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# Unpacking the concept of urban marginality

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## 1. Introduction: thinking urbanity through the margins

The members of the research group *Cities as Laboratories of Change*<sup>1</sup> at ZMO Berlin recognise the limits of making generalisations based on Western models, as has been remarked by Förster (2013), for African towns.<sup>2</sup> We therefore explore processes of urbanisation across the Muslim worlds.<sup>3</sup> Studying cities from different disciplines, angles and regions, the group discussed the concept of urban marginality in 2014 by investigating the urban through the lens of margins (as space), marginality (as social dimensions)<sup>4</sup> and marginalisation (as a process). The themes of relationality and temporality arose immediately as central to our exchanges. From refugee settlements in Karachi to middle-class gated communities in Jakarta via nightlife in Côte d'Ivoire and urban wasteland in Tunis (among other fields), the aim was to question the concept of urban marginality through its empirical diversity so as to clarify and highlight its different (and sometimes contradictory) analytical potentialities for urban studies at large. As such

this paper shall above all be read like an account of an intellectual journey that expresses our interdisciplinary debates about the perspective of margins across the Muslim worlds.

The research group initially aimed at conceptually dissecting the archival turn observed in urban history towards an increasing interest in the living conditions at the so-called »margins« of the city (i.e. Milner 2005) as well as its impact on global studies. This focus on the perspective of margins developed out of earlier research at ZMO: migration in an Ottoman context (Freitag, Fuhrmann, Lafi, Riedler eds., 2011), the governance of ethnic and social diversity in the Ottoman Empire (Freitag and Lafi eds., 2014), urban violence in the Middle East (Freitag, Fuccaro, Ghrawi, Lafi eds., 2015) and daily life in the cities of the Ottoman Empire (Freitag and Lafi guest eds., 2011). These publications touched upon several aspects of the margins: studies on migration illustrated the fragile position of migrants in urban societies as well as the multitude of attempts at regulating them; studies on daily life showed how urban life can be socially compartmentalised according to quarters and communities of different natures (ethnic, religious, professional) under scrutiny; those on violence highlighted how it was often the result of a complex interaction between marginalised people and members of the elites who tended to instrumentalise the potential of violence of the former group; and works on governance showed how access to the civic sphere in cities depended on restrictive social and spatial patterns. The specific focus on urban margins consequently emerged from within these above predominantly historical discussions; its early idea was to read, combine and confront these different approaches into an innovative set of reflections based on multidisciplinary

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the working projects of Saana Alimnia, Ulrike Freitag, Claudia Ghrawi, Wai Weng Hew, Nora Lafi, Fatemeh Masjedi, and Florian Riedler whose comments, inputs and discussions substantially participate to its elaboration; the EUME fellows Ufuk Adak and Yektan Türkyilmaz also took considerable part in these exchanges. It finally benefited from the sharp and inspiring comments of the reviewers Birgit Meyer and Katrin Bromber. However, the author alone is responsible for its analyses and any remaining shortcomings.

<sup>2</sup> See also works of the *Global Prayers: Redemption and Liberation in the City* project: <http://globalprayers.info/about/> (retrieved 02.2015).

<sup>3</sup> Muslim worlds refer to the predominantly Muslim societies found across Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

<sup>4</sup> Economic, historical, political and social dimensions.

plinary references to the perspective of margins in urban areas beyond the history of the MENA region, the main field of research for urban studies at ZMO so far.

The meaning of marginality has changed over times and between societies. In the field of development studies and international cooperation the notion of marginality is for instance permeated by the philanthropic spirit of »who gives and who receives«. Not surprisingly, it tends to refer to a Western paternalistic view of those who lie at the edge of the society in spatial, social and economic terms (i.e. Gurung and Kollmair 2005). Although such approaches to marginality in terms of the vulnerable poor who are drifting away from mainstream society are thought of as dynamic processes, marginality in these approaches mostly remains an »operational concept«<sup>5</sup> which barely challenges the context of power relations in which it is produced. Marginality does imply some notion of a power asymmetry; this is the very reason why its analytical potential to probe the field of power should not be overlooked. With the increasing development of megacities around the globe scholars such as Mike Davis (2006) have contrarily employed the concept to denounce the shanty towns as spaces of exclusion from the supposed benefits of modern capitalism. By contrast, other analysts have explored these so-called »slums« beyond poverty as spaces of alternative social arrangements which are characterised by specific dynamics (see Roy 2011), as will be discussed further in section 3.

Although the group agrees that »marginal domains are not all torment and subordination« and therefore can also be »the realms of opportunity for the exertion of power« (Bayat 2012, 21), we further wish to question Bayat's suggestion that the key understanding of marginal space is mostly based on a »benefits and costs« equation towards »the normal« (Ibid., 26). What is the nature of such equation? Who defines what is normal? How do such discourses relate to other fields of human thoughts, ethics and activities? Thus, scholars who employ marginality as an analytical concept must above all undo its moral design, political agenda and instrumentality. In this way, they will be able to better consider the dynamics of margins as it is initially given by its intellectual imagery: the ways a centre is articulated to, shaped by and lived through what is in its outside (and vice versa). Such a holistic approach explores urban margins, marginality and marginalisation as inherent to a centre the manifestations of which are often of multiple natures. To do so, one must start from the field; that is to say following an empirically based method.

Cultivating such ambitions the members of the above research group held an interdisciplinary

workshop on the question of the perspective of [urban] margins in social sciences during which they were invited to reflect upon the nature(s) of its related concepts through the terminologies used by locals to name, understand and discuss its local realities in their respective archive and field researches in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.<sup>6</sup> By focusing on processes of naming urban margins, the aim was to stress their social representations<sup>7</sup> as well as the interactions in which these representations emerged, were shaped and transformed. Through the Saussurean linguistic dynamic between the signifier (sound-word) and its signified (representation), processes of naming urban margins can consequently reveal their materiality. In certain contexts the border and/or the interface between the centre and the margin becomes the locus of their demarcation, while a scarce terminology can question the ontology of urban margins. In short, the contributions attempted to »unpack« the politics of naming the margins within their respective field so as to stress what we think are some of the founding dimensions of urban margins, marginality and marginalisation as analytical tools. In parallel to these reflections, this collective paper aims at bringing out a shared framework that embraces the plurality of urban marginality observed in these works. In so doing, it finally attempts to assess the comparative potential offered by the concept of urban marginality despite its fluidity and complexity so as to gain deeper insights into urban dynamics across cultures.

## **2. The state: a key regulatory authority within the flow of human activities**

In a recent book titled *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt*, Pascal Menoret has shown how Riyadh's extension planned between 1968-72 by the Greek architect Constantinos A. Doxiadis had been politically framed by the issue of Bedouin removal from the town's centre, mostly because the Saudi government perceived them as a threat to public order, the sedentary identity of autochthons and the real estate market. With the nationalisation of tribal land and the oil boom, rural migrants flooded into the capital in search of jobs threatening to outnumber its autochthons in late 1960s (Ibid., chapter 3). Facing similar galloping urban growth in Jakarta, the Indonesian government attempted to set an ambitious housing programme which, by »decently« relocating low-income population outside the centre of the metropolis, also aimed at eliminating the image of a poor city to foreign private investors (Kusno 2012). Contemporary Angola has also undergone

<sup>6</sup> »The Question of Urban Marginality«, ZMO, 11.9.2014.

<sup>7</sup> This includes the perspective of those whom outside observers might consider marginal.

<sup>5</sup> Or a medium range concept which operationalises theory.

rapid urban growth in its capital (Luanda) within the contexts of a booming oil sector and increasing social inequalities. Part of the state's response to this challenge has been to relocate impoverished people evicted from the centre to social housing projects located in »rural« suburbs of Luanda (Buire 2014). These three contributions highlight the fact that urban marginalisation is officially conceived through master plans written by urban planners. In this regard urban planners are like gardeners of an urban territory; as such their work is framed by the garden's corners which, although pointed at, are often difficult to reach. Such expertise demonstrates that defining and erecting the margins through urban planning is nonetheless a tremendous power at the hands of the state. As an urban planner the state becomes a key authority which attempts to regulate the flow of human activities by means of spatial politics. Therefore, the state often lies at the heart of the dynamics of centre-periphery in urban planning; its interventions consequently ought to be taken in consideration of the materiality of power and the monitoring of marginality inscribed within a town.

In her project on the urban margins of the historic port city of Jeddah in the region of the Hijaz during the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, Ulrike Freitag observes in early descriptions of the town the importance attributed to the wall as a central defining feature of the city in contrast to its surroundings. According to an Ottoman map of 1884, the wall clearly separated the inner-city quarters from the rest of the residential areas which were not considered to form an integral part of the city in spite of the residents' clear economic links to the city where they worked or sold their goods. Instead, the region outside of the wall was considered as a potential threat. In parallel, Claudia Ghrawi's research on oil development and urban growth in Eastern Saudi Arabia also puts forward the fact that the old towns were traditionally considered as urban zones of enforced security within their walls, whereas what laid outside the walls was associated with the notion of the freely roaming Bedouin (*bedu*) that assaulted caravans and urban dwellers (and hence foster insecurity). Both projects on Saudi Arabia engage with the fragmented territorial rule of the state whose power was primarily established in the urban centres of the Hijaz and al-Hasa provinces, whereas vast parts of the surrounding territory remained for a long time outside the realms of Saudi rule - a phenomenon that had important backlashes in the ensuing Saudi policy of sedentarisation of the Saudi Bedouin and their parallel socio-economic and political marginalisation. The above-mentioned projects illustrate the historical importance of the wall as the state-built (and citizen-financed) material boundary between the secured city centre and the dangers linked to the porosity of its periphery.

Fatemeh Masjedi, in her project on the town of Tabriz (Iran), emphasises the fact that the wall of the town built in late 18th century, which surrounded governmental buildings and the bazar (the city centre), and its road connections influenced urban developments in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Better-off quarters were afterwards planned and constructed along shorter and more secure accesses to the centre than poorer quarters. In a similar vein, Florian Riedler found that the city plans of Niš under the Ottoman period in the 18th century disclosed a spatial hierarchy of the town which was considerably based on people's origins and economic status. The fortified centre hosted the Ottoman administration and population, whereas the unfortified quarters were inhabited by migrant workers and Romani people.

The location of Niš, as a border town within the Ottoman Empire, furthermore opens up the question of marginality in relation to political borders and international trade. Odienné, the main fieldsite of André Chappatte's research on urban night-life, exemplifies a broad economic marginality related to the history of West African economy in this remote savannah. Being located in a buffer-zone between the pre-colonial Empire of Wassoulou and the Kingdoms of Kenedougou and Kong, which thereafter was on the fringe of colonial policy, Odienné has remained a secluded town in postcolonial Côte d'Ivoire. The government of Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1960-1993) kept Denguélé (the most northwestern district of the country) at the margins of the politics of development so as to prevent territorial ambitions over northern Côte d'Ivoire by the neighboring military regimes of Guinea and Mali, which share similar religious and ethnic identities across the border. Whereas the road network to the border is made of sandy roads punctuated by dilapidated sections, only the road access to the wealthier forest and coastal regions of the south is tarred. Odienné, the farthest Ivorian town from the main economic centre of the country (Abidjan) was where the wife of the former President Laurent Gbagbo had been held under house arrest until November 2014, a political decision which also stresses the locality's dead-end and prison town connotations. Although Odienné is at a distance of 120 kilometers from the border with Mali and 40 kilometers from the border with Guinea, the border as a zone is already felt in the town through the naming of urban quarters, such as *Quartier Douanes* (Quarter of Customs), and landmarks, such *Hôtel les Frontières* (Frontiers Hotel). The border towns of Niš and Odienné demonstrate that the spatial politics within a country and across national borders ask for a closer study of the dynamics between the state, its urban territoriality and the geography of marginality.

### 3. The creativity of those at the margins

The state, as a regulatory authority, does also act in the background of the society by providing a legal framework for civic identities within its territory. In her project on Afghan refugees living in contemporary Karachi, Sanaa Alimia focuses on the socio-political ramifications of their legal status in Pakistan. Not legally considered as official citizens, Afghans are also marginalised by the Pakistani state through negative discourses by various state officials and popular media who propagate the idea that they »should return to Afghanistan«. Their marginal status, however, is not silently accepted in daily life. Despite not having access to numerous state services, many among these Afghan refugees have found jobs, accessed education services, or set up a business in town; they are securing everyday gains for themselves despite being neglected by the state. Such asymmetrical power relations therefore do not prevent the existence of successful stories among refugees. In this case, the role of the state in labelling others as marginalised does not silence these very people's ability to move forward in life in ways that are hardly monitored by the state. Such findings stress the agency and potential empowerment of those who live at the margins of the civil space of the state.

When urbanites invest in places<sup>8</sup> marginalised by the state, their activities can also transform its reputation. Focusing on the urban transformation of the Medina (old city) of Tunis from the mid-19th century to the present, Nora Lafi's project investigates the socio-historical dynamics by which a place became abandoned and thereafter enlivened and thus re-appreciated over time. From the contrasting transformation of quarters due to their different factional identity during Ottoman times to recent phenomena of »wakalisation« (installation of migrants into formerly prestigious houses), her research follows the urban history of the Medina through various periods (including colonial policies and destruction during WWII) to the recent transformation of a specific area. Whereas a few streets of the Medina have been the object of ambitious programmes of rehabilitation of heritage buildings which initiated their gentrification, other parts of it were neglected; as they decayed, these areas were abandoned and consequently turned into wastelands officially labelled as *kherba* (ruin, rubble) which were used as car parks. In the midst of these contrasting urban transformations, however, Lafi observed that a wasteland has become progressively invested by neighboring residents with various bustling activities, such as a market, a children's playground and a meeting spot for elders. This place gradually became not

a wasteland anymore in the eyes of urbanites. In contemporary Medina locals now meaningfully call it *al-Batha* (place, square), a new labelling which is about to be soon adopted by the municipality. This popular re-appropriation of a wasteland into a lively square illustrates that a spatial marginalisation relative to a central authority, the state, does not necessarily overlap with the concrete experiences of the locals. More importantly, spatial marginality is not static: such places marginalised by the state are often the very urban spaces through which popular culture is able to come to the front. The withdrawal of the state may produce informal and private opportunities; in the end, both state action and inaction play a part in shaping urban marginality.

By contrast, Ghrawi's research on company-built, old and new towns, which are located in proximity to oil production sites in Saudi Arabia, underlines a more segregated marginality based on race, nationality, professional status and religious affiliations that is not free of contradictions, yet only at first glance. In the labour towns built by the oil companies the segregated space reflected an industrial hierarchy based on professional status that strongly mirrored the race and the nationality of the employees (rather than their religious affiliation), whereas the process of spatial segregation in the old and new Saudi towns worked alongside old and new socio-economic and sectarian divisions. For example, Sunni workers who moved to the oil production areas from the more distant parts of the country initially settled in the labour towns built by the oil companies; however, they preferred in the long term to settle in the newly emergent Saudi towns at the Gulf littoral. In these towns, segregation largely worked in terms of economic affluence and whether or not a resident was a Saudi citizen. Foreign labour migrants, who accounted for a large part of the inhabitants of these towns, gathered around particular districts; Saudi employees of the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) were allocated to specific quarters that ranged among the best developed ones of the towns (besides those occupied by the government). Wealthy merchants and affluent civil servants likewise built their homes in these better-off areas. Although Shi'a employees enjoyed a freedom of settlement, only a few of them left their nearby hometowns in order to benefit from the modern amenities found in these new towns. Despite a state tendency to »overlook« the old Shi'a towns in its policy for oil-based modernisation, most Shi'a employees stayed in their old towns where they could access local networks from which they elaborated their own initiatives for the development of their communities. Like Alimia and Lafi's projects, Ghrawi's project finally stresses that people themselves also seek to invest from within the margins.

<sup>8</sup> A place indicates a concrete piece of land; a space can indicate something conceptual, such as a space of discussion.

In his project on the development of Muslim gated communities at the outskirts and periurban districts of Jakarta, Hew focuses on reformist Muslims of the middle class who deliberately decide to move to these remote areas because they are allegedly less »spoiled« by the secular forces »invading« the city centre. As suburban expansions based on the building of Muslim exclusive residential enclaves, these gated communities are however less about reducing »the daily confrontation to otherness« (Charmes 2005, 4-5) than gathering together so as to pursue a common religious agenda. Living in these spatially marginal neighborhoods above all stresses the moral centrality of Islam to their inhabitants who aim to safely and freely build their quotidian around the practice of a specific pious lifestyle. In doing so this growing Muslim middle class also seeks to promote and to popularise Islam in the elaboration of a modern Indonesian way of life. These Muslims consequently challenge the common description of marginality as those who are »oppressed« (*tertindas*) and »powerless« (*tidak berkuasa*) in Indonesia insofar as their spatial peripheralisation is intentional and does not mirror an economic marginality.

In our contemporary world the state is, to a certain extent, an unavoidable authority which by nature aims at regulating the flow of human activities. Therefore its regulating power is often taken for granted and enmeshed with our very usage of the notion of marginality. Such a tendency inclines the analyst to overlook the discrepancies between official discourses on marginality, concrete marginality and the possible empowerment of margins. As researchers, our task is also to pinpoint to what really happens in the ground and what matters for the urbanites living at the margins of the state so as to also explore the politics that shape the perspective of margins in its creative dimension.

#### **4. The historicity and reflectivity of marginality**

The regulatory authority of the state has not always been documented by state officers as it has been lived by the various people living within its territory. Besides the increasing operational usage of the notion of marginality found in contemporary policies this discrepancy often expresses the changing, subjective and contestable nature of the social order endorsed by the state. For instance, a given characteristic *per se* (i.e. the color of the skin) does not matter originally; however, it may become a distinction through a process of marginalisation. Its formalisation is thereafter accepted or challenged by those being marginalised depending on the circumstances in which such dynamics happen and are being transformed in history. In this regard a characteristic which does matter often stresses the regulating intentionality

that lies behind a process of marginalisation conducted by centres of power such as the state.

For example, there are hardly any contemporary Arab sources which openly and directly address the issue of marginality in Jeddah. Thus, the names of spaces outside the walls of Jeddah are rather neutral; for instance, the term *al-Ruways*, which broadly means »the place where they dropped an anchor«, refers to an outdoor area north of Jeddah where members from the Harb tribe settled. The cleavage between *hadar* (sedentary and possessing *madaniyya* – civility) and *bedu* (nomadic and hence by implication uncouth and lacking that very civility) accentuated a boundary and a competition over spaces based on distinctive lifestyles, customs and sets of values (i.e. city vs. countryside) rather than a margin. The impartial imprint of such cultural differences found in the archives suggests the existence of a dual society rather than the marginalisation of a society by the other. The notion of the »marginality« of the countryside mostly results from the urban basis and bias of the available sources, which were mostly written by administrators or foreign consuls or visitors, but does not reflect the respective self-perceptions of the populations. On the contrary, with the submission of the Hijaz to the rule of the Al Sa'ud, an ideology explicitly favouring pure Arabs of Beduin origin as opposed to cosmopolitan city dwellers became dominant (regardless of the actual treatment of Beduins in Saudi society mentioned above). However, within both the walled city and among those living in the suburbs, large differences of economic and personal status can be discerned. In the city, illiterate workers and slaves hardly left traces in the archives, unless they came to the attention of foreign consuls or the Ottoman authorities. Thereby, the classical image of the silenced subaltern certainly holds true for historical periods beyond the scope of oral history – no matter how much one tries to read archives »against the grain«. Hence, the urban centre certainly comprised many socially marginal individuals, whilst in the rural »margins« emerged the later powers to be in terms of tribal (or tribally legitimated) leadership.

To a certain extent, the spatial analysis of the 18th century city plans of Niš is subject to interpretation. The construction of an orthodox church at the edge of the city (but still inside the walls) might simply have been caused by the lack of building land in the centre rather than the result of a spatial marginalisation orchestrated by the Ottoman authority; at the end this church is still noticeable as a landmark within the map. A spatial analysis of a city plan has to be sided by an understanding of social and political processes, which, in the case of Niš in the second half of the nineteenth century very clearly indicate a rising

political participation of its Christian inhabitants that was supported by the Ottoman state.

The reading of a map as archival material is framed by the analyst's understanding of a past local life which remains only partially documented. Values (i.e. equality) and structures (i.e. classes) do not have the same moral ontology now compared to earlier times; they have changed in nature and importance. They were often not questioned when the society accepted them as the immutable normality, the product of God. Sometimes they were even alien to the debates that animated public life at that time. Given that naming a reality also means attaching importance to it, the real margins might be unnamed and remain therefore untraceable in written official materials. In other instances, we possibly have not found the right sources of the so-called »margins« as they were understood in the past. This above array of doubts over the historical existence of marginality as it is commonly understood today invites us to think about the genesis of the contemporary question of marginality and to investigate the historical transformations which paved the way to its emergence.

The issue over the rarity (or absence) of clear terminologies of marginality related to archival sources stresses the politics of situationality around marginality as it is discerned through the ethnographic method. During his stay in the town of Odienné in April 2014, Chappatte observed that the remoteness of the town within Côte d'Ivoire was partially relative to the life trajectory of a specific individual. A civil administrator coming from southern Côte d'Ivoire told him that he was in Odienné »malgré lui« (despite himself). Like many other civil servants in town, he was transferred to the north of the country following the fall of the former President Laurent Gbagbo. Whereas the current government interprets their transfer to the north as part of a broad process of national reconciliation, many of them perceive it as a way to control them due to their allegedly pro-Gbagbo ethnic origins. As he uttered: »We got bored here; there is nothing here. Locals are a bit backward. Go to the south and you will see that Odienné is not the Côte d'Ivoire«. His forced move to the unfamiliar town of Odienné was ultimately lived as a step backwards in his career which also cultivated the remoteness of this urban locality to him. In a state of waiting for his next transfer, he simply wanted to go back to the south »where the civilisation is«. By contrast, villagers who grew up in the hinterland of Denguélé positively assessed their move to its administrative capital as a door towards the wider world because this was their first experience of the urban. As a self-perception, the sentiment of being marginalised becomes expressed in situational discourses. When such discourses are not relayed into political debates and claims for

one reason or another, they will most likely not be archived in written documents.

## 5. A moral reading of the society

The question of marginality can be perceived as a moral reading of society because it always originates from a judgment over others (or of the self by comparison to others). To put it slightly differently, part of the legitimacy of a marginal status is rooted in a moral and relational statement. In the Ottoman town of Niš the migrant workers who lived outside of its fortified centre were the so-called »bachelors« (*bekar*); their marginal status was morally reinforced by the fact that the Ottoman administration perceived them as »dangerous classes« which consequently needed to be controlled. In a similar vein, the marginal character of the legal status of Afghan refugees in contemporary Pakistan is, in a way, attested by negative discourses on these refugees by state elites in public discourse. In contemporary Indonesia, reformist Muslims increasingly perceive Jakarta city centre as »secular«, »morally corrupted« and »dominated by non-Muslims and non-religious Muslims«. Motivated by such moral statements, some Muslims have moved away from Jakarta city centre to live in Muslim gated communities located in its periurban areas, such as Depok. This university town in West Java is known for being a stronghold of the Justice and Prosperous Party (PKS), a major Islamist party of Indonesia which attempts to insert Islam at the centre of the state. Many of those opting for such gated communities on the edges of the city are, incidentally, migrants from rural areas who were initially drawn to the urban centre. These projects demonstrate that a moral reading of society is inherent to the justification for a process of marginalisation, whether this latter is an imposed state regulation (i.e. the legal status of Afghan refugees) or a deliberate re-centring vis-à-vis the mainstream way of life (i.e. Muslims who decide to live in Muslim gated communities located in Depok). As a complement to a focus on those who define and enact the margins, one can also explore how marginality is lived by those who are being marginalised by such discourses which they might not identify with.

Alcoholic beverages have been produced in West Africa since precolonial times, where they were consumed during public festivities and the rituals of local religious practices. When Islam spread into the region and thereafter became a major force of public life, however, alcohol became »morally forbidden« (*haram*). Those who still drank it publicly were socially stigmatised. As a consequence, most of its consumption drifted away into the night because its darkness creates a specific marginality in which activities can hide away. Similar to urban Muslim Punjab, the streets at night become »a liminal zone« which is on the edge between

the domestic sphere and the public domain (see Frembgen 2008, 14). In Bougouni, a small town in southwest Mali, young men for instance took great care to conceal their alcohol consumption (see Chappatte 2014, 534). When Chappatte planned to go to a *maquis* (bar) with a young Muslim student whom he met in such an establishment, they nearly always started their evening in informal meeting spots called *grin*. While they were chatting, drinking tea and playing cards, someone would regularly take a motorbike, disappear into the town and return after a while. These short excursions were announced by expressions such as »I go and I come here« (*ne bε taa ka na*) and »I go on an errand here« (*ne bε taa ci la*). People did not ask for further details about these trips because the night was understood above all as a time for private and unspoken matters. Others said »I go home« (*ne bε taa so*) or »I go to sleep« (*ne bε taa da*), but in reality they just moved away and unobtrusively tended to their own »businesses« (*affaires*) in town. When his friend felt ready to go to the *maquis*, they both left the *grin* and, like others, disappeared into the darkness of the night. Such empty idioms and kinds of »lie« (*nkalon*) were not motivated by malice; they were »modes of deception« (Barnes 1994, 1-19) designed to cover one's tracks at night. Secrecy here was not only about concealing content, but also about »creating remoteness« (Sarró 2009, 8-9) so as to preserve privacy that is someone's autonomy and vulnerability (Bok 1989, 18-25). Similar terminologies of secrecy and discretion happened in the neighboring Ivorian town of Odienné. For urbanites living in small towns of contemporary Muslim West Africa, margins associated with the night go beyond the common association of urban marginality with poverty. Its scope relates to the ways in which a wide variety of actors invest<sup>9</sup> the temporal margins of the day with activities that should remain out of public sight. Therefore, people's participation in such forbidden activities, if not silent, was often expressed in discreet, suggestive and devious manners. Such rhetoric stresses the presence of margins without revealing its contours.

The night in West Africa is the realm of men, whereas women are bound to traditional norms of nocturnal confinement. Any adult woman of good education (especially a married woman) is expected to stay at home after dinner time. Nevertheless, women occasionally may have to go out in the evening. When this happens people of the neighborhood scrutinise their conducts and motivations. For instance, a woman walking under the light, wearing decent dress (traditional wrapper, *boubou*, plain jumper) and heading toward a local shop does not necessarily raise suspicion. Men

<sup>9</sup> Whether temporal, legal or spatial, the margins produce specific domains of investment.

in the streets might think she has been commissioned by an elder because her presence is visible therefore unambiguous. However, if a woman is often observed out at night, her habit invites suspicion. In addition, if her presence is furtive and unfathomable, her »reputation« (*danbé*) is undermined when her identity is discovered. People say women should not »walk-around« (*yaala*) without good reason during the night. During the day the verb *yaala* simply means going out for a walk. However, a walk in the night supposes secret activities; in this way, the verb *yaala* often connotes flirting. It is only for a known and accepted reason that a woman can go out at night without raising suspicion. A woman regularly spotted and identified as wandering at night is most likely to be labelled *sunguruba* (prostitute), *bandite* (bandit) or *vagabonde* (woman with loose morality). People think only spouses deceiving their husbands, and unmarried women involved in casual sex go out under the cover of the darkness. In contrast to the terminologies of secrecy and discretion uttered in men's circles during the night so as to cover one's tracks at night, women's activities at night do not raise suspicions when their »respectable« tracks are deemed uncovered. The issue of the confinement of women in West Africa stresses that the moral reading of the society related to the question of marginality should also be explored in its gendered ramifications.

## 6. Articulating marginality

The elaboration of comparative researches framed by the perspective of margins is a challenge due to its plural and contextual manifestations within and between societies. When thought in articulation to macro and systemic themes (i.e. social mobility) that have emerged from our archive and field researches, however, it takes a more comparative turn. In this regard, the comparative potential of urban margins, marginality and marginalisation primarily depends on the analyst's intellectual aim when using them.

The Shi'a oil workers living in and around the old local towns and the Sunni labour migrants moving to the new Saudi towns shared a marginal status of low educated national labour force during the early decades of oil production in Saudi Arabia. In-between periods of social unrest, individuals of both groups also aimed to escape from their marginal status by seeking to settle to better neighborhoods and towns. These Saudis seemed to be constantly »on the move« or »moving forward« towards better housings and localities, which are one of the main signs of a successful life in contemporary Saudi Arabia. What looks like a segregated marginality based on professional education runs in parallel with ideas of the »self-made man«. This working status simultaneously intersects with older social distinctions, such as



Sunni versus Shi'a or sedentary versus nomadic identity. During the first decades of oil production, for instance, slum-like settlements emerged at the margins of the newly built oil towns; these rudimentary agglomerations were mostly occupied by poor labourers of *bedu* origin. Their families were called *'anīn*, a term employed to designate where the needy live. This terminology of urban margin puts forwards an economic distinction which intersects with an older process of differentiation based on the notions of *bedu* and *hadar*. The culture of social mobility, which emerged from people facing a segregated marginality, also opens up the study of the permeability of margins all the more so as it exists now spaces in Saudi oil conurbations where Sunni and Shi'a mix and display their economic success through ostentatious consumption. This social mobility away from the margins might be the very trajectory through which marginalised people have indirectly legitimised the hierarchical nature of Saudi society. The issue of social mobility leads to the question of social change at the margins over time.

Many Afghan refugees in Pakistan live in what officials call »refugees tented areas« or what are often popularly coined »refugee camps«. Many more, however, live outside refugee camps in formal and informal housing areas. Many Afghan areas, which seem temporary in their structure such as refugee camps and informal housing areas, are situated on the urban peripheries of cities such as Karachi or Peshawar. They have, however, endured for more than 30 years and seen housing structures shift from tents to concrete-mud structures and then brick houses. Many Pakistani refugee camps, still labelled »refugees tented areas« by the Pakistani authorities, have become more permanent urban quarters on the ground, and for those Afghans who have transnational links in Afghanistan at least a more permanent and tangible transnational base. Thus, whilst legally being marginalised over the years, the projects and activities of Afghans in Pakistan challenge their marginal status as »foreigners in transit«. This begs the questions: for how long more will the Pakistani state continue to ignore their lasting trajectories in this country? Will the state formalise these Afghan spaces as parts of the urban as it has done for other similarly marginalised spaces, such as urban poor Pakistanis spaces? Such a question puts forward the continuity and durability of margins. For instance, the aforementioned wasteland in the heart of the old city of Tunis, called *kherba* (ruin, rubble), is about to be officially renamed *al-Batha* (place, square) by the local municipality thanks to popular re-appropriation of it over the years. Such state recognition would formalise the fact that a substantial process of social change has been shaping this former marginal space; it would also likely accelerate the coming of public and pri-

vate investments to this square. The transformation of margins becomes salient through the study of processes of *longue durée*. In the 19th century the Ottoman authority set the ambitious reform of Tanzimat which aimed at restructuring urban administration as well as well-established socio-religious hierarchies. Did this reform reflect a change over the status of marginalised groups within the Ottoman Empire? How did it shape the spatial hierarchy of the town of Niš over the *longue durée*?

As mentioned earlier, there are hardly any contemporary Arab sources which openly and directly address the issue of marginality with regard to the historic port city of Jeddah in the region of the Hijaz during the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. From the dual society characterising the political entities of this epoch, urban Hijazis in contemporary Saudi Arabia have become stigmatised because of their non-Arab pedigree, while they themselves still harbour reservations about what they see as uncouth Beduin. How have such processes of mutual marginalisation emerged at the heart of the state over the *longue durée*? A study of the relationship between spatial marginalisation and road access in Tabriz during the 19th and early 20th centuries could also shed light on the possible transformations of the meanings of the city centre for urbanites over the *longue durée*.

In the town of Odienné the names of quarters are often not innocent. Those of the old town proudly refer to their pre-colonial origins. Due to their more recent history, the postcolonial quarters hold names which tell something on their reputation in terms of dwellers and activities. One of them is called *Dar-es-Salam* (the Home/Abode of Peace)<sup>10</sup> partially because it hosts the main Islamic school of the town. It is also said that one should behave according to Islamic precepts there because many of its dwellers are observant Muslims. A more recent quarter has been named *Texas*. Walking at night along its streets one could notice numerous *maquis* and brothels there. In fact, this quarter is known to have the highest concentration of bars among the quarters of this predominantly Muslim town; the biggest and most lavish hotel-restaurant-club complex called *La Primature* (The Residence of the Prime Minister) recently opened there. Thus *Texas* is in a way a reference to the loose morality that characterised the period of the Wild West and the American Frontier; it resonates like an open invitation to the entrepreneurs and consumers of the night for investing in this land free of strict morality. *Texas* at night indeed turns into a space-time for entertainment, pleasure and business where big men of the town are meeting away from public scrutiny. As such, these noctur-

**10** One of the widespread popular meanings of this expression is »The Land of Islam«.

nal activities are often lived as sensual, adventurous and risky resources the ramifications of which are felt at the core of society. In this way their marginality becomes central to the affairs in town. Locals are aware of the forbidden character of night life, but they let it be so (to a certain extent). What happens indeed when the state and Muslims could but choose not to intervene? The quarter of *Texas* illustrates that the nature of forbidden activities is, to a certain extent, deeply human.<sup>11</sup> Their presence must consequently be socially assumed (and not only rejected) at the margins of the Muslim community. This observation meaningfully reveals the centrality of margins for maintaining social harmony between the various urban networks and communities and therefore opens up the question of marginalisation as a strategy.

Perceiving Indonesia as a secular state, a growing number of middle-class Muslims think they can live according to stricter Islamic principles by settling together in Muslim-only gated communities located at the periurban areas of Jakarta. They cultivate a discourse of fear of urban diversity (i.e. challenges regarding »secular lifestyle« and »Christian missionary«) and therefore seek a more secure community (i.e. free from crime, social problems, and floods) to justify their religious and class-based exclusion; such spatial marginalisation is strategic in so far as it belongs to religious politics which challenge the secular forces embedded in Jakarta city centre. Through the building of Muslim-exclusive places, such as Muslim gated communities, Muslimah Spa, Muslimah boutiques and Islamic integrated schools, at the periurban areas of Jakarta, these Muslims ultimately aim to promote a pious agenda based on an »Islamic way of modern living« at the centre of contemporary Indonesia. Ironically, while these urban middle class Muslims claim that they uphold Islamic piety, poor and secular-minded Muslims are being »marginalised« in their processes of urban place-making and visions of the Indonesia of tomorrow.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper we mostly discussed the concept of urban marginality through the themes of temporality and relationality because of our dominant background in history and anthropology. How can we combine these two disciplinary approaches into the study of »urban margins«? What is deemed marginal is always assessed as such in relation to a centre. The marginal often contains a strong spatial component, but it can also or simultaneously indicate social, political, religious,

<sup>11</sup> Whereas Islam's relationship to contemporary Muslim societies is mostly explored in the ways Muslims strive to be pious, this project investigates Muslims' recognition (whether tacit or manifest) of the forbidden as being an integral part of the life of most Muslims.

cultural and economic facets; the marginal transforms over time as well. In this regard, a socio-historical approach to urban margins would offer the possibility to »translate« and »read« a history of marginalisation in urban space and its outskirts.

In the field of social sciences numerous studies have attempted to explore what is situated at the margins of the society; one can even argue for the existence of a fascination with what is marginal in general.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Mattijs van de Port wrote about a Serbian fascination with the Romani people, whom they discriminated against, but whose spaces, identities and culture they examined and revisited over and over again (1998); those who ascribe marginality to spaces and their people may also relate to their alleged marginality in deep ways. In this regard, people become fascinated by the marginal because it potentially mirrors their own identity. By defining and pointing at who they think they are not, or who they want not to be, the marginal contributes to tell those who delineate it things, ideas and reflections about who they are or who they would like to be. Thus, the study of urban margins allows us to gain deeper insights into urban dynamics of regulation by mirroring the rotation axes of the urban society in complex, indirect and intimate ways; it consequently offers a better understanding of the characteristics of the urban centre as well as its formation and transformation.

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Birgit Meyer for this suggestion.

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