Political scientists working in Senegal have produced a number of now classical texts on the nature of the country’s polity. Central to this body of work, as well as to the concerns of earlier generations of French colonial scholars, has been Islam as a crucial element in Senegalese political sociology. In particular, the emergence and development of a range of Sufi orders or brotherhoods has provided the focus for scholarly investigations of a phenomenon which contributes some of the most significant institutions to present-day Senegalese social organisation. While these orders constitute a central component of the political system, the religion of Islam itself has not to any great extent been radically politicised. Indeed, these brotherhoods are a crucial element in one of the most stable, and relatively democratic and non-oppressive, post-colonial regimes in the whole of Africa. This present book by Villalón, while situated within this tradition of political scientific writing, breaks new ground by means of a sensitivity to the complexities of local social and cultural processes. This work merits attention equal to that given to the very best works in this genre.

*Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal* engages with the established intellectual concern of the role of Islam in state-society relations in general, via a case study of Senegal in particular. Through a particularistic empirical study of what Villalón calls ‘Senegalese political exceptionalism’, which has a particular form of Sufi Islam at its source, the book nonetheless aims to contribute ultimately to an understanding of the conditions shaping the exercise of state power in Africa.

The main argument of the book concerns the interactions among three sets of societal actors: the state/political elite, Islamic marabouts, and ordinary people both as citizens and disciples or followers of particular marabouts. The author defines three ‘modal types’ of political activity articulated around maraboutic organisations: they either engage and co-operate with the state; or they flee from and isolate themselves beyond the clutches of the state; or they contest and challenge state power. By means of these diverse strategies, the state is held somewhat in check and its power is curbed and indeed moulded to some extent by the actions of religious orders. Moreover, the two statuses of citizen and disciple for ordinary people are not necessarily contradictory, but each one is brought into a relationship through the role of Islamic orders in the operation of the Senegalese polity. Villalón argues that
the social organisational structures of Sufi orders 'introduce a stabilising element into the precarious balance between state and society' (p. 114). Islam, however, is treated not only as a framework of social organisation, but also as a form of religious ideology which informs state-society relations.

The author handles the three main concepts appearing in the title, namely Islam, the state and society, in a subtle manner. Not only does he acknowledge the complexities involved in the definition of Islam as a conceptual category, he quite rightly, in my view, argues too for a nuanced understanding of the concepts of state and society. If 'civil society' in this specific case is composed of modes of social organisation developed around religiously-based orders, then also the domain of civil society as opposed to the state is similarly shown to be never clearly or unambiguously distinct. An 'economy of affection' operates to blur the line between state and local society, and a 'spiritual economy' works to bridge and unite state and maraboutic organisations. The complexities and ambiguities inherent in these relationships are well worked out by Villalón in all their intricacies.

For this reviewer, and perhaps for many of the readers of this Journal as students of religion in Africa, the most engaging parts of this study arise out of the ethnographically-based chapters detailing a fine-grain view on to local social processes of religious affiliation, of devotion and of interaction. The research is based on an extended period of field research in the town of Fatick, a small and reasonably representative urban setting, elevated to a regional capital in 1984, in the centre of the country's peanut basin. The town is ethnically and religiously mixed, with all the major Sufi orders represented locally. Focusing on a town and its population rather than exclusively on one Sufi order or brotherhood, the study allows for an appreciation of the dynamics, interaction and indeed competition that exists within and between Sufi orders, their marabouts and their followers. The structure of Fatick society is introduced, and this is followed by analyses of the relationships between the state and its citizens, and then between the Sufi orders headed by marabouts and their disciples. These processes are refracted through the lens of the local Fatick population.

Particularly illuminating were the analyses of the dynamics of recruiting and maintaining a following, and of the structures of allegiance (chapters 4 and 5 especially). Here Villalón deals with a relatively neglected area in studies of Senegalese Islam, namely marabout-follower relations, and especially the processes by which marabouts are obliged.