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Music and Spirituality in Africa: Gospel Music, Spirituality, and Everyday Meaning-Making in Nigeria

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Abstract: This article explores gospel music as one of the ways people negotiate spirituality and everyday meaning-making in Lagos. Beyond sonic spheres and analysis, this article provides insight into ways in which people ‘perform’ spirituality and negotiate wellbeing amidst Nigeria’s social, political, and economic uncertainty through a focus on the ‘celebrity’ character and self-fashioning of one of Nigeria’s gospel music stars, Tope Alabi. Gospel music and its infrastructures of modernity constitute one of the ways Nigerians negotiate wellbeing and respond to global economic tensions ‘from below’. We explore the nexus between gospel music and how the ‘spirituality’ it facilitates shapes people’s subjective ideas of social and economic wellbeing. We ask: what is the link between gospel music, spirituality, and people’s everyday meaning-making and self-making? Using Harry Garuba’s animist unconscious, we explore ways in which the social life and superstar image of Nigerian ‘celebrity’ gospel musicians constitute sites where people negotiate spirituality and everyday subjective happiness, and social and economic wellbeing. We argue that spirituality, ‘being spiritual’ or the understanding thereof does not only manifest at the intersections of sound and emotion. Instead, we suggest that people’s subjective idea of spirituality or ‘being spiritual’ in a place such as Lagos can also be understood through a focus on the social life and the self-fashioning of gospel musicians. The self-fashioning and superstar image of gospel musicians become a medium through which the everyday idea of spirituality and meaning-making is negotiated, staged, and performed, and a channel through which these processes of meaning-making can be explored and understood.

Keywords: music and wellbeing; music and spirituality; Africa; Nigerian gospel music; animism



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1. Introduction

In February 2020, social media was invigorated after a video went viral, displaying Evangelist Tope Alabi, one of Lagos-based Nigeria’s celebrity gospel singers, dancing in a manner that some Nigerian Christians perceived as ‘unholy and indecent’. In the viral video, the gospel music minister is seen wearing a white tight-fitting dress that reveals the shape of her body, akin to sportswear, dancing to a live band performance and gesturing in dance steps alluding to what many Nigerian Christians perceive as ‘unbelievers dance steps’ and mannerisms. The gestures of Alabi’s dance steps allude to the ‘Gbese’ dance of the Marlian movement, a subcategory of Nigerian emerging hip-hop music culture that uses vulgar lyrics, sexuality, and display of acts and dressing that defies what many Nigerians understand as established ‘normative’ moral sensibilities. The Marlian movement is a recent phenomenon in Nigerian social spaces, particularly in the southwest states of the country. Central to the Marlian ideology are forms of self-fashioning that many Nigerians think work against established moral codes of the society. For example, the female Marlians (those who subscribe to the movement’s tenets) do not wear bras, and male Marlians do not wear boxers/underwear. They publicly display and uphold acts such as marijuana smoking, masturbating, and indecent sexual displays. The social life of the

Marlian movement merits a dedicated academic study. However, this goes beyond the focus of this article.

In the viral video, the dance and gestures of Evangelist Tope Alabi came as a rude shock to many Nigerians for whom her songs have provided spiritual fortification and those who have used her songs to gauge their spiritual life daily. These events became unsettling and constituted an ambiguity for many Christians regarding whether Tope Alabi could still be considered a music minister, a 'born-again' Christian, or if she had 'backslid' and had become a 'sinner'. In the Nigerian context, the term 'born-again' Christian references socio-religious behaviours and self-fashioning that are modelled after Jesus Christ, as recorded in the Holy Bible. Moreover, the ultimate expectation and reward of such self-fashioning lies in inheriting the paradise (kingdom of God). To fashion the self in contrary to this premise is to become a 'sinner'. These categories of Nigerian Christians, the 'born again', found themselves in a spot where they had to choose between focusing on Tope Alabi's initial gospel music or disassociating themselves from her music and her 'new' personality. As the comments and reactions on social media, street corners, and public spheres such as church suggest, people's ideas and everyday performance of spirituality in Lagos is often animated by the self-fashioning of their 'celebrity ministers', in this case, gospel musicians.

This controversy and peoples' reactions point to the deep connection between music, spirituality and people's subjective ideas of wellbeing in the economic and cultural heartbeat of Africa, Lagos, Nigeria. With a population of more than twenty million people, Lagos is not only the largest city in Sub-Saharan Africa but also one of the ten fastest-growing cities in the world. Historically, Lagos is the abode of the Awori people, one of the sub-ethnic groups of Yoruba of West Africa. Lagos was one of the sophisticated economic hubs of the British Empire and, from 1900, the seat of the British colony until Nigeria's independence on 1 October 1960. Lagos remained the capital of Nigeria until 1991, when the capital was relocated to Abuja. While Abuja is Nigeria's current political headquarter, Lagos remains Nigeria's economic capital, with its ambiguous megacity status. Lagos is plagued by what [Obadare and Adebaniwi \(2016\)](#) call the 'crisis of rule', the government's inability to manage resources and corruption among Nigeria's political elites. Despite Lagos's infrastructural deficit, people constantly negotiate social and economic wellbeing.

Lagos is an example of a place in which all manners of extremes converge; a place where abundant wealth and resources coexist with extreme poverty ([Adebaniwi 2017](#), p. 6). Indeed, anything can change from one side to the extreme other side in Lagos. This is a city where people make things happen for themselves. To 'make things happen' references people's agency, that is ways in which people strive to make a living amidst economic hardship and political inconsistencies. Central to this act of making things happen is people's subjective spirituality, which shapes their everyday meaning-making and economic wellbeing. For many Lagos Christians, at the heart of this meaning-making and subjective wellbeing is the role of gospel music and its social and spiritual infrastructures.

Beyond enhancing and shaping an individual's spirituality, gospel music is constitutive of one of the ways Nigerians negotiate wellbeing daily. This explains why many Nigerians were disappointed and reacted to Tope Alabi's viral video in February 2020. Tope Alabi's music, fame, and celebrity status constitute symbolic sites where many people negotiate spirituality and wellbeing. This form of fandom and symbolism is not unique to Tope Alabi. It is a common phenomenon in the Nigerian gospel and the broader popular music scenes. People ascribe meanings not only to their favourite gospel music but also to the self-fashioning and self-presentation of gospel musicians across public and social spaces. The case of Tope Alabi, to which we return shortly, constitutes an interesting example and a case to explore ways in which people ascribe meanings to and negotiate subjective wellbeing from the self-fashioning of gospel musicians in Nigeria. As we argue, the manifestations of these symbolic interactions and connections between the people and gospel musicians in Nigeria provide a lens to explore the nexus between music and spirituality in contemporary Africa.

2. Music and Spirituality in Africa

In this article, we explore the nexus between gospel music and the ‘spirituality’ it facilitates as it shapes people’s everyday ideas of wellbeing (broadly conceived) in Lagos. We ask, what is the link between gospel music, spirituality, and people’s everyday negotiation of wellbeing in Nigeria where political, social, and economic crisis is endemic? In exploring this question, we draw data from an ongoing research project that explores the nexus between music and everyday life in Nigeria. This ongoing research project is also shaped by our longstanding experiences as church musicians in Nigeria and participant observants across gospel churches in the Lagos metropolis. The ethnographic data for this research initiative also includes curated online conversation, what is now known as social media ethnography (Ayorinde 2020). However, this particular article is not an ethnomusicological study of how people engage with Gospel music in Nigeria. Instead, in this article, we use theoretical perspectives to understand the complex interactions between traditional African forms of spirituality, Christianity, music, and the postcolonial African celebrity culture driven by a neoliberal capitalist music industry. Through this theoretical approach, we aim to start a conversation around music and spirituality, and what this might mean for our understanding of people’s everyday meaning-making, subjective happiness, and wellbeing in contemporary Africa.

Scholars of African music, religion, culture, and history have explored the nexus between music and spirituality in many African societies and the ways in which this relationship shapes people’s everyday life in pre- and post-colonial Africa (Adedeji 1973; Nketia 1974; Bebey 1975; Ottenberg 1975). They have argued that before the adventures of European missionaries and the colonial era in Africa, Africans animated and performed spirituality daily through a high god and a pantheon of lesser gods. Thus, Africans negotiated their essence and wellbeing through spiritual performances, social and religious activities in which music is a core component (Kidula 1998, pp. 41–43; Agawu 2016, pp. 20–50). Within this performance context, the idea of ‘music’ (which includes dance, visual arts, verbal arts, and others) and music-making have different meanings and functions for Africans compared with Europeans’ idea of music. In other words, music is not just an ‘aesthetic’ or ‘art’ for many people across Africa (and African/black diaspora), as it is not detached from humans’ everyday social, religious, economic, and political consciousness. Music facilitates and animates communication and serves as a spiritual tool, healing, ritual, and medium through which multitudes of human needs are negotiated in many societies across Africa.

Scholars (such as Adedeji 2004, 2007; Brennan 2010; Kidula 2011) have explored the centrality of gospel music in the activities of the orthodox churches and the Pentecostal churches, and the ‘para-church’ and non-denominational Christian gatherings in postcolonial Africa (Adedeji 2007, pp. 88–90).¹ For example, Femi Adedeji distinguished between church music and gospel music. Adedeji situated church music within the context of liturgies and worship programmes, hymns, canticles and responses, and anthems, of the orthodox churches such as Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist churches. For him, gospel music is predominantly a core component of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, as the genre is predicated on the logic of ‘soul winning’ (Adedeji 2007, pp. 88–92). In a similar argument within the Kenyan context, Jean Kidula (2011, p. 117) also argues that gospel music should be understood differently from other religious music genres. Kidula invites us to understand and engage (African) gospel music through its composite nature. In particular, she invites us to consider the genre’s obsession with and appropriation of lyrical structures, tunes, beats, styles, and protean culture and everyday life, a condition deeply inspired and driven by the neoliberal and capitalist-oriented popular music industries across African societies. The works of Adedeji and Kidula (as well as others) are valuable as they provide insight into the musical, social, and political dynamics of gospel music in contemporary Africa.

Scholars (Emielu and Donkor 2019; Obadare 2018) have also explored the self-fashioning and the identity of gospel musicians both as ‘ministers’ and ‘entertainers’ in the context of

Pentecostal Christianity. For example, in his study on Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, Ebenezer Obadare (2018) explains how the confluence of Pentecostalism and the popularity engenders a distinct form of spirituality and secular entertainment. Focusing on ‘gospel comedy’, a sub-genre that fuses gospel music and comedy, Obadare explores popular culture’s influence on artistic forms of Pentecostal Christianity. For Obadare, among other factors, the conversion (being ‘born again’) of popular entertainers/musicians and comedians accounts for the convergence of popular culture and Charismatic Christianity in Nigeria:

“[I]n a context of serious and persistent economic deprivation, ‘assurances of salvation’ are no longer enough to draw crowds to Church. Accordingly, churches have to offer other products (entertainment, commodities, etc.) in addition to their core product. (ibid., p. 5)

Obadare further suggested that gospel music offers some sort of ‘religious product’ marketed by Christians as the Nigerian Pentecostal churches use gospel musicians as merchants to reach out to new clients (worshippers) while retaining old ones. For Obadare, this is so because it has become commercially imperative for churches “to adapt to the changing conditions of an intensely competitive religious marketplace” (ibid., p. 4).

Obadare’s insightful exploration of the social life of Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity and gospel musicians is relevant to our understanding of the controversies around the social life of ‘gospel music ministers’ in Nigeria. Following Obadare’s argument, one can understand people’s sentiments and confusion as to whether their ‘gospel minister’ is their ‘spiritual mentor’ or not. Similar to the cases that Obadare presented, many Nigerian gospel musicians are also stuck in the neoliberal global capitalist agenda as they constantly seek alternative means to garner and sustain their popularity and ‘celebrity’ status. Doing so means that they would access more financial gains from record sales and endorsement deals from churches and multinational companies. Therefore, in pursuit of juicy deals and popularity, gospel musicians tend to benchmark themselves with their counterparts in mainstream entertainment by fashion and presenting themselves on social media and public spaces in manners that tend to contradict the messages and essence (salvation and spirituality) of their songs.

We aim to contribute to this established discourse around music and spirituality in Africa. We do this with a focus on the nexus between gospel music and people’s everyday idea of social and economic wellbeing. We begin by exploring gospel music as a lens to understand how people ‘perform’ spirituality and negotiate wellbeing not only through music but also through the social life, fame, and self-fashioning of gospel musicians. Our focus is premised on the argument that music does not contribute to social development on its own. We argue that “the transformative power of music lies solely not in the music itself but in the agency of people who make, listen and use music—thus providing a lens to understand the process of transformation in society” (Ayorinde 2020). In pursuing this line of thought, we draw on Harry Garuba’s (2003) concept of ‘animist unconscious’ to provide materiality to the idea of spirituality in a contemporary African context and how music and its social infrastructures conferred spiritual essence on its adherent daily in a place such as Lagos. In particular, we explain how the body: social status, fame, and self-fashioning of gospel musicians in Lagos becomes a site of spirituality, within which people negotiate social and economic wellbeing.

3. ‘Animist Unconscious’: A Theoretical Perspective on Spirituality in Contemporary Africa

Beyond the popular understanding of spirituality shaped by religious dogma, Garuba’s (2003) ‘animist unconscious’ becomes an essential tool in re-thinking spirituality as a phenomenon that is equally shaped by materialism and social, political, and economic processes. In what he described as the continual re-enchantment of the world, Garuba explores how an animistic mode of thought is embedded within the processes of material, economic activities, and then reproduces itself within the sphere of culture and social life

in post-colonial Africa. He explores ways in which African elites, writers, and politicians have appropriated indigenous African expressive and performance genres as sources of spirituality in modern politics, literary, and creative genres:

“[C]ultural practice of assimilating the diverse instruments and dimensions of European modernity, such as its science and technology as well as the European model of the state and its political machinery, into the matrix of traditional ritual and culture. This practice, which has been broadly referred to as the ‘re-traditionalization of Africa’ can be observed in different aspects of life on the continent from the introduction of praise singers into the protocols for the inauguration of Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki in South Africa to the induction of ‘ancestor worship’ into some African churches.” (ibid., p. 264)

Garuba further argued that the reappropriation or recolonization of technology and the instruments and ideologies of the modern world by traditional culture is not wholly the result of a conscious nationalistic appropriation (p. 265). For him, the appropriation of traditional culture in the contemporary world is “not just an epiphenomenon or simply an effect but becomes a producer of effects and therefore acts as a driving force in the formation of collective subjectivity” (ibid.). This collective subjectivity and the appropriation of traditional culture in everyday life in Africa is what Garuba explains as the ‘animist unconscious’. According to Garuba, the ‘animist unconscious’ is a form of collective subjectivity that structures being and consciousness in predominantly animist societies and cultures’ (2003, p. 269). In other words, the ‘animist unconscious’ points to the conscious and unconscious ways people seek spiritual essence in their everyday social, economic and political life. Garuba’s ‘animist unconscious’ is a theoretical standpoint that engages and brings to the fore the longstanding anthropological discourse on animism, as instituted in the seminal works of the British anthropologist Edward Tylor in the late nineteenth century. Motivated by the Darwinian evolutionary ladder, animism believes that all animate and inanimate things have agency and, in turn, provide agency for another phenomenon, particularly human beings:

“[A]nimism is often simply seen as belief in objects such as stones or trees, or rivers for the simple reason that animist gods and spirits are located and embodied in objects: the objects are the physical and material manifestations of the gods and spirits. Instead of erecting graven images within the phenomenal world, nature and its objects are endowed with a spiritual life both simultaneous and coterminous with their natural properties. The animist urge to reification may have been religious in origin, but the social and cultural meanings that become attached to the objects often break off from the purely religious and acquire an existence of their own as part of the general process of signification in society.” (ibid., p. 267)

However, animism was a problematic theory used by early social scientists to stigmatise indigenous people/non-Western cultures as backward, underdeveloped, and uncivilised in relation to Western society and cultures, which they dubbed civilised and developed. Anthropologists have problematised the controversial Eurocentric conception of animism. This is the discourse that Garuba revisited with more nuances and argued that discourse around animism is shaped mainly by Western modernity and binaries (ibid., p. 270). We understand Garuba’s position on animism as a retraction of the initial problematic conceptualisation of the theory, for an encompassing understanding of animism or spiritualism as human essence. Garuba’s argument has two interlinked themes. The first is the idea that “animism is an intellectual and ontological resource that remains at hand for peoples to make sense of the world” (Ibid.). The second, more relevant to our argument, is the re-traditionalization of postcolonial Africa’s social, economic, and political life. In this article, our idea of animism references ways in which people draw on animate and inanimate ‘things’ such as music, the human body, fashion, cars, places, food, etc., (Appadurai 1986, p. 5) in renegotiating their social, economic, and spiritual wellbeing. In

other words, we understand Garuba's notion of 'animist unconscious' here as the logic through which people negotiate spirituality through appropriation and assimilation of modern material cultures such as gospel music, clothing, self-fashioning of pastors and gospel musicians, churches, mosques, and commodification and consumption of prosperity gospel.

We are particularly interested in Garuba's notion of 'animist unconscious' because it shines a theoretical light on the ambiguities around spirituality in contemporary Nigerian gospel music. This brings us back to the case of Tope Alabi and the controversy surrounding her viral video. As in Garuba's 'animist unconscious', being spiritual or concepts of 'spirituality' is relative. This is evident in people's reactions to Tope Alabi's video:

"Tope Alabi pls retrace your steps back, and don't let your fans backslide; there are decent dances, you are a role model to millions of Christians."

"Do not conform to this world but be ye transformed by renewing your mind that ye may prove what that good, acceptable and perfect will of God—Romans 12:2. That dance step is worldly, and they are bringing it to the Church. That's why the Church is powerless to have such people in the forefront."

"God is love. Why was she condemning or judging us years ago in her album that all these things are sins that we are going to hell? Oh, is it she didn't have money then that's why we didn't see her true colours?"

"So disappointed!!! There are things you don't do . . . we shall know that eyes are on us!! So irritating!!"

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZB6ZVNwWzg&t=127s>, accessed on 14 July 2021)

These reactions and comments point to how people ascribe meanings and conceptualise spirituality through the superstar image of their gospel musician. In this case, people's conceptualisation of spirituality is vested not only in music but also in the 'celebrity' status and superstar persona of Tope Alabi. People's perception of Tope Alabi's music is inextricably rooted in her positioning of herself and her body in the social space.

The notion of spirituality is inextricably linked to neoliberal modernity in a place such as Lagos.

Many popular Nigerian gospel musicians such as Tope Alabi can be understood as culture brokers whose celebrity status constantly mediates between people's search for economic and social wellbeing and Nigeria's harsh economic, social, and political conditions. For example, the theme song in Tope Alabi's 2007 album, "Angeli Mi (My Angel)", provides a metaphoric narrative that alludes to people's constant search for spiritual, economic, and social wellbeing:

"Angeli mi o o o, Angeli mi

Angeli mi, oku ise mi

Mase pada leyin mi", etc.

"My angel, my angel

Thanks for your commitment to my life

Please do not forsake me", etc.

The excerpt above explains ways in which people's spiritual, economic and social wellbeing depends on their relationship with their assigned angel. Tope Alabi went on in the song to provide an extensive explanation and analysis of what she meant by 'angel'. For her, angels are not necessarily invisible beings; they can also be human. She explains that anyone's angel can be his/her friends, family members, co-workers, employer/boss, or pastor. She charged people to be expectant because God has positioned these categories of 'angels' in every aspect of people's life to meet their social, economic, and spiritual needs at all times. Tope Alabi's narrative and conceptualization of angels within people's everyday lives references the precarious social and economic conditions that shape people's life in

Nigeria. Thus, it is common to see people playing this particular song daily, particularly in the morning, at home, and in their cars while driving to work. Moreover, the roadside record stores play Tope Alabi's songs daily, and people sing along or connect to these songs daily across the streets, market squares, public buses, and motor parks in Lagos. People internalise and reinterpret these songs to address their own personal social, economic, and spiritual needs. It is through songs such as this that they become motivated, consoled, or garner spiritual fortifications to 'manage' the everyday disappointments, unemployment, and the everyday hustle and bustle in a place such as Lagos. In other words, Tope Alabi's music and her status as 'music minister' mediate between the people and their everyday struggle for social and economic wellbeing in contemporary Nigeria.

The concept of a culture broker is useful for our understanding of the connections between Alabi and her gospel music career, and her Nigerian Christian followers and fans. This is because gospel musicians appropriate global signs such as fashion, cars, jewellery, houses, and appropriation of musical ideas from elsewhere in re-fashioning themselves as modern subjects. Therefore, we argue that it is not only the music that people connect to but also Tope Alabi's self-fashioning in public spaces. As Garuba's notion of 'animist unconscious' suggest, spirituality and what it means to different people is subjective. The nexus between music and spirituality alludes to how people draw not only from the music content but also rely on the superstar persona of gospel musicians for daily spiritual fortification in negotiating social and economic wellbeing for themselves in Nigeria, a society that has no plan for them. The question then is, what is the link between spirituality, economic gains, and the celebrity status that gospel music confers on its 'ministers'? What might these layers of significance mean for peoples' wellbeing in Nigeria? We further explore these questions in the following sections through the case of Tope Alabi.

4. "I Danced Like David Danced": Tope Alabi and the 'Celebrity' Image in Nigerian Gospel Music

Similar to many superstar Nigerian popular musicians and actors turned gospel musicians, Tope Alabi (bn 27 October 1970) started her musical career in the Nigerian theatre/film industry as an actor, songwriter, and singer. Her entrance into gospel music was marked by her Christian conversion of being 'born again'. Following her hit song 'Ore ti o common' (from 5, p. 41 https://youtu.be/NfUECnpLL_I, accessed on 4 September 2021) in 2001, and her recent albums (like those in Figure 1), she became the favourite of many Yoruba Pentecostals/churches who considered her earlier recordings to be evangelistic with themes centred primarily around salvation, holiness, and the power of God. In the past, Tope Alabi has waxed albums that blatantly condemned nudity, materialism, conspicuous consumption, and indecent public dance. These are characteristics and gestures that people claimed she expressed in the viral videos. Tope Alabi has been in the news recently for different controversies. Criticisms have trailed her status as 'gospel music minister' after the recent viral videos. However, during a television interview on 20 February 2020, Tope Alabi explained why it was important for her to express herself through such a gesture:

"You see, it was my father's burial. That was on the wake-keep night, and I danced like David danced. I needed that dance." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9MmDenOCCw>, accessed on 15 January 2022)



Figure 1. Tope Alabi on the covers of her 2018 album, *Yes and Amen*. (Images: courtesy of Gospel Vibes Music Records, Oshodi, Lagos. accessed on 10 December 2021).

Tope Alabi's notion of 'I dance like David danced' references her celebration and being thankful for surviving her father, a commonly celebrated condition in Nigeria. As stated earlier, celebrity gospel music ministers such as Tope Alabi are influential and constitute an important symbol of spirituality and wellbeing in the people's everyday hustle and bustle in Nigeria.² Tope Alabi's music and self-fashioning are particularly relevant to people's wellbeing and spirituality because she is one of few Nigerian gospel musicians who have successfully negotiated themselves both as a subject of modernity and commercially successful gospel musicians. Despite the social, political, and economic crises and the neoliberal global economy that constantly limits the aspirations of ordinary people in an African society such as Nigeria, Tope Alabi has negotiated herself from the fringes of the society into the mainstream, becoming an embodiment of global neoliberal capitalism. The gospel music idea and vocation is now a lucrative profession in Nigeria. Gospel musicians are popular not for the content of their music but for their ability to fashion and circulate themselves as superstar personas. Their music is constantly being marketed with 'celebrity' status, a condition that further accentuates the commercial success of the gospel musician. Thus, gospel musicians or 'music ministers' such as Tope Alabi have achieved popularity and commercial success beyond what is possible in other local genres. Tope Alabi's music videos have been shot in London, the US, and Canada, and her albums are one of the most purchased and consumed in places such as Lagos and other Yoruba communities in West Africa and beyond. By her superstar or 'celebrity' status, she is a 'role model' to many Nigerian Christians who aspire to the type of popularity and commercial success she has garnered.

Therefore, pastors, churches, and gospel event organisers often advertise and attract participants to religious events such as crusades, church conventions, camp meetings, concerts, and Sunday services through displays of celebrity images of gospel musicians such as Tope Alabi on their invitation tracts, pamphlets, posters, and banners (as in the case of Figures 2 and 3). A superstar persona such as Tope Alabi automatically attracts 'common' people to such events; hence she is as important as any popular/influential preacher at such events. At such events or church programmes, people seek 'spiritual power' for financial 'breakthroughs' (success), victories over demons and their imagined 'enemies', and healing from diverse sicknesses. People negotiate these layers and forms of spiritual power not only from the prayers and musical activities at such gatherings but also from the celebrity images of their superstar gospel ministers, which in the first place was

their motivation for attending such gatherings. Thus, programme organisers invite gospel musicians such as Tope Alabi to generate current and win more members to their Church. This is because pastors and event organisers know that superstar gospel music ministers such as Tope Alabi and others in her category are commercial brands that ordinary people aspire to for their subjective success, celebrity status, and utilitarian function of their songs in everyday life.



Figure 2. This is a poster for a religious/Christian event at a parish of The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), one of Nigeria’s most popular Pentecostal churches. The poster is composed of graphic design that alludes to the theme of the event and the event’s promotion pictures of Tope Alabi, Nathaniel Bassey (another Nigerian popular gospel musician), a group photograph of the church choir and four other gospel singers who are members of RCCG’s national praise team. (Image: courtesy of RCCG Tabernacle of David Parish, Ajah, Lagos, accessed on 15 January 2022).



Figure 3. This is a poster promoting/inviting people to an Easter Sunday service at one of the contemporary/emerging Pentecostal churches, Global Impact Church. Alongside the pictures of the host pastor and his wife, Yemi and Bimbo Davids, are pictures of three superstar Nigerian gospel musicians: Tim Godfrey, Tope Alabi, and Ikay. (Image: courtesy of the Global Impact Church, Ogudu, Lagos, accessed on 15 January 2022).

The layers of social currents she accumulated over the years have bestowed on her a ‘superstar persona’, the identity conferred on her not only a ‘celebrity’ status but also a ‘brand ambassador’ for many real estate, fashion outlets, and local companies in Nigeria. Tope Alabi is a Nigerian ‘gospel music minister’ that any upward mobile pastor and Church dream of having on their posters. A mere display of Tope Alabi’s picture on churches or Christian events’ posters constitutes a significant endorsement of such events.

Considering the composite nature, celebrity status, and social currents of ‘gospel ministers’, one could ask: what does Tope Alabi’s viral video mean for many people’s (Nigerian Christians) concept of spirituality? Why do these categories of Nigerians feel so disappointed? The answer to these questions is not far-fetched. For the average Nigerian Christian, the image of the superstar music minister and his/her music constitute spiritual archives where subjective happiness and wellbeing are negotiated daily. The spectral imageries that people attach to gospel music and the social life of gospel musicians explain why Tope Alabi’s controversial dance gesture attracted people’s attention, generating debate and expressions of disappointment across social media platforms. Most Nigerian Christians do not only conceptualise/rationalise spiritualism from the rhetoric of the Bible, church doctrines, or song texts but also the superstar persona of their favourite gospel singers (and pastors). This also explain why churches will always include gospel musician images in their event posters (as in the case of Figure 4). Popular gospel musicians’ dressing, lifestyle, and material life are part of the ‘standard’ from which many people negotiate and regulate their spirituality. While music is closely linked to spirituality, our argument is that music does not solely facilitate spirituality by itself. Instead, “the transformative power of music operates through the agency of social actors” (Ayorinde 2020, p. 157). In other words, the self-fashioning, social life, and superstar persona of gospel musicians in contemporary Nigeria are conduits of spirituality. Therefore, Tope Alabi’s personality and celebrity status also constitute a site where people negotiate spiritual meanings that are in per with their everyday subjective wellbeing. Spirituality or ‘being spiritual’ is the logic of everyday meaning-making, a phenomenon that Garuba (2003) calls ‘animist unconscious’.



Figure 4. This is another poster promoting and inviting people to a church event. On the poster is the picture of the host Pastor, Samuel Olubiyo, and the two superstar guest gospel musicians/ministers/artists, Efe Nathan and Tope Alabi. (Image: courtesy of the Triumphant Christian Centre, Ikeja, Lagos, accessed on 15 January 2022).

5. Music and Spirituality, and the Everyday Logic of ‘Animist Unconscious’

Tope Alabi’s case points to ways in which Garuba’s (2003) concept of ‘animist unconscious’ is internalised and performed in contemporary Africa. The ‘animist unconscious’ is a spiritual logic embodied and manifested in everyday sense-making and meaning-making. As Garuba argued, the ‘animist unconscious’ manifested and performed beyond the Christianity and Islam Enlightenment and rationality on spirituality. In Tope Alabi’s case, the viral video and the gesture therein and people’s reactions constitute a performance of the ‘animist unconscious’. Tope Alabi became a channel through which spirituality is constantly negotiated and maintained. This is because spirituality is the ‘meaning that stands between man and the object world and between man and other men in the gender-free sense of his use’ (ibid., p. 279). Thus, ‘animist unconscious’ is a social imaginary and a spectral

realm of knowing, meaning-making, and making sense of the world around us (*ibid.*). In Tope Alabi's case, her self-fashioning, music, and social life become a spiritual sphere that constantly accumulates social and spiritual meaning, which people convert to different forms of use-value in their daily life.

Garuba's concept relates to how Tope Alabi's music and her superstar persona have constituted spiritual spheres that regulate and enable the aspirations of her Christian followers. In this case, beyond her music, Tope Alabi's celebrity persona and self-fashioning also constitute spiritual objects for the people. Her acts, appearances, and dressing, within the religious/church and social contexts, acquire spiritual meaning and layers of use-values in people's everyday life. In other words, people spiritualise Tope Alabi's superstar/celebrity images and social life because these spiritual objects provide agency and motivation for them (the people) in their daily negotiation of social and economic wellbeing. People attend religious events and concerts and follow their supporter gospel musicians across social media to also nourish their subjective happiness, wellbeing, and sense of spiritualism. This form of 'following' both on social media and religious events is also one of the ways people perform Garuba's idea of the 'animist unconscious', as people follow and attend these musical or religious events for diverse spiritual and economic needs.

Therefore, our argument is that while music facilitates collective subjectivity, there exists no collective experience of spirituality, everyone negotiates, expresses, and performs spirituality according to her/his social and economic aspirations. As Garuba argues, animism is an intellectual and ontological resource that provides materiality to human aspirations. While some people annex spiritual fortifications from the music performed, others annex spirituality from the material, social, and superstar character of Tope Alabi. Thus, people have tied their wishes, supplications, and aspirations for social and economic wellbeing to the lived experiences of gospel artists such as Tope Alabi. The gospel musicians become animist objects brokering between the music and people's social and economic wellbeing. This is our point of departure into music and spirituality in contemporary Africa. Thus, 'animist unconscious' in the context of gospel music and spirituality is another way of thinking about the relationship between music and spirituality in contemporary Africa.

The 'animist unconscious' perspective is not a new phenomenon in Africa. In indigenous African music and religious practices, musical (as in sound and aesthetics) and associated/non-musical objects (such as musical instruments, mother musicians, and custodians of musical knowledge and instrument builders) constitute spiritual objects and people negotiate spirituality through them equally (Nketia 1974; Bebey 1975; Ottenberg 1975). This remains the case in contemporary Africa, particularly in the religious context of music and music-making. The social life of Nigerian contemporary gospel ministers such as Tope Alabi and their music are animist objects that "opens up a whole new world of poaching possibilities [and] prepossessing the future" for people and their subjective aspirations and wellbeing. Animist objects are mediums and "channels through which people lay claim to what in the present is yet to be invented" (*ibid.*).

Similar to other superstar gospel musicians, Tope Alabi becomes an animist object not only because of her music but because of her ability to fashion and circulate herself as a 'celebrity' minister and a 'successful' person. Thus, Tope Alabi's popularity is sustained and will remain in circulation as far as people find the essence in her 'celebrity' status and can annex their aspired possibilities through her music and social life. We argue that people feel so disappointed and become invested in social media discourse after the viral videos and Tope Alabi's gestures because it has a massive implication for their spiritual and subjective wellbeing. Tope Alabi's songs and social life epitomise the Biblical standard of living for many Nigerian Christians and the successful life and future they aspire to. Her music and social life become one of the channels through which spiritual tenets are animated daily across streets, homes, the marketplace, and public spaces in cities such as Lagos. Therefore, spirituality and 'being spiritual' are both navigating tools with which social and economic wellbeing are negotiated daily. Moreover, music and images/social

life of musicians become a conduit and animist object within which people negotiate and animate their spirituality.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we initiated a conversation on music and spirituality in contemporary Africa. In doing so, from the Nigerian gospel music perspective, we suggested another way of thinking about the relationship between music and spirituality in contemporary Africa. Gospel music has, since the mid-twentieth century, become a core component of the Pentecostal movement and medium through which spirituality is made intelligible to members and new converts. While music is closely linked with spirituality, we argue that music does not solely facilitate spirituality by itself. Instead, spirituality in music also operates and can be understood through the social life and experience of music bearers, instruments and musicians. In other words, spiritualism manifests through the agency of musicians, social actors, and music objects. As this article shows, popular or celebrated gospel musicians' dress, lifestyle, and material life are part of the 'standard' from which many negotiate and regulate their spirituality.

Similar to [Garuba's \(2003\)](#) idea of 'animist unconscious', Tope Alabi constitutes a site where people negotiate spiritual meanings that are at par with their spirituality and everyday subjective happiness, and social and economic wellbeing. Therefore, spirituality or 'being spiritual' is a logic of everyday meaning-making and self-making. Gospel music becomes a medium through which this everyday meaning-making is staged and performed and a channel within which it can be explored and understood. In other words, we argued that, beyond the music, the self-fashioning, social life, and superstar persona of gospel musicians in contemporary Nigeria, they are conduits of spirituality. Following Garuba's perspective, we argue that while music provides a collective religious experience, no collective conception and performance of spirituality exists. Even in communal religious music-making, as it is across churches in Nigeria, music provides contexts for everyone to conceptualise, internalise, and perform spirituality. This realm of spirituality is also determined by the individual's social and economic aspirations and subjective ideas of wellbeing. Therefore, we argue that central to people's social and economic wellbeing in Lagos (and elsewhere) is a sort of 'animist unconscious'. Thus, spirituality, or being spiritual is not a homogenous human character. A pluralist idea of spirituality presents us with an understanding that spiritualism is "not explicitly tied to an expressed doctrine, a codified set of beliefs, or an elaborated theology" ([Garuba 2003](#), p. 283). Thus, people's spirituality is located in and shaped by their cultural, social, and economic conditions and aspirations. Understanding spirituality in this way acknowledges the world as a process, where the nature of ideas such as culture, religion, enlightenment, modernity, and identity remain a process rather than a product.

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Notes

- ¹ In Nigeria, para-churches are religious meetings, groups and ministries composed of small groups of (between 5 and 20) Christians, these groups often develop/transform into a church. In fact, this is how many churches began in a city such as Lagos. Many para-churches meet on weekdays, and some have their meetings on Saturdays and Sunday evenings.
- ² The David mentioned here references the musical figure and the King of Israel in the Holy Bible: 2 Samuel 6.

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