

BOOK REVIEW

Carole Ammann. *Women, Agency, and the State in Guinea: Silent Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2020. xiv +220 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$52.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781032238081.

Women, Agency, and the State in Guinea: Silent Politics by Carole Ammann focuses on the political activity of grassroots women in Kankan, the third most populous city in Guinea-Conakry. Ammann examines the ways in which Kankan women act politically in the face of political, economic, and social insecurities during times of great political change. She argues that the political activities of these women are not primarily the product of women's associations or institutional politics. Rather, their political actions emanate from their daily lives—how they earn a living, marry, raise their children, meet their friends, and do household chores. Using these networks, they are able to bargain successfully with local government and so-called traditional authorities.

While women acting alone have very little power in the male-dominated spheres of institutional politics, they can be effective in influencing governing authorities when they mobilize their networks to engage in collective action. As a result, Kankan women have used their culturally sanctioned gender roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and household managers to make claims when their ability to fulfill these roles is threatened. For instance, they might protest publicly when basic foods are scarce or unaffordable, when governmental repression affects their husbands and children, or when widows are unable to access their deceased husbands' pensions. They protest publicly only in times of crisis—that is, when men are not fulfilling male roles appropriately, thus creating an environment hostile to women's concerns.

Given the rarity of women's public protest, Ammann argues that women in Kankan do not generally regard themselves as political actors. Most join men in defining politics as the male-dominated institutional sphere of governing that includes parliaments, ministries, political parties, trade unions, and public protests. In order to retain their social respectability, women generally shy away from the public square, and men ordinarily resist women's "encroachments" in these spheres, claiming that such acts violate tradition and are unwelcome Western imports that champion Western ideas of modernity. As a result, when women do protest publicly, they claim that they are not

violating gender norms, but instead are reacting to unusual conditions that prevent them from fulfilling their culturally mandated roles. They ally with powerful males in their families and communities, who then represent the women's interests in the public sphere, permitting women to remain within the bounds of cultural norms. Because women's public protests are so unusual, they attract considerable attention, and their gender-based political claims are often deemed legitimate by both women and men.

In her nuanced portrayal, Ammann notes that there is no homogeneous category of "women." Women's perspectives are influenced by their age, marital status, seniority within a group, educational background, socioeconomic class, occupation, and ethnicity. In times of crisis in particular, women will forge alliances across these lines, sharing their common interests as wives, mothers, and household managers. In such times, some women are especially powerful. Market women, for instance, wield broad powers during economic hard times, as they contribute significantly to family finances and are able to use their market networks to mobilize large numbers of women. Similarly, elite women—the daughters and wives of powerful men, as well as women with advanced Western schooling—carry weight in male-dominated arenas that are ordinarily closed to women.

Ammann bases her analysis on material gathered from oral interviews and informal discussions with women and men in Kankan between August 2011 and March 2012, and from November 2012 to February 2013. The interviews and discussions took place following a turbulent political period that had resulted in Guinea's 2010 turn to democracy after decades of military rule. These oral sources are supplemented by articles from local media and scholarly works on Guinean women's history and practices.

Ammann's book will be of particular interest to scholars engaged in African, gender, and Islamic studies, as well as social, political, gender, and urban anthropology. It is a welcome and much-needed contribution to the literature, adding to existing scholarship that has focused on Guinean women's political action during the late colonial and early independence periods. It is unfortunate, however, that its geographical focus was not broader, and that its sources were dated shortly after the book's publication. The interviews and discussions were conducted nearly a decade before the book was published, and much had happened in the interim. Some of the most significant events occurred just after the book appeared—most notably, the widespread protests against constitutional changes in 2019–2020 that permitted the president to run for third and fourth terms, and a military coup in 2021, followed by the dissolution of the government and its institutions, as well as the annulment of the constitution. Readers will wonder how women reacted to these events, not only in Kankan, but also in other parts of the country. One hopes that a sequel is in store.

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