GROUP AND GRID: ZONGOS AND THE BRITISH

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Abstract

Accra, the capital of Ghana, exemplifies the spatial impact of the colonial system of organization on the urban landscape, with regional inequalities complemented by sociospatial inequalities of density, modernization, and residential exclusion in the city. Accra’s population grew through migration, and new neighborhoods emerged with distinct names. After the British established their administrative quarters in Accra in the late 19th century, they built Victoriaborg as a European quarter and then cordoned off other sections for indigenous groups, including Muslims. As the British came to understand, the Muslim collectivity was composed of different ethnicities, primarily Yoruba and Hausa, supplemented by Kanuri, Fulani, Nupe and Wangara. Density of population and problems of sanitation (and the plague) in the old downtown core needed to be addressed; thus, the British began creating a series of town site plans to regularize the Muslim communities. One of those, Sabon Zongo, was commissioned by the Governor J.P. Rodger in 1908. The community was laid out on a grid, sub-divided into 32 parcels and lots apportioned. By 1912, the relocated Hausa residents had built about 165 compounds. This paper discusses “the constraints of a frame” (Ingraham 1991:65) in the socio-spatial evolution of the community.

Introduction

This paper discusses “the constraints of a frame” (Ingraham 1991, 65), that is the grid, in the socio-spatial evolution of a migrant community in Accra, Ghana, known as Sabon Zongo, since it was first established in 1912 until the present.

Various forces, in the present case, colonialism and modernity, have spread new ideas for town planning globally (Watson, 2004). The British brought to their African colonies “standards of ‘normality’ regarding proper living environments” (Watson, 2004, i), to which the grid was core. Extending the grid regulated the “unruly” people and their spaces, imposing physical forms and interventions. “Among the cultural projects that colonialism entailed, the remaking of space played a critical role... [as] colonial rule hinged on efforts to refashion cultural landscapes” (Bissell, 2011, 108). As Bissell found for Zanzibar (2011), street layouts, house form, street networks, are expressive of the culture. To the British, Zanzibar (like other indigenous towns) appeared chaotic. In its colonial program, the British set out to define urban districts, seeking to make the city conform to British rather than Zanzibari categories.

Like urban Zanzibar, Accra was a colonial city, and like colonial cities throughout West Africa and indeed the world, its development had a particular impact on local social and physical space, in part a manifestation of power (King, 1976). The British determined to condition human actors and socialize them as social beings – enabled through materiality, that is the relationships and behaviors that people develop over time with their material world, such as streets, roads, lanes, byways of all sorts (Dant, 1999). The space and the built environment are created by and create social relations.

The architecture and plans of colonial cities, hybrid constructions blending influences from colonizer and host, became traditions in their own right. Formal ideas and spatial concepts were adapted to local conditions, depending upon climate, materials and availability of skilled labor. The Europeans arrived in West Africa in the late 15th century, their town building a consequence of their push to control sea trade, set up forts and engage in the slave trade. They made deals with chiefs and big men. Later, adventurers like Henry Stanley mapped Africa’s interior. Colonial annexation and government legitimated the enterprise, bringing these places under their control and expanding Eurocentered capitalism. The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 initiated the Scramble for Africa in earnest, formalizing colonial activity. In West Africa it was primarily the British and the French who claimed territories, setting up trade towns and administrative centers along the coast.

They brought modernity, a vague term with many meanings and a vast literature, but by which I mean “long-term processes of social change ... and multidimensional yet often systematic interconnections between a variety of cultural, political and economic structures” (Felski, quoted in Hodgson 2001, 3). In European thought, this implicated science and rationality in the development of space and society, including the built environment (see Pellow, 2015 for a longer discussion of modernity and its multiple instantiations). In some places, they built monumental architecture; in all places they created urban plans enabling their reorganization of and rule over local and colonial populations. They brought the modernist grid, a reflection of “standardization, mass production, and the newly smooth mechanics of transportation” (Higgins, 2009, 6). They codified and ranked differences as a central tenet to their enterprise. This was expressed in spatial hierarchies to minimize contact and to supervise the local population, impacting the layout and functioning of the urban systems (King, 1976).

Accra exemplifies the spatial impact of the colonial system of socio-spatial organization on the urban landscape, with regional inequalities complemented by sociospatial inequalities of modernity, density, and residential exclusion in the city.

The British, like colonial powers elsewhere, created new kinds of cities, reflecting conscious planning. In Ghana, as elsewhere in West Africa and the colonial world, foreigners developed the city to promote their own interests. In the new spatial ordering, colonial designers destroyed or overlaid traditional or indigenous architectural forms through urban planning.

Creation of a Community

Accra has had the status of a primary city, what Konadu-Agyemang (1998) referred to as the “favored child” since the 1950s. Its metro area covers 1,079 sq km (Konadu-Agyemang, 1998). While it constitutes 1.36 percent of Ghana’s land area, it contains 15.8 percent of the country’s population (Konadu-Agyamang, 1998). In the 1870s, Accra consisted of Central Accra, an area less than 10 square km.

The city first emerged out of a combination of the great migrations of Africans and European explorers, beginning in the 15th century. The Africans began to settle and set up trading links with the Europeans. By 1600, the Ga people had established themselves, and set in motion the creation of Accra as their federal capital. Their towns grew up along the coast, between and beyond three European forts, which became centers of economic and political power. By the late 19th century, the British had prevailed over the other European powers.

In Accra, one sees the footprints of colonialism and modernity in old spaces and new, the post-modern spaces of contradiction and opportunity – commercial, residential, even accidental (Quayson, 2014). The British moved their administrative headquarters to Accra from Cape Coast in 1877 and imposed European-style town planning – i.e. laying out house plots and streets on a grid. Accra, which had been a relatively homogeneous small-scale community, was transformed into a heterogeneous large-scale one (Acquah, 1958). New neighborhoods emerged with distinct names. They built Victoriaborg as a European quarter and then cordoned off other sections for indigenous groups, including Muslims and various migrant ethnicities, primarily Yoruba and Hausa, supplemented by Kanuri, Fulani, Nupe and Wangara.

The new built environments represented new habitats of meaning. The street layouts communicated a European system of organization, “ideological representation[s] of the real” (Moore, 1986, 152). The grid, with all buildings sited in a particular manner, was not indigenous to the local residents. The rationale behind the organization of physical space followed several basic tenets. First, through cadastral surveys and registration systems, colonial administrations set out the functional specialization of land use. Social and health reformers, architectural designers and city planners sought to reorganize the spatial and material conditions of the city to bring so-called order to what they considered the city’s physical chaos. Second, colonial policy-makers interpreted scientific/medical theories, such as infection through aerial contact, to mean that the native population had to be contained. They used the disease metaphor to justify segregation in colonial cities. Colonial doctors preached that “miasma” (foul air), emanating from the soil and rotting vegetation, caused tropical diseases which could be transmitted from “immune” Africans to vulnerable Europeans by mosquitos. One solution was the *cordon sanitaire*, a physical barrier designed to prevent the spread of disease. Instrumental to the ideology and material practice of urban zoning, it segregated populations along the hierarchies of race and class and in line with scientific/medical theories of the late 19th century. In Accra, Ghana, the *cordon sanitaire* was the race course site, created as a buffer for the European residential area.

Another solution was formal town planning. In 1908, the plague hit the oldest part of Accra, Jamestown and Zongo Lane by the sea. The colonial government condemned much of the housing [Fig 1] in the old quarter to decrease population density and improve sanitation.

They demolished the old housing, constructed of mortar and mud, with grass or corrugated iron roofs, to ease crowding and improve drainage, while also resettling residents in new planned town sites around town. Codes stipulated that new buildings be stone or concrete. New town sites were laid out to relocate those affected (Pellow, 2008).

One such site is Sabon Zongo, a 75-acre “new” *zongo* (Hausa, stranger settlement), located on the west side of the city of Accra. It was formed as a diasporic community, a *zongo* by the Hausa leader Malam Bako for his Hausa followers more than 100 years ago. It was Accra’s first such ethnically-based community created by and for the people who moved there (see Pellow 2008 for the history of the Hausa in Accra and the founding of Sabon Zongo). They were strangers, which in Ghana means they came without prior rights to land, because

Figure 1
Jamestown, Accra. 1912. “An unsanitary area showing huts and houses crowded together without roadways or good compounds. Nothing but demolition of the huts and remodeling whole area can render healthy.” Courtesy of FCO Photograph Collection. Library & Information Services. Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Figure 2
Malam Bako’s Land: Official Survey Map ca. 1915. 1948 Tracing. Courtesy of Chambers of Akufo-Addo Prempeh & Co

all land was owned by the chieftaincy, stools in the south or skins in the north. Land is of fundamental importance in Ghana, because it enables various kinds of legitimacy – for example, creating relationships and setting up enterprises. Rights to land also play into social rights, or peoples’ perception of such rights, of who belongs and who does not. The physical lines of demarcation are crucial to social understandings, identities and roles and rights.

Thus in need of a parcel of land, Malam Bako applied to and was granted the land by the local Ga chiefs who owned it; their grant was affirmed by the British colonial administration, which was in the process of creating planned town sites in Accra. Somewhere around 1912, Sabon Zongo was established. While Malam Bako remained downtown for some years, he demarcated living space at Sabon Zongo and allocated it to his followers. When first surveyed, the acreage was subdivided into 32 parcels, varying somewhat in size and greatly in the number and dimensions of compounds [Fig 2]. The 32 plots of land were laid out on a grid. The parcels are clearly drawn and all of the plotted roads cut through north-south and east-west. The plan, Malam Bako’s Area, shows the names of those to whom Malam Bako

awarded land. All were Muslims. The vast majority were Hausa, but there was also a handful of other “stranger” ethnics, primarily from Nigeria (Yoruba, Fulani, Kanuri and Nupe) and elsewhere to the north (Wangara, Mossi and Zabrama).

Genealogical underpinnings played out socially and on the ground – a resident's relation to the history of this *zongo* and its founder has determined where one received a plot relative to Malam Bako's house and how much influence one carries. Over the years, residents have both reproduced the social and spatial order while also incorporating change and new meanings in the process. This community, laid out by the British as a rational site on a grid, went its own way.

The locale seemed rural: some Hausa chose not to move there because of the physical wildness of the new place. In an interview, the Yoruba chief told me there were “animal, bad animal even ... wolves” (Interview, Chief Alida Braimah, February 2, 1982). It was a place apart from the city: At that time, if you were going to Sabon Zongo, you came to a river [Korle Lagoon] – they called it Korle. You paid a penny before you could cross. At that time, there was no street” (Interview, Chief Alida Braimah, February 2, 1982). The place was “bush;” Ga people farmed the land. There was cassava, okra, mango, cashew and pineapple. The farmers were forced to relinquish their crop growing and relocate. Malam Bako kept cattle and his son Chief Idrissu, stabled horses, as does his grandson Baba Mai Doki still today. While the locale seemed far from Accra, it was incorporated into Accra in 1943, thus required to observe municipal laws, such as the ban on keeping cattle.

Layout

Sabon Zongo is spatially divided into internal sub-divisions (*unguwa*), or neighborhoods, which over the years have been associated with particular people or groups [Fig 3]. Their social practices and spatial/temporal practices – how they use public and domestic space over time – have been linked through their production of the social and spatial environment. Their locations map out relations along socio-spatial axes, carved out by the original grid. The *unguwa* themselves are informal and not clearly demarcated, but they encompass distinct social and material differences. They have histories and qualities that distinguish one from another.

Figure 3

The unguwa (quarters) delineated on an aerial map. (Accra: Survey of Ghana 1963)

For example, *Kan Tudu* (on top) is at the top of the incline going towards Market Street and Malam Bako's palace is located there. Thus it is associated with the Bako family and many who live in the area are genealogically close to the Bako's. Individual perceptions of where one ends and another begins come into play, perhaps because of social interactions, of ethnicity, of language/dialectal difference. Early on in the community's life, Malam Bako recreated typical offices of Hausa authority, such as chief of the blind people (*sarkin makafi*). Several of such titled groups were allocated space within Sabon Zongo, each of which became a named neighbourhood. Thus, the blind and their chief live in *Unguwan Makafi*, the blind quarter. According to *Sarkin Makafi* Munkaella, whom I got to know in the 1990s, when Malam Bako was deciding upon the spatial sections and who would live where, he had his son Lawal Daudu throw a stone – first east, then west, north, south. The first section he created was *Unguwan Makafi* and they began to build there. Malam Bako allotted it to the blind in perpetuity (Interview, May 31, 1995). Other specialized populations mapped onto the landscape, included kutare (lepers), and their chief *Sarkin Kutare* (Interview, Imam Alhaji Idrissu August 16, 1997). Over time, other socio-spatial divisions also evolved. The core of Sabon Zongo, represented by the chief's palace and the empty field that houses the Night Market,

is bounded on all sides by internal roads. Like all of the socio-spatial delineations, this too follow the footprint of the grid.

Boundaries

Today the community is also very much a part of the urban landscape, with transport pick-ups and drop-offs within and alongside Sabon Zongo. It is edged by main roads, although its actual boundaries are somewhat ambiguous, with local opinion varying. Oblogo Road forms Sabon Zongo’s northern boundary, travelled by commuters into Accra from suburban and peri-urban areas. Various transport vehicles run along Oblogo Road. Oblogo ends at Ring Road, a semi-circular dual carriageway from the coastal road in Labadi (Ring Road East), around the city (Ring Road Central), past Liberation Circle (becoming Ring Road West) and dissolving into a two-lane street as it approaches the periphery of Sabon Zongo. There it is known as Mortuary Road and proceeds down to the coast to the west of Accra’s old downtown. Mortuary Road is the informal boundary of Sabon Zongo’s eastern edge. Turning onto Oblogo off Ring Road, one sees the profiles of two of the community’s landmark mosques.

Many believe Market Lane (bounding Freedom Market) is the community’s southern boundary, although in fact the British plan extends Sabon Zongo through the market to its far end. To the west, Market Lane does not meet up with a cross-street – even though it does cut through on the original plan – but rather Ojo Primary School and one of the four sets of public toilets.

Thus, the community is spatially delineated. But its coherence is less due to its physical boundedness than what I found to be “an overarching shared morality and the attachment that residents feel for the place... [T]his is operationalized by exchange as social practice in everyday life and it defines the boundaries of Sabon Zongo” (Pellow, 2006, 146).

The original structures were built within the block pattern. Even on the 1969 Lands Department survey map, the original grid remained apparent, even though most of the streets remained uncompleted. On a contemporary aerial map [Fig 3.], the north-south streets are not clear and even where they are, they do not cut all the way through because of scattered buildings that over time were expanded out over the inscribed property line. In the newest section, Ayigbetown, the roads do not follow a straight line and houses are not aligned with the road. Streets large and small are named on official map, and house numbers are written on the walls by the city. But as in Accra more generally, residents do not use maps or addresses,

often do not know the street names and rarely use them. Throughout, locationality is given in terms of commonly-recognized landmarks. For example, when I was doing research there 15 years ago, there were 30 mosques. There is the Night Market space. There are the public toilets. There is the market and then the cooked food locales.

While much of Accra has enjoyed infrastructural improvement, Sabon Zongo continues to suffer dilapidation. Few have toilet facilities. The only houses with water closet plumbing are less densely packed in and thus have room for a septic system.

There has been some road improvement: three streets were fully paved and “guttered” in 1999 as part of an urban development plan: Market Road, on the southern periphery, Malam Bako Street, which runs north-south past the palace; and a chunk of Korle Bu Street, which runs east-west. These three connect with city arteries. Most cross streets are narrow,

Figure 4
A street with traders in Sabon Zongo. (Deborah Pellow photo)

unpaved lanes, similar to the alleys in the old downtown of Accra (see **Figure 4**). Most lack proper gutters. Only since 2010 have most other streets been paved and gutters installed.

Building codes are not enforced. Throughout the community, roads have lost their alignment and are impassable for motor vehicles; indeed, in some places the absence of grading and a rocky, hilly surface impede anything but walking. Particularly in the denser sections, compounds have been constructed in the path of a sited road. Before gutters could be laid on Malam Bako Street and the road paved in the late 1990s, the walls on a number of houses protruding into the road had to be demolished. Throughout, one sees large X’s on such walls “by order of the AMA [Accra Metropolitan Authority].”

When collecting mental maps of Sabon Zongo some years ago (Pellow 2006), I was struck by the dominance of the grid in peoples’ responses. This of course makes sense, given the fact that the town site was laid out according to formal principles of the grid, and when people arrived, the constraints of the framework were there to be built within. And yet, even as the grid may lie within social consciousness, “the people’s architecture” has resisted it. People have ignored the street patterning, building out in an aggregative or accretive way. Quoting Hubbard and Sanders (2003, 83-84), I noted that areas may be produced not just by those in power but also from those below.

As I depicted earlier (Pellow, 2008), the formal physical attributes of Sabon Zongo’s site plan do not necessarily coincide with social practices. As residents have built into the courtyard space, activities such as wedding celebrations have relocated to the street. This involution of the courtyard in the compound houses is due to peculiarities of kinship, inheritance, and building practices.

The safety and availability of the streets is significant, because with involution, residents of a compound lose their shared commons. Activities that would normally take place in the compound yard move out into the street. Thus when particular festivals or occasions are held, such as an outdoor for a new baby or the dancing accompanying a wedding, the street, laid down by the grid to mark the public domain for movement through the public space, in effect becomes the compound’s private space. The participants create what I call “public privacy,” “each allowing the others to carry out daily activities in the open space but as if they were not visible” (Pellow, 1991, 203). In other words, groups of people share use of

the public street for activities that are not public but at least semi-public – in the public eye for those who are invited and participated in by those who are not.

Thus, on the one hand, the Zongolese have maintained a particular lifestyle, ignoring the boundaries of walls, streets and lanes when building or renovating or celebrating. And yet, at the same time the footprint of the grid, of British rationality, remains. Its persistence “demonstrates that once a grid is invented, it never disappears” (Higgins, 2009, 7).

Conclusion

In the early twentieth century, the British imposed their view of community space as a grid, and through this prism, compound and community life evolved. Some residents ignored it when building their houses, as is apparent in the southeastern quadrant, others in renovating and expanding theirs. The municipality’s adherence to the colonial spatial pattern emerges when streets are to be paved (Malam Bako St.) or proper gutters to be laid. On these occasions, structures that extend into the street are cut back. Thus, the Western grid remains 100 years later.

The evolution of this place has genealogical underpinnings which have played out socially and on the ground – a resident’s relation to the history of this *zongo* and its founder has determined where one received a plot relative to Malam Bako’s house and how much influence one carries. Locations map out relations along socio-spatial axes, to which social and spatial/temporal practices are linked.

This community, laid out by the British as a rational town plan site, went its own way. Infrastructure was not incorporated into the planning. Roads were not paved. Not all roads were cut through. Many houses have been added to, spreading out beyond the lot’s boundaries. Plumbing for houses was not laid.

The grid remains, and yet, the physical space expresses a cultural form, its housing incorporating a pre-colonial past from northern Nigeria, a colonial overlay and a post-colonial adaptation. As in other African cities, it constitutes a type of socio-spatial form that exemplifies the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial city.

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