

BOOK REVIEW

Debora Pellow. *A New African Elite: Place in the Making of a Bridge Generation*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2022. xi + 259 pp. Photographs, Glossary, References, Index. \$135. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-80073-378-7.

The significance of this book centers on confounding cultural hybridity and social complexity implicit in the new African elite and its aftermath on society. The title gives the impression of a broader discourse of the new elite in Africa, but *A New African Elite* is an ethnographic project among Dagomba, an ethnic group in the Northern Province of Ghana consisting of two clans or “gates,” Abudu and Andani. It is an account of how Dagomba’s educated elite, “a bridge generation,” deploy their status and influence to manipulate local politics. Western education and cosmopolitan exposure transformed Dagomba elite into bicultural and multilingual leaders who identify with both Western values and lifestyle as well as their home culture and tradition. While living comfortably in the modern city of Accra, they never relinquished their Dagbon tradition and culture, exerting “undue influence” on “the campaigns for kings and chiefs” (221). The critical point was the murder of the king, Ya-Na Yakubu Andani II along with twenty-eight of his followers in 2002. This book derived its impetus from this hideous incident.

The book is divided into six chapters arranged chronologically to provide the reader with the trajectory of the new elite, their beginnings and evolution, and the status and influence that they acquired and then deployed in their homeland. Its robust introduction sets the stage and milieu by relating the Dagomba new elite to the broader intellectual framework in West Africa, with a prologue on the events that culminated in the murder and crises in Dagbon and an epilogue on the subsequent settlement in which “nobody got everything, but everybody got something” (231).

Chapter One explores the socioeconomic inequities and cultural context within which the new elite were raised and their individual and collective experiences in Dagomba. It narrates the history of the Kingdom of Dagbon, its founding, and the core institutions of chieftaincy and how the gate identity became so paramount not only in Dagbon but also in Ghanaian state politics. Quite glaring is the role of the British colonial administration in creating and maintaining the north/south divide in Ghana, which affects the postcolonial attitudes and relationships to date. Chapter Two focuses on the early beginning of the new elite, their traditional institutions, kinship patterns as well as socialization and family life in their Dagbon locale. A common trait among the elite is the nostalgic feeling of their past in Dagomba and reminisces of their joyful and collective living as well as robust customs that once united them.

While they have become professional and cosmopolitan with new tastes, practices and values, “they are also very much creatures of their upbringings” (63). Thus, while living in Accra, their childhood ties and memories continue to influence their current behavior, especially attachment to their locale and fixation with its chieftaincy and kingship matters.

Chapters Three and Four focus on the education and career paths of the Dagomba bridge generation respectively. Chapter Three aptly places the discourse on education within the larger context of colonial education as a vital tool for European cultural conquest of Africa. Unlike southern Ghana, educational opportunities in the north were quite measly since the British treated the region “as a labor reserve” and sought to “prevent the creation of a politically conscious and articulate political class....” (99). Yet, education bestowed a select few with considerable status and influence among their homefolks, which they readily use to elicit loyalty in local politics. Chapter Four examines the career paths of the new elite and their transition from traditional “homies” to successful, cosmopolitan people in the modern sense. Although their paths to education were littered with obstacles, they excelled once they gained access and soon occupied important professions vastly different from the hometown possibilities. Indeed, education and professional accomplishments reinforce their status among their local Dagomba brethren who look up to them for guidance.

Chapter Five discusses the cultural and spatial complexity of the new elite, the in-betweenness or how they straddle their Dagomba birthplace and their city of abode, the difference in spaces they have created, and behaviors they exhibit. While traditional customs were treasured, Western values remained their reference point for modernity. As a bridge between their underdeveloped locale and a highly developed city infused with Western values, the new elite “live with one foot and their heart in each place” (169). Chapter Six interrogates their early home attachment and how traditional chieftaincy issues solidify that connection, and how politics and conflict in Dagomba are inflamed and manipulated by the new elite who pull strings from afar or “leadership by remote control, using tools gained through education and social connections” (202).

As an ethnographic work, this study presents an insightful reflection on the new African elite as cultural and social hybrids. As in Dagomba, this “bridge generation” can be discerned in many parts of Africa. As a product of Western education, they are infused with Western values and complicated lifestyles, which often results in the hybridity exhibited in their orientations, responses, and actions in their local community. The murder of the king, Na-Yakubu, and twenty-eight of his followers in 2002 marked a gloomy watershed resulting from the problematic influence of the new elite in their Dagbon local politics. Yet, the story of the educated elite in much of modern Africa today denotes that the Dagbon situation is not isolated.

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