

Book Review

DIPO and the Politics of Culture in Ghana, Marijke Steegstra, Woeli Publishing Services, Accra Newtown, 2005, 348 pp. ISBN 9988-626-55-X. Maps, Pictures, Glossary

Increasing teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV-AIDS and general sexual laxity, especially among the youth, in Ghana, have generated much public controversy on certain cultural practices, particularly puberty rites to which *Dipo* belongs. This discourse in turn has amplified cultural ambivalences towards the rites leading to two schools of thought, namely whether to abolish the rites completely or modify some aspects of it.

In *Dipo and the politics of culture in Ghana*, Marijke Steegstra, the author poses the question: how should modern Krobo relate to the *dipo* custom or puberty rites for girls among the Krobo? She juxtaposes historical and contemporary Christian and traditional views on the topic and deduces that *dipo* is both a resilient and ambivalent ritual which is “probably the best known and certainly most enduring girls’ initiation rites in Ghana” (p.1.) which also brings out the people’s cultural notions about cleanliness, pollution, and what it means to be a woman in Krobo society.

The author combines ethnographical and historical analysis to enter the present through the past. She gives an overview of the demography of the Krobo people and how their locations have changed over the years from mountain dwellers to their present location in the plains. She argues that Christian influences have not only infiltrated, and attempted to annihilate the custom, but continue to see to its destruction, resulting in persistent tensions among the Krobo.

Just like their predecessors, contemporary Christian church leaders and members view traditional religion and its practices as heathen, uncivilised and primitive and are thus perceived as a matter of the past. Christianity embodies the “advancement of European civilisation and enlightenment and thus the modern way for the Krobo to go” (p.288). Steegstra is emphatic that the constant attack on *dipo* since Christianity

arrived in Krobo has strengthened and perpetuated this practice as seen in the contradictory arguments of contemporary Krobo people. She finds the Krobo perception that regards Christianity as a symbol of modernity and *dipo*, a matter of traditional religion, as an ideology that makes *dipo* political, powerful and resilient. "The fixation of tradition and imagining culture as shown in particular in the *dipo* rites is part of modernity and a way of dealing with modernity. Where modernity emphasises change and rationally controlled development, tradition is its twin concept that denotes continuity with the past." (P.14).

Conversion to Christianity implied a complete rejection of African culture and by extension the *dipo* custom though most Christians did not reject their customs as they were required to because they were not willing to give up *dipo*. Those who will not give up the practice argue that *dipo* is not only *kusumi* (custom) handed down by generations but an integral part of Krobo culture that gives Krobo women their unique identity and belonging. From the foregoing, one could argue that since men do not undergo the *dipo* or any initiation rite, for that matter, but insist on marrying only Krobo women who have gone through the rite, it would not be incorrect to contend that the personhood of men depends on the *dipo* custom. By implication, *dipo* can be said to be the same channel through which both women and men attain their dignity and social identity.

In trying to assert the resilience of *dipo*, the author re-states how attempts by Christians to substitute *dipo* with the Christian sacrament of confirmation have been unsuccessful. These Christian efforts, in my opinion, will continue to fail until *dipo* is understood in the context of its practitioners because the practice goes beyond the performance of rituals and conferment of an identity. *Dipo* is regarded as a complete school system and integral aspect of Krobo culture that encompasses a formal traditional education system through which young girls are trained in history, genealogy, practical aspects of life and above all the smooth transition to the world of sex and marriage. In this sense, the average Krobo girl or woman must be seen as more educated than the boy or man who does not go through any elaborate rites at puberty. This should be regarded as an advantage rather than a disadvantage because girls/women will invariably become the custodians of the cultural heritage, in

their role as mothers, and should therefore be well versed in Krobo culture in its entirety.

Again, in my opinion, the Christian confirmation as a substitute for *dipo* also failed because it ignored the teachings on sex as a gateway and preparation for marriage and other societal values that were (and are still) crucial in Krobo puberty rites. Finally, *dipo*, perceptibly, links the living inhabitants of the visible world with the ever present forces of the invisible world. Thus, abolition of the custom would mean the abolition of an entire institution that would probably result in the extinction of the essence of "Kroboness".

Another issue that Steegstra raises concerns the misnomer in referring to *dipo* as 'puberty rites' because sometimes girls as young as two years of age, who have not reached the age of puberty are also made to participate in the ritual, which disputes the whole concept of *dipo* as an initiation from adolescence into adulthood and a gate way to marriage. The author notes that the practice of younger girls undergoing *dipo* rites has been in existence as far back as the 19th century. She refers to Weiss' observation in 1877, which intimates that not only mature girls went on the Krobo Mountain, "but also girls of six or seven years old" (p. 211). Steegstra explains this seeming aberration as a measure to counter the missionaries' attempt to abolish *dipo*, though she adds that the reasons for the reduction in the biological age for the performance of *dipo* in contemporary times are mostly of economic nature and convenience (p. 211). If the author had probed a little deeper, she would have traced the under-aged *dipo* practice to child betrothal as a system of marriage in traditional society; because even toddlers were made to go through the rites when they have been given into marriage in advance. In order to understand this whole under-aged *dipo* practice, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether child betrothal is still valid in contemporary times and make recommendations for relieving the children from this burden.

Perhaps, apart from child betrothal, a covert reason inherent in the performance of the *dipo* rites for under-aged girls in contemporary times could be the issue of human rights. Thus, the idea is to 'catch them young' before they reach adolescence where they could reason for themselves and refuse to go through the rites by making claims to their human

rights. The idea of human/child rights brings us to the discussion of *dipo* and modernity.

While I disagree with the author's binary approach which puts modernity and tradition as antithesis namely: modernity equals rationality and tradition equals continuity (irrationality), some aspects of our behaviour indeed tends to endorse this eurocentric view of tradition. For example, the nudity associated with *dipo* has been abolished so that the breasts are now covered. Yet, when the American film actor, Steven Seagull, visited Ghana about three years ago, in the company of a Krobo princess, he was welcomed by bare-breasted *dipo* girls, contrary to the 'correct' performance of *dipo* these days. Whatever the intention for this aberration might have been, I think it defeats the attempts at winning the confidence of adolescent girls to participate in puberty rites.

In a preliminary study undertaken in 2001, I solicited the views of Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) girls in Accra on how to repackage puberty rites as a means to combating HIV/AIDS. The study revealed that about 70% of them would be willing to go through a kind of initiation devoid of nudity and inhuman practices (like female genital mutilation which fortunately is not part of *dipo*, but is practised elsewhere). Nudity was one aspect the pupils found repugnant; indeed, it has also been one of the arguments used by antagonists of *dipo* to condemn this cultural rite. The initiators of *dipo* may have included the baring of breasts for purposeful and significant reasons but modern society regards it as indecent and obsolete. Again, I must argue that the preservation of *dipo* will depend on the implementation of the purposive changes that future candidates would like to see, of which nudity is most significant.

The author's main objective for the study- namely, how contemporary Krobo society should relate to *dipo*, was not adequately addressed. Although she makes several arguments she does not succeed in arriving at a plausible suggestion as to how *dipo* should be handled in contemporary times. In my opinion, since all cultural practices are subject to change, with or without foreign influences, a middle-range approach could be considered as a solution to the tensions associated with the rites. This could be done by inventing an African Christian variant of the custom as has been the case with African Independent Churches (Spiritual, Pentecostal/ Charismatic churches) which amalgamate both Christian

and African elements in their worship. In other words, one could argue that the future of *dipo* lies in a judicious fusion of eclectic socialisation elements of Christian and Krobo cultures.

The title of the book is *dipo* and the politics of culture in Ghana, and the author brings out the various features of politics seen in the Christian contest between Krobo cultures. However, Streegstra does not attempt a definition of politics. Granted that the term politics, is one of the over-used words, a working definition of the as per her understanding as well as Krobo interpretations of it would have been very useful. Nevertheless, her discussion of the Cultural Policy of Ghana that deals with the preservation as well as modernisation of cultural heritage and practices should give us some hints about the political nature of culture and the Krobo *dipo*.

On Methodology, the author did well by interviewing the custodians of *dipo* including the traditional priests/ priestesses and old women who are experts on the custom, people who had already gone through the rite as well as leaders of Christian churches, representatives of Krobo traditional religion, government officials and women. It was significant that the author interviewed candidates participating in the rites, though their views were not clearly articulated. The views of this category of girls are very essential in establishing the future of such a contested custom, since the consent or refusal of prospective *dipo* girls is crucial in the survival of the custom in any form.

The book has nine chapters. Chapters one and two introduce the research setting and aspects of migration history of the Krobo respectively; chapters three and four take us through the encounter with foreigners, their culture, politics, and socio-religious transformations. Chapters five to seven deal with the dynamics of Krobo religion, a description and importance of the *dipo* custom. The debates on *dipo* are discussed in chapter eight. The book has a glossary which is very good resource for understanding Krobo words especially for the non-Krobo speakers. However the inclusion of an index would have been a resource for easy reference.

Overall, the book will be a useful textbook for students and teachers of religious, cultural and modernity studies, as well as people who would like to know more about *dipo* and its current challenges. It has added to knowledge on the literature on the *dipo* custom and has filled the lacunae

in scholarly publication on the topic by women. Marijke Steegstra, who has written the current publication on *dipo* is a Dutch woman, which should motivate and challenge Ghanaian women to write about our own culture.

Foreign scholars have done well in helping to document and preserve our culture, but, 'unless lions write their own stories, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter,' as an African proverb roughly suggests.

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