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## The Impact of Religious Tourism

A Case Study of Cistercian Monastery in Awlum,  
Southeastern Nigeria

OBIAGELI OKOYE

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# The Impact of Religious Tourism: A Case Study of Cistercian Monastery in Awhum, Southeastern Nigeria

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*Abstract: This paper examines the impact of religious tourism using Cistercian Monastery in Awhum as a case study. The study employed qualitative research methods such as participant observation, key informant interview, in-depth interview, and focus group discussion for data collection. It was discovered that tourists' visit to Cistercian Monastery has positive and negative impacts. The positive impacts include the provision of employment opportunities, income generation, development facilitation, and an improvement in the standard of living for members of the host community as well as spiritual benefits such as creating the opportunity and a conducive environment for tourists to establish better relationships with the Supreme Being. In addition, pilgrimage to Awhum Monastery popularizes the host community and enables religious tourists to visit other ecotourism sites within the monastery complex. The negative impacts are increased noise, crime rates, and cultic activities as well as hostility between the religious community and the host community. The author recommends sensitizing the host community to the dangers of clashes with the religious community and upgrading security.*

*Keywords: Pilgrims, Prayer, Tourism, Religious Community*

## Introduction

Tourism, the mainstay of many countries' economies, exists in various forms that include cultural tourism, ecotourism, health tourism, sport tourism, and religious tourism. Pilgrimage, a form of religious tourism, entails abdication of a regular life pattern to improve on the spiritual aspect of life. Generally, tourists embark on pilgrimage to seek salvation and physical healing. Religious tourists travel in search of the supernatural through visits to sacred sites. Religious tourism cuts across all countries and major religions of the world. Among the well-known pilgrimage destinations in the world are Rome, Lourdes, Compostela, Loretto, Fatima, Einsiedelela, Medjugorje, Czestochowa, and Guadeloupe for Christians; Mecca and Medina for Muslims; Varanasi (Benares), Allahabad, Lumbina, Leshan, and Mandalay for Buddhists and Hindus; Lhasa for Tibetan Buddhists; and Jerusalem for Christians, Jews, and Muslims (Vukonic 2000, 498). For instance, in the US alone, about 25% of the travelling public is interested in pilgrimage or faith-based tourism (Vijayanand 2012, 340).

The wave of religious tourism in Nigeria has been on the increase in recent times. Some of the places visited in the country by tourists during traditional religious festivals are Osun shrine in Osogbo, Osun State, and Arondizuogu in Imo State. Other religious activities such as conferences, retreats, and conventions attract many tourists from diverse countries to Nigeria. Instances include "The Experience," organized by House on the Rock Church in Lagos, the monthly "Holy Ghost Service" of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, numerous programs at Synagogue Church of All Nations, and monastery visits. A monastery provides a suitable environment for solitude, prayer, contemplation, ready penance, and worship of the Supreme God (Onuoha 1998). Some of the monasteries in Nigeria are Benedictine Monastery Ozubulu, Anambra State; Pascal Abbey, Nike, Enugu State, and Cistercian Monastery, Awhum, Enugu State. Cistercian Monastery is the most popular monastery visited by Christians in southeastern Nigeria. Also, the monastery is blessed with unique ecotourism sites that include a waterfall, cave, mountain, and a vast expanse of land referred to as a desert.

Religious tourism has enormous impacts on different societies and nations. It creates revenue and employment opportunities for host destinations, strengthens relationships, and enhances infrastructural development as well as contributes to the improvement of the general well-being of the people. In the same vein, religious tourism facilitates spiritual renewal of pilgrims. Hitherto, previous studies on religious tourism in Nigeria focused more on its tourism potentials and practices with scant attention to the impacts of the religious elements. The tourism implications of religious centers and belief systems in Nigeria are examined with a view to harness their potentials (Okonkwo and Nzeh 2009). Tourism potentials of Our Lady of Mount Calvary Cistercian Monastery and the experiences of pilgrims at the site have been discussed (Ukpokolo and Okoye 2013). Another study explored religious tourism in Nigeria in the context of its practice at the domestic, regional, and international levels (Asiegbu and Achunike 2014). Tourism potentials of Eyo festival are covered in another effort which established a nexus between African religion and tourism (Emmanuel 2014). Against that backdrop, the current study examined the impacts of religious tourism on Cistercian Monastery Awhum, Enugu State southeast Nigeria. It examined the extent to which the host community, religious community, and pilgrims have benefited from their visits to the monastery. The adverse effects of their visits are also investigated to engender proper management and sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in the monastery.

## Research Questions

This article addresses the following research questions.

- a. What does religious tourism in Cistercian Monastery entail?
- b. What do pilgrims gain from their visit to Cistercian Monastery?
- c. To what extent does the religious community benefited from pilgrims' visit to Cistercian Monastery?
- d. To what extent does religious tourism influence the host community?

## Literature Review: Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is a journey motivated by faith or religious reasons (Sharpley and Sundaram 2005). Pilgrimage is the most common form of religious tourism. Some religions—Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Shinto—include pilgrimages in their practices (Rot, Minkinac, and Bogdan 2014). Motivations for religious tourism include the quest for truth, enlightenment, or authentic experience with the divine or holy; another is to satisfy educational interest, such as learning more about the history of a site or understanding a particular religious faith and its culture as well as for nostalgic reasons (Olsen and Timothy 2006). There has been a rapid increase in the flow of religious tourists across the world in recent times. The sudden upsurge of public interest in religious tourism is attributed to the economic potentials of pilgrims (Olsen and Timothy 2006). Following this, host communities regard sacred places as assets that can be commodified to satisfy the quest of tourists interested in cultural and historic sites. However, the commodification fails to anticipate challenges posed by the development. Expectedly, an influx of tourists constitutes a serious challenge due to paucity of infrastructure at the tourism sites. Consequently, it has been asserted that although religious and spiritual journeys have become a key sector of international tourism, few sacred sites were built to cope with the volume and flow of today's visitation patterns and the expectations of modern-day visitors (Goral 2011). This implies that there is need to redesign religious sites to cope with the ever-increasing number of religious tourists and meet their expectations.

One of the benefits of religious tourism is that it is the greatest revenue-generating form of tourism (Karar 2010). This is probably because religious tourism cuts across all the major

religions in the world. Accordingly, Gedecho (2014) submitted that it can facilitate regional development and employment generation as well as restore cultural values as many modern evils caused by materialism can be cured with the help of religious tourism. Indeed, he further suggested that religious tourism could enhance the local community's economy while preserving the heritage of the area. This is an indication of the revenue generation and conservation capacities of religious tourism.

The Cistercian Monastery, Awhum, a pilgrimage centre located in southeast Nigeria has a serene environment due to its location at the periphery of the town. According to Turner (1974, 197): "The peripherality may be regarded as one spatial aspect of liminality found in passage ritual. A 'limen', is of course, literally a 'threshold.' A pilgrimage center, from the standpoint of the believing actor, also represents a threshold, a place and moment in and out of time, and such an actor as the evidence of, many pilgrims of many religions attests-hopes to have their direct experience of the sacred, invisible or supernatural order, either in the material aspect of miraculous healing or in the immaterial aspect of inward transformation of spirits or personality." To pilgrims, the Cistercian Monastery represents a threshold where they hope to experience supernatural healing and personal or spiritual transformation. This is in line with the submission that the most important motivation for religious tourism is to meet the spiritual needs of the religious tourists (Rot, Mikiac, and Bogdan 2014). The monastery provides a suitable environment for prayers and personal reflection for the monks and pilgrims. The eco-tourism sites located close to the monastery complex attract both religious and secular tourists. Pilgrims also visit the monastery in search of solutions to their material problems. They engage in various spiritual activities, sometimes seeking the help of the monks. As they engage in these activities, they become spiritually rejuvenated and, sometimes, receive answers to their petitions. The monks as the management of the monastery not only ensure that the facilities needed by pilgrims are put in place, but they also act as spiritual directors to pilgrims and support them with prayers. They experience spiritual fulfillment helping the pilgrims and seeing them relieved.

The monks employ individuals from within and outside the host community to cater to the needs of pilgrims during their visits. These people work as security men, porters, cleaners, and so on. Pilgrims buy religious materials and farm produce from the monks and make known the availability of these materials to the outside world. In other words, they create a bigger market for the monks and are equally publicized by the host community. Pilgrims buy food, provisions, and water containers for holy water as well as other personal items from individuals, mostly from the host community. Thus, their visit becomes an avenue for revenue generation to the members of the community. Pilgrims give food stuffs and money for thanksgiving and redemption of pledges made during prior visits to the monastery. These items are distributed as relief materials to indigent members of the host community; they are also used for community development. This is in consonance with the proposition that religious tourism can advance the local community's economy and preserve the heritage of the area (Gedecho 2014). In sum, pilgrims' visits to the Cistercian Monastery are beneficial to the monks, the pilgrims, and the host community. Each of the three stakeholders would continue to engage in religious tourism insofar as they derive individual satisfaction from it.

## Research Methodology

The study is designed as descriptive ethnography relying exclusively on qualitative methods. The choice of these methods was guided by the need to ensure originality, accuracy, and relevance of data collected to the objectives of the study. The traditional leader of Awhum, selected members of the community, religious community members, pilgrims, and some monastery staff were interviewed for this study. The rationale was to capture diverse opinions on the impacts of religious tourism on the community and gain knowledge of religious activities in the monastery. The informants were questioned on pilgrimage to the Cistercian Monastery and the extent to

which it impacts on the host community, pilgrims, and the religious community. The methods employed in data collection include the following:

- Participant observation: the researcher joined a group of pilgrims during visits to the monastery and this enabled her to observe daily activities in the monastery.
- Key informant interview: the researcher conducted interviews with people who hold important positions in the monastery and Awhum community and are knowledgeable about pilgrimage to the monastery. These included the guest monk, the chief security officer, the traditional leader of Awhum, and some of his cabinet.
- In-depth interview: the researcher intensively questioned some monastery staff and pilgrims on the subject under study.
- Focus group discussions: the researcher conducted focus group discussions with groups of pilgrims and members of Awhum community to gather divergent opinions on pilgrims' visits to the monastery and their impact on the pilgrims and members of the host community.

The population sample included fifteen members of the local community comprising the traditional leader and selected cabinet, ten members of the religious community (selected from the monks and staff of the monastery), and twenty-five pilgrims. A purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the monks and staff of the monastery whereas random sampling was adopted in selecting pilgrims. The pilgrims were interviewed to ascertain the purpose of their visits and the extent to which their visits had impacted them. A snowball approach was adopted in selecting informants from the local community. The focus group discussion was in five sessions consisting of between six and eight participants in each session. The rationale for focus group discussions was to obtain a range of opinions on the subject being studied. Interviews were conducted in Igbo and English depending on the choice of the informant. Data were also elicited from secondary sources such as magazines, textbooks, journals, websites, and newspapers. Descriptive and interpretative analyses were employed in data analysis. The major limitation of this work is that the monks were not easily accessible due to their way of life. The fieldwork for this study was carried out between December 2009 and March 2010.

## Study Area

Awhum is a rural community in Udi Local Government of Enugu State, Nigeria. It is approximately 24 kilometers from Enugu, the state capital. It consists of eight villages (Isiogwu, Amani/Ama-abo, Ibite Uwa-enu, Umuoka, Obegu/Amachara, Akparata/Amaudara, Amaofia-ni-Ibite, Enu Awhum). His Royal Highness Onyebuchi Ugwu Chimere I of Awhum is the community leader. The population of the Awhum community is predominantly Christian. However, few members are adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion. The establishment of Our Lady of Mount Calvary Cistercian Monastery has encouraged the growth of religious tourism, which is the mainstay of the community's economy. The Cistercian Monastery, Awhum, was established by the late Most Reverend Godfrey Okoye and Reverend Father Abraham Ojefua on May 7, 1970, at the Holy Ghost Novitiate House in Awo-Omamma, Imo State, southeast Nigeria. On May 15, 1970, the monastery was moved to Awhum in Enugu State, Nigeria. Initially, the monks lived at Awhum Junior Preparatory Seminary, about a kilometer southeast of its present location. However, because the seminary was not spacious enough and members of the Awhum community built houses close to the space and disrupted the quiet life of the monks, the religious community requested for more land from the community leader, Igwe J.O. Igboji, Ezeudo I of Awhum. The community leader gave them the "evil forest" after due consultations with community members. The religious community moved to the present site after they had prayed and sanctified the land. The old site currently serves as accommodation for pilgrims.

Pilgrims began visiting the monastery in September 1970 for prayers and reflection. The monks later discovered the waterfall and the cave, which are visited by secular and religious tourists.

## Results and Discussion

### *Religious Tourism in Awlum Monastery*

The monastery is visited by domestic and international tourists in the secular and religious categories. Domestic tourists visit the monastery from different parts of Nigeria, particularly the southeast. However, few tourists come from outside the country. The tourists consist of infants, youths, and middle-aged men and women as well as old people. The secular tourists visit to admire eco-tourism sites within the monastery complex while religious tourists of different social classes visit the monastery for spiritual renewal and to offer special petition to the Supreme God for their general well-being. The religious community receives all pilgrims to the monastery and treats them equally irrespective of age, ethnic affiliation, and social class. This is in acknowledgement of the oneness of God and humanity. This affects the attitude of pilgrims toward one another during pilgrimage.

From observation, pilgrims visiting the monastery engage in various religious activities, and some of these are carried out at the eco-tourism sites within the monastery complex. Pilgrims conduct personal prayers or join a group while others worship together with the monks at mass and their regular office (prayers, devotional readings, and singing of psalms). The office continues seven times daily. Timetables are stuck on the doors of guest houses to indicate the schedule of activities in the monastery. In-between the periods of the offices, some pilgrims say personal prayers, purchase items from the bookshop, and/or visit the mountain, cave, and waterfall for special prayers. Some groups on special retreat invite monks to deliver special talks. In fact, each group has its own program. The program may include midnight prayers, donations for thanksgiving, and visiting eco-tourism sites for worship and prayers. These religious activities are efficacious in changing the pilgrims' inner and, sometimes, outer condition from sin to grace and sickness to health (Turner 1974). Participation in the offices is not compulsory, and pilgrims enjoy these offices. Consequently, the church is always full during these devotions.

Facilities put in place for the comfort of pilgrims during pilgrimage include graded roads leading to the monastery, hostels, security personnel, bore holes to ensure constant water supply, generators for steady power supply, dining halls, kitchen, fast food outlets, and a mini market popularly known as the "Biafran market" where pilgrims buy food, provisions, etc. Other facilities provided for the pilgrims' convenience include car parks; a bookshop (where books, religious items, soap, containers, and other materials are on sale); the church, which serves as a centre for worship and prayers; and the grotto, serving as a place for prayers and meditation and statues for Stations of the Cross (which involves a re-enactment of Christ's passion). Pilgrimage to Awlum Monastery is feasible because of the infrastructure put in place by the management of the monastery and some pilgrims. Hence, availability of infrastructure is a prerequisite for tourism development. It has been observed that, due to the continuous increase in the number of pilgrims, accommodation has become inadequate; some pilgrims have to reduce the duration of their stay and, oftentimes, during the boom period, five pilgrims are assigned to a room meant for two. The church cannot accommodate all the pilgrims during Mass and other devotions. So, most pilgrims stay outside the building during this activity. The religious community welcomes pilgrims to the monastery throughout the year except during the yearly retreat from 19–25 September, when absolute silence and solitude is required. A few months before this period, bills are pasted by the management at strategic places in the monastery to notify pilgrims and request their prayers. The pilgrims' boom periods are weekends, Christmas, and Easter. It was observed that the weather does not obstruct the activities of pilgrims in any way. They carry out their

religious activities regardless of the weather condition. Indeed, some pilgrims were seen observing the Stations of the Cross under the blazing sun as a form of penance.

### ***Impact of Pilgrims Visit to Cistercian Monastery***

Religious tourism is becoming an increasingly important component of Nigeria's economy. Tourists' visits to various faith-based activities have enormous impacts, particularly on members of the host community. Pilgrimage to Cistercian Monastery has impacted significantly on the host community, religious community, and the pilgrims. Accordingly, these impacts are the net changes brought about by the process or sequence of events of tourism development (Mathieson and Wall 1989). From the data collected, pilgrimage to the monastery has spiritual, economic, and social impacts on the pilgrims, host community, and the religious community.

### **Spiritual Impacts**

Pilgrims derive spiritual benefits from religious tourism. Some pilgrims embark on pilgrimage in order to satisfy their spiritual needs. Thus, the key motivation for religious tourism is to meet spiritual and religious needs of the people involved (Rot, Minkinac, and Bogdan 2014). In this way, pilgrims who visit the Cistercian Monastery Awhum become spiritually rejuvenated and often receive answers to their prayers after participating in the various religious activities in the monastery. Consequently, they spread testimonies publicizing the monastery. This leads to a considerable increase in the number of pilgrims visiting Cistercian monastery. The regular prayers of the monks regarded as office equally motivate some pilgrims to improve on their prayer life. In the same vein, the religious community benefits from pilgrims' visit to the monastery. According to an informant, Monk Wilson (pers. comm., 2010), the guest monk, "It gives the monks joy when they see pilgrims relieved of their problems." This is probably because some monks serve as spiritual directors to the pilgrims; they share their problems with the monks who help them with advice and prayers. The monks experience spiritual fulfillment for obeying the Christian injunction of helping the needy when the pilgrims are relieved of their problems.

### **Social Impacts**

The monastery provides a forum for socialization and establishment of long-lasting relationships with fellow pilgrims particularly among those who share a room. Thus, pilgrimage centers are designated not only for religious activities but also to provide platforms for strengthening national unity and promoting brotherhood (Vijayanand 2012). The monks, as the management of the monastery, ensure the provision of facilities required for the well-being of pilgrims. They equally contribute to the well-being of indigent members of Awhum community. For instance, items, especially food stuffs, brought by some pilgrims for thanksgiving and redemption of pledges and part of the monks' farm produce are used for the development of the local community and cater for the well-being of pilgrims. These food items are redistributed to the poor and needy every Wednesday as relief materials. The monks also build houses for homeless members of the local community when the need is brought to their notice; they have equipped the community with a secondary school and train indigent children from the community. Most of the informants stated that the monks have trained members of the community and provided a 300KV transformer to ensure regular power supply; they have drilled bore hole for the community to solve the problem of water scarcity; they give out their buses to members of the local community in emergency situations. For example, when a woman is in labor, and her people approach the monks for help, the monks take her to the hospital. The monks also lease their buses to members of the local community to fuel and use when they have an important gathering to attend as a group. They equally help members of the host community in need who request help. This is meant to give them a sense of belonging. Consequently, in recognition of



what the monastery has done for his community, the leader of the host community, Igwe Onyebuchi, declared, “The monastery is in fact, the ninth village in Awhum. This is because of the various contributions of the religious community to the development and well-being of our community. They have contributed to the development of this community even more than the members of this community” (pers. comm., 2010). In all, the monks contribute to the welfare of members of Awhum community. They have played an essential role in reducing poverty in the community. This is probably done to show appreciation to the host community for giving them free land.

### **Economic Impacts**

Pilgrimage to Cistercian Monastery provides employment opportunities for individuals from within and outside the state, thus alleviating unemployment, which is prevalent in Nigeria. During fieldwork for this study, the researcher interviewed the chief security officer, and four other security men who are from Plateau State, north-central Nigeria. Most of these people were employed to ensure the security and comfort of pilgrims at the monastery. Monks generally live by the labor of their hands. Consequently, they engage in poultry and fish farming and have ventured into other means of self-support such as oil production, sachet water production, and soap making. As the establishment grows and becomes difficult to manage, more people are employed from within and outside the community to work in these departments. Some pilgrims purchase these items and spiritual materials during their visits and equally publicise the availability of these products to the outside world creating a bigger market for the monks. Hence, pilgrims’ visit to the monastery has become a source of revenue generation for members of host community and the monks.

At the time of this research, the monastery staff totaled forty-eight in all. The staff are employed as porters, security men, cooks, and so on. For instance, a young man, Alex who had worked in the monastery after his Senior Secondary Examination before going to Enugu to start a business testified “the monastery provides employment for the people from Awhum community and some members of the community use the money saved from the work to start up business in the mini market close to the monastery” (pers. comm., 2010). According to some of the informants, the conditions of service in the monastery are much better compared to the conditions of service in most places in Nigeria. For instance, the workers are given free food and, in situations where a staff member lives far from the monastery, that staff member is offered accommodation within the monastery complex. Some of the workers are allowed to work part-time giving them enough time to participate in other business activities. The management of the monastery also gives loans to the staff who has worked for at least one year in the establishment. Additionally, members of Awhum community, especially the young women who were formerly unemployed, earn their living selling cooked food and other items to pilgrims. Some individuals from within and outside the community live on transporting pilgrims to the monastery. They serve as bus drivers and *okada* riders (motorcyclists).

Indeed, religious tourism has contributed in various ways to the development of the local community and this has led to significant changes in their quality of life. In line with this, religious tourism can facilitate regional development, employment generation, and strengthen the cultural values (Karar 2010). The monks are able to perform these feats in Awhum community with the support of the pilgrims. In all, religious tourism in Awhum has contributed to the reduction of poverty and the improvement in the standard of living of the members of the community.

***Negative Impacts of Religious Tourism on Cistercian Monastery, Awhum, Enugu State***

Pilgrims' visits to the Cistercian Monastery have generated many adverse effects. The development has created suspicion and hostility in Awhum community. According to the informants from the religious community, clashes with the host community began after the Niger Delta Crises of 2009. They submitted that with the continuous influx of religious tourists to the monastery, the youth and some elders from the two villages (Ibite Uwenu and Ibite Uwani) closest to the monastery conspired against the religious community. Some of their women demonstrated and entered the secluded part of the monastery. The aggrieved members of Awhum community alleged that the religious community was encroaching on their land. Some of them requested for a renegotiation of the extant land agreement between the religious community and the forebears of the community on the grounds that the land bequeathed to the religious community was too much. They alleged that the ancestors had acted in ignorance. As a result, they vandalized the properties of the religious community. The religious community refused to renegotiate. Normalcy was restored to the system after the vandals were arrested by law-enforcement agents. The cause of this friction may be attributed to jealousy by some members of Awhum community because the land they formerly rejected as worthless had become the centre of attraction for tourists from within and outside Nigeria.

The second problem observed is that of pollution caused by exhaust fumes from vehicles conveying pilgrims to the monastery. However, the large vegetation surrounding the monastery complex helps alleviate the effect. Some of the informants reported that there is equally the problem of noise, which is on the increase as more pilgrims visit the monastery. Lodging facilities available are no longer sufficient; as a result, five people are accommodated in a room meant for two. Some pilgrims pray loudly in their rooms instead of going to the desert where they would not disturb fellow pilgrims. Furthermore, the management had received reports that some individuals were observed carrying out cultic rituals close to the waterfall. This is probably because of the publicized healing powers of the water. Consequently, pilgrims are not allowed to visit the waterfall after 5:00 p.m. Another problem is that litter has been observed on the paths to the mini market. Some of the informants admitted that there has also been increase in crime rate as the number of religious and secular tourists visiting the monastery increases. There are stories about pilferers disguised as pilgrims to steal from unsuspecting pilgrims and people posing as evangelists who tout so-called visions to exploit gullible pilgrims.

**Conclusion and Implication**

This paper discussed the impacts of religious tourism on southeastern Nigeria using the Cistercian Monastery, Awhum as a case study. The findings established that pilgrimage to Cistercian Monastery Awhum has both positive and negative impacts. The pilgrims became spiritually revived and received answers to the petitions after visiting the monastery. The religious community experienced joy from the presence of pilgrims and from helping some of them with their spiritual problems. With the support of pilgrims, the monks are able to contribute considerably to the well-being and development of the host community. The monastery has created employment for individuals from within and outside the community. For instance, some people generate income from conveying pilgrims to the monastery and selling food and other items to them. Indeed, the host community, pilgrims, and monks have benefited immensely from pilgrim's visits. The monks would continue to welcome pilgrims insofar as they benefit from the visits. The pilgrims would equally continue to visit if such visits are favorable to them. However, hosts may be hostile to pilgrims if the visits become inimical to Awhum community. In order to ensure the sustainability of pilgrimage to the monastery, enlightening members of the host community about the dangers of clashes with the religious community is necessary as such clashes will discourage pilgrims from visiting the monastery. There is also need to employ more

security personnel and to provide additional lodging facilities to address the problem of security and noise-making respectively.

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