

Conference - Call for papers

# Women and the history of state building in postcolonial African countries

6-7 June 2024

Department of African Studies- University of Vienna, Austria

As African countries became independent, being represented in state institutions was a political goal for many women, but undoing the legacy of colonial politics and gaining public visibility in the political field was no easy task. Despite serious difficulties and challenges, women vied for offices, campaigned, talked and wrote about politics, voted, and expressed their ideas within various institutions (organizations, political party, unions, local and national assemblies...). They were strategic actors in the processes of postcolonial state building. Yet, their history has remained confined to a separate section of African politics, the “women’s section”. While African political history has long been dominated by male actors, the history of African women in politics has been primarily written from the perspective of grassroots politics and women’s role in social and economic development projects. A new wave of scholarship has recently begun to address this discrepancy in the historiography, with scholars exploring the ways women have challenged established political orders “from the top”, from creative writing to frontal opposition to presidential rule.<sup>1</sup> This literature shows that African women’s politics must be placed at the heart of narratives of state building, party politics, governance and presidential rule, that political narratives need to be complexified, concepts rethought, and that new sources must be sought to acknowledge African women’s complex modes of political imagination, action, and language.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué, *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* (University of Michigan Press, 2019); Grace A. Musila (ed), *Wangari Maathai's Registers of Freedom* (National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2020); Anna Adima, "Anglophone women's writing and public culture in Kenya and Uganda, 1959-1976" (PhD diss., University of York, 2022). The film “When Women Speak” retracing Ghanaian women’s political history also makes a significant contribution in making African women’s political history accessible to a larger audience, see <https://whenwomenspeakfilm.com>.

Building on this trend, this conference aims to retrieve histories of African women's contribution to the postcolonial politics of state building. Who were the women who vied for positions of power, how/why did they campaign (or were appointed), for which ideas? What did they achieve during their political mandates, which challenges did they face? What did they do afterwards, what impact did they have? Which sources are available to document their stories? What are the methodological challenges that emerge when retrieving these sources and/or writing these histories?

Case studies focusing on specific leaders, historical periods and/or countries are welcome.

Papers may explore (but are not confined to) the following themes:

- *Documenting generations of African female politicians*: pioneers, outsiders, through the lens of elite reproduction...
- *Documenting women's modes of action in elite politics*: via state and non-state organizations; informal and formal networks; African women's roles in connecting multiple political spaces: at home, in local, national, or international politics.
- *Documenting the lives of non-conventional actors and the politics of silencing, cooptation, or amnesia*.
- *Sources & Methodologies* to retrieve women's postcolonial political history; oral, visual, and/or material sources; personal testimonies.
- *Political languages*: use of symbolic political languages (motherhood, politicization of the body...); how precolonial forms of politics inform African women's postcolonial politics/activism; feminist discourses (applying a *longue durée* perspective).
- *Conceptual reflections*: exploring the politics of "empowerment" and "disempowerment"; "women's political space"...

Please send an **abstract** (250 words max) and a **short biography** (100 words) to

[womenafricanhistory2024@univie.ac.at](mailto:womenafricanhistory2024@univie.ac.at) before **15<sup>th</sup> October 2023**.

Limited funding is available to cover hotel and travel costs for participants based in African countries. **Please indicate in your proposal if you require financial assistance.**

Thank you!

The conference organizers

Anais Angelo and Sandra Benecchi