

## **THE ROLE OF POPULAR DANCE TRENDS IN THE SUSTENANCE OF HYBRIDIZED GOSPEL MUSIC IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the role of popular dance trends in sustaining the relevance and influence of hybridised gospel music in Nigeria. It asserts that integrating contemporary dance styles, often from secular youth culture, has revitalised gospel music by making it more relatable, especially to younger audiences in urban settings. The paper addresses a key concern: traditional gospel music's declining resonance with today's youth due to cultural shifts, digital media influences, and changing musical tastes. Using qualitative methods, including a literature review, analysis of gospel music videos, and ethnographic observation of performances and worship services, the study reveals that dance plays a strategic and transformative role in Nigerian gospel music. Drawing from Performance Theory and Cultural Hybridisation Theory, the paper frames dance as both a ritualistic act of spiritual expression and a dynamic cultural product shaped by globalisation. The paper identifies several objectives: to explore how dance trends sustain gospel music's appeal, to examine their use in evangelism, and to assess the theological debates surrounding secular influences. Findings show that artists such as Testimony Jaga and Limoblaze successfully use dance to foster spiritual connection, enhance performance aesthetics, and promote gospel messages within and beyond church walls. However, this cultural blending has sparked controversy among religious leaders who fear a loss of sacred authenticity. In conclusion, the paper argues that dance is a powerful and necessary element in Nigeria's evolution of gospel music. It recommends a balanced, culturally aware approach to integrating popular dance with gospel traditions, encouraging collaboration between gospel artists and dancers, and promoting theological literacy about embodied worship practices. Future research should explore gospel dance's broader social and spiritual impacts on youth identity and community engagement.

**Keywords:** Popular Dance Trends, Sustenance, Hybridised Gospel Music

## Introduction

The Nigerian gospel music landscape has experienced a significant evolution over the past few decades, shaped by urbanisation, technological advancement, youth culture, and globalisation. From its traditional roots characterised by solemn hymns and choral anthems, gospel music in Nigeria has progressively embraced diverse musical and performative elements drawn from indigenous and global popular cultures. One of this evolution's most compelling and understudied aspects is incorporating popular dance trends into gospel music performance and expression.

In African epistemology, dance is not merely an artistic or entertainment tool but a powerful medium of communication, spiritual invocation, and communal identity (Nketia, 1974). Within many Nigerian communities, dance serves as an embodied language through which joy, lamentation, praise, and supplication are expressed. In religious contexts, especially within Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian movements, dance has become a visible and vibrant mode of worship, employed to glorify God and foster emotional release and congregational unity. Within this expressive continuum, contemporary gospel music in Nigeria increasingly adopts and adapts trending dance styles from youth subcultures and social media phenomena.

These popular dance moves, such as Shaku Shaku, Zanku, Legwork, Gbese, and Focus Dance, are widely circulated via platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, often becoming synonymous with specific songs or artists. In recent years, gospel musicians have strategically embedded these dances into their music videos, stage performances, and even church worship sessions to make gospel music more relatable, participatory, and evangelically effective. The fusion of

sacred messages with secular dance aesthetics raises critical questions about negotiating cultural boundaries, the sanctity of worship, and the adaptive strategies of religious expression in a rapidly changing society.

This phenomenon is part of a broader trend of **hybridisation**, where gospel music blends with other genres such as Afrobeat, highlife, hip-hop, reggae, and soul, producing what scholars have termed "hybridised gospel music" (Oikelome, 2013; Maultsby & Burnim, 2015). While this hybridisation has enhanced Nigerian gospel artists' visibility and commercial success, it has also provoked debates among theologians, musicologists, and church leaders who question the appropriateness of adopting secular cultural elements in spiritual contexts (Jackson, 2004; Okafor, 2005).

This paper, therefore, seeks to explore the intersection of popular dance trends and hybridised gospel music in Nigeria by examining how dance functions as a tool for spiritual expression, cultural relevance, and artistic innovation. It interrogates the implications of this trend for worship practices, audience engagement, and the transmission of Christian messages in contemporary Nigeria. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions on the evolving nature of African gospel music, youth religiosity, and the role of performance in postmodern Christian worship.

Through a multidisciplinary lens drawing from performance studies, ethnomusicology, and African cultural theory, this paper offers a critical analysis of how dance sustains the vitality of gospel music in Nigeria and serves as a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity, spirituality and entertainment, and liturgy and popular culture.

## **Gospel Music and Cultural Adaptation**

The intersection of music, dance, and spirituality in African contexts has long been the subject of scholarly interest. Scholars such as Nketia (1974) and Ajayi (2000) have established that music and dance are not separate art forms in African societies but co-exist as integral components of communal and spiritual life. Dance, as an embodied form of communication, conveys messages that are often beyond the capacity of verbal language. In religious contexts, it serves as a mode of worship and a vehicle for healing, storytelling, and social cohesion.

Gospel music, originating within African American Christian traditions, has undergone multiple phases of evolution and adaptation. According to Burnim and Maultsby (2015), gospel music developed from early spirituals and blues, evolving into a vibrant genre characterised by emotional intensity, rhythmic dynamism, and theological richness. The genre has since spread globally, assuming local forms in different cultural contexts.

In Nigeria, gospel music took root through missionary education and church choirs but has been profoundly shaped by local musical sensibilities. Okafor (2005) documents the localisation of gospel music in Nigeria, noting how indigenous languages, traditional rhythms, and performance styles have been incorporated into gospel forms. This process led to hybridised gospel music, which blends sacred content with popular genres such as highlife, juju, Afrobeat, and hip-hop.

The hybridisation of gospel music results from cultural syncretism and strategic evangelism. Scholars such as Stokes (2004) and Pieterse (2009) refer to this phenomenon as part of a global cultural flow where musical forms become "glocalized", adapted to reflect local identities while incorporating global influences. In Nigeria, this has

manifested in artists blending scriptural themes with contemporary beats, creating a new soundscape that resonates with urban youth. Oikelome (2010), while reflecting on the cultural revolution of gospel music, notes that:

Gospel exponents... that marries both the Western and African traditional contents is worth mentioning. Artists like Dekunle Fuji have included American rap in their gospel Fuji albums. The likes of Kunle Ajayi and Mike Aremu have created some stylistic variants of gospel jazz that are fully injected with African traditional folklore to make some cultural statements.

Oikelome's position also projects the contributions of artists like Frank Edwards and Buchi as forerunners of this movement, integrating Afro-pop, reggae, and hip-hop into gospel songs. These hybrid sounds are not merely stylistic but deliberate efforts to reach broader audiences, particularly those who may not engage with traditional gospel formats. The reception of these forms, however, remains contested. While younger audiences embrace the creativity and relevance of hybridised gospel music, some church leaders and theologians express concerns about the dilution of spiritual integrity (Jackson, 2004; Miller, 2012).

Dance in African religious life is far more than an aesthetic activity. As established by scholars like Ajayi (2000), Omofolabo (2005), and Nketia (1974), it is a fundamental medium of ritual, identity, and collective spirituality. In many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Nigeria, dance has become central to worship expression, from spontaneous movement to organised choreography.

Contemporary gospel music videos and stage performances often feature

choreographed dance routines that align with popular street styles such as *Zanku*, *Shaku Shaku*, and *Gbese*. Obidiegwu (2020) argues that these dances represent urban Nigerian youth identities and symbolise resistance, celebration, and cultural assertion. The emergence of dance ministries and gospel dance crews within churches also illustrates the formal institutionalisation of dance as an expression of faith.

The digital era has further amplified the significance of dance in gospel music. Oladele & Abolaji (2023) discuss how Nigerian gospel artists utilise platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram to reach digital audiences. Viral dance challenges and music videos serve as tools for evangelism, expanding the reach of gospel music beyond the church and into everyday social life. Integrating popular dance trends thus becomes a strategic method for retaining youth attention in a media-saturated culture.

This shift is not without its tensions. While some scholars and practitioners celebrate dance as a contemporary form of testimony and engagement (Meyer, 2004; Oikelome, 2013), others critique it for potentially trivialising sacred messages or prioritising entertainment over worship (Okafor, 2005). This reflects broader debates about the sacred and secular boundaries, especially in postcolonial religious contexts where cultural identity is constantly negotiated.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Hybrid Performance**

The integration of popular dance into Nigerian gospel music can be critically examined through the intersecting frameworks of Performance Theory and Cultural Hybridisation Theory, illuminating how dance operates as a spiritual practice and a cultural negotiation in contemporary worship and performance settings.

Richard Schechner's Performance Theory (2002) views performance as a ritualised behaviour capable of transforming participants and audiences. Within Nigerian gospel contexts, dance becomes more than an aesthetic display; it functions as a ritual act of worship and social expression. Gospel performances often involve choreographed routines, emotive bodily gestures, and congregational movement, aligning with Schechner's notion of "restored behaviour", culturally significant actions that are repeated and imbued with meaning. Through these performances, dance serves as a site of spiritual embodiment and communal participation. This dynamic is particularly evident in Nigerian Pentecostal churches, where high-energy performances blur the lines between sacred devotion and public spectacle, fostering what Victor Turner (1982) described as "communitas"—a temporary dissolution of hierarchies during ritual performance.

Expanding on the idea of performance, Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1993) helps situate gospel dance as a means of identity construction. Through repeated choreographed movements and stage performances, Nigerian gospel artists convey religious devotion and actively perform cultural and generational identities. These embodied practices communicate a gospel message that resonates with youth audiences who see themselves reflected in these dances' rhythms, gestures, and social references.

At the same time, Jan Nederveen Pieterse's theory of cultural hybridisation (2009) provides a lens through which to understand the blending of sacred and secular elements in gospel music and dance. In the Nigerian context, gospel artists are not simply imitating Western gospel traditions or secular pop culture. Instead, they selectively fuse Christian theology with indigenous

musical forms and contemporary dance trends, resulting in culturally relevant and spiritually potent expressions. This hybridisation reflects a deliberate and strategic adaptation. Afrobeat rhythms, hip-hop beats, and urban street dance styles are harnessed to create gospel music that speaks directly to contemporary Nigerian life. The result is a dynamic and context-sensitive gospel aesthetic that resonates with modern audiences while remaining grounded in Christian spirituality.

This hybridisation process also challenges enduring colonial binaries that separate the sacred from the secular. By incorporating popular dance trends such as Zanku and Legwork into church worship and gospel music videos, Nigerian artists reclaim the validity of local cultural forms within spiritual practice. This artistic reclamation is a form of postcolonial resistance, where cultural elements once deemed "worldly" are reinterpreted and sanctified for divine purposes. The fusion of urban dance with gospel music reflects an evolving theology of worship that recognises the body as an instrument of praise, communication, and cultural continuity.

Further insight is provided by recent scholarly work on embodied theology and Afro-Pentecostal aesthetics, which highlight the body's central role in African spiritual expression. Scholars such as Birgit Meyer (2004) and Nimi Wariboko (2014) argue that African Pentecostalism promotes a theology in which physical movement, dancing, clapping, and gesturing are manifestations of spiritual experience. Within this framework, gospel dance is not simply an accessory to worship but an expression of divine encounter. The physicality of popular dance trends, when integrated into gospel performance, serves as a powerful medium through which spiritual truths are enacted,

testimonies are shared, and communal identities are reinforced.

These theoretical perspectives affirm that dance in Nigerian gospel music is a multi-layered phenomenon. It is simultaneously a form of worship, an aesthetic expression, a tool of evangelism, and a symbol of cultural hybridity. The fusion of performance and hybridity helps explain why gospel music in Nigeria remains vibrant and impactful, especially among youth. It enables artists to navigate the complexities of faith, modernity, and cultural identity within a rapidly evolving global and digital environment. Through the lens of performance and hybridisation, dance emerges as a vital force in the sustenance and transformation of contemporary gospel music.

### **Hybridised Gospel Music, Controversies and Cultural Negotiations**

The evolution of gospel music into hybridised forms in Nigeria is a product of cultural innovation and strategic evangelism. As Nigerian gospel artists increasingly blend sacred content with elements drawn from secular genres such as Afrobeat, hip-hop, reggae, highlife, and R&B, they produce new musical forms that resonate with diverse and often younger audiences. This hybridisation reflects broader patterns of global cultural exchange, where localised expressions are shaped by, and in turn shape, global musical trends. However, this process is neither neutral nor uncontested; it generates significant debates around authenticity, spirituality, commodification, and the boundaries of sacred art.

As conceptualised in the Nigerian context, hybrid gospel music signifies a fusion of theological messages with rhythms, aesthetics, and idioms traditionally

associated with secular entertainment. This trend has been driven mainly by urban youth culture, digital media exposure, and the increasing commercialisation of religious music. Artists such as Frank Edwards, Mercy Chinwo, Buchi, Testimony Jaga, Limoblaze, and Gaise Baba exemplify this synthesis, producing gospel tracks with contemporary soundscapes that appeal to the faithful and broader popular culture audiences.

This phenomenon aligns with what scholars such as Maultsby and Burnim (2015) have described as the strategic incorporation of contemporary musical forms into sacred genres as a means of relevance and retention. Their studies of African American gospel music, which has similarly fused with R&B, funk, and hip-hop since the 1990s, provide useful parallels to the Nigerian experience. Gospel artists in Africa and the diaspora recognise that spiritual messages gain traction when delivered through familiar and culturally resonant forms. As Miller (2012) argues, gospel success in the 21st century often depends on its capacity to reflect its audience's language, rhythm, and concerns.

However, the rise of hybridised gospel music in Nigeria has provoked significant controversies. Critics, particularly from conservative theological circles, argue that incorporating secular rhythms and popular dance trends risks compromising the spiritual integrity of gospel music. The underlying concern is that the sacred is being subsumed under the guise of entertainment, thereby weakening its theological focus. Scholars such as Jackson (2004) and Okafor (2005) raise important questions about the tension between cultural relevance and doctrinal purity. They caution that gospel musicians may inadvertently erode the distinction between worship and spectacle in pursuing mass appeal.

From this perspective, hybridisation is perceived as a form of cultural commodification, wherein gospel music is repackaged to align with the logic of the entertainment industry rather than the priorities of worship and discipleship. The commodification critique draws on Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944) analysis of the culture industry, which suggests that when religious art is subjected to market dynamics, it may become less a means of spiritual edification and more a product for mass consumption. This critique becomes particularly acute when gospel concerts resemble secular music shows in terms of aesthetics, stagecraft, and audience behaviour.

However, proponents of hybridised gospel music offer counter-arguments grounded in cultural theology and missiological pragmatism. They assert that culture is not static and that the gospel message must be contextualised to remain effective. As Meyer (2004) observes, African Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have long demonstrated an openness to integrating popular culture in their modes of expression. In such contexts, hybridisation is not seen as a threat but as an opportunity for cultural negotiation and evangelistic expansion. Dance styles, musical beats, and fashion drawn from urban youth culture are appropriated as tools of relevance, aimed at bridging generational gaps and attracting new believers.

The tension between these opposing perspectives reflects what Hall (1997) describes as the ongoing process of cultural negotiation. Every cultural practice, especially those linked to religion, constantly struggles over meaning, identity, and legitimacy. Thus, hybridised gospel music becomes a site of struggle and a cultural battleground where the sacred and the secular are redefined through

performance, production, and public reception.

Indeed, some scholars advocate for a more nuanced understanding of hybridity. Rather than diluting the sacred, it can be seen as a form of theological creativity. Wariboko (2014), for instance, proposes that African Pentecostal aesthetics embrace the material and the spiritual, the local and the global, in a fluid dialogical relationship. In this view, hybrid gospel forms embody the lived realities of Nigerian Christians who navigate modernity, urbanity, and tradition simultaneously. The beats may be contemporary, but the message remains rooted in biblical conviction.

Moreover, the hybridisation of gospel music raises questions about musical ownership and cultural agency. Artists who engage in this blending are not simply mimicking Western musical forms; they are redefining gospel music in ways that reflect their cultural specificity. As Oikelome (2010) notes in his study of gospel music, that:

The gospel music scene has enjoyed tremendous influence from its fusion with traditional musical genres. Some gospel music exponents call this the age of the Cultural Revolution in the industry. We now have indigenous gospel music adapted to fit the traditional music genre like highlife, waka, Apala, Sakara, Juju, Afrobeat, etc.

In Nigerian gospel music, hybridisation often involves creatively adapting indigenous idioms and languages, reinforcing rather than undermining cultural identity. In sum, hybridised gospel music in Nigeria exists within a matrix of cultural production where religious expression, market imperatives, and youth identity intersect. While it invites legitimate concerns regarding authenticity and

reverence, it also exemplifies the adaptive power of religious music to communicate across boundaries. Though contentious, these cultural negotiations indicate a vibrant and evolving gospel tradition that seeks to be faithful in message while fluid in form.

### **Hybridisation in Nigerian Gospel Music**

The development of hybridised gospel music in Nigeria represents a dynamic intersection of faith, culture, and artistic innovation. Unlike the more rigid gospel traditions inherited from Western missionary influences, Nigerian gospel music has evolved into a pluralistic and stylistically diverse form that reflects the nation's rich ethno-linguistic heritage and cosmopolitan urban identity. This hybridisation process is neither accidental nor superficial; it results from deliberate creative efforts by gospel artists, producers, and worship communities who seek to communicate spiritual truths through culturally relevant forms.

At its core, hybridisation refers to blending musical genres, performance styles, and aesthetic practices to form new, context-specific expressions. In Nigeria, this means fusing traditional gospel themes, rooted in biblical teachings and Christian liturgy, with various indigenous and contemporary music forms, including Afrobeat, highlife, fuji, juju, hip-hop, reggae, R&B, and even drill and trap. The resultant musical expressions maintain their theological core while drawing stylistic energy from the cultural milieu in which they are situated. As Stokes (2004) observes, musical hybridity is not just about combining styles; it involves the strategic negotiation of identity, belonging, and meaning in a globalised world.

This musical fusion process reflects broader patterns of cultural hybridisation in postcolonial societies. Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2009) conceptualises hybridisation as a global cultural dynamic wherein local

traditions interact with transnational influences to create novel forms that are neither wholly indigenous nor entirely foreign. Nigerian gospel artists operate within this paradigm, drawing on their religious convictions and the musical languages of their socio-cultural environment to craft music that speaks to a diverse audience. For many young Nigerians, especially those raised in multicultural cities and connected to digital platforms, these hybrid sounds provide a spiritual experience that is also culturally authentic. Oikelome (2010) in his study on Pop Goes the gospel music identifies:

Gospel music is undoubtedly firmly established in the Nigerian music industry. This is given its wide range of publicity in both electronic and print media. The growth of several professional musicians in the field has given rise to the development of the style. Many secular musicians are shifting grounds to gospel music because of its wide acceptability and the seemingly acclaimed success.

This study identifies this trend as a response to the country's shifting music consumption and spiritual practice patterns. As church congregations increasingly comprise young, media-savvy worshippers, artists have had to innovate by integrating familiar popular styles into their gospel repertoire. This integration is evident in the works of artists such as Frank Edwards, Testimony Jaga, Sinach, Mercy Chinwo, and Limoblaze, who have successfully navigated the line between sacred messaging and popular aesthetics. These artists demonstrate that it is possible to remain theologically grounded while being culturally expressive.

One of the most prominent features of Nigerian gospel hybridisation is its incorporation of indigenous musical idioms

and languages. For example, highlife gospel, popular among the Igbo, utilises guitar-driven melodies and call-and-response vocals, often delivered in vernacular language. Fuji gospel and juju gospel, rooted in Yoruba musical traditions, employ polyrhythmic percussion, praise chants, and talking drums elements that evoke deep cultural resonance while delivering Christian messages. This practice aligns with what Nketia (1974) described as the indigenisation of music, whereby foreign musical systems are localised through appropriating traditional instruments, scales, rhythms, and performance styles.

This indigenisation is more than a musical strategy; it is a theological and cultural act. It reflects a postcolonial theological shift wherein African Christians reclaim their cultural heritage as a legitimate vehicle for worship. Scholars like Ekwueme (2004) and Adeogun (2008) have argued that African church music must shed its colonial vestiges and develop spiritually edifying and culturally affirming forms. By incorporating traditional musical expressions into gospel music, Nigerian artists contribute to this re-Africanization of Christian worship, promoting a contextual theology that recognises the value of local cultures in expressing universal truths.

Digital media has further accelerated the hybridisation of gospel music in Nigeria. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Boomplay, and Instagram have enabled artists to share their music beyond church walls and reach global audiences. This has led to the emergence of Afro-gospel and Christian Afrobeats, a genre typified by danceable beats, synthesised instrumentals, and youth-oriented lyrics rooted in faith. Artists such as Prinx Emmanuel, CalledOut Music, and Limoblaze exemplify this subgenre, combining theological depth with rhythmic appeal. Oladele & Abolaji (2023)

note that these digital platforms have become new spaces for digital evangelism, where gospel music is consumed as worship, entertainment, social commentary, and cultural identity.

Nevertheless, the hybridisation of gospel music is not without challenges. Critics from conservative Christian communities express concern that the fusion of gospel with secular musical forms may dilute the spiritual seriousness of gospel worship. These concerns echo earlier debates in the African American context, where incorporating blues and jazz into gospel music elicited accusations of worldliness and doctrinal compromise (Darden, 2004; Jackson, 2004). In Nigeria, similar concerns persist, particularly when gospel music adopts stylistic elements associated with nightclubs, secular dance, or explicit fashion.

However, proponents argue that what matters is not the style of the music but the intention and message it carries. They emphasise that music, as a cultural product, is inherently fluid and adaptive. As long as the content of gospel music maintains theological soundness and edifies the listener, incorporating diverse musical forms should not be deemed unspiritual. This argument finds support in contextual theology, which affirms that the gospel must be communicated in ways that make sense within the cultural frameworks of the target audience (Sanneh, 1989).

Ultimately, the hybridisation of gospel music in Nigeria represents an ongoing process of cultural negotiation. It reflects the realities of a society that is at once deeply religious, culturally diverse, and globally connected. Gospel artists act as cultural mediators, translating sacred truths into musical languages that resonate with local sensibilities and global trends. Far from being a threat to spiritual authenticity, this

hybridity, when thoughtfully engaged, enhances gospel music's reach, relevance, and richness in the Nigerian cultural and spiritual landscape.

### **Popular Dance Trends in Contemporary Nigeria**

Popular dance trends in contemporary Nigeria serve purposes far beyond entertainment; they are deeply embedded in society's cultural, social, and spiritual fabric. In the context of hybridised gospel music, these dance styles function as vital tools for communication, identity formation, and religious engagement. Often originating from street culture and propelled into the mainstream by digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, dances like *Zanku*, *Shaku Shaku*, and *Legwork* have gained widespread popularity and cultural significance. When incorporated into gospel music, these dances do more than entertain—they reflect Nigerian youth's lived experiences and urban realities, acting as cultural markers that localise spiritual messages and make them more relatable.

Artists bridge sacred texts and everyday expressions by fusing gospel with trendy dance styles, allowing gospel music to speak fluently within contemporary youth culture. This localisation transforms gospel music into something heard, seen, and felt, enriching its communicative power. Moreover, dance in gospel contexts fosters social cohesion, particularly among young people. Whether during church services, gospel concerts, or online challenges, collective participation in dance builds group identity and emotional unity. This sense of community reflects traditional African values where dance is inherently communal and plays a central role in celebrations, rituals, and worship. Through this collective participation, dance reinforces shared beliefs

and strengthens the spiritual bond among worshippers.

Beyond cultural expression, dance is a powerful communicative tool in gospel music. Drawing from African traditions where dance conveys stories, emotions, and religious sentiments, contemporary gospel dance interprets lyrics, dramatises testimonies, and visually enacts themes of joy, deliverance, and praise. Movements and gestures become a kinetic language, capable of expressing spiritual depths that words alone may not fully capture. Choreographed routines and spontaneous expressions alike serve as visible embodiments of faith, making the gospel message more dynamic and emotionally resonant.

The strategic use of popular dance in gospel music also enhances its evangelistic reach. In the digital age, dance trends boost visibility and shareability. Music videos featuring catchy dance moves are likelier to go viral, spreading gospel messages far beyond traditional church audiences. Artists like Testimony Jaga illustrate this well, using popular dances to entertain and minister within urban communities. His integration of dance into the “Street Gospel Movement” exemplifies how dance becomes a tool of outreach, drawing in those who might not engage with conventional religious settings. As these dances circulate on social media, they serve as vehicles for gospel lyrics, effectively evangelising through entertainment.

However, the use of secular dance styles in gospel music is not without its critics. Some religious traditionalists argue that specific movements are too closely associated with nightlife or non-religious contexts and, therefore, inappropriate for worship. These concerns highlight ongoing negotiations between spiritual integrity and cultural relevance. Despite such criticism, many

gospel artists defend their creative choices, emphasising that dance is a neutral expression, and its spiritual value depends on context, intention, and purpose. For these artists, contemporary dance in gospel music represents not a compromise but an evolution—a way to keep worship vibrant, meaningful, and accessible in a fast-changing cultural landscape.

Popular dance trends in Nigeria play a crucial cultural and communicative role in gospel music. They embody and transmit meaning, build community, and serve as instruments of both worship and outreach. As gospel music continues to evolve, dance remains a supplementary feature and a core element that animates, contextualises, and deepens the spiritual experience.

### **Dance as a Tool for Engagement and Evangelism**

Dance has emerged as a strategic and transformative medium in Nigerian gospel evangelism, serving as an artistic expression and a powerful tool for spiritual outreach and engagement. Contemporary gospel artists increasingly recognise the magnetic appeal of dance, particularly among urban youth. They are integrating it into their ministry to bridge the gap between sacred messages and popular culture. One prominent example is Testimony Jaga, whose use of dance-driven formats, especially incorporating trending moves like Zanku and Legwork, has redefined how gospel is presented to inner-city audiences. His “Street Gospel Movement” combines energetic performances, relatable lyrics, and viral choreography to evangelise in unconventional spaces, capturing the attention of a demographic often overlooked by traditional church outreach. Platforms like YouTube and Instagram amplify this strategy, allowing gospel content to transcend geographic and denominational

boundaries. Through digital virality, these dance-infused performances reach local audiences, diasporic communities, and global viewers, making the message of Christ more accessible in an age of short attention spans and visual media dominance.

Beyond individual artists, ministries like Spirit of David and mega-events like *The Experience Lagos* have institutionalised dance within worship settings. These platforms feature professionally choreographed routines that blend artistic excellence with spiritual depth, drawing large youth audiences who find resonance in the fusion of faith and performance. The intentional inclusion of dance in these worship experiences signals a broader shift in Nigerian gospel culture from rigid, solemn liturgical norms to more performative, participatory, and culturally attuned modes of expression. This shift is particularly significant in attracting younger generations who value creativity, interactivity, and visual storytelling. Thus, Dance becomes more than movement; it becomes a medium for testimony, embodied praise, and a gateway to spiritual encounters.

The effectiveness of dance in gospel evangelism lies in its ability to communicate across linguistic, cultural, and generational barriers. While words may be constrained by language or theological density, dance operates on a more universal plane, conveying emotion, conviction, and narrative through physicality. As choreographed praise routines, spontaneous worship dances, or even social media challenges tied to gospel songs, dance facilitates immediate and deeply personal engagement. This reconfiguration of gospel outreach reflects a broader theological and cultural openness within Nigerian Christianity that embraces innovation, affirms indigenous creativity, and redefines

what it means to worship in spirit and truth in a digital, globalised era.

### **Sustenance of Gospel Music through Popular Dance**

The continued relevance and vitality of hybridised gospel music in Nigeria owes much to the strategic incorporation of popular dance trends, in a media-driven society where entertainment and cultural relevance dictate audience engagement, dance bridges sacred content and contemporary aesthetics. By aligning gospel music with popular entertainment's rhythms, movements, and visual appeal, dance ensures the genre stays dynamic and resonates with a broader, younger, and more culturally diverse audience. This synergy allows gospel music to remain spiritually potent while adapting to shifting cultural contexts. Meyer (2004) asserts that African religious expressions increasingly integrate elements of popular culture in order to maintain social and cultural significance. In this light, dance becomes not merely a performative add-on but a core component of gospel's adaptive strategy, a vessel through which spiritual messages are contextualised, made emotionally compelling, and socially relevant.

Incorporating viral and street-inspired dance moves into gospel music, such as Gbese, Zanku, or Shoki, injects a renewed energy that revitalises traditional worship experiences and breathes life into gospel performances. This not only captures the attention of youth but also encourages participatory worship, shifting the role of congregants from passive observers to active co-performers. Through dance, hybridised gospel music becomes a shared experience that is deeply immersive and community-driven, qualities essential to its sustainability. The collaboration between gospel musicians and choreographers also

creates room for artistic innovation, encouraging new interpretations of worship and performance that push creative boundaries while remaining grounded in faith-based values.

Critics continue to express concerns about the perceived secularisation of gospel music, arguing that adopting popular dance styles often born in nightclubs or street cultures risks diluting the spiritual integrity of worship (Okafor, 2005). These criticisms typically stem from traditional perspectives that prioritise solemnity and liturgical purity. However, as Oikelome (2010) argues, the sanctity of gospel music is not inherently compromised by its form; rather, its power lies in the message it conveys and the spiritual intent behind its expression. From this standpoint, dance is a neutral medium, capable of conveying divine truths just as effectively as any sermon or hymn, depending on how it is framed and presented.

Ultimately, popular dance plays a vital role in the sustainability of gospel music by facilitating cultural dialogue between faith and contemporary life. It provides a platform for innovation without sacrificing doctrinal substance, helping gospel music remain relevant in an era where visual culture and digital engagement are paramount. As Nigerian gospel music continues to evolve, dance enhances its performative appeal and affirms its position within the broader currents of modern African spirituality and artistic expression.

### **Dance Enriches Gospel Music Across Several Domains**

Dance enriches gospel music in Nigeria by operating across multiple domains—spiritual, cultural, aesthetic, and social— as both a sacred embodiment and a dynamic enhancer of gospel’s expressive power. Historically, dance has been integral to

African spiritual traditions, functioning as entertainment and a medium of ritual, communication, and divine encounter. In West African religious systems, dance was often used to invoke ancestral spirits, express communal joy, or channel prophetic utterances. This historical foundation profoundly influenced the African diasporic experience, where dance continued to serve as a liturgical expression, especially in Pentecostal and Holiness church traditions. Practices such as “shouting” or ecstatic movement under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit illustrate how dance has long been tied to spiritual fervour and emotional release in Christian worship, particularly within Black church contexts.

Creatively, dance has had a transformative effect on the performative dimension of gospel music. It has shaped the genre’s rhythmic complexity, stage dynamics, and overall aesthetics, making performances more engaging and musically rich. Gospel musicians increasingly design their music with movement in mind, crafting beats and arrangements that lend themselves to choreography and physical interpretation. This synergy between sound and movement enhances the sensory appeal of gospel performances, turning them into holistic experiences that stimulate both spiritual and artistic sensibilities. Dance teams, praise dancers, and gospel step crews have become essential elements of many church services and concerts, contributing to a more vibrant and expressive form of worship that aligns with contemporary tastes without losing its theological core.

Dance is a deeply cathartic and unifying force in community building and healing. During worship services and religious gatherings, choreographed routines and spontaneous dance moments create emotional spaces for joy, release, and transformation. Movement allows

individuals to express gratitude, grief, deliverance, and praise physically, offering a pathway to healing that words alone may not provide. Moreover, the participatory nature of dance fosters inclusivity across age, gender, and social status. From children to elders, everyone can engage in worship through movement, strengthening the intergenerational fabric of faith communities and enhancing the collective experience of church life.

As an evangelistic strategy, dance also plays a crucial role in expanding the reach and accessibility of gospel music. It bridges linguistic and cultural divides, using the universality of movement to communicate spiritual messages in ways that transcend verbal limitations. Dance can draw in those sceptical of organised religion or traditional preaching methods, offering a more engaging and relatable medium through which the gospel can be presented. This is particularly effective in multicultural and urban settings, where gospel music and dance intersect with popular culture, creating new entry points for evangelism. Through social media challenges, flash mobs, and gospel dance videos, artists and ministries can reach global audiences, bringing the message of Christ to digital and physical spaces far beyond the church walls.

Despite these manifold benefits, dance in gospel contexts is not without its detractors. Conservative denominations sometimes resist the incorporation of contemporary or secular-inspired dance styles, fearing that such practices might dilute the sacredness of worship or prioritise performance over reverence. These critiques often reflect more profound anxieties about the evolving boundaries between sacred and secular culture. However, proponents argue that dance, like music itself, is a morally neutral form of expression whose meaning is shaped by intention and context. When guided by

scriptural values and spiritual purpose, dance complements gospel music and amplifies its role as both worship and witness.

In essence, dance remains a vital and multifaceted force within gospel music, historically rooted, aesthetically enriching, communally empowering, and evangelically strategic. It reflects the evolving identity of gospel as a living, adaptive genre that speaks to the soul, moves the body, and connects diverse communities in shared praise and purpose.

### **Conclusion**

Incorporating popular dance trends into hybridised gospel music represents a significant evolution in the Nigerian religious and cultural landscape. Far from being superficial additions, these dance forms function as strategic tools for audience engagement, artistic innovation, and embodied spiritual expression. Their integration reflects a broader trend within African Christianity toward contextual adaptability, wherein the socio-cultural dynamics of modern life increasingly shape faith practices. In aligning with contemporary entertainment norms, gospel music sustains its appeal among younger demographics and reaffirms its place within the lived realities of a digitally connected, culturally diverse society.

While concerns regarding the encroachment of secular aesthetics into sacred spaces continue to generate critical discourse, such tensions underscore the dynamic nature of religious expression in postcolonial African societies. The ongoing fusion of dance and gospel music should thus be understood not as a dilution of spiritual meaning but as a cultural negotiation that bridges historical liturgical forms with emergent artistic expressions. This synthesis enriches gospel music's communicative power and extends its reach beyond traditional ecclesiastical boundaries. As the genre continues to

evolve, dance will remain integral not merely as performance, but as a culturally grounded, spiritually meaningful, and socially unifying force within the contemporary gospel experience.

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