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Democracy in Ghana: Everyday Politics in Urban Africa by J.
W. Paller (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

J. W. Paller, *Democracy in Ghana: Everyday Politics in Urban Africa*. Cambridge University Press, 2019. 328 pages.

Since 1992, the political system of Ghana has received ample academic attention. The reason for this, many times, is that it represents a stable democracy with peaceful transitions, unlike its flailing neighbors elsewhere on the continent. Despite the attention, many aspects of the Ghanaian type of governance have not been studied. The variation of governance and development between and within cities is one such area that has not been sufficiently understood. Expanding the analysis beyond electoral politics and using an extensive mixed method developed over a decade, Jeffrey W. Paller, in his excellent book *Democracy in Ghana: everyday politics in urban Africa*, crafts a new reading of the Ghanaian political landscape by aptly theorizing the urban space. Weaving together two under-researched aspects of Ghana's democratization process—the local politics in between elections and the quickly expanding process of urbanization in three Accra neighborhoods: Ashaiman, Ga Mashie, and Old Fadama—Paller carves out a theory of how “everyday politics” can explain this variation.

Paller's definition of everyday politics is “the institutional context of daily decision-making in a neighborhood—how people think, act, and feel about power on a daily basis” (p. 4) with the important addition that everyday politics is the site where the political elite meets ordinary people. While theoretically expanding the study of politics to informal institutions is not new, the contribution is in the study's interdisciplinary method. Paller efficiently combines historical research, quantitative survey data, and ethnographic case studies. The survey data is based on the Afrobarometer battery of questions with a most similar sampling strategy with a variation on the type of settlements (indigenous, stranger, and squatter) and the case studies follow this typology. Paller's credo is that social science must center the very people it terms as actors and speak with and consult with them; “place them front and center in the study of democracy” (p. 249).

Further, the book seeks to understand the coexistence of a healthy electoral democracy with ills such as political clientelism, elite capture of state resources, and ethnic politics. Paller suggests that the key is to be found in cities and writes

that, beyond elections, “control of urban space is the most important political struggle” (p. 22). Paller succinctly compares urban politics to rural politics, where we come to understand how politics differs in the two locales. In cities, land prices are constantly increasing due to the urbanization process, and tenure is rare; more ethnically diverse populations live side by side; population density is higher, putting pressure on amenities such as water and sanitation and security. However, urban populations also often have better access to social services such as healthcare and education (although highly unequally distributed) and nearer physical proximity to the power of the state. Taken together, the urban space becomes a political powder keg as political contestation is heightened and voting blocks in cities tend to be volatile, quite the opposite of the more stable rural voting patterns (p. 21).

In the first chapter, we are introduced to the topic with three illustrative vignettes which *show* us what everyday politics is before we are told, for instance featuring a Ga Mashie fetish priest/traditional leader and his role in rebuilding a local food market. These cases illustrate how motivations among urban poor lead to certain democratic or clientelistic behaviors and how those, in turn, contribute to multiparty politics.

Paller’s work is built on a typology of urban neighborhoods, discussed in Chapter 2: Indigenous, Stranger and Settler settlements. Where indigenous settlements contain a majority of dwellers with autochthonous claims to the land, the stranger settlements consist mostly of migrants who purchased land directly from the landowners, and the squatter settlements have a majority of settlers seen as temporary as they have no legal claims to the land. The third chapter describes the political history of urbanization in Ghana and traces informal norms of settlement and belonging throughout history from pre-colonial times until the present time. Debates and contestations over issues such as temporary housing, demolitions and evictions, health concerns and organizations for resistance are proven to be recurring if not eternal issues on the Accra urban decision-makers’ table. The sections on Ga Mashie, especially, are thorough and informative, building on detailed secondary accounts from a long list of Ghana Studies scholars recorded on the first page of the chapter. The fourth chapter discusses authority and how it is legitimized and hereby challenges earlier scholarship on clientelism, suggesting that the type of settlement determines how legitimacy is constructed. Further, in Chapter 5, Paller shows how the type of settlement informs distributive politics based on both qualitative and quantitative data. He concludes that rather than goods and services being uniformly distributed across neighborhoods or variations being possible to explain by formal differences such as political competition or demography, it is the informal norms and local expectations that distribute goods along lines of club, public or private for indigenous, stranger and squatter neighborhoods respectively. While much qualitative data is presented with clarity and detail,

the quantitative data shared in chapter 5 is less convincing. When the quantitative survey results are examined in full they show, on many variables, little variation between the types of settlements (p. 265ff). The presentation could have benefitted from a more extensive discussion on methodology and when to lean on which academic tradition and method.

Worth highlighting is also the overview of the organization of civic life in the neighborhoods (Chapter 6) which builds on Noah Nathan's work on ethnic voting and provides insights on the linkages between settlement and ethnic organization. Ethnic voting in Ghana is a contested issue. Beyond party strongholds, it does not dominate the voting pattern and, in cities, ethnic organization and thus polarization vary greatly between neighborhoods. In this volume, the multiethnic civic life in Ashaiman is heralded as a success story of sorts, especially in limiting crime with community involvement.

In the final chapter, Paller concludes on how leadership in some communities becomes accessible and accountable, how urban poor can engage in cross-ethnic deliberation and how norms of settlement and belonging underpin these processes. Paller's findings are also complemented by a few poignant policy suggestions: he concludes that eviction or "slum clearance" is a failed strategy and that leaders who live in their communities are seen to be more responsive by the people they represent.

In addition to being useful for students of politics, sociology, ethnography, development and urbanization, students of interdisciplinary methods could learn much from the approach of this book in the way it confidently triangulates its results from a variety of methods without sacrificing nuance. The critique of political science and how it tends to overemphasize elections leads to the addition of ethnographic methods to better theorize variations in development. Paller, in other words, uses his political science knowledge to strengthen his ethnography: where earlier research focused on single neighborhoods, Paller's study compares cases.

The book's welcome focus on the rapidly growing urbanization rate in Africa thus aligns with a new interdisciplinary interest in urbanization well summed up in Sustainable Development Goal 11: "Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable." There has been a shift in policy conversations around cities, from clamping down on problem areas to supporting cities as key for wealth creation. While the comparative study of African cities is a new and emerging literature, research on urban settings is more established in, especially, India and Latin America. Interestingly, Ghana and its capital Accra, with its far-reaching urbanization process, presents an interesting case for studying the intersection between democratization and urbanization.

In the tradition of scholars such as Hernando De Soto and Robert Putnam, this work expands what political science could be and presents a compelling case for the notion that everyday politics in urban areas, with their locally different

informal norms of settlement and belonging, can explain variations in development and democracy.

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B. G. Jallow, ed., *The Prison Letters of Dr. J. B. Danquah*. Timbooktoo, 2020. 150 +xii pages.

Baba Galleh Jallow's *The Prison Letters of Dr. J. B. Danquah* is quite narrow in scope. It details the two periods of detention of Joseph Boakye (J. B.) Danquah under Kwame Nkrumah's Preventive Detention Act of 1958 (PDA): from October 1961 to June 1962, and from January 1964 to his death in Nsawam Prison in February 1965. While much has been written about Danquah, the "architect of modern Ghana," (p. 3) and there are annual memorial lectures dedicated to his name and even calls for the University of Ghana to be named after him, Jallow's book is the first comprehensive compilation of the numerous letters and memorials Danquah wrote from prison to his erstwhile colleague and political opponent, President Kwame Nkrumah, asking for clemency.

Danquah's letters give a graphic description not only of the mass arrests, but also of the brutal conditions that awaited detainees in prison, including chaining, deprivation of food and medical attention, and verbal assaults from wardens (Jallow, 2020, pp. 84–94).

The book contains nine letters, each constituting a chapter. Three were written between October 1961 and June 1962 at Ussher Fort Prison, when Danquah suffered his first imprisonment, and the remaining letters were sent out from the Special Block at Nsawam Prison, where he was detained for thirteen months until his death on February 4, 1965. For each chapter title, the author cleverly adapted a line from the letter which best summarized its content.

In Chapter 1, titled "What grounds for detention?" and dated October 13, 1961, Danquah rejects the reasons advanced by the CPP Press for his detention: that he had organized meetings with Ismaila Annan and Atta Bordor to "design subversion" and "did act in a manner calculated to endanger the security of the state and cause the overthrow of the Government of Ghana by unlawful means" (p. 5). The letters encapsulate the heavy dose of anger that swelled in the lawyer and nationalist's chest as he explained to Nkrumah that his Order of Detention "was not made in Good [*sic*] faith." He also chided the Ghanaian leader for making "reckless use of the PDA, 1958, (thereby) making our country the laughing stock of the world and reduces our age to an abject condition in the eyes of history" (p. 7). Danquah ended the letter by assuring "for its falsity, and for its bad faith, the Order of Detention is illegal and I therefore respectfully