

**UNDERSTANDING THE ZONGO**  
PROCESSES OF SOCIO-SPATIAL MARGINALIZATION IN GHANA

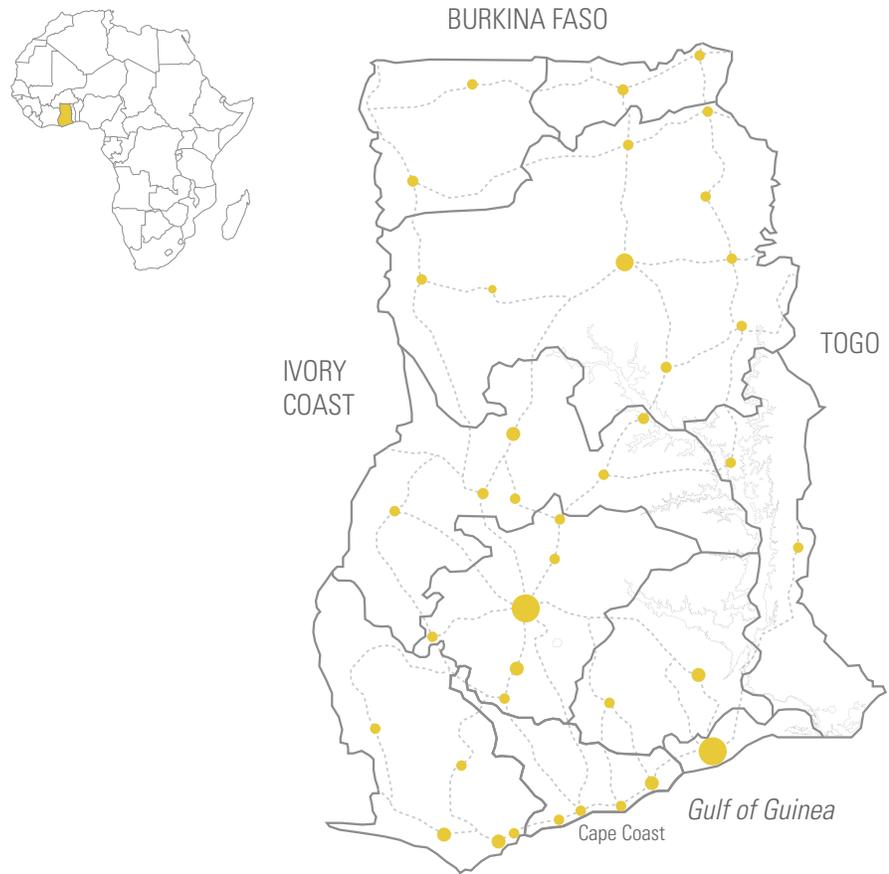
**2013 AGA KHAN TRAVEL GRANT REPORT**

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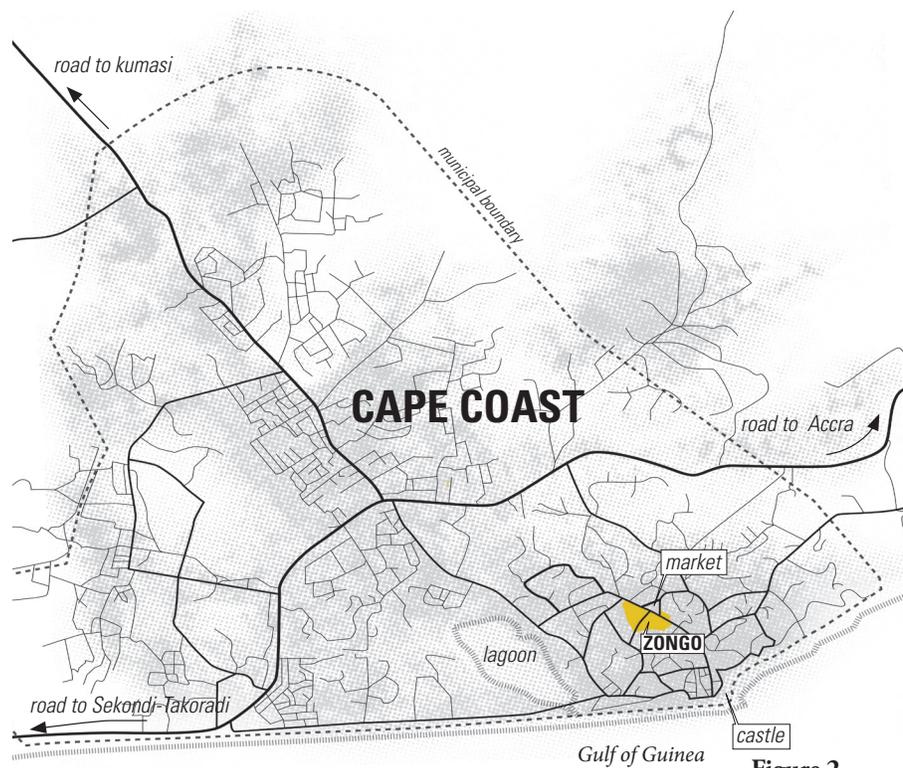
*Thank you to the Aga Khan Travel Grant and the  
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for making this research possible.*



**Figure 1**

**Figure 1** Map Showing Zongo Network in Ghana drawing by Emily Williamson

**Figure 2** Map of Cape Coast, Ghana, drawing by Emily Williamson



**Figure 2**

## Research Overview

This is an investigation into the socio-spatial processes of marginalization and ghettoization of the Zongo. A fascinating and understudied historical phenomenon in Ghana, Zongo means “traveler’s camp” or “stop-over”<sup>1</sup> in Hausa and was used by British Colonial Officers to define the areas in which Muslims lived.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, the inhabitants of these settlements were Muslims migrating south from northern territories either for trading purposes or as hired fighters. Today, Zongos have become a vast network of settlements, and there is at least one Zongo in every urban center in Ghana (Figure 1). Since these ethnic groups were not indigenous to the Gold Coast, it is not surprising that many were historically marginalized. While the Zongos in Ghana’s northern regions have been able to circumvent marginalization and even enjoy prosperity due to their majority religious status,<sup>3</sup> land-based economy, and little influence from foreign authoritative powers; those further south, particularly those located along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, still struggle to fully engage in civic life. Using *history* as the primary means of investigation, this thesis seeks to understand the Zongo’s full range of socio-spatial variation from marginalization to prosperity and the combination of historical and social factors that have caused these settlements to become relatively more prosperous or marginalized. To accomplish this, the investigation centers its inquiry on the most extreme case of marginalization – the Zongo in the city of Cape Coast (Figure 2).

The span of the research covers over two centuries, between 1823 and today, and is arranged chronologically to most clearly demonstrate the social and spatial transformations over time. The account begins in 1823 with British explorations to Hausaland to recruit soldiers for the British-Asante Wars<sup>4</sup> and ends with the establishment of a democratic constitution and my own observations for the past seven years. This time span has then been subdivided into five historical periods, *Imperialism*, *Segregation*, *Nationalism*, *Industrialization*, and *Modernity*, that mark important ideological and political shifts in the history of Cape Coast and Ghana. Using primary sources, the research threads a nuanced narrative of prosperity and marginalization across these chapters and interrogates the sometimes conscious, and other times unconscious, relationships between social construction and spatial manipulation giving particular attention to architectural, settlement, urban, and regional patterns of marginalization.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Newman, *A Hausa English Dictionary*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 230.

<sup>2</sup> Enid Schildkrout, *People of the Zongo*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 67.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Government of Ghana, Islam is the dominant religion (56.1% of the total population). See “Government of Ghana,” <http://www.ghana.gov.gh/index.php/about-ghana/regions/northern>. Accessed December 18, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> The British Asante Wars were a series of four wars between the Ashanti Empire in the interior of the Gold Coast (now the center of Ghana) and the British Empire between 1824 and 1901. Though the Ashanti successfully defended their territory for some time, by the end, the British were victorious and the Ashanti Empire became a British protectorate.

The main protagonists of this historical narrative include, but are not limited to, the “Colonial Masters,”<sup>5</sup> “Native” or “Aborigine” Authorities, the Military Regiment, The Government of Ghana, and most importantly, the residents of the Zongo comprised of their own rulers (Chief Imam, Sirikin Zongo, and other tribal chiefs) as well as scholars or “uluma”, traders, soldiers, business owners, and those who stay in the house (mainly women and children). Though the needs, intentions, and desires of these protagonists change markedly from the height of British Imperialism to onset of Industrialization and Modernity, I argue that the dominant authoritative powers of each period use different combinations of economic production and religion, disguised in “virtuous” missions, to construct a city and architecture in their own image. In some cases this image more closely aligns with the evolving cultural systems and spatial concerns of the Zongo and thus produces a more prosperous period for the Zongo settlement, but at other times they radically diverge causing increased marginalization and hardship. In the extreme case of Cape Coast, the city loses its economic value and devolves from its prosperous position as the capital of the Gold Coast Colony to a marginalized outcast scrambling to make ends meet. Echoing the town’s ruinous downfall, the Cape Coast Zongo was consigned to the same fate. Though the research traces the historical evolution of this particular case, it constantly shifts scales so as to understand not only how the Cape Coast Zongo plugs into larger socio-spatial systems, but also how these emerging patterns explain the gradation of Zongo development - from the most prosperous to the most marginalized.

## **Motivations from Existing Literature**

In the section that follows, I will explain how the Zongo phenomenon fits into the existing scholarly discourse grounded in Ghana and Africa - its questions, concerns, and controversies among urbanists, anthropologists, and sociologists. Since the amount of material is vast and diverse, I have chosen to focus on four particular areas where I see gaps that this research will help fill: African urban scholarship, the complicating of dichotomies (rural v. urban and traditional v. modern), emphasis on the particulars of place rather than western universals; and research on the history of Islamic architecture.

## **The African City, Space, and Time**

First, and most broadly, African cities are often excluded from discussions on the world’s cities. When they are included, the term “third world” or “less-developed” usually serves as a disclaimer. Richard Grant, a geographer who has written extensively about West Africa rightly argues that,

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<sup>5</sup> This was a term commonly used by the Zongo residents throughout the in-depth interview sessions in January, 2014.

“Africa’s cities need to be included in the discussion of global cities – because they are.”<sup>6</sup> Though most urbanists working in Africa share this view, the research is limited to fast-growing, globalizing cities that are seen as most directly influencing other parts of the world. Hence, smaller cities such as Cape Coast (which is of course also affected by these larger global forces) are often left out of the discussion. Thus, this research on the Zongo will contribute to urban scholarship on smaller West African cities and deepen our understanding of how they are affected by their larger global counterparts.

Who and how these cities are written about is also an important consideration. Thus far, the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and urban planning dominate the discussion on urbanism in Africa with little input from urban design or architecture. As one would expect, the literature most often explains the social, economic, and political dimensions of the African city with little articulation of how these factors affect and transform the built environment. Abdoumalig Simone for example describes the invisible, informal, spectral, and movement aspects of the city. He writes, “By focusing on diffuse and largely “invisible” ways in which participation and collaboration are mobilised, it is possible to discern tensions and contested development trajectories of the urban arena.”<sup>7</sup> When the scholarship does invite the built form into the discussion, it is most often treated as a static object, a stage upon which their actors create an invisible city of human infrastructure.

I am not trying to proclaim that the built environment should be fore-grounded and the social dimensions relegated to the back, rather that research on urban Africa would benefit from an emphasis on the connection between social forces, spatial processes, and built forms and how they transform over time. Historically, space, time, and the built environment were often thought of as distinct, oppositional entities. In an interview concerning the discipline of geography Michel Foucault reflects upon this problematic binary, “Did it start with Bergson or before? Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time on the contrary was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic. For all those who confuse history with the old schemas of evolution, living continuity, organic development, the progress of consciousness or the project of existence, the use of spatial terms seems to have the air of an anti-history.”<sup>8</sup> He goes on to argue that spatializing history is crucial to understanding the power dynamics that impress upon it. Arguments such as Foucault’s have become increasingly resonant with scholars who have worked extensively in Africa such as Edward Soja,<sup>9</sup> Trinh T. Minha, and Simone. These scholars, among others working

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6 Richard Grant. *Globalizing City: The Urban and Economic Transformation of Accra, Ghana*. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

7 Abdoumalig Simone. “Between Ghetto and Globe: Remaking Urban Life in Africa.” *Associational Life in African Cities* (2001): 48.

8 Michel Foucault. Colin Gordon, Ed. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Chapter 19: Questions on Geography. (New York: Pantheon, 1980) 177-178.

9 Edward W. Soja. *Post-Modern Geographies: the Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. (New York: Verso, 1989), 11.

in Africa, insist on increased attention to the dynamic attributes of space in research on Africa's cities. Grounded in the dialectic between the social and spatial, this thesis contributes to not only helping to fill this gap, but also demonstrates how bringing in the spatial dimension reveals new linkages and patterns.

### **Dichotomies: Rural v. Urban and Traditional v. Modern**

Moving from the larger scale of how African cities are written about as a whole and the need to both expand and deepen the inquiry to encompass the dialectic of time and space, a second theme and gap in the literature pertains to the insistent dichotomies of rural v. urban and tradition v. modern. Though scholarship on Africa's human settlements became more prolific in the 1960s -1990s, the emphasis was on the rural, not urban. It has only been in the last couple of decades that there has been a renewed interest in the city.<sup>10</sup> This dichotomy however, as explained by Mahmood Mamdani, is a lasting residue of colonial domination and the "bifurcated state."<sup>11</sup> This distinction between rural and urban and traditional and modern persists both the way they are written about and on the ground through plural policies and spatial demarcations. In binary opposition to the Modernist principles of dynamism, change, and progress, rural and tradition became notions relegated to the past.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, recent scholarship on urban Africa calls for a hybrid approach, one that examines these settlements as intricately connected to one another and that are impossible to understand without the other. Simone calls these cities "trans-territorial", places with plural modes of action and interpretation among their actors, materials, and places.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Edgar Pieterse describes the process as "the multi-plex," a network of relational politics and processes.<sup>14</sup> Since I have conceptualized the marginalization of the Cape Coast Zongo as a process that manifests on the architectural, settlement, and urban scales, the research will complicate current bounded, one-dimensional representations of the city. Furthermore, because the Zongo in some ways may be conceived as a village operating within a city in its traditional modes of organization, this research will contribute to a blurring of the dominating Western ideology bifurcating the rural and urban.

### **From Western Universals to the Particulars of Place**

Third, I want to touch briefly on a theme in literature on Africa that encourages a shift away from applying theory generated in the United States or other Western contexts to African cities. After all,

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<sup>10</sup> Garth Andrew Myers. *African Cities*. (London: Zed Books, 2011) 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996) 8.

<sup>12</sup> Marcel Vellinga, "The Inventiveness of Tradition: Vernacular Architecture and the Future," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 13, 2 (2006): 115.

<sup>13</sup> Garth Andrew Myers. *African Cities*. (London: Zed Books, 2011) 12.

<sup>14</sup> Garth Andrew Myers. *African Cities*. (London: Zed Books, 2011) 16.

the celebrity social and urban theorists such as Harvey, Lefebvre, Massey, Sassen, and Castells, hardly emphasize Africa.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Garth Meyers, Jean and John Comaroff, Abdoumalig Simone, and Tim Edenser<sup>16</sup> among others propose developing theory that begins with an ‘ex-centric’ vantage,<sup>17</sup> one that emerges from local phenomena in Africa’s cities. Even before generating new theory however, scholars of urban Africa such as Myers insist on “cutting through the abstraction” by paying attention to the particular and unique qualities of the everyday.<sup>18</sup> In investigating the extreme case of marginalization in Cape Coast and the specific patterns of urban transformation in Ghana, the research contributes to not only the field’s growing interest in detailed local phenomena but also its ambition to develop a more comprehensive repository of urban theory in West Africa. Furthermore, the overarching patterns and themes that emerge from this historical inquiry will contribute to larger theoretical discussions explaining how, why, and when ghettoization appears and functions in West Africa.

### **Vernacular Islamic Architecture in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Contemporary discourse on the vernacular of Islamic architecture in West Africa is sparse with little analytical investigation into its formal and performative aesthetics. The writing tends towards outdated, unhelpful dualities between West and Non-West that situate its vernacular in a surpassed epistemology. While scholars in many other geographical regions have begun creating historical narratives rooted in cultural context, the vernacular of Islamic architecture in West Africa remains largely ahistoricized with few admitting to Islam’s influence.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the number and types of sources need to be expanded to include far more Islamic documentation and other non-European visual, written and oral records.<sup>20</sup> Beyond this extensive laundry list to heave the vernacular of Islamic West Africa into contemporary discourse, if the vernacular is to remain relevant, its basic definition needs to change simultaneously with its methods. Instead of equating the vernacular’s character with the physical characteristics of an artifact, it should become a far more versatile process that coincides with multiple, interdependent identities. In this way, the ideals of the vernacular – that of collective and local expressions - may assimilate into a multiplicity of methods, techniques, and traditions able to migrate from one physical form to another. Furthermore, if plural modes of action comes to define the vernacular more than a singular mode of being, perhaps it is more germane to historicize the vernacular in terms of duration - the span of time during which the architecture is constructed, maintained, and re-constructed rather than confining it to a specific point in time.

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<sup>15</sup> Garth Andrew Myers. *African Cities*. (London: Zed Books, 2011) 5.

<sup>16</sup> See Tim Edensor and Mark Jayne, eds. *Urban theory beyond the West: a world of cities*. Routledge, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Jean and John Comaroff. “Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa.” In *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 113-131. (2012): Routledge, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Garth Andrew Myers. *African Cities*. (London: Zed Books, 2011) 16.

<sup>19</sup> Labelle Prussin. *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 256.

<sup>20</sup> Labelle Prussin. *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 7.

As applied to the vernacular Islamic architecture of West Africa, Trevor Marchand offers a hopeful command of the vernacular as process with duration in his writing about the largest mud Mosque in the world. He argues, “Djenne’s distinct architectural tradition, like that of other towns and cities where building crafts flourish, is perpetuated not through a rigid conservation of its surviving buildings and monuments, but instead via its dynamic and responsive transmission of skill-based knowledge from one generation of building to the next. Effectively, it is this ‘tradition as process’, as instituted in the apprenticeship-style education, which must be conserved if architectural styles and techniques that respond to, and create the specificities of ‘place’ are to survive and potentially proliferate.”<sup>21</sup> Echoing this far more versatile vernacular as demonstrated by the transactions at Djenne, this thesis frames Islamic architecture as defined by its historical transformations and not static form.

## Personal Motivations

This research is also highly motivated from a more personal, long-term interest and involvement with the Cape Coast Zongo. My first encounter with one of these settlements was in 2007 when I was introduced to the Chief Imam of a Zongo located in the urban, coastal city of Cape Coast. At that time, I had observed issues of flooding, drought, sanitation, and erosion, but also reflected upon what I saw as the community’s strong collective social and cultural identity. Since that initial visit, I have been teaching design studios in Cape Coast, conducting interviews, and working with the residents to develop long-term, community-based design strategies aiming to improve their quality of life. Over these last seven years, I have developed a trusting relationship with the community and lifelong friendships. The Cape Coast Zongo affectionately gave me the name “Habiba” and I have been invited to participate in what I perceive as highly personal activities such as sharing of tea and fresh bread with a family inside their home, attending wedding receptions, and being privy to ablution and communal prayer.

I still have an infinite amount to learn about the Zongo as a place and community. Thus, for this historical research, I aim to adopt a parallel approach to that of my earlier design initiative grounded in human-centered design.<sup>22</sup> Rather than implementing a top-down design strategy, or in this case, a top-down research strategy in which I would map terms, observations, and theories invented in

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<sup>21</sup> Trevor H.J. Marchand, “Endorsing Indigenous Knowledge: The Role of Masons and Apprenticeship in sustaining Vernacular Architecture – the case of Djenne,” in *Vernacular Architecture in the 21st Century: Theory, Education, and Practice*, ed. by Lindsay Asquith and Marcel Vellinga (London: Francis and Taylor, 2006), 47.

<sup>22</sup> There are many examples of practitioners and scholars who have contributed to the concept of human-centered design. A few of them are as follows: Bryan Bell of “Design Corps”, Jeremy Till as outlined in his book “Architecture Depends”, the architecture and urban design firm IDEO, and artist Teddy Cruz.

the West, for the West, on to the Cape Coast Zongo, I will begin with local context and concerns to guide my inquiry. Furthermore, the research requires uncertainty from beginning to end – a constant questioning and self-reflection of how I see, name, interpret, and differentiate people, places, materials, and value systems.<sup>23</sup> Such an approach requires a conceptual framework formulated from local perceptions and concerns.

## **Aga Khan Travel Grant Research: Objectives and Methods**

Though I had completed rapid analysis in 11 Zongo settlements in the summer of 2013, the Aga Khan Travel Grant provided me with the opportunity to return to Cape Coast in January 2014 to both deepen and sharpen my research regarding the Cape Coast Zongo. During this month, I conducted over 25 in-depth interviews and recorded my own observations in the forms of photography, mapping, and field notes. In addition, I spent approximately half my time in the Cape Coast Regional Archives collecting, coding, and analyzing letters, legal documents, and maps. The findings from this research provided me with the rich, localized evidence I needed to develop a convincing case for *understanding* the Zongo in its full range from its development to marginalization. The following section speaks in more detail to how I collected and analyzed the evidence.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Since there was no data source that spanned every period, and because it was important to hear from those voices left out of the archival evidence, I collected material from a combination of colonial letters, legal documents, newspapers, historical photographs, maps, field notes from informal observation + participation, in-depth interviews, and my own photography. These sources of data convert into three types: text, images, and maps.

From the texts, I made inferences about the community conditions of socio-spatial marginalization by linking thick descriptions of construction materials, buildings, and urban space (spatial) to implicitly or explicitly stated social causes such as policies implemented by the Colonial Government (authority), restrictions on Islamic practices (religion) or availability of resources (economic production).

From the images, I made inferences about the perceived quality of materials, buildings, and landscape (spatial); what content chosen to be represented in the frame and why; and whether particular social forces are illustrated more or less often than others – whether it be images of markets

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<sup>23</sup> See Ben Agger. "Critical theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance." *Annual Review of Sociology* (1991): 106.

(economic production), churches, mosques, or fetish houses (religion) or government institutions (authority).

Finally, from the maps, I made inferences about the spatial positioning of buildings and settlements – whether they are located at the center or periphery of the city and to what degree their adjacencies to markets, schools, and other institutions contribute to a more or less marginalized position. In addition, I could speculate about to what degree one consciously intended to marginalize the settlement based upon building and infrastructure sequencing. For example, if the Zongo settlement relied on the market for their livelihoods and then the Government built a market at the opposite side of the city, one could infer that the Government was not taking the community's needs into account.

It is also important to note that I coded and analyzed the data according to the time in which it was produced because the indicators for marginalization and its causes shift depending upon the period. Furthermore, I examined the text and subtext of each text, map, and photograph for every piece of evidence is “contested terrain.”<sup>24</sup> In addition to the examination and interpretation of primary sources, I also created my own maps and floor plans to illustrate particular modifications, additions, or erasure of the building environment. For the maps, most of this information came from hundreds of textual sources that I then compiled and translated into graphic form. The purpose of these maps was to demonstrate the spatial transformations from one historical frame to the next. As for the floor plans, these too were not measured with a high degree of accuracy for their purpose was to understand the use of the spaces, their adjacencies, and how buildings evolved over time.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

Rather than focusing on the spatial marginalization of the Zongo as a singular, ahistorical bounded entity (as many scholars have treated it in the past), I endeavor in this research to privilege its process of becoming over its object-ness. Understanding the space of the Zongo as a process of socio-spatial transformation allows us to free it from the misconception that it somehow operates “outside” the city in isolation from its context. In fact, I would argue the exact opposite is true – the Zongo functions as an economic and social hub of the city with a strategic location across from the market. At one point, a Zongo resident even asked me, “Emily, why is it that the Zongo is always at the center?”<sup>25</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha reinforces this relationship between margin and center. She writes, “it is an elsewhere that does not merely lie outside the center but radically striates it.”<sup>26</sup> Even though this

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<sup>24</sup> Note: text as “contested terrain” is Derrida's formulation, but is described in Agger:

Ben Agger. “Critical theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance.” *Annual Review of Sociology* (1991) 112.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with an anonymous Cape Coast Zongo resident on July 29, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha. “Cotton and Iron” in *Out there: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. ed. Ferguson Russell Ferguson and Martha Gever (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990) 328.

research is first and foremost a history of the Zongo settlement, this notion of process and becoming, shifting between edge and center, leans away from description and explanation towards practice and spatial agency. As opposed to some draconian historians and theorists, Meyers and Simone among others, argue that scholars should find more ways to link theory and practice – to improve the quality of life of those living in African cities.<sup>27</sup> As an architect by training, I believe that such a deep, yet open and inclusive investigation into the socio-spatial histories of the subaltern, will help dislodge space from its taken-for-granted and immobile position and enable projections of alternative futures.

Thank you again to the Aga Khan Travel Grant and the MIT Aga Khan Program of Islamic Architecture for making this research possible.

*To read the final thesis produced from this research, please download the document from MIT's dspace:*

*<https://dspace.mit.edu>.*

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<sup>27</sup> Garth Andrew Myers. *African Cities*. (London: Zed Books, 2011) 14-15.

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Please note that the following bibliography (primary and secondary sources) includes not only what was referenced directly in this report, but also the sources for the final thesis document.

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Interviews and Informal Conversations: All of the interviews took place in either July, 2013 or January 2014. Whereas the interviews completed in July were highly structured, those in January were longer, in-depth interviews. All of the interviews were executed with MIT COUHES approval. In addition to interviews, information was also collected from informal conversations with residents and observations from 2007 to 2014.

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