

“Sing and be Possessed”: A Reflective Practitioner’s Perspective on the Impacts of Music on Jinn-Human Relations

Muhyideen Olasunkanmi IMAM¹, 

¹ Department of Languages and Linguistics, Fountain University, Osogbo, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study utilizes Driscoll's (1994, 2007) model of structured reflection, based on Terry Burton's core questions, namely: what (the situation), so what (what was learned), and now what (the action plan), to examine an aspect of fieldwork observations at a Nigerian Islamic exorcism center. The case involves a thirty-five-year-old lady allegedly afflicted by jinn possession attributed to her habitual consumption of secular music. The paper examines the ontological, theological, and socio-cultural dimensions of jinn-human relations mediated through musical practice. It opens with the provocative public confessions of two prominent Nigerian musicians, 9ice and Terry G, whose self-reported claims about the devil's dominion over secular music provide a compelling popular-culture entry point into this under-theorized intersection of ethnomusicology, hip-hop linguistics, Islamic demonology, and the anthropology of possession. This piece argues that music in many West African Muslim contexts is not a neutral aesthetic phenomenon but a spiritually charged medium through which permeable boundaries between the human and unseen worlds are negotiated, violated, and potentially restored. The study contributes to growing scholarship on musical linguistics, Islamic therapeutic practices, the moral economy of sound, and the gendered dimensions of jinn affliction in postcolonial Nigeria.

Keywords: Driscoll's Reflective Model, Ethnomusicology, Jinn Possession, Music and Evil, Gender and Possession

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* Corresponding author’s email: imam.muhideen@fuo.edu.ng

Introduction

The relationship among music, spirituality, and possession has been a contested terrain in ethnomusicology, linguistic anthropology of beliefs, and religious studies. In African societies, music is not only a cultural artifact but also a spiritually fraught medium whose consumption is understood to carry consequences that impinge on the moral and metaphysical order and transcend the aesthetic. However, despite the growing body of works on jinn-human communication (Imam et al., 2023), Islamic healing practices (Suhr, 2019; Rassool, 2018), and the ethics of musical sound in Muslim communities (Hirschkind, 2006), the question of how music consumption may sustain or precipitate jinn affliction remains critically underexplored.

This gap fills that gap by examining a case encountered during fieldwork at a Nigerian Islamic exorcism center. The case involves Hafsa (a pseudonym), a thirty-five-year-old lady whose jinn possession was attributed, by the possessing spirit speaking through her during a ruqyah session, to her continual consumption of secular music. By selecting Driscoll's (1994, 2007) reflective model as its analytical scaffold, the study describes the fieldwork encounter (What?), engages a multidisciplinary interpretation of its critical dimensions (So What?), and articulates its implications for future research and practice (Now What?).

The following research questions are interrogated in this research: i) In what ways does secular music function as a mediating vehicle for jinn-human relations within Islamic healing settings; ii) How do musical consumption, gender, and cosmology interact in supposed jinn possession cases; and iii) What ethical and methodological frameworks are accurate for examining emic accounts of spiritual affliction? Beyond the case's focus, this study makes a methodological statement: the humanities researcher must cultivate the willingness to take emic accounts seriously without imposing rationalist perspectives or surrendering analytical rigor.

When the Choirmaster Calls

In August 2025, veteran Afrobeats musician Alexander Adegbola Akande, popularly known as 9ice, made a declaration that reverberated across social media and beyond the usual confines of celebrity gossip. Speaking on *The Nancy Isime Show*, *Alapomeji* affirmed: 'The devil controls music. The devil is the choirmaster; that is why we smoke and do all these things...' He emphasized that music is a spiritually charged domain where one enters at one's own peril. 9ice's confessions were grounded in spiritual experience, including what he described as a mysterious illness in 2010. He further explained that his musical journey had intersected with encounters with spiritual forces, ultimately leading him to embrace Ifá, the Yoruba traditional religion, as a coping mechanism for navigating those forces.

Meanwhile, 9ice's revelations were neither unprecedented nor isolated in the Nigerian music scene. Prior to 9ice's interview, Gabriel Oche Amanyi (Terry-G), the self-styled *Apako Master*, made a similar and equally arresting admission. Speaking at *The Honest Bunch Podcast* in March 2024, Terry-G stated: 'I am a secular musician. I sing for the devil. We (secular musicians) sing for the devil; we praise the devil; we do not glorify God...' Interestingly, he was later allowed to retract these statements, but he rather reaffirmed his position and insisted that the devil is the source of his success and that this was simply the reality of a secular musician's existence.

These admissions made by musicians are more than sensational tabloid fare. They reflect the transactional nature of music, a trait that suggests the musician's relationship with parties far beyond the visible world. In fact, they constitute, from the perspective of the humanities researcher, emic articulations and primary testimonies of a widely held belief in many Nigerian

religious settings that secular music is demonically authored, spiritually dangerous, and capable of drawing its listeners into covenants with unseen entities they may not consciously intend or understand. Thus, this paper utilizes Driscoll’s (1994, 2007) What Model to examine a case encountered during fieldwork at a Nigerian Islamic exorcism center. The case involves a thirty-five-year-old woman whose decade-long jinn affliction was attributed, by the jinn speaking through her during a ruqyah session, to her sustained consumption of secular music; music whose lyrics, the jinn claimed, facilitated an unconscious spiritual communion with evil spirits.

Music, Jinn, and the Permeable Body

Jinns are supernatural beings or possessing agents believed to possess invisible yet potent powers capable of influencing an individual’s behavioral, physical, and mental health (Imam et al., 2023). In the West African context, belief in jinn intersects with pre-Islamic cosmologies. Among the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria, the *ajogun* (malevolent forces) and various categories of spiritual beings share conceptual space with Islamic jinn in ways that are syncretic rather than mutually exclusive (Mudathir & Liadi, 2016). Among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria, jinn-like spirits known as *iskoki* or *bori* spirits occupy a complex relationship with Islamic orthodoxy. Therefore, exorcism centers in Nigeria are crucibles in which multiple ontological systems, namely the Qur’an, Yoruba cosmology, Hausa spiritual practice, and Catholic-enshrined Christian exorcism, are negotiated through the body of the afflicted.

Further, the musical linguistics and ethnomusicological literature on possession and music contend that in many African religious contexts, music is understood as a structured vibration that opens channels between the visible and invisible worlds (Mudathir & Liadi, 2016; Imam et al., 2016). For instance, the *bori* possession cult of the Hausas uses specific musical rhythms and melodies to summon particular spirits; in Sufi *dhikr* practice, repetitive chanting and music are used to facilitate transcendence and, in some traditions, to encounter the divine (Earle, 2021). Thus, the line between summoning and being summoned, and between the musician as agent and the listener as passive vessel, is far from stable.

Meanwhile, scholarship on spirit possession across cultures has consistently noted a disproportionate representation of women among the possessed (Imam et al., 2023; Rassool, 2018; Suhr, 2019). Possession among women functions as a form of what I.M. Lewis calls ‘oblique redressive strategy’, a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of grievances within patriarchal structures. In the Nigerian context, Ajetunmobi et al. (2025) have explored how women’s bodies become sites of moral and spiritual contestation amid globalization, consumer culture, and the penetration of popular media, especially music. The case explored in this piece is situated accurately at the intersection of gender, musical sound, and spiritual vulnerability.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design informed by the principles of reflective practitioner’s inquiry. It is situated in the anthropological linguistic tradition where the researcher engages with the cosmological world of the interlocutors without imposing external rationalist frameworks that may foreclose the salience of indigenous knowledge systems (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). The study utilizes Driscoll’s (1994, 2007) three-stage reflective model to narrate the fieldwork encounter and interpret its significance.

Data Collection

The fieldwork on which this paper is based was conducted over several visits to an Islamic exorcism center in Nigeria as part of an ongoing research on the linguistics of healing practices in Nigerian religious contexts. Data were collected through participant observation (with the researcher present at the exorcism sessions). Detailed field notes were documented. Hafsa's case, examined in this paper, was observed during one such session and is discussed here as an instance of the relationship between musical consumption and jinn possession.

Ethical Consideration

The exorcism center and the lead exorcist were consulted. The center gave institutional approval for the researcher's presence as a participant-observer. Meanwhile, prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from the patient's family, who consented on her behalf, given her condition at the time of the session. Equally, the patient is assigned the pseudonym Hafsa throughout this paper, and all identifying details (of the patient and of the center) have been excluded to protect the patient's dignity and safeguard the patient's operational confidentiality.

The Researcher's Positionality

My experience at the exorcism center was marked by a productive tension that, I would argue, is the proper condition for the engaged arts and humanities researcher working in religiously saturated environments. On one hand, my academic training inclines me toward the kind of explanatory pluralism recommended by the ontological turn: treating emic accounts seriously without fully surrendering my analytical distance. On the other hand, I am not culturally or religiously exterior to this world: as a researcher living in the Nigerian society, I inhabit a context in which the existence of jinn is not a contested hypothesis but an established cosmological fact confirmed by tradition, attested by the scriptures (the Qur'an in Q72:1-3 and the Bible in Mathew 5:2-5:9), and experienced by people whose intellectual and moral credibility I have no grounds to dismiss. This productive tension is itself a form of data. It is the tension that reflexive ethnographic study is designed to examine and interrogate.

Driscoll's Reflective Model

Driscoll's (1994, 2007) reflective model is a three-stage framework based on Terry Burton's core questions, namely: what (the situation), so what (what was learned), and now what (the action plan). It is a model of structured reflection originally developed for nursing practice that has since been adopted across a wide range of professional and practitioner-research contexts, including education, social work, and qualitative fieldwork (Price, 2017). Reflection entails looking back on past events, experiences, responses, emotions, and actions, and using this information to enhance one's knowledge base and attain a better understanding.

For the humanities and social science researcher engaged in ethnographic fieldwork, Driscoll's model acknowledges that the researcher is never a neutral observer but an embodied, culturally located subject whose encounter with the field produces data through the friction of encounter. The 'What?' stage grounds the article in the specificity of lived experience; the 'So What?' stage opens that experience to multidisciplinary interrogation; and the 'Now What?' stage relays the implications for future practice, research, or understanding.

The Setting

The fieldwork was conducted as part of the data collection for ongoing research at an Islamic exorcism center in Nigeria. Such centers (popularly called ruqyah centers) have proliferated across Nigerian cities in recent decades, operating at the intersection of biomedical referral, Islamic therapy, and traditional healing. They typically offer sessions in which a

trained Islamic exorcist (rāqī) recites Qur’anic and Sunnatic verses over the afflicted, while simultaneously using microphones, Zamzam water, and other prescribed alternatives by the Prophet of Islam, with the intent of detecting, dialoguing with, and expelling the possessing spirit. The researcher served as a participant-observer and collected field notes as part of a broader study of the linguistics of healing practices in contemporary Nigeria.

The Case

Among the cases encountered during the fieldwork exercise, one was particularly striking in its presentation of music as an aetiological factor. The patient, a lady of about 35 years whom we call Hafsa, had been under long-term treatment at the center for several years. She displays symptoms of what clinicians call dissociative or possession trance disorder: involuntary vocalizations, reported experiences of hearing voices, episodic loss of consciousness, and feeling an invisible presence. During the exorcism session, the exorcist recited verses from Qur’an 2:255, Qur’an 72:1-3, Qur’an 112-114, and a host of other exorcism verses. At a point in the session, Hafsa’s physical demeanor changed markedly: her voice deepened, her body stiffened, and she began to speak in a manner that those present interpreted as the jinn speaking through her.

The Jinn’s Testimony

While speaking through Hafsa, the jinn provided a detailed account of the affliction. It claimed that Hafsa had been a devoted listener of secular music since her late teenage years. It further asserted that many of the songs she had loved listening to contained lyrical content that functioned as unconscious spiritual communiqués; channels through which listeners unconsciously entered into relationships with the spirits whose energies permeated the music. The jinn claimed that he had married Hafsa spiritually; a union it described as the primary reason she had, at mid-thirties, remained without a human husband. It affirmed that it would not permit a human male to stay in her life and that the spiritual marital relationship had persisted for over ten years. This testimony was received by those present: the exorcist, family members, and exorcism assistants. As a researcher, I carefully recorded these proceedings. I was deeply aware of the tension between my role as a scholarly observer (trained to maintain analytical distance) and my engagement in a religious and cultural context in which such testimonies carry profound epistemic weight.

The Ontological Turn

The first interpretive challenge this case presents is epistemological: how should the researcher engage with the jinn’s testimony? A strictly rationalist perspective would dismiss it as delusion, cultural performance, or the projection of social anxieties onto a supernatural canvas. However, such a dismissal would be both epistemically arrogant and methodologically impoverishing. Following Holbraad and Pedersen’s (2017) ontological turn, this piece asserts that the jinn’s claims should be taken seriously as an emic account; one that operates within a coherent cosmological framework shared by the patient, the exorcist, the family, and a substantial portion of the Nigerian Muslim (even non-Muslim) population. To affirm these claims conceptually is not to endorse them metaphysically; it is to respect the integrity of the epistemological world in which the affliction is lived, and the healing is sought.

Music as a Spiritual Medium

The jinn’s claim that Hafsa’s affliction was mediated through the lyrical content of songs she absorbed over many years resonates with multiple scholarly traditions. From the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, this is far from a novel claim. As noted earlier, *Ibnul Qayyim al-Jawziyyah* argued in *Igāthat al-Lahfān* that music softens the defenses of the heart,

creating spiritual permeability that renders the listener susceptible to satanic influence (Hamid, 2014). With this theological view, music not only reflects a morally compromised culture, but it also actively produces spiritual vulnerability in its consumers.

Meanwhile, from a hip-hop linguistics perspective, the idea that music operates as a medium of communication between human and non-human worlds is, as Suhr (2019) demonstrated, cross-culturally attested. The specificity of the jinn's claim (that it was the *words, melodies, and instrumental sounds* of the songs that served as vectors of communion) introduces a fascinating semiotic dimension. If, as the jinn asserts, certain song lyrics function as inadvertent invocations, then the listener-as-consumer becomes, without consent or knowledge, a participant in a spiritual exchange. This aligns with what Hirschkind (2006) calls the 'ethical formation' of the listening subject: the idea that what we listen to shapes not only our minds but also our spiritual dispositions and our relationships with the unseen world.

The Spiritual Marriage

Interestingly, the most amazing dimension of this case is the jinn's claim to have *married* Hafsa and to have used this spiritual marriage as the mechanism by which human males were prevented from forming lasting unions with her. This motif is far from unique to this case. Scholars, including Rassool (2018) and Imam et al (2023), have documented extensively how jinn or spirit marriages are understood to create binding claims on humans, particularly women, that must be formally negotiated, contested, or dissolved before human social life can proceed normally.

In the Nigerian Muslim context, the concept of a spiritual spouse (*auren aljanni* in Hausa) is well known among exorcists and patients. Such arrangements arise through various pathways: inherited spiritual attachments passed through family lines, deliberate pacts made in moments of vulnerability or ambition, or, as in Hafsa's case, inadvertent communion facilitated by morally compromised cultural practices such as the consumption of music. Similarly, the gendered dimensions of this case demand careful analysis. Hafsa is a woman, approaching forty, and unmarried, a status that in many Nigerian social contexts carries significant stigma and social pressure. The explanation offered by the jinn, that she cannot marry because she is already married to a spiritual entity, does several interpretive things. First, it constitutes a powerful narrative that makes sense of a painful social circumstance within a cosmological structure. Second, it may be read as a culturally intelligible articulation of the pressures and constraints that structurally marginalize women in patriarchal societies. However, following Pecoraro (2016), we must resist the urge to reduce the spiritual dimensions of the case to mere symptoms of social dysfunction. The women involved in these cases are not simply displaced persons seeking supernatural explanations for social disappointments; they are inhabitants of a cosmological world in which music can serve as a portal between worlds, in which the seen and unseen are co-present, and in which marriage can occur across ontological boundaries.

The case of Hafsa, analyzed through Driscoll's (2007) reflective model, has enormous implications for research, practice, and pedagogy. These are discussed in the following.

Ethnomusicology of Spiritual Risk

Existing literature on possession and trance disorders, exorcism, and jinn possession (Mercer, 2013; Littlewood, 2004; Pecoraro, 2016) largely focuses on intentional ritualistic uses of music to induce possession states. Less attention has been paid to inadvertent possession, understood as the idea that recreational music consumption might produce spiritual vulnerability over time. This case invites the development of what this study terms the ethnomusicology of spiritual risk, a subfield that concerns how music consumption is

linguistically, ontologically, and morally regulated in religious communities, and the consequences believed to have emerged from violations of such regulations. Future research should compare West African Muslim communities to map the range of beliefs about music’s spiritual valence, the specific lyrical features identified as spiritually hazardous, and the therapeutic protocols employed in response.

Gender, Vulnerability, and Pastoral Ethics

The disproportionate representation of women among possessed patients raises urgent questions about the gendered dimensions of vulnerability, diagnosis, and care in Islamic therapeutic settings. Ethically, practitioners and researchers must remain attentive to the risk of pathologizing women’s social experiences through supernatural frameworks to ensure that spiritual diagnosis does not substitute for, or obstruct, attention to the structural conditions that render women disproportionately vulnerable. Future studies should examine whether the attribution of jinn affliction to music consumption operates differently across gender lines and whether women are more frequently assigned music-related aetiologies than men.

Protecting Research Participants

This case highlights the ethical complexities of conducting fieldwork in exorcism settings. Patients such as Hafsa are vulnerable as they are afflicted (or perceived to be afflicted) by a possessing entity and are subjects of both therapeutic intervention and scholarly observation. Future studies in this aspect must develop robust protocols for obtaining meaningful consent from patients who may be in altered states of consciousness during sessions. Such protocols must also ensure that the dissemination of research findings does not compromise either the patient’s identity or the center’s operations. Meanwhile, ethical reflexivity is an ongoing commitment that must permeate every stage of the research process.

Implications for Islamic Therapeutic Practice

For practitioners at ruqyah centers, this case underscores the importance of incorporating detailed patient histories that include cultural and media consumption patterns. If secular music consumption is understood within the therapeutic formation as a potential vector for jinn possession, a detailed assessment of a patient’s musical history may constitute a clinically relevant dimension of intake and diagnosis. Practitioners may also benefit from formalized training in the musicological and semiotic dimensions of popular music, especially regarding lyrical content that alludes to spiritual allegiances, pacts, or invocatory language. This will help exorcists engage more precisely with the aetiological claims made by possessing entities.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a single case study encountered during a broader fieldwork project. While the case is richly suggestive and analytically productive, its findings cannot be generalized to all Islamic exorcism settings, all cases of jinn-attributed music consumption, or all configurations of jinn-human relations in West Africa. Second, the testimony of the possessing entity, though taken seriously as an emic account, cannot be independently verified. Third, the researcher’s dual positionality as a Nigerian Muslim and an academic is a productive tension but also a potential source of bias: confessional and affective propinquity to the subject matter may, despite the researcher’s best efforts, color interpretation. Fourth, the brevity of this paper precludes the kind of extended thick description that a full ethnographic treatment of the case would warrant. It is recommended that future studies expand the empirical base through comparative case analysis, multi-sited fieldwork, and longitudinal observation.

Conclusion

This paper has used Driscoll's (1994, 2007) structured reflective model to examine a case of jinn possession at a Nigerian Islamic exorcism center where the possessing spirit identified secular music consumption as the primary vector of affliction. Using the structured three-stage reflective model, the paper offers a description of the encounter, an interpretation of its critical observations, and concrete implications for research, practice, and ethics. The case of Hafsa reveals certain important dynamics at the intersection of music, gender, and spirit possession namely: the semiotic complexity of lyrical content as an inadvertent spiritual medium, the theological weight attached to secular music in many Nigerian Muslim communities, the cosmological logic of spiritual marriage as an ontological and social narrative, and the methodological challenges that confront the researcher who prioritises emic accounts of spirit possession.

A significant proposition of this paper is that sustained engagement among ethnomusicology, hip-hop linguistics, and religious studies (and, in extension, Christian or Catholic exorcism practices) forms a strong interdisciplinary framework. Similarly, the field of religious therapeutic practice is a fertile ground for interdisciplinary scholarship. Moreover, the belief held by exorcists, patients, and their families that music is a spiritually charged medium through which the boundaries between the human and unseen worlds are negotiated, violated, and restored is not a marginal datum to be explained away. It is a profound cultural detail that demands the full attention of scholarship committed to understanding the complexity of religious life in contemporary Africa.

About the Author

Muhyideen Olasunkanmi IMAM lectures at the Department of Languages and Linguistics, Fountain University, Osogbo, Nigeria. His research interests include cognitive and clinical linguistics, mental health communication, sociolinguistics, socio-semiotics, and discourse analysis. He prioritizes interdisciplinary approaches to health intricacies and how linguistics can provide integrated solutions. **ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5361-6867>

AI Statement

This document has been enhanced with Grammarly, which was employed to refine its linguistic style and correct grammar and spelling. While the incorporation of these technologies may introduce some AI-generated linguistic patterns, it is important to note that the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented are entirely the work of the author.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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