



SACRED SOUNDS VS CIVIC QUIET: NEGOTIATING RELIGIOUS NOISE IN PORT HARCOURT CITY GOVERNANCE

Dearson, Dumo Sokari

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Humanities,
Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt.
+2349032255988
dumosokari@yahoo.com

Abstract

Urban soundscapes in rapidly expanding African cities increasingly reveal tensions between religious expression and civic regulation. This study interrogates the negotiation of religious noise in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, focusing on the interface between “sacred sounds” (amplified worship, night vigils, calls to prayer) and “civic quiet” within urban governance frameworks. Anchored in a sociology of religion perspective and informed by studies on religion in the public sphere and urban noise governance, the research examines how sound becomes a site of contestation, power, and accommodation. It addresses three core questions: how religious actors justify and regulate amplified sound; how residents and city authorities perceive and respond to religious noise; and what mechanisms mediate conflicts between religious freedom and urban order. Using qualitative methods - key informant interviews, policy analysis, and neighborhood case studies in Diobu, Government Reserved Area (GRA), and Odili Road - the findings reveal uneven enforcement of noise regulations shaped by informal negotiations, socio-religious influence, and spatial inequalities. Religious institutions frame sound as integral to worship and spiritual presence, while residents emphasize health, privacy, and rest. The study recommends dialogical policy frameworks, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and context-sensitive enforcement strategies that balance constitutional religious freedoms with residents’ rights to a livable urban environment. It contributes to broader debates on lived religion, governance, and everyday urban coexistence in African cities.

Keywords: religious noise, urban governance, sociology of religion, Port Harcourt, soundscape

Introduction

Rapid urbanization across African cities has brought increased attention to the ways everyday life is shaped not only by physical structures but also by sound. In Nigeria, religion occupies a central place in public and private life, and its presence is often expressed audibly through sermons, prayers, worship music, and calls to devotion. These expressions, referred to in this study as “sacred sounds,” form an integral part of the social and cultural fabric. However, in densely populated urban environments, they frequently intersect with concerns about noise pollution and the need for regulated, livable spaces (Gandy, 2017; Simone, 2020).

Noise pollution is now widely recognized within environmental and urban studies as a significant challenge, particularly in fast-growing cities where planning and regulation often struggle to keep pace with expansion. Beyond mere inconvenience, excessive noise has been linked to adverse health outcomes, including sleep disturbance, stress, and reduced cognitive performance (World Health Organization, 2018). In developing urban contexts, such as Nigeria, the issue is further complicated by weak enforcement of environmental standards and the normalization of high noise levels in everyday life (Akinyemi & Adejumo, 2021).

Port Harcourt, one of Nigeria's urban and economic centers in the Niger Delta, provides a revealing context for examining these dynamics. The city's rapid growth, mixed land-use patterns, and high concentration of religious institutions have contributed to increasingly contested soundscapes. Churches and mosques often operate in close proximity to residential buildings, with the use of loudspeakers, night vigils, and early morning services creating persistent acoustic tensions. Empirical observations from similar Nigerian cities indicate that religious noise frequently exceeds recommended environmental limits, thereby raising questions about public health and urban sustainability (Okeke, 2019; Eze & Eze, 2022).

At the core of the issue lies a delicate balance between competing rights and interests. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) guarantees freedom of religion, including the right to manifest one's beliefs in worship and practice. At the same time, this freedom is not absolute; it is subject to limitations necessary for the protection of public health, safety, and the rights of others. This creates a complex governance challenge: how to accommodate vibrant religious expression while also safeguarding the right of residents to peace, quiet, and a healthy environment (Ogunleye, 2020).

Scholars have argued that the persistence of religious noise in Nigerian cities cannot be understood solely as a regulatory failure but must also be viewed within its sociocultural context. In many cases, loudness is associated with spiritual intensity, visibility, and institutional growth, particularly among Pentecostal and charismatic movements. As a result, sound becomes both a religious tool and a marker of presence within a competitive urban religious landscape (Marshall, 2009; Ukah, 2016). This dynamic complicates efforts to impose restrictions, as such measures may be perceived as limiting religious freedom or targeting specific groups.

Although regulatory frameworks such as the National Environmental (Noise Standards and Control) Regulations (2009) exist, their implementation remains inconsistent. Challenges including limited institutional capacity, political considerations, and public resistance often hinder effective enforcement. Consequently, noise from religious activities continues to be a normalized yet contested feature of urban life in Port Harcourt and other Nigerian cities (Adewale, 2018; Eze & Eze, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the tension between "sacred sounds" and "civic quiet" in Port Harcourt. It focuses on how various stakeholders - religious actors, residents, and government authorities - negotiate the use of urban acoustic space. By

situating the issue within broader discussions of urban governance, environmental regulation, and rights-based frameworks, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how cities manage the intersection of cultural expression and environmental order.

Conceptual Framework

Religion in the Public Sphere

The concept of religion in the public sphere has attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly within debates on secularization, democracy, and pluralism. Classical secularization theory predicted the gradual decline of religion from public life as societies modernized. However, contemporary scholarship challenges this assumption, arguing instead that religion continues to play a visible and influential role in modern democratic societies (Dreyer & Pieterse, 2010). This shift has led to renewed interest in how religious beliefs and practices interact with public institutions, policies, and everyday urban life.

One of the most influential contributions to this discourse comes from the work of Jürgen Habermas, who conceptualizes the public sphere as a space for rational-critical debate among citizens. In his earlier work, Habermas viewed modernization as leading to the privatization of religion. However, his later writings acknowledge the persistence of religion in what he terms a “post-secular” society, where religious and secular worldviews coexist and contribute to public dialogue (Habermas, 2008; Dreyer & Pieterse, 2010). He argues that religious perspectives can enrich public discourse, particularly in articulating moral concerns, but emphasizes the need for such views to be translated into universally accessible language within democratic deliberation.

Similarly, political theorists such as John Rawls (1997), stress the importance of “public reason,” whereby citizens justify political decisions using arguments that can be accepted across diverse belief systems. While Rawls allows for the inclusion of religious viewpoints, he maintains that these must ultimately be framed in secular terms to ensure fairness and inclusivity in pluralistic societies. This perspective highlights an ongoing tension between the expression of deeply held religious convictions and the need for neutral, shared grounds in policymaking.

Expanding on these debates, scholars like José Casanova (1994), argue against the strict privatization of religion, emphasizing its “public resurgence” in many parts of the world. Casanova contends that religion can legitimately participate in public life, particularly in advocating for social justice, morality, and community values. This position aligns with emerging views that religion is not merely a private matter but a social force that shapes public norms and collective identities, especially in non-Western contexts.

In African societies, and Nigeria in particular, religion occupies a highly visible place in the public sphere, extending beyond institutional settings into everyday urban experiences. Scholars note that religious practices often blur the boundaries between private devotion and public expression, manifesting in forms such as street preaching, amplified worship, and public religious events. These practices reflect the embeddedness of religion in social life but also generate tensions when they intersect with issues of governance, regulation, and the rights of others (Marshall, 2009; Ukah, 2016).

Importantly, the literature suggests that the negotiation of religion in the public sphere is not solely a theoretical concern but a practical governance challenge. The coexistence of multiple religious expressions within shared urban spaces raises questions about inclusion, tolerance, and regulation. In contexts like Port Harcourt, where religious sound is a dominant feature of the urban environment, these debates become particularly salient. The interaction between “sacred sounds” and civic expectations of order illustrates how the public sphere is not only discursive but also sensory, requiring new approaches to understanding and managing religious presence in contemporary cities.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that religion remains a dynamic and contested component of the public sphere. Rather than disappearing, it continues to evolve, shaping and being shaped by democratic norms, legal frameworks, and everyday urban interactions. This underscores the need for context-specific analyses that consider both the theoretical foundations and lived realities of religion in public life.

Soundscapes and Urban Life

The concept of soundscape has emerged as a critical framework for understanding the role of sound in shaping urban life. Originally developed by R. Murray Schafer in the 1970s, the term “soundscape” refers to the acoustic environment as perceived and experienced by individuals within a specific context. Rather than treating sound merely as noise or a byproduct of urban activity, soundscape studies emphasize the subjective and social dimensions of auditory experience, highlighting how sound contributes to meaning-making, place identity, and everyday interactions (Schafer, 1977; Truax, 2001).

Contemporary scholarship expands this perspective by defining soundscapes as perceptual constructs shaped by the interaction between physical sound sources, human cognition, and socio-cultural context. According to the International Organization for Standardization, a soundscape is “the acoustic environment as perceived or experienced ... in context,” underscoring the centrality of human interpretation (ISO, 2014). This shift from purely quantitative noise measurement to qualitative perception has transformed urban acoustic research, encouraging interdisciplinary approaches that integrate sociology, psychology, urban planning, and environmental studies.

Urban soundscapes are inherently complex and dynamic, reflecting the diversity of activities, infrastructures, and social relations within cities. Scholars note that soundscapes consist of multiple layers of sounds - natural, human, and technological that vary across time and space, creating what has been described as a “shifting aural terrain” that shapes how individuals experience the city (Atkinson, 2007; Wissmann, 2014). These auditory environments influence not only how people navigate urban spaces but also how they interpret safety, comfort, and belonging. In this sense, sound becomes a key component of urban sensory experience, often working alongside visual and spatial elements to construct a sense of place.

Importantly, the literature highlights that urban soundscapes are not neutral; they are embedded in power relations and social structures. Certain sounds are valorized as culturally meaningful or desirable, while others are categorized as “noise” and subject to regulation. This distinction is often shaped by social norms, institutional frameworks, and

competing interests among urban actors. For instance, sounds associated with commerce, transportation, or religion may be tolerated or contested depending on context and perception (Raimbault & Dubois, 2005). As such, soundscapes can reveal underlying inequalities and conflicts within urban environments.

The impact of soundscapes on human well-being is another major theme in the literature.

Excessive or unwanted noise has been linked to a range of negative outcomes, including stress, sleep disturbance, and reduced cognitive performance, making it a significant public health concern (Goines & Hagler, 2007). However, scholars also argue that not all sounds are harmful; some

contribute positively to urban life by enhancing environmental quality and emotional well-being. This has led to a growing emphasis on designing and managing soundscapes to promote “acoustic comfort” rather than simply reducing noise levels (Kang & Aletta, 2018).

Recent studies further emphasize the role of perception, memory, and social context in shaping how individuals evaluate soundscapes. Factors such as personal experience, cultural background, and current activity influence whether a sound is perceived as pleasant or disturbing (Cao & Kang, 2023). This suggests that effective urban sound management must go beyond technical regulation to consider the lived experiences of city residents.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that soundscapes are integral to urban life, functioning as both environmental conditions and social phenomena. They shape how cities are experienced, contested, and governed, making them particularly relevant for studies examining the intersection of cultural practices such as religious expression and urban regulation. In cities like Port Harcourt, where sound is a prominent feature of public life, the study of soundscapes provides a valuable lens for understanding the negotiation between “sacred sounds” and the demand for civic quiet.

Religious Noise and Conflict in Urban Nigeria

Scholarly literature on religious noise and conflict in Nigeria situates the phenomenon within broader debates on religion in the public sphere, environmental governance, and urban coexistence. Scholars argue that religious sound such as amplified preaching, prayer calls, and worship music represents both an essential expression of faith and a potential source of tension in pluralistic urban environments (Hackett, 2012; Gaffney, 2014). In this regard, religious noise becomes a contested practice, particularly where it intersects with the rights of other city residents to peace, health, and environmental quality.

A central theoretical perspective emphasizes the dual or ambivalent nature of religion in society. Religion can foster social cohesion while simultaneously generating conflict, especially when public expressions of faith are perceived as intrusive (Appleby, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 2008). In the Nigerian context, this ambivalence is heightened by the visibility and audibility of religious practices in everyday urban life. As Hackett (2012) notes, the proliferation of loudspeaker use among both Christian and Muslim groups has transformed



the soundscape of Nigerian cities, making religion a constant and sometimes contentious public presence.

Empirical studies focusing on noise pollution identify religious institutions as significant contributors to urban noise levels. For instance, Adekola and Mitchell (2011) observe that churches and mosques in Nigerian cities frequently employ high-powered amplification systems, often without adherence to regulatory standards. Similarly, Oloruntoba (2019) finds that practices such

as night vigils, revival meetings, and early morning prayers contribute to persistent noise disturbances, particularly in densely populated residential areas. These forms of religious sound have been associated with adverse health outcomes, including sleep disruption and psychological stress (WHO, 2018).

Beyond environmental and health concerns, scholars link religious noise to broader patterns of social conflict and intolerance. Studies suggest that disputes over religious practices, including noise, are often embedded in wider socio-cultural and political tensions (Falola, 1998; Ngwoke & Ituma, 2020). In heterogeneous cities like Port Harcourt, where multiple religious groups coexist in close proximity, the assertion of religious presence through sound can be interpreted as a form of dominance or territorial claim, thereby heightening the potential for conflict.

Urban governance literature further highlights the role of weak institutional frameworks in exacerbating these tensions. Agbola and Agunbiade (2009) argue that inadequate urban planning and poor enforcement of environmental regulations in Nigerian cities have allowed incompatible land uses - such as residential buildings and worship centres to exist side by side. This proximity intensifies the impact of religious noise and complicates conflict resolution. In addition, Ladan (2013) points out that although Nigeria has environmental laws addressing noise pollution, enforcement remains inconsistent, limiting their effectiveness in managing religious sound.

Recent scholarship adopts the concept of “urban soundscapes” to analyze how sound functions as a medium of social interaction and power negotiation. Gandy (2014) and LaBelle (2010) suggest that urban sound reflects broader struggles over space, identity, and belonging. Within this framework, religious noise is not merely a by-product of worship but a deliberate assertion of presence in the public sphere. The tension between “sacred sounds” and “civic quiet” therefore reflects deeper challenges of balancing religious freedom with the need for order and inclusivity in urban governance.

In sum, existing studies demonstrate that religious noise in Nigeria is a multidimensional issue shaped by theological practices, socio-political dynamics, and governance limitations. While it remains a vital aspect of religious expression, its increasing prominence in urban soundscapes necessitates more effective regulatory and dialogic approaches to mitigate conflict and promote harmonious coexistence.

Noise Governance in African Cities

Noise governance in African cities has attracted growing scholarly attention as rapid urbanization intensifies conflicts over sound, space, and regulation. Rather than treating noise simply as an environmental nuisance, contemporary studies frame it as a governance issue embedded in social, cultural, and political dynamics of African urban life. This perspective recognizes that sound is not only measured in decibels but also interpreted through meanings, practices, and power relations (Simone, 2004; Myers, 2011).

A central concern in the literature is the complexity of urban soundscapes across African cities. Unlike many Western contexts where transport noise dominates policy discourse, African cities exhibit layered sound environments shaped by traffic, street commerce, domestic life, and religious activities. In studies of cities such as Accra and Lagos, scholars note that everyday urban life produces “mixed soundscapes” that blur distinctions between public and private space (Gandy, 2017; Lawhon et al., 2018). These overlapping sound sources make it difficult to apply standardized regulatory frameworks, as what constitutes “noise” is often socially negotiated rather than universally defined.

Scholars also emphasize institutional weaknesses and enforcement gaps in noise governance.

Regulatory frameworks often exist on paper—such as environmental protection laws and municipal by-laws—but are inconsistently enforced due to limited technical capacity, corruption, and fragmented institutional responsibilities (Akinola, 2019; Oloruntoba & Gray, 2009). In Nigeria, for example, agencies like National Environmental Standards and Regulations Agency (NESREA) and state environmental bodies are tasked with controlling noise pollution, yet enforcement is frequently undermined by political interference and inadequate monitoring infrastructure (Ajayi, 2020). This results in a governance gap where citizens experience persistent exposure to high noise levels without effective recourse.

Another key theme is the role of informality and negotiated governance. African cities are often characterized by informal settlements and economic activities that operate outside formal planning systems. As a result, noise regulation becomes a matter of negotiation among residents, religious institutions, and local authorities rather than strict legal enforcement. Studies show that community tolerance, social hierarchy, and religious legitimacy often determine whether certain sounds are accepted or contested (de Boeck & Plissart, 2004; Marshall, 2009). For instance, amplified religious practices may be socially protected despite violating formal noise regulations, reflecting the intersection of governance with cultural and spiritual life.

Emerging research also highlights technological and data-driven approaches to noise governance. Tools such as geographic information systems (GIS), participatory noise mapping, and low-cost sensors are increasingly used to document urban soundscapes and support policy interventions (Díaz Olvera et al., 2020). However, scholars caution that data availability alone does not guarantee effective governance; institutional capacity and political will remain critical for translating data into action.

Notably, Chronic exposure to high noise levels has been linked to stress, sleep disturbance, and cardiovascular risks, particularly in densely populated urban areas (World

Health Organization, 2018). In African cities, these health risks are compounded by socio-economic inequalities, as low-income communities often experience higher exposure and fewer coping mechanisms (UN-Habitat, 2020).

In conclusion, scholarly work on noise governance in African cities points to the need for context-sensitive, participatory, and multi-level governance frameworks. Effective approaches must go beyond technocratic regulation to incorporate local norms, strengthen institutional capacity, and integrate noise management into broader urban planning and public health strategies. Such an approach is essential for managing the complex and culturally embedded soundscapes that define African urban environments.

The Port Harcourt Context

Understanding the tension between sacred sounds and civic quiet in Port Harcourt requires grounding the discussion in the socio-spatial realities of the city itself. Port Harcourt is a historically layered urban center that has grown rapidly from a colonial port into a densely populated oil city, marked by migration, economic inequality, and infrastructural strain (Falola et al., 2018). Within this evolving urban fabric, sound especially religious sound has become a key site where social life, identity, and governance intersect.

The soundscape of Port Harcourt varies significantly across its neighborhoods, reflecting differences in planning, class, and everyday rhythms of life. A comparison between Diobu, Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road reveals how urban form and socio-economic conditions shape what people hear, tolerate, and interpret as either meaningful sound or disruptive noise.

Diobu's soundscape is dense, immediate, and unrelenting. As one of the most populated and commercially active parts of Port Harcourt, the area produces what scholars describe as a "high-intensity acoustic environment," where multiple sound sources overlap without clear separation (Schafer, 1977; Thompson, 2002). From dawn, the streets come alive with the calls of traders, the rumble of motorcycles, and the hum of generators sounds that rarely fade completely at any point in the day.

A defining feature of Diobu's soundscape is its continuity. Commercial activity blends seamlessly with residential life, and both intersect with religious practices. Churches, often located within or between residential buildings, project sermons, prayers, and music through loudspeakers. This creates an auditory environment where religious sound is not confined to sacred spaces but

spills into everyday life. In Nigerian cities, such amplified worship has been noted as a key element of urban soundscapes, functioning both as spiritual expression and as a form of public presence (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2017; Hackett, 2012).

Because of the close proximity of buildings and narrow streets, sound travels quickly and reflects off surfaces, intensifying its reach. This produces what Bull (2000) refers to as "involuntary listening," where individuals cannot easily escape surrounding sounds. For residents, this can generate mixed experiences: while some perceive the lively soundscape as a sign of economic vitality and community life, others experience it as overwhelming,



especially when high-volume religious activities extend into late-night vigils or early morning devotions.

Even at night, Diobu rarely becomes quiet. Instead, the character of the sound shifts. Reduced traffic noise gives way to more distinct religious and social sounds drumming, singing, preaching - making them more audible and sometimes more intrusive. This persistence reinforces the sense of a neighborhood in constant motion, where silence is rare and often temporary.

In contrast, Odili Road and Government Reserved Area (GRA) presents a markedly different acoustic environment. These neighborhood are characterized by planned layouts, lower residential density, and a higher socio-economic profile. These features contribute to what can be described as a more “regulated soundscape,” where noise is less continuous and more spatially contained (Truax, 2001).

Here, the day begins more quietly. The absence of dense roadside trading and the presence of wider streets reduce the layering of sounds typical of inner-city areas like Diobu. Traffic exists but is more orderly, and commercial noise is largely confined to designated spaces. The overall effect is a soundscape with clearer distinctions between periods of activity and rest.

Religious sounds are still present but tend to be more moderated. Churches in Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road are often situated on larger plots of land, sometimes with enclosed structures that limit the outward projection of sound. While amplification is still used, it is generally less intrusive due to both spatial separation and, in some cases, greater adherence to noise regulations. Studies on urban planning suggest that such environments enable what Schafer (1977) calls a “hi-fi soundscape,” where individual sounds can be distinguished clearly without overwhelming the listener.

However, this does not mean the area is silent. Instead, its soundscape is intermittent.

Periods of calm marked by minimal traffic and subdued human activity can be punctuated by sudden sounds: a passing vehicle, a generator switching on, or a burst of music from a nearby event or religious service. Because the baseline noise level is lower, these sounds can stand out more sharply, sometimes making them feel more noticeable than similar sounds in noisier environments like Diobu.

Importantly, expectations of quiet are higher in Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road. Residents in such planned neighborhoods often associate quietness with comfort and status, which can shape how they perceive and respond to sound. What might be considered normal or even desirable in Diobu such as loud, expressive worship may be interpreted here as disturbance. This difference in perception highlights how soundscapes are not only physical but also socially constructed (Thompson, 2002).

The contrast between Diobu, Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road underscores how urban inequalities are reflected in acoustic environments. In Diobu, sound is immersive and collective, woven into the fabric of daily survival and social



interaction. In Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road, sound is more controlled and segmented, aligning with planning ideals that prioritize order and privacy.

Yet, in both contexts, religious sound remains a significant presence. It continues to serve as a medium of faith, identity, and community connection, even as it is experienced differently across spaces. Residents in both areas navigate their soundscapes in ways that reflect their environments - whether through adaptation in Diobu's crowded setting or through expectations of regulation and restraint in Government Reserved Area (GRA).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how religious sound practices are negotiated within the framework of urban governance in Port Harcourt. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the issue of religious noise is not only about measurable sound levels but also about meanings, perceptions, and everyday lived experiences within the urban soundscape.

The research is anchored in a case study strategy, focusing on selected neighborhoods such as Diobu, Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road. These areas were purposively chosen to reflect contrasts in socio-economic conditions, spatial organization, and levels of regulation. Diobu represents a high-density, mixed-use environment characterized by intense religious activity and close proximity between worship centers and residential spaces. In contrast, Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road reflects a more planned, low-density urban setting where residential order and regulatory expectations are more pronounced. This comparative lens enables a deeper understanding of how religious sounds are produced, perceived, and managed across different urban contexts.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and triangulation.

First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including residents, religious leaders (such as church pastors and mosque leaders), and officials from relevant government agencies responsible for environmental management and urban planning. These interviews provided valuable insights into personal experiences, perceptions of noise, and the tensions between the right to religious expression and the need for civic quiet.

Second, non-participant observation was employed to capture the everyday soundscape of the selected areas. The researcher observed and documented patterns of religious sound production such as early morning prayers, midweek services, and night vigils - paying attention to timing, volume, and community reactions. Field notes were used to record both the auditory environment and the social interactions surrounding these sounds.

Third, document analysis was carried out on existing legal and policy frameworks guiding noise regulation in Nigeria. This included relevant provisions from the Constitution, environmental protection laws, and local government regulations. These documents were

examined to understand the formal structures in place for managing noise and how they are interpreted and enforced within the city.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and policy documents were systematically coded and organized into recurring themes such as “sacred obligation,” “noise as disturbance,” “community tolerance,” and “regulatory limitations.” This process made it possible to identify patterns, overlaps, and tensions in how religious noise is experienced and governed.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their consent was obtained prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the omission of identifying details. The researcher also remained sensitive to religious and cultural dynamics to avoid misrepresentation or bias.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that the tension between “sacred sounds” and “civic quiet” in Port Harcourt is not simply a matter of noise control, but a lived negotiation shaped by belief systems, spatial conditions, and governance realities. By drawing on interview excerpts, observations, and policy review, this section highlights how religious sound is produced, contested, and managed in everyday urban life.

Sacred Sound as Obligation and Expression

A dominant theme across interviews with religious leaders is the understanding of sound as a core element of worship. Many respondents emphasized that amplification is not merely a technical choice but a spiritual necessity. As one Pentecostal Pastor in Diobu explained:

“We are not just making noise; we are reaching out spiritually. The louder the sound, the more people are drawn into the presence of God” (Interview, Pastor A, Diobu, 15th March, 2026).

Similarly, a mosque leader noted:

“The call to prayer must be heard. It is not something we can keep silent because it is part of our faith” (Interview, Imam B, Diobu, 15th March, 2026).

These perspectives reflect what scholars describe as the public and embodied nature of religion in African cities, where worship is designed to be heard as well as seen (De Witte, 2011). Sound, in this sense, becomes a marker of religious presence and legitimacy in the urban space.

However, differences emerge between the two case study areas. In Diobu, religious expression is highly audible and continuous due to the density of worship centers. In contrast, in Odili Road, some churches reported self-regulation practices. One church administrator stated:



“We try to be mindful of the environment here. People complain quickly, so we control our speakers, especially at night” (Interview, Church Admin C, Odili Road, 22nd March, 2026).

This suggests that while the theology of sound remains consistent, its expression is shaped by the socio-spatial context.

Noise as Disturbance: Residents’ Experiences

For many residents, especially those living close to worship centers, religious sound is experienced less as sacred expression and more as disruption. Participants frequently described the strain of constant exposure to amplified preaching, music, and prayers.

A resident in Diobu shared:

“You can’t sleep properly. By 5 a.m., one church has started, and before they finish, another begins. It’s like there is no quiet time at all” (Interview, Resident D, Diobu, 18th March, 2026).

Another respondent emphasized the cumulative effect:

“It’s not just one church. It’s many of them at the same time. The noise overlaps, and it becomes overwhelming” (Interview, Resident E, Diobu, 18th March, 2026).

These experiences align with research linking environmental noise to reduced well-being and increased stress (World Health Organization, 2018). The issue is not only volume but also frequency, timing, and lack of control over the sound environment.

In Government Reserved Area (GRA), complaints were less about constant exposure and more about specific disturbances. One resident noted:

“We respect religion, but there should be limits. Night vigils with loudspeakers can be very disturbing” (Interview, Resident F, Government Reserved Area (GRA), 22nd March, 2026).

This reflects a more conditional tolerance, where religious sound is accepted as long as it does not violate expected norms of quietness.

Everyday Negotiation and Informal Governance

A key finding of the study is that conflicts over religious noise are often managed through informal negotiation rather than formal enforcement. Residents and religious leaders frequently engage in direct dialogue to resolve issues.

For instance, a Diobu resident recounted:

“We went to meet the pastor and explained how the night programs were affecting us. After that, they reduced the volume a bit” (Interview, Resident G, Diobu, 18th March, 2026).

Likewise, a church leader acknowledged community pressure:

“Sometimes people come to complain, and we have to adjust. We cannot ignore them because we are part of the same community” (Interview, Pastor H, Diobu, 15th March, 2026).



In Odili Road, these negotiations are often more structured. A member of a residents' association explained:

"We usually invite the church leaders for meetings. We agree on what is acceptable so that everyone can live comfortably" (Interview, Resident Association Rep I, Odili Road, 22nd March, 2026).

These interactions illustrate that sound governance is not solely a top-down process but is co-produced through everyday social relations. This supports the idea that urban order in many African cities emerges through negotiation and compromise rather than strict regulation (LaBelle, 2010).

Regulatory Frameworks and Enforcement Gaps

Despite the existence of legal frameworks for noise control, enforcement remains inconsistent. Government officials interviewed pointed to several challenges, including limited resources and the sensitive nature of regulating religious institutions.

One environmental officer stated:

"We have the laws, but enforcing them is not easy. Once religion is involved, people become defensive, and it can turn into a bigger issue" (Interview, Government Official J, 18th March, 2026).

Another official added:

"Most times, we act only when there is a serious complaint. We don't have enough manpower to monitor everywhere" (Interview, Government Official K, 18th March, 2026).

These insights reveal a gap between policy and practice, where regulation is reactive rather than proactive. Although frameworks such as the NESREA Act and constitutional provisions exist (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999), their impact is limited by weak institutional capacity.

As a result, religious institutions often operate within a loosely regulated space, relying more on community tolerance than formal compliance. This creates what can be described as a "negotiated order," where acceptable sound levels are determined informally.

Spatial Differences and Inequality in Soundscapes

The contrast between Diobu, Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road highlights the role of urban structure in shaping sound experiences. In Diobu, high population density and mixed land use create conditions for constant acoustic overlap. A resident described it as:

"Everything is happening at once - church, mosque, market - there is no separation" (Interview, Resident L, Diobu, 15th March, 2026).

In Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road, better planning and lower density allow for more control. As one resident noted:



“Here, things are more organized. You won’t find too many churches close together, so the noise is manageable” (Interview, Resident M, Government Reserved Area (GRA), Odili Road, 28th March 2026).

This supports the argument that soundscapes are socially and spatially produced, reflecting broader inequalities in urban planning and governance (Schafer, 1977). Areas with less regulation and higher density tend to experience more intense sound conflicts.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, the findings show that religious noise in Port Harcourt exists at the intersection of faith, space, and governance. For religious actors, sound is a vital expression of identity and devotion. For residents, it can be a source of disturbance and stress. Between these positions lies a field of negotiation shaped by social relationships, spatial conditions, and weak regulatory enforcement.

Interview excerpts highlight that neither side is entirely inflexible. Religious leaders often adjust practices when approached, while residents demonstrate a degree of tolerance rooted in

shared cultural and religious values. However, this balance is fragile and uneven, particularly in densely populated areas.

Conclusion

This study has examined the complex relationship between “sacred sounds” and “civic quiet” within the context of Port Harcourt’s urban governance, drawing on both existing scholarship and empirical insights from the field. The literature reviewed underscores that religious sound is not merely a by-product of worship but a deeply embedded cultural and spiritual practice that affirms identity, presence, and community belonging in African cities. At the same time, it highlights a growing body of work on urban soundscapes which frames noise as a public health, environmental, and governance concern, requiring regulation in increasingly dense and pluralistic urban environments.

Findings from this study reveal that in Port Harcourt, religious noise operates within a negotiated space rather than a strictly regulated one. Residents, religious institutions, and state actors continuously engage formally and informally in managing the boundaries between acceptable expression and perceived disturbance. In areas such as Diobu, Government Reserved Area (GRA) and Odili Road variations in socio-economic status, spatial organization, and population density shape how religious sounds are produced, received, and contested. While some residents view amplified worship as an essential expression of faith, others interpret it as an infringement on their right to rest, privacy, and a healthy environment.

Notably, the study finds that regulatory frameworks exist but are unevenly enforced, often mediated by political considerations, community tolerance, and the influence of religious organizations. This results in a pattern of selective compliance and negotiated enforcement rather than consistent application of environmental laws. Consequently,

governance of religious noise in Port Harcourt is less about strict control and more about balancing competing rights freedom of religion on one hand, and the right to peace and quiet on the other.

In all, the tension between sacred sounds and civic quiet in Port Harcourt is not simply a conflict to be resolved, but a dynamic process to be managed. Sustainable urban governance in this context requires context-sensitive policies, inclusive dialogue among stakeholders, and adaptive enforcement mechanisms that recognize both the cultural significance of religious expression and the necessity of maintaining livable urban environments.

Recommendations

Drawing from the literature reviewed and the empirical findings of the study on Sacred Sounds vs Civic Quiet: Negotiating Religious Noise in Port Harcourt City Governance, the paper suggests these recommendations :

1. **Strengthen and Clarify Regulatory Frameworks:** There is a need for clearer, context-sensitive noise regulations that specifically address religious sound. Existing environmental and public health laws should be updated to define acceptable decibel levels, permissible hours, and enforcement procedures, while recognizing the cultural and spiritual significance of religious practices. This reduces ambiguity and limits selective enforcement.
2. **Promote Dialogue and Stakeholder Engagement:** City authorities should facilitate regular forums that bring together religious leaders, residents, environmental officials, and community associations. These platforms can help negotiate acceptable sound practices and foster mutual understanding. Participatory governance encourages compliance and reduces conflict more effectively than top-down enforcement.
3. **Encourage Self-Regulation within Religious Institutions:** Religious organizations should be encouraged to adopt internal guidelines on sound use, including moderating volume levels, limiting late-night activities, and investing in soundproofing technologies. Faith-based leadership plays a crucial role in shaping responsible practices among congregants.
4. **Invest in Public Awareness Campaigns:** Government and civil society organizations should educate the public on the health and social impacts of noise pollution. Awareness campaigns can reframe excessive noise as a shared urban concern rather than a purely religious or cultural issue, promoting collective responsibility.
5. **Strengthen Institutional Capacity for Monitoring and Enforcement:** Relevant agencies, such as environmental protection bodies, require better equipment, training, and logistical support to monitor noise levels and enforce regulations effectively. Transparent enforcement mechanisms will help build public trust and ensure fairness across different groups.



6. **Integrate Urban Planning with Sound Management:** Urban planning policies should incorporate soundscape considerations by designating appropriate zones for religious activities and ensuring adequate spatial buffers between worship centers and residential areas. This long-term approach reduces friction as cities expand.
7. **Adopt Technological Solutions:** The use of modern sound management technologies—such as directional speakers, decibel monitoring devices, and acoustic insulation—should be promoted. Government incentives or partnerships can support religious institutions in adopting these innovations.
8. **Establish Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Local mediation committees or community-based dispute resolution systems should be created to address noise-related complaints promptly. This helps prevent escalation into broader social or religious tensions.
9. **Ensure Equity and Non-Discrimination in Enforcement:** Regulatory actions must be applied uniformly across all religious groups to avoid perceptions of bias or marginalization. Fair enforcement is critical for maintaining social cohesion in a religiously plural urban environment.
10. **Support Further Research and Data Collection:** Continuous research on urban soundscapes, public health impacts, and governance responses should be encouraged. Reliable data will help policymakers design evidence-based interventions and adapt to evolving urban dynamics.

References

- Adekola, O., & Mitchell, G. (2011). The Niger Delta wetlands: Threats to ecosystem services, their importance to dependent communities and possible management measures. *International Journal of Biodiversity Science, Ecosystem Services & Management*, 7(1), 50-68.
- Adewale, O. O. (2018). Environmental noise pollution in Nigerian cities: Issues and challenges. *Journal of Environmental Management and Safety*, 9(2), 45-58.
- Agbola, T., & Agunbiade, E. M. (2009). Urbanization, slum development and security of tenure: The challenges of meeting Millennium Development Goal 7 in metropolitan Lagos, Nigeria. *Urban Population-Environment Dynamics in the Developing World*, 77-106.
- Ajayi, O. O. (2020). Environmental regulation and noise pollution control in Nigeria. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Law*, 50(2), 123-135.
- Akinola, S. R. (2019). Urban governance and environmental challenges in Nigeria. *African Journal of Public Administration*, 11(1), 45-60.
- Akinyemi, O., & Adejumo, T. (2021). Urban environmental challenges in Nigeria: A focus on noise pollution and public health. *African Journal of Environmental Studies*, 15(1), 88–102.



- Anyanwu, C. N. (1985). The growth of Port Harcourt: 1912–1960. *Cities*, 2(1), 14–23. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751\(85\)90058-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751(85)90058-7).
- Appleby, R. S. (2000). *The ambivalence of the sacred: Religion, violence, and reconciliation*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Asad, T. (2003). *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford University Press.
- Augoyard, J. F., & Torgue, H. (2005). *Sonic experience: A guide to everyday sounds*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Bull, M. (2000). *Sounding out the city: Personal stereos and the management of everyday life*. Berg.
- Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.
- De Boeck, F., & Plissart, M.-F. (2004). *Kinshasa: Tales of the invisible city*. Leuven University Press.
- Díaz Olvera, L., Plat, D., & Pochet, P. (2020). *Urban mobility and environmental challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa*. *Transport Policy*, 94, 1–9.
- Eisenstadt, S. N. (2000). Multiple modernities. *Daedalus*, 129(1), 1–29.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2024). Port Harcourt. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Port-Harcourt>.
- Eze, A. C., & Eze, I. C. (2022). Noise pollution and urban health challenges in Nigerian cities. *Journal of Environmental Health Research*, 12(1), 60–74.
- Falola, T. (1998). *Violence in Nigeria: The crisis of religious politics and secular ideologies*. University of Rochester Press.
- Falola, T., Genova, A., & Heaton, M. M. (2018). *Historical dictionary of Nigeria*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gaffney, P. D. (2014). The mosque, the state, and the modern Islamic movement. In *Islamic urban studies*.
- Gandy, M. (2014). The acoustic city. *Sound Studies*, 1(1), 1–14.
- Gandy, M. (2014). The acoustic city. *Sound Studies*, 1(1), 1–3.
- Gandy, M. (2017). Urban atmospheres and the politics of sound. *Jovis*.
- Gandy, M. (2017). Urban atmospheres. *Cultural Geographies*, 24(3), 353–374.
- Habermas, J. (2006). Religion in the public sphere. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14(1), 1–25.
- Hackett, R. I. J. (2012). Sound, spirit, and the politics of listening in Nigeria. *Africa*, 82(4), 537