



International Journal of African Studies

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Review Article

Open Access

Interrogating mainstream models of states and statehood in Africa: A critical review

Horman Chitonge*

¹Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa. E-mail: horman.chitonge@uct.ac.za

Article Info

Volume 1, Issue 1, March 2021

Received : 22 December 2020

Accepted : 15 February 2021

Published : 05 March 2021

doi: [10.51483/IJAFRS.1.1.2021.1-13](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJAFRS.1.1.2021.1-13)

Abstract

Scholarship on 'states in Africa' has been evolving into a distinct field of study, with a remarkable growth of literature occurring during the 1980s and the 1990s. This growth, however, is no mere coincidence; it occurred at a time when states in Africa were widely believed to have degenerated into a condition of irredeemable decay, and the large body of literature produced was meant to diagnose the malaise. The growing incidences of insurgencies in different parts of Africa are raising similar questions about the notion of statehood in Africa. This paper provides a critical review of the conceptual approaches adopted in the mainstream scholarship on states and statehood in Africa. The paper concludes that understanding statehood in Africa requires paying attention to the different political formations which shape the character of states rather than applying the ideal-type models.

Keywords: *State formation, African states, Statehood, Political contestation, Political formations*

© 2021 International Journal of African Studies. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

1. Introduction

Statehood and state formation in Africa have been subjects of scholarly inquiry and public debate for a long time now. Despite the extensive scholarship on this topic, the theoretical tools and concepts used to study the African political experiences and formations have been deeply problematic. One of the fundamental problems in the scholarship is the tendency among scholars to use the European experience and models of statehood as the template for understanding states in Africa and elsewhere. Critics of this approach argue that concepts and models of statehood used in studying and assessing African states are 'ideal-type' Western notions of statehood, and they question whether this approach helps us understand the African manifestations of statehood (Wai, 2012; Cilliers and Sisk, 2013; Mamdani, 1996). It has for instance been observed that the scholarship on states "has had an almost exclusive focus on Europe despite the presence of state systems elsewhere in the world that have had radically different operating assumptions" (Herbst, 2000). The major concern which critics of the mainstream scholarship on statehood have raised is that it is not because concepts and models of the state are from Europe; the primary concern is that the European experiences of statehood and state-making is used as the standard against which all states in the world should be evaluated. This is problematic precisely because by using European concepts and models of statehood, states which do not resemble European states are easily dismissed as failed or quasi states.

This paper provides a critical review of the scholarship on state and statehood in Africa, arguing that, using the European experiences and concepts of statehood to understand states in Africa has not only prevented the diverse

* Corresponding author: Horman Chitonge, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa.
E-mail: horman.chitonge@uct.ac.za

African political formations from enriching the concept of the state, but also perpetuates epistemological violence, to the extent that other political experiences are forced to fit into prototype boxes. This limitation arises mainly from the error of confusing *substance* with *form* and *species* with *genus*. In order to avoid this mix-up, it might be useful to think of states as *species* (which can take different shapes, texture and sizes), different from *genus* (the *polity*), which is a universal feature of any settled human society.

The paper is organized in two parts. In the first part, a brief outline of scholarship on African states is presented, followed by a brief discussion of some of the dominant models of statehood used and their limitations. The second part of the paper suggests some areas of study that which have the potential to enrich the understanding of statehood on the continent.

2. Approaches to states and statehood in Africa

A review of approaches and models employed in studying states suggests that most scholars use European concepts, models and theories as the template for understanding states everywhere (Mandani, 1996; Herbst, 2000; Hill, 2005; Taylor and Botea 2008). Analysts critical of this approach, see this, not only as a form of hegemony, but also as epistemological violence against other political experiences and articulations (Wai, 2012; Nugent, 2010; Nabudere, 2006; Hill, 2005; Ahluwalia, 2001; Mamdani, 1996; Ekeh, 1975). Wai (2012), for instance, argues that this approach of universalizing a specific experience and manifestation of statehood “tends to disregard specific historical experiences while subsuming them under the totalitarian grip of a Eurocentric unilinear evolutionist logic”. Concepts such as *sovereignty* (the Westphalian type), nation, bureaucracy, state formation, territorial control, centralized authority, constitutional rule, which are fundamental elements of what constitute statehood in the European context, are often used as universal benchmarks against which statehood everywhere must be assessed. By questioning the conventional approach, critics have argued that “we can no longer arrogantly assume that the modern Western State is intrinsic to civilization and the inevitable destiny of all societies, dismissing other polities as somehow “prepolitical” or, a la Willoughby, not “civic”” (Eckstein, 1979). Therefore, the applicability and usefulness of mainstream models of statehood to non-Western experiences and contexts needs to be interrogated critically (Taylor and Botea, 2008).

As Eckstein (1979) points out, “States are not polities, but a type of polity arising under odd circumstances.” Therefore, an appropriate theorizing of the African political reality has to start from the local manifestations of the polity, whether they are states or something else, and not by imposing an ideal-type model of the state as the yardstick. Such an approach amounts to confusing *species* with *genus*. Thus, to generate useful insights about statehood and state formation in African, it is essential to pay attention to the local expressions of *polity*, and not simply conducting a check list of inadequacies based on ideal-type states. This approach has led to a situation where focus has been solely directed at understanding capital cities and network politics (patrimonial politics of the big men, not so much women), as if polity equates to central government. This has led to a weak theorization of states and statehood in Africa (Nugent, 2010).

With specific reference to Africa, the hegemonic posturing in the scholarship is evident in the epithets of adjectives used to describe African states, such as, ‘soft’, ‘quasi’, ‘failed’, ‘hollowed’, ‘patrimonial’, ‘neo-patrimonial’, ‘fragile’, ‘uninstitutionalized’, ‘rentier’, ‘captured’, ‘weak’, ‘juridical’, ‘ramshackle’, ‘artificial’, ‘derelict’, ‘hybrid’, ‘imported’, ‘presidential’, ‘collapsed’ or even ‘pygmy’ states. The common message which all these adjectives convey is that African states do not conform to some established standard of statehood, and on the basis of this, their existence is often asserted negatively (Wai, 2012). It is perhaps this flippant posturing which explains the little progress made over the past six decades towards understanding political realities in Africa (Nugent, 2010; Herbst, 2000). Clearly, there is a lot lost in classifying Somalia as a ‘failed’ state or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as an ‘artificial’ state,¹ or Malawi as a ‘banana’ republic.

3. Against the current

Although critics have questioned the appropriateness of using European models of statehood to assess African states, the mainstream scholarship continues to be dominated by the approach which sees African states as highly distorted replicas of states in Western Europe. This approach has resulted in states in Africa and other regions of the world been treated as “extended series of case studies of Europe” (Herbst, 2000). But as Herbst (2000) has observed, “the European experience does not provide a template for state-making in other regions of the world... “the development of states in Europe is—in a world-historical perspective—highly idiosyncratic.”” Therefore, the dominant approach of dismissing any form of political formation that deviates from the European standards of statehood needs to be reassessed

¹ Claphan (2001).

critically. Eckstein (1979) attributes the dominance of this approach to a “mechanistic conception of politics: where the state is reduced to a machinery for exercising power, and therefore, understanding the state is equated to studying the formal rules that govern the exercise of power. But the state is much more than the formal-legal rules.

While it is important not to pretend that Africa’s political formations function perfectly well in their specific contexts, it is perhaps more informative to go beyond the pseudo-comparative approach, in order to understand the nature and ‘personality’ of African polities. It is because African political formations are often dismissed as ‘fake’ or quasi states, which should only be taken seriously when they become ‘real’ states, that some analysts have been baffled by why these formations have persisted (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982). Contrary to the dominant prognosis of the 1990s that most of these states would collapse and disappear by the turn of the new millennium (Kaplan, 1994), states in Africa are alive and kicking, and new ones are being born. In view of this, it is imperative to briefly highlight what state formation is in order to provide a basic framework.

3.1. What is state formation?

To start with, it must be acknowledged that defining *state* and *state formation* is not a clear-cut task, though it is an extremely essential part of any discussion on states, given that there are myriads of definitions and approaches (Cilliers and Sisk, 2013).² Any conceptualization of *state formation* entails a particular understanding of what a *state* is; just as the concept of state failure or collapse is underpinned by a particular conception of statehood (Akude, 2007). In this paper, the term *state formation* is used to refer to a complex set of processes that lead to the creation and sustaining of public institutions and structures which perform public administrative functions in a specific territory. This understanding of state formation relates to the concept of a state as “a collectivity that summates a set of functions and structures in order to generalize their applicability” (Nettl, 1968). In other words, the state is both an abstract concept as well as a physical reality (Eckstein, 1979).

As a physical reality, the state is ubiquitous in society: we encounter the state at birth, at school, at work, whenever we buy and sell something, when marrying or divorcing, even when we die. But the state is not the only institution in society; there are other institutions which interact with and shape it (Kawabata, 2006). Understanding these other institutions—organized or not, informal or formal, compliant or rebellious—is critical to understanding state formations in any place. In this sense, the state can be seen as an integral part of the broader society in which it is located (both domestically and internationally).

This paper echoes Wunch (2000) and Dorman’s (2009) emphasis on locating the analysis in the local political manifestations of the state, to avoid what I refer to here as the pitfalls of ‘capital city’ notions of the state. The local context, in this case, becomes crucial to understanding states and state formation processes, for the simple reason that states are a product of socioeconomic, culture and political interactions, contestations, institutional arrangements, identities and cultures, and the diverse histories, organized activities and aspirations of the different people who make up a particular polity (Dorman, 2009). Following from this, state formation can then be conceived as an open-ended process, with “highly differentiated outcomes, and of equal finality” (Barnett, 2002). Therefore, when we are talking about state formation,

... we are basically referring to a set of ongoing processes. Theoretically, it ... includes the establishment, growth and differentiation of state structures, and the redefinition of the position of various social and political formations, groups and organizational networks within the wider state context. These processes lie at the heart of the dynamics of state-society relationships, and raise fundamental questions about the manner in which the state in formation has set out to establish its linkages with constituent social units and categories... (Doornbos 1990).

It is for this reason that local expressions of the polity, no matter how crude they are, provide us with the building blocks for conceptualizing and theorizing states and statehood.

4. State and state formation scholarship in Africa

As noted earlier, scholarship on states in Africa has had a long pedigree. The scholarship goes back to the eve of African colonization, when the colonialists sought to understand traditional African societies and political formations for purposes of establishing effective control over them. However, scholarship on states in Africa proliferated at the time when the African state was declared to have hopelessly deteriorated, starting from the early 1980s (Kawabata, 2006; Young, 2004). The recent rise in insurgent groups such as Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, Isis, al-Qaeda, has led to questioning

² It is also important to note that some analysts use the term, *state formation*, inter-changeably with *national-building*, but the two are not the same.

the authenticity of statehood in Africa (Crocker, 2019). While there are different strands of this scholarship, one thing that is common among them is the use of European notions of statehood as the benchmark. As it has been observed, “Scholars have concentrated on the European experience when trying to understand state development despite the fact that Europe contains only a small percentage of states formed throughout history” (Herbst, 2000). Apologists justify this approach by arguing that European models are dominant because the “rise of the European states is well documented and that the creation of states in other parts of the world is shaped by European imperialism and colonization” (*ibid*).

Not surprising, scholars who use European models to understand African states are dismayed when they realize that states in Africa are marching ‘to a different tune’ and that the prospect that they will follow the ‘European route’ are ever becoming thin (Clapham, 2001:11). Faced with this allegedly ‘deviant’ trajectory, the easy way out, for most scholars, is to resort to the negation of the African forms of statehood. For instance, it has been argued that because most of the states in Africa did not wage war to establish authority over a given territory, they are primarily *juridical states*³; “they are still far from being complete, so to speak, and empirical statehood in large measure still remains to be built” (Jackson, 1990). Seen as such, attention is then directed not to understanding African states *as they are*, but to producing a catalogue of defects, a long list of why they should not be accorded statehood status.

Here, the main issue which critics of this approach have raised is the apparently weak justification for using the European notions of statehood as a norm for understanding and assessing states in Africa, and other parts of the world. At a more fundamental level, the approach of seeing African states as ‘yet-to-mature’⁴ replicas of the ideal Western European states raises the question of whether the European experience of statehood can be symmetrically mapped onto the African experience to merit holding the former as the benchmark against which the latter should be assessed. We see here the influence, but also the pitfalls, of the modernization paradigm which many analysts during the 1960s and 70s, embraced based on the strong conviction that African states were in the process of *becoming*, and when fully ‘matured’, they would eventually ‘look’ and ‘behave’ like states in Western Europe (William, 2013; Clapham, 2001; Jackson, 1990). This assumption has influenced the scholarship and the dominant discourse on states in Africa to the point that statehood has only been ascribed to a few countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Mauritius and the North African countries before the *Arab Spring* (statehood on the latter is seriously questioned these days)⁵. The current scholarship on states in Africa can be broadly grouped into four strands.

5. The colonial anthropology scholarship

This strand of scholarship on states in Africa was largely dominated by the early British and American anthropologists, whose focus was on understanding the pre-colonial political formations and administrative systems in Africa. A good example of this scholarship is a number of papers published in a volume edited by Fortes and Evans-Prichard (1940)—*African Political Systems*. The empirical work for this strand of scholarship was largely stimulated by the colonial administration’s interest in understanding how the pre-colonial African political and social systems operated so that ‘appropriate’ apparatus for domination and control could be devised (Mafeje, 1971). Notably, these empirical studies, “had considerable impact on Western political scientists and on political science thinking which until that time had been dominated by philosophical rather than empirical influences” (Southall, 1974).

But there is heated debate about whether ‘colonial anthropology’ contributed to the subsequent misunderstanding and misrepresentation of African political systems. Critics argue that the enthusiasm of the early anthropologists to find forms of political institutions similar to what they were familiar with in Europe and America pushed them to invent notions of tribes, states and nations in Africa, even where there was none (Ekeh, 1975; Mafeje, 1971). On the other hand, it has been observed that social anthropologists at that time were genuinely attracted to studying African political formations by the “rich variety of African political and social systems which they found under the surface of the colonial setting” (Southall, 1974).

³ The distinction made between *empirical* and *juridical* states is that the former goes through a prolonged process of state-building by waging wars to establish institutions for exercising power, while the latter is granted statehood by the international community (de Oliveira and Verhoeven, 2018). It has been argued that “states of sub-Saharan Africa did not as a rule become free of the European empires.... On the contrary, they were granted independence by those empires regardless of their empirical conditions and they exist today more by their universal right of independence than by their demonstrable reality” (Jackson 1990).

⁴ There are other scholars who argue that given African states’ late emergence, they are still in the process of becoming ‘real’ states (William, 2013:2).

⁵ It is common in the literature to refer to the “State in Africa” or the “African state” in the singular form, which sometimes convey the idea that the phenomenon of states in Africa has largely been homogenous across the continent, with only a few exceptions (Nugent, 2010).

6. The political science scholarship

The second strand of scholarship on African states has focused on colonial states introduced in many parts of Africa during the early 20th Century. While the colonial state in Africa has been an object of scholarly work and analysis across the different categories of the scholarship, there have been studies which have focused on trying to understand the relationship between indigenous African political structures and what Young (2004) referred to as the “command state”—the colonial state. Even if this scholarship has labored to uncover the logic of indigenous African political systems, these are widely deemed to be archaic, and therefore perfect candidates to be replaced by the rational modern political structures and institutions. This scholarship focused on debating whether there was anything that could form the basis for conferring nationhood to what was widely believed to be fragmented indigenous tribes or ethnic groups in pre-colonial Africa. The conclusion was obvious, colonialism manufactured not only states but “nations” in Africa (Rotberg, 1966)

One feature that distinguishes this strand of scholarship from the others is the preoccupation among scholars (particularly political scientists) with the issue of how post-colonial states in Africa are hybrids of indigenous and colonial institutions. Analysts, such as Feit, have argued that the post-colonial state in Africa could only be a hybrid between the colonial state and traditional forms of governance (Southall, 1974). Consequently, a lot of studies within this strand of scholarship have concentrated on trying to affirm not just the colonial origins of the post-colonial state in Africa, but also the continuities between the two (Claphan, 2001; Young, 2004). Influential among them include Rotberg’s (1966) “African Nationalism, Concept or Confusion?”; Ekeh’s (1975) “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa”; Hyden’s (1980) *Beyond Ujamaa*; Sklar (1993, 2003) “Mixed government”; Crawford Young (1994) *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*.

Even though this strand of the scholarship has dealt with the notion of dualism, there is a dominant view that colonial rule introduced states in Africa:

...colonial domination gave them [Africans] common experiences, a sense of common history, however brief.... They shared common grievances. They also lived within a single definite territory and, admittedly without enthusiasm, subjected themselves to the same laws and methods of administration (Rotberg, 1966).

A similar view is expressed in the argument that prior to the imposition of boundaries by colonial forces and apart from the *lingua franca* (‘usually of colonial origin’), most indigenous groupings were fragmented communities without a sense of a common identity, culture or history (Clapham, 2001). Because of the strong emphasis placed on the colonial origins of post-colonial states in Africa, “scholars have generally been unsuccessful in developing a view of African politics that takes the precolonial period seriously while still acknowledging the traumas created by white rule” (Herbst, 2000).

7. The post-colonial state scholarship

The third strand of scholarship on African states is what I refer to as the post-colonial state scholarship. Scholars within this group have directed their efforts primarily towards understanding independent African states (post-colonial states). Most scholars, particularly from the international relations school and the *formal-legal* studies school, have focused on the nature and the role of formal institutions such as parliaments, the police, the judiciary, the army, civil service, and the role of the media (Geertz, 1977). This scholarship was spurred by the great enthusiasm and expectations of the prospects of the ‘newly liberated’ African states and the vibrant processes of creating state visions and state *personas*. The works of David Apter—*The Gold Coast in Transition* (Apter, 1955); Edward Shils’ *Political Development in the New States* (Shils, 1963); Aristide Zolberg’s *Creating Political Order: The Party-system of West Africa* (Zolberg, 1966); Ruth First’s *The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d’Etat* (First, 1970); Cranford Pratt’s *The Critical Phase in Tanzania, 1945-1968* (1976); and Rivkin’s (1969) *Nation-Building in Africa* are some of the examples of the scholarship in this strand.

Among other things, the post-colonial state scholarship highlights the view that in most independent African countries during the 1960s and 1970s, state formation was a process dominated by the strong charisma of the liberation and nationalist *heroes* (Southall, 1974; Stark, 1986). Accordingly, the scholarship focused on understanding the liberation struggle leaders who were identified with the process of nation building and consolidation of power (Stark 1986). A good example of this is Apter’s (1955) work which identified state formation in Ghana with Nkrumah’s personal ability to overcome factions and consolidate various power bases into a unified and centralized system. Another example is Cartwright’s work which argued that “an individual political leader can have a substantial effect in shaping the evolution of almost any African state” (Stark, 1986).

8. The state failure scholarship

The fourth strand of scholarship is the state failure school. As noted above, this strand of scholarship dominated the discourse on states in Africa during the 1980s and flourished throughout the 1990s into the New Millennium. Interestingly, it is during this period when most African states were diagnosed to be in crisis which was attributed mainly to the worsening economic conditions and the implementation of the structural adjustment programs (SAPs, [Mkandawire, 2001](#)). One thing that distinguishes this scholarship from the other three strands outlined above is the sense of frustration and hopelessness expressed in the literature, and no doubt, felt by the scholars themselves. This is evident in the two key concepts which define this scholarship; namely, *state failure or collapse* and *neopatrimonialism* ([Wai, 2012](#)).

Like the other strands of the scholarship, the *failed states* school conceptualizes failure in terms of the African states' inability to create and sustain institutions and state character seen and experienced in Western Europe. For instance, the literature that proliferated during the 1980s and 1990s cited the fact that most African countries were unable to project power throughout the entire territory, in the manner seen in Europe and North America ([Herbst, 1996; 2000](#)). Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Chad and the former Zaire (Even Nigeria, [Akude, 2007](#)), were all classified as failed states because they lacked the ability to project the "monopoly of power" within their boundaries.

What sparked the growth of studies and literature around the concept of *state failure* in Africa is not very clear, though Jackson and Rosberg (1982) seem to have stimulated the intellectual appetite to explain what was seen as the deteriorating quality of governance and state institutions in Africa. Although some scholars prior to the 1980s depicted African states in terms of weak or fragile states, the pessimism which infected the state failure scholarship is so blatant that it degenerated into some sort of a media hype feeding into 'Africa Bashing' ([Sangmpam, 1993](#)).

Serious questions about whether there are 'real' states in Africa arose at the height of the state failure scholarship, with some analysts warning of the "coming anarchy", to be precipitated by widespread failure of states in Africa ([Kaplan, 1994](#)). This prophecy was picked up by other scholars who proposed that the only effective way to respond to the problem of state failure in Africa was to recolonize the "weak" and "failing states," by placing them under some sort of trusteeship ([Mazurui, 1994](#)).

As the negative portrayal of African states dominated the debates, scholars brushed aside the need to understand the politics they were describing; paying no attention to what was actually meant by failure, and more importantly, the parameters for calibrating and assessing failure. It seems as though nothing really mattered beyond the label 'failed state.' These different strands of scholarships have drawn from the dominant models of statehood to analyse African states.

9. Models of statehood

9.1. The war-making model

One of the most popular models of statehood is Charles Tilly's war-making model, which views state formation as essentially a war-making venture. This model is built on the assertion that states and nations in Western Europe were created by waging wars, conquering and subjugating weaker groupings, and by so doing, creating a monopoly of power over the conquered territories and groups. This idea is captured in the aphorism, "war makes states" ([Tilly, 1985](#)). Tilly (1985) argues that, "the people who controlled European states and states in the making warred in order to check or overcome their competitors and thus to enjoy the advantages of power with a secure or expanding territory" ([Tilly, 1985](#)).

When applying this model to Africa, although it has been observed that while warfare was widespread in pre-colonial Africa, as was the case in century Europe until the 1870s, the claim is that African wars were not fought to capture territory aimed at creating a monopoly of power; "the primary objective of warfare [in Africa] ... was to capture people and treasure, not land which was available to all" ([Herbst, 2000](#)). According to this view, since African states as we know them today were mere creation of colonial rule and not a product of warfare, they are technically *juridical* (quasi) and not *empirical* (real) states ([Jackson and Rosberg, 1982](#)). As juridical states they are devoid of that internal coherence born out of the imperative to secure the monopoly of power, thus making it difficult to effectively carry out legitimate mandates such as making the benefits of a sovereign state available to the wider society ([Jackson, 1990](#)).

Monopoly of power is central in this model of statehood and state formation, which is still a dominant view in mainstream political studies today, although more recent studies see war-making as a necessary but not sufficient condition ([Taylor and Botea, 2008](#)). For example, when discussing the defining characteristics of a state, William (2013) argues that within the Westphalian model of statehood, a state is defined by five monopolies: monopoly of the apparatus of violence the exclusive right to extract public tax from citizens, uncontested right to impose duties on citizens, sovereign right to adjudicate internal disputes and an exclusive right to international representation of the nation.

Interestingly, using the concept of monopoly of violence, Tilly (1985) contends that war-making as a process of creating states is in the same league as banditry, piracy, gangland rivalry and cults, except that the latter occurs on a smaller scale⁶. However, Tilly (1985) does acknowledge that states which have emerged in more recent times have been formed differently and warns of the dangers of applying this to decolonized states. He however, maintains that even in recently formed states, the process of state-making has involved the acquisition of military power which secures unconstrained 'monopoly of violence' for the incumbent state. On the basis of this, Tilly (1985) maintains that "a thorough exploration of European experience will serve us well" even today.

Clearly, the creation of states by waging wars is a feature of 17th Century Europe (Herbst, 2000). The process of state formation in the 20th and 21st centuries is much more complex than merely subjugating weaker groups through violence. In fact, the concept of power within the state has become more subtle to pin down and later on assess where exactly the power lies. Competitive power politics (Wendt, 1992) which dominate most polities today cannot be adequately defined on the basis of monopoly of violence or use of uncontested power. Further, in terms of monopolizing the tools of violence, post-colonial African states actually perfected the act through one-party states and in some cases military rule that precluded competitive politics (Young, 2004).

10. Weberian model

The other popular model of statehood used to assess states in Africa is the Weberian model, articulated by Max Weber⁷. In this model, Weber identified a rule-based bureaucracy as the defining feature of a state in an industrial capitalist society. According to Weber (1968), a modern state is defined in terms of an effective bureaucracy which consists of three key elements: fixed jurisdiction, autonomous civil service and clearly outlined rules. Fixed jurisdiction refers to the idea that each public officeholder has a well-defined area of competency where he or she operates, with a well-defined hierarchy of supervision and accountability in the system. Building on his concept of state bureaucracy, Weber emphasizes the principle of separating the "bureau from the private domicile of the official and in general segregates official activity from the sphere of private life, which is at the heart of impersonal as opposed to personal rule" (*ibid*).

Like the war-making model of statehood, the Weberian model of statehood also highlights the importance of the state projecting power throughout its territory as a fundamental feature of a modern state. But unlike Tilly, Weber ties the monopoly of power to the bureaucratic machinery of the state through which the state projects its power and maintains order and integrity. State formation is essentially defined in terms of the development of a state bureaucracy that is technically competent to carry-out the functions of the state. In the Weberian concept of the state, the collapse of the administrative bureaucracy through which the state projects its monopoly of power is what leads to state failure.

11. The overdeveloped state model

The third influential model of statehood used to analyze states and state formation in Africa, particularly by radical political economists, is the notion of an *overdeveloped state*, initially developed by Alavi (1972) in his analysis of the post-colonial state in Pakistan and Bangladesh. A simplified version of this model asserts that states inherited in post-colonial societies have features that are incongruent with the post-colonial social, political and economic realities. According to Alavi (1972), the notion of an overdeveloped state refers to the mismatch between state structures and the social formations in post-colonial societies. At the heart of this model is the Marxian view that the superstructure in any class society is developed to serve the interest of and is controlled by the most dominant class (the bourgeoisie in capitalist societies). Therefore, since most post-colonial states are characterized by a disarticulate class formation, a well-developed state apparatus used to serve the interest of the colonial bourgeoisie in the imperial centers becomes a misfit in a post-colonial setting. Therefore, if an ex-colony has a disarticulated indigenous bourgeois class, it will be unable, at the moment of independence, to subordinate the relatively highly developed colonial state apparatus to the logic of accumulation and social formation (Alavi, 1972).

The concept of an overdeveloped state also conveys the sense that the colonial state was not merely a replication of the state structure in the imperial centers, but additional structures were established, through which the colonial state dominated and controlled all the social classes in the colony. In this sense, the colonial state, since it had to "create additional state apparatus through which it [could] exercise dominion over all... it might be said that the superstructure in the colony [was] therefore overdeveloped..." (*ibid.*, 61).

⁶ Tilly (1985:170) also makes an interesting observation that during the 17th Century in Europe, "mercantile capitalism and state making reinforced each other."

⁷ Max Weber has other defining features of statehood such as unrivalled exercise of authority, but here we focus on the concept of the modern bureaucracy.

As is the case with other models outlined above, critics have challenge this view arguing that there are other ways of analyzing the dynamics of state formation in post-colonial Africa other than the idea that the inherited colonial state has not been transformed by post-colonial political, social and economic realities (Leys, 1976). The notion of an overdeveloped state overlooks the fact that the state is continuously being shaped by the contestation of interests, identities and power bases, no matter how disarticulate these formations may be. Thus, the over-developed state model tends to present a static version of a state which is hard to justify especially in post-colonial societies where the transformations of colonial institutions was the *raison d'être* of the nationalist project and liberation struggles (Mandani, 2007).

When assessing African states, the common approach has been simply to draw up a checklist of features of the Weberian or war-making state model and see if any of the key features are discernible in African states (Niemann, 2007; Nugent, 2010). However, this underplays the possibility of political formations and realities that are different from the Weberian concept of statehood. Further, since the Weberian state was conceptualized as a rational offshoot of a capitalist industrial society, this raises the question of whether it is defensible to use the Weberian model of statehood when trying to understand states in non-industrial capitalist countries, as is the case in most African countries. Most importantly, this approach assumes that African states in the 21st century are like 18th or 19th century European states (Geertz, 1977).

12. States as special expressions of polity

Given that statehood and state formation in Africa have been analyzed from a European point of view, the critical question is whether it is defensible to use the European model of statehood to assess states everywhere. While critics have answered this question in the negative, many scholars do not see anything wrong in marking “off African states against a checklist of criteria derived from an ideal-type, and then find them wanting...” (Nugent, 2010). In this way, the scholarship on states in Africa has proved to be less ambitious by restricting its mission to merely describing how African states are not like European states. There has been little reflection on why African states should resemble or behave like states in Europe.

This tactic of seeing the *other* through *oneself* is an issue which post-colonialism, as a field of inquiry, has extensively discussed, highlighting the violence inherent in the politics of negating the ‘other’ through subordination of the other’s experience or interests (Hill, 2005). However, the negative “representation of non-European and colonized peoples within colonialist literature should not be considered merely as literary inaccuracies. Rather, they [form] part of a much larger project...”, that of domination through subjugation, not just politically, but also through the way knowledge is produced as well as how knowledge is validated (*ibid* 142).

Justification for this approach is often based on the idea that since the main focus of the “science of states” is on the organizational rules, structures and procedures of public administration, this is what we should look for whenever and wherever we are analyzing a state (Eckstein, 1979). According to this view, states and state formation are a universal phenomenon, just like gravity, and therefore should be assessed against a universally applicable set of concepts and tested standards.

In this debate, there seems to be a deliberate decision to treat a state like a calcium atom which has the same structure regardless of whether it is on planet Jupiter or Mars. As Nettl (1968) as observed, this is an inevitable outcome of the social sciences trying to mimic the natural sciences. And the consequence is that one set of experience of statehood is privileged over others (Mamdani, 1996). As such “Western states represent the normative, universal standard of success, and it is the inability of certain African states to replicate the political, economic, social and cultural conditions within Western States that has ... resulted in failure” (Hill, 2005)⁸. Fundamentally, this is a clear outcome of treating the state as *polity*, and not as a unique expression of *polity* (Eckstein, 1979).

While there is nothing wrong in comparing African states to states in other parts of the world, this approach has an inherent danger of ascribing statehood on the basis of characteristics obtained in contexts that are fundamentally different. Even if this approach has a semblance of a genuine comparative method, in reality it creates imperfect analogies, “between experiences considered universal and normal and those seen as residual or pathological” (Mamdani, 1996). As Hill (2005) points out, the Western experience of statehood is taken as the norm, while the African manifestations of polity are only affirmed to the extent that they resemble Western notions of statehood. The danger here is that whatever does not fit the western experience is often explained away.

⁸ Even in Western Europe, it is not clear that one can speak of one route of state formation. For instance, the English process of state formation followed a different route from what one would call the European norm (Nettl, 1968).

Aware of this shortcomings some scholars have started calling for a genuine “comparative approach that does not conflate experiences, but opens up the possibility of understanding a range of phenomenon across African countries as well as a mechanism for understanding the salient differences” (Nugent, 2010).

13. Understanding statehood in Africa today

Having highlighted the limitations associated with the mainstream scholarship on African states, the question that arises is how then should one approach the study of states in Africa to generate useful insights? If one accepts the idea that a state is defined and shaped by the various elements of the society in which it is located, then one would argue that the different components of society interact with and shape the state. In other words, understanding states and statehood in Africa today requires a close analysis of state-society relationship (Crocker, 2019). Instead of dismissing the political formations as weak, fragile, failed, patrimonial etc; it is understanding interactions within these political formations that can contribute to a better understanding of states in Africa today. As Doornbos (2015) has argued to better understand states in Africa it is important to appreciate the context in which states operate and the various ways in which they seek to establish and consolidate their legitimacy. In this case, the task then would be to study how the different components of African societies contribute to the making or unmaking of the state. For instance, instead of dismissing Somalia and the Central African Republic as failed states, examining how the various aspects of these societies, including their histories, the makeshift arrangements to deliver public goods, how they reconcile the diverse interests in their communities, can generate useful insights about states and statehood in Africa. The dominant approach of focusing on the ideal-type models of the state drawn from the European experience has created a crisis in both the conceptualization of states and the way states fulfill its basic functions (Olukoshi and Laskso, 1996). What the mainstream approach tells us is more about the extent to which states in Africa are not like states in Western Europe, leading to a situation where the “best known and carefully studied political problems in Africa have not been specifically African problems” (Sklar, 1993).

To generate useful insights into the realities of states in Africa, there are a number of areas which require in-depth and systematic analysis. Below I suggest a few examples. While some of these areas have already received scholarly attention, especially the issue of traditional institutions and their role or relevancy in the formation and function of African states today (Sklar, 1993; Mamdani, 2006; Herbst, 2000; Ntsebeza, 2006; Nuelsiri, 2014), there are other areas which have largely been neglected.

14. Local government structures

One of the areas which have received little scholarly attention is local government structures and institutions, and how these interact with the central state. This is despite the fact that states, across the continent, have local government structures as one of the tiers of government. Most African countries have a three-tier system through which the state interacts with citizens and other actors in society. But so far, there has been little attention in the literature given to the lower tiers of the state; all attention has been directed to the central government, manifesting the dominance of the ‘capital city’ notions of the state. It is as if the state only exists in Harare, Ndjamena, Kampala, Mogadishu or Pretoria. Surely, the state exists outside of capital cities; and our understanding of the character of a state can be enhanced by studying how the national structures relate to the lower tiers of the state. Recent literature on states in Africa has tended to focus largely on how armed insurgencies and rebel groups such as Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, IS and al-Qaeda are contesting for sovereignty and thereby endangering the future of statehood in Africa (Shuriye and Ajala, 2016; Crocker, 2019). While armed insurgencies and rebellions constitute one of the forces that shape the character of states in Africa, that is not the only force at play in the making of African states. Moreover, African states are now redefining a new understanding of sovereignty in ways that seek not only to defend the autonomy, but to consolidate the power of the incumbent government (de Oliveira and Verhoeven, 2018). In most cases, local state structures are playing crucial roles in how states in Africa are navigating new challenges including the contestations around nationhood (Larmer *et al.*, 2014).

The local structures of the state are important in this case because most citizens interact with the state at the sub-national level (Wunsch, 2000). But because mainstream scholarship is preoccupied with the notion of the state as a monolithic machine for projecting power from the centre, the tendency is to focus on the national state structures and functions, usually in the capital cities. This has reinforced the view that post-colonial African states, like the colonial state, has been an urban project, “with few links to the countryside where most of the population live” (Herbst, 2000). But even if the formal structures of the state exist only in the capital cities, people in the countryside must have a way in which they organize themselves, maintain social order and exercise power.

Since the 1990s when the policy of decentralization (*devolution of power*; to use the conventional term) was seen as an important pillar of good governance (World Bank, 2005), we have seen the revival of the lower tiers of government in many countries. Understanding these lower branches of the state (in both rural and urban areas) can yield refreshing insights into the nature of African states and why they operate and behave the way they do.

The importance of analyzing local government structures in Africa is that this is an arena of contestation which influences and informs the way the state operates. In many African countries, the pressure to reform state institutions, policies, and programs, is initiated by the contestation at the lower spheres of government, where citizens push for effective services on the one hand, and local government structures are contending for autonomous powers on the other (UNECA 2009; Crocker, 2019). But oftentimes, these complexities at the sub-national level have largely been overlooked.

15. Informal Actors

The other important area which has received less attention is the informal formations, whether economic, social, political or legal. Informal actors are by nature difficult to categorize and analyze because they resist the rigid categories of systematic scrutiny and sorting. But we know that there are many entities which occupy informal spaces in many African societies and in some cases constitute the largest sectors in terms of employment and livelihoods. But in the dominant scholarship, where the informal sector has been discussed, it has often been in relation to the economic aspects, with no attention given to how this constituency shapes the state in various ways (Olukoshi and Laakso, 1996). So far, we have had little understanding of how actors in these spaces influence the character of states and contribute to defining statehood in Africa. Of course, we do not have similar entities in the European context, so we just do not know what to do when we encounter these actors in Africa. Mainstream scholarship has predominately dismissed these formations as patrimonial networks which are a result of the partial institutionalization of the state (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). It is therefore not surprising that the scholarship has struggled to relate theory with reality, and to move from theory to the empirical and vice versa. The role of urban informal traders, for instance, in shaping how the state defines and executes its duties can be quite revealing.

16. Non-state actors

As noted above, the state does not act in a vacuum; it always operates on and in relation with other actors, which I broadly refer to here as non-state actors. Non-state actors include religious bodies, trade unions, opposition parties, independent media, student movements, professional bodies, social movements, special interest groups, philanthropic organizations, peasant groups, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), etc. In more recent times, we are seeing a growing influence of regional, continental global bodies in the way states operate in Africa. The rising influence of, particularly, African supra-national institutions at the regional or continental level is slowly leading to a situation where national sovereignty is being redefined (de Oliveira and Verhoeven, 2018). Crocker (2019) argues that the regional “leading states” are increasingly playing an influential role in how statehood is defined in Africa today. To the extent that these actors contest on the ‘state-space’ through social and collective action, it can be argued that they influence and shape states and notions of statehood. Understanding how these actors position themselves vis-à-vis the state can reveal a lot about statehood and the character of states in Africa (Doornbos, 2015). Even though it has been argued that because of the repressive nature of most African governments, there has been little space for civil society actors to express themselves (Neubert, 2012), non-state actors of various types exist and exert influence on the character of states in Africa. What is less known is how each of these actors contributes to shaping African political formations and lived political realities.

Again, since mainstream analysts have been focusing on describing how these actors are different from those found in Europe and America (Lewis, 2001), there has been little effort made to understand how these actors contribute to shaping African states. As long as these actors contest on the state-space, no matter how rudimentary they are, they constitute the fabric of states in Africa, and understanding how they interact with the state can yield rich insights about states and statehood in Africa.

In recent times, there have been suggestions that non-state actors are playing a more influential role in the transformation of state and state institutions in Africa. A diverse range of factors are cited to explain this including the deepening of social formation (Adetula, 2011), the reforms initiated by donors which have pushed the good governance and political liberalization agenda (World Bank, 2005). Whether these changes are entirely a response to internal pressure and demand from local social formations is not yet clear. What is evident is that these entities are playing an important role in shaping the character of states in Africa and how they relate to the broader society (UNECA, 2009).

17. International Actors

The other entity that is crucial to understanding states and state formation in Africa is a cluster of international actors. These can be broadly classified into three categories, namely the international financial institutions (IFIs) and bilateral donors, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and multi-national corporations (TNCs). While the role of IFIs and the UN has been widely debated (Mkandawire 2001; Chitonge, 2015; de Oliveira and Verhoeven, 2018), there has been less attention given to how TNCs and the multitude of INGOs operating in Africa contribute to shaping African states.

The actions of INGOs are widely believed to be apolitical, focusing mainly on alleviating the suffering of the African masses and filling in the gaps left by the “failed” or “captured” states. As for the TNCs operating on the continent, they have largely been perceived as entities that deal with the state only in matters of paying tax and kick-backs to the “big men” and their networks. The dominant view on this has been that the TNCs operating in Africa usually collude with the political elite to use state power for personal gains (William, 2013). The question about whether the presence of TNCs has impacted on the character of states in Africa is rarely discussed. But understanding the operations of TNCs (including shady ones) can shed more light on what and how they contribute to shaping African states into what they are today.

18. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the limitations in the mainstream approach to studying African states. The paper has provided a critique to the mainstream scholarship on states in Africa, highlighting the need for alternative approaches to studying African states. Drawing from the critique of current scholarship, the paper has suggested possible areas of study, which can contribute to a better understanding and theorizing states in Africa.

There are a number of lessons which can be drawn from the discussion above. The first is that a universalistic and rigid approach to conceptualizing state formation and statehood endangers the very concept of a state. The danger lies in the higher likelihood of excluding forms of political and social formations which do not fit the ideal-type (Apter, 1965). The main problematic in this regard emanates from treating states as the *genus* instead of seeing state as *species* of the *genus*—polity. The main point here is that while *polity* is a common experience of any settled human community, the specific expression of *polity*—*states*— can take different shapes, depending on the context in which they develop. Here the issue is not so much about comparing political formations from different contexts, it is the use of specific manifestations of political formation to analyze different sets of experiences, which is problematic.

The other lesson is a methodological one which sees the state as a variable set of experiences. In this regard, it is argued in this paper that states embody the totality of social, political, economic, cultural, religious realities, past and present, in which people live. If approached from this angle, the concept of the state is not only liberated from pitfalls of a pseudo-comparative method, but also makes it possible to think of states as dynamic spaces that are shaped and reshaped by the local sociocultural and political contestations.

References

- Adetula, Victor. (2011). *Measuring Democracy and ‘Good Governance’ in Africa: A Critique of Assumptions and Methods*. K. Kondlo and C. Ejiogu (eds.) *Governance in the 21st Century*. Pretoria. Human and Social Sciences Research Council. 10-25.
- Ahluwalia, Pal. (2001). *Politics and Post-colonial Theory: African Inflections*. London: Routledge
- Akude, John. (2007). *The failure and collapse of African states: On the example of Nigeria*. *FRIDE Comment*, Lagos: FRIDE September 2007.
- Alavi, Hamza. (1972). “The state in post-colonial societies—Pakistan and Bangladesh. *New Left Review*, 74 (July-August). 59-81.
- Barnett, Michael. (2002). *Historical sociology and constructivism: An estranged past, a federated future,*” in *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, S. Hobden and J.M. Hobson(eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 105-127.
- Chabal, Patrick. and Daloz, Jean-Paul. (1999). *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. London: James Currey.
- Chitonge, H. (2015). *Economic Growth and Development in Africa: Understanding Trends and Prospects*. London/New York: Routledge

- Cilliers, Jakkie. and Sisk, Timothy. (2013). *Assessing Long-term State Fragility in Africa*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies.
- Claphan, Christopher. (2001). Rethinking African states. *African Security Review*. 10(3). 6-16.
- Crocker, Chester. (2019). African governance: challenges and their implications. Hoover Institution Winter Series, Issue 119. Monday 14 January.
- de Oliveira, Ricardo-Soares and Verhoeven, Harry. (2018). Taming interventions: sovereignty, statehood and political order in Africa. *Global Politics and Strategy*. 60(2), 7-32.
- Doornbos, Martin. (1990). The African state in academic debate: retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28(2), 179-198.
- Doornbos, Martin. (2015). Conceptualizing African statehood and legitimacy: Shifting positions in the research-politics nexus,” in *Social Research and Policy in the Development Arena*. EADI Global Development Series. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 44-66.
- Dorman, Sara. (2009). Patrick chabal: An appreciation?. *Critical African Studies*, (2), 10-18.
- Eckstein, Harry. (1979). On the Science of the States. *Deadalus*, 108(4), 1-20.
- Ekeh, Peter. (1975). Colonialism and the two publics in africa: a theoretical statement. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17(1), 91-112.
- First, R. (1970). *The Barrel of the Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d’Etat*. London : Penguin Press.
- Fortes, Meyer. and Evan-Pritchard, E.E.(1940[1970]). Introduction. in *African Political Systems*, in M. Fotes & E. Evans-Prichard (eds.). London: Oxford University Press. 1-24.
- Geertz, Clifford. (1977). The judging of nations: some comments on the assessment of regimes in the new states. *European Journal of Sociology*, 18(2), 249-61.
- Herbst, Jeffrey. (1996). Responding to State Failure in Africa. *International Security*, 21(3), 120-144.
- Herbst, Jeffrey. (2000). *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hill, Jonathan. (2005). Beyond the other? a postcolonial critique of the failed state thesis. *African Identities*, 3(2), 139-154.
- Hyden, Goran. (1980). *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and Uncaptured Peasantry*. London: Heineman.
- Jackson, Robert. and Rosberg, C. (1982). Why Africa’s weak states persist: the empirical and juridical in statehood. *World Politics*, 35(1), 1-24.
- Jackson, Robert. (1990). *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaplan, D. Robert. (1994). The coming anarchy: how scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet. *Atlantic Monthly*. 273(2), 44-76.
- Larmer, Miles., M. Hinfelaar, B. Phiri, L. Schumaker and M. Szeftel. (2014). Introduction: Narratives of nationhood. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40(5), 895-905.
- Lewis, David. (2001). Civil society in african contexts: reflections on the usefulness of a concept. *Development and Change*, 33(4), 569-586.
- Leys, Colin. (1976). The ‘overdeveloped’ post-colonial state: a re-evaluation. *Review of African Political Economy*, (5), 39-48.
- Mafeje, Archie. (1971). The ideology of tribalism. *Journal of Modern African Studies*. 9(2), 253-261.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. (1996). *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mazrui, Ali. (1994). Decaying parts of africa need benign colonization. *International Herald Tribune*. Pretoria, 4 August.
- Mkandawire, Thandika. (2001). Thinking about the developmental states in Africa. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 25(3), 289-313.

- Nabudere, Dani. (2006). Development theories, knowledge production and emancipatory practice. in *The Development Decade? Economic and Social Change in South Africa 1994-2004*, V. Padayache(ed.). Pretoria: HSRC Press: 33-52.
- Neimann, Michael. (2007). War making and state making in central Africa. *Africa Today*, 53(3), 21-39.
- Nettl, P. J. (1968). The state as a conceptual variable. *World Politics*. 20(4), 559-592.
- Neubert, Dieter. (2012). Civil societies in Africa? forms of social self-organisation and local socio-political order. Bayreuth African Studies Working Paper 12.
- Ntsebeza, Lungisile. (2006). *Democracy Compromised: Chief and the Politics of Land in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC.
- Nugent, Paul. (2010). States and social contracts in Africa. *New Left Review*: 63, May-June 2010. 35-68. Press.
- Olukoshi, Adebayo. and Laakso, L. (1996). The crisis of the post-colonial nation-state project in Africa. in A. Olukoshi. and L. Laakso (eds.) *Challenges of the Nation-State in Africa*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Pratt, C. (1968). *The Critical Phase in Tanzania 1945-1968: Nyerere and the Emergence of the Socialist Strategy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rivkin, Anold. (1969). *Nation-Building in Africa: Problems and Prospects*, New Brunswick: Rutgers
- Rotberg, Robert. (2013). *Africa Emerges: Consummate Challenges, Abundant Opportunities*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Rotberg, Robert. (1966). African nationalism: Concept or confusion?. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 4, 133-146.
- Sangmpam, S. N. (1993). Neither soft nor dead: the african state is alive and well. *African Studies Review*, 36(2), 73-94.
- Shuriye, Abdi and Ajala, Mosud. (2016). The future of statehood in Africa. *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 9(2). 221-229.
- Stark, F. (1986). Theories of Contemporary State Formation in Africa: A Reassessment. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2. 335-347.
- United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). (2009). *African Governance Report (AGR II)*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cite this article as: Horman Chitonge (2021). Interrogating mainstream models of states and statehood in Africa: A critical review. *International Journal of African Studies*. 1(1), 1-13. doi: 10.51483/IJAFRS.1.1.2021.1-13.