'. For them, secular arts – music, sounds, dance and symbols, including fashion, hairdo and language – are considered 'unclean', 'worldly' and unacceptable for Christian worship. Criticisms from pastors, especially holiness preachers, have followed the use of 'worldly' arts – music, sound and dance – by Nigerian gospel musicians. According to these preachers, 'worldly' sounds are not from God; they are influenced by significant 'others' (marine, spirit, demons, spirit world).

In a sermon by Apostle Arome Osayi, a Nigerian Pentecostal preacher who is known for his fierce preaching against heresy in Christianity, he narrated how music is a spiritual construct

and that Christians must be careful what they listen to. He explained, "You don't know how spiritual music is. The extent to which a man's music goes is dependent on two factors. One, where did he get the inspiration? If the inspiration came from one of those angels that encoded the sound, it will affect the whole earth… the sorcerer never operates outside music".[3] These words reflect the perception of some preachers about the sources and implications of the music believers engage with. One may be tempted to ignore Pastor Osayi's ambivalent claim that angels encode sounds and influence musical inspirations; however, his experience in demonology could afford him possible explanations.

In Christian theology, for example, Lucifer (popularly referred to as Satan) is described as the chief musician responsible for producing music for the worship of God in heaven. As a result of pride, he is believed to have been ousted from heaven and lost his musical position. This notion has engendered thoughts about Satan's influence on the musical activities of the 'world', heightening awareness of the spiritual implications of music. Hence, there is a belief that musical lyrics, instrumental sounds, and dances are inspired (encoded to invoke Pastor Osayi) by Lucifer and malevolent agents. With this understanding, it becomes clear why and how Christians publicly voice their concerns about the influence of popular entertainment on Christian and gospel music through various platforms.

Figure 2: Poster of a gospel "Street Jamz" organised by RCCG in Lagos

On the other side of the debate are those who maintain a liberal stance on the incorporation of secular arts in sacred expressions such as gospel music. These liberals believe that popular forms such as music –vocal or instrumental, dance, slang and graffiti are effective resources to reach and win the world – figuratively and geographically. By referencing the evangelistic logic of Apostle Paul: "to the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews", they validate the use of popular expressions and arts for missions.[4] To win the 'world', like Apostle Paul, gospel musicians and Pentecostal churches (the 'we' Pastor Chris mentioned), adopt different popular entertainment forms such as Street Gospel Jamz and concerts for evangelism (See Figure 2). Street Jamz is a type of secular urban creative event – involving music, art, choreography and fashion – where upcoming artists, Disk Jockeys (DJS), dancers and designers can showcase their creative abilities. Organisers of Street Jamz mobilise street language, art and costume as an attraction for the public.

Similarly, churches and Christian creatives organise Street Gospel Jamz to take the Christian faith and message to the streets (physical or virtual) in response to fulfilling the Great Commission of world evangelism (Matthew 28:19-20). For example, a social media initiative on Instagram known as "Street Church" (SC) was created by Tobi Oreoluwa, a Christian content creator, on February 21, 2021. The motto of SC is "gospel according to the street." He explains,

> It started a few years back during my personal devotion. The idea came to my mind that instead of just reading the Bible, why not put it in slangs and street expressions? I understand street culture very well; I am very conversant with the street. So, I sat back and decided to start doing something with my Bible in a different form that I can really understand. Then I would take a street slang and find a Bible verse that suits it. So, I started using that in my devotion. From there, I started putting it on my Instagram story and a lot of people engaged with it[5].

Christian and popular activities, such as Street Church and Street Gospel Jamz, provide striking examples of how the sacred is constructed, encountered, and negotiated through everyday mundane engagements, including street-appropriate communication and entertainment. These initiatives and others enable us to sense and make sense of how the profane and the holy influence each other, possibly assisting us in responding to Pastor Chris's critical question: how far should we (church pastors and gospel musicians) go to win the world?

The nexus between the sacred and the secular is also evident in other known religions. Hur (2000, p. 86) explains how Buddhists used beautiful, entertaining, and popular items to attract people and win them as followers. The strategic engagement of popular culture in many religious practices, according to Prohl (2023), hinges on its inherent "ability to appeal to, entertain, and win over a large number of people across great distances using mass-produced goods and professionally designed products" (p. 308). Ibrahim (2022) examines the ensuing tensions

and debates at the intersection of Islam and popular culture in Nigeria. The author observes that "In northern Nigeria, many conservative Islamic preachers are averse to arts and creativity as part of contemporary Muslim cultures and view the Kannywood industry as 'un-Islamic'." Beyond screen movies, music is another area where heated contentions about Islam and popular culture arise in Nigeria (Adejube and Ajala, 2024; Njoku 2022; Ogundipe, 2022).

A critical examination of the Christian musical landscape in contemporary Nigeria reveals an unprecedented level of interplay, borrowing, entanglement, and exchange between gospel music and popular culture. In a bid to 'capture' the sonic sensibility of the 'unchurched' or non-believers and convert them to the Christian fold, gospel musicians employ popular street sounds such as Afrobeats and Amapiano and dance. These sounds feature heavy instruments, such as kick drums and bass guitars, as well as a range of synthesised sounds. For example, the instrumental accompaniment of "Gbéòsèò" (lift your legs) by Testimony Jaga (aka Salau Aliu Olayiwola) is similar to that of Naira Marley's "Tèòsùmólèò." Jaga is a popular Fuji/hip-hop gospel musician and worship leader at Christ Embassy, while Naira Marley is a hip-hop musician whose music and personal lifestyle challenge normative societal morals and values among Nigerian youths. (See Sylavnus and Eze 2022 for discussion on Naira Marley and his music). The fact that Marley, a 'worldly' musician by Christian standards, mobilises sacred words: Gbésè ko tesumole, sebi omo Jesu niwo (lift your leg to trample on Satan since you are a child of Jesus) is a vivid illustration of how the sacred can also manifest in the mundane. To provide some context, I discuss the song text from both musicians below:

"T'esumole" by Naira Marley
(Instrumental Intro with spoken words akin to a 'hype' man: "hello"… "marlians")

[Chorus]
Se b'omo Jesu ni wo (Are you not a child of Jesus?)
Gbese ko t'Esu mole (Raise your legs and tread on Satan)
Gbese na, gbese ko t'Esu mole (Raise your legs and tread on Satan)
Se b'omo Jesu ni wo (Are you not a child of Jesus?)
Gbese na, gbese ko t'Esu mole (Raise your legs and tread on Satan)
Gbese ko t'Esu mole... Chinedu *t'Esu mole* (Tread on Satan…Chinedu tread on Satan)
Gbese na, gbese ko t'Esu mole … Amaka *t'Esu mole* (Tread on Satan… Amaka tread on Satan)
Wa sha le t'Esu mole …Chigozie *t'Esu mole* (Tread on Satan…Chigozie tread on Satan)
Gbese na, iwo sha t'Esu mole … Nnamdi *t'Esu mole* (Tread on Satan…Nmamdi tread on Satan)

"Gbese" by Testimony Jaga

Instrumental Intro with spoken words (Excerpt A) as in Naira Marley

Excerpt A (Spoken)
Update, cool way, soft way
eyin T.R.E.D *ki lon sele*? (T.R.E.D what's happening)
Ijoba Jaga ti wa online (Jaga's kingdom is online)
Talo sure *ju*? *Ijoba Jesu* (Who is the surest? The Kingdom of Jesus)
Omo ope, gbese, (Wonderful child, lift your legs)

Excerpt B: Chorus in call and [response]
Oruko Jesu laye mi [Oshaprapra]
Oruko Jesu ni'se mi [Oshaprapra]
The money I'm spending [Oshaprapra]
The car I'm using [Oshaprapra]
The way I'm living now [Oshaprapra]

Excerpt C:

[Spoken]: *E tun* drop *e die*,	Please, drop the groove
awa ti wa high bayi on a Holy Ghost level	We are now high on a Holy Ghost level
T.R.E.D, *ehn, eti e, ma sun*	T.R.E.D.. listen, don't sleep
Pastor Chris *ti wa* online	Pastor Chris is now online
B'a se wa yi lasan	At the moment
Awa o raye lati ma daruko awon ti o sure	We will only recognise those who are sure
Awon to sure ju la fe daruko bayi	Only those who matter will be mentioned
Oya gboran	So, listen!

A close reading of the lyrics of the songs by Naira Marley and Testimony Jaga reveals similar patterns and intentional ambiguity in the use of everyday religious and secular (street) verbal expressions. While Marley evokes a Christian sense of identity and belonging, omo Jesu (child of/belonging to Jesus), who has been spiritually empowered (in Luke 10:19) to trample on Satan (t'esu mole), Jaga mobilises street slang, for instance, Oshaprapra (brand new, sparkling, brilliant, effective). In Nigeria's everyday usage, one's possessions (cars, mobile phones), body (especially that of women), and intellect are described as 'shaprapra'. Articulating a narrative framed by popular culture and lifestyle – flaunting wealth, belongings, and social connections, particularly with highly placed people in society – Jaga describes his spiritual and material lifestyle (cars, money) as attractive (Except B). To make his gospel message relatable to a street audience, he quickly announces that he and his team (featuring T.R.E.D.) are 'high' on a Holy Ghost level (Excerpt C). To be 'high' in the secular sense is to be under the influence of psychoactive substances, and for Jaga (and perhaps other Christians),

it signals a state of 'spiritual stupor' where the believer becomes unconscious of their immediate self and breaks into sacred utterances – speaking in tongues (Ajose and Omotayo, 2023).

Here, let me quickly mention that Testimony Jaga considers himself a street and radical evangelist. He describes his stage name as JAGA: "Jesus Associate, God Ambassador" and sees himself as someone who uses his 'street' experience as a testimony to reach out to the unchurched. In Nigeria, the street is a convergence of many elements, including violence, crime, and gangsterism, driven by poverty, inequality, and unemployment (Ajiola, 2024). Within the network of street gangs, hierarchy is sometimes determined by age, and the most formidable members are commonly saluted as Alaye (controller), Baba mi/Agba (my senior father), and Oloye (chief). Similarly, Jaga introduces the superior and influential members of his church network to his 'street' network by referring to them as Baba, Alaye, and Mama (mother).

Excerpt D: Singing continued in call and [response]

Pastor Chris [Baba niyen o, Alaye niyen]
Rev John, all the district members, all the zonal Pastors [Baba niyen, awon Baba niyen
All the Directors of God, all the DG [Baba niyen, Alaye niyen o]
Mama mi Evang [Mama niyen o]
Evangelist Kathy Woghiren [Mama mi niyen o]
All the Deaconess [Awon Mama niyen o]
Big Mummy [Mama niyen o] ….Iya Oyakhilome [Iya iya won niyen o]

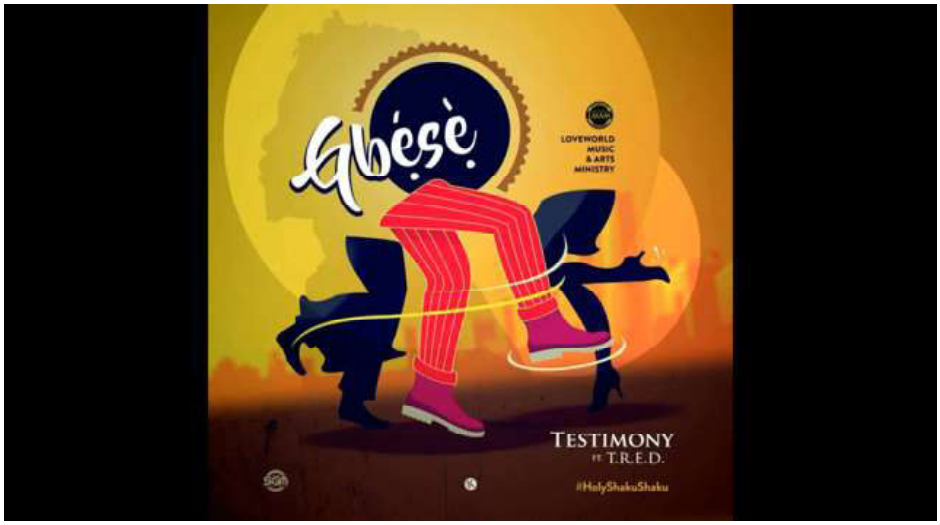

Figure 3: Album cover of "Gbese" showing #HolyShakuku (bottom right)

Dance is a vital component of popular music, and gospel musicians believe that incorporating dance styles from secular music will make their music more appealing to the audiences they aim to reach. This approach is evident on the album cover of "Gbese" with #HolyShakuShaku (Figure 3). Shakushaku is a popular street dance style that mimics the steps of someone who is drunk or under the influence of narcotics. The dance is believed to have emerged in 2017 and popularised by Olamide (aka Baadoo), a well-known Nigerian hip-hop musician. The labelling of Jaga's "Gbese" as #HolyShakuShaku exemplifies how Christians adapt secular popular expressions, such as the ShakuShaku dance, in their performance, highlighting the interaction between the profane and the sacred in religion, particularly in Christianity (Ajose, 2024a, Ajose, 2024b).

In a newspaper interview on the 26th February 2023, Grace Owolabi (aka ZionGrace), a female gospel artist, remarked:

> Bringing in worldly vibes should be replaced with Christ-honouring vibes. We (gospel artists) should stop imitating worldly vibes and dance steps. Many of those vibes and dance steps are sourced from the devil. We can not serve God a meal prepared with unclean resources. The Bible says we are the 'salt and light of the world'. It is those in the world that ought to copy us, and not the other way round[6]

The proposal by ZionGrace signals a response to the ongoing tension regarding whether popular practices deemed profane should be incorporated into Christian music. Her proposal underscores Pastor Chris' warning that churches and musicians "don't have to dance like them for them to think we are dancing for God." The remarks by Pastor Chris, Zion Grace, and Pastor Osayi reveal how music and dance are perceived, interpreted, and understood as sacred and 'worldly' constructs. The point is that music and dance serve as active zones where the convergence of two worlds – seen and unseen, holy and profane – can be fully encountered and comprehended in public discourse on Christian popular music in Nigeria. This echoes the long-standing cross-currents between popular entertainment and Christianity in Africa (Adeola, 2020; Collins, 2004).

Fandom and celebrity culture

One way religion and popular culture interact is through celebrity culture. The celebrity scholar, Graeme Turner (2010, p. 13), conceptualises "celebrity as representation, as discourse, as an industry and as a cultural formation," which, according to Ibrahim (2022), "produces subcultures of consumption and modes of identities constructed around media representations of individuals and groups" (p. 209). Individuals or collectives, whether in religion, politics, film, fashion, or the music industry, have been produced, circulated, and consumed as celebrities. As Turner argues, the process of celebritisation is transformational and political, while it also serves as a form of enfranchisement and exploitation. As cultural producers,

religious preachers and creatives—actors, actresses, musicians—constitute celebrity culture (Ibrahim 2022), and that "their celebrity is a commercial property which is fundamental to their career and must be maintained and strategised if they are to continue to benefit from it" (Turner 2010, p. 13). Some Nigerian gospel musicians are not only religious celebrities, but they also serve as ambassadors for corporate institutions and their brands.

In 2021, Ada Ehi, a popular female gospel artist affiliated with Christ Embassy Church, was appointed as the Brand Ambassador for Cedarwood Luxury, a real estate company. According to Cedarwood's managing director, Amb. (Dr) Julius Odeyemi, their choice of the "Gospel music star is an epitome of luxury." He adds, "the synergy between Cedarwood Luxury and her brand is going to birth new and amazing opportunities." [emphasis mine]. Interestingly, Ada recognises her dual Ambassadorial identities: religious and commercial. In an interview a few days before her unveiling as the Brand Ambassador, Ada articulated her marketing roles to include social media influencer, investment consultant, and advertising agent. She explains:

> As a brand ambassador, you use your social media platforms to talk about the products and services and you also avail yourself of physical activities. Also, you answer questions, direct people who are looking to invest. You actually convince people because there are people who have the money but don't know what to do with it. Some people would not know about a property like Cedarwood Luxury Maisonette, Ikoyi. If one does not know about it, he or she may not know how to invest in it. And you want them to know about it, so you talk about it so that they will know about it. You convince people to get interested in the product and act on it. (https://themomentng.com/2021/09/30/gospel-artiste-ada-ehi-becomes-face-of-cedarwood-luxury-maisonette/)

In another interview in April 2022, Ada remarked: "I won't say that gospel artistes are rarely engaged by brands. I would rather say gospel artists are very careful with the brands they work with, especially because we are Ambassadors of Christ and His Church, so credibility is required of us. Hot and cold water cannot come from the same place." The metaphor that a source cannot produce hot and cold water paradoxically challenges Ada's position as both a religious musician and brand marketer. This highlights one of my earlier arguments that Christian popular musicians (including Tope Alabi, Ada Ehi, Jaga Testimony) understand and negotiate their roles within Nigeria's popular entertainment networks and its neo-liberal capitalist structures, making them celebrities on one hand and 'religious entrepreneurs' on the other. While Ada's responses help us understand how superstar status changes the consumption of celebrities and the meanings they invoke (Turner, 2010), we are also confronted with the poetics and politics of making, unmaking, and remaking religious celebrities and what this means for understanding the ongoing synergy (to recall Cedarwood's Manager) between popular culture and Christianity in Nigeria.

Labour, Religious Economy and Gospel music

One of the unsettled zones where the alliance of the sacred and the profane meets and is constantly engaged in Christian public conversations on gospel music is the area of religious labour and economic reward. Various arguments and counterarguments sustain this tension. In Nigeria (and perhaps elsewhere), some individuals, including pastors, believe that church musicians–singers and instrumentalists–are required to serve God and the Church with their talents. They argue that musical skills are divinely endowed and that gospel musicians should not receive any financial remuneration for the 'services' they render. These individuals often cite, albeit partially, the scripture: "... You received without paying; give without pay" (Matthew 10:8, English Standard Version) to support their anti-transactional stance.

On the other side of the exchange are those who maintain that "…You shall not muzzle the ox while it is treads out the grain. The worker is worthy of his pay" (I Timothy 5:18, ESV), stressing that musicians are religious workers who deserve appropriate compensation. My experience – growing up as the son of a clergy and a young church organist, later a music scholar, music consultant, and trainer for various church denominations, and presently serving on the upper management team in a church as music director – gives me insight into both sides of the debates. Interestingly, I am a paid church musician, and I have served as a volunteer at different times. The focus of this article is not about taking sides in the conversation. However, I have observed that while both sides subjectively invoke the Holy Writ to express their opinions, individual and institutional ideologies regarding financial compensation for church musicians for their labour are critical. I attended the Leadership Academy of the Daystar Christian Center in Lagos, where Pastor Sam Adeyemi – the convener of the academy and founder of the church, renowned for his teachings on personal and organisational success – explained that his church does not believe in 'free service,' especially from critical service units of the church. This could explain why the church is known for its vibrant music team in the country.

The criticism against the 'monetisation' of gospel music seems to play out in other African countries as observed in the discussion of Lovemore Togaresei (2007) on gospel music scene in contemporary Zimbabwe. The author writes:

> The rise of gospel music was accompanied by its commercialisation. Although generally this development was well received, some were quick to criticise it. They asked why musicians were selling the Word of God. Critics also pointed to the fact that some among the gospel musicians were not themselves Christians. Critics used this to paint all gospel musicians as 'lovers of money', not ministers of the Kingdom. They also questioned the fact that gospel music was being sold at the same price as secular music. Other sources of criticism of gospel musicians pertain to their lifestyles. As gospel musicians have come to be celebrities, their dress, their cars and the way they relate to the public have all come under scrutiny (Toraresei, 2007, p. 54).

Recently, there has been a surge of public exchanges on what some people consider the "monetisation" or "commercialisation" of the gospel, particularly among gospel musicians in Nigeria. This invites us to consider the relationship between religion and economics or the economics of religion. The work of the German sociologist Max Weber (1978) detailed the role of religion in shaping people's attitudes, including their economic behaviour, and provided insights into the economic history of religion. Other studies theorising an economic approach to religious institutions have explained that participation in religious activities impacts religious market structures within a competitive spiritual market economy (Anderson, 1988; Iannaccone, 1997).

In his exploration of rational choice theory in the study of religion, Professor of Economics Laurence Iannaccone examined how religion constitutes a 'commodity' that is "advertised and marketed, produced and consumed, demanded and supplied," and that people engage with "religion in the same way they approach other objects of choice, an object that exists because people produced it" (1992, p. 123-124). The author explained that consumers' choices impact the production of religious goods and services as well as the structures of the institutions that provide them, arguing that religious competition is prevalent in contexts where religion is less regulated. He views religious commodities as 'household commodities' that are produced with scarce resources – purchased goods, household labour, and human skill" (p. 125). This view echoes the thinking of Adeola (2020b, p. 85) that gospel music is both a spiritual and social commodity. Taking insight from Iannaccone and Adeola's work, gospel music should not only be valued as a musical product but also as a religious commodity that is produced, marketed, and consumed as goods (recorded and streamed performances) and services (live performances at Christian gatherings).

I return to the debate about how popular entertainment has contributed to the "monetisation" or "commercialisation" of the gospel, particularly by gospel musicians. At this juncture, the concluding sentences of Pastor Chris' sermon are instructive: "Music is for worshipping and praising God…. don't use it for your ego, don't use it for your so-called career". It shows that gospel music has taken on a professional dimension where its practitioners can create a career trajectory and demand wages for their labour. On April 10, 2025, in a sermon titled "Michael Jackson, " Prophet Uebert Angel, a British-Zimbabwean preacher and businessman, expressed his concerns about a Nigerian gospel musician whom he claims charged him 80,000 USD to minister in his church. The prophet narrated how he turned down such a request and would rather invest in his church choir. The Prophet's YouTube page shows comments in favour of his message, but another blogger's YouTube page regarding the same message attracted some criticism.[7]

Sometimes in March 2025, the revelation by a Nigerian preacher, Pastor Femi Lazarus, of a pro-forma invoice from a Nigerian gospel, went viral. The invoice detailed the flight (first and business class), luxurious accommodation, meal preference (Nigerian cuisine), and a deposit and non-refundable fee of 10,000 USD. This revelation sparked rebuttals on social media, as illustrated by the following comments:

Figure 3: An Instagram post about Pastor Femi Lazarus on a popular blog -Yabaleftonline (https://www.instagram.com/yabaleftonline/p/DHkiGGSC7KP/?img_index=)

***@8tunessss**: All this man is saying is "as a minister of the gospel in songs" you shouldn't have a price tag to lead people to worship God… we musician are just very proud set of people….my verdict is this ..if a church has the capacity to always support..they should…but putting a price tag on my service to God sounds ridiculous to me too..this is my 9th year being a church multi instrumentalist..*

***@sassy_.rn**: Why do churches call popular gospel artists to minister for a church or Christian gathering? 1. They don't see their in house ministers as good enough. 2. They want to pull out a show 3. They want to trend as well…*

***@Cindeenaa**: It's happening all over, even here in the US. If they are not flying first, sleeping in executive suite, and traveling with 20-40 persons on top of the millions requested, they aren't showing up! And this why worship is now limited to flashing lights, screaming matches, showing off vocal abilities like a yodeling class, and events that lack a true move of the Holy Spirit! It's all about entertainment, performance, and flesh, which equals to "Ichabod*

*@**azanah.of.nembe**: This alone is a conviction that everything about ministry and gospel, is a business and nothing is done out of generosity or love for God. At this juncture, gospel artist should stop condemning circular artist, bcos everybody is just doing what will give them money.*

These comments clearly illustrate the contradictions, ambivalences, and intricacies surrounding the issues of commodity, exchange, value, labour, and the economy in Christianity and, by extension, gospel music in both local and global contexts (See the comments of @Cindeenaa). As I argued earlier, the forces of liberal capitalism (including the religious market) foster a bond between the sacred and the impious and further suggest ongoing connections between spiritual practices and popular entertainment in Christianity. If gospel musicians demand payment in foreign currency, intercontinental cuisines, and five or seven-star hotel accommodations for their religious 'services' in church programmes, similar to their secular counterparts, it compels a reevaluation of the place of Christian musicians within the broader religious and liberal market space. As churches maximise the 'marketing' value of religious commodities, particularly gospel music, to retain old clients and reach out to new (religious) clientele (Obadare, 2022) by putting on a 'show' to 'trend' (@sassy_.rn), I suggest that the firm handshake between the church and popular entertainment, along with its market structures, will endure.

As previously noted, the analysis by scholars of the economics of religion, including Iannaccone (1992), reveals that consumers' tastes influence the production of religious goods and services as well as the structures of the institutions that provide them. This helps explain why churches invite popular entertainers – gospel and 'worldly' musicians (remember Pasuma, Portable, and May Shua) – and comedians to satisfy their consumers' (audience) musical tastes with the aim of attracting and retaining them amid the dynamic competition in the religious market. Adeola makes this clear: "The musical tastes of the society have greatly influenced the development of gospel music at different stages because of the desire to maintain appeal to the audience. This affects the styles of performance, use of costumes, dance, moves, and the increased interaction with the secular terrain (2020a, p. 92-93). The understanding of Christian and gospel musicians, particularly in Nigeria, regarding their significance in the overall religious market value chain may have influenced their demand for a fair 'share' – commensurate compensation for their religious and artistic labour. After all, the Christian teaching encourages that "the worker is worthy of his wages."

Conclusion

This article explores Christian music in public discourse, particularly concerning the tension at the intersection of the sacred and the mundane in contemporary Nigerian gospel music. I have argued that addressing the unsettled tension regarding the link between secular practices and Christianity requires rethinking the religious, creative, and economic environments in which gospel musicians and churches operate. As Adeola rightly observes, "...all that goes into these works of art is determined by what will sell and bring financial gains to investors, in addition to propagating the gospel of Christ." (2020a, p. 95). To take this observation more seriously is to understand why and how the sacred and the mundane influence religious popular expressions like gospel music. I have also suggested that the permeability of both Christian and secular

popular culture enables them "to be detached from the here and there and be recreated, repeated or recontextualised in another time and place" (Barber, 2018: 13). Furthermore, the patterns observed and discussed in this article affirm Obadare's (2022) claim that the "mutual interpenetration of Pentecostalism and popular culture result in the further blurring of the boundaries between secular and religious entertainment" (p. 108-109). As scholars of humanity continue to investigate how people make meaning of their religious and social worlds—especially at the intersections of spirituality and popular culture—Nigerian gospel music offers an exciting entry into such an exploration. Hence, I conclude that the public controversies regarding the extent to which religious actors, including preachers and gospel musicians in Nigeria and Africa, will go (mobilise secular popular culture) to win the world are limitless.

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Footnotes

1. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUMR34DTLXw for the entire sermon.
2. Vessels here in Isaiah 52:11 are used to described sacred items used in the temple which were taken to Babylon during exile
3. Apostle Osayi Arome claims that some sounds are from marine spirits and grooves and are dangerous for Christian consumption. Listen to the complete message on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-VGBR941Po&t=239s
4. Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 9:20-22 noted how he became a Jew to win the Jews. Similarly, Christians draw on this analogy to carry out their evangelistic work in different situations.
5. https://www.thecable.ng/street-church-the-social-media-page-using-street-language-to-preach-the-gospel/
6. https://punchng.com/gospel-artistes-should-stop-using-worldly-vibes-ziongrace/
7. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKU3dZ1NT-g