



**Book Review: Chris Shore & Stephen Nugent (eds). *Elite cultures: anthropological perspectives*. ASA Monographs No 38. London: Routledge, 2002.**

Reviewed by Stefanie Lotter (University of Heidelberg, Germany).

It is reasonable to say that we have waited thirty years for the publication of the edited volume by Chris Shore and Stephen Nugent on 'Elite Cultures'. Thirty years ago, Laura Nader demanded that more anthropologists should study-up indicating also why so few do so: '*anthropologists value studying what they like and liking what they study and, in general, we prefer the underdog*' (Nader 1972: 303). Little has changed since Nader's comments and in the past thirty years elite studies have been a widely neglected area in ethnography. This is despite well-founded and inviting theoretical frameworks provided by Marx, Weber, Pareto, Mills, Althusser, Foucault and Bourdieu, amongst others.

Before 'Elite Cultures' two attempts were made in the 1990s to bring together anthropological studies of elites. In 1993 the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* devoted a special issue to elites, exploring them within the field of the anthropology of organisations, and as an extension of 'anthropology at home'. In 2000, João de Pina-Chabral and Antónia Pedroso de Lima edited a volume on elites focusing on the importance of dynasties, family support and trust. This included an interesting article on the Bush family by George E. Marcus, who also published 'Elites: Ethnographic Issues', one of the most important monographs on elites besides Abner Cohen's 'The Politics of Elite Culture'

What makes Chris Shore and Stephen Nugent's 'Elite Cultures' stand out amongst other works on elites is that it focuses neither on traditional leadership, caste and kingdom nor on the anthropology of organisations. Instead, it asks how anthropology can contribute to the understanding of how elites operate, and what meaning and practices they maintain to define and sustain their identity and status. These questions run through the volume, which draws on ethnographic examples from North and South America, South and Southeast Asia as well as Africa and the UK. The book comprises fifteen chapters loosely divided into three parts. Preliminary to this tripartite division, Chris Shore gives an excellent introduction to the subject as well as a topical overview to the volume. On the methodological side, Shore claims that studying elites may be seen as a counterweight to the elitism of anthropology. He provides us with challenging ethical questions surrounding issues such as censorship and the rights of those studied. It gives us the opportunity to regain theoretical ground that escaped post-modern trends, specifically by focusing on a sociological and historical analysis of issues such as economics, politics and social change.

The first part, 'Elites, politics and peripheries' presents five studies in post-colonial elite settings and discusses the reactions of old elites to political power shifts, as well as introducing issues around elites of the marginalised. The section begins with John Gledhill writing on Mexico, where social reform is prevented because a new regime takes up elite practices, such as the patron-client relationship, to amass private fortunes while old elite families remain successful in the field of finance and politics. Stephen Nugent describes in the next article the institutional conditions under which elites are locally produced. In Amazonia elites emerged as by-products of colonial experience and later development community promoting economic globalisation while on the local level introducing non-local forms of social differences based on a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Nugent states that elites, by definition distinct groups, are under fewer obligations to consent with an anthropological study. The study of elites is therefore bound to either concentrate as it previously did on accessible elites, studied with conventional methods, or to take a new perspective by 'studying-up' and undertaking research with effective elites which may or may not be technically possible. Penelope Harvey's article is an example of what Nugent terms the study of an 'accessible elite with peripheral status'. Focusing on mestizo traders in Peru, it demonstrates how a local elite maintains control of state institutions in rural areas of the Southern Andes. The shift of old elites with occupations in administration, military and party organisation towards new elites with professional jobs (also discussed in Nugent's article on Amazonia) is the topic of C.W. Watson's article on Indonesia where alliances between several interrelated elite-groups brought President Suharto down. Likewise, one can read Jonathan Spencer's article on Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka as a study of elite continuity, despite the general perception that the new elite has succeeded the old anglophile elite. Spencer's analysis shows how British colonial sociology enforced the status quo of a small, interrelated family-based elite, and has managed to continue dominating politics up to the present day.

While the first part demonstrates that some elites are able to shift from one social field to the next while preserving their status, the second part, 'Elites, hegemony and tradition' explores the strategies used by elites to maintain their status by using and producing forms of history and tradition that legitimises their distinct positions. Elisabeth Tonkin and Michael Rowland both engage in comparative studies. Tonkin discusses how two different income groups (white British settlers and black Americans) use similar ideologies to legitimise their position in Kenya and Liberia, while Rowland is concerned with elite reproduction in Mali and Cameroon. He finds that, while in Mali, the elites are successful in inventing their legitimacy on the basis of nationalism, their counterparts in Cameroon prefer to ground distinction in autocratic authority. Sandra Evers writes in the following chapter on Madagascar about the Betsileo elite, who despite their recent immigration, claim ownership of land on the basis of ancestral tombs and thus constitute their presence into a timeless past. Laura Peers provides an interesting urban anthropological example, studying how Native American and Canadian First Nation people have become a new 'heritage elite' in North American museum sites. Grant Evans concludes this second part on dominance and legitimacy with an example from Laos where a ceremonial vacuum left by the exiled and condemned royalty is increasingly filled by a post-socialist government during its search for legitimacy.

The last part of the volume is titled, 'Elites, professionals and networks' and is comprised of three chapters, two of which are concerned with elites in the United Kingdom. John Eade explores the social capital built into the educational institutions

belonging to the Catholic Church in England. There is the interesting twist that increasing groups of students now come from migrant families originating from predominantly Catholic countries such as Poland, Colombia and the Philippines. Monica Konrad's excellent article directs us into a different field, by exploring lay and expert knowledge in the area of bioinformatics and molecular biology. This involves addressing the methodological problem of multi-sited elite fieldwork by focusing on actor-networks while studying information flows. Konrad advocates an applied anthropological perspective, and suggests that anthropologists find their way into ethics committees partaking in the terms of reference to explore the means by which scientists and others draw up future policy agendas. After this powerful suggestion at the end of the ethnographic section, the last chapter by Ronald Frankenberg rounds up the volume in a short commentary conclusion. Frankenberg questions whether attempting to study elites might in fact be '*a heuristic device of pretending to accept in advance the existence of elites*' which is an interesting reflexive final statement to the volume.

To my mind, the most important contribution of this volume is its authors' emphasis on the importance of elite studies in a wide range of ethnographic settings. It has a thorough introduction providing the necessary bibliographic references required to engage in the study of elites. Particularly, it demonstrates the methodological difficulties of studying-up where direct observation is limited, consent is often not given and access to information can easily be denied. Unfortunately too little is said about the problematic of accessing effective elites and the danger of more or less consciously associating and collaborating with the powerful. A consideration of the dilemmas of either betraying informants, which clearly goes against the AAA code of ethics, or representing the views of elites, such as dictators, nuclear weapon scientists or anti-abortionists, might have added a further interesting perspective to the volume. I hope the publication of 'Elite studies' will encourage more anthropologists to engage in studies of elites, and provide more insights into the inner working of power whose effects anthropologists have studied for many years with their preference for the '*underdog*'.

## References

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