

“This is the breaking news in the zongo! All of the children will let everyone know about this [“Gizo-Gizo!"]. Even this afternoon, I went back and lots of adults and kids were huddled around a single book reading it. The children were teaching their parents.”

-*Muhammad Awal; now teacher/previous student*

### **A Personal Reflection on “Gizo-Gizo!: A Tale from the Zongo Lagoon”**

How does one, in but a few paragraphs, tell the story of a story? In this case, where, how, why, and when did the children’s story “Gizo-Gizo!” come to life in Ghana’s Cape Coast zongo<sup>1</sup> and how does it continue to unfold in the companionship of its authors, illustrators, readers, and listeners? For analogous to other Hausa folktales, the storyteller selects from a nearly infinite set of beginnings. Indeed, while Malam Hammadu, the head teacher of the Hassaniyya Quranic School, might pinpoint its origins on the humid afternoon in June 2012 in which we held a community-based design workshop for educational programming, former students (now teachers) Muhammad Awal and Yusuf might open their story with the long hours we spent later that summer contemplating Spider’s bad habits while sipping on icy cold Milo. And, still other students such as Abidatu, Aminatu, and Ramatu might point proudly instead to their carefully wrought pencil drawings of crab fishing in his canoe, a platter of fried fish, or fantastical, eye-shaped trees. I will leave those stories up to them to tell.

Though more generally, my love for writing and illustrating children’s stories runs nearly as deep as my life, for me *this* story and project began nearly nine years ago when I arrived in Cape Coast as an eager architecture student wanting “to do good in the world.” My instructor had introduced me to the region’s Chief Imam (and head of the zongo community) outside his house and location of the Quranic School or what the community calls “Madrasa Alley.” Without the intimate knowledge of place - its layers of meaning, culture, and history – all I could see at that time were skeletal earthen structures, the pungent odor of open sewers, the static crackling of call to prayer, and above all, poverty. What I realized years later though, was that the very story I had fashioned then - its characters, conflict, and resolution - had less to do with how the inhabitants saw, felt about, and understood their world and more to do with my own discomfort of inhabiting a world I had not yet learned to read and comprehend. As I spent summer after summer getting to know the place and contours of everyday life, I realized, a little despondently, that most of the participatory design strategies I had in mind no longer made sense – that is except for our story-telling workshops.

It was every weekend in madrasa alley – under a billowing rice bag canopy protecting us from the blistering sun – that we came together over story-telling and then eventually story-making. At first, we read stories out loud together and exchanged tales we heard from our grandparents. I read them Roald Dahl’s *George’s Marvelous Medicine* and a

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<sup>1</sup> “Zongos” (also spelled “zango”) are a particular kind of West African urban settlement meaning “traveler’s camp,” “stop-over,” or “Hausa quarters” in the Hausa language. See: Paul Newman. *A Hausa-English Dictionary*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) 230.

fictional story I wrote about my first travels to Ghana in 2002. The children (and adults too) shared accounts of wild beasts that used to live in the bush of Kotokuraba market, men from Niger who would play xylophone under a full moon, and procrastinating cockroaches who danced during the rainy season instead of collecting water. We also talked about current challenges the students and community faced – experiences that were not yet stories, but could be. I recall one child describing a recent issue in which the city of Cape Coast had no clean drinking water for a few weeks because the mining companies upstream had polluted their water bodies with chemicals and waste. Other students agreed and supplemented with their own experiences, ideas, and views about the problem and potential solutions.

Through a collaborative, multi-faceted process of drawing, performance, writing, and reading, we tacked between these lived and imagined worlds until the shape of “Gizo-Gizo!” gradually came to life. As we tried on the voices and personalities of the characters through drama performances, drew the places in which they lived, laughed with each other about how our imaginations etched onto the page, and wrote about how the characters changed over the course of the story, I relished in the creative inconsistencies in our multiple interpretations and across mediums.

More recently though, I felt saddened by certain congruencies and singularities required in publishing our story and perhaps even more so by the monetary and ethical challenges that inevitably arose in its wake. Nevertheless, the collaborative process of creating “Gizo-Gizo!” and story-making more generally – at once rooted in local experience and all that exists imaginatively outside it, I believe has the capacity to offer all of us (whether children or adults) productive ways-in to understanding and experiencing one another’s worlds without necessarily requiring us to share the same world. For as one resident offered up to me, “Life has its crooked ways. There is suffering. It has its ups and downs – we have to learn how to cope with it. Stories can help us. It is a way to make the sour turn sweet...”.