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In recent years there has been growing interest in international relations beyond the 'West.' Some of this literature is explicitly concerned with exploring insights from traditions of international thought that did not develop against the backdrop of the European state system, particularly from Asia and the Indian subcontinent.¹ Others have taken the presumed universals of international politics to test outside this European context, finding, for instance, that pre-modern, non-European polities rarely engaged in balance-of-power politics—the central pillar of realist theory.² John Anthony Pella's "International Relations in Africa before the Europeans" speaks to both debates. The article goes beyond the conventional focus both in terms of geographical boundaries, given that the African continent has received only scant attention in the literature thus far, and in terms of its chronological scope. Pella describes and analyzes the "relatively ordered set of relationships" between West-Central African polities before the arrival of significant numbers of Europeans in the late-fifteenth century (100). The nature and extent of these relationships, Pella argues, render West-Central Africa an historical international system—and this despite the heterogeneity of its 'units' and their 'constitutive practices' (war, trade, and shared understandings about cosmology and political authority) which distinguished this system from its (modern) European counterpart.

¹ For instance, Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia* (London: Routledge, 2010); and Louise Fawcett, "Between West and Non-West: Latin American Contributions to International Thought," *The International History Review* 34, no. 4 (2012).

² Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, *The Balance of Power in World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

More specifically, the author identifies four types of political organization in the region. The first are the 'stateless societies' of the coastal wetlands and rainforests, ranging roughly from today's Gambia to the Congo River. 'Stateless societies' were based on kinship ties, and characterized by their low degree of political centralization and highly mobile population. Moving further west and inland, the grasslands gave way to polities that were more centralized, even if these 'savannah states' shared many of the cultural traits of the neighbouring coastal societies. The third type is the 'consolidated savannah state', which emerged from the establishment of tributary relations between one 'savannah state' and its less powerful peers. Again, because group membership was defined by lineage and not residence within a territory, 'consolidated savannah states' were in constant flux. This form of political organization is then contrasted with the fourth and last polity, the 'hinterland state,' which was more permanent, centralized, and territorially defined, including the Mali Empire, and the Kingdom of Kongo.

Note that the form of political organization is largely taken to be determined by the political organizations' physical environment (101, 105). For instance, whereas the tropical wetlands made dense settlement unfeasible, the open grasslands of the savannah allowed for sedentary farming and the employment of draft animals to sustain large population, and a centralized state apparatus. Geography also seems to be decisive in shaping the relations and practices between these entities, of which the author identifies three: trade, war, and shared norms and values. The natural environment formed trade routes, which depended on the geographic distribution of scarce resources, such as salt, copper and gold. Patterns of trade in turned reinforced the prevailing form of political organization in specific area, as well as the relationship between polities (106). A similar observation is made with regard to war. 'Hinterlands states' fought wars for the control of trade, fielding large armies which, depending on the respective terrain, were formed by either cavalry or infantry, although the language here suggests that this was the result of strategic choice rather than geographic faith (108-109). Overall, however, much of the causal work is done by the natural environment. The argument that geography shapes political institutions has a long and distinguished pedigree (and a complicated history, when applied to the African continent as justification for European colonialism), but it nevertheless leaves the reviewed work exposed to the charge of determinism. When it comes to the form of political organization, there is little discussion on how political communities and individual agents responded to the challenges posed by their natural environment.³

Fortunately, Pella's analysis does not stop here. The question of human agency becomes more central in the discussion of the second aim of warfare in the West-Central African

³ As suggested by environmental historians, such as Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport: Greenwood, 1972); and John Robert McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

international system: the acquisition of slaves. Because power and status did not derive from territory but rather from people, slaves were an important means of exchange, including as payment of tribute. This rendered slavery an integral institution or, in the author's words, a "constitutive practice" based on customs and mutual expectations (110). Finally, cultural norms and values also shaped patterns of political authority. As noted, political legitimacy in West-Central Africa derived from kinship. In the smaller 'stateless societies,' kinship was first and foremost biological, in the more extensive polities, however, this lineage was constructed through foundational myths of shared ancestry, which justified rulers' claims to power as guardians of ancient customs and traditions.

Pella's analysis revolves around the concept of an 'international system.' He notes a distinct lack of consensus in the literature, especially with regard to the type of relationships ("practices or institutions") that are required to be in place for an 'international system' to exist (100), advocating a multi-dimensional conception that is not limited to either the military-diplomatic, economic, or cultural sphere. Furthermore and importantly, Pella seeks to correct the view, allegedly derived from the European experience, that an 'international system' can only exist among similarly organized political communities, such as nation-states ('like units' in political-science parlance). This conceptual move allows the author to contrast the European state system with the West-Central African international system. In this regard, the influence of the English School, which has long been concerned with comparing different international orders across time and place, is notable.⁴ The question, however, is whether Pella compares the African case with an anachronistic benchmark of the 'Westphalian' system of sovereign and territorially demarcated states. "The European system", the author concludes "featured remarkably similar political units that were more or less territorially fixed and sovereign, shared norms and values related to Christianity and individuality, and populations that were more often than not attached to a particular territory" (113). At this point, the author juxtaposes his empirical description of an actual case with an ahistorical ideal-type and, unsurprisingly, finds it wanting. Viewed in historical perspective, organizational diversity was also the norm in the European international order up until (at least) the nineteenth century, given that knightly orders and chartered trading companies hardly fit the 'Westphalian' ideal either. It is true that the "African case," as presented by Pella, "pushes the bounds of the notion of an international system" (114). However, rather than demonstrating the inadequacy of the European ideal for understanding international relations elsewhere, it points to the inadequacies of this ideal (or stereotype) itself.⁵

⁴ In particular, Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977); Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵ The question of heterogeneity in other historical "international systems" is also the subject of David C. Kang, 'Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems: The Tribute System in Early Modern East Asia', *Security Studies* 19, no. 4 (2010); and, more recently, Andrew Phillips and Jason C. Sharman,

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A second point of criticism concerns the legacy of the West-Central African international system. Here, the author fails to deliver on the promise to demonstrate the “profound impact upon the global system that emerged from the fifteenth century” (100). The point is first raised in the introduction and only taken up again in the last paragraph of the conclusion. Only in passing does the author note that when arriving at the West African coast, Europeans had “quickly learned” from regional practices, including slavery, and engaged in commercial and political relations with these polities (114). This is not to dispute the impact that the ‘constitutive practices’ might have had on the evolution of the modern international order; rather, this reviewer wants to read more. There is much more to be learned from international relations beyond the ‘West,’ and Pella’s contribution offers an enticing glimpse in this regard.

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International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).