



Religion and Noise Making: A Reflection on the Religious Sound Space of Kumasi, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Excessive noise beyond certain levels of intensity adversely affects human health and decreases productivity. One would expect that religions such as Christianity and Islam would be spared in the discussion of noise making. However, there has been a debate regarding the assertion that the liturgies of Christianity and Islam in Ghana, especially in Kumasi, Ashanti Region are becoming noisy instead at an ever-increasing level. This study examined the sources and effects of religious noise among the two major religions in the Kumasi Metropolis. The study discovered that the sources of religious noise in Kumasi include—the use of ear-shattering loudspeakers by Christians and their Muslim counterpart during morning and night worship sessions. The paper's findings indicate that the effects of such noise pollution include sleep disturbances, and the ability to aggravate high blood pressure. The paper advocates the ban on the use of loudspeakers in residential areas, the location of churches in non-residential areas and educating the adherents of these religions on worship decorum.

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INTRODUCTION

The control and enforcement of appropriate noise levels at various places of national life have become a principal environmental concern, especially in urban settlements with high population growth rates.¹ The common definition of noise is “unwanted or disturbing sound.”² Sound becomes unwanted when it either interferes with normal activities such as sleeping and conversation or affects adversely the quality of life. Disturbing sounds or noise (as one may choose to call it) is measured in decibels (dB) and the permissible ambient noise as set by the Environmental Protection Agency of Ghana (EPA) for residential areas requires that during the day, noise levels should not be above fifty-five dB (55) and forty-eight dB (48) at night.³

In Ghana, some productive human activities, be they commercial, religious or recreational, are associated with noise generation. Indeed, excessive noise beyond certain levels of intensity adversely affects human health and decreases productivity. Therefore, the control and enforcement of appropriate

¹ Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Ghana, “Noise Pollution (Leaflet)” (n.d.).

² Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Ghana, “Noise Pollution (Leaflet)”

³ Act of 1994 (Act 490).

noise levels at various places in national life have become a principal environmental concern, especially in urban settlements with high population growth.⁴

Sources of noise in the Kumasi Metropolis and Ghana, in general, include motor vehicles, and blowing of horns and sirens and horns, hawkers and commercial activities, recreational activities as well as public address systems and musical and communication instruments of religious bodies. The mention of religious bodies as a source of noise brings to mind the fact that the global society today is undergoing a significant constant proliferation of religious houses which are thought to provide solutions to the numerous problems confronting people, especially, Africans in general and Ghanaians in particular.

According to Wassermann and Parnell, there have been continual attempts to mitigate the impacts of noise since Roman times, and it is the assessment, understanding, communication and management of noise impacts that has provided the challenge for all involved in the process of reducing the impact of noise.⁵ Therefore, a better understanding of prevailing neighbourhood religious noise, the relationship between these noises and health, and the effectiveness of healthy environmental interventions are essential for formulating policies, plans and actions to improve the quality of human life which subsequently enhance the nation's health and general productivity.

There have been several news reports in the Ghanaian media on supposedly noisy churches and mosques. These reports go far to show that **noise, its** control and enforcement at various places of our national life have become a principal environmental concern, especially in urban settlements with high population growth. The researcher believes that a few commentaries have been written about the problem of religious noise in the press, and many commentators have also condemned the practice both on radio and television. Even though some of the measures taken by the authorities against the churches were necessary to serve as a deterrent to other churches which were doing the same, it is necessary to carefully study the liturgies of Christianity and Islam to identify the sources of religious noise and present effective measures to reduce the levels of noise during worship.

Kumasi Metropolis like any other cosmopolitan area in Ghana is prone to religious activities due to the multi-religious nature of the country. These religious activities mostly take the form of congregational worship in mosques, churches, and other nonconventional locations like classrooms, football fields as well as residential buildings in the daytime and sometimes throughout the night. The noise of significant levels is generated by these congregational centres aided by the use of heavy public address systems which projects the voices of the worshippers with deafening intensity. However, despite the thunderous nature of the noise and the adverse effect on human health, not much has been done to address this all-important issue. Hence this study has conducted an appraisal of the Religious Sound Space of Kumasi to ascertain the role religious people play in the generation of noise and its effect on the health of residents in the Kumasi Metropolis.

The Religio-Cultural Setting of Kumasi

Kumasi is located in the transitional forest zone and is about 270km north of the national capital Accra. It is between latitude 1.35-6.40 and longitude 1.30-1.35. The Kumasi metropolitan area has a surface area of 254sq km with a population density of 5,419 persons per sq km.⁶ Kumasi is the second largest city in Ghana. It is a metropolis and has all the characteristics of a modern metropolis. Kumasi has a large inland market and also has a vibrant wood and furniture-making industry (*Sokoban Wood Village*) and vehicle repairs and engineering workshops (popularly known as '*magazine*'). Kumasi has a heterogeneous population.⁷ According to Arhin and Afari-Gyan, the population growth rate of

⁴ Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Ghana, "Noise Pollution (Leaflet)"

⁵ John Wassermann and Jeffrey Parnell, "The Art of Noise Communication," Proceedings of ACOUSTICS, 24th-28th November, 2008, Geelong, Australia.

⁶ Ghana Statistical Service, "Population and Housing Census-National Analytical Report," May 2013, https://statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/fileUpload/pressrelease/2010_PHC_National_Analytical_Report.pdf.

⁷ N. Abayie Boateng and K. Arhin, *Research Review Supplement No. 5, Papers on The Symposium on The City of Kumasi, The Historical Back-Ground*, (University of Ghana, Legon: Institute of African Studies, 1993).

Kumasi has responded to the conditions of the times in that population growth is determined by the socio-economic factors that affect the populace.⁸

Religious composition of Kumasi

Due to its location and position, Kumasi is a focal point of migration in the country. All the major religious groupings in Ghana can be located in Kumasi. In other words, the migrants from other regions and the other parts of Africa and other non-African countries have brought their religious values which has made Kumasi ‘notoriously religious’.⁹ Thus, Kumasi in contemporary times is not solely influenced by Christian religious practices even though Christianity is the dominant religion in the metropolis. The proportions of the population in terms of religion are 78.8%, 16.0%, 0.3% and 0.7% for Christianity, Islam, Traditional and others respectively. Apart from these four groupings, there is another group that bears the tag of ‘no religion’ constituting some 4.2% but this could vary.¹⁰ Kumasi by its location and composition is deeply religious. Are these religious groups the cause of noise pollution or otherwise? This question is discussed subsequently.

Religious freedom and noise making in Ghana

There is a need for constitutional law experts to clarify unambiguously where the Ghanaian constitution stands on freedom of religion; whether an individual’s freedom to practice a religion of his or her choice overrides the freedoms of other citizens, or whether freedom of religion takes cognizance of other citizens’ freedoms? This clarification is needed urgently for two reasons. Firstly, leaders of some religious institutions behave as if freedom of religion is absolute and entitles them to disregard the freedoms of other citizens, an attitude which may have resulted from the way senior politicians have lately been pandering to imams, priests and pastors. Secondly, the recent proliferation of churches and mosques in suburbs in Kumasi has led to an increasing number of people living close to churches and mosques and these people are being subjected to unacceptable noise levels from churches and mosques.

Churches

One often reads about people regularly subjected to very loud prayer sessions late in the night and early mornings by Christian groups in complete disregard for the right of these people to a quiet night’s sleep. There was also the reported case of the Ashanti Regional Minister who had to call the police to intervene because a church service near his residence got very loud.¹¹ Instead of the pastor apologising, he threatened to instruct his followers not to support the minister’s political party in the next elections. This pastor obviously does not believe in the golden rule of “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Historically, when Christianity was first brought to the African soil, churches were located at strategic places, somehow far from human dwellings. It was so because absolute tranquillity within the church arena was needed for conducive worship and also to show reverence for God. Apart from that, it reminded people that the church is a holy place, sacred indeed that people assume God’s presence. As congregations got bigger there was the need for the use of loudspeakers in order to communicate effectively on the church premises. Therefore, the essence of the introduction of loudspeakers in churches was to enable the congregation to get the message clear from the preacher or anybody who speaks behind the microphone and not just for the fun of it or to make excessive noise.

⁸ Kingsley Arhin and K. Afari-Gyan, *The City of Kumasi (HandBook) Past, Present, and Future* (University of Ghana, Legon: Institute of African Studies, 1992), 23-26.

⁹ For the expression ‘notoriously religious’ refer to John S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

¹⁰ “About KMA,” 2020, Accessed on 9th May, 2019. <http://kma.gov.gh/kma/?about-us&page=5140>.

¹¹ Daily Graphic, “Ashanti Regional Minister Arrests Pastor over Noise Making,” November 26, 2017. Accessed May 10, 2020

In that case, it would be meaningless to use speakers when the congregation is minimal or where there is no difficulty speaking to a minimal congregation.

In the liturgy of every church, there is at least an aspect of noise. Therefore, noise is central to the Ghanaian Christian liturgical life. However, the challenges of noise come in the degree and emphasis the various strands place on the noise in their liturgies. It is clear from the situation in Ghana that there have been some forms of misunderstanding and misapplication of the invitation to “make a joyful noise unto God” coupled with some issues in the Ghanaian socio-cultural heritage.

Culturally, one may not be far from the truth to say that the tendency of the Ghanaian Christian to be inclined to noisy worship emanates from the fact that noise is primarily part of the Ghanaian and for that matter the African worship life. The phenomenon of religious noise was prevalent in the African society even before the advent of the various western religions. The combination of chanting and singing is still present among African traditional religious practitioners such that many sacred songs affiliated with rituals and rites of passage are accompanied by loud sounds. Through these songs, worshipers ask the deities to listen to their pleas for rain, crop growth, and other elements needed for survival. They combine singing and chanting with dancing in order to create a highly energetic offering to the spirits. As a result of this, most of the shrines, (like the Christian churches in the missionary periods) were located on the outskirts of the towns and villages. Drums were played loudly and the chief priest and others would dance all day. The playing of drums regularly in traditional religious worship has made the African develop an insatiable desire for music and dance. It appears this innate character has found its way into the Ghanaian Christian worship life.

The basic knowledge of sound technology indicates that the level of volume of a sound depends on the distance between the source and the audience. A closer look at the situation in the Kumasi Metropolis is different in this regard. Some of the churches are located in residential areas. Even the plots on which some of the churches are located were originally allocated for residential facilities but have now been converted into religious sites. Aside that, a walk through most principal streets in the major cities and towns in the country will be met with loud and blaring speakers of street evangelists some of whom use the name of God to disturb the peace of mind of commuters, traders and passers-by alike. While the writer does not seek to stop anyone from embarking on his or her ‘God-given assignment’, it is equally important to understand that there are laws on the land which govern such activities. Also, in biblical times, there was no amplification, so there was little or no possibility for their worship to become noisy. In other words, the loud noise in Bible times was not loud enough to cause harm to people. Today the possibility of being hurt by excessive volume in some of the churches in Kumasi is constant. The shout of about a thousand people in a sanctuary in the time of the Bible, which was in itself far from residential areas cannot be higher than a ten-man singing band in a noisy church using amplification and other sound equipment.

Supporting the forgone statement, it is established that there is no biblical basis for believing that noise making in worship is acceptable to God. The Bible indicates that singing in a worship setting should be emotional with joy and gladness. It is recorded that the Levites “sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshipped”(2 Chron 29:30). If Christians in Ghana should follow this biblical principle, then their liturgical practices in relation to worship should be joyful and enthusiastic rather than noisy.

In addition, the Bible specifically mentions that joyful noise should be directed to God. Its purpose is not personal gratification, but God’s glorification. Moses said to the people: “I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously” (Exo 15:1). David declared: “I will extol thee, O Lord, among the nations, and sing praises to thy name” (2 Sam 22:50). Similarly, Paul exhorts the believers to sing and make melody “unto the Lord with all your heart” (Eph 5:19). God and the praising of His people have so wrapped up together that God Himself is identified as “my song”: “The Lord is my strength and my song” (Exo. 15:2).

A further comment is that worship by Ghanaian Christians should not be limited to the church setting, but should extend to the totality of one’s existence. Christians who live in peace with God have a constant song in their hearts though, the singing may not always be vocalized. This is why the

Psalmist says: “I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live” (Ps 146:2; 104:33). Therefore, singing praises to God is an experience that begins in this life and continues in the world to come.

A question that runs through one’s mind at this point is that; even, if this loud sound of speakers and prayers at night are the only ways God could hear prayers, is it also the only way to get new converts? Is there any difference between this noisy style of worship and that of the outward religious life of the Pharisees in the Bible? It may be wrong for someone to think that when he or she forces his next door neighbour to keep awake all night against his wish all in the name of worshipping, God would be pleased. We should not misconstrue God when He said; “go to the world and preach the word” He did not say that “go and disturb the peace of other people”.

Mosques

In the case of the Mosques, there are loud calls to prayer by Imams at different times of the day; 4:00 am, 12:00 pm and 6:00 pm which makes sound sleep impossible for non-Muslims, especially the call at 4 am. Shift workers i.e. nurses, the police and factory workers through no fault of their own have to work during ‘non-regular’ hours and then sleep at ‘non-regular’ hours. Who knows what impact depriving them of sound sleep has on their productivity and health? Even non-shift workers have a right to peaceful sleep uninterrupted by the religious activities of other citizens. In effect, the legal clarification is to remind religious institutions of their responsibilities under freedom of religion and empower victims of unbearable religious noise to take a stand and complain to the authorities. To be fair, not all imams turn the megaphones on very loudly and not all Christian institutions sing or pray loud late at night and early morning.

Given this atmosphere, Ghanaians were excited when the Minister of Environment, Science and Technology was reported to have raised the issue of noise making from religious institutions and asked whether calls to prayer could not be made via WhatsApp. Some Muslims immediately took umbrage at what the minister said and branded it barbaric with some arguing that the call to prayer was an injunction from the Qur’an.¹² Are they thus implying therefore that non-Muslims just have to put up with the ‘irritating’ calls to prayer or that no way should be sought to balance these calls to prayer in respecting the right to peace and quiet for others? Fortunately, not all Muslims were hostile in their responses. An Imam was reported to have welcomed the idea of the use of WhatsApp but for the fact that he was not paid as an Imam and could not afford the data cost, he was not really inclined to the idea. Another Muslim Haj. Mohammed Lamin Abdul Hamid, in a thoughtful article, lamented how some Muslims turn the volume of the megaphones so loud and ignore the disturbance to non-Muslim neighbours.¹³

The Impact of Religious Noise on the residents of Kumasi

The global society today is undergoing a significant constant proliferation of religious houses which are thought to provide solutions to the numerous problems confronting people, especially, the black race and Ghana in particular. As indicated earlier, this proliferation of religious houses is borne out of the understanding that in Ghana, there is freedom of religious worship but central to this should be the question of the environmental effects of the excessive noise created by these gatherings on the people in the society. All these are not without the attendant emotional and psychological effects on individuals and society at large. Religious houses are springing up at an alarming rate in all available spaces, shops and uncompleted buildings. Worship centers can also be found in warehouses, hotels, abandoned cinema buildings, studios and other public places.

¹² Isaac Kaledzi, “Ghana Wants Mosques to Use WhatsApp to Call for Prayer – DW – 04/14/2018,” April 14, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/ghana-asks-mosques-to-turn-down-the-noise-and-use-whatsapp-for-call-to-prayer/a-43373007>.

¹³ Ghanaian Times, “Religious Noise - Living in the Shadow of Mosques and Churches,” June 14, 2018.

According to Mohammad, Saidatul and Tamjis, noise activates the pituitary adrenal-cortical axis and the sympathetic-adrenal-medullary axis.¹⁴ Researchers frequently found changes in stress hormones including epinephrine, norepinephrine and cortisol in acute and chronic noise experiments. Noise disturbs sleep and when sleep is disturbed, it affects mental functioning and judgment. Even students living in such environments will lose concentration while reading at night and that alone is capable of reducing their productivity. Noise does affect human behaviour and physiological measurements such as blood pressure, heart rate and blood flow.¹⁵ The population which is exposed to a nocturnal equivalent continuous air traffic noise level of 50 dB for three-quarters of a given time has a higher average blood pressure compared to a population exposed to the same equal energy noise level for only one-quarter of the time.¹⁶

According to Adesanya, experts in medical science contend that chronic noise exposure may cause noise-induced hearing loss and it could also lead to stress-induced ailments like hypertension, diabetes and psychiatric problems. Hence, the normal noise level in any circumstances should not go beyond 60 decibels, anything beyond it is a threat to one's hearing capacity.¹⁷

Babisch stated that when sleep disruption becomes chronic, the results are mood changes, slowness in task performance, and other long-term effects on health and well-being.¹⁸ Noise exposure during sleep may increase blood pressure, heart rate and finger pulse amplitude as well as uncontrollable body movements. There may also be after effects during the day following a night of disturbed sleep. A person's mood and performance in terms of reaction time are all decreased following a night of disturbed sleep.¹⁹ Stephen and Mark further noted that noise pollution may cause or contribute to, anxiety, stress, nervousness, nausea, headache, emotional instability, argumentativeness, sexual impotence, changes in mood, increase in social conflicts, neurosis, hysteria, and psychosis. Noise is a potential hazard to health, communication and enjoyment of social life. Depending on its duration and volume, the effects of noise on human health and comfort are divided into four categories; physical effects, such as hearing defects; physiological effects, such as increased blood pressure, irregularity of heart rhythms and ulcers; psychological effects, such as disorders, sleeplessness and going to sleep late, irritability and stress; and finally effects on work performance, such as reduction of productivity and misunderstanding what is heard. In comparison to other pollutants, the control of environmental noise has been hampered by insufficient knowledge of its effects on humans and a lack of defined criteria.²⁰

The problem of noise pollution is widespread with several studies reporting that noise level in metropolitan cities exceeds specified standard limits. The living environment plays a vital role in determining health. A better understanding of prevailing neighborhood environmental stressors, the relationship between these stressors and health and the effectiveness of healthy environmental interventions are essential to formulating policies, plans and actions. This is to improve the quality of neighborhood environments which subsequently enhances the nation's health and general productivity. Individuals living in poor neighborhood environments tend to have higher morbidity and mortality compared to those living in environmentally sound neighborhoods.

¹⁴ N F Mohamad, A Saidatul, and M R Tamjis, "A Study of Noise Effect on the Fast Brain Activity," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Man-Machine Systems (ICoMMS)*, 2009, 1–3.

¹⁵ James M. Fields, "Effect of Personal and Situational Variables on Noise Annoyance in Residential Areas," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 93, no. 5 (May 1993): 2753–63, <https://doi.org/10.1121/1.405851>.

¹⁶ Mohamad, Saidatul, and Tamjis, "A Study of Noise Effect on the Fast Brain Activity."

¹⁷ Ibiyinka Olusola Adesanya, "Environmental Effects of Church Proliferation: The Redeemed Christian Church of God as a Case Study," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1, no. 15 (2011): 177–82.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Babisch, "The Noise/Stress Concept, Risk Assessment and Research Needs," *Noise and Health* 4, no. 16 (2002): 1.

¹⁹ Stephen A Stansfeld and Mark P Matheson, "Noise Pollution: Non-Auditory Effects on Health," *British Medical Bulletin* 68, no. 1 (December 1, 2003): 243–57, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/ldg033>.

²⁰ Oyedepo S Olayinka, "Effective Noise Control Measures and Sustainable Development in Nigeria," 2013.

SUMMARY

Noise, whether caused by religious or non-religious activities, is an unwanted sound. It is a nuisance. Noisy liturgies exist in the Kumasi Metropolis mainly on daily bases, especially in the evenings. The noisy religious space in Kumasi and the rest of the country may be attributed to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Christians and Muslims of Biblical and Qur'anic texts and the apparent failure of some of the religious leaders and the city authorities to deal with the situation. Considering that many churches and mosques these days are located in residential areas, it is expected of them to organize their religious services at comfortable sound levels. Some religious groups have made efforts to reduce their level of noise. Other groups can also do the same. Noise in general, and religious noise in particular in Kumasi, is irritating and undesirable; it affects people's health and does not promote a productive environment. Acceptable and pleasing sacrifice for the Lord is not in noisy liturgy or how loud one can be but in one's relationship and intimacy with God. Too much shouting during worship service does not necessarily bring down the presence of God. Since Ghana is a religiously pluralistic country, it is possible and probably reasonable for the Christian and Muslim communities to organize their activities with "minimum noise", so that they do not give cause for others to complain. Perhaps, God may be the one complaining, when people are complaining about the religious noise or noise being made by religious people (Amos 5: 23-24).

RECOMMENDATION

No religion in Ghana and for that matter, in the Kumasi metropolis is impervious to modernity. Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists all make use of modern gadgets to advance their faith. These religions are beneficiaries of modern technology. During the time of Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, there were no loud speakers or modern amplifiers. It is, therefore, obvious that the Muezzin was involved in Adhan, using his natural voice or any other means of reaching people for prayer. Today, both Muslims and Christians use loudspeakers to propagate their faith. They also use social media, alongside traditional media, to evangelise and educate the public about their faith. Some practices of the Church such as drumming and dancing during night vigils have no biblical basis. They are construction that can be reconstructed to cohere with modern practices.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the sources and effects of religious noise among the two major religions in the Kumasi Metropolis (Christianity and Islam). From the discussion, the rejection or acceptance of either Christianity or Islam depends greatly on how the message is packaged. Christian and Islamic worship or liturgy should be attractive and must contribute to the promotion of a healthy environment for society.

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