

The African State: Reconsiderations. Abdi Ismail Samatar and Ahmed I. Samatar, eds. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002. 286 pp.

This collection of essays on the state in Africa is an important contribution to political science on Africa, despite several conceptual weaknesses discussed below. Comprised of an introduction followed by seven case studies – South Africa, Ghana, Libya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia – it captures the wide gamut of state experiences in Africa, and will doubtless be a useful addition to undergraduate curricula and library holdings.

Many of the chapters provide strong historical accounts of the experiences of state formation, sometimes coupled with critiques of earlier attempts to examine the state. This works better in some cases than others. Raufu Mustapha's historical examination of the Nigerian state usefully identifies 'critical constitutive elements' that have shaped the Nigerian state under successive regimes, seeing continuity as much as change (169). Kidane Mengistaeb's Ethiopian case study, in contrast, analyzes the efforts and failures of early state-building projects, before focussing on the post-1991 'ethnic federalism'. Mengistaeb provides readers with an excellent, critical account of contemporary Ethiopian state-building. Similarly, Eboe Hutchful deftly links together the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial state formation experiences of Ghana. His inclusion of gender, class and youth as variables affecting and being affected by the state is an ideal model for the study of other states.

Other contributions, however, seem lacking in analytical focus. Ahmed Samatar's study of Somalia is near poetic in its reflections on the diasporic community, and countless peace conferences. Yet, the chapter's potentially most interesting discussions – the state-building experiences in Somaliland, and Puntland, and peace efforts in the South – give too little detail for those unversed in post-1991 Somali politics. The author is perhaps rightly sceptical about these efforts, but glosses over them with little empirical detail. Despite some interesting introductory points, Ahmad Sikainga largely rehashes a standard account of early Sudanese state formation, with surprisingly little reference to primary or secondary sources. Similarly, while Ali Abdulatif Ahmida's account of the origins of the modern Libyan state is informative and analytical, the 1980s and 1990s are scarcely described. Indeed, even Mengistaeb's most useful and critical analysis of the post 1991 state-reforms in Ethiopia might be better substantiated by the inclusion of interviews or on-the-ground observation.

Few of these contributions succeed in describing how society views the state or present much in the way of new research – the best emphasize the need for new perspectives. Perhaps this relative empirical poverty is a problem inherent to the topic – how does one 'research' the state? Moreover the authors do not provide much in the way of innovative methodology or case studies of particular aspects of the state. In contrast to much of the literature on South Africa, Yvonne Muthien and Gregory Houston attempt to link state and society-centered approaches, but the final result is heavy on policy prescription, and reveals little about the experience of living under the 'new' South African state.

The vagueness of the state in these contributions seems to be a function of the over-broad definitions and conceptualization of the state advanced in the introductory essay. The authors suggest that "the state might be conceptualized as a concatenation of four frames: leader, regime, administration, and commonwealth" (7). As a student, this writer was taught to differentiate clearly between the regime "rules, principles, norms and modes of interaction;" the state "the organization of people and resources and the establishment of policy outlines...institutions of power"; and the government "the specific

occupants of public office” (Chazan et al., *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*, 1992,39). Going back to this classic African politics textbook, I am struck by the continued good sense of their analysis “state, regime and government may or may not overlap empirically. In concept, however, they are quite distinct” (Chazan et al., 39). However, the authors in *The African State* do not engage with these issues. Their conceptual framework presumes a conceptual as well as empirical overlap between leader (government), regime, and state. Even if this can be justified analytically, it leads to confusion over what we mean by ‘the state’.

A further significant weakness of the study is that no reference is made to the substantial political science and sociological literature on state-formation. In addition to well-known European studies, there is an extensive literature on the Middle East, Latin America, and also on South Africa, all of which might have been useful in this work. Another body of literature that might have been drawn on, or at least critiqued, is the newly expanding IR-related literature on states and state-systems in Africa.

The contributions therefore suffer from an overly broad definition of the state, a failure to engage with existing literature on the state, and a lack of descriptive detail. Put together, these criticisms suggest that the collection’s weakness is more theoretical than empirical. But it also suggests that a stronger theoretical base might lead to more interesting empirical research. Here then is the first step of an important research agenda: to ‘bring the state back in’ without replicating European-centric theories, or relying too heavily on their assumptions; to build a new theoretical framework for studying the state in Africa, starting from a firm empirical basis.

Sara Rich Dorman
University of Edinburgh