

# Migration networks and narratives in Ghana: a case study from the Zongo

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## Introduction: why the Zongo?

Through an analysis of migrant settlements located in urban areas of northern Ghana, this article demonstrates the inherent agency of migrants' memories. The memory of migration, together with the memory of the different communities that inhabit these areas, does not simply reproduce the actual historical experience of mobility and displacement lived by migrants, but actively incorporates the social and political meaning of 'being a migrant'. These memories, in fact, assert something. The symbolic capital produced and experienced by these historical migrant communities today has a crucial value in the Ghanaian political and social landscape. Indeed, Zongo people often act as bridges between different social and geographical realities, and also represent a possible interlocutor for the Ghana government.

Zongos are areas of contemporary West African towns established as a result of trading activities. In Ghana, they mostly came into existence before colonization. The word 'Zongo' comes from the Hausa '*zango*', which means 'temporary settlement'. Initially this word was used to describe the areas or fringes of towns where traders – at the beginning mostly Hausa who came from present-day northern Nigeria – would stop to rest and undertake their trading activities (Schildkrout 1978; Agier 1980; Pellow 1991). These settlements are still present in many modern West African countries and are still viewed as places inhabited by 'strangers' who are often identified with Islam, which is followed by the majority of Hausa traders. According to Yusuf:

Zongo or Zango is an old [Hausa] term for a caravan resting place just outside a walled city. In Daura and other Hausa northern towns, a Zango settlement traditionally contained Kanuri and Arab merchants. Hausa migrants were the primary dwellers of Zango urban units in some parts of Niger, Ghana, Dahomey. (Yusuf 1974: 213)

The notion of the Zongo began to be used in a broader sense outside the Hausa region, and to include other ethnic groups; today, the word generically designates a historical migrant settlement. Kwame Arhin, exploring the socio-political role of the Zongo of Atebubu (Ghana), states that 'a Zongo was not only a residential quarter, but more significantly a commercial institution ... Zongo residents acted as agents for traders in the more northerly market towns, as hosts for incoming seasonal (November to March) traders, as interpreters and generally as links between the diverse multilingual traders' (Arhin 1971: 73). Zongo is therefore

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definitely a location, with its own specific urban features, although it incorporates social notions that go beyond its spatial connotations.

Contemporary Zongos are often characterized by overcrowding and inadequate sanitation, and represent, both symbolically and practically, a condition that is between inclusion and exclusion. The institution itself is an attempt to include and regulate the presence of migrants in their host communities, where all the actors involved are constantly negotiating their own socio-political position and their own citizenship rights. At the same time, the inhabitants of the Zongos are often excluded from direct control over land and from the so-called traditional political arena.

This article analyses the experiences of different actors. It includes the memories of former soldiers, traders, local authorities, young men and women, and the actors who have taken part in the process of network building. It discusses the experiences of two Zongo communities in Tamale (Northern Region): Hausa Zongo and Mossi Zongo. Each produces a different narrative, although their primary idioms (Monson 2000: 360) remain the same. Even if these communities are commonly labelled as belonging to a specific ethnic group (Hausa and Mossi in this case), their composition is far from homogeneous, a fact that is reflected in the vast majority of migration experiences (Rodet and Reinprecht 2013: 11). Both Zongos are inhabited by a multitude of people, and although this calls for different social and ethnic definitions, these people can be seen as participating in the construction of a common identity process. Their 'right to stay', together with their transnational identities, produces a peculiar discourse and holds a specific socio-political potential. I critically address these narratives with the aim of analysing the creative self-construction of the inhabitants. My focus is on *zongowanci* ('Zongo-ness', in the Hausa language), as defined by Pellow (2002) in her work on Sabon Zongo (Accra): a collective identity that derives from living and experiencing a feeling of attachment to Zongo life.

The research methodology includes both fieldwork<sup>1</sup> and archival research<sup>2</sup> and combines anthropological and historical approaches. However, we will see that historical data and the narratives passed down through oral history are often incongruous. I argue that the discrepancy between historical evidence and the memory of the migrants – a discrepancy that is very common in the self-representation of migrant communities and diaspora actors (see Eyerman 2004) – may be viewed as a political tool with which they define themselves as subjects included within the social framework of modern Tamale townships and in the national arena.

As stated by Alessandro Portelli, oral history is essentially a relationship – between narrators and researchers, between past events and present facts. It is difficult because it asks the researcher to focus on both the factual and the narrative dimension, on both the referent and the significant, on the past and the present, and, above all, on the relationship that occurs between the two (Portelli 2012 [1999]: 23–4). Oral history distinguishes what lies between events and

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<sup>1</sup>The information contained in this article was collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana in 2013–14. Fieldwork was conducted in the municipalities of Tamale and Accra.

<sup>2</sup>Archival research was conducted at the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) of Ghana in Accra and in Tamale, and at the National Archives in Kew, London.

narrations, history and memory, and it eventually asserts that narrations and memory are themselves historical facts. When a ‘wrong’ narration of history becomes widespread, we need to call into question not only the actual construction of the events, but also the reasons why and how this common understanding has been created, what it means, and why it is useful (*ibid.*: 24; Portelli 2009: 24). This is essentially the reason why I base a substantial part of my analysis on incongruous memories, and on the reproduction of a narrative of ‘wrong’ past events, by using memory as a historical fact.

This specific memory of migration helps produce a group identity that may protect the community from the homogenization process implemented by government and municipality planning departments, according to which all Zongos fall under the category of ‘slums and deprived areas’ (NDPC 2013). This identity may well foster a critical challenge to the category of ‘slum’ by highlighting the active role played by migrant communities and their effect on socio-political analysis, something which, if taken into account, may also provide some effective practical solutions.

The strong ability of the Zongo people to preserve and enhance cultural differences will be analysed in the light of the theoretical framework outlined by Nyamnjoh, who discusses the weaknesses of current policies of inclusion and of citizenship (2006). My hypothesis is that the memory of migration continuously develops in the network that links these mobile communities in West Africa, by changing and adjusting its shape through time and space. In the face of the attitudes and approaches of the postcolonial state of Ghana and of local authorities, Zongo people have shown themselves to be active interlocutors in the production of a shared memory and of a history of migrant communities. At the same time, migration constitutes a dynamic and driving factor within hosting societies, where migrant communities often act as catalysts for political change and social transformation, and offer challenges to the existing model of citizenship rights.

### The Hausa Zongo in Tamale: a system of migration

The cases presented here were collected during fieldwork conducted in 2012–13 in Tamale, a metropolitan area of 371,351 inhabitants located in the north of the country.<sup>3</sup> There were two main reasons for concentrating part of this research in this specific area. Tamale is the present-day capital of the Northern Region of Ghana. It acquired a central role because of the administrative requirements of the British colonial power, following the decision to establish headquarters in a central and relatively non-urbanized location in the Protectorate of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. Therefore, Tamale had not been one of the main nodes in the long-distance trade network,<sup>4</sup> but it became more central

<sup>3</sup>Taken from ‘Population by region, district, locality of residence, age, group and sex’, Ghana Census 2010 (<<http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/>>).

<sup>4</sup>In what is now Ghana, the long-distance trade network developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries due to the Hausa interest in the sale of kola nuts, which were produced in the forest areas of Asante (Wilks 1966; Levtzion 1968; Lovejoy 1971). This trade gave rise to a larger commercial network that involved the whole region, where markets flourished and key commodities such as kola, salt, textiles, currencies and slaves were exchanged (Goody 1967; Wilks *et al.* 1986). Islam provided a framework within which long-distance trade could operate (Lovejoy

at the beginning of the twentieth century (MacGaffey 2007; Soeters 2012). ‘Node’ here indicates a place where processes of social, commercial and political networking between different households, families and trade groups take place. Nodes are interconnected places, and they should be considered in terms of synergistic processes (Howard and Shain 2005: 47). Today, Tamale is home to two important Zongo communities, which are crucial in the transnational network that we are considering here. This first aspect (nodes being sites of networking) allows me to evaluate and analyse the changing aspects of the Zongo network: nodes can appear, change status, and disappear. At the same time, it enables me to understand the extent to which the expansion of Tamale has strengthened the role of the Zongos, and vice versa.

The second aspect revolves around the fact that the northern part of the country is widely Islamized, especially in comparison to southern Ghana.<sup>5</sup> As a historical migrant enclave strongly identified with Islam in the common public discourse, the case of Tamale provides an opportunity to analyse the social dynamics and identity construction of the Zongo by observing it from another perspective, not necessarily linked to its Islamic connotations. Moreover, studies of Tamale Zongos are scarce (the majority of studies on Zongos in Ghana have been carried out in southern areas, especially Accra, Kumasi, Atebubu and Cape Coast), and the very existence of the Zongo in a Muslim context has been called into question by southern government officials and town planners. Zongo communities are believed to exist mainly in Christian areas, where they are supposed to function as a connective system exclusively for Muslim migrants. While this is certainly the case, I argue that Zongos connect a wider range of people, and that their presence is important and historically proven in predominantly Muslim contexts as well.

Although Tamale developed significantly after World War Two, with the expansion of trade due to the central geographical position of the city (MacGaffey 2007: 120) and the (weak) colonial attempt to develop the north, the establishment of the British headquarters in 1907 had already given the city a new commercial role. A document dated 11 October 1910 reports the construction of ‘excellent roads for caravans’ and the consequent increase in traders (Hausa, Mossi, Yoruba and Fulani) using them.<sup>6</sup> The Tamale township rent document of 1918 mentions Zongo communities:

Rents in Tamale are of four kinds: market stall rents 2/6 per month; store building ground rents £1 per annum; Zongo ground rents 10/- per annum; ground rents for building sites in other parts of Tamale native town of 20/- p.a. payable by others than natives of Tamale.<sup>7</sup>

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2005: 155), allowed ties to be maintained between distant trade settlements (Wilks 1966: 170), and consolidated communities of ‘strangers’ (Cohen 1969).

<sup>5</sup>In the southern part of the country, the separation is also a religious one: if Zongos are mainly inhabited by Muslims, the host societies today are mainly Christian. In Tamale, for example, this boundary is blurred, since the Northern Region of Ghana is extensively Islamized; according to the Ghana Living Standard Survey of 2014 (GLSS 6), the Northern Region comprised 14 per cent Christian and 83.6 per cent Muslim (see <<http://www.statsghana.gov.gh>>).

<sup>6</sup>ADM 56/1/141, Accra.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

This document demonstrates, on the one hand, that Zongo communities were already an integral part of the urban structure of the city, and, on the other, that Zongo people were considered to be different from other 'non-natives'. They presumably occupied a special recognized place, since the rent they had to pay was lower.

Having experienced great difficulties in collecting rents from the Zongos for some years, the District Commissioner suggested drawing up a complete list of Zongo houses. Finally on 9 October 1922, the Commissioner of the Southern Provinces wrote:

With regard to the Hausa Zongo rents, these are payable to the Chief of Tamale vide Rule 7 ... and should never have been collected by us. I suggest that the Chief of Tamale collects these rents himself in future and recover what he can of the rents outstanding. We cannot trace half of the people mentioned.<sup>8</sup>

This evidence suggests that there was a relationship between the Zongo and the local authorities, a relationship of dependency and mutual assistance that could not be understood or replicated by the colonial authority.

'Zongo' today is an ambiguous social category. Having gone through numerous changes over time, it now represents a social structure that is fluid but also persistent. It has always been defined as an important node in West African migration trajectories, not only for Hausa people but also for many different groups of migrants (Mossi, Fulani, Yoruba and Frafra, to mention only the most numerous). Furthermore, the Zongo today remains an enduring stereotype in Ghanaian society, where critical environmental and infrastructural conditions, and a high crime rate, are often linked to the presence of 'strangers'. These 'strangers', however, in many cases have lived in stable conditions in the town for many generations, and this fact challenges both the notion of 'stranger' and the local discourse on migration.

The presence of the Hausa Zongo in Tamale 'can be traced back to at least 270 years ago', as the head of the community told me.<sup>9</sup> Of course, it is very difficult to verify this claim, but archival documents provide evidence of the presence of the Hausa Zongo from the arrival of the British administrators at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

The history of the settlement, as the inhabitants narrate it, is remarkably consistent. Hausa traders came from the Sokoto area to trade their goods and buy kola nuts. They asked local Dagomba authorities for permission to settle, and land was granted to them. As already noted, Hausa people had a place to stay and were required to pay a rent that was lower than that paid by other 'strangers'. This fact is an indication of the relations they established with local authorities.

My fieldwork experience in the Hausa Zongo revealed a common discourse about transnational trade and identity, and a strong perception of that discourse's historical importance for the indigenous society. Mahmoud<sup>11</sup> explained his role as a cattle trader, and described in detail the network system that he uses in his work:

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Interview with Mr S., Tamale.

<sup>10</sup>ADM 56/1/141 and ADM 56/1/222, Accra; NRG 8/4/1, Tamale.

<sup>11</sup>In order to protect my interlocutors' privacy, I have used pseudonyms or initials to refer to them.

If I can't find all the cows here in the north of Ghana I will go to Mali to buy them. There they have a lot, a lot of cows, more than here, and when the dry season comes they have to sell the cattle as soon as possible, to prevent the cows from dying. So, the cows are less expensive in Mali ... there I can hire one or more trucks that can contain 50 to 60 cows. They go back and forth. When the lorry goes back to Mali, it is not empty. It can carry a lot of other things to be sold there, like plastic chairs, mattresses, building materials ... all things that are difficult to find there. I go and buy in all the Zongos that I know. There is not a specific place where I go. I can go anywhere to buy, anywhere they have cows. I buy mostly from Hausa people, or from Muslims. There are a lot of Muslims there. We are all brothers. If I buy a lot, the price is lower. Nowadays it is very hard to go to Mali to buy, because of the war. But there are still some small villages where the police has not yet arrived where you can still buy and sell. They can go along some hidden roads that nobody knows, and they can do businesses.<sup>12</sup>

In this conversation, the mobile and transnational aspect of everyday life is crucial. As Mabogunje (1972) stated, the notion of 'system' can be appropriately applied to the phenomenon of migration: it is a system that is constantly supported, that can potentially expand and that can eventually produce new connections. Even if the war in Mali has rendered various important nodes of this network system inaccessible, the network itself has not lost its function altogether, since some small villages and their Zongos still remain operative. The nature of this network is not only economic: it also has a fundamental social value (de Haas 2009). Another important aspect related to the vital nature of this 'system of migration' concerns its adaptability. Commercial nodes can become political centres, or can provide social services. In this specific case, the network of Tamale Zongos proves to be particularly effective in absorbing war refugees coming from abroad, through the establishment of a semi-spontaneous system of reception, treatment and relocation of people. Indeed, the ability to create a support network for migrants coming from abroad was frequently commented on by the people I talked to: many migrants from Mali, having fled the ongoing conflict, come to the Hausa chief and spokesperson seeking assistance and a place to stay.<sup>13</sup>

If the experience of everyday mobility is crucial in this self-narration, many other aspects contribute to the construction of the identity of migrants and strangers. When narrating the Zongo experience, however, it is necessary to mention the re-elaboration of the subordinate position of these people. Hausa people often speak about themselves as cultural bridges between their place of origin and the new settlements, and they seem to build a common narrative about their 'unique' presence in present-day Dagomba society:

Our people came with religion, clothes and leather goods, all things that the natives, Dagombas, didn't have. We introduced many things, like the *Sarkin* court, that is a Hausa chief who sits to the right of the Dakpema<sup>14</sup> when there is an issue to judge. The *Sarkin* knows Islamic law and knows how to write in Arabic; this has helped them so much. Through Islam, we helped Dagombas to create a justice system. They did not have it before. Our ancestors went to them and said: this is not good; this is

<sup>12</sup>Interview with M. Z., Tamale.

<sup>13</sup>Interviews with F. M. and Mr S., Tamale.

<sup>14</sup>Dagomba chief of Tamale and earth priest.

not the way to settle a dispute. We will teach you how to do it. Dagombas gradually absorbed Islam and other Hausa practices. When you see a Dagomba man working on leather, he is doing this thanks to Hausa people that introduced this job in their society.<sup>15</sup>

This vision is shared not only within the community, but also by local authorities: when I talked to the members of the court of the Dakpema, the six elderly people I interviewed highlighted the role of the Hausa community in the socio-political development of the host society.

In fact, Zongo communities act as, and perceive themselves to be, connectors between different countries, different cultures and urban contexts – labelled ‘transmigrants’ by Glick Schiller *et al.* (1995). By doing so, they refer not only to their places of origin, but also to the persistent mobile aspect of their experience as migrants. This ‘transmigrant’ community uses regional networks that already exist, sometimes modifying the location of some nodes. As stated by Bruno Riccio, it is important not to consider ‘transmigration’ simply as a network system; rather, we must view it as a constant process of networking, in which a whole system of practices, often conflicting, work together and lead to interconnected results (Riccio 2001). Zongos represent some of these nodes: they are places where ‘transmigrant’ memory is shaped. The ‘sense of consciously belonging to a group that lives in two settings’ (Levitt 1998: 931) – or in more than two settings – allows these migrant groups to produce hybrid social forms that meet the needs of their communities, often bypassing the government.

Zongos’ historical cultural influence, together with their contemporary role as connectors of migrant fluxes, demonstrates their active function as political actors. Zongo people assert a sort of ‘transmigrant citizenship’, which is only partially recognized by the Ghanaian government.

### The Mossi Zongo: inclusion and exclusion discourses

When I started my fieldwork in the Mossi Zongo, I found myself in a somewhat fragmented social situation, where it was almost impossible to identify a collective image of the community. The only shared narrative was connected to the alleged ‘total freedom’ of the Zongo, while opinions concerning the origin of the settlement diverged. The current composition of the area is mixed: besides the Mossi, the Zongo is also home to many other migrants from different places. The presence of the Mossi Zongo in Tamale can be traced back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century. Archival evidence points to its being in existence as far back as the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> Soeters also talks about the foundation of the Mossi Zongo in the 1920s (Soeters 2012: 83), while MacGaffey explicitly mentions it when quoting a colonial document written in 1932 (MacGaffey 2007: 112). However, the Zongo’s inhabitants I interviewed mostly gave a later date. According to their accounts, the Zongo was created to settle Mossi soldiers who fought with the Gold Coast Regiment in Burma during World War Two. This discrepancy between historical and oral sources might be explained as an

<sup>15</sup>Interview with S. M., Tamale.

<sup>16</sup>ADM 56/1/222, Accra; NRG 8/4/17, Tamale.



overlapping of interpretative levels: the Mossi community certainly arrived before World War Two and settled in Tamale in a site granted by the Dakpema, by virtue of strong ancestral ties with the indigenous Dagombas<sup>17</sup> (see also Skinner 1970), while the urban planning of the area started after the colonial government's decision to assign houses to Mossi war veterans, who settled in Tamale in two phases, after World War One and after World War Two.

This rereading of their own history is definitely connected to the scarcity of political authority and to the outstanding mobility and social mixture of the Zongo, which determine the complexity of passing on a shared narrative concerning the past. Despite this, we must also consider the socio-political relevance embedded in the discourse of 'being a soldier'. All the migrant communities that were trained and employed during the colonial period in the Gold Coast Regiment, especially Hausa and Mossi (Skinner 1960; Wilks 1966; Abaka 2009), were able to find a place for themselves that was recognized by the colonial administration. This fact had crucial consequences in the postcolonial period, especially when the Busia government issued the Alien Compliance Order in 1969 (Peil 1971; Eades 1993; Kobo 2010). This ordered all 'non-citizens' to leave the country, in an attempt to tackle the economic crisis and the alleged responsibility of 'foreign traders'. This dramatic political decision led to the instant expulsion of all the people defined as 'aliens': that is, 'non Ghanaians' (Peil 1971). War veterans, however, found themselves in a privileged position, because they had already acquired the status of Gold Coast colonial subjects. Their position in the post-colonial state of Ghana was one of inclusion, and so they were not forced to move at that particular moment. The Zongo people I spoke to constantly pointed to this fact: the link between participation in the war and the right to settle in Ghana, despite their being migrants, appears to be crucial in the way in which they narrate themselves. They claimed that the veterans hid many friends, companions and relatives who might not have qualified for this dispensation, thus helping them to stay despite the 1969 Order.

By using oral history and memory, I am trying to reconstruct not only the historical event, but also the history of its memory, and the ways in which that memory grows, changes and operates. In our case, the malleability of the collective memory of the Mossi Zongo is crucial in affirming the historical need to recall the identification of 'being a soldier' and to connect it to the urgency of claiming an active citizenship. As Alessandro Portelli states, 'what is really important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings' (Portelli quoted in Thomson 2011: 4).

A migrant is always a stranger, but a stranger is not necessarily a migrant. Migrant and stranger are fluid definitions, which often overlap, especially in our case study. Zongo people are not always migrants, since the majority of them have lived in non-migratory conditions for many generations. However, they always refer to themselves as migrants, and to their group's history as a history of migration that can be either recent or rooted in the past. A stranger can have been settled in the area for generations, but is always considered to be 'outside'

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<sup>17</sup>This aspect was highlighted in all the conversations I had with headmen and inhabitants of the Mossi Zongo.



the ritual order of the hosting society in that the stranger lacks rights over land (Lentz and Kuba 2006).

A crucial point, frequently and proudly stressed by Mossi Zongo people, is the alleged total absence of chiefs in their own socio-political space. They claim to be 'autonomous', 'free from any control', and able to rely solely on their own social links and communal assistance system. Actually, a Mossi chief does exist but he does not reside in the Zongo, in contrast to chiefs and elderly members of other groups, such as Zamberma, Frafra and Yoruba, who do settle there. The chief himself claims a certain degree of control and involvement in issues concerning the Zongo, but it is interesting that the majority of the inhabitants see him (and all the other chiefs) as an 'ambassador' – as he has been defined – more than as a figure who exerts real political and social power inside the community. The same perspective applies to the 'autochthonous' Dagomba chiefs, who certainly hold rights over land, but cannot really intervene in any issue concerning the Zongo.

This narrative is profoundly connected to the history of migration and to constant mobility, two aspects that determine the current heterogeneous social structure of the Zongo. Many different people have settled here, having come from different countries and belonging to different ethnic groups, and many different people pass through on a daily basis to find a temporary place to stay, or to ask for help and support. 'Everybody can come here; we welcome every person that comes from any country. We have all the ethnic groups of West Africa settled here.'<sup>18</sup>

This narrative speaks of a group in constant transition, which tries to construct its legitimacy day by day. To declare the chief redundant is to assert the plural and peculiar nature of the group. As strangers, these people do not want to be categorized as such; rather, they try to find their own specific path of inclusion and access to citizenship rights. Their lack of rights over land and their liminal position are discussed here by highlighting this open refusal of the socio-political categories that are locally perceived to be 'necessary' in order to gain social inclusion.

### National politics and representation

Despite this claimed attitude of non-involvement with local politics, Zongos are in fact an integral part of the contemporary Ghanaian political landscape, and have been since independence (Kobo 2010); this was especially the case in the past few years under the government of former President John Dramani Mahama.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Zongo people represent an important and complex pool of voters, because of their position as 'mediators' and 'interpreters' discussed above. They always maintain an ambiguous position and build a discourse that allows them to alternate between the wish to be fully integrated in the political dynamics of contemporary Ghana and a desire to maintain the strong collective identity of

<sup>18</sup>Interview with R. M., Tamale.

<sup>19</sup>John Dramani Mahama was president of the Republic of Ghana for the NDC party (National Democratic Congress) until 7 December 2016, when the NPP (New Patriotic Party) opposition leader, Nana Akufo-Addo, won the presidential elections.

the group, an identity that is always connected to the history of migration. It is interesting to note that the fundamental starting point of the discourse constructed by common people (which is often very different from the dialogue between the elites and local political authorities) is a denial of the authority of the chieftaincy system in favour of an internal self-organizing system. This unique feature is claimed to be a key aspect that differentiates this community from the 'natives'. In this sense, great attention is paid to national politics, an arena they feel could easily offer them inclusion, in that no particular affiliation to 'traditional' powers, which derive legitimacy from a privileged relationship to land, exists or is required at this level.

National political actors have also grasped this potential, and have worked on ways to include (and often exploit) Zongos. The most direct way was to get the young people from the Zongos involved in political campaigns by promising small gifts and money, taking advantage of the conditions of precariousness and poverty that characterize most Zongos. The result was a complex picture in which the unity of the group has been profoundly redefined. The young claimed a space of action and the possibility to seek a way of earning money, while the elderly condemned this 'political activity', which often consists only in political parties involving the 'Zongo boys' in violent forced recruiting activities for electoral campaigns and in the destruction of electoral material belonging to the opposition (see also Amankwaah 2013). Episodes of violence occurred in Tamale, caused by the 'Zongo boys', or militants of the NDC (the former party in power),<sup>20</sup> fomenting discontent in the rest of the population and radicalizing feelings of exclusion among 'strangers' living in the Zongo. Former President Mahama himself frequently spoke to the press about the need to contain this phenomenon, inviting the authorities in the Zongos to control and guide their youth.<sup>21</sup>

Zongo people are perceived and represented as 'strangers' even when they have recognized Ghanaian citizenship and/or were born in the country. However, being a stranger in this cultural and political context does not necessarily mean exclusion from society; on the contrary, this categorization may even apply to a prominent person in the host society, an individual who might hold an important economic position and who is perceived as contributing to the economic and political development of everyday life (Shack and Skinner 1979). It is interesting, though, to see how this condition is normally expressed in terms of liminality: in fact, the stranger can easily change his or her social position, but can also suddenly become the scapegoat in a tense or conflictual situation.

One of the strategies adopted by Mahama and his political entourage is to integrate Zongos into a 'traditional' system, for instance through the creation of a National Council of Zongo Chiefs (NCZC). This body is composed of representatives from all the Zongos in the country and is acquiring legitimacy in the local political discourse. When he was president of the Republic, Mahama inaugurated

<sup>20</sup>See M. J. K. Bokor, 'The Azorka boys, Boko Haram in Ghana, and threats to national security', GhanaWeb, 24 December 2014 <<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/The-Azorka-Boys-Boko-Haram-in-Ghana-and-threats-to-national-security-340528>>.

<sup>21</sup>'John Mahama speaks', GhanaWeb, 31 July 2012 <<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/John-Mahama-Speaks-246396>>.

the first national congress of the NCZC in June 2012, where the main issue was the necessity to build a strong union between the various Zongos; it was felt that, by focusing on common objectives, electoral violence could be contained effectively.<sup>22</sup> Repeated promises made by the president and his supporters to undertake urban renewal and to develop sanitation projects were aimed at making Zongo people feel integrated at a national and local level.<sup>23</sup> It is clear that many of these promises were instrumental, aimed at rapidly creating an internal system that could contain violence, especially during electoral periods. It is also true, however, that the gradual inclusion of Zongo authorities at a local political level is actually taking place and has produced instances of favours being exchanged with the president.<sup>24</sup>

When local chiefs shape their discourse on the need to include the heads of the Zongos, they adopt a rhetoric that is based on respect and on the importance of the historical heritage of migrant subjects. They stress how these subjects have contributed to the country and how they connect Ghana to the countries they originally came from.<sup>25</sup> This last point is of interest with regard to migrant memory: this memory is not only performed by the inhabitants of the Zongo and by local authorities, but also has profound echoes in the national and 'traditional' political spheres.

### Urban citizenship and the Zongo

Zongos can be used by government officials as connectors between government policies and the everyday practice of migrant communities, by exploiting network ties productively – ties that are active between the centre (the contemporary urban agglomeration) and the periphery (the various nodes of this articulated migrant network) (see also Ntewusu 2012).

The common contemporary practice of placing the Zongo under the category of 'slums and deprived areas' is often misleading, in relation both to emic social perceptions and to possible and positive future solutions to urban problems. The production of memory – the way in which Zongo people fabricate an image of themselves – constructs a sense of community that exists mainly in reference to their historical roots as migrants. This complex identity, composed by the acted consciousness of being migrants and strangers, allows the community to build a critical discourse that is able to challenge the possibility of their identity being erased as they become part of a larger 'informal' group in a process promoted by the macro-category of 'informality' (Hansen and Vaa 2004).

<sup>22</sup> 'Lead crusade against corruption', Graphic Online, 14 August 2014 <<https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/lead-crusade-against-corruption-rev-gbordzoe.html>>.

<sup>23</sup> 'Tamale Metro Assembly signs contract agreements', GhanaWeb, 15 November 2014 <<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/regional/Tamale-Metro-Assembly-signs-contract-agreements-335050?channel=D1>>.

<sup>24</sup> 'Program to improve Zongo communities in the offing ... Mahama tells Zongo leaders', *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 20 February 2013 <<https://www.modernghana.com/news/446512/1/program-to-improve-zongo-communities-in-the-offing.html>>.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with Mr S. and A. F., Tamale.

If we assume that society changes faster than the structures of cities, and that urban planning often struggles to keep up with this change (Sobrero 2011: 34), the Zongo example can provide a useful framework within which to develop urban ideas and planning solutions. Moreover, African cities – including Zongos – exhibit a high degree of organization precisely with respect to such forms of ethnic, religious and commercial associations (Freund 2007: 160). Could Ghana take advantage of this widespread knowledge related to the historical presence of migrants in the socio-political and urban setting?

The majority of urban planners told me that ‘Zongo’ is not an appropriate word according to urban policymakers: it is slang that may lead to misunderstandings and give rise to a feeling of exclusion among the inhabitants of such settlements. At first hearing, this change of nomenclature seemed to signal a progressive and inclusive approach, but I reconsidered this impression when I was told that Zongos are normally classified as ‘slums’. ‘Slum’ is not an appropriate term to define Zongo areas, as the vast majority of my interlocutors explained. Even if they are often poor and deprived areas, to homogenize them in this way is problematic. Residents are concerned about being the possible targets of forced eviction and resettlement, and that Zongos’ potential as connective and creative urban settlements will be ignored. Zongos in Ghana ought rather to be considered effective interlocutors for government urban planners. This is the case in relation to at least two relevant urban issues. The first concerns how to deal with internal migrant flows, especially those caused by situations of conflict. Zongos, in fact, are already organized and structured as support networks for Malian refugees. Various people I spoke to voiced the views expressed below:

The aftermath of this war in Mali will be terrible. We are already witnessing some consequences. Many people now are coming, especially women and children, but also old men, preachers, healers. They don’t have anything, they come in big numbers. Where do they go? They come here, they come to the Zongo. When somebody finds them around, they ask them where do they come from. They send them to the Zongo, where they can find their own people. They are especially Fulani. We have many Fulani here, and we have also the Fulani chief. So, we take care of them, we host them here around the mosque for a while, and then we hope to find them a place to stay.<sup>26</sup>

The second issue highlights the ways in which urban and rural needs might be linked. For example, as underlined by Sudarkasa, Yoruba in Ghana were allowed to have a political and social presence because of their intermediary role, which facilitated the movement of goods between urban and remote rural areas (Sudarkasa 1985). At the same time, as already noted, the commercial and social role of Zongo inhabitants in linking urban and rural contexts is central. Zongos, because of their historical trajectories, could help organize the flow from rural to urban areas, aiding government officials in finding shared proposals to practically deal with such movements; Zongo inhabitants could also act as spokespersons and represent the needs of mobile groups of people. This is true especially if we consider that the Ghana Shared Growth Development Agenda

<sup>26</sup>Interview with Mr S., Tamale.

(GSGDA) recognizes the lack of buffer zones between rural settlements and cities (NDPC 2013: 68).

Furthermore, Zongo people are also expressing something else when they try to challenge the 'slums and deprived areas' definition. In the 1990s, the structural adjustment programme transformed urban space, affecting the distribution of both social groups and activities, 'exacerbating grim situations in many countries, making social inequality across urban space more visible than ever before' (Hansen and Vaa 2004: 11). Ghana has been an integral part of this process (Konadu-Agyemang 2001), a process in which forced eviction and resettlement are common practices intended to 'fight' the growth of 'informal' settlements. The very concept of informality is ambiguous and should be used critically. As defined by Hansen and Vaa (2004), informality may be connected to illegal or extra-legal practices, but it is not necessarily perceived as illegitimate by the actors involved in the process. Therefore, the concept can be misleading. 'Slums and deprived areas' are included in the 'informal' sector, constituting a *de facto* category that finds itself at the core of the country's urban planning strategies, which very often imply forced evictions and resettlements. In this sense, Zongo people are trying to produce a viable image of themselves to avoid being forcefully included in this stereotype, with the aim of demonstrating that they are part of a different urban and social dynamic. Representing themselves as migrants, even if they have lived in Ghana for generations, can be seen as a specific way to act in the contemporary political arena, and of being included with their own specific characteristics and heritage.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have presented some of the contemporary challenges of being part of a migrant community in Ghana, through an analysis of the local historical institution of the Zongo.

The specific way in which Zongo people represent themselves (as bearers of cultural heritage, linked by a transnational network system) connects them both to their historical trajectory and to their contemporary role in Ghanaian society. Their position bridging different places and diverse historical periods serves to assert their strong wish to be better represented in the public sphere, and to be fully recognized as catalysts of contemporary migration processes.

Hausa Zongo people describe themselves as homogeneous and as connectors (of goods, people, knowledge) between their actual settlement and the various nodes of their transnational network, conceived in both an historical and a contemporary way. Mossi Zongo people, while representing their social identity as distinctive (heterogeneous, autonomous, creative), nevertheless ground their specific social features in their ability to welcome and connect people coming from the whole West African region.

I thus asked my interlocutors whether their incorporation of the social and political meaning of 'being migrants' and 'being Zongo people' could be exploited in an active manner, with the aim of finally developing a new way of feeling included in the political and social framework of the Ghana government.

It is important to underline here that their constant liminal position is not only endured but also often consciously performed to maintain their independence and their freedom of movement. This aspect is perceived as a trap, especially when young people are exploited for political purposes during elections, but it is not portrayed as a limitation when liminality can be used as a bridge to connect people and places, and can elevate Zongo people to the position of mediators and translators between ‘strangers’ and ‘locals’.

Certainly, their identity as Zongo people is shaped on the basis of their collective construction and reconstruction of their memory of migration, which can be actively used to assert their legitimacy to be included in the national political framework.

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### Abstract

The historical presence of Zongo communities in contemporary Ghana is analysed through archival documents and ethnography, with the aim of highlighting their social and political value as migrant communities, and their possible inclusion in the urban strategy of the country. Zongos have been present in Ghana since precolonial and colonial times, depending on specific cases, and are historically connected to the presence of Muslim trade communities in the market areas of various urban settlements. I argue that their role in the Ghanaian socio-political landscape goes beyond this common definition: Zongos act as interlocutors between the urban centre and peripheral rural areas, and they have a potentially effective role in dealing with migrant flows. Zongo people elaborate their memory of migration in particular ways, revealing both an inherent mode of producing a common group identity, and a conscious strategy of inclusion in the contemporary political dynamics of Ghana.

### Résumé

Cet article analyse la présence historique de communautés zongo dans le Ghana contemporain à travers des documents d'archives et des données ethnographiques,

dans le but de souligner leur valeur sociale et politique en tant que communautés migrantes, et leur inclusion possible dans la stratégie urbaine du pays. La présence des Zongo au Ghana remonte aux temps précoloniaux et coloniaux, selon le cas, et est liée historiquement à la celle des communautés commerçantes musulmanes des quartiers marchands de divers peuplements urbains. L'auteur soutient que le rôle des Zongo dans le paysage sociopolitique ghanéen va au-delà de cette définition courante : les Zongo servent d'interlocuteurs entre le centre urbain et la périphérie rurale, et ils jouent un rôle potentiellement efficace de gestion des flux migratoires. Les Zongo ont une façon particulière d'élaborer leur mémoire de migration, qui révèle à la fois un mode inhérent de production d'une identité de groupe commune et une stratégie consciente d'inclusion dans la dynamique politique contemporaine du Ghana.