Accra’s Sounds and Sacred Spaces

MARLEEN DE WITTE

Abstract
This article explores the sonic sacralization of urban space in the multicultural city of Accra. In Ghanaian cities today religious groups increasingly vie for public presence. It is especially the religious manifestation in the urban soundscape, most forcefully by charismatic-Pentecostal churches and preachers, that has of late generated controversy. While charismatic-Pentecostal ‘noisemaking’ leads to conflicts all year round, it is especially during the annual traditional ‘ban on drumming and noisemaking’ that the religious confrontation over sound and silence in the city comes to full and violent expression. Approaching the articulation between religiosity and urban space through the aural, this article examines how religious sound practices create, occupy and compete for urban space. Comparing the nexus of religion, urban space and aurality in charismatic Pentecostalism and Ga traditional religion, it seeks to establish two points. First, that behind the apparent opposition between Pentecostalism and traditional religion is a difference in religious spatiality, but a remarkable similarity in the place of sound in relation to the spiritual. Second, it argues that the religious clash over sonic sacralization of urban space should not only be understood as a competition for symbolic control of spaces, but also as a spiritual struggle over the invisible, but all the more affective powers felt to be present in the city.

Introduction
From 1998 to 2002 Ga traditionalists and born-again Christians in Accra clashed every May over the traditional ‘ban on drumming and noisemaking’. During this 30-day period of silence preceding the Ga Homowo festival, the traditional authorities in Accra do not allow drumming, handclapping and other forms of ‘noisemaking’. This silence is meant to give the local deities the peace to look after the growth of the ritually sown corn before it is harvested and prepared into a ceremonial dish (kpokpo) to ‘hoot at hunger’ (as homowo translates) during the harvest festival. Before 1998 the ban hardly caused any problems. Since then, several charismatic-Pentecostal churches have refused to respect the ban, leading to violent clashes. The churches claimed their right to freedom of worship and the right of Christians not to be involved in ‘animistic’ rituals. Traditionalist groups, such as the Afrikania Mission, the Ga Traditional Council and Ga high priests (wulomei), in turn, opposed the ‘noisemaking’ that accompanies charismatic worship and required respect for the ‘local cultural heritage’. Churches were raided, worshippers wounded and instruments seized, until in 2002 a Task Force on Nuisance Control was installed to resolve the matter. In the public debate over this conflict various charismatic
churches, Christian umbrella organizations, wulomei, the Ga Traditional Council, the Afrikania Mission, local government authorities, the national government and the media struggled over sound, religiosity and urban space.

This article explores the sonic sacralization of urban space in the multicultural city of Accra. In Ghanaian cities today religious groups increasingly vie for public presence. They do so with impressive buildings and mass gatherings, visual markers such as huge billboards, banners and posters (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005b), technologically amplified sounds of music, preaching and prayer, and audio-visual representation in the mass media (De Witte, 2003; 2005a). It is especially the religious manifestation in the urban soundscape, most forcefully by charismatic-Pentecostal churches and preachers, that has of late generated controversy. Because of their loud and boisterous modes of worship, their use of powerful public address systems to extend the sonic boundaries of their meetings far beyond the confines of their churches into residential neighborhoods, and their appropriation of radio to establish a strong sonic presence in the city’s public sphere, charismatic-Pentecostal groups are often accused of public ‘noisemaking’. Above all their ‘all-night prayer meetings’ are a nuisance to surrounding residents who are deprived of their sleep by the voices speaking in tongues, frantic preaching and praise music that loudspeaker systems bring right into their bedrooms. While this leads to conflicts all year round, it is especially during the annual ‘ban on drumming and noisemaking’ that the religious confrontation over sound and silence in the city comes to full and violent expression.

Approaching the articulation between religiosity and urban space through the aural, this article examines how religious sound practices create, occupy and compete for urban space. Comparing the nexus of religion, urban space and aurality in charismatic Pentecostalism and Ga traditional religion, it seeks to establish two points. First, that behind the apparent opposition between Pentecostalism and traditional religion is a difference in religious spatiality, but a remarkable similarity in the place of sound in relation to the spiritual. Second, it argues that the religious clash over sonic sacralization of urban space should not only be understood as a competition for symbolic control of spaces (Corbin, 1998; Hervieu-Léger, 2002), but also as a spiritual struggle over the invisible, but all the more affective powers felt to be present in the city.

Urban space, religion, sound

This article joins a growing literature on urban religion that criticizes the assumption of the city as the space of the secular par excellence and explores the place of religion in the modern city not as a residual category, but as part and parcel of the formation of modern urban culture (Steinhoff, 2004). One way in which urban anthropologists, historians and religion scholars have theorized the intersection of religiosity and urban space is through a focus on religious practices of sacralization of the city or city spaces. Sacred space is inevitably contested space (Chidester and Linenthal, 1995), as sacredness of specific spaces and places is claimed by some and disputed by others, and boundaries of sacred spaces are pushed back and forth, made permeable and sealed off. This is especially so in multi-religious cities like Accra. The spatial politics of charismatic Pentecostalism in particular is informed by a constant need to reassert and expand occupation of spaces, as its relation to territorial space is essentially unstable (Hervieu-Léger, 2002; Mary, 2002).


2 For studies of sacred Hindu cities, see for example, Levy (1990), Parish (1994); for Islamic cities, see Abu-Lughod (1987), Reeves (1995), Ross (2005); for a collection of essays on religion in the American urban landscape, see Orsi (1999).
African traditional religions are usually studied in rural contexts and, if in relation to space, to rural landscape (Greene, 2002; Lovell, 2002). In the urban context, traditional religious territorialized spatiality is challenged by ethnic and religious plurality, migration and globalization (Dianteill, 2002) and, as I will show, is given new forms and interpretations by neo-traditionalist movements.

Another approach to religiosity in urban space has been to investigate how religious imaginaries inform people’s conceptions and experiences of the city. Critical of discussions of urban space in African cities that focus mainly on built form and material infrastructure (e.g. Mills-Tettey and Adi-Dako, 2002 on Accra), I borrow De Boeck and Plissart’s concept of the ‘invisible city’ (2004) to take into account the widespread belief that there is more to the city’s spaces than meets the eye. Religious spatial strategies are informed by this invisible city of spirit forces as much as by the more visible, more physical city.

Between the visible and the invisible city is the audible city. Sound is central to the lived experience of urban space and crucial to the negotiation of space, as ‘aural space is both tactile and ephemeral’ (Arkette, 2004: 167). Sound waves easily transgress spatial boundaries and mediate between public and private, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility. At the same time, they can have a profound physical impact, especially so in cities, which are generally noisy places. Recently, historians and social scientists have turned their attention to the ways in which ‘soundscapes’ (Schafer, 1994) generate shared senses of space and acoustic communities (Garrioch, 2003), structure identities and power relationships (Corbin, 1998; Arkette, 2004) and are transformed by negotiation between different groups (Van Dijk, 2001; Bröer, 2007) and by developments in audio technology (Hughes, 2002). Sound, particularly in the urban environment of plurality and proximity, is never an objective or neutral phenomenon, as is demonstrated by the many disputes over ‘noise’ (Baily, 1996; Van Dijk, 2001; 2005; Bröer, 2007). Most sound studies analyze sound as a symbol, an ‘acoustic signal’, an ‘identity marker’ and the auditory environment as ‘a semiotic system’ (Garrioch, 2003: 6). Although an analysis of the ‘meaning’ of urban sound is important to move away from a taken-for-granted notion of sound as decibels, it risks ignoring the tactile dimension at stake in sound politics. As Martijn Oosterbaan (2006: 87) has argued for Brazilian Pentecostalism, ‘sound can touch us and evoke a sense of social boundaries that are not merely symbolic but also physical’ and hence ‘sound not only reflects (symbolizes) power, it also constitutes power’ (ibid.: 105). This is crucial in the context of African religiosity as well.

Informed by a symbolic approach to religion, anthropologists have tended to analyze religious sounds such as ritual speech, song, incantations and magical spells, in terms of their symbolic meanings in cultural and religious life, but rarely in terms of the importance of the sound itself (Stoller, 1989). Recently, scholars of religion in Africa have proposed that African religions, including both African Christianity and traditional religions, should be understood not as ‘systems of symbols’, but as ‘systems of powers’ (Meyer, 1999; Ellis and ter Haar, 2004; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005a) and living religiously as ‘being in touch with the source and channels of power in the universe’ (Bediako, 1995: 106). I argue that this ‘being in touch’ is not to be understood metaphorically, but points to the centrality of the body and tactility in African religiosity and also implies being out of touch with the wrong powers or at the wrong time. Spiritual touch or embodiment may be mediated by physical touch, but also by sounds or images. The power of seeing and vision in this respect has been well theorized, especially in relation to Pentecostalism (e.g. Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005c; De Witte, 2005a; Gordon and Hancock, 2005; Meyer, 2005), but the importance of sound has been largely ignored (but see Hirschkind, 2001; Van Dijk, 2005; Oosterbaan, 2006). As sound penetrates us, fusing the material and the nonmaterial, the tangible and the intangible (Zuckerkandl, 1956), religious sound is a powerful medium for connecting to and accessing the effective power of spirits. This article analyzes religious groups’ spatial practices of sound and silence as ways to invoke and be in or out of touch with the invisible forces present in the material spaces of Accra.
Accra’s soundscape

Every morning the city of Accra awakens to the sounds of twittering birds, the rhythmic shww shww of brooms sweeping concrete compounds, and the singing and praying voices of devout Christians, escaping private rooms through the open louver windows. Not much later the city comes to full life and the cacophonic sounds of busy traffic and public transport surround the early morning pedestrian around the city’s bustling transport and commercial hubs. With their ’Sèk sèk sèk’ trotro mates try to get passengers for Circle; ‘Kanesh kanesh’ yell others, heading for Kaneshie Market; or ‘Kra kra kra’, those going to Central Accra. Mates’ hands beat on iron body work as passengers respond by calling or signing their destination, drivers break, ramshackle doors sling open, bang shut again, engines accelerate. With short, repeated horn blows taxi drivers seek passengers to fill up the seats; with long blows they push themselves through the congested traffic. People looking for a shared ride call their destination to the driver as he passes, those wanting to hire a ‘dropping’ hiss sharply.

With bells and yells street vendors and peddlers try to sell their wares on pavements, along main roads, and around trotro stations and taxi ranks — pens and panties, batteries, bibles and meat pies; thinly peeled juicy oranges, ready to squeeze into one’s mouth, ‘aarange, aarange’ or ‘ankaaaa’. There is a high-pitched ‘iiiiiiiiice wata’ of a young girl selling cooled water in plastic bags; the sonorous ‘graphic, graphic’ of a boy vending newspapers by the car windows. Shoe shine boys tap their wooden tool boxes and tailors snip their scissors to attract customers to their trade. Markets are cacophonies of female voices puffing wares, bargaining prices and making way through the crowds.

Radio and music cassettes blast from taxis and trotros, pavement kiosks and open-air drinking spots — preaching, music, news, jingles; ‘Radio Gold, your power station’. Radio is everywhere and the sounds of the numerous stations competing for sonic presence merge into each other in the streets. We hear music, singing, laughter, wailing, chattering and preaching from public gatherings, funerals, parties and church services. Talking or quarrelling voices escape from private houses. Architecture has a great impact on the soundscape. Because of the hot climate, many built spaces in Accra are open spaces; only air-conditioned buildings and rooms have closed windows. Most buildings, houses and churches have open louver windows. Moreover, many gatherings take place on open courtyards or outside compounds. Sound thus easily transgresses the boundaries between public and private spaces. Private sound easily becomes public and public sound permeates into spaces as private as one’s bed.

In the evenings the pounding of fufu signals mealtime in Asante homes, clearly distinguishable from the pounding of corn or millet. At night religious all-night prayers and night vigils, nightclubs, drinking spots, private parties and funerary wake-keepings combine to disturb Accra residents’ sleep. Whereas in early modern European towns the most common legislation on noise was to ban excessive noise during church services and holy days (Garrioch, 2003: 22), in contemporary Accra it is church services that are regarded as the prime sources of noise. In the city’s dense soundscape, with various kinds of loud sounds originating from multiple sources, charismatic-Pentecostal churches are singled out and condemned for ‘excessive noisemaking’. Clearly, noise is not simply a matter of decibels.

The charismatic ‘colonization’ of public space

From the late 1970s a new kind of Pentecostal Christian church sprung up in the Accra landscape. These young, but fast-growing charismatic-Pentecostal churches, such as the International Central Gospel Church and the Word Miracle Church International, attract...
the upwardly mobile, aspiring young urban dwellers with a combined emphasis on success and prosperity and on the personal experience of the Holy Spirit. Unlike former mission churches and earlier African independent churches (‘spiritual churches’), these newer churches explicitly condemn traditional religious practices as Devil worship and require their members to refrain from participation in traditional festivals such as Homowo because of their demonic implications. These churches have entered the Ghanaian scene with an overt strategy of public presence and are highly visible and, above all, highly audible in the city’s public space.

A cynical observer might remark that most building taking place in Accra is church building. Indeed, anywhere in the city new churches mushroom, outdoing one another in size and prestige. Driven by the desire to mark their success with a huge building and financially supported by their growing congregations, many independent churches succeed in buying a piece of land and putting up a large structure. Smaller churches that cannot afford this use old cinema halls, warehouses, classrooms or private homes to come together for worship. The location of new churches and meeting places has attracted public controversy, especially the conversion of residential accommodation into churches and the construction of churches at sites earmarked for residential facilities only. The sound emanating from church buildings and meeting grounds is perceived by some as ‘excessive noise’ and ‘a nuisance and a great worry’ for surrounding residents, especially so at night.4 Charismatic groups also organize mass gatherings at public open-air places. In August 2001, for example, a 3-day miracle crusade with the Korean evangelist Dr Yonggi Cho took place at Independence Square in Central Accra, which attracted tens of thousands of worshippers and live radio coverage by JoyFM. Critics condemned this ‘charismatic colonization of the nation’.

Charismatics’ predilection for marketing churches and pastors accounts for their marked visual presence in Accra’s imagescape (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005b). Along the city’s main roads one encounters huge billboards depicting the portraits of ‘powerful men of God’ and bus shelter adverts with church slogans, pastors’ ‘power quotes’, and religious broadcast frequencies (Figure 1). Banners and posters decorate many of Accra’s public walls and bridges and call people to Christian crusades, conferences or

concerts. Perhaps most spectacular is churches’ appropriation of modern media technologies, especially television and radio. Since the deregulation of the Ghanaian media in 1992 when the broadcasting scene was privately owned, commercial FM and TV stations have mushroomed, claiming Accra’s soundscape from the state-owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. Religion is strikingly abundant in the new public sphere as churches have jumped into the new media spaces to exploit their religious, commercial and political possibilities to the fullest. Although legally churches may not own broadcast stations, the new media freedom does enable prosperous charismatic and Pentecostal religious leaders to buy airtime. Televised church services, commercials for healing crusades and prayer summits, radio sermons and phone-in talk shows, Pentecostally oriented video movies, audio taped sermons, and popular gospel music inundate public and private space, serving a ready market of enthusiastic young Christians. Tuning the radio or zapping through the TV channels one encounters energetic, charismatic pastors, who, like professional media entertainers, preach their convictions and communicate their spiritual powers and miracles through the airwaves.

Accra’s cityscape, imagescape and soundscape have thus become sites of religiosity. Charismatic Christianity has obviously established the strongest public presence, but certainly not the only one. The chapels of the former mission churches still occupy prominent places, signaled by far-sounding bells that call people to mass. Numerous mosques throughout the city emit the call for prayer from their minarets five times a day. But their presence is hardly as assertive as the charismatic presence. African traditional religion is almost absent from urban public space. There are shrines, but their location is hardly marked, if at all. The most visible and audible presence of African traditional religion in the city is established by the Afrikania Mission, a neo-traditionalist organization aiming at modernizing and promoting traditional religion in the national public sphere (De Witte, 2004). Confronted with the public hegemony of Christianity and especially Pentecostalism, Afrikania seeks to present African traditional religion as an ‘authentically African’ counterforce to this militant and exclusionary type of Christianity. Despite its self-conscious non-Christian orientation, Afrikania has adopted Christian-like modes of public representation. Visible from far away, its recently completed, bright yellow four-storey building with ‘Afrikania Mission’ written on top of it in bold capitals is a clear instance of claiming public presence in the cityscape, a sign of being established as a ‘true religion’ rather than a ‘fetish cult’. With its Sunday worship service with lots of traditional drumming, passionate preaching and shouting of Afrikania slogans, Afrikania competes with Christian churches in providing Sunday entertainment and conforms to the dominant image of being religious in present-day Ghana: dressing up and going to church on Sundays to sing and dance together and listen to preaching, usually visible and especially audible for the whole neighborhood. The loudspeaker system it employs serves not so much for reaching the handful of people that attend a service, but for establishing a sonic presence in Sunday’s battlefield of religious sound. Likewise, its radio broadcasts, its use of loudspeaker vans for ‘evangelization’, and the 2-day mass convention of traditional religion it held at Independence Square in 2000 cannot be understood without reference to Christian modes of occupying public space.

The growing physical and acoustic presence of religious groups in Accra’s public space, notably since the second half of the 1990s, has heightened inter-religious tensions, particularly between Pentecostals and traditionalists. Accra is a ‘contested city’, where ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ are negotiated on the airwaves and in physical public space. Religion, and especially the religious soundscape, has become a site of public clash.

Clashes over the ban on drumming

While the Ga ban on drumming is centuries old, as is the presence of Christianity and its sounds in Accra, it was not until 1998 that the practice developed into a major struggle over sound and public space (Van Dijk, 2001). In May that year a group of about 50 Ga
youth and traditional rulers attacked the Lighthouse Chapel International, a charismatic church in Korle-Bu, an old Ga neighborhood in Central Accra (Figure 2). Following this violent physical clash, police investigations, claims and counter accusations by both parties, and a myriad of views on the matter inundated the media. Contributions of listeners to radio phone-in programs led the Minister of Communications, John Mahama, to ‘extreme circumspection’ in order to prevent ‘unguarded utterances that are currently whipping up ethnic sentiments around the issue’. Still, ethnic and religious tensions mounted and the conflict seemed almost irresolvable as both charismatic-Pentecostals and traditionalists called on the constitution, the former to defend their freedom of worship and the latter to demand respect for cultural heritage.5

In 1999 the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) determined that ‘while the ban on drumming is constitutionally protected, it does not extend to other groups, nor does it overrule the right of people practicing different religions to exercise their own freedom of worship’.6 This declared the general enforcement of the ban unconstitutional, but did not solve the conflict; rather, it worsened the situation. In May that year ‘busloads of angry traditionalists armed with clubs and dangerous weapons’ stormed Pentecostal and charismatic churches in various parts of Accra, seizing or destroying musical instruments and sound equipment.7 In April 2000, religious and traditional leaders agreed to modify the ban, requiring drumming to be subdued and confined to the churches, the latter being an unrealistic requirement considering church architecture. Despite the agreement, youth in Teshie (Greater Accra Region) attacked the Open Heaven Mission International Church, seized drums and injured six worshippers. The following year, on 7 May 2001, the first day of the ban, the

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5 Chapter 5, article 21 (1) (c) of the constitution guarantees everyone the right of ‘freedom to practise any religion and to manifest such practice’. Article 26 (1) entitles every person to ‘enjoy, practise, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion subject to the provisions of this Constitution’.


7 Churches attacked in May 1999 included the Church of Pentecost (Dansoman), the Assemblies of God (James Town), Word Harvest Church (Kwashieman), Victory Bible Church International (Awoshie).
Ga Traditional Council announced that the agreement it had reached with local churches in 2000 was not applicable for 2001 and that the ban would again apply to all drumming and noisemaking. Churches refused to comply and on 13 May a Ga youth mob attacked the Christ Apostolic Church in Osu, Accra, destroying the sound system and other property and injuring several worshippers. A week after, five other churches were attacked.

The new NPP government led by president Kufour, who had come to power in January 2001, realized that the conflict had escalated and started new negotiations with the Ga Mantse (‘chief’), Nii Adote Obour II. A committee on the ban on drumming and noisemaking (officially known as the Greater Accra Permanent Conflict Resolution and Management Committee) was set up to mediate between Christian bodies and traditionalist groups and to prepare policy guidelines on the ban. Meanwhile, in the month preceding the 2002 ban on drumming, a Ga youth group was mobilizing forces to ‘enforce the ban and meet any opposition with war’. They blamed the violation of the ban by especially charismatic and Pentecostal churches for ‘mysterious disasters’ that had befallen the Ga Dangme state in recent years, among others the 9 May 2001 stadium disaster that claimed the lives of over 100 people, the death of a wulomo who could not perform his traditional rites 2 years before, and the floods that hit Accra and its surroundings 3 years before. They also claimed that the location of the Christ Apostolic Church in Osu was supposed to serve as a cemetery for local chiefs and wulomei, and that the land had been sold to the church illegally. To prevent violence that year, the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) set up a Task Force on Nuisance Control that was to enforce a 1995 local bye-law abating ‘excessive noise’ in the city throughout the year. The Task Force was made up of people from the AMA, the police, and Environmental Protection Agency; no traditionalists or representatives of the traditional council were included. Equipped with decibel measuring instruments, they went around the city to check sound levels, especially in churches, night clubs and drinking spots. Sixty people were arrested during the 2002 ban on drumming for ‘excessive noisemaking’, including representatives of several churches and bar operators. It was emphasized, however, that the enforcement of the law would continue after the ban on drumming. No violent clashes were reported that year, or in the following years, but the situation remains tense. Apparently, the turn to an environmentalist discourse of ‘noise pollution’ and noise as a ‘health hazard’ provided a way out of the impasse between one party claiming freedom of worship and the other party claiming the right to protection of cultural heritage, and both legitimizing their claims with the constitution.

While the conflict between charismatic Pentecostal churches and Ga traditional authorities is mostly seen as a conflict over religion, it has various layers that indicate that in Ghana religion and politics can hardly be separated. It is also a conflict over different understandings of citizenship and territory between ‘native’ Ga people and ‘strangers’, mostly Akan (and born again), which have ‘invaded’ the city of Accra, the national capital, yet are situated in traditional Ga country. Central Accra, or ‘Old Accra’, and especially the Ga Mashie area (Bremer, 2002), including Jamestown and Ussher Town, is where urban settlement started in Accra in the early seventeenth century, when Ga people who had migrated from what is now Nigeria settled near the Portuguese trading forts (now James Fort and Ussher Fort). Situated at the heart of the city by the sea, it is considered an indigenous Ga settlement of great cultural, religious and spiritual significance for the Ga people. At the same time, it is one of the most deprived

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8 The Accra Metropolitan Bye-law on Abatement of Nuisance permits a noise level in residential areas of 55 dB between 6 am and 10 pm and 48 dB between 10 pm and 6 am. In areas with some commercial or light industry, the levels are 60 and 55 dB in the day and night, respectively. In places of entertainment or public assembly and places of worship located in this zone, levels are 65 dB in the day and 60 dB at night.

9 In 1877 the British moved their capital from Cape Coast to Accra, which has hence been the center of administrative function for well over a hundred years.
neighborhoods of Accra. For centuries, Ga Mashie was the prosperous center of commercial and urban life in Accra, located at the harbor, a railway track and close to the trading forts. The closure of the Accra port and the relocation of port and harbor activities to Tema have seriously deteriorated living conditions in Ga Mashie. Poverty, overcrowding and unemployment have made the area a ‘shanty town’ at the heart of a modern capital city.

In the ban on drumming conflict, born-again Christians make claim to universal rights, guaranteed in the constitution, on the basis of their national citizenship. For many ‘immigrants’ in Accra, most of whom are Christian and Akan, the city is first of all the national capital and they see themselves more as national citizens than as strangers in Ga country. The self-conscious born-agains among them see no reason to respect a law associated with a religion they do not wish to associate with and claim their constitutional right to worship as they wish. Ga traditionalists, however, claim religious obligations that come with local citizenship and their spiritual ties to Ga land. They feel that their land is invaded by strangers who not only loudly profess an exclusivist religion, but have also numerically, linguistically and economically become far stronger than the Ga people, a minority on their own land. What feeds this frustration is the expropriation of Ga lands by the Ghanaian state and the misuse of such lands for private purposes, including church building. The wulomei see charismatic-Pentecostal churches making money on their lands while their own people live in poverty. By once a year exerting their authority over the ‘strangers of the land’, an authority normally exerted by the state, the wulomei have been able to mobilize large groups of poor, frustrated Ga youth, who violently enforce traditional law. Their assertiveness in the name of the spiritual obligations of local citizenship is also a way of claiming supremacy over these ‘strangers’ who do not respect the Ga people and their customs. As Garrioch (2003: 18) has argued for the early modern European absolutist state, ‘the power to change the rhythms of urban life, to control sound’ is a ‘formidable symbolic tool’ in the construction of authority for Ga traditional authorities as well. In this case, the ability to command silence, as a mark of respect, asserts the chiefs’ and wulomei’s authority over Ga territory. Other groups of people in the capital, however, challenge this ability and use noise not only to protest against traditional laws, but also to assert rights as national citizens.

The state takes up an ambiguous position in the debate, mediating between the ‘universal’ liberal democratic ideals of a modern nation-state, its cultural policy of preserving local cultural heritage, and its dependence on the popular and powerful Pentecostal and charismatic churches. The state’s policy on culture seeks to promote local traditions and festivals as part of the nation’s diverse and rich cultural heritage and to boost the nascent tourist industry. At the same time, democratization processes have made the government dependent on powerful groups in society, especially charismatic-Pentecostal churches and their mass followings. Charismatics’ condemnation of traditional religious practices makes them highly critical of the state’s cultural policy (Van Dijk, 2005). The tension between freedom of worship, respect for tradition and electoral support thus made the Rawlings government in particular very cautious about interfering in the conflict. By turning to the Accra Metropolitan Bye-law on Abatement of Nuisance, the subsequent Kufuor government pulled the matter out of the sphere of tradition and religion and seemed able to reclaim its monopoly on law enforcement.

Clearly, the conflict over noise and religion was part of the power struggles in the national capital, where various groups of people claim authority over urban space on different political, historical or religious grounds. To understand the power struggle between charismatics and traditionalists we have to recognize that in the African religious context power always has a supernatural component (Ellis and ter Haar, 2004). We need to analyze sonic and spatial practices not only as symbolic tools for establishing or disputing this worldly authority, but also in relation to beliefs about spiritual power.
Sound, space, and spirit power in Ghanaian Pentecostalism

Contrary to the Catholic tradition, charismatic churches advocate a direct, personal relationship with Jesus Christ and an immediate access to the power of the Holy Spirit; that is, unmediated by ordained priests and sacralized church buildings. Since charismatics see the Spirit of God at work beyond material space, any space can be turned into a worship space. It is not attributes, icons or incense that make a space sacred, but the congregation of believers in the name of Christ. Charismatic groups all over the world thus use classrooms, private homes, theatre halls, stadiums and open spaces to come together, worship and be touched by the Holy Spirit. Still, having their own consecrated building is important for charismatics, not only for the practical reason of not having to rent somebody else’s place, but also as a symbol of success and as a sign of God’s blessing on the church. The choice of and claims to a particular building are often motivated by the Holy Spirit, via prophecies or visions. When the International Central Gospel Church started building its Christ Temple at Abossey-Okay, a struggle ensued over the land it had bought. A government minister also claimed the land and disputed the church’s building permit. However, members told me: ‘During a revival held at this place in 1985, Reinhard Bonnke prophesied that one day there will rise a very big church at this very spot. So God had already ordained it!’ For charismatics the authority of such ‘divine building permits’ or land entitlements issued by the Holy Spirit outweighs any human permit or prohibition.

The architecture and sound equipment of charismatic church buildings underscore the performative and entertainment aspects of the services. Like many charismatic Pentecostal church buildings around the globe, the Christ Temple gives the impression of a theater or concert hall (Kilde, 2002). Although the designation ‘auditorium’ for the main church hall emphasizes its function as a space for hearing (the Word of God), it is designed in such a way that from every seat one can not only hear, but also see the person on stage. Outside the building, extra seating is provided under canopies, visually connected to the stage through closed-circuit TV screens. The aural connection between both the inside and the outside audience and the stage is provided by the sound equipment: hand-held wireless microphones used by pastors, speakers and lead singers; small, almost invisible microphones hanging from the ceiling over the stage to amplify the choir; two loudspeaker towers in the front and smaller loudspeakers fixed at several points in the auditorium. The surround sound of the pastor’s voice or the praise and worship music thus envelops the worshipper in total sensory experience. Because the Christ Temple is quite isolated from the residential areas around it, there have never been any complaints about noise emanating from the church, despite the sometimes rather high decibel levels. In the evenings the many wide open doors on both sides of the hall allow the call for prayer emanating from the mosque next door to mingle with the sound experience in the Christ Temple and the wind to blow inside the auditorium.

Sound plays a central role in the sacralization of space, in evoking the touching presence of the Holy Spirit in the auditorium. Services generally start with ‘praise and worship’, led by the praise and worship team on stage. Upbeat songs invoke the Holy Spirit and lift up the people, who participate by clapping, dancing and singing along. Slower, emotional songs make people lift up their hands in surrender to the Lord and sing along, pray aloud or cry. Preaching is characterized by variation in voice and volume. Vocal style is crucial. Typically passionate, loud, screaming, fast and agitated, it underscores spiritual authority and embodies divine inspiration.10 The audience does not listen silently, but shouts interjections: Hallelujah!, Amen!, Yes! Prayer is far from silent either. People pray aloud, in human language or in ‘tongues’. On 18 September

10 ICGC leader Mensa Otabil is an exception, with his deep, calm voice and slow and relaxed preaching style.
2002 I visited a prayer session in the Holy Pentecostal Church and wrote in my notebook:

About two hundred people are walking about in the hall, clapping, rapidly moving their hands or fists up and down, shaking their heads, stamping their feet, and fervently praying in tongues. I join them and start moving about a bit. Listening to the sound, I discover a beat, a kind of rhythm in the apparent cacophony. The ‘tongues’ of the people are backed by a monotonous, almost Buddhist sounding prayer by the guy behind the mike. The backing sound of the keyboard is hardly distinguishable from the human voices, but integrates them into a cadence.

It is not hard to imagine that this kind of sound can bring people into trance or possession.

In the course of the session people’s prayers and body movements become more passionate, culminating in the ‘outpouring of the Spirit’, manifested by sudden jumps and cries, falling or rolling on the floor, crying or even fainting. Healing and prophecy, finally, is a noisy business as well. Laying his hands on people’s heads or sick body parts, healing prophets cast out any demons that may be causing their sickness or failure in business or marriage and loudly prophesy victory in the form of a visa, a villa, a pregnancy, a husband or business success. Shouting in their ears and in the mike, they ‘take authority over any spirit of fear’, ‘uproot every assignment of demons’, ‘bind the works of the Devil’, ‘ban it right now in Jesus’ name’ and ‘command the power of the Holy Ghost’ to come upon them. Upon the pastor’s touch, prayer and prophecy, many people fall backward, or start shaking or spinning. A team of ushers attends to them, by standing behind them, catching them when they fall, tying a cloth around their waist, covering them with a cloth when they lie on the floor, or guiding them back to their seats when they walk ‘drunk in the spirit’. Soft music and sound effects intensify the drama of the performance.

In charismatic practice, then, spiritual mediation occurs mostly through touch and ‘haptic sound’. It is not so much the symbolic quality of sound (the meaning of words spoken or sung), but its physical, tactile quality that makes the Spirit flow: the volume, tone and pitch of a preacher’s voice, a crowd of people uttering meaningless gibberish, the vibrations of the indecipherable shouting of a prophet on one’s eardrums, and the beat and melody of worship music. Similarly, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the individual believer manifests itself in bodily movement or sound: involuntary spinning, shaking, jumping, falling down, crying, screaming or speaking in tongues are all signs of the touch of the Spirit. At the same time, however, wild body movements and screams can also be signs of ‘evil attacks’. High-pitched screams are generally interpreted as manifestations of ‘witchcraft power’ (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005a: 187). A diagnosed presence of evil spirits may be countered with loud prayer, partly in tongues, by the pastor and the whole congregation. The battle between the spiritual powers of good and evil is then fought out aurally (cf. Oosterbaan, 2006).

Despite a doctrine of sensory perception that is suspicious of human perception and favors ‘spiritual knowledge’ instead, charismatics also conceive of the human senses as vehicles for not only divine communication, but also spiritual power, both good and evil. The senses, then, are both mobilized to connect to the power of the Holy Spirit and disciplined to disconnect from the power of the Devil. The general understanding of hearing taught in charismatic-Pentecostal circles is that ‘there is power in the spoken word’, which can be for good or for evil. The power of prophecy, preaching, praying aloud and gospel music rests on the principle of the spiritual effect of the sound of divinely inspired speaking and singing. The ear serves as an entrance to the body for the Holy Spirit to touch a person, but the Devil can equally make use of this ‘doorway’. Hearing frightful news on the radio or television can transmit ‘the spirit of fear’ into people. Listening to gossip or ‘worldly music’, especially sexually loaded song texts, can transmit ‘the spirit of sin’. Listening to traditional drumming allows ‘demonic spirits’ to enter the body through the ear. The sounds of the spoken Word of God, gospel music, sinful songs or traditional drums, then, do not just represent something; they embody
spiritual powers that can affect the hearer. The Holy Spirit and the Devil fight about the ear in order to enter a person’s body. Pentecostal sound politics should be understood in terms of this spiritual battle. Their strategy to establish a presence in urban space through the production of loud sounds is also a way of blocking out all other potentially dangerous sounds, especially at night, when evil spirits and witches are believed to be more powerful.

**Sound, space, and spirit power in Ga traditional religion**

In contrast to charismatic Pentecostalism, where the power of the Holy Spirit is universal and all spaces can be made sacred by invoking its presence, Ga traditional religion associates many of its deities (*dzemawodzi*) with definite places; in Accra, among others, the Korle Lagoon (*Korle* deity), the Densu lagoon (*Sakumo* deity) and the sea (*Nai* deity). The lagoon deities are the landowners of the town, with *Sakumo* being the senior deity of the whole of Accra (Field, 1937). They control land fertility and may cause drought, floods and famine as punishment for social misdeeds. Every deity has his priest or *wulomo* (pl. *wulomei*), whose task it is to maintain good relationships with the deity in order to ensure land fertility and human wellbeing.\(^\text{11}\) As Lovell (2002: 23) has pointed out for Ewe religion, ‘territory or space is defined both as a metaphysical domain, and as a terrestrial entity. Deities are believed to dwell in another plane, but also need to have their presence manifested and anchored on earth in order for humans to propitiate them properly’. In Ga traditional religion, burying ‘medicines’ in the ground and periodically ‘feeding’ the burial mound (*otutu*) physically ‘anchors’ a deity.\(^\text{12}\) Although in contemporary Accra many of these sacred stone mounds have disappeared, their former locations are still known. A *wulomo* explained to me that the ancient *wulomei* have long ago buried ‘something’ in the ground that has always secured the spiritual ties of the Ga people to their land and makes it difficult for them to move away. This spiritual bond to territory underlies the Ga ethnic group’s claims to authority over ancestral lands and connects traditional religion to territorial governance and traditional understandings of citizenship. Citizenship is defined as having ancestral ties to land, and in relation to strangerhood, having ancestral ties to land elsewhere. While this is true for many ethnic groups in Ghana, its spiritual implication seems to be stronger for the Ga people.

While the relationship between spiritual power and space or territory is thus very different in charismatic-Pentecostalism and traditional religion, the emphasis on spiritual touch and the central role of sound for getting in touch with spirit power is remarkably similar. This is most clearly so for the phenomenon of spirit possession, a key practice in most African traditional religions. In possession rituals, the beating of particular drumming rhythms invokes the tactile presence of particular deities. As someone explained to me, every spirit has his or her own ‘signature tune’ and hearing that tune causes the spirit to enter the body of the human medium, as manifested by particular styles of dressing, dancing, speaking and movements. The physical sound of ritual speech has a similar power to connect to spirits, as exemplified by the practice of libation, the pouring of strong alcoholic drink, water, palm oil or food stuffs on the ground to call the presence of ancestors and deities and communicate with them through ritual speech.

\(^{11}\) The Ga people have two types of traditional authority. In pre-colonial times the *wulomei* were the rulers and they had a political and a spiritual function. As a result of the interactions with the British, a system of chiefs modeled on that of the Akan and Fanti was introduced. Chiefs were appointed to handle traditional politics and jurisdiction and *wulomei* to handle spiritual matters. In practice this ‘division of labor’ is not that clear-cut, for example in the case of the ban on drumming.

\(^{12}\) Field (1937: 121) has described such mounds, or *otutui*, as markers of the burial place of protective medicines, always including ‘some living thing buried alive’, various kinds of animals or, from earlier times, human beings.
Charismatic-Pentecostal auditory practices, then, by which sounds can transfer the touch of Holy Spirit power to listeners and affect their being, show a continuity with traditional African ideas about hearing, touch and spiritual power (e.g. Geurts, 2002), in which spoken or drummed words do not just have meaning, but are vibrations of air that physically contact and influence the addressee, human as well as spirit (cf. Stoller, 1989: 111).

The Ga Homowo festival, and the ban on drumming and noisemaking prior to it, bring out the particular connections between space, spirits and sound in Ga traditional religiosity. As a traditional religious practice of place making, the festival reinforces people’s bond to territory and safeguards land fertility and urban safety by pacifying the local deities with prayers and ceremonial offerings. The exact festive date is determined by the Dantu Widomo in consultation with the deities during a special visit in early April to Tummete, a secluded place at the beach behind Independence Square in Central Accra (Lokko, 1981). In early May, before the first rains, wulomei, woyei (priestesses) and attendants visit the sacred planting plot to sow millet and corn. On the way the procession calls at different stations where the deities’ otutu mounds used to be to pour libation and pray (ibid.). Immediately after the ritual planting they announce a month-long ban on drumming, which is lifted with harvesting rites, characterized by possession of the priestesses, singing and dancing in the open space, and beating the special obunu drums. The climax of the Homowo season is the celebration of the Homowo Day in August in honour of the spirits and ‘scorn’ of hunger (Figure 3). On the day before the festival, chiefs go to the burial place of the founders of the Ga state to inform them that ‘we will hoot at hunger’ and accompany the ancestral spirits to Accra. Ga houses are smeared with ochre to protect inhabitants from evil spirits that may have entered the city with the returnees. At night guns are fired to drive away unwanted ghosts. On Homowo Day chiefs in each quarter go around town and to places like cemeteries, the royal mausoleum, and other burial places of distinguished people, to pour libation and sprinkle some kpokpoi, a ceremonial dish made of steamed fermented corn meal and palm oil, for the deities and the ancestors. The heads of Ga families then sprinkle kpokpoi and offer libations to their ancestors in special places in the homes. Finally, living Ga enjoy large quantities of kpokpoi with palm soup and smoked fish, as this is the day for which dispersed Ga people return to their ancestral homes to share a ritual meal with dead and living family members. After this, chiefs, priests, other Ga people and visitors participate in dancing and drumming through the streets of Accra.

While Homowo Day is a rather noisy day evolving around being in touch with ancestors and deities (be it to various degrees for various participants) through drumming, ritual food and libation, the month of silence prior to it is about staying out of touch. What is known as ‘the ban on drumming and noisemaking’ pertains to specific sounds that are believed to have an effect on the spirit world and disturb the deities: drumming, handclapping, whistling, yelling, wailing and shooting. But it also includes a ban on the performance of libation and, originally, on the burial of corpses and a restriction on fishing, all practices that involve the deities. The ban is thus meant to ensure that the deities and ancestors are left untouched and can take care of the growth of crops in peace. The practices of sound and silence during the Homowo festival and the ban on drumming, then, are practices of relating to the invisible city, to the spirit powers present in Accra.

13 The practice of libation, common to the celebration of naming ceremonies, marriages, and funerals, traditional religious and cultural festivals, royal traditions, but also parties and informal gatherings, is perceived in different ways: as a way of communicating with ancestors, gods or God, of remembering them and honoring them, of invoking their presence, as the traditional form of prayer, or as a cultural duty.
Debating the ban

In the urban environment, and particularly in the national capital, territorialized traditional religious practices are, as we have seen, challenged from various sides. In the debate over the ban on drumming, the main public defender of the ban, apart from the traditional authorities, has been the Afrikania Mission. Afrikania’s position in the conflict, however, is complicated by the very solution the movement proposes to the challenges posed to traditional religion by processes of urbanization and migration. In its effort to unite the various local traditions in a broad national traditional religion, it de-emphasizes ethnicity, blood descent and land. This de-ethnicization of traditional religion implies decoupling it from traditional governance of local, ethnic territory. At the same time it re-couples its reformed traditional religion to the national, multi-ethnic territory. Paradoxically, then, the traditional practices Afrikania seeks to promote or defend conflict with the ‘universal’ norms and rights of its nationalist project. In the ban on drumming conflict, Afrikania hardly links up with the *wulomei* to shake a fist at Christian hegemony and arrogance, because the ethnic identity that the *wulomei* fight for is exactly what Afrikania tries to overcome.14

14 In fact, even though one of the attractions of Afrikania for traditional priests is the organizational backing and protection it offers in conflicts with Christians, there is not a single *wulomo* among Afrikania’s membership, not even of the branch in a Ga neighborhood in Central Accra.

*Figure 3* Gun bearers preparing for Homowo Day in the house of their chief (source: photo by the author)
Instead, Afrikania raises its voice in the debate in another way and claims people’s right to tradition on the basis of the constitution, that is, on the basis of national citizenship. At press conferences and in radio and TV interviews, Afrikania speaks up as the representative of traditional religion and culture in general and fiercely argues for the ban and against the churches that defy it. At a press conference Afrikania organized after the first clash in 1998, for example, Afrikania leader Ameve stated that the ban was a ‘highly spiritual requirement’ that should be respected by everybody living on Ga land regardless of their religious conviction. Around the same time, Ameve featured in the TV talk show About life, when he explained the spiritual meaning of the ban in a very general and abstract way:

The world, if I should say it in mystical terms, is a world of vibrations, full of things that we do not see. In a manner similar to radio waves the spiritual forces exist. And so many things connect to the spiritual forces. If you play a particular instrument at a particular time, you will get some vibration. Certain vibrations are attracted by certain instruments and certain level of sounds. So these vibrations are there, and you can use them to make harmony or to destroy.

Vibration is the source of life, everything is vibration. Vibration is sound, is movement. You can manipulate everything with a certain type of sound. Setting the thing in a state of vibration. At certain times of the year, when the plants are going to take seed, certain sounds can destroy it. Just like when a woman is in the early stages of pregnancy, exposure to certain noises can cause abortion. Sounds that cause destructive vibration are: yelling, shooting, drumming, especially with drums made of leather, what we call membranophones. We live in a world of forces; we need to have rules that permit nature to do its work. Our ancestors have taken years, generations to observe those things. These are experiences they have handed down to us up to today (Ghana Television, 20 May 1999).

While Afrikania leaders incessantly talk about spiritual powers and the importance of living in harmony with them, their de-emphasis of particular local, ethnic deities makes them lose ‘touch’ with the spiritual powers and spatial politics that occupy shrine priests and priestesses. They faced a dilemma when a TV crew visited the Afrikania Mission to shoot a worship service for a documentary on traditional religion exactly during the ban on drumming (De Witte, 2005b). The prohibition on drumming and libation, two essential ingredients of Afrikania services, interfered with the leaders’ aims of creating attractive media images of traditional religion. They compromised by playing drumming tapes, singing without drums, and performing a ‘fake’ libation without liquid, but were very much aware that this was still risky. In practice, Afrikania leaders’ keenness at public representation outweighed the ‘spiritual meaning of vibration’ that ‘our ancestors have handed down to us’.

ICGC pastor Mensa Otabil, who was involved in the solution of the conflict as a member of the National Commission on Culture, in an interview with me, trivialized the spiritual meaning of the ban for those defending it most passionately:

The wulomei are very negative about the intellectuals talking big English on TV. What they are saying about the power of sound, the anger of the gods, and the meaning of it all, is none of their concern. They are just surviving, so they use this opportunity to get money from the churches. It is just about money. It is as simple as that.15

He thus explained the conflict as essentially a political-economic one, where ‘traditional religion’ and ‘cultural heritage’ are mobilized for economic empowerment.

The acting Ga Mantse, Nii Adote Obuor II, an Anglican himself, told me that:

15 Interview, 19 December 2002.
It is not a religious thing at all. Actually the period of silence has more of an agricultural and environmental significance than a spiritual one. It is meant for people to farm, harvest, fish, so that there can be abundance of food and no hunger. They add some mystical, spiritual air to it so that people would abide by the law.16

Interestingly, in a letter to the churches announcing the 2005 ban on drumming, the traditional authorities described the period of the ban as a ‘solemn occasion of traditional religious worship by our Chief Priests and Priestess, essentially to seek communion with God for soul cleansing and spiritual direction and uplifting’.17 In legitimizing the ban and asking for compliance, they thus stressed exactly its spiritual aspect, but in a discourse about silence, solemnity and spiritual union with a singular ‘God’ that is much closer to the old Christian churches than to traditional religious practice.

For Samuel Addai-Kusi, deacon of the attacked Christ Apostolic Church, the issue was obvious: ‘We are talking here about a conflict between the Christian religion and the traditional religion’.18 He reiterated the argument used by most churches for not complying with the ban, that it was only Pentecostal and charismatic churches that were accused of and punished for disrespecting the ban and none of the other sources of noise in the inevitably noisy metropolis. Indeed, it was only when arguments proceeded that sounds such as the Muslim call for prayer, music played at open-air drinking spots and night clubs, yelling at football matches, wailing at funerals, military drumming and trumpeting at state ceremonies, and shoeshine boys beating on their tool boxes entered the discussions.

What stabilized the conflict eventually was the mediating role of the state in turning away from a focus on religion and tradition towards an occupation with measurable levels of decibels throughout the year but during specified hours of the day. An environmentalist and health discourse entered the discussion that described noise as ‘an acoustic phenomenon that produces an unpleasant or irritating auditory sensation’, which has the effect to ‘increase heart rate and blood pressure, shorter attention span, loss of memory, anxiety, reduced field of vision, gastro-intestinal problems, physical and mental fatigue, insomnia, bulimia, chronic hypertension, depressive or aggressive behavior’.19 In April 2004 the Environmental Protection Agency launched an annual National Noise Awareness Day under the theme ‘Stop noise, protect your hearing, protect your health’.

Conclusion

This article has examined sonic practices of sacralizing urban space in Accra. The sacralization of significant places is an important religious and cultural practice. By sacralizing space people define places, events and activities as connected to a divine being or beings, and express how they conceive of power, human power as well as divine power. Religious groups vary according to the form of their sacred spaces and the processes by which they sacralize them. In multi-religious settings this may lead to negotiations and contests over religious space and sacralized spaces may become sites of struggles over power. In Ghana practices of and struggles over sacralization of space have an important sonic dimension. This article has used the clashes between traditionalists and charismatics over the annual ‘ban on drumming and noisemaking’ in Accra as an entry to a comparison of the modes in which charismatic-Pentecostal groups and proponents of Ga traditional religion claim and sacralize urban space through practices of sound and silence.

16 Interview, 17 January 2003.
18 Interview, 17 January 2003.
Sound is central to the power struggles of the present-day city of Accra. Embedded within the urban soundscape is a negotiation of authority to determine who can make what sort of sound and when. Power relations in Accra are far from stable. Pre-colonial settlement, colonial history, post-colonial migration processes, and religious developments have made the national capital a place where the (central and metropolitan) government’s authority is not taken for granted. As a result various groups vie for control over the city’s soundscape and so negotiate questions of territorial belonging, rights and obligations, economic empowerment, traditional culture and religious doctrine. In the context of the mounting presence of religious, and especially charismatic-Pentecostal, voices and sounds in the media and public space, public representation has become crucial to these struggles.

Charismatic groups’ loud modes of worship, prayer and preaching, their use of powerful sound technology and the open architecture of their worship buildings and meeting places combine to establish an auditory sacred space that is never contained within the physical boundaries of their sacred spaces. They come together not only in church buildings, but also in secular spaces, such as class rooms, cinema halls or city squares and parks, where they invoke the presence of the universal (deterritorialized) Holy Spirit and drive off evil spirits with loud sounds. Such loud claims to public presence give rise to conflicts with Accra residents who do not wish to be confronted with charismatics’ sonic and doctrinal aggression and want to push the boundaries of the latter’s sacred space back into their church buildings. During the preparations towards the Ga Homowo festival, charismatics’ expansionist politics of sonic sacralization clash with other claims to the sacredness of urban space.

In contrast to charismatic Pentecostalism, Ga traditional religion is bound to place and constituted by ancestral ties to Ga lands, including almost the whole of Accra, and sacred sites connected to territorial spirits and requiring particular practices of sound and silence. This is problematic in a cosmopolitan, multi-religious city like Accra, where immigrants and Ga Christians may not respect the sacredness of certain sites and the laws of Ga spiritual leaders, the wulomei. While this is so throughout the year, it is only during the ban on drumming that the Ga traditional authorities declare the whole of Accra sacred territory and subject all residents to traditional religious law. Some churches’ self-conscious resistance to this law evoked violent clashes as wulomei mobilized Ga youth groups to confiscate or destroy churches’ sound systems and musical instruments. They punished ‘noisemaking’ because of its political implications and reclaimed power over the sonic occupation of public space in Accra from those considered most threatening to their local authority.

In the public debate over ‘the ban’ the leaders of the neo-traditionalist Afrikania Mission have become one of the major defendants. The irony of their defence, however, is that in looking for a religious answer to the process of urbanization, they separate traditional religiosity from territory and ethnicity and thus run counter to the concerns of the Ga traditionalists. The alternative sonic ways of sacralizing urban space they adopt are very similar to those of charismatic churches and by valuing public representation over participation in Ga traditional practices, they risk being accused of ‘noisemaking’ themselves.

Implicated in this struggle for symbolic control of space through sonic presence is the inseparable connection in African religiosity between earthly power structures and struggles, and divine power structures and struggles. Both charismatic Christianity and traditional religion do not separate sounds from spirit powers by a relation of referentiality. Sounds not so much represent or symbolize the spiritual power of God, gods, or evil spirits, but embody their power and may thus affect the hearer. In Ga traditional religiosity, ritual speech or drumming can establish a connection with the divine, as in possession or libation. In charismatic Pentecostalism, loud prayer, music, and preaching facilitate the movement of the Holy Spirit and the exorcism of demons. For both religions, then, sacralized spaces are spaces where these invisible powers can be brought into the visible, physical realm and effectively dealt with or tapped into. The
struggle over sound and silence thus becomes a struggle over the flow of spiritual power. As the leader of the Ghana Evangelical Society stated, ‘the ban is being used to denounce the work of God and obstruct the movement of the Spirit of God that brought the liberation of the church and the people from idolatry and captivity’. Both charismatics and traditional priests are concerned with spiritual protection of territory through practices of sound and silence. The ban on drumming and the Homowo festival are part of maintaining good relationships with the territorial spirits and ancestors of Ga country to safeguard land fertility and urban safety. Charismatic ‘noise’ and refusal to respect the ban are part of a spiritual battle against demonic forces that lurk behind traditional festivals and rituals and threaten the safety of the nation.

This is not to argue that all parties involved in the conflict are ultimately concerned with spiritual power. We are dealing with conflicting ways of conceptualizing sound in relation to space and personhood. The ‘official’ traditionalist discourse on the ban on drumming talks about specific kinds of sound that during a specified ritual period are believed to have an effect on the metaphysical territory and, through the gods, on the physical territory. Afrikania leaders, in representing the traditionalist point of view in the public debate, emphasize first of all this spiritual aspect of sound. But Afrikania leaders fight a symbolic battle. They are concerned with public representation vis-à-vis Christian dominance and talk about spirituality in such an abstract and intellectualist way that they lose ‘touch’ with the presence of spirit powers. Charismatic churches fight a spiritual battle. As much as their loudness is a way of publicly asserting power, it is also part of the struggle between the Holy Spirit and the Devil — and the point is precisely that the two cannot be separated. Paradoxically, then, charismatic sound practices are much closer to traditional religious sound practices than Afrikania’s symbolic approach, and perhaps even closer than the wulomei, whose political battle against the ‘stranger’ majority on their lands appears to be a stronger motive for their violent actions than the spiritual effects of acoustic vibrations. The state, in attempting to restore law and order and reclaim their fragile monopoly over law enforcement, privileged a concept of sound as measurable decibels. The health discourse on noise implied a de-sacralization of space, but a sacralization of the human body and a concern with the physical impact of sound not on spirits, but on the human body. All-year application of noise laws also implies a de-sacralization of ritual time as defined by the traditional Ga calendar, but a sacralization of the night as the time set aside for bodily rest and thus silence. This conceptualization of sound and noise is closely connected to ‘modern’ ideas about citizenship, civilization and a healthy body, but also hopelessly out of tune with actual sound politics in Accra.

Marleen de Witte (m.de.witte@fsw.vu.nl), Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1081, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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Résumé

Cet article s’intéresse à la sacralisation sonore de l’espace urbain dans la cité multiculturelle d’Accra. Dans les villes ghanéennes, les groupes religieux rivalisent aujourd’hui de plus en plus pour gagner en présence publique. La dimension sonore des manifestations religieuses, particulièrement énergique de la part des églises et pasteurs pentecôtistes charismatiques, a récemment suscité une controverse. Alors que la “génération de bruit” pentecôtiste charismatique crée des différends tout au long de l’année, c’est surtout pendant l’interdiction annuelle traditionnelle sur les tambours et le bruit que l’affrontement religieux relatif au “son et silence” s’exprime pleinement et violemment dans la ville. Abordant l’articulation entre religiosité et espace urbain à travers la dimension auditive, cet article examine comment les pratiques sonores religieuses créent, occupent et luttent pour l’espace urbain. Deux points sont dégagés en comparant le lien entre religion, espace urbain et nature auditive dans le Pentecôtisme charismatique et la religion traditionnelle Ga : en premier lieu, derrière l’apparente opposition entre le Pentecôtisme et la religion traditionnelle, on trouve une différence de spatialité religieuse, mais une étonnante similitude dans l’importance du son par rapport au spirituel en second lieu, le désaccord religieux concernant la sacralisation sonore de l’espace urbain ne devrait pas être appréhendé uniquement comme une rivalité en vue d’un contrôle symbolique des espaces, mais aussi comme une lutte spirituelle contre les puissances invisibles, et d’autant plus affectives, perçues dans la ville.