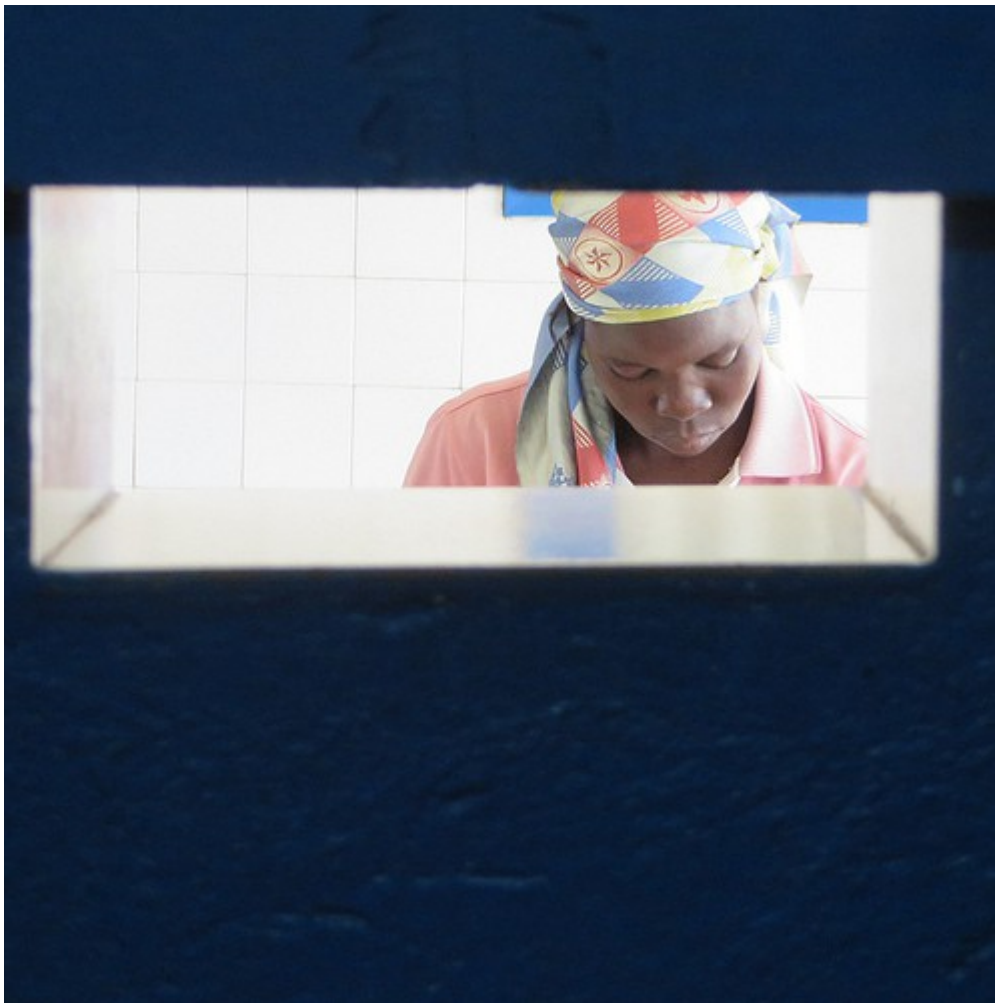




#Review: States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies

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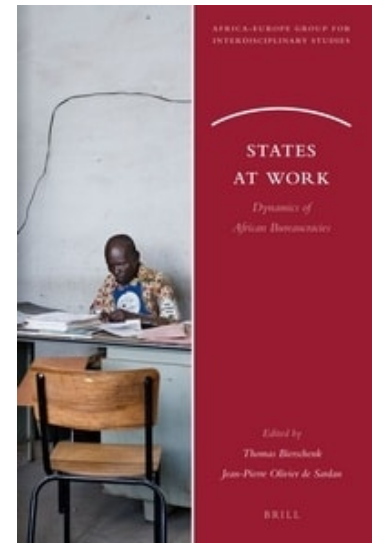
Anthropologists have been studying the various phenomena associated with states and 'state-like' structures for a long time (cf. Fortes 1940, Leach 1954). It was only in the last decade of the 20th century, however, that ethnographers began to specifically define a new field for the study of the contemporary forms, functions, and actions of state apparatuses. Veena Das and Deborah Poole's edited volume on the margins of the state (2004) alongside the Reader assembled by Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (2006) remain two landmark publications that sought to



establish a theoretical and methodological approach for the ethnographic study of the modern state in an era of globalization.

[The current volume](#) edited by Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan can be seen as the most recent addition to this scholarly genealogy, albeit from a different theoretical and methodological orientation, as the two editors specify.

The volume opens with two chapters by the editors, whose aim is to offer both a theoretical and analytical grounding for the rest of the book as well as something of a manifesto for a “comparativist” and “symmetrical” ethnographic study of the state (p. 21). Critical of both anthropological and political science approaches studying the state in African contexts, the volume’s stated objective is to shift focus from the “margins or interstices” of the state (cf. Das and Poole 2004) and towards the very core of bureaucratic processes and state actors (p. 4). The editors are right to note that the bulk of this anthropological literature has focused on the difficulties of “locating the state” (cf. Abrams 2006) or the interactions with and perceptions of the state by its citizens. They ascribe this primarily to anthropology’s “classical reflex” to “favour the periphery” (p. 52). There are very practical difficulties posed by obtaining access to ‘study-up’ state apparatuses. In light of current and similar anthropological engagements with the topic elsewhere (cf. Bear 2007, Hetherington 2011, Hull 2012, Gupta 2012, Graeber 2015), the editors’ framing of the current volume as a plea for a “corrective” to anthropology’s trajectory as increasingly “self-referential and inward looking” (p. 20) seems somewhat unnecessarily provocative and slightly misplaced. This, however, should not detract from the overall quality and strength of the contributions that make up the book.



The remaining fourteen chapters are divided under two sections. 'Bureaucrats at Work' and 'Bureaucracies at Work', which brings together ethnographies of public servants and of the delivery of public services, respectively. Together they cover an impressive breadth of thematic and geographical ground. The material is skewed towards West African examples as the book grew out of a comparative research project focused on Benin, Ghana, Mali, and Niger – with further examples looking at public services in Nigeria, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda, respectively. Overall, the chapters seriously engage with the multiple meanings presented by the title. 'States at work' refers to both the mundane practices required in the functioning of bureaucratic apparatuses, as well as the "always incomplete nature of state formation processes" (p. 5-7). This conceptualization of the state as 'building site' allows the authors to study the shifting and often contradictory patterns of bureaucratic functioning with which their case studies present them.

As such, one of the volume's key contributions is to put into perspective the common neopatrimonial view of African states that still dominates much of popular media and international development work.

Running through the chapters, there is a concern with the complexity of everyday bureaucratic processes and the ways in which they contradict normative



portrayals of bureaucrats, as well as the structures in which they are embedded. Taking a neo-Weberian perspective, the authors in this volume oppose ethnographically grounded accounts of the improvisational and adaptive forms of practice required in the everyday functioning of local bureaucracies to the stereotypical image of the corrupt, clientelist state-bureaucrat and official. Together, their examples demonstrate that, unlike the monolithic image of the 'failed state' commonly associated with African bureaucracies, an empirical study of public services and public servants reveals a bureaucratic landscape marked by complex arrangements and negotiations. In this picture, public servants balance informal arrangements with strict adherence to formal regulations, often in an attempt at achieving bureaucratic efficiency. Moreover, forms of patronage are present alongside a fierce belief in meritocracy, and genuine public service vocation needs to be constantly reconciled with the pragmatism of securing economic livelihoods. Local public service structures are often fragmented or factionalized and bare comparison to an "islands" of functionality.

The focus on historicising the current state of African public services is another significant contribution. In an excellent theoretical chapter concluding the first section on 'Bureaucrats at work', using the metaphor of "sedimentation," Thomas Bierschenk shows how colonial and postcolonial processes have led to the production of a fragmented bureaucratic landscape "shot through with numerous double binds" (p. 224). Several authors also engage with E.E. Evans-Pritchard's work on "ordered anarchies" (1940), in the attempt to provide a critical and productive re-visiting of the practical manifestations of 'informality' and the analytical productivity of this concept.

Through the adapted term of "ordered informality," several chapters tackle the pervasive and overdetermined view of African bureaucracies as chaotic or "failed."



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Instead, authors such as Olivier de Sardan and Hamani show how the term can illuminate the internal logics and regulations of local bureaucracies and the entanglement of local cultural logics with extremely heterogeneous public service structures. Another significant aspect is the focus on branches of the state bureaucracy that have received little attention or have remained inaccessible to researchers so far. Excellent chapters on the reform and militarization of the Senegalese Forestry Service and that on Cameroonian veterinary agents provide such examples – both of which tackle the question of how internal hierarchies and shifting dynamics are negotiated from moral, political and economic points of view.

Finally, it is also remarkable how, in spite of the breadth and diversity of ethnographic examples presented in the chapters, a coherent and convincing whole emerges. This should be seen as evidence that the approaches and findings of the authors are capable of resonating across locales and could provide a thorough theoretical framework for further discussion of public services in other African countries not included in the present volume.



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