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'The road is blocked': notions of sound and silence in the Ga Hɔmɔwɔ festival, a Teshie perspective

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Abstract

Since the early 2000s the literature on the Ga code of silence, or what is often referred to as a ban on drumming and noise-making, has focused predominantly on the violent clashes that emerge between the Ga Traditional Council, and Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Accra during the commemoration of the annual Ga Hɔmɔwɔ harvest festival. With most scholars perceiving the code as a ritual that instigates conflict, it has become a dominant point of reference for discussing conflict-related matters in Accra and Ghana in general. My interest here, however, is not to examine the code in relation to the conflicts it incites. As a 'native researcher' and ethnomusicologist, my findings suggest that the Ga code is about more than provoking conflict or settling scores with churches or non-Ga residents in Accra. The code presents selective Ga communities with an opportune moment to undergo a degree of introspection through the mediation on indigenous notions of sound and silence so as to renew themselves. In this article, I explore from a Teshie perspective the notions of the code and how it impacts the music performances of the Hɔmɔwɔ festival. I argue that the Ga code, to borrow from Turner (1979), is a 'frame' within which Ga society is enabled to inspect itself.

Introduction

Between May and September every year, several indigenous Ga towns in Accra individually enforce a ritual code of silence, also described as a ban on drumming and noise-making, on their communities to commemorate the Hɔmɔwɔ festival.¹ This annual harvest festival, the name of which means 'to hoot at hunger', is celebrated by the towns of Ga Mashie, Osu, La, Teshie and Tema. Several scholarly works have been published on the code of silence since the early 2000s. Most of these writings are based on topics such as 'Contesting silence: The ban on drumming and the musical politics of Pentecostalism in Ghana' (Van Dijk 2001), 'Identities, inequalities and conflicts in Ghana' (Tsikata & Seini 2004), 'Accra's sounds and sacred spaces' (De Witte 2008), 'Ethnicity, religion, and conflict in Ghana: The roots of

1 This article is based on research conducted for my Master's degree (see Akwetteh 2017).

Ga nativism' (Asante 2011), 'Ga marginalization and social transformation' (Webb 2015), and *The Politics of Religious Sound: Conflict and the Negotiation of Religious Diversity in Ghana* (Arthur 2018). They address the clashes that ensue between Ga natives, on the one hand, and non-Ga residents, Pentecostal churches and Charismatic churches, on the other, during the annual observance of the code.² The narrative often stresses the transformation of Accra into a capital city and an international hub in West Africa with a multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan society, or a modern multicultural city with noisy religious practices and nightlife.

In this article, I do not wish to examine the code of silence in the light of the violent clashes that emerge between Ga natives and non-Ga residents, Pentecostal churches and Charismatic churches. Nor do I seek to investigate the code from the perspective that it incites conflicts. I am interested in how the code of silence and the traditional music performances it evokes enable Ga society to renew itself. This article explores the indigenous notions of the code and how it impacts on the traditional music performances of the Ga *Hɔmɔwɔ* festival from a Teshie perspective. I argue that the Ga code is neither simply a ban on drumming and noise-making, nor a period of quietude aimed at inciting conflicts. Rather, to borrow from Turner (1979), it is a 'frame' within which Ga society is enabled to undergo a degree of introspection through the mediation of indigenous notions of sound and silence.

Hɔmɔwɔ is a harvest festival that celebrates the transition from the lean season of deprivation to the season of plenty (Amanor 2020). According to Kilson, it

occurs within a timeless period when ordinary activities of day-to-day life, from gaining and living to engaging in interpersonal animosities, are suspended [...] Among the Ga ceremonies, only *Hɔmɔwɔ* belongs to all Ga people [...] And although participation in traditional Ga cults or in Christian congregations may be associated with socioeconomic differences among Ga, all participate in *Hɔmɔwɔ*, whatever their social status. (Kilson 2012:92–93)

Whereas Ga towns such as Teshie, Nungua and La refer to the rite performed to institute the code of silence as *gbemlilaa* (road blocking), Ga Mashie, Tema and Osu know the code as *ɲmaadumɔ* (millet sowing). *Gbemlilaa* is the name used for the opening ceremony of the Teshie and La *Hɔmɔwɔ* festival (Kropp Dakubu 2009 [1973]:79). Once instituted, the people say '*ala gbemli*' ('the road is blocked') to notify both Ga and non-Ga residents of the stringent customary demands of the sacred period. The *gbemlilaa* ceremony provides Ga society with a period of tranquillity, meditation and communion with Ga autochthonic deities as they descend from their homes in the Ajangote mountain to the towns below (Field 1961 [1937]; Sackey 2001; Laryea 2004; Nii-Dortey 2012). In an interview with Nii Nortey Tuaka II (2016), the Head Captain of Teshie, he explained how the code forbids the Ga to die, prohibits the pronouncing of curses or summons to a deity, and marks a time

2 Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are types of Christian churches often 'noted for their livelier forms of worship, involving drumming and dancing, as well as clapping of hands, shouting, and other signs of an intensely emotional religious experience' (Asante 2011:82).

to reveal good and bad deeds. *Gbemlilaa* further represents a time to exchange goodwill messages and to critique humans and deities.

Methods of data collection

Research was undertaken between 2016 and 2018 in Teshie, a suburb of Accra. Data-collection methods included structured, in-person interviews as well as participant observation and personal communication. Interviews were based mainly on purposive sampling and shaped by an exploration of, among other things, the Ga conceptualisation of silence and noise; the actual meaning of the code of silence; why it is adhered to with such strict observance; and whether it is aimed at seeking vengeance on non-Ga residents in Accra. The investigation also sought to ascertain the impact of the code on the socio-political and religious lives of the Teshie community. The research involved nine ritual experts who fully participated in the performance of the *gbemlilaa* ceremony and other religious rituals in the HŌmŌwŌ festival. Because traditional knowledge expands beyond religious authorities, seven non-traditional religious adherents were also purposively included (Table 1). These are Ga Christians who have lived in the Ga tradition and participated in its religious ceremonies.

The ritual experts and non-traditional religious adherents listed in Table 1 also recommended other interlocutors for further interviews. These individuals not only have in-depth knowledge of the HŌmŌwŌ festival, but have witnessed the complete festival for at least three decades (Table 2).

Table 1: Ritual experts and non-traditional religious adherents interviewed

Ritual experts	Number	Gender	Age (years)
Priests	3	Male	40–80
Mediums	2	Female	45 & 73
Traditional military brigade members	2	Male	40 & 55
Ritual musicians	2	Male	50 & 63
Non-traditional religious adherents			
Clerics	7	Male (5); Female (2)	53–88

Table 2: Additional ritual experts and non-traditional religious adherents included

Ritual experts	Number	Gender	Age (years)
Priests	1	Male	60
Musicians	1	Male	80
Assistants	3	Male (2); Female (1)	35–44
Non-traditional religious adherents			
Clerics	1	Male	90

Table 3: Personal communication with academics and non-academics

Interlocutors	Number	Gender	Age (years)
Academics	5	Male	36–80
Non-academics	2	Male (1); Female (1)	46 & 88

I also engaged in personal communication with academics from the University of Ghana, Legon and non-academics from the Teshie community (Table 3). Some of these were non-Ga individuals who also observed a similar ritual code in their native communities.

Participant observation here does not refer to actual involvement in the *gbemlilaa* ritual since inclusion is solely based on one's position as a qualified ritual expert of the larger *gbemlilaa* community. Rather, my notion of participation is based on two positions: as a member of the senior priest's lineage and a relation of his personal assistant and medium; and as an indigene who lives in the researched community and has access to ritual sites and spaces. In this regard, the employment of participant observation is based on my personal knowledge of the community's traditions and language usages, observation of its religious rituals since childhood, shared relation with specific ritual experts, access to ritual spaces which are inaccessible to non-natives, and participation in the annual festive music performances. Chiener (2002:458) describes this position as a 'native researcher' or 'researchers who are themselves already experienced [...] within the tradition that they subsequently choose to investigate [...]'. Secondary sources in the form of academic literature have been used to position the primary research data within the wider discourse.

A note on Teshie

Teshie, which lies west of Ga Mashie, Osu and La, and east of Nungua and Tema, shares borders with La and Nungua. It is not only the last Ga town to be established, but the only settler community within the larger Ga-Dangme area. Like other Ga towns, Teshie is essentially an agrarian society with hardworking individuals in accordance with the prevailing societal standards, even though its inhabitants still earn low-level incomes. The town is composed of five quarters (Kle, Lenshie, Krobo, Agbawe and Gbugbla), shrines, political offices and religious institutions that constitute what is described as the *gbemlilaa* ritual community. According to two of the traditional priests interviewed, the ritual community consists of three categories of ritual experts (Ayiku & Opeko 2016).³ Those referred to as *yitse* (heads) include priests, male and female mediums, ritual musicians (*amlakui*), male and female members of the traditional brigade companies, the senior priest's acolyte (*laabia*) and Ga autochthonic deities. These ritual experts completely participate in the *gbemlilaa* ceremony. The second group, who assist only with parts of the ritual ceremony, are called *yeli ke buabi* and consist of the ritual hoe bearers (*hulbi*) of the individual quarters and children believed to be reincarnated priests. The third and final category simply observe the *gbemlilaa*

³ Ayiku is from the Gbugbla quarter of Teshie.

ceremony and is composed of the town’s traditional executive body or *akulashin*.⁴ It includes the king (*mantse*), traditional secretary (*shikiteli*), head of the traditional council (*akwashon̄tse*), caretaker of the town (*mankralo*), treasurer (*atofotse*), the head captain (*shippi*), chief fisherman (*woleiatse*) and leaders of the traditional councils of the town’s quarters (*dzaasetsem̄ei*).

Traditional musical groups described as *aflaŋai* or ‘flags’ emerged from all five quarters of Teshie some time after the town was established in 1710. From the period of their emergence until the present only seven of these groups (Kɔɔle Wɔko, Gbee Matele, Mind You, Six, Tafo Ye Feo, Ghana, and Greece) remain recognised by the community. According to Kumah (2016), an *amlaku* ritual musician of Teshie, these traditional music groups are credited with the introduction and performance of *kpasɔkpa*, a musical style dedicated to commenting on the community and its members’ behaviour amidst stylistic stomping of the feet. The *kpasɔkpa* designation is, however, now uncommon as community members prefer the name *kpashimɔ*, the local term for feet-stomping during *kpa* music performance. The aim of *kpashimɔ* performances and songs during the festive season is to renew the community’s socio-political and religious lives. *Kpashimɔ* performances and songs are exclusively vocal, unaccompanied by any musical instruments, and in a call-and-response format. Ranging from binary to ternary and even to through-composed form, the songs are often composed in the diatonic scale and only occasionally in the pentatonic. They are textually and musically made up of repeated phrases that have iconic relationships with current issues, making it easier for the audience to follow the storylines.

New musical groups continue to emerge during the Hŏmŏwŏ festival. To the older generations, however, these groups have deviated from traditional societal standards of decorum in their usage of profane music texts and costumes during *kpashimɔ* performances. One of my interlocutors, the mother of the present senior priest, reiterates that ‘they are renegades destroying a long-cherished tradition of music-making ritual meant to renew the community’ (Atswei 2017). Among these new musical groups and the *aflaŋai* is one called ‘Airport’, the first of its kind to emerge in Teshie. Airport is not affiliated with any of the five quarters of the town and does not require special costumes for the *kpashimɔ* performance. Its membership consists of the educated elite in society, most of them non-Ga individuals from both inside and outside Teshie. Over the years, Airport has earned the admiration of the town due to its respect for the *aflaŋai*.

Until the induction of Gbetsɔɔɔ Nii Ashitey Akomfra III in 2014, Teshie had been without a king for over two decades. During this period, when one of the three royal houses attempted to instate a king, a violent conflict ensued among royals. The most recent clash occurred in 2015 when Lɛnshie, one of the three houses of the royal quarter, was alleged to have hired a group from outside Teshie to fight the opposition, who were in the process of instating a king. In addition to this conflict, community members have

4 The office of the senior priest is both religious and political. In this category of performers, however, he does not form part of those in the background because of the role he plays during the performance of the ritual code of silence.

witnessed violent clashes in the Kle quarter of the senior priest, when a faction of the house attempted to overthrow the newly elected priest in 2019. These conflicts are so violent that people sometimes flee their homes for days or even weeks while the military attempts to impose calm. The clashes are not peculiar to Teshie, however, as they manifest every year in almost all Ga towns, especially during the annual Hɔ̀mɔ̀wɔ̀ festivities. In many instances, the code and the rituals associated with this, serve as an immediate cause of the conflicts. There are underlying, simmering chieftaincy disputes throughout the year that often serve as remote causes of such conflicts. What seems to always bring people together, however, is the Hɔ̀mɔ̀wɔ̀ festival, its associated *gbemlilaa* ceremonies and traditional musical performances, all of which require participation from every quarter.

The *gbemlilaa* ceremony is an activity that has been incorporated into Teshie cultural history relatively recently. According to an *amlaku* ritual musician, during the reign of the 14th Teshie King Ashitey Akomfra II (1916–1937), a delegation was sent from Teshie to La to negotiate and institute the process of the town's complete breakaway, and included the *gbemlilaa* ceremony (Achimore 2015). After Teshie finally gained its autonomy, the ritual was established and performed solely to affect the immediate environment of the five quarters occupied by the ritual players.⁵ But the situation has changed since then. Not all ritual players reside within the immediate ritual environment, with some of them living over 10 kilometres away, which is why the stringent demands of the code now affect the whole community. In present-day Teshie, the use of public address (PA) systems is a major part of everyday life because of the weekly funerary activities, child-naming ceremonies, or the celebration of youth group achievements. The use of these PA systems also ceases for the month's observance of the code of silence. Other activities such as hawking, the selling of products through megaphones, and industrial or mechanical work automatically subside too. Sellers of audio and video recordings on the streets continue to operate by purposefully replacing the playing of popular music genres with *kpashimɔ̀* songs. But the extent of such observances varies from one Ga town to another. In Nungua, for instance, the code lasts for only one week, but with more stringent demands, especially during the observance of the ritual night (*ajeekpo*), which is meant to usher deities and ancestors into the town. The town's residents are strictly advised to stay indoors while observing total silence. I learnt from correspondence with Adjeley (2015), a native of Teshie who once domiciled in Nungua while growing up in the 1970s, that even urination in a bedroom must be done with care as the sound can attract the attention of ritual officials purifying the town in their bid to meet the spirit beings. Adjeley (2015) stresses that 'it is highly religious'.

Gbemlilaa is a public meta-social rite that makes use of quotidian spaces as its stage. The issues dealt with during performance are done 'in full view of everyone, as they are not

5 It is not surprising that Field never mentioned the Teshie *gbemlilaa* ritual despite her in-depth research on the Ga, which was first published in 1937. Her assertion that the 'head god' of Teshie (called *ayiku*) still acknowledges the supremacy of Lakpa and that such acknowledgement would cease once Teshie completely broke away from La, 'which it is trying to do', suggests that she witnessed the ongoing negotiations (Field 1961 [1937]:75).

secret affairs [...] protected from profanation’ (Turner 1979:467). In present-day Teshie the performance attracts both Ga and non-Ga residents, traditionalists and Christians, as well as non-Ghanaians. While the Ga in general, the majority of whom may be Christians, may easily shun the *gbemlilaa* ceremony and some of its related religious rituals, their reverence for the ritual is evident during the week of the Hŏmŏwŏ proper. During this time, families gather in ancestral homes to eat festive food, resolve problems, take stock of happenings in the year, offer libation prayers to ancestors, find better ways to forge ahead as a lineage, and exchange goodwill messages constructed within the context of traditional knowledge. Eliade (1959:69) rightly argues that festivals enable a ‘reactualization’ of a people’s history and customs.

Beneath the gbemlilaa ritual

Gbemlilaa is a complex ceremony that consists of several ritual players, religious sites and shrines, and ritual practices, some of which do not necessarily occur on the day of the ritual proper. In the light of the main argument of this article, that *gbemlilaa* is more than just a ban on drumming and noise-making or a period of silence designed to antagonise non-Ga residents in Accra, this section presents an analysis of the three ritual segments that characterise *gbemlilaa*.

According to Osrana (2015), the medium of the senior priest of Teshie, the ritual proper can be divided into three distinct segments that together form the complete rite.

In segment one, the Senior Priest performs the *ŋmatsu* cleansing ritual called *maŋtsukŏmŏ*. Afterwards, he proceeds with another one-round libation prayer called *ŋkpaiyeli* to mark the second segment. In segment three the *hulbi*, senior priest, *amlakui* and the supposed incarnates perform a three-round path-clearing ritual called *gbejee*. (Osrana 2015)

The social significance of segment one, the *maŋtsukŏmŏ* cleansing ritual, is realised in how the Ga *tsukŏmŏ* expression applies to steaming or smoking activities. This includes *hetsukŏmŏ* (steaming of one’s body with medicinal vapour), *maŋtsukŏmŏ* (cleansing a town or community with *ŋmatsu* smoke), *lootsukŏmŏ* (wood smoking of fish for preservation), and *nutsukŏmŏ* (using smoke to disinfect drinking water and enhance its taste with *ŋmeasra*).⁶ It is worth noting that in many West African spiritual traditions, entering a sacred space requires the removal of Western-style clothes, watches and other modern articles in favour of naturally constructed alternatives. The employment of smoke from ancient palm tree fibres in cleaning the town may signify the resurfacing of deep cultural roots and, by extension, a rejection of modern products and lifestyles. Based on the iconic relationship this segment forms with the everyday *tsukŏmŏ* activities of the Ga, it is evident that beneath the *mantsukŏmŏ* rite lie thoughts of preservation, purification, good taste and healing.

Similarly, the importance of the *ŋkpaiyeli* second segment is understood by how the Ga’s

6 *Ŋmatsu* are natural, ancient fibres of an indigenous palm tree.

application of the affix ‘*yeli*’ (eating) relates to socio-political and religious activities such as *niyeli* (the eating of food), *afiyeli* or *yeleyeli* (commemoration), *ηkpaiyeli* (libation prayer), *lumoyeli* (political officeholding), *nyonyeli* (slavery) and *jarayeli* (trading). In this regard, the *nkpaiyeli* segment highlights the extent to which the Ga pray to their ancestors and deities for the physical, psychological, political and religious sustenance of society. Prayers for peace in the town and nation, as well as the welfare of all non-Ga residents (referred to as *gbɔi*) who have come to witness the festival or domicile in Teshie, are also offered during this segment.

Although scholars such as Field (1961 [1937]), Nii-Dortey (2012) and Ammah (2016) rightly represent the term ‘*gbe*’ as a road or path, its use in *gbemlilaa* stems from the Ga word ‘*hegbe*’ which literally means authority, right or privilege. Its usage in Ga ritual contexts, according to Tettey (2016), has nothing to do with a physical road or the blocking thereof,⁷ but is rather applied as a metaphor (Kropp Dakubu 2016). The original expressions are ‘*hegbemlilaa*’ (blocking of authority) or ‘*ala hegbe mli*’ (the authority is or has been blocked) – phrases that mark a time when the authority of deities is blocked until the code is lifted. The present *ala gbemli* designation or road-blocking is ‘a creation inherited and passed on to this generation [...] *so a so* (meaning it was crafted)’ (Kumah 2016).

The road or path concept in coastal West African languages, ranging from Ga to Yoruba, is recognised by practitioners and academics as having a metaphorical connection with spiritual life, as observed in Field (1961 [1937]) and Nii-Dortey (2012). The Ga believe that *gbejee* (literally translated to mean road-clearing or path-clearing) as the final segment of the *gbemlilaa* ritual proper ‘clears the path’ for both humans and spirits to go through a degree of self-examination. Festivals indeed mark the closing of one ritual year with all its shortcomings and accomplishments, and usher in a new one (Nii-Dortey 2012). They may symbolise a period of ‘ritual reversal’ during which statements are made in speech or in song about ‘the social order – to affirm it, attack it, suspend it, redefine it, oppose it, buttress it, emphasize one part of it at the cost of another, and so forth’ (Myerhoff 1983:231).

Ga notions of sound, death, silence and noise

Within the *gbemlilaa* ritual frame, innocuous sounds from handclapping, musical instruments, playing traditional games and even large-scale frying of fish are all perceived as symbolic noise and thus prohibited. Yet the loud blaring noise of *kpashimɔ* songs on PA systems is allowed throughout the festive season. The Ga code is thus not an absolute negation of sound but, to borrow John Cage’s words, ‘include[s] sounds and more and more’ (Kahn 1997:558). These particular sounds are distinguished from everyday sound and silence through the complementary rituals of *gbemlilaa* and *gbemlilaa gb’lemɔ*.⁸

7 Tettey is a Ga historian and retired reverend minister of the Presbyterian church of Ghana.

8 *Gbemlilaa gb’lemɔ* is the rite performed to lift the code *gbemlilaa* institutes.

Sound

Ga society considers any activity perceptible by ear as *gbɛemɔ*. Spoken comments and actual practices within the space of the code suggest that Ga people privilege certain sound qualities. They believe that within the *gbɛmlilaa* frame, every sound must promote the Hŏmŏwŏ festival. Sound from gadgets, speech, eating, drumming, footsteps, songs, urinating, slaps, beatings, flatulence, whistling, etc. are prohibited on the night after the *gbɛmlilaa* ceremony, when ritual experts gather to commune with spirit beings. Throughout the festive season, however, greetings such as *afiooooooofi* (happy new year), *walaeeee ee wala* (life in abundance) *omanyeeeee ee omanyee* (goodwill, success, peace) and *ηɔ wala, ηɔ wala* (receive life, receive life) are regularly heard as residents seek to give life, blessings, goodwill and reconciling messages to one another. These sounds may be accompanied with handshakes, or in the case of the people of La, the hugging of individuals regardless of their dress, position, religion or ethnicity.

On the contrary, a sound (whether in speech or song) that does not promote the Hŏmŏwŏ is perceived as unproductive and thus ‘dead’. To better understand this idea of unproductivity, the Ga use the term ‘*gbonyo*’ (a dead person) as an affix to describe a bad or offensive person (*gbɔmɔ gbonyo*), character (*suban gbonyo*), law (*mɩa gbonyo*), activity (*nɔ gbonyo*), etc. The Ga community thus establishes an iconic relationship based on the resemblance between death and unproductivity. Songs such as ‘*J J Sɔpɔta Ashikishan Pioto Awole Parazo Ashikishan Pioto*’ (‘J J Rawlings’s Underpants are Sewn from a Bleached Wheat Flour Bag or Sack’), which are composed to insult, are in this regard labelled as unproductive or *kpa gbonyo*, a dead *kpa*.⁹

Not only is a dead sound prohibited by the code, but *gbɛmlilaa* also forbids a dead person from being taken across the Kpeshie and Sango Lagoons during the Teshie Hŏmŏwŏ.¹⁰ It is seen as taboo and a curse to die within the Hŏmŏwŏ space. Any Ga who dies at this time is said to have ‘died on the day death is forbidden’, and s/he must be buried immediately without any mourning (Tuaka 2016). In Teshie, the only funerary rite observed for a Ga individual who dies during Hŏmŏwŏ is the general practice meant to cleanse the town of the undesirable event.¹¹ As expressed in the Ga word ‘*efite*’, it is believed that a dead person (*gbonyo*), like spoiled food, is unclean and unfit to encounter the sacred. Christian individuals, however, keep the deceased in mortuaries until the end of the festive period, when they can start to plan funerary activities. Non-indigenes are allowed to do likewise,

9 During his tenure as president of Ghana, Jerry John Rawlings attempted to suspend the Teshie Hŏmŏwŏ festival, as he successfully did for the people of La due to chieftaincy disputes. This then is a *kpashimɔ* song composed in the 1990s as commentary against the actions of Rawlings.

10 Kpeshie Lagoon is situated between Teshie and La. It belongs to the people of La and forms part of their deities. Sango Lagoon, situated at the Teshie landing beach, is the only lagoon between Teshie and Nungua. It originally belonged to the people of Nungua.

11 See the book *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People* by Field (1961 [1937]) for a vivid account of what happens not only to those who die during the Ga Hŏmŏwŏ festival, but also the deceased’s family.

or cross the Kpeshie and Sango Lagoons with the deceased to their hometowns. These are the only people exempted from the curse or taboo and the consequent hurried burial in Ga society.

Silence

The Ga notion of silence within the Teshie *gbemtilaa* ritual frame is, primarily, concerned with issues that have been ‘left to idle’, waiting for the opportune moment to be unearthed. It is ‘all of the sound we don’t intend’ (Kahn 1997:558). As broad and encompassing as they can be, these matters are described by the Ga as *sajii ni awɔnɔ* (issues that have been slept on) and believed to be matters that threaten the peace and stability of the town. They include interpersonal or family issues, matters concerning local authorities, national and political topics, etc. *Sajii ni awɔnɔ* are considered as (unproductive) noise in ordinary life and thus no one addresses them. But, this logic is reversed during the observance of the code as these issues that have been left to idle or *sajii ni awɔnɔ* become acceptable and productive. They constitute the primary compositional resources for *kpashimɔ* groups, are set to memorable tunes with well-crafted texts, and discussed publicly and fearlessly by the music groups. The manner in which they are awakened and commented upon — how they avoid negative speech and conflict — confirms Peek’s argument (2013:5) that ‘silence is the supreme virtue, a type of wisdom that subsumes integrity, courage, the power of the soul, prudence, modesty, and temperance’.

In 2016, for example, the *kpashimɔ* group called Ghana composed a song to reprimand a particular deity that was constantly demanding blood sacrifice in Teshie (see Table 4 for the textual transcription). By simply listening to the call-and-response phrases in the first section, the audience is tempted to assume that the entire song is in praise of the Manjaranɔ shrine.¹² The chorus’s response, however, reminds the community of the role of its deities. Line 5 and 6 are indexical, for based on its context the community understands that deities at the Manjaranɔ shrine are benevolent and clean in contrast to those at shrines such as the one in Obeney We, which are malevolent and unclean.¹³ In Section B, the performers draw both a physical and religious contrast between the big Manjaranɔ shrine and the small shrine of Obeney We. The question posed by the chorus in line 7 does not suggest that they are unaware of the origin of the deity, but rather that they seek to know something beyond the obvious.

Another *kpashimɔ* song that exemplifies *sajii ni awɔnɔ* is ‘*Wɔye Man Ko*’ (‘We are Living in a Strange Town’), which was composed by the group Greece in 2015 (see Table 5 for the textual transcription). In this song, the performers express the consequence of living in a community without a king. To indexically indicate all the other dangers the town is bound to encounter, they embellish the Ga word ‘*aagbo*’ with the modifier ‘*sɔnni*’ (translated

12 Manjaranɔ shrine is the only one that belongs to the entire community rather than a specific quarter or house.

13 This shrine belongs to the people of Obeney We and regularly has blood sprinkled over it.

Table 4: Textual transcription of 'Manjaraw Otutu' by Ghana

Section A	Section A
1. Cantor: <i>Manjaraw Otutu ooo, Manjaraw Otutu ooo</i>	1. Manjaraw shrine ooo, Manjaraw shrine ooo
2. Chorus: <i>Manjaraw Otutu ooo, ke eshe afi, le ebua wɔhe</i>	2. It is the Manjaraw shrine ooo, that protects us during the annual festival
3. Cantor: <i>Leeleɛ, Manjaraw Otutu ooo, Manjaraw Otutu ooo</i>	3. Truly, Manjaraw shrine ooo, Manjaraw shrine ooo
4. Chorus: <i>Manjaraw Otutu ooo, ke eshe afi, le ebua wɔhe</i>	4. It is the Manjaraw shrine ooo, that protects us during the annual festival
Section B	Section B
5. Cantor: <i>Otutu bibioo, bibioo oo eee</i>	5. A small shrine, small oo eee
6. Chorus: <i>Otutu bibioo ni ema Obeney We, Otutu bibioo ni ema Obeney We</i>	6. The small shrine situated at Obeney We, the small shrine situated at Obeney We
7. <i>Wɔɛbi ake nakai Otutu'ɛ negbe akeje ee ee</i>	7. We are asking where that shrine was brought from ee ee
8. <i>Ni bei ke bei feɛ ni enua la sɔɛɛ</i>	8. It is always drinking blood
Section A'	Section A'
9. Cantor: <i>Leeleɛ, Manjaraw Otutu ooo, Manjaraw Otutu ooo</i>	9. Truly, Manjaraw shrine ooo, Manjaraw shrine ooo
10. Chorus: <i>Manjaraw Otutu ooo, ke eshe afi, le ebua wɔhe</i>	10. It is the Manjaraw shrine ooo, that protects us during the annual festival

Table 5: Textual transcription of 'Wɔye Man Ko' by Greece

Section A	Section A
1-4. Cantor: <i>Wɔye man ni mantse bemli eei, aagbo sɔɛɛ</i>	1-4. We are living in a town without a king eei, people are always dying
Section B	Section B
5. Cantor: <i>Eee aanji wɔye mantse ku'e</i>	5. Eee if only we have a king
6. Chorus: <i>Ke mɔko gbe enyemi abaamɔ le awole tsu</i>	6. When someone kills his relative, he would be arrested and imprisoned
7. Cantor: <i>Eee aanji wɔye mantse ku'e</i>	7. Eee if only we have a king
8. Chorus: <i>Ke mɔko gbe enyemi abaamɔ le awole tsu</i>	8. When someone kills his relative, he would be arrested and imprisoned
Section C	Section C
9. Cantor: <i>Eee Teshie onukpai wie ake</i>	9. Eee the elders of Teshie said that
10. Chorus: <i>Akabɔ wɔɛye Teshie</i>	10. Summoning of people to a deity should cease in Teshie
11. Cantor: <i>Ee man neɛ onukpai wie ake</i>	11. Eee the town's elders said that
12. Chorus: <i>Akabɔ wɔɛye Teshie</i>	12. Summoning of people to a deity should cease in Teshie
13. <i>Bo'ɛntse onyemi tete po, ɛmene omɔ le ogbe le</i>	13. Today, you have killed your very own sibling
Section A'	Section A'
14. Cantor: <i>Wɔye manko</i>	14. We are living in a strange town
15. Chorus: <i>Wɔye man ni mantse bemli eei, aagbo sɔɛɛ</i>	15. We are living in a town without a king eei, people are always dying

as ‘always’) in lines 1 and 2. The appropriate punishment that would be given to anyone who takes the life of a relative if there was a king is then discussed in line 6 and repeated in line 8. It is not that the elders of the community do not know of such a penalty, but rather seem to overlook it because there is no king. Section B of the song therefore serves as a metonymic index and reminds the elders and community members of what was done to persons who engaged in ritual murder in the past. To the performers, the past experience of sanctioning murderers must therefore be revisited to stop the act. Section C partly gives credit to the minimal effort made by elders of the town to curb the act of ritual murders (lines 9–12). Not only have those rules been ignored, but they have not been met with the appropriate sanctions and responses, as suggested by the performers in Section B. In line 13, the performers’ employment of the word ‘sibling’ (*nyemi*) symbolically suggests any member of the community. The use of the word ‘today’ (*ɲmɛnɛ*) in the same line establishes an indexical relationship with real-life experiences of community members. In the reprise of Section A, the cantor’s expression in line 14 indicates the group’s astonishment at living in a community without a king.

By talking about *sajii ni awɔwɔ*, *kpashimɔ* songs such as these deflate people’s egos and even immobilise spiritual powers.¹⁴ Once the songs have confronted the authorities and deities and addressed all the ills that have hurt the society in the previous year, everyone hopes and believes that there will be a fresh beginning in the new year. To the Ga, this silence is ‘a present reality tied to life [...] it is a source of life since it leads to the conservation of existence which it otherwise protects’ (Peek 1994:477). Meanwhile, talking or singing about the same *sajii ni awɔwɔ* in ordinary life is an act of *hoofeemɔ* (noise-making). Within this framework, the person involved is considered *hoofeelɔ* (a noisy person) and perceived as someone without knowledge of when to keep quiet, or of the appropriate person to address an issue with. On the other hand, a person who observes this protocol is considered a *diofeelɔ* (a quiet person) and is described as wise enough to know when and how to talk. In other words, silence in Ga society, especially during *Hɔmɔwɔ*, does not suggest quietude. Similarly, noise-making is not necessarily about making a loud sound but, as discussed earlier, refers to any sound that does not promote *Hɔmɔwɔ*. Such a sound, whether in speech or song, is unproductive and does not possess the ‘extra-human or supernatural dimensions needed to facilitate its employment as a preferred medium for negotiating and normalising physical and spiritual wellbeing’ of the Teshie community (Avorgbedor 2000:21). It is dead.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper have shown that the Ga code of silence is more than a period of quietude for Ga deities, or a ban on drumming and noise-making meant to incite conflicts. Instead, the stringent demands of the code are not only an integral part of the community’s life, but are also *lived* throughout the annual festive season. Simply

14 See Akwetteh (2017) for more transcriptions of Teshie *kpashimɔ* songs.

describing the code as a ban on drumming and noise-making is therefore problematic as the expression fails to adequately convey the intended demands and expectations of the code to both non-Ga individuals and the global world who perceive Accra as a modern, multicultural city. In the *gbemlilaa* ritual context ‘not only are the rules and procedures of musical practice reversed and interrogated, but effort is also made to extend the boundaries of sound’ (Avorgbedor 2000:11). It would thus be inappropriate to say or think that nothing happens while the code is being observed. On the contrary, the things that do happen are conceptualised as silence (Agawu 1986) and ‘experienced as an embodied activity’ meant to renew society (Clifton 1976:163).

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