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Charles R. Butcher and Ryan D. Griffiths, *Before Colonization. Non-Western States and Systems in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2025 pp xi + 331. ISBN 978 023 219365.

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Since the twilight of the last century, scholarship in International Relations (IR) in the Western intellectual cosmos has striven to formalize universal theories in the discipline almost exclusively from a single state system, viz, the European, thereby excluding other systems and historical locales from other parts of the world. These were presumed to be non-existent or unworthy of the nomenclature state systems in Eurocentric narratology. The title under review is probably the latest from the Western academic tradition to challenge the dominant lopsidedness in IR narratives and address the crass abandonment of other systems by Western scholarship. Mementos and from the medieval Sultanates of maritime SE Asia Archipelago (15th-19th centuries) before the Dutch incursion; relics from Mughal India (1526-1857) and the Sokoto Caliphate (1804-1903) in West Africa before the British colonialism clearly indicate that several states or communities across the world operated functional local and transnational socio-political, and economic systems which shaped their IR, although the Western discursive tradition has typically treated these with a graceful sidestepping.

The introduction Chapter One (1-19) entitled ‘Billiard Ball and Bull’s Eye,’ analyses two distinct models of state systems. The first illustrates how centralized states are able to project power over long distances; the familiar model in the European state system, while the second is about decentralized states with limited hegemonic reach, as largely demonstrable with the non-European subregions discussed. The rest of the work is divided into three parts. Part One, “Theoretical Frameworks and Beginnings”, consists of two chapters which discuss the birth and death of states before the emergence of The League of Nations (23-54), and the comparative dynamics of states and systems (55-73). Part Two, “Regional State Systems” which is made up of four chapters is the core and kernel of the work. These are case studies dedicated to East Asia, (77-106 China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam- the Sinocentric system (80); South Asia (107-

36 India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives reduced by British colonialism to this paltry number from about forty states before 1816); Maritime Southeast Asia (137-62)- the Archipelago- the island chain of Malaysia and Indonesia, and successor states to the Mughal Empire), and West Africa (163-91) described as “a fascinating system that until now has only been loosely covered in IR scholarship” (19).

Part Three, “The Synthesis”, comprises two chapters which discuss lessons from the case studies and the core findings in them, typically ignored by IR scholars. It also illustrates five descriptive and/or analytical lessons derivable from decentralization (195-218). The final chapter examines in detail the systems of Decentralized States (219-239). An insightful Conclusion (241-52) offers a nuanced recap of all that was discussed and analysed in the preceding chapters. The objective of the work is to make IR scholarship “break free from its traditional Eurocentric provincialism” (3). A recent objective counter-narrative against negative stereotypes, especially regarding Africa is Victoria B. Coifman’s essay. (<https://cla.umn.edu/aaas/news-events/story/shining-light-dark-continent>). The stylized Western scholarship in IR which derives largely from the Correlates of War (COW) project state system list (1816-1920) - <https://correlatesofwar.org> - gives the impression that the African continent was *stateless* (emphasis mine), as were South Asia, SE Asia, and the Pacific (32-33).

However, the work under review has used the four regional systems essayed here to debunk those misgivings. With datasets from 1816, “the date when we (the authors) start recording states in the ISD [International Systems Dataset]” (108), the obvious lacunae in facts and figure analyses that are embedded in the existing scholarship that relied largely to the exclusion of other system sources became too alarming to be ignored, hence the adept and nuanced analysis of new insights afforded by the ISD became inevitable regarding the four regional case studies provided in this title.

Sharman is one of the recent voices against the crass neglect of Africa in the IR discourse (Sharman, J. C 2023. ‘Something new out of Africa: States made slaves, slaves made States’, *International Organization*, 77 no 3, 497-526). Whereas COW identifies 23 states in 1816, the ISD lists 230 (7). Historical sources and records, as established by the work under review, betray the cynicism, if not the ideology of contempt that is demonstrable in the Western discourse. Maritime SE Asia represented a system of “pulsating and overlapping *mandala*, that is, centrifugal, states” (151), the same pointillist pattern of governance found in West Africa during the period. European colonialism and other factors brought many of those states to extinction or subsumption.

Essentially, these regions had vibrant states and state systems that were contemporaneous with the Concert of Europe, yet they had been ignored on their own terms and in comparative modules in the COW list and in post-colonial IR scholarship.

The ubiquity of ‘clusters of states’ in the subregions discussed facilitated the authors’ deployment of qualitative standards in the case studies and allowed for comparative perspectives on the indexicalized parameters for ‘*centralization*’ or ‘*decentralization*’ systems regarding the four subregions. Whereas the latter contains elements of “hierarchy, anarchy, and heteronomy” (59), the former is often woven around dependent variables; viz, the outcomes of struggles between rulers, states, and their vassals (73).

Overall, the major contributions of this work are:

- i. provision of a catalogue of independent states since 1816 with details on their emergence and extinction *a la* European colonialism.
- ii. introduction of a theoretical framework; the billiard ball and bull’s-eye models for comparing state systems across four regions of the world, and
- iii. Illustration of the effects of war, trade, and interaction capacity on the structure of states and systems.

The comparative approach applied across the subregions studied here will certainly give any future researcher the leverage to identify the common from the unique, and this is a good tool for further investigation. Another added value is the analytical rigour of the authors and the readability of their arguments such that modern scholarship on IR and indeed the socio-economic ethnogenesis of the subregions discussed have been greatly updated and enhanced.

The chapter on West Africa is particularly intriguing for the fresh insights it offers on the system of governance, tribal configurations, slavery narratives (cf. M. A. Klein & S. J. Rockel 2025 *Enslaved Africans and their Descendants in Africa*, Athens: OUP), and the trading networks which gave the subregion a “tenuous economic unity” (165). The Yoruba (Nigeria) here are said to have achieved a unique urban revolution “without any direct European influence” (170).

Although the movement for the decolonization of knowledge or epistemic decolonization became earnestly academic about five decades ago, advocacy for the exploration of alternative discursive traditions to Eurocentric ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies in global political and cultural discourses has found strong voices among non-Western public intellectuals across the world.

The title under review reinforces this. Franz Omar Fanon (d. 1961), Kwame Nkrumah (d. 1972), Anibal Quijano (d. 2018), Toyin Falola (b. 1953), and Achille Mbembe (b. 1957) stand out in this regard. Africa, in Henry Stanley's (1841-1904) estimation was a 'Dark Continent', a rehash of Georg Hegel's (1770-1831) negative and dismissive view of the continent which view became the norm for a long time. Asia, the largest continent on earth, is referred to as a "Continent of Contrast", not in a genuinely positive sense, though. It is the negative stereotypes against the two continents regarding International Relations (IR), specifically from 1816, that this work has set out to correct, and it has successfully done so in a remarkable way.

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