

BOOK REVIEW

Olaf Bachmann. *Quasi-Armies and State-Building in Africa: Towards a Global Understanding of Civil-Military Relations*. London: Zed Books, 2024. 224 pp. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$80.50. Hardback. ISBN: 9781350413382.

It is hard to write about the African state, especially the processes that have brought about its crisis. Olaf Bachmann in *Quasi-Armies and State-Building in Africa: Towards a Global Understanding of Civil-Military Relations* takes on this daunting task, describing his mission as untangling a process of remaking the state in which the military is at the center.

Bachmann's thesis reformulates Charles Tilly's theory that "wars make states." His proposition is that with an advanced territorial military arrangement, statemakers can create a master plan, and deploy the army to build an effective state. Citing William Beasley's (2000) study, he points out that this was the case in 1870s Japan. In a little over forty years, he continues, statemaking had been decided on, planned, and successfully executed according to a set objectives formulated in the slogan "...strong army" (26). Yet what has happened in his case examples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Cameroon, and Rwanda has been the opposite: the African army has been at the center of the unmaking of the state.

What explains this crisis of the African state? Armed with a historical approach and concepts borrowed from political sociology, Bachmann suggests that the guide to understanding the crisis is in the deficits of the African state's military. He follows a Marxian tradition (though he does not credit it) of conceiving the process of colonization as partly responsible for this state of the African army. Here, he documents how European incursions and administrations altered the development of the precolonial armies in the territorial communities and polities that occupied what is today Central Africa. The French and Belgians' administrators prized repression in order to maintain control, straining civil–military relations, a development that explains the predatory nature of postindependent Africa's fragile, or what he calls "quasi-armies." In his view, a quasi-army makes for a "quasi-state," a term that he borrows from Robert Jackson.

However, Bachmann concedes that a strong Rwandese state cannot be entirely situated alongside the DRC and Cameroon. This is because Rwanda's precolonial army was well established at the time of colonization. The resilience of its military through the colonial period accounts for stable behavioral patterns of the Rwandese state. Still, Rwanda has much more in common with other case examples. What ties it to the DRC and Cameroon is that its "stateness" in the "Western sense of [a] modern" state remains limited (154). According to

Bachmann, this is due to another unique African experience that has steeled against the strengthening of militaries in Central Africa—political culture, specifically neopatrimonialism. Some features of this institution which characterize the African military are extreme hierarchy and a lack of civic culture, patterns of behaviors from the precolonial period, which have fostered civil–military relations that depart from a Huntingdonian model.

Bachmann's uncovering of neopatrimonial practices of African elites has precedent in the works of the likes of Chabal and Daloz (1999) and Bayart (1993), amongst others. However, he does not rehash these works. Rather, what he does, and does so well, is that he carefully rearranges neopatrimonialism within the context of military practices in Africa and links it with a Tillian and Huntingdonian treatment of institutional developments, to create a coherent and provocative understanding of the role of the army in the making and unmaking of the African state. This innovative approach allows readers to appreciate that African elites' failure to harness the military for successful statebuilding is not only the outcome of exogenous (colonization) but also local (political culture) processes.

For Bachmann these forces have either worked independently or reinforced each other to prevent African statemakers from achieving their goals, as we have seen in his articulation of how the Japanese state came about. But there is a problem with this way of conceiving the development of states: it is linear, and it seems Bachmann is very much aware that such an understanding can lend itself to severe criticisms which are leveled against neopositivist thinking; hence he concedes that state formation, which he distinguishes from statebuilding or statemaking is a nondirectional and a rather haphazard process. However, he insists that statebuilding is also a deliberate operation. Political ethnography studies, and anthropological understandings of the state provide a more convincing argument that even the process of statebuilding is open-ended, with the state being constantly reinvented such that patterns of transformation that emerge are unpredictable. The argument being that the Japanese elites might have set out objectives to achieve, but the state that we see today might not be the one that they had planned for.

This criticism should not be a distraction to the contributions of this book to the understanding of the crisis of the African state, with the army as the site of its making and unmaking. Brachmann's monograph will also profit students of Africa's political cultures (without the exaggerated linguistic mystification of earlier writers such as Chabal and Daloz) and military studies.

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