

Family politics and female authority in Sierra Leone

In Freetown, Sierra Leone, electoral politics is not the dominant form of politics. Jonah Lipton sheds light on the significance of family politics and the prominence of women in these decision-making processes.

This article is part of the #PublicAuthority blog series, part of the ESRC-funded [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#).

In March of this year general elections were held in Sierra Leone. The result was a narrow victory for the main opposition party, SLPP, who returned to government after over 10 years out. I was not in the country to witness the events unfold, but I was in regular contact with friends that I had lived and worked with during many trips to the county; including for a year and a half between 2013–15 for my PhD fieldwork. The election was highly contested, with dramatic turns of events, and a number of my friends were involved in campaigning. However, excitement soon began to fade. What appeared to replace it was a sense that things would probably go on much as they had done before. As one friend, Musa, wryly commented during one of our calls, ‘now SLPP get to eat a little’.

It is possible to conclude from this that electoral politics is performative; and that popular engagement with it is tokenistic. Or that its value is ultimately realised through corrupt practices that undermine liberal democratic ideals to which politicians simply pay lip service. What is missing from such narratives of politics in Sierra Leone is, I suggest, the dominant form of politics that people meaningfully participate in on day-to-day basis: family politics.

Family politics is radically under-theorised and misunderstood in popular representation and scholarship on African political authority. This has led to a number of false assumptions. First, that the family is a ‘private’ domain, so what goes on among families cannot be political. Second, that all politics taking place outside of the remit of formal state institutions and civil society organisations is, by definition, ‘corrupt’ and ‘informal’. Third, that figures of public authority are predominantly male; hence the proliferation of concepts and idioms such as ‘patrimonialism’ and ‘big men’.



Freetown, Image Credit: Erik Cleves Kristensen via [Flickr](#), CC by 2.0

When I first visited Sierra Leone in 2011 – and later when I embarked on long-term ethnographic research – I assumed from my prior reading that I would encounter this kind of political landscape. However, as I became integrated into the close-knit neighbourhood in Freetown where I was based, a different picture emerged. A major turning point was being invited to participate in family meetings by my hosts, friends, and neighbours, after spending a substantial amount of time living together. I was struck by the structured formality of these meetings, and how far-reaching and wide-ranging the topics of deliberation were.

Family meetings were called for a multitude of reasons; to resolve disputes between married couples or siblings; to arrange care and housing for those who were unwell; or to initiate local development projects, such as road maintenance and street lighting (services that the state could not be relied upon to provide). At meetings, decisions were made that involved or affected scores, if not hundreds of family members, spread between villages, towns, and continents. Membership of family networks was a surprisingly fluid process, as I eventually discovered first hand. At the centre of political decision-making processes were often women, such as one of my hosts, Auntie Sarah, who after her sister's death during the Ebola crisis was central in making arrangements for her memorialisation, and assigning duties of care for her children, as described in [my previous article on this](#).

This sets the scene for my new postdoctoral research project undertaken at the Centre for Public Authority and International Development, hosted at the LSE Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa. The mission objective of CPAID is to examine what forms of public authority actually govern people's lives in areas shaken by conflict and crisis. I will soon be returning to Sierra Leone for further field research, in which I will be observing family meetings and everyday politics that takes place behind the scenes in, around, and beyond the home.

Family politics is a particularly revealing angle to examine public authority in Africa, in large part because it falls on either side of what might be considered the public–private divide. At family meetings people often decide themselves what should remain within, and what goes beyond. While of course this can be a contentious and at times exclusionary process, I think that there is an optimistic, and possibly democratic, side of family politics that, if better understood, could be embraced and learned from.

One such aspect is the prominence of female authority in day-to-day decision-making processes, which anthropological methods and feminist theories are particularly well placed to pick up on and interpret. In my research I am keen to discover how female authority works in Sierra Leone, and how it might be informed by particular logics or idioms. As the Nigerian feminist scholar [Oyeronke Oyewumi writes](#), 'In much of Africa, 'wife' is a four-letter word...*Mother* is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women'.

Can we think of motherhood, beyond its biological meaning, as a model for a particular way of doing politics? And what might this look like on large scale?

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Jonah Lipton ([@jonah_lipton](#)) is an anthropologist and post-doctoral Research Officer at the Centre for Public Authority and International Development.

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