Review – The Postcolonial African State in Transition

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The Postcolonial African State in Transition: Stateness and Modes of Sovereignty
By Amy Niang
Rowman and Littlefield, 2018

Amy Niang's book takes up the urgent task of our collective postcolonial moment: to trace and critique historical trajectories, while finding in these the possibility to extract and abstract a plurality of modes of being, so as to create future imaginaries. Niang achieves this through her reading of the trajectory of Mossi state formations in the Voltaic Region of West Africa between the 16th and 19th centuries. Employing both archival and ethnographic research methods that draw on an engagement with oral historical accounts of origin stories, secondary literature as well as personal conversations, *The Postcolonial African State in Transition* is driven by Niang's reverberating research questions: "What was the state internally built against?" and consequently, "What social forms did the advent of the centralized state displace?" (p.1). Approaching this through a focus on the Moogo region across its diverse social topographies and multiple temporal eras, as well as their dominant yet shifting epistemologies, Niang's most important contribution to the field of International Relations (as both theory and praxis) lies in her ability to take up and shine new light on three of its most primordial categories: conceptualizations of stateness and statelessness as these attend to ideas around sovereignty and territoriality; epistemological and methodological inquiries into the nature of 'the political and non-political' or 'the political' and 'the social'; as well as narratives and practices of power and authority.

Stateness and Statelessness

A focus on the formation of the state reattaches to this category a historicity, which, as Niang skillfully demonstrates, is often absent from contemporary theorizations of statehood. This pertains not only to a mythologized Westphalian (and thus European) model but also to supposed deviations from this normative framework that are recurrently attributed to postcolonial and specifically African postcolonial states in the literature (e.g. Clapham, 2002; Jackson, 1996). Against this narrow dichotomy, Niang calls for an "un-understanding of the state" so as to "start thinking more fruitfully about how different historical communities have gone about conceptualizing institutions that adequately embody different figures of authority, of order, of self and of interrelating" (p.14). Niang traces this through a careful analysis of a variety of socio-political entities among the Mossi, such as Mamprugu, Ouagadougou, and Yatenga, as well as those established by the Kasena, Kusasi and Dagara. Their various "trajectories of political experimentation," she argues, illustrate "the full range of institutional possibilities between 'stateness' (centralized sovereignty) and 'statelessness' (decentralized governance)" (p.43).

'The Political' and 'the Social'

Vital to Niang's mapping of this centralized-decentralized institutional spectrum of stateness is her consideration of the multiple ways in which Mossi societies negotiated an interplay between the *Naam* – the political sphere as a particular set of knowledges and imaginaries of the state that pertain to the craft and technology of state-making, as well as a metaphysical quality embodied by rulers (p.26, 59, 64, 79) – and the *Tenga* – the spiritual sphere of earth priests and earth cults as sites, modes and discourses of morality, social order, and control over land (p.24, 27, 89, 210). Growing respectfully out of migrant populations and first-settler populations to the Moogo region, the

delineation of these two spheres was articulated as a "duality discourse" (p.87) that resulted in a "systematic opposition between civilized/uncouth; reason/unreason; feminine (matrilineal)/masculine (patrilineal); political/nonpolitical; society/anarchy; rational/irrational; and migrant/autochthon" (p.123; 56). As Niang illustrates, such dichotomies were actively pursued in processes of centralization and homogenization reflecting states' attempts to establish themselves as the dominant if not sole meaning-giving entity. In reality, however, emphasis on the duality discourse strayed from socio-political practices, where the political and ritual spheres permeated and infused one another throughout.

The interplay of a political and ritual qua social sphere is of particular importance when considering notions of territoriality as a constitutive conception of sovereignty. Under the framework of the *Naam*, conceptions of territoriality were relegated to the realm of kinship ties, fostered both through ancestral lineage and alliance. By contrast, the *Tenga* preserved spiritual boundaries through "moral control of social behavior" (p.40). Nonetheless, the latter's interactions with, and productions of, space were integral to its formation and legitimization as propagated by the *Naam*. In its physical dimensions, Niang illustrates this through the shared practice among decentralized societies to establish "founding settlements around shrines, land gods or ritual locales" (p.93). While this must not coincide with the demarcations of administrative and political borders, settlement serves here as an engagement with land qua dwelling that concomitantly constitutes "ritual sites as a corporeal mnemonic of social action" (p.93). Delineating a sphere of ideological limits, this simultaneously acts as a limit to territorial expansion under the *Naam* (p.40). In addition, earth custodians under the sphere of the *Tenga* were considered the "backbone of an original (com)pact that legitimizes a political arrangement in which the position of earthpriests remains a sacred link to the ancestors" (p.56), and thus to kinship ties as the underpinning territorial framework in conceptions of *Naam*.

In delineating these spheres, Niang is careful, however, to avoid a reinscription of existing conceptual frameworks that insist on a strict separation of 'the political' in opposition to 'the social', which is concomitantly relegated to the realm of the nonpolitical (p.90). Nor does Niang resort to notions of sovereignty as necropolitics in its constitution of bare life as proposed by Giorgio Agamben (1995; 2014) or Achille Mbembe (Mbembe and Meintjes, 2003), who inevitably must ascribe to a flattening of these categories in a sweeping proclamation that 'everything is political'. Instead, Niang moves to insert a conception of authority as that which lends recognition to power through a "permeation of social thought" in its reference to legitimizing norms (p.48). Thus conceived, authority emerges as a bridging element that highlights the co-constitutive nature of 'the political' and 'the social' – the *Naam* and the *Tenga* – without reducing one to the other.

Sovereignty and Authority

By insisting on a symbiotic relationship between the *Naam* (the political) and the *Tenga* (the social), Niang is able to engage seriously with the relationship between ritual and sovereignty to excavate a complex understanding of a socio-political sphere that exceeds commonly conceived configurations of territorial and lineal ties as foundational elements of state formation. Rather, ritual spaces emerge here as "a social-referential domain that produces its own normative and ethical requirements" (p.90). Simultaneously, their temporal link to ancestral history and kinship requires, Niang argues, a re-conception of the political and politics in light of daily modalities of engagement among individuals and collectives (p.90). Carrying "implications for territorial organization, the possibility of group membership and the nature of social action," rituals, Niang argues, "have to be seen as mapping the contours and revisiting the terms of a charter that governs society at large" (p.98). Fusing the social and the political, it is in this weaving together of the *Naam* and the *Tenga* that Niang arrives at her conception of sovereignty "not as a discrete phenomenon (that has to be imposed on people) but in terms of *mutuality* and *cooperation*" (p.26). Indeed, Niang conceives of the interlaced nature of the *Naam* and the *Tenga* as a "transfer of sovereignty" from the sphere of the latter to that of the former (p.53). This is pertinent, according to Niang, for formulations of subjecthood – shaped through normative social practices under the *Tenga* – to be bound up with the realm of the state. Granting the latter authority as both legitimacy and accountability it is in this sense that the state "never 'governed' alone", but was contingent on its reference to, and collaboration with, social and ritual non-state actors (p.187).

The Postcolonial State in its Present Transition

It is in her emphasis on sovereignty's contingency on pre-existing and synchronic sources of authority that we discern Niang's appeal to the contemporary postcolonial African 'state in transition'. Calling upon them to restitute and invoke legitimizing norms so as to bring state and society together rather than subjecting the latter to the will of the former (p.21, 184), such invocations constitute no easy feat, however. As Niang argues, both colonial enterprises and post-independence nationalist projects of state formation, such as that propagated by Thomas Sankara, have led to an eradication of the signs and symbols of traditions, customs, and histories, and thus African sensibilities of governance, as well as attendant notions of political legitimacy and consent. Their availability as markers of reference for political authority in the present and – perhaps more prudently – alternative imaginaries of governance for the future, are thus largely lost within the sphere of the postcolonial African state.

While Niang maintains that their relics continue to be lived and practiced in the cultural sphere, her insistence that the postcolonial African state is "culturally void" (p.197) leaves open a series of questions: Who might the legitimizing non-state actors in and for the present postcolonial African state be? Within which cultural realm might they be sought? And how might they be retrieved for the legitimation of statehood without eradicating their relative autonomy and thus their pertinence as a source of accountability? Probing such questions in more detail and with attention to fluctuations in spatial and temporal settings appears essential for the pursuit of the political and intellectual project that Niang has forged for her readers: formulating a framework to think through "the nature (in terms of social morality and symbolic order), form (aesthetic) and purpose (ethics) of social governance in African contexts" on their own terms (p.38); and to abstract from these three elements, conceptions of statehood, sovereignty and authority in light of the categories of 'the political' and 'the social' beyond their confines conventionally prescribed by political science and international relations canons.

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