

THE MAKING OF A MODERN POSTCOLONIAL CULTURE

The Pen-Pictures of Modern Africans and African Celebrities by Charles Francis Hutchison, Michel R. Doortmont, ed., Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2005, pp. 497, ISBN 90-04-14097-2

A Review by Sanya Osha

It is always pleasing to come across snapshots of Victorian culture playing themselves out in peculiar ways in West African history and lives. Charles Francis Hutchison's book, *The Pen-Pictures of Modern Africans and African Celebrities* which was first published around 1930 boldly tackles various experiences of unfolding modernity within a dominant ambience of colonialism. The predominant dialectic is familiar enough: colonizer/ colonised and tradition/ modernity. But within the context of the dominant binary logic, the surprises of existence are what one finds truly arresting, that is, the ways in which colonised/ 'native' subjects navigate the strange byways of euro-modernity and in the process, re-make themselves, their life-worlds, their cultures and other subjects around them. In essence, not only are they re-invented as subjects but also, the entire fabrics of their societies are reconstructed.

Charles Francis Hutchison was successful Gold Coast businessman who was born in Cape Coast in 1879. He trained as a surveyor in England in the 1890s and then returned to the Gold Coast where he became the pre-eminent land surveyor. He had also been sired by

“one of the most prominent Euro-African families of the nineteenth-century Gold Coast, namely the Hutchison-Bartels clan of Cape Coast and Elmina” (p. 16).

In addition, his great-grandfather was William Hutchison, a Scot who had served the colonial administration in the Gold Coast. Indeed, within the Gold Coast of that era, it was not surprising to find families with European ancestry or members. Some Europeans – Dutch, Danish or British – married local women and raised families thereby creating what in various ways might be

termed ‘subjectivities of whiteness’ within the populace.

The political context in which Hutchison’s book was conceived and written is equally interesting. Great social and political changes were occurring. An African elite had emerged in the sphere of international trade and commerce. The Atlantic slave trade had more or less provided the grounds for the creation of the local elite. And then as the slave trade ended to make way for legitimate trade in agricultural produce and minerals, new processes of social stratification and re-alignment re-configured the social scene. In other words, fortunes were made and lost. The agglomeration of interests that emerged from this socio-economic flux was indeed crucial to the making of modern Ghana. As processes of social stratification set in, so did the nature and configurations of political power change. At a time, the local elite were fairly cordial partners with the agents of empire. In other words, they aided the machinery of the colonial administration either as minor bureaucrats or as trading partners. Afterwards, the colonial machine preferred to deal with traditional chieftains thereby incurring the displeasure of the local trading, educated elite. It was the displeasure of the elite that eventually provided the fuel for the sentiments that congealed to make modern Ghanaian nationalism leading to the moment of political liberation. Obviously, this change in the general political climate also led to a transformation of the perception and subjectivity of whiteness. The book captures the crucial moments of incipient anti-colonialism that emerged in the 1890s.

So Hutchison’s book incorporates a number of registers; it is first and foremost, a celebration of the lives of prominent Gold Coast indigenes, it is also a portrait of subtle and overt colonial social relations, a commentary on the various subjectivities of whiteness, in addition, a somewhat understated translocal engagement with the dialectics of freedom as espoused anti-slavery movement of the United States and finally, a depiction of the multiple social tensions involved in the making of a modern postcolonial culture. These are the broad discursive registers that inform the book.

However, we must bear in mind that the book in fact comprises biographical sketches in blank verse and prose. Part of its strength lies in being able to reveal a great deal of historical truths within those sketches of biography. In all, there are sketches of 162 individuals from fairly diverse professional backgrounds- mercantile/business, civil service, law, traditional rulership, the clergy, medicine and engineering.

Michel Doortmont who has done an impressive job of preparing a new edition of Hutchison's book mentions some of its values; it is an important source book on vital segments of Ghanaian history, as a text filled with photographs, it is both a piece of cultural commentary as well a significant product of art, it is, in the same vein, a work of West African literary art as well as historiography and finally, it is an important launch pad for other historical and theoretical projects.

In Doortmont's words,

"Hutchison often provides numerous snippets of information that are the product of intimate personal knowledge of the individuals described, and give the reader a detailed and very private insight into the life and times of the Gold Coast educated elite of Hutchison's generation, and that of his father, making the book both a historical biographical dictionary and an intimate sketch of upper class Gold Coast society in the twentieth century" (p. 1).

Doortmont introduction to the new edition of Hutchison's book puts it in its proper perspective. In addition, he has added new biographical information and footnotes to amplify the significance of Hutchison's historic text. Indeed Doortmont undertakes a major role not only in restoring the cultural significance of Hutchison's text but also in amplifying it through further research and elaboration. This process took years of research into Gold Coast family history by various methods of archival study (libraries and newspapers) and oral interviews. In this sense, Doortmont accomplishes two objectives. First, through academic research, he brings to the fore an important cultural text and second, he evaluates the achievements of its author by putting them in their proper perspective. Accordingly, we discover that Hutchison wrote other works- *A Eulogy of White Celebrities of British West Africa*, *African Cameos: A book of entertaining stories*, *Shades of Africa: Reflects Life, Scenery and Psychology*. Other titles by Hutchison include, *Man of Genius: A book on the miracles of the subconscious mind* and *The Problem of Progressive Africa: Corrective monologues of African psychology*. Those were indeed culturally rich times for an inspiring mind.

