Amy Niang, *The Postcolonial State in Transition: Stateness and Modes of Sovereignty*. London: Rowman and Littlefield (978-1-78660-653-2). 2018, xi + 231 pp.

Amy Niang's ambitious, if not always conceptually and organizationally clear, book, *The Postcolonial African State in Transition,* sits within a refreshing and much-needed strand in international relations (IR) theory. This strand examines the theoretical and intellectual implications of distinguishing between myth and reality in the historical and conceptual construction of the "Westphalian state." If the unitary, centralized, sovereign state—which, in all modern societies, we are to locate as the source of all legitimate political authority—is grounded in an historical falsehood, then it means that there is more than one conceptual species of the "rightly ordered" state.

By fleshing out the historical development and operation of indigenous state formation and political organization within the Mossi states system (covering modern-day Burkina Faso, Ghana, Niger, and Mali) between the 16th and 19th centuries, Niang's arguments aim to give a positive account of a different conceptual understanding of the state. Niang paints an image of the state as fluid, bureaucratically decentralised (not anarchic), and reliant on multiple structures of political authority shared with other forms and resources of socio-political and socio-cultural organization. For a West African region whose social and political history is defined by complex patterns of migration, such an open, decentralised, multi- and non-linear approach to state-making and re-making would seem necessary. It seems necessary still.

Niang's analysis certainly underscores the promising terrain of contemporary IR thought, particularly when it is open to interdisciplinary methods of investigation. In Niang's case, an historical anthropological approach provides the empirical substance for the book's major theoretical thesis: namely, that the state is not a conceptual given, and that political-theoretical formulations of law, order, authority, and legitimacy that take it to be so, including critiques of statism, are bound to fail not only in non-European historical contexts, but in European ones also.

The book, however, contains a number of shortcomings. First, it suffers from Niang's failure to plainly explain, at the outset, the precise terms and references most central to her examination. This makes the book appear not only organizationally haphazard but also obscures the analytical substance of Niang's arguments, since even for scholars of African history, geography, and philosophy, terms such as *Naam* (political authority) and regions like *Mamprugu-Dagbon-Nanun-Mossi* will be unfamiliar—never mind for others. Such analytical clarity would seem essential if at least part of the purpose of Niang's examination is to aid in permanently removing African societies from their regular confinement to the inconsequential fringes of narrow scientific, historical, and philosophical comprehension.

What may seem a minor shortcoming is, I think, part of a larger miscalculation that means that the book's methodological innovativeness and thematic ambitiousness fails to be matched by its theoretical boldness. Niang adds crucial historical texture to what should already be commonplace understanding, given the depth of good scholarship on the postcolonial African state: that it is not the state, *per se*, that is failing in many African societies but, rather, a particular *type* of centralised state. This is the state that has been built on the Westphalian falsehood, and which is now given sanction by local elites and, thereby, continues its institutionalised domination protected by the procedures of international law and order.

As such, persistent internal and external focus on the dysfunctionality of this state continues to disfigure our understandings of other kinds of processes of state and polity formation that underpin the social, political, and historical fabric of African societies. As Niang notes, there is also a great deal of harmful literature on the "failed" African state—much of it publicly prized—so it may be enough simply to tip the balance in favour of more nuanced, thoughtful analyses that are not actively deleterious to the future of political organization and development on the continent. Perhaps, but I do not think so. Neither do I count such an aim as befitting of Niang's analysis.

The book intends not only to decenter the prevailing Westphalia model, but also to add to our wider historical understandings both of African statecraft and to more general understandings of the state. However, the book does not reach this goal because Niang is unclear about whether we should do away with existing conceptions of the state, complicate them, or both. In whichever case, greater clarity is required regarding what precisely distinguished the construction and operation of decentralised states from centralised ones within the Mossi system itself. And further, what distinguished centralized African polities (such as the Ashanti, for example) from what is, truthfully, a very recent history of European state centralization, and which made the former more capable of dealing with high degrees of complex social stratification, migration, and diversely ordered political formations.

However, as Niang herself notes, it is not easy to theorize about state forms that are not, of themselves, peculiar, but which have become unfamiliar even to those in whose interest it is to disband with the popular way of doing things.

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Blavatnik School of Government

University of Oxford

eniola.soyemi@bsg.ox.ac.uk