

African Studies Quarterly

Volume 8, Issue 4
Summer 2006

BOOK REVIEW

Dilemmas of Culture in African Schools: Youth, Nationalism, and the Transformation of Knowledge. Cati Coe. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 241 pp.

In this book Cati Coe sets out to understand the role that schools play in propagating and/or creating a national culture. She does this historically and ethnographically by looking primarily at the primary, junior secondary, and secondary schools in the Akuapem region of Ghana. By examining culture via the roles of various actors such as the church, the state, the schools, and local elders, as well as how these roles have changed over time, Coe gives a perspective that is informative and intriguing. She avoids simplifying the culture debate to a modernity versus tradition perspective, but rather problematizes such simplistic views and shows the complex ways in which culture and modernity are viewed, and used, via discourses which may coincide, overlap, or be in opposition to one another.

The book is divided in two sections. The intention of the first is to show historically how "culture became the property of the state." From the work of early missionaries in Ghana, who also, not incidentally, were the first to start western-type schools, we see the initial conflict of traditional culture and a new cultural discourse from the church. Coe then shows the ways in which the state, especially in the immediate post-colonial era of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, sought to capitalize on Ghanaian culture as a tool for developing nationalism among the youth in schools. According to Coe, some of these state efforts, as opposed to more recent efforts, were relatively successful because the state provided a cultural discourse that was in line with what the people desired.

The second section, which is the bulk of the book, examines "how culture is reclaimed by its citizens." Although it could be argued that culture per se was never out of the citizens control at all, but rather that the state was more or less successful in matching the cultural desires of the people at various points in time, the point is nevertheless well made that a new cultural tension between the state, the people, and the church has arisen in more recent times. Coe exposes these tensions by exposing a number of cultural discourses: culture as nationalism, as Christianity (or as anti-Christian), as a way of life, as "drumming and dancing," as national development, as inheritance, as ideological, or as hegemonic. Each of these discourses is interesting in its own right, but the complex interactions of these discourses is where the real story is told. For example, the state has created cultural competitions for students, whereby the state intends to be seen as the provider and the judge of national culture. However, a Christian discourse does not approve of some parts of traditional culture, and so a new form of cultural expression emerges in the form of drama-dances. Students perform on themes that are in the interests of national development (state discourse) but which are also morally appropriate for Christians (church discourse), such as teenage pregnancy or drug abuse.

This example is at the core of two main questions in the text: where is culture located and how is the meaning of culture defined? In teasing out answers to these questions, the author touches on several other broad themes: the appropriation of social spaces, appropriate school pedagogies, local participation, social reproduction, the role of power, the changing relationship of youth and elders and/or teachers and students, the role of globalization, and how top-down policies are actually put into practice at the local level. Each of these themes could be a book of its own, but they all successfully inform this study of culture in Ghanaian schools.

The text is at its best when it uses such themes to not only show conflicts between cultural discourses, but also to show the paradoxical nature within some of these discourses, such as the simultaneous rejection and appropriation of traditional culture in an effort to change the meaning of culture. For example, early missionaries and current charismatic Christians both rejected many of traditional cultural practices. However, they each also sought to use select parts of the traditional culture to give themselves legitimacy. Missionaries sought to use local language as a tool for teaching God's word. Modern African Christians may attempt to use drumming as a method for praising God, though that same drumming at traditional festivals may be rejected. The state's actions often also result in

paradoxes. The state seeks to use schools as the vehicle through which to teach a national, standardized view of culture. However, due to teachers' lack of experience or cultural knowledge, this often means that the view of culture as a possession of the local elders is actually strengthened and the view of culture as a state commodity is not ultimately successful.

Some might say that, at the edges, the book sweeps a bit broadly. In studying one region of Ghana, Coe states that she hopes to generalize to Ghana in general. However, the title of the book refers to African rather than Ghanaian schools, and in the conclusion she stretches the findings to multicultural education in the United States. However, since she stops short of drawing any definitive conclusions for these wider groups, I feel that the themes uncovered here most certainly can inform issues of schooling and culture beyond Ghana and even beyond Africa.

Coe also gives limited attention to some of the themes mentioned above. For example, educators would be interested in a deeper discussion of the effect that various pedagogies have on cultural transmission. The way in which globalization seeps through all aspects of culture could also be examined much more deeply. Although it leaves me wanting more, or perhaps because it leaves me wanting more, her approach works for me. Though I would like to see many of the universal themes mentioned above drawn out further, attempting to do so here would have bogged down an intriguing glimpse at school life and cultural traditions in Ghana—a glimpse that shows the complexity of cultural dynamics in our modern world.

Ryan Wells
University of Iowa