

PONTZEN (Benedikt)

Islam in a Zongo. Muslim Lifeworlds in Asante, Ghana

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The book of Benedikt Pontzen adds a significant contribution in the study of the everyday life inside the complex and multifaceted environment that is the Zongo, by using Islam practices as the main analytical instrument. Moreover, he recalls the scholars that have so far studied and lived the Zongo - especially when located in largely Christian areas - that Islam is not a simple inherent characteristic of this kind of settlement, but that the various ways in which Islam is practised, discussed, and contested shape the life in the Zongo, including the processes of community and identity construction.

As an anthropologist, Pontzen conducted fieldwork in the Kokote Zongo located in the outskirts of Offinso, twenty miles from Kumase, the political centre of the Asante, which population is nowadays largely Christian. Zongos are wards, quite diffused in various towns and cities in West Africa, hosting migrants and traders originally from the northern Sahelian region, where people used to settle and carry on trade (especially kola nuts, originally), and maintaining strong contacts with the areas or origin. In Asante, Zongos are specific part of towns where strangers from northern regions have settled and still today are important areas that keep on attracting migrants, even if, as Pontzen notes, their importance as trading posts has diminished. What is still crucial and vital in the Zongos is the production and re-production of Islamic practices, that in the opinion of the author are intensely informing the everyday life of Zongo people.

The methodology used by the author is based on structured and semi-structured interviews, recording of sermons, and research in local archives, with the aim at disclosing the narrative about three crucial Islamic phenomena: the various Islamic prayers found in the Zongo, the authorisation of Islamic knowledge (*ilm*) and the local debate around *bōkā*, a word that is used to describe the practises of spiritual healing and divination, that involves, among other things, the manufacturing of amulets to cast spiritual beings. The act of choosing these three aspects, and the methodology undertaken to describe, historicize and locate them accompany the reader to the final point, that is the assertion of the irreducible diversity of Islam in its past and present times.

Pontzen demonstrates to be aware of the debate around the anthropology of Islam and its main challenges, namely the reconciliation of the universal appeal of the religion and the diversity of its practices, conceptions, forms. He openly contrasts the notion of an alleged “African Islam” and chooses to approach Islam as a discursive tradition: Pontzen places himself and his work in a research trend (Asad, Eickelman, Schielke among the others) that conceives imaginaries, understanding, and practices in relation to their context. In narrowing down his idea of “discursive tradition” and connection to the context, the author is clear in pointing out that there is not possible to give an idea nor a definition of a supposedly coherent “Zongo Islam”, and with his research he demonstrates that the confrontation and competition between different traditions is characterizing the forms of Islam in the Zongo.

Pontzen’s attempt to design a brief history of Islam in Asante unveils the presence and juxtaposition of various traditions that can be understood in their cultural, religious, and political importance only if analysed in their historical dimension. The Suwarian tradition has apparently shaped Islam in Asante during the eighteenth and nineteenth century and was replaced by Qadiriyya in the late nineteenth century. Together with the latter, other traditions became more influent, like the Tijaniyya in the early twentieth century, and Sunna in the 1970s; especially the last two are continuously competing in present times for maintaining or enhancing their religious hegemony. As an example of the archival and contemporary narration material used by Pontzen, of particular interest is the story of the religious contrast and the dialectical confrontation happened in the 1960s between two influential *malams*, the Tijaniyya *malam* Maikano Jallo of Kumase, and the Sunna *malam* Afa Ajura, active in Tamale (Northern Region of Ghana) where he opened a Qur’anic School and started preaching, being the first to openly question the authority of the Tijaniyya. The nature of the confrontation (the real value of the major Tijaniyya prayer *ṣalāt al-fātih*), the space where it

took place (in front of an audience in Tamale's central park), and the final decision (both Tijaniyya and Sunna found their claims emerging victorious), give a profound meaning to the analytic discourse made by the author. Islam is contested, is openly contested, and its interpretation is a crucial issue that drives the reader into another complex theme that is the interpretation and understanding of *'ilm*, Islamic knowledge. The Chapter on *'ilm*, which displays Pontzen's profound knowledge of Islamic theology, initiates and concludes with the sentence of a local *malam* "being a *malam* is not an easy thing". The ethnography of the various practices that are produced and reproduced in the Zongo, in fact, reveals how Islamic knowledge is acquired with the study of the scriptures, but also through the way that a *malam* live in the world. Knowledge is a social phenomenon, "embodied" by *malams*, who are constantly undergoing local scrutiny. Their authority can be contested, and the issue regarding "who" has the authority to transmit Islamic knowledge, but also to talk and recount the story of Islam in the Zongo to the researcher is very well developed. The rich and fascinating Chapter on *bōkā* sheds further light on the general argument of the author; from one side the description of various forms of divination and spiritual healing confirms the relevance of the observation and analysis of Islamic practices in their context, from the other side the local debate on whether *bōkā* can be considered an Islamic practice (*'ibāda*) or un-Islamic (*bōkā*, indeed) informs again the locally grounded and contested nature of different forms of Islam. Benedikt Pontzen demonstrates how the Zongo is a privileged point of observation of social, religious, and political dynamics of contemporary Ghana. He does not forget to mention the main common characteristic and stereotypes that are built around the Zongos in the country, like poverty, destituteness, seclusion, criminality, ignorance, "a place for northerners". However, choosing to focus on Islam only with professionalism and good fieldwork, he does not fail to bring back the reader to the complexity and richness of the experiences provided by these settlements.

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