then Abidjan, became the trailblazers in Europe. Others of more modest means followed. Wolof speakers soon surpassed in number Soninke- and Pulaar-speaking Senegalese in France. As their population expanded, internal discussions about faith and community grew. Two Murid houses in the remote suburbs of Paris display contrasting orientations between the more educated, who want to turn Muridiyya into a universalistic, missionizing movement addressing Europeans, and the majority, who are committed to internal community ties and the largely hereditary spiritual hierarchy. Another challenge comes from the Salafi-influenced new elite who possess an Arab Islamic education. They reject Sufi orientation and also disdain the parochial, uneducated social traits of the Murid disciples.

In New York City, a crucial new element was the African American community, including a large proportion of Muslims who had converted since the civil rights movement. As the Murid became implanted in Harlem, the Malcolm Shabazz mosque served as a key place to perform their *salat* prayers, but for Sufi practices they needed other spaces. In the imaginations of many African Americans, the Murid substantiated the fabled Muslim life of medieval West Africa. Yet mass adherence did not result, and the Murid ultimately created their own separate religious institutions. Illegal taxicab driving, a common occupation, made them suffer disproportionately from violence in dangerous neighbourhoods. They are now threatened by gentrification and by rising property values and rents in Harlem. But Murid women found a lucrative channel in hairstyling – West African braiding being popular with African Americans – and earned more money than their men.

Religious institutional innovations were not accepted without contention. Organizing public processions and social events, such as Qasida Day or Ahmadu Bamba Day, created dissent within the community and required connections with social and political forces outside.

Babou queries whether Murid organizational structures helped their migration success. The decision to migrate is inspired by an individual migrant's local circumstances. The institutions selected or invented in migration contexts are disciples' creations, not their sheikhs' initiatives. What does the examination of migration teach us about Muridiyya, Babou asks, and what insights does Muridiyya bring to the study of international migration? This excellent study offers a wealth of observations and thoughts for answering both questions.

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Amy Niang, *The Postcolonial African State in Transition: Stateness and Modes of Sovereignty*. London: Rowman and Littlefield (hb US$138/£106 – 978 1 78660 652 5; pb US$47/£36 – 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

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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 sixteenth and nineteenth 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 decentralized (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, decentralized, multi- and non-linear approach to state making and remaking 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 not only makes the book appear 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 such as *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 fail 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 centralized 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 institutionalized 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

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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. Nor do I count such an aim as befitting of Niang's analysis.

The book intends not only to decentre the prevailing Westphalia model, but also to add both to our wider historical understandings 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 decentralized states from centralized 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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Sheila D. Collins, *Ubuntu: George M. Houser and the Struggle for Peace and Freedom on Two Continents*. Athens OH: Ohio University Press (hb US$50 – 978 0 8214 2424 7; pb US$34.95 – 978 0 8214 2450 6). 2021, 392 pp.

Sheila Collins has written an engaging biography of George Houser (1916–2015), an American civil rights activist and pacifist who spent much of his working life defending the cause of African freedom to American audiences. Collins' book succeeds both in convincing its readers that Houser is a figure worth knowing about and in richly describing the political, religious and ethical sites that shaped Houser's work and life.

Houser is a curious character: a man genuinely motivated by his faith without being doctrinaire; an internationalist but not a communist; a committed pacifist able to support armed liberation movements; and a white man committed to movements for racial justice in the USA and Africa. Despite Collins' meticulous research, at the end Houser remains a mystery – the question of *why* he devoted his life so thoroughly to the cause of African liberation politics may be impossible to answer. This is a theoretical and historical question, not merely a personal one. Throughout Houser's lifetime, as much scholarship has explored, competing political movements offered visions for the future of race relations and Africa's place in the world: communist, Pan-African, liberal democrat and white supremacist movements all proposed competing utopias, and during the heat of decolonization, the possibilities seemed wide open. What, in this crowded terrain of hopes, was Houser's horizon of expectation?

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