

# Everyday Politics: Market Women and the Local Government in Kankan, Guinea

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## **Abstract**

The Guinean state has not only been shaped and reshaped by the political elite, but also by people's daily actions. Women selling at Dibida market in Kankan, the stronghold of Guinea's current President Alpha Condé, are doing politics although in interviews they often deny to do so. Thus, I propose to focus on these women's everyday agency so as to reveal their modes of political articulation and to illustrate how they influence governmental discourses and practices. Drawing on ethnographic research, I highlight the phenomenon of everyday politics by focussing on Kankan's market women's interactions with the local government represented by actors such as tax collectors, members of the market office, and other administrative employees. The aim is to gain insight into modes of political articulations that are hardly visible, hence difficult to grasp and analyse. I illustrate that market women, despite not forming a strong network, are able to put pressure on the local government by their sheer number and can thus sometimes pursue their goals.

## **Introduction**

The Guinean state has not only been shaped and reshaped by a political elite, but also by people's daily actions "outside the male-dominated institutional sphere" (Waylen 1996: 11). By analysing individual and collective agency only in 'formal' politics or within 'civil society' organizations we easily overlook forms of political actions that emerge from

everyday social practices. This article's aim is to gain insight into modes of political articulations that are hardly visible, hence difficult to grasp and analyse. I propose to focus on the daily lives of marginalised individuals or groups, in this case market women, who do not have access to channels and means to voice their interests so as to reveal their modes of political agency. This paper highlights the phenomenon of everyday politics (Kerkvliet 2002, 2005; Kallio/Häkli 2013) in Kankan, Guinea's second largest city. Kankan, founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the stronghold of current President Alpha Condé, is situated in the Upper Guinean Region, some 650 km northeast of the capital Conakry. It is a Muslim religious centre known for its trading activities. According to the latest census, around 220,000 people actually live in the city (République de Guinée 2014: 9).

This contribution focuses on women selling at Dibida market. It analyses how market women as individuals and/or collective actors negotiate selling rights, access to market infrastructure, and tax collection. How do market women's daily actions influence the local government's discourses and practices and vice versa? Many of these women live from hand to mouth spending the money they earn during the day on their evening meal. This makes them especially vulnerable to governmental interventions, such as the closing of the markets or the displacement of ambulant vendors.

The data for this article was gathered during two long-term field trips in Guinea between September 2011 and February 2013 (eleven months in total). The methodology applied is that of the triangular Emic Evaluation Approach (EEA), which rests on three pillars: a) mapping of social actors, b) discourse analysis, and c) social-practice analysis (Förster et al. 2011). First, I mapped the actors, their physical and social environment (Lefebvre 1991), and how these actors relate to each other. In a next step, two social spheres where everyday and political discussions are common have been chosen, namely markets and cafés. Much information was gathered through systematic participation in and observation of these spheres. In the markets I could observe and discuss how women deal with scarcity in their everyday lives and when and how they interact with representatives of the

local government. I therefore spent many hours sitting on hard benches besides market women listening and observing what was going on around me. Additionally, informal conversations, group discussions, and a few narrative interviews gave important insights into experiences, expectations, and practices of these vendors.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1990s, scholars especially within (feminist) political science have started paying attention to the participation of women in African politics. Yet they narrowly focused on their access to, presence in, and impact on (Goetz 2003) the conventional political setting or the 'civil society' level (Waylen 2007).<sup>2</sup> In recent scientific literature on Guinea, questions regarding women's political articulations have largely been neglected. Steady (2011), in her book on female leadership in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, ignores political activities of women outside the institutional political sphere. However, four authors laudably treat this subject: Osborn (2011) elaborates on the influence of households on politics in the Milo River Valley between 1650 and 1890. Schmidt (2002; 2005) highlights that women's mobilization and implication within the nationalist movement has been crucial. Pauthier (2007) and Camara (2014) draw attention to female representation, mass mobilization, and political activities during the First Republic under Sékou Touré when women constituted important pillars of the one-party regime. Both authors illustrate how market women were among the rare voices opposing the regime during protests in 1977. Furthermore, they emphasize women's massive participation in the general strikes of 2006/07.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview see Bauer/Britton (2006), Bauer (2012), Goetz (2009), Hassim (2006), Steady (2006), and Tripp (2001; 2013).

Women selling at Dibida, Kankan's main market, and their everyday political articulations stand at the centre of this analysis. I have structured the paper into four sections: First, I illustrate why the state cannot be regarded as a single actor with clear boundaries. I also argue that we have to look beyond advocacy politics in order to grasp and analyse various modes of political agency of marginalized individuals and groups. Secondly, I describe the state of research on women's political activities in Guinea since World War Two. Thirdly, I take a close look at how political articulations of market women manifest in their daily interactions with employees of Kankan's local government. Here, two instances are used as examples: In February 2012, the local government decided to banish ambulant vendors from selling their commodities on a market road. This resulted in fierce debates among Dibida's vendors, within the offices of the local government, and on the local radio. Further, I describe the interrelation between market women and a particular tax collector, Ali Sebebilala, and analyse what this tells us about these women's political articulations. In the last part, the results are summarized.

### **Looking at the state and political articulations**

Guinea is divided into four administrative regions, 34 prefectures, and 335 sub-prefectures (Camara et al. 2014: 22). The city of Kankan as the administrative centre of the Upper Guinea Region has a governorate, a prefecture, and a municipality. Formally, the responsibilities of each institution are determined. In reality, however, they intermingle. Not surprisingly, the local population, in daily discourses and when not talking about a particular person does not usually differentiate between the three administrative levels; they are all referred to as "authorities".<sup>3</sup> The notion also includes the *chefs de quartier*, which closely collaborate with the local government but do not get any remuneration. This illustrates that the state is not a single actor and cannot be separated from society. A state's boundaries are blurred, fluid, elusive, and constantly defined and redefined

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, I use the term local government when referring to one of these administrative levels.

by various individuals, groups, and institutions (Kerkvliet 2001: 239f.; Greenhouse 2002: 8; Nugent 2004: 198; Blundo/Le Meur 2009: 14; Hagmann/Péclard 2010: 552). Thus, state and society constitute each other and a variety of actors are “doing the state” (Migdal/Schlichte 2005: 14f.).<sup>4</sup>

Migdal’s (2001) state-in-society model focuses precisely on the state’s paradoxical quality insofar as it is simultaneously part of and apart from society. Waylen argues similarly. For her, the state is “a site of struggle, not lying outside of society and social processes, but having, on the one hand, a degree of autonomy from these [...] and on the other, being permeated by them.” (Waylen 1996: 16) Waylen also hints to the fact that many forms of inequality, based on gender, age, ethnicity, or class are “buried within the state”. (idem)

Hagmann and Péclard promote the concept of ‘negotiating statehood’ as “a way of looking at and grasping dynamic and complex dimensions of statehood.” (Hagmann/Péclard 2010: 544) Various actors such as bureaucrats, political parties, trade unions, neighbourhood associations, NGOs, religious movements, but also warlords, businessmen/-women, regional and international institutions compete in negotiation arenas that “represent[...] the broader political space in which relations of power and authority are vested.” (idem: 551) Ordinary practices relating to power poles reveal how statehood is negotiated (Förster 2010: 719). In the following, I use the term bargaining to grasp all encounters between women selling at Dibida market and representatives of Kankan’s local government. Bargaining occurs on a daily basis between two or more persons, groups, or institutions. It does not necessarily contain a mutual, oral agreement – on the contrary, most bargaining processes are nonverbal.

Likewise, Kerkvliet promotes the idea of arenas “in which boundaries, rights, jurisdiction and power distribution between state and societal agencies are debated, contested and resolved.” (Kerkvliet 2001: 240) Arenas

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<sup>4</sup> Schroven (2010), for example, describes the dilemma of state employees in a small Guinean coastal town during the general strikes of 2006/07. While the bureaucrats see themselves as citizens confronted with the same everyday hardship the strikers protest against, they actually represent the very state addressed by the objectors.

may be institutions such as municipalities, universities, or police stations but also groups such as NGOs, councils of elders, women associations, or even families. According to Kerkvliet, "arenas may also be problems and controversies that are not confined to a particular institution." (idem) This article looks at the arena of Dibida market for an analysis of market women's political articulations and their interrelation with employees of the local government. Before doing so, I first elaborate on the continuum between everyday politics and advocacy politics that helps grasping different forms of political activities.

"We women, we think that politics is a sleazy affair. So everything that is political does not interest us. We are already afraid if someone mentions politics." (Group discussion, young female graduates, 29.01.2013) "Here, generally, women are only talking about the prices, because women are not interested in politics. Especially women who have not been to school are not really interested in politics. They say everything is expensive. The prices must be reduced." (Interview, female radio journalist, 17.01.2013) These two quotations depict a general discomfort of women in Kankan from different educational and economic backgrounds when they talk about politics. Many of them do not want to be related to what they consider as "a dirty male business". "Politics is for the politicians" is a typical statement in this regard.<sup>5</sup> Especially since the presidential elections of 2010, it is regarded as a cause for the division of individuals and groups. The quotations also demonstrate that women who do not frequent one of the political parties typically do not see themselves as political actors (cf. Leftwich 2010 [1983]: 11; Waylen 1996: 18). Politics, in an emic perspective, is identified with elections, parliaments, political parties, government's policies, trade union, protests, and so on.

I argue, however, that my interlocutors are 'doing politics' despite often denying so in interviews. We have to look for politics "at every level and in every sphere" (Leftwich 2010 [1983]: 12). Thus, everyone can be a political

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<sup>5</sup> The attitude of considering politics as a dirty, dishonest, immoral, and corrupt business is not specific to women in Kankan. It can be found in different places and contexts (cf. Kerkvliet 2002: 10; Spencer 2007: 32).

actor, every form of agency can become political, and everything can be politicized (Kallio/Häkli 2013: 7-8).<sup>6</sup> I propose to focus on everyday politics, that is, people's daily discourses and social practices so as to finally reveal their political articulations. My understanding of everyday politics follows Kerkvliet: "Everyday politics occurs when people live and work and involves people embracing, adjusting to, or contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources. It includes quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that indirectly and for the most part privately endorse, modify, or resist prevailing procedures, rules, regulations, or order. Everyday politics involves little or no organization. It features the activities of individuals and small groups as they make a living, raise their families, wrestle with daily problems, deal with others like themselves who are relatively powerless and with powerful superiors and other." (Kerkvliet 2005: 22)

To grasp various forms of political articulations I propose to place political actions on a continuum between everyday and advocacy politics. As the continuum indicates, this boundary is fluid. Further, the orientation of political articulations can shift quickly: Everyday politics can easily merge into advocacy politics and vice versa. The characteristics of everyday politics are that people do not see themselves as political actors and are usually unaware of their political articulations. This may be when someone complains about government's mismanagement and misappropriation while listening to the radio. Conscious claim making, on the contrary, is an integral part of advocacy politics.<sup>7</sup> This continuum is helpful in identifying and analysing marginalized individuals' and groups' political articulations that are mundane and thus hardly visible at first sight – such as those of women selling at Dibida market. As will be illustrated in the example on tax collection, most of the vendor's political articulations are subtle and can be characterized as everyday politics.

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview on how anthropologists have framed the political since the 1940s see Spencer (1998: 4-6; 2007).

<sup>7</sup> The here proposed continuum further develops Kerkvliet's (2005) tripartition of politics into official, advocacy, and everyday politics. It is also influenced by Bayat's concepts of "street politics" (1997) and "life as politics" (2010).

Throughout Guinea's history, women have been politically active: In her analysis on politics between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century, Osborn (2011) emphasises that household building had highly influenced state building in the Milo River Valley. On the eve of independence, women started frequenting the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain-Parti Démocratique de Guinée* (PDG-RDA). Starting by the 1950s, the next part elaborates on modes of women's advocacy politics until the presidential elections of 2010.

### **A historical perspective on women's political activities**

Women started engaging within the nationalist movement after the general strikes of 1953, in which they had played an important role. From this point onward, the PDG-RDA began mobilizing women on a larger scale (Schmidt 2005: 113; Pauthier 2007: 221).<sup>8</sup> Unlike other Guinean political parties, the PDG-RDA took women's concerns such as health, sanitation, and education seriously and altogether, women fundamentally transformed the PDG-RDA's mobilization tactics, communication methods, programs, and objectives (Schmidt 2005: 114). Already during his early political career, Sékou Touré made women his key followers. The party established the *Union révolutionnaire des femmes de Guinée*, one of four mass organizations (Barry 2002: 163). The aim of the latter and other unification policies or at least their rhetoric was to foster the Guinean identity at the expense of ethnic identity (Højbjerg et al. 2012: 5; Young 2007: 249). Women's emancipation and youth's empowerment went hand in hand with the PDG's ideology of people's enlightening. The two groups thereby became the party's most important pillars (Rivière 1968: 406; Camara 2014: 153ff.). In addition, various laws were adopted to improve the situation of women: Marriage under the age of 17 was prohibited, the high bride-wealth was

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<sup>8</sup> This is no Guinean particularity. The support of women at the grassroots' level was important to many (West) African political parties engaged in the struggle for independence (Denzler 2005 [1992]: 217).



reduced and fixed (Doumbouya 2008: 174), and polygamy was officially prohibited (Steady 2011: 63).<sup>9</sup>

The effectiveness of Touré's measures to foster female emancipation is contradictorily discussed. For Hanry (1970: 74f.) women's emancipation was encouraged mostly through Touré's speeches. However, in his view, not much changed in women's daily lives. Kaba (1977: 30) reminds us that women were present at all levels of the administration and the state party. Rivière (1968: 408ff.) and Pauthier (2007: 225ff.) emphasize that even if Touré had really wanted to make women active agents of the proclaimed revolution, he still addressed them in their roles as wives, sisters, and mothers. Women took part in party politics, thus their advocacy politics were officially fostered, but their function was not to take decisions; they were only encouraged to spread the regime's ideology. Camara (2014: 164ff.), on the contrary, is convinced that the PDG's women policies were successful in the domains of education, employment, and political participation. Gender equality was not only the party's goal rhetorically; it was also put into practice.<sup>10</sup>

One could describe women's political activities during the Touré-era as being contradictory: On the one hand, women vigorously took part in the various entities of the PDG. This engagement gave them a feeling of being integrated into the nation-building process. On the other hand, this does not mean that the regime invited women to look for solutions to their problems. Instead, the party was setting the agenda that women had to follow. Moreover, the different women-committees were an effective means to control the female population. Nevertheless, as the example of the 1977 women's protests illustrates, when an incident at Conakry's market led to a

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the articles of Guinea's civil code have not been changed until today and, thus, polygamy is theoretically still forbidden (Code civil de la République de Guinée, articles 315-319). In reality, however, the situation looks quite different: More than half of Guinea's women lived in a polygamous household in 2005 (République de Guinée 2006: 97). Contrary to Sékou Touré's claim, General Lansana Conté did not foster monogamy. Officially, he himself had two wives. Conté had also a third wife who was called 'the non-official one'. All three of them, along with their networks, strongly competed in the distribution of the country's sinecures (Chambers 2004: 131f.; Camara 2014: 397; Engeler 2008: 92).

<sup>10</sup> McGovern (2007: 137), too, sees the lasting effects of Touré's gender policy.

collective reaction by market women, they sometimes left the predetermined path and publicly showed their malcontent with the government's policies (Pauthier 2007: 232). These women's protests are vividly remembered among the Guinean population. Many contemporary witnesses consider the event as the beginning of a less repressive period of Touré's regime (McGovern 2007: 137).

In contrast to his predecessor, gender was not a central issue for General Lansana Conté and his *Parti de l'unité et du progrès* (PUP).<sup>11</sup> The political opening of many African countries in the 1990s nevertheless presented a possibility for women to reinforce their claims and consequently a multitude of new women's organisations emerged (Tripp 2005 [2003]: 234ff.). This was also the case in Guinea. Further, the Dakar (1994) and Beijing (1995) UN Platforms for Action influenced Lansana Conté's women policy. Along these actions the Guinean Ministry of Social Affairs and the Promotion of Women and Childhood started a women's promotion policy in 1997. The government also adopted some legal reforms to stop women's discrimination e.g. in the domain of inheritance and land ownership. Additionally, women's education and health care were promoted. The Conté government also signed international treaties and thereby officially adopted regulations to enforce women's rights, but it did so mostly to please the 'International Community'. Nevertheless, Camara (2014: 314ff.) positively evaluates Conté's policy of women's liberation even though much remains to be done in the domain of gender equality. Schmidt (2005) has a different standpoint. According to her, Guinea in the early 1990s "[...] was in the midst of a reactionary backlash against women and the political, economic, and social gains they had made during the first two and one-half decades of independence." (Schmidt 2005: 13)

Nevertheless, women's advocacy politics became also visible during the Conté-era; the general strikes of 2006/07, where people across ethnic and class boundaries participated, were once again marked by women's massive

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<sup>11</sup> This partly explains why there is almost no scholarly work on the topic.

mobilisation.<sup>12</sup> According to Pauthier, women expressing their grievances were regarded as highly legitimate: “Every person interrogated on the subject agreed upon the idea that a mobilisation of women would enjoy huge legitimacy and would prove to be more efficient than protests by other political or social actors. [...] In a diffuse manner, women thus seemed considered to be best positioned to launch the mobilisation: after them, every category of the population would follow.” (Pauthier 2007: 220, author’s translation)

When Hadja Rabiadou Serah Diallo, one of the leading and identifiable figures of the trade unions, was accused of setting the country on fire, she explained her engagement in the general strikes with her role as a mother: “I am a woman and mother of six children. If I put on fire it is under the cooking pot for nourishing my children. But in Guinea the cooking pot is empty. [...] That is what heats up the country.” (Jeune Afrique 2010, author’s translation) Women who protested during these general strikes did not put forward political claims, but – like Diallo – insisted on their fight against difficult living conditions instead. However, even though their claims were ostensibly economical in nature, women’s demands obviously were political. It was their superficially apolitical character that made these claims legitimate (Pauthier 2007: 234ff.).

During the presidential elections of 2010, the political and social atmosphere in Guinea was tense (International Crisis Group 2011). In Kankan, the Association of Female Leaders helped appeasing these tensions: First, they consulted Madame Béréte and Madame Keita at the Bureau for the Promotion of Women and Children. Secondly, they went to see the senior members (*doyens*) of each ethnic group. The leader of the association stressed that this had not been an easy task, as women in Guinea usually do not get involved in political issues. Thirdly, they talked about peace and reconciliation to the vendors on Kankan’s markets. And finally, the Association of Female Leaders organised a peaceful march where they

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<sup>12</sup> For more details on the general strikes and the Guinean trade unions, see McGovern (2007), Jörgel/Utas (2007: 83ff.), and the report by the International Crisis Group (2007).

spread their main message: Do not kill our children! When asked about their role as women in regard to conflict resolution, a member of the association answered: "If there is anything irregular, we are here to put out the fire. It is our duty as spouses, as mothers, because we are stabbed one way or the other. If it is not our husband, it is our children, our brothers. We are more involved than these men." (Interview, 21.11.2011) Interestingly, this argumentation very much resembles the one of Hadja Rabiadou Serah Diallo: Both consider their actions as advocacy politics. However, they justify it by referring to their domestic roles.

When looking at the state of research of women's political articulations in Guinea in a historical perspective, the focus lies on their advocacy politics, on women's participation in political parties and NGOs, and on mass mobilisations such as general strikes. However, the variety of women's political articulations does not become visible by only analysing women's activities within the institutional sphere or public protests. Thus, after this more general overview on Guinea's past regimes' discourses and practices in regard to gender issues, I now look more specifically at women's everyday political activities, which typically do not make headlines. The following case study on women selling at Dibida market illustrates several aspects of women's political articulations in their interactions with employees of the local government.

### **Of tax collectors and ambulant vendors**

Kankan's markets are social spheres where "actors fight for access to and control over space, resources and political allegiance." (Prag 2010: 65) Market women's interactions with representatives of the local government are manifold. Some encounters take place on a regular basis, such as tax collection. Others are quite unpredictable, for example food inspections. For the purpose of this paper, I elaborate on two examples of interrelations between women selling at Dibida market and the local government, namely tax collection and the closing of a road next to the market.

In general, women in Kankan spend much time on markets (Godard 2010: 211) where they do not only buy and sell different items of daily use, but also establish and foster social and commercial relationships (cf. Werner 2003: 122): On Dibida, similar to other markets, all aspects of a human life are discussed and gossip is everywhere (cf. Prus 1998: 23; Storr 2008; Clark 2010: 15ff.). Many conversations are centred around family issues and local norms such as marriage, illegitimate pregnancy, and both male and female demeanour within matrimony, followed by debates on shifting realities, religion, and the latest news. Elderly people accuse youth of taking drugs and not listening to their parents anymore. Further, many conversations centre on the rice quality. Market women complain about the costs of living, putting a special focus on the high food prices, before turning to their final subject of controversy, namely lacking governmental support. Hence, Kankan's markets are an ideal social sphere to observe women's political articulations and their bargaining with representatives of the local government. As Prus notes, "the marketplace is thoroughly and fundamentally social in its constitution. [It] actively reflects people's past experiences and their anticipation of the future, but it takes its shape in the 'here and now' as people work out aspects of their lives in conjunction with other people [...]" (Prus 1998: 21)

Dibida, Kankan's main market, is located in the city centre. It is a closed area whose high ceiling ensures bearable temperatures. Vendors inside the market offer food on tables. Some sell vegetables from their own garden near the Milo River that crosses Kankan, others sell imported rice, fruits from the Forest Region, onions from Mali, etc. Even outside the market, people continue selling items on stands or blankets on the soil. There, the vendors not only sell food, but also other items such as cosmetics and second-hand clothes. Further, there are many ambulant vendors. Women constitute the large majority of the vendors, though men occupy some of the tables too. Contrary to their female counterparts, they usually sell non-perishable goods. The chief of the market, an elderly woman, who is a member of the governmental party and has been appointed by a former

mayor, officially represents Dibida's vendors and acts as an intermediary between them and the local government.

Market women are usually depicted as rather poor and uneducated; however, they do not constitute a homogenous category. The most prominent distinction among them is their ethnic background.<sup>13</sup> Age is another important differentiation. Hereby, the actual age is not that important – many do not even exactly know it. Being 'young' or 'elderly' is socially constructed and has to be understood relationally (Shepler 2010: 630). Women who are considered to be elderly are associated with more experience and wisdom and have therefore more authority than younger women. If there is, for example, a quarrel in the market, elderly women are consulted. Further, a differentiation in regard to economic background has to be made: The larger a vendor's table and the more expensive her commodities, the better is her (and usually her family's) economic situation. Market women differentiate between items of daily use, which "give money swiftly", and others, such as cosmetics, jewellery, or clothes, that people do not buy in economically harsh times. The religious background of the vendors is of minor importance, as, in Kankan, religion is usually not an issue of contestation. The market customers, in contrast, represent the whole range of Kankan's (female) population.

Statehood as a practice is very present in the daily lives of Dibida's vendors. For the latter the state's actions are sometimes predictable, for example the routinized tax collection. Other events such as food inspection or the closing of the markets on special occasions – due to the arrival of an important governmental person – are quite unforeseeable. Market women are typical victims of harassment (cf. Prag 2010: 65): If someone disregards a regulation, or if the inspecting person decides, the commodities of the corresponding market woman are to be seized and brought to the market office. There, with the help of family members or friends, she has to bargain with members of the market office to free the seized commodities. The exact

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<sup>13</sup> The politicization of ethnicity and its impacts on Kankan's markets have been discussed elsewhere (Ammann/Kaufmann 2014: 76ff.) and are therefore not further elaborated here.

procedures of these instances are unclear and therefore give representatives of the local government a looming presence enhancing their authority. As Lund (2007: 24) notes, the line between taxation and bribery is often fuzzy; both enforce governmental authority.

Local authorities want to exercise control over markets “but often lack legitimacy or means of regulation” (Prag 2010: 65). One possibility of exerting authority is through tax collection. All vendors at Dibida market have to pay 100 Guinean francs (FG) a day.<sup>14</sup> At the time of research the smallest banknote was 500FG, corresponding to 5 Euro cent. During a conversation in 2012, a shoe vendor explained that the tax she has to pay felt like a rent to her, as the place was governmental property. Members of the market office employed by the municipality collected the tax every third day. The market women appreciated the tax collector at Dibida market, calling him Ali Sebebilala, ‘the ticket giver’. My informants told me that they let Sebebilala keep the respective change of 200 FG, a practice that seemed to be accepted by all vendors I talked to. “This became somehow obligatory,” a woman said referring to the respect they had for the tax collector. “He is very sympathetic and compassionate”, the female vendor continued. She explained that if a woman happened to be absent from the market for some time because of family obligations, illness, or because she had travelled, Sebebilala would not complain about the missing taxes, nor would he confiscate her commodities or give the table to someone else, as would be the official requirement. Sebebilala’s employer, the municipality, though, had nonetheless sanctioned his ‘misbehaviour’ by cutting his salary, as it was noticed that he would not deliver the amount of money he should have according to the number of tables (informal conversation, 14.01.2012).

The blurred boundaries between the state and society are illustrated by ‘the ticket giver’ Ali Sebebilala, who, despite being an employee of the municipality, is considered by the market women to belong to their own social group, rather than to the local government. Typically, men working at

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<sup>14</sup> Officially, all vendors have to pay this tax regardless of the size of their market stands. This theoretically also holds true for ambulant vendors. In practice, however, they easily avoid the tax collectors due to their mobility. Personal relations with tax collectors can result in tax remission.

the market office have a bad reputation. My informants consider it unbecoming for a head of family to wander through the market quarrelling with women all day long in order to collect taxes. Sebebilala, however, due to his behaviour, is seen differently. The relationship between him and Dibida's vendors can be described as a reciprocal dependency: The market women give Sebebilala an additional 200FG every third day – almost twice the amount of the official tax – thus paying a part of his salary. The tax collector, in return, turns a blind eye on vendors disregarding official regulations. The municipality, too, profits from this arrangement as it can reduce its expenses for Sebebilala's wage. The vendors do not consider their action as political and thus, it can be categorized as everyday politics. Nevertheless, it has an impact on the behaviour of the local government insofar as Sebebilala, despite ignoring official guidelines, is not replaced.

Dibida's vendors typically complained that the local government "does nothing but eating our money. Our concerns are not taken seriously." (Conversation, 14.01.2012) They expected the municipality to use the tax money to clean, equip, and reconstruct the market. Further, the (local) government should build up infrastructure; deliver basic services, such as education, health, and electricity; provide micro credits; and create jobs. Above all, the interviewees claimed lower food prices. The (local) government – in the eyes of Dibida's vendors – is seen as more powerful than it actually is. As Förster (2012: 8) notes, this incorporation of "elements of reciprocity and redistribution" is a typical characteristic of the post-colonial social imaginary<sup>15</sup> of the state.

A second example of interaction between representatives of the local government and market vendors highlights the bargaining for the control over parts of Kankan's main market: In February 2012, the municipality decided to unblock the road around Dibida market that directly leads to the central bus station. Normally, the road is crowded with market stalls. Some women illegally sell their commodities with clothes spread on the floor and

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<sup>15</sup> By imaginary I understand collectively shared images of how things should look like, that is the shared conceptions of a society (Castoriadis 1987).



ambulant vendors<sup>16</sup> carry goods in pushcarts or on their heads, which makes it difficult for cars and motorcycles to get through, resulting in numerous accidents. The problem of women illegally selling on the street had been an old but still unsolved one, a member of the market office explained (conversation, 27.02.2012).

The information that the market women were to unblock the road spread through various channels: The municipality informed both the head of market and the market office's members. They were then to pass the message to the market women. In addition, the news was announced in the local radio stations through which the women were continuously 'sensitized' to respect the law by not selling on the streets. Obviously, the message spread rapidly by word of mouth among the market sellers. Nevertheless, some affected women reported that they had not been informed beforehand. Whenever such problems arise at Dibida market, the vendors first discuss it with the market chief. If necessary, the latter accompanied by some vendors then goes to the municipality in order to find a solution for the difficulties at hand.

The reluctance of these market women to clean the road has widely been debated by members of the local government. Especially involved were the Mayor Lassana Fode Quatre Doumbouya, who the local population just calls Fode Quatre, as well as two municipal officials, Madame Béréte and Madame Keita, who are responsible for 'social affairs and the promotion of women and children' at prefectural and municipal level respectively. Fode Quatre told me that there was enough space in the market for those selling their commodities illegally outside. Some of them even had a table inside the market, but they were convinced to sell more quickly if they were placed outside the market walls, Fode Quatre lamented. Some women selling inside the market shared his view, as they told me. They even

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<sup>16</sup> A clear distinction between ambulant and non-ambulant vendors is difficult to make. Some vendors from inside the market send off their children to sell their commodities as ambulant vendors outside Dibida. Like this, they hope to acquire customers who usually do not go inside the market.

congratulated the mayor for his decision as they hoped to gain an advantage and to sell more in the future.

Madame Keita complained about the police being too arrogant vis-à-vis these market women, whose situation she understood: “Most women are poor. They sell quickly during the day to buy something to eat for their family’s evening meal. We have to make these women understand that we are not their enemies; on the contrary, we are here to help them.” (Conversation, 23.02.2012)

Madame Béréte, however, emphasized that the law had to be respected. Similar to Madame Keita, she stressed that they would find a solution together with the concerned women. One viable option would be the relocation of the latter to another, almost empty market within half an hour’s walk from the city centre. After a meeting with Dibida’s market chief and some vendors, Madame Béréte underlined that the women concerned were very difficult to convince: “The problem is that they are not educated; too many of them did not go to school. It is so difficult to make them understand things. They do not know their rights and duties. The law is on our side, they are not allowed to sell on the street.” (Conversation, 23.02.2012)

As this statement illustrates, employees of the local government create boundaries between themselves and women selling at Dibida market on different levels (cf. Bierschenk/Olivier de Sardan 2014). First, they manifest through the bureaucrats’ posture: While members of the local government sit uprightly on a chair behind a desk in their offices, the women have to bring their pleas forward on a wooden bench. State employees in Kankan usually wear so-called ‘traditional’ outfits or modest suits. Female state bureaucrats demonstrate superiority and hint at wealth by having an expensive-looking hairstyle, wearing jewels, and depositing a big handbag in front of them.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, difference is being established by the discursive formation of governmental employees; on the one hand by referring to the law that backs their position and thus gives their actions legitimacy. On the

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<sup>17</sup> On the importance of authorities’ outfit see Engeler (2012: 104f.).

other hand, the bureaucrats promoted an image of Dibida's vendors as a uniform group. Even though some men, too, have been affected by the municipality's prohibition to sell commodities on the road around Dibida market, the three governmental representatives only talked of women, labelling them as uneducated, stubborn, and therefore difficult to handle. The three state employees, in contrast, presented themselves as well educated, thus conveying the image of someone knowing right from wrong. Altogether, these practices create a boundary between members of the local authorities and the market women.

The affected vendors for their part were furious, not knowing where to go. They were afraid of losing their clients if they had to change their points of sale. One of the market women explained: "Ah, you know, if you have the habit of selling something here and then they come and tell you to move to another place...it is very hard for you, because your clients will not find you. You have to tell your clients beforehand to look for you somewhere else. But will they do so? So we are all afraid of not earning enough money to buy the evening meal for our children." (Conversation, 22.02.2012) Furthermore, the commodities of several women have been confiscated and taken to the market office.

## **Conclusion**

On looking at women's advocacy politics throughout Guinea's history, it becomes obvious that they, too, shaped Guinean politics: They were active in political parties and women's movements already before independence. The discourses and practices of Guinea's past regimes with regard to gender issues have influenced how women acted politically. Sékou Touré integrated women into his state building project and placed much emphasis on female emancipation, gender equality, and women's political participation. However, in Touré's one-party state, women were only allowed to diffuse the party's ideology. During the era of General Lansana Conté women were not put on the front stage. He mostly signed treaties concerning women's rights to please the 'International Community'.

Nevertheless, thanks to Guinea's political opening since the 1990s, many (women's) movements have emerged.

Remarkable is the fact that throughout Guinea's history, women decided to publicly put forward their claims mostly in times of political, social, and economic crisis. This has been the case during the general strikes in the early 1950s, the protest of market women in 1977, the general strike of 2006/07, and lately, during the Presidential elections of 2010 – all typical cases of advocacy politics. Further, as the example of Rabiadou Serah Diallo and the Association of Female Leaders in Kankan illustrate, women allude to their roles as mothers or wives to legitimise their public involvement.

Besides such forms of public advocacy politics, it is hardly visible how women shape state and statehood. Generally, women in Kankan do not see themselves as political actors. Their emic notion of politics solely refers to the male dominated institutional politics. I argue that in order to reveal political articulations of marginalised groups, such as Dibida's vendors, we have to look outside the institutional public sphere that is typically identified with elections, parliaments, ministries, political parties, trade unions, and rebellions. These women's political articulations are nuanced and manifest themselves in their everyday actions such as during interactions and bargaining with representatives of the local government.

Market women's everyday politics manifests, among other things, their imaginary of the state: Dibida's vendors pay a tax of 100 FG a day. They expect the local government to clean and repair the market with this money. Further, the market women want the (local) government to build up infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals and to deliver basic services. Why do such normative expectations vis-a-vis the (local) government prevail, even if it has been disappointing its population for decades (cf. Jackson 2007)? The imaginary of these women hints at the success of statehood practices in self-staging an image of a strong state, so as its citizens like Dibida's market women would still believe in its capacities. As Navaro-Yashin notes "[...] the very people who critique the state also reproduce it through their ,fantasies' for the state." (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 4)

When asked if they did something against the misuse of public funds, my interlocutors replied in the negative. They stressed that they did not consider their position as a powerful one. This illustrates that Dibida's vendors, in most situations, do not consider advocacy politics as a viable option. They often do not understand the 'language of bureaucracy' and they feel intimidated and disrespected by representatives of the local government.

Dibida's vendors decided to give Ali Sebebilala the change of 200 FG due to his personal behaviour and proceeded doing so even after the municipality had cut his salary. Thus, Sebebilala could continue working on the market and the women still had the ticket vendor they wanted. As this example shows, these market women do not hesitate to call on local state employees to take into account their special situations – as breadwinners of their families – and help them in times of trouble without making their lives harder by confiscating their commodities or giving their selling-tables to someone else. If there is a problem in Dibida market, the vendors usually address the female chief of market. Together, they then decide whether a delegation should go and see someone at the municipality. Even if they thereafter bargain with the representatives of the local government, the market women do not consider their actions as advocacy politics.

The role of the market chief is an appropriate example which illustrates the blurred boundary between the state and the population: Even though a former mayor has made her the market chief, she does not receive any salary from the municipality. She sells her commodities in Dibida like all the other vendors, but is expected to act as an intermediary between them and the local government in times of conflict, such as during the dispute over the access and control of a public space, namely the road outside Dibida market. This was a conflict of interest: The local government, on the one hand, officially wanted to ensure free traffic circulation. Their actions, however, can also be analysed as a means of enforcing their authority. The affected vendors, on the other hand, were reluctant to move to another market far away from the city centre, as they were afraid of losing both

clients and income. This contestation over regulation can be seen as a typical example of everyday politics: Even though a delegation of Dibida's vendors and the market chief went to discuss the issue with the mayor, Madame Béréte, and Madame Keita at the municipality, they did not consider their action as political. Still, the two examples clearly illustrate that forms of everyday politics have an influence on the local government.

Market women, despite not forming a strong network<sup>18</sup>, are able to put pressure on the local government by their sheer number and can thus sometimes pursue their goals. The statements by members of the local authorities demonstrate that they were aware of market women's economic role within their families. They feared the female vendors would publicly protest if their income were further reduced. According to my informants, Kankan's women only march on the streets in case of high necessity such as during the contested Presidential elections of 2010. These women's protests did not turn violent but were still seen as a bad omen for the sitting president. The fear of women's public protest, therefore, prompted members of the local government to handle market women somehow carefully.

In the end, the measures taken by the local authorities have not resolved the problem of women selling on the market road. A few days later, the market road is as crowded as before.

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<sup>18</sup> It could rather be characterised a passive network, which in Bayat's words represents "an inherent element of street and back-street life; [it] ensure[s] instant cooperation of the individual actors once they feel a threat to their well-being." (Bayat 1997: 66)

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