Book Review

By

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Book: The State in Africa: A Critical Study in Historiography and Political Philosophy, (no price given, pp xiii, 332, index and bibliography)

Author: Aminu Isiyaku Yandaki

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The advent of Yandaki’s The State in Africa: A Critical Study in Historiography and Political Philosophy is a pioneering work on the ‘State’ in African historiography, and a welcome development which has opened up a new vista in the history of historical scholarship in Africa. Indeed, the work has succeeded a great deal in addressing the great lacuna in the study of African historiography. The book is an updated version of Yandaki’s doctoral thesis which was submitted to the History Department, Usmanu Danfodio University, Sokoto, in 1998. The book is divided into ten chapters and about three hundred and thirty-two pages including bibliography and index.

Chapter one is the general introduction, examines the importance of history and how the study of African history got recognition especially during the post WWII era. Yandaki examines the role a historian should play in writing history thus, the realm of historiography was considered to be in the historical ability to rub-shoulder with archival materials as well as an all embroiling gamut of a variety of other sources to establish the authenticity of dates or integrity of events regarded as of historical significance (p2). The author debunked the idea that Africa did not contribute to world progress, by showing that the idea was aimed to justify colonial administration. The chapter also concerned with how history was initially seen as a fairy tales, and reached to a point that it began to be considered as a discipline of its own (p10).

The work is an excellent literature as far as State in African history is concerned, because the author made it clear how writing history using multidisciplinary approach made history a better social science course (p12).
Chapter two titled ‘theories of the state: a review’ concerned with the two theories of ‘State’, classical and Marxist approaches to the study of state and the historical evolution and development of man and society. The author traces the origin of the idea of ‘State’ to be of Greek origin and it was Greek philosophers that identified political power as distinct from other powers which man exercised over man (p21). The approach to an understanding of the origins, nature, purpose and working of the state was to be given to Karl Marx and Engels, the two philosophers of the 19th century in dialectical opposition. The views in the writing of Marx and Engels explained class domination on how humans exploited other humans (p25).

Chapter three is concerned with the pre-colonial Africa society and state formation. The chapter started with the geographical description of Africa in terms of size, population and vegetation. There is also discussion on the origin of man and his development in progressive stages, first the early age, iron technology when man begin to use iron or metal tools in hunting and gathering of food, fishing and early agriculture. The chapter also examines linguistics and sub-division of African languages and concluded that sedentarisation, development of agriculture, permanent homesteads and pottery making led to the emergence of political communities, state and means of social control (p 51). But in my view, the examples given with regard to states in Africa in the chapter were samples from north and east Africa and neglected other regions in the continent.

Chapter four examines the role played by the outsiders in influencing African states and the extension of state building processes to areas which were previously small-scale polities and from 16th to 19th centuries, African polities dominated western writings (pp 98-99).

Chapter five is concerned with the 19th century economic situation in Europe and how industrial revolution led to the conquest of African continent as a source of raw material, market for finished goods and as an area for reinvestment. The chapter also examines how Europeans colonised and administered various States in Africa through direct or indirect means. Thus, how they changed and undermined the pre-existing political system of African states and administered them, while in places where hitherto have no established political systems, the colonialist appointed rulers loyal to them. Yandaki also examines how the colonial states forced African colonies into mass production of cash crops needed by the European industries of the time, but his argument that the colonial state changed the colonies production process ‘from direct subsistence production to a whole scale production for the market’ (p 140). This means that there was no trade among African societies before colonial period which was not true and convincing. This is because many African states produced for market and engaged in trade within and outside the continent even before their contact with the Europeans. Rather, colonial states changed the production processes of Africans to what was needed by European industries.

Additionally, in page 141 Yandaki discusses the barter system as the dominant system of trade in pre-colonial African states. But the author failed to explain the barter system was operated at the local markets. In the case of transaction among long distance traders and other big cities in pre-
colonial African states, there were other currencies being used apart from cowries and manillas. This includes gold, silver, cloths, slaves and other currencies.

Yandaki also emphasises that ‘Indirect Rule’ system in Northern Nigeria was administered with minimal interference from the colonial government (p152). It is true that from 1903 up to 1910 colonial government left local rulers in Northern Nigeria to administer their subjects with less interference. But with the establishment of Native treasuries starting from 1910, local rulers were undermined and put on monthly salary. Some of the local rulers were being imprisoned, dismissed or demoted whenever they deviated from colonial policies.

Chapter six is concerned with the processes of attaining independence of African states and the conflicting ideas of capitalism and communism, emergence of radical and militant Islamic organisations among African states and how neo-colonialism hindered development of African states. This made African states became dependent on Europe and America through IMF, World Bank and other monetary institutions.

Chapter seven examines how African states became dependent to Europe, rampant political instability either in the form of ethnic conflict, tribal rivalries, racial or religious confrontation among African states and how USA as a unipolar country dominated the political and economic affairs of African states.

Chapter eight is concerned with the importance of history in every society and how historiography evolved in Africa and the role played by radical historians towards the development of African historiography.

Chapter nine examines different view given by scholars on the evolution of Hausa people, the areas occupied by Hausa people in Northern Nigeria, the dialectical differences among Hausa people of Northern Nigeria and other parts of West Africa. Regardless of their dialectical differences, the Hausa people shared common beliefs, traditions and social aspect. While Chapter ten is the general conclusion of the work.

The great merits of this book captured by A.I. Yandaki, is how various scholars perceived the idea of State in Africa from pre-colonial to colonial and post colonial periods. How states in Africa transformed politically during the pre-colonial period and how colonialist changed the nature of African states which later after independence became a dependent capitalist type. The work was well researched and written in clear and lucid language.

On the whole, the book reflects one of the finest narratives on the history of historical scholarship on State in Africa. Although in my view, there seem to be relative thematic overlap, from the title of the work The State in Africa..., there is a need for the author to provide a map in the main context which will serve for clarification on the changing nature or transformation of various States in Africa in terms of territorial boundary or size. Also in my view, the cover page of the book does not tally with the content, because by mere looking of the cover page, one will assume it’s all about independent African States. While contrarily, it’s about State in Africa in
pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods. Generally, the book is a valuable addition to the study of Nigerian and African historiography, which will surely enjoy reputation for quality of scholarship and clarity of text. Indeed, it is a compelling work for both academic and public historical discourse which deserves a place in public libraries and students’ Bibliography.