

Islam in a Zongo

Zongos, wards in West Africa populated by traders and migrants from the northern savannahs and the Sahel, are a common sight in Ghana's Asante region, where the people of these wards represent a dual minority as both foreigners and Muslims in a largely Christian area, facing marginalisation as a result. Islam provides the people of the zongos with a common ground and shared values, becoming central to their identity and to their shared sense of community. This detailed account of Islamic lifeworlds highlights the irreducible diversity and complexity of 'everyday' lived religion among Muslims in a zongo community. Benedikt Pontzen traces the history of Muslim presence in the region and analyses three Islamic phenomena encountered in its zongos in detail: Islamic prayer practices, the authorisation of Islamic knowledge, and ardently contested divination and healing practices. Drawing on empirical and archival research, oral histories, and academic studies, he demonstrates how Islam is inextricably bound up with the diverse ways in which Muslims live it.

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Islam in a Zongo

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Benedikt Pontzen

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To my parents

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Dɔhɔɔ ani akesee-akesee, nanso ɔnfa nhunu kuro mu asem.

A stranger's eyes are wide open, but he does not see what is going on in town.

Anthropological research cannot be done alone; here, it depended on the people I encountered during fieldwork. Without their openness and trust, their innumerable small and big deeds, and the effort some people went to in order to see my research advance, this project would have been impossible. Only thanks to what I have learned from them was I able to write this work.

Dɔhɔɔ behunu kuro mu asem no a, efiri ɔmanni.

If a stranger is to understand what is going on in town, it comes from the citizens.

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Aseda yie. Mo nyinaa, meda mo ase pii.

Giving thanks is good. I thank all of you very much.

A note on style

On style

As author, I have attempted to employ a gender-aware writing style; however, none of my interlocutors have employed or striven for gender-aware language. Furthermore, this does not nullify the male bias of my data and writing.

I employ the ethnographic present in parts of my writing. As remarked by Marilyn Strathern: ‘Ethnographic knowledge is necessarily “out of time”’ (Strathern 2004 [1991]: 48) – not in the sense that it is timeless, but because it is abstracted from time (the time of fieldwork, the time of writing up, the time of reading). Experiences, events, and memories that have trickled down into field notes and diary entries are (re)created in the acts of writing and reading. This does not imply that my ethnography or the people it is about are out of time or without history. I present an extended historical background and argue that my ethnography remains incomprehensible without it. Still, ethnographic knowledge is partially out of time as it abstracts from the timed events and experiences on which it is founded (Strathern 2004 [1991]: 48) and remains open and ephemeral (Lambek 1993: 407).

Transcriptions and orthography

Zongos are polyglot, and the people of these wards speak numerous languages. The common lingua franca of interlocutors of my generation was Asante Twi. Yet, Hausa and Arabic terms are also central to the ethnography, and some terms from other languages appear as well. Accordingly, the glossary is polyglot, giving the term in italics with its language in parentheses, followed by my translations. If I name two languages, the first one is the etymological basis. I translate the terms using what I have learned during fieldwork and then checking back with dictionaries.

xii A note on style

The transcription for Arabic follows the *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three* (Fleet et al. 2007–).

The spelling of Asante Twi takes the *Akan Dictionary* project (Department of Linguistics 2006) as a guide with adjustments of the spelling to Asante Twi. The specifics are:

- *dw* (IPA: dzɥ) and *tw* (IPA: tɥ) are palatal approximate fricatives; *dw* is voiced, *tw* voiceless;
- *gy* (IPA: dz̥) and *ky* (IPA: tɕ̥) are palatal plosives; *gy* is voiced, *ky* voiceless;
- *hy* (IPA: ɕ) is a palatal fricative;
- *nw* (IPA: ɲ) is a palatalised nasal;
- *ɔ* (IPA: ɔ) and *ɛ* (IPA: ɛ) are open mid-vowels.

English terms that appear in quotation marks in the text are part of the active vocabulary of the people of the zongo: for example, ‘heaven’, ‘traditional’, ‘home town’, and ‘position’.

The spelling of Hausa takes the *Hausa-English Dictionary* by Nicholas Awde (Awde 1996) as a reference. I have simplified the orthography by omitting tone markers:

- *d* (IPA: d) is a voiced dental implosive;
- *k* (IPA: k̠) is a voiceless velar implosive;
- vowels marked by an ¯, as in *ā* or *ī*, are long vowels.

Glossary

<i>aberantee</i> (Asante; pl.: <i>mmerantee</i>):	Young, celibate man
<i>abusua</i> (Asante):	Family; matrilineage among the Asante, a couple and their children in the zongos
<i>adab</i> (Arabic):	‘Literature’; etiquette, demeanour
<i>adhān</i> (Arabic):	Call to prayer
<i>aduro</i> (Asante):	Cure, medicine
<i>adwene</i> (Asante):	Mind, intellect
<i>adwuma</i> (Asante):	Work
<i>ahobreasee</i> (Asante):	‘The self brought to the ground’; humility
<i>akyedee</i> (Asante):	Gift
<i>Allāh</i> (Arabic):	God
<i>Asanteman</i> (Asante):	Asante empire, dominion
<i>Asante Nkramo</i> (Asante):	Asante Muslims
<i>‘aṣr</i> (Arabic):	Afternoon prayer
<i>as-salām ‘alaykum</i> (Arabic):	‘Peace be with you’; Islamic greeting
<i>āya</i> (Arabic; pl.: <i>āyāt</i>):	Verse of the Qur’an
<i>āyat al-kursī</i> (Arabic):	‘Verse of the throne’, recited to acquire divine protection
<i>baraka</i> (Arabic):	Divine presence, blessings
<i>basmala</i> (Arabic):	‘ <i>Bi-smi llāh al-rahīmān al-rahīm</i> ’ / ‘In the name of Allah, the most Beneficent, the most Merciful’
<i>bid’a</i> (Arabic):	Illegitimate innovation in the religion of Islam; divided into <i>bid’a ḥasana</i> and <i>bid’a sayy’a</i> , the former being good and in accordance with the Qur’an and the <i>Sunna</i> , the latter being objectionable and not in accordance with the scriptures

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<i>bōkā</i> (Hausa):	Traditional healing and divination practices involving ‘the spiritual’ Deity
<i>bosome</i> (Asante):	‘Traditional’ priest (of any gender) interacting with deities and spirits
<i>bosomfoɔ</i> (Asante):	‘Cowrie shell’; the Ghanaian currency
<i>cedi</i> (Asante/English):	‘Evidence’; quotation from the Qur’an or the <i>Sunna</i>
<i>dalīl</i> (Arabic):	Remembrance of Allah, litanies
<i>dhikr</i> (Arabic):	Religion of Islam
<i>dīn al-islām</i> (Arabic):	Individual prayer
<i>du‘ā’</i> (Arabic):	Morning prayer
<i>fajr</i> (Arabic):	Divine obligation, religious duty
<i>farillā</i> (Hausa; Arabic: <i>farḍ</i>):	
<i>fātiḥa</i> (Arabic):	‘The Opening’; first sura of the Qur’an
<i>fiqh</i> (Arabic):	Islamic jurisprudence
<i>ghusl</i> (Arabic):	Ritual bath to remove impurity
<i>ḥadīth qudsī</i> (Arabic):	A divine revelation in the words of the prophet
<i>hadīya</i> (Arabic; pl.: <i>hadāya</i>):	Gift, token of gratitude
<i>haillallāh</i> (Hausa; Arabic: <i>ḥaḍra</i>):	The weekly congregational <i>dhikr</i> of the Tijaniyya
<i>ḥalqa</i> (Arabic):	‘Circle’ to apprehend the <i>ṣalāt</i> and memorise <i>āyāt</i>
<i>hātīm</i> (Hausa):	Seal; design employed in the manufacture of <i>lāyā</i> and <i>rubūtū</i>
<i>‘ibāda</i> (Arabic):	Religious deeds, acts of worship
<i>‘īd</i> (Arabic):	Islamic festivity
<i>‘īd al-aḍḥā</i> (Arabic):	Feast of sacrifice in remembrance of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son
<i>‘īd al-fīṭr</i> (Arabic):	Feast of breaking the fast at the end of Ramadan
<i>idhn</i> (Arabic):	Permission; to initiate others into the <i>ṭarīqa at-Tijaniyya</i> and guide them in the <i>tarbiya</i> ; to enter the <i>ṭarīqa</i>
<i>ijtihād</i> (Arabic):	‘Maximum effort’; independent individual reasoning based on the scriptures

<i>‘ilm</i> (Arabic/Hausa):	Islamic knowledge; divided into <i>‘ilm zāhīran</i> (Hausa; Arabic: <i>‘ilm al-ẓāhīr</i>): open, visible, exoteric knowledge; and <i>‘ilm bāṭinan</i> (Hausa; Arabic: <i>‘ilm al-bāṭin</i>): covered, hidden, esoteric knowledge
<i>īmān</i> (Arabic):	Faith
<i>in shā’ Allāh</i> (Arabic):	‘If God permits’
<i>iqāma</i> (Arabic):	Second <i>adhān</i> performed immediately before the <i>ṣalāt</i>
<i>‘ishā’</i> (Arabic):	Night prayer
<i>ism al-a’ẓam</i> (Arabic):	One of Allah’s greatest names
<i>istighfār</i> (Arabic):	Seeking of Allah’s forgiveness
<i>jum’a</i> (Arabic):	Congregational Friday prayer, the major weekly prayer
<i>kāfir</i> (Arabic):	Rejecter, disbeliever in Islam
<i>khuṭba</i> (Arabic):	Sermon delivered at the Friday prayer
<i>kufr</i> (Arabic):	Rejection, disbelief
<i>lāyā</i> (Hausa):	Islamic charm, amulet
<i>magrib</i> (Arabic):	Evening prayer
<i>maigidā</i> (Hausa):	Landlord, middleman in the kola trade
<i>makarantā</i> (Hausa):	Qur’an school
<i>malam</i> (Asante; Arabic):	Male Islamic scholar
<i>‘ulamā’</i> ; Hausa: <i>mālam</i>):	
<i>mālamā</i> (Hausa):	Female Islamic scholar
<i>mawlid</i> (Arabic):	Celebration of the birthday of the prophet Muhammad; public event under the aegis of a <i>malam</i> who thereby displays and acquires prestige
<i>mīhrāb</i> (Arabic):	Prayer niche in the front of a mosque
<i>mmotia</i> (Asante):	Ambiguous spiritual-corporeal beings, servants and messengers of deities and spirits
<i>mu’adhīn</i> (Arabic):	One who makes the <i>adhān</i> and acts as the linguist of the imam
<i>muqaddam</i> (Arabic):	‘Guide’; Tijaniyya malam who initiates into the <i>ṭarīqa</i> and instructs in the <i>tarbiya</i>
<i>murīd</i> (Arabic):	Adept
<i>nā’ib</i> (Arabic):	Deputy imam

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<i>nana</i> (Asante; pl.: <i>nananom</i>):	Ancestor
<i>nkramo</i> (Asante; from Mande <i>karamɔɔ</i> : scholar):	Muslim
<i>nsunsum</i> (Asante):	Spiritual beings – morally neutral but commonly considered malevolent; spirit
<i>nūr</i> (Arabic):	Divine light
<i>ɔhɔhoɔ</i> (Asante):	Stranger, foreigner, guest
<i>rak`a</i> (Arabic):	Ritual prayer cycle
<i>rubūtū</i> (Hausa):	‘Writing’; liquid of washed-off <i>āyāt</i> or prayers to wash with and drink
<i>rūhānī</i> (Hausa):	Spiritual beings
<i>ruqya</i> (Arabic):	Exorcism; recitation of <i>āyāt</i> and prayers over water to wash with and drink
<i>ṣadaqa</i> (Arabic):	Deed or donation for the sake of Allah
<i>sadaqī</i> (Hausa):	Dowry
<i>ṣalāt</i> (Arabic):	The five daily prayers
<i>ṣalāt al-fātiḥ</i> (Arabic):	‘Prayer of the opener’; prayer of the Tijaniyya to praise the prophet
<i>sarkī</i> (Hausa):	‘Chief’
<i>shahāda</i> (Arabic):	‘Testimony’; Islamic profession of faith
<i>Shaiṭān</i> (Arabic):	The devil
<i>sheikh</i> (Asante; Arabic):	Major Islamic scholar and religious leader
<i>shaykh</i> ; Hausa: <i>shēhū</i>):	Joining others to Allah in worship, transgression of <i>tawḥīd</i>
<i>shirk</i> (Arabic):	Secret
<i>sirr</i> (Arabic):	Tradition of the deeds and sayings of the prophet, collected in reports (Arabic: <i>ḥadīth</i>) of his companions and successors; the second most important source for Islamic norms and rules
<i>tafsīr</i> (Arabic):	Exegesis, elucidation of the Qur’an
<i>taqlīd</i> (Arabic):	‘Imitation’; adherence to or emulation of the teachings of others
<i>tarbiya</i> (Arabic):	‘Raising of plants, growth, increase’; spiritual training of the Tijaniyya in invocations and bodily techniques that may allow one ‘to see God’ – <i>in shā`</i>
<i>ṭarīqa</i> (Arabic):	<i>Allāh</i> ‘Path’; Sufi order

Glossary

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<i>tasbīḥ</i> (Arabic):	Prayer beads
<i>tawḥīd</i> (Arabic):	Doctrine of the oneness of Allah; monotheism
<i>ṭibb an-nabawī</i> (Arabic):	Prophetic medicine; collection of remedies and prayers employed by the prophet to cure and protect
<i>umma</i> (Arabic):	Muslim community
<i>wa'azī</i> (Hausa; Arabic):	Admonishment, sermon
<i>wa'zī</i> :	
<i>walī</i> (Hausa/Asante; Arabic: <i>wālī</i>):	Someone close to God, 'saint'
<i>waṣīfa</i> (Arabic):	The daily congregational <i>dhikr</i> of the Tijaniyya
<i>wird</i> (Arabic):	Litany
<i>wuḍū'</i> (Arabic):	Minor ritual ablutions
<i>zakāt</i> (Arabic):	Religiously obligatory cession of a part (a fortieth) of one's wealth to the poor if one's income has surpassed a certain level in the last year
<i>zamzam</i> (Arabic):	Water from the source at the Kaaba
<i>zongo</i> (Asante; Hausa):	'Lodging place for trading caravans';
<i>zangō</i> :	strangers' wards
<i>zongohene</i> (Asante):	Zongo 'chief'