



AN INTIMATE REBUKE

FEMALE GENITAL POWER IN RITUAL
AND POLITICS IN WEST AFRICA

Laura S. Grillo

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The Religious Cultures of African
and African Diaspora People

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Duke University Press Durham and London 2018

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Courtney Leigh Baker
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Grillo, Laura S., [date] author.

Title: An intimate rebuke : female genital power in ritual and politics
in West Africa / Laura S. Grillo.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2018. | Series: The religious cultures
of African and African diaspora people | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018008228 (print) | LCCN 2018013660 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478002635 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478001201 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 9781478001553 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Côte d'Ivoire—Religion. | Older women—Religious life—Côte d'Ivoire. |
Older women—Political activity—Côte d'Ivoire. | Generative organs, Female—Symbolic
aspects—Côte d'Ivoire. | Generative organs, Female—Religious aspects. |

Generative organs, Female—Political aspects—Côte d'Ivoire.

Classification: LCC BL2470.C85 (ebook) | LCC BL2470.C85 G75 2018 (print) |

DDC 305.4096668—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018008228>

Cover art: Michael Richardson, *Oshun, Healer, Prosperity, River of Love*.

Watercolor. 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

To Angela Lanza Grillo,
for the gift of life

To Jacob K. Olupona,
for the gift of friendship

To Henry Pernet,
for the gift of love

WITH LOVE FOREVER

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Acknowledgments

First I acknowledge with gratitude she who came first: my mother, Angela Lanza Grillo, who provides love and support, both material and moral. My sisters Janet and Carolyn are an inextricable part of that nucleus of matrilineal strength.

The seeds for this book were sown long ago in Côte d'Ivoire by the love of another family that embraced me and never ceased to extend to me their hearts, hospitality, and help each time I returned. They have been my generous hosts, companions, and guides. They introduced me to friends who in turn freely offered the concrete assistance that made it possible to conduct local research. To them, I offer my most sincere gratitude and affection: Irène Melei Mel, Eugénie Meliane Mel, Dr. Pierre Adou, Marie-Noëlle Adou, and their girls Emmera, Sarah, Anna, Victoria, and Eve-Andrée, Alysse Adou, Fred Vamy, and Philippe Leite. Friends in Abidjan, both old and newfound, went out of their way to help me with my investigations. I cherish the camaraderie that we forged through the remarkable adventures, trials, and secrets that we shared along the way: Prof. Dakouri Gadou, François Bindje, Cindy Assi, and Mireille Lofton.

Others in Abidjan whom I must acknowledge and thank for their assistance with my research: Genevieve Bro-Grébé, Victorine Dongo, and Mme Yésone, Proviseur of the Lycée Moderne Nangui Abrogoua, and the students there.

I humbly thank the elders and ritual specialists of the Adiokrou village of Orbaff who were so generous with their knowledge and time: Djedjéro Edouard, Sangroh Esaïe, Essoh Nomel Salomon, Yedoh Edouard, Sess Egue Mel Michel, Meless Akpa Esaïe, Mansso Lorgng Yed, Akpro Bedi Mathieu, Owel Assra Antoine, Meledje Djedjéro Theodore, Gbétou Yao Emmanuel, Kakré Marcel, Low Agnime Emilienne, Djedjéro Nan Lili, and Akpa Akpess Paul. I am especially indebted to my host and interpreter, Jonas Amary Ly, his lovely wife, Marie-France, and their family.

In the Adiokrou village Yassap, Chef de Terre Meledje Djedjress Philippe, and Latte Mel Paul generously shared their deep knowledge and patiently gave of their time to interviews. I thank them as well as Akpa Alexi and Mme Margeritte Akpa, who offered warm hospitality as well as important introductions

to village notables. I am especially grateful to my amiable hostess, Alice Nomel, who extended friendship as well as shelter.

In the Abidji village of Sahuyé I was the happy beneficiary of the patient and attentive assistance of Chief Tanau Laugau Julien, Chef de Terre Gnangra N'Guessan Bertin, and the elders and ritual specialists of Dipri: Djidja Adangba Marcel, Yao Tanoh Daniel, Lasme Tomah, Abo Brou Andre, Yede Okon Richard, Kassi Aby Simeon, and Koffi Akissi, as well as Tanoh Marie-Claire and Kamenan Adjoba. I owe particular thanks to my host, Koffi Bègré, and the extended family of N'Dia Bègré Bernard N'Guessan, whose hospitality extends back thirty years, to the time of my first study of Dipri. In the nearby village of Sokokro I was warmly welcomed and indulged by You Yvonne and Ako N'Drin Marcel; thank you.

Many of my colleagues in the American Academy of Religion (AAR) showed interest and appreciation for this study at various stages of its presentation at its meetings. I am particularly beholden to my friend and fellow Ivoirianist Joseph Hellweg, who as a guest editor of a feature of *Cultural Anthropology* elicited my earliest publication on “female genital power” (FGP), a reflection piece on the Ivoirian political crisis. Also thanks to him, I presented portions of this work at the 2017 conference of the Mande Studies Association (MANSA) at the University of Grand-Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire, where many new friends and colleagues offered validating examples of FGP elsewhere in the country as well as in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Togo. Special thanks for those go to Bintou Koné, Benjamin Lawrance, Moussa Moumouni, Ba Morou Ouattara, Serge Noël Ouedraogo, Kando Amédée Soumahoro, and Monica Blackmun Visonà.

I owe my deepest debt of gratitude to my colleague and great friend Jacob K. Olupona, whose faith in me was a powerful and steady beacon over the past four years. Without his encouragement and support this book would never have been written. It was thanks to his sponsorship that I was granted a Research Fellowship at Harvard Divinity School in 2013, which provided me the unique opportunity for consecrated time to devote to launching this book project. Since then he continually entrusted me with his patient confidence that I would succeed, a gift that cannot be matched with simple words of thanks. There is no better harbor than such a faithful friend.

During that Research Fellowship at Harvard I enjoyed stimulating exchanges at the Center for the Study of World Religion (CSWR), whose participants extended me warm collegiality and showed heartening interest in my project. I especially thank the Director, Francis X. Clooney, for welcoming me to the group. The goodwill and generosity of that fellowship was a reflection of his kind leadership.

I also want to gratefully acknowledge Sian Hawthorne and Adriaan van Klinken, organizers of the 2012 conference on Catachresis at SOAS University

of London, as well as its participants, particularly Morny Joy. That working conference provided inspiration for the methodological framework for the book. The paper that I delivered at SOAS and its subsequent publication in *Religion and Gender* gave this project critical impetus. Adriaan van Klinken has since championed the developing work, and his friendship has proved stalwart.

A presentation I made at another conference, a workshop on Religion and Global Civil Society organized by the Orfalea Center for Global Studies at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) in 2012, also proved formative for this work. Happily, the many subsequent conversations about its development with the center's former Program Director, Victor Faessel, bloomed into an abiding friendship.

Teaching offers many rewards, but the most valuable is the enduring bond forged with students, fellow seekers of wonder. My former doctoral students' eager interest and engaging conversations elicited regular renewed commitment to seeing this project through to completion. Among those most faithful friends are Thea Bloom, Rebecca Diggs, Mary Diggin, Rebekah Lovejoy, Elizabeth Stewart, and Leslie Stoupas.

Other true friends who encouraged my work and, more importantly, lovingly stood with me during my woes are Karen Anderson, Teresa F. Blomquist, Carol A. Burnett, Fran Cho, Richard N. Chrisman, Hendrika de Vries, Rita Dragonette, Jennifer Kwong, Jan Rudestam, and Ann Taves. Each one has provided me with a very particular kind of sustaining hope over the years.

I am grateful to those at Duke University Press who immediately saw value and promise in this work and who brought it to print. First among these are the editors of this series on the Religious Cultures of African and African Diaspora People, Jacob K. Olupona, Dianne M. Stewart, and Terrence L. Johnson. From the outset Miriam Angress, Associate Editor, has been a remarkably responsive and encouraging companion in the journey to publication. I am also indebted to the two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript whose careful reading, insightful suggestions, and enthusiasm for the project were deeply rewarding.

Last but certainly not least among those deserving recognition is my husband, Henry Pernet, whose constant love has been my anchor. He faithfully supported every step of this project, even cheerfully braving the discomforts of the tropics to accompany me on my preliminary research trip back to Côte d'Ivoire. He regularly listened patiently as I unknotted puzzles aloud, he eagerly shared articles of interest, he read drafts of my work, and he made careful editorial corrections. Through all this and more, his joyful companionship and tender, steadfast love has given me true happiness.

There is no power greater than love.

INTRODUCTION

O, cock, stop this ostentation,
for we all came out of the egg-shell.

—ASANTE PROVERB, in Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng,
“Spirituality, Gender and Power in Asante History”

Ceremonial nakedness greatly increases
the magico-religious power of woman, and the chief
attribute of the Great Mother is her nakedness.

—MIRCEA ELIADE, “Masks: Mythical and Ritual Origins”

In the Abidji village of Sahuyé in southern Côte d'Ivoire in 2010, the carnivalesque ambiance of the evening had given way to a deep stillness. Even the electricity was cut, and all were thrust into the darkness of the moonless night. The hush prepared the village for “Dipri,” the dangerous initiatory festival that was to take place the next day. In the small hours of the morning, my young companion shook me awake. “Auntie, Auntie, the old women, they’re coming. Get up.” I sat up on the mattress we shared in our shuttered and stifling room. In the distance a faint eerie knell, a shrill calling and a droning chant, and then a repeating thud like a heartbeat. “If you want to see them, Auntie, let’s go.” “No, no. That old woman made it clear I cannot join them. It is a sacred thing, a taboo to look upon them. It would be an offense.” I knew the elderly women performing the rite were naked, they were crossing the village pounding the ground with pestles to curse the malevolent forces of witches who might threaten the initiates who were to be consecrated at the river the next morning, and to chase away death. They would make aspersions with water used to bathe their genitals and pour it at the village entrance to seal it. After that no one would be allowed to exit or enter until the next day’s ceremonies were over. This was Egbiki, the secret, nocturnal ritual of female genital power. It was an act of spiritual warfare, a critical and dangerous enterprise that the women were undertaking on behalf of the whole village. I stood at the window with my recorder trying to capture the strange distant keening, their soft shuffle, and the thud. That sound was so chilling that even now, years later, I dread to listen to the recording.

Female Genital Power: A Prototypical Ritual over Great Expanse

Egbiki is not only an esoteric practice unique to this remote village or to the Abidji people who celebrate Dipri. For at least five centuries and throughout West Africa, women have made vivid appeal in ritual to a fundamental religious concept: that woman bears the innate spiritual power and embodies moral authority. The locus of this power is the female genitals. In times of social calamity female elders strip naked, wielding branches or old pestles, dance “lewdly,” slapping their genitals and their breasts to curse the forces of evil. This constellation of paradigmatic gestures, enacted as a collective rebuke and a curse, constitutes the appeal to “Female Genital Power” (FGP).¹

This power is *not* the reproductive capacity of women, nor does it allude to the office of motherhood, important as that status has been to women in African traditional societies. Rather, “the Mothers” are *postmenopausal* women who, having surpassed the defining stage of sexual reproduction, are ambiguously gendered. Like primordial beings, their incarnate power resides in that gender doubleness. As the living embodiment of the ancestors, the Mothers are guardians of the moral order and conduits of a spiritual power that is primary, paramount, and potent. The seat of their power is not only the womb, but also the vulva. Appealing to their sex as a living altar, the women ritually deploy their genital power to elicit the most perilous of curses as an act of “spiritual combat” against malevolent forces that threaten the community.

While the use of female genital power is a spiritual weapon, it is also invoked as a rebuke of immoral or injudicious governance and has therefore served as an equally potent deterrent to the pernicious use of political power. Women have regularly mobilized collectively, forming associations that sometimes even transcend ethnicity, to chastise the state and its military forces for reprehensible misuse of power and invoke FGP in public protests to assert their moral authority.

So critical is the conception of FGP as a guiding and sustaining force that this paradigmatic rite has been documented in material as varied as accounts of early Arab chroniclers, colonial administrative records and decrees, missionary tracts, travel diaries, ethnographic studies, and newspaper reports. In Côte d’Ivoire as early as 1894 the ethnographer Maurice Delafosse observed the Baoulé (Baule) women’s ritual Adjanou (Adjanu), demonstrating obscene gestures to rebuke male transgressions of the moral order.² This same ritual figured prominently in the now celebrated nationalist uprisings of 1949, when a multi-ethnic coalition of 2,000 Ivoirian women marched to the colonial stronghold, Grand-Bassam, to take a stand against the French. Once gathered in front of

the prison where nationalist leaders were being held, they deployed Adjanou. The descriptions of those women stripping naked, making lewd gestures and gyrations, chanting sexually explicit and aggressive lyrics, donning vines, and brandishing sticks clearly reiterate the critical features of traditional religious ritual, Egbiki. Transposed onto the political sphere, the secret, nocturnal spiritual rite becomes a shocking spectacle of protest against the contemporary state that has wielded its force without moral compass.

Aware of the ritual potency of their nudity and the conjuration of their sex, contemporary West African women still exploit this strong rhetorical form to resist social injustice, to condemn violations of human rights, and to demand accountability. During Côte d'Ivoire's recent civil war and its violent aftermath, Ivoirian women have repeatedly executed the rite of FGP to protest abuses on both sides of the political divide and to recollect the moral foundations of legitimate authority. But are their acts being properly recognized and their appeals understood beyond the immediate sphere of the local? Does the appeal to traditional religion and a mystical rite like Adjanou still have salience in today's increasingly globalized world?

The Problem with Tradition in the Modern Situation

The rapid pulse of technology, the massive migration and displacements of Africans on the continent, the increasing cultural homogenization of urban populations gravitating toward the European metropole, and the electric spread of geography-defying ideologies are all forces of globalization that overshadow and obscure distinct and idiosyncratic practices associated with the local. The study of particular indigenous traditions is being eclipsed by a shift of interest onto a fast-changing and interconnected world. More and more the focus is on bilocal studies, on migration and diaspora communities, on the new cosmopolitanism fostered by mass consumption of international commodities and rapid social media, or on the new virulent forms of Christianity and Islam seizing the African continent. It seems the local is no more.

One might imagine that this trend reflects the trajectory of the traditions themselves and the fate predicted for them at the turn of the last century—namely, that local practices and beliefs would be effaced by the encroachments of modernity, the advances of science, and the challenge and competing interests of the so-called world religions. But those predictions were based on the false idea of tradition as a set of customs and beliefs that are *timeless and unchanging*, belonging to a *closed society*, preserved from the taint of cultural encounter and exchange. By now it is well understood that such a conception of tradition as

fixed, immune from history, and untouched by innovation was an invention by scholars of the last century with a decidedly Eurocentric perspective. Their depictions of traditional society as a fossilized version of Europe's historical past were based on Darwin's evolutionist biology, mistakenly applied to the social sciences. While they represented *remote* places and peoples in terms of distance in *time*, as nonmodern and without history, no such isolated and pristine communities ever existed. Distorting claims about traditional society were also the basis for the construction of the demeaning notion of "the primitive," which portrayed Africans in particular in sharp contrast to Westerners.³ Such peoples purportedly *lacked reflexivity and therefore any true agency*, since the ability to act with intention depends on self-consciousness and the ability to distance oneself as an individual apart from the group or tribe. This was deemed beyond the capacity of peoples whose very identity presumably depended on the unquestioning acceptance and perpetuation of ancient ancestral ways.⁴ More than a mere term, then, *tradition* is a construct heavily freighted by imperialism. The colonization of people in distant and exotic places was justified on the basis of the claim that they were "savages," as distinct from modern Europeans as were the original "primitives" of the human race (Chidester 2004, 84). Ultimately tradition came to signify all thought and practice that stands in contrast to modernity and to the defining institutions and ideals of the West, like individualism, secularism, development, and democracy.

Actually, the etymology of the word is from the Latin *traditio* ("handing over"), and in religious studies it simply refers to "the body of knowledge which has been preserved and transmitted, and whose original source is no longer accessible or verifiable [through written records or sacred texts]. It is both a means of engaging memory and the normative expression of ideals and solidarities" (Valliere 2005, 9267, 9280). Such knowledge, often embodied in ritual practice, can only be preserved and transmitted insofar as it is performed or rehearsed, an undertaking that implies commitment to its transmission, not only as a matter of historical record but especially as a vital means of orienting social life to what is held to be most deeply significant, and providing meaningful orientation as a result. Tradition as such endures, but the trend away from interest in it may have less to do with any actual obliteration of practices than with the fear of reproducing the epistemic violence of imperialism in a subtle new form. Postmodern critiques rightly shook the foundations of ethnography and forced a welcome shift in thinking "away from the traditional model of the study of 'peoples'" and reified treatments of traditional cultures that presented them as if they were not

subject to the contingencies of real world events or capable of innovation (Marcus 1998, 20).

While we may be content to do away with the study of cultures as bounded wholes and closed systems, we can't do away with "the cultural, as a constitutive dimension" of meaningful life (Rabinow et al 2008, 106). How then can one make sense of those other meaningful cultural worlds without recapitulating the sins of the past?

The Problem with "the Local" in the Global Situation

Postcolonial theorists like Charles Piot (1999) have attempted to do so by "unsettl(ing) the orientalizing binarism—and conceit—that associates Europe with 'modernity' and Africa with 'tradition'" (2). In *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa*, Piot criticizes the use of the conventionalized categories that continue to inform scholarship about Africa but that "operate at some distance from *local conceptions*" and the actual realities on the ground and "fail to get at *local understandings* of social relations" (6–7, emphasis mine). Rather than eschewing terms like *tradition* or *local*, he makes an account of "apparently traditional features" in African society in a way that problematizes Eurocentric assumptions about them, disrupting facile distinctions between traditional and modern, local and global (2).

Reference to the local does not necessarily infer remote, circumscribed places or persons uninformed by outside contact. Nor are locals persons who have remained immobile and wedded to a definitive way of living that protects them from influence. To ascribe those notions to *the local* makes the term a counterpoint to *the global* in parallel to the way that *traditional* has been used to signify all that contrasts with *modernity*. That is, the local comes to designate a social space that is *fixed and unchanging*, while the domain of the global is associated with change and the dynamics of contemporary *transformation*: mobility and the rapid shifts in populations across the world, as well as communication and the rapid flows of ideas and information across world-space. Piot therefore recasts African *local* realities as instantiations of global dynamics, characterized by mobility and exchange.

Such a move corrects the distortions of early scholarship that depicted Africa as an isolated preserve in which circumscribed tribes are fixed in place. It underscores that Africans have always been full partners in shaping the world through migration and exchange of goods and ideas, a point that is especially poignant when considering the extent to which the world was reshaped by the forced extraction and dispersal of its population through slavery. However,

globalization is more than migration or the impact of commodities, ideas, and practices across borders or cultural boundaries; certainly in this simple sense, Africa has always been involved in the globalizing project. Today reference to *the global* domain refers to more than the increase in mobility and the intensified flow of material, culture, or ideology. Globalization is moreover the consolidation of a dominant set of practices and ideologies. *Globalism* now implies the hegemony of the metropole, its culture, and its socioeconomic and political interests and advantages.

Although Africans also live with the fluidity and uncertainty that define the postmodern situation, that fact is not sufficient to identify even those most mobile and transient of African workers who regularly travel between villages and urban centers as *cosmopolitans* (Piot 1999, 132). A cosmopolitan is not only a person who moves rapidly and easily across boundaries and borders, but is most especially one who can enjoy the certainty that one will be at home anywhere in the world that reproduces the familiar patterns of the dominant metropole. Cosmopolitans move readily between metropolises that share a global frame of reference. By contrast, translocals are peoples who move or flee their native situation (such as migrant workers, refugees, evacuees, exiles), but who do not necessarily adopt the new, dominant worldview when they are displaced and dispersed (in the diaspora). Unlike the cosmopolitan who has no investment in any particular place as home, no commitment to carry familiar practices or defining values into the newly occupied spaces, and no aspiration to return to that geographic locus of identity, the translocal remains firmly rooted in the *habitus* of the culture of origin and brings a very particular epistemology and ontology into the new spatial context (P. Werbner, 1999; R. Grillo, 2007; L. Grillo 2010).

The local is a literal domain of *home*, grounded in place as well as conceptual reality. It refers to those contexts in which particular practices arose and were regularly practiced, giving charter to a common worldview as well as a social space as defined by the social imaginary. I therefore use *the local* to refer to those realities on the ground that are recognized by Africans themselves to be real and to have consequence in terms of their self-definitions and the orientation of their lives.

The local social imaginary is all that constitutes a sense of home. The local may extend beyond the circumscribed parameters of small communities, however. I intentionally use the term *local* to denote indigenous African values and practices, those that emerged in and are associated with the African context, even when that context is regional or continental in span. My intent is to differentiate those values and practices from supposedly global ones—which are, in fact, the consolidation of Western ideology that is circulated and adopted (or imposed) elsewhere.

Today, “the relentless drive of homogenizing and standardizing market forces to turn the whole world into a hi-tech consumerist landscape has irreversibly destabilized these familiar feelings of belonging” that constitute the “radiating warmth of ‘home’” (Steger 2008, 196). The local phenomenon of FGP is an act of resistance to such external pressures to conform to Western hegemony. It recalls instead the fundamentals of a uniquely African vision of the moral order and the society that arises from it. The ubiquity of the ritual phenomenon of FGP and the common moral precepts that it embodies undergird so much of West African culture as to represent a common epistemological grounding—a local, that is to say *particularly African*, way of understanding and organizing knowledge and meaning.

Writing New Histories and the Problem of Logocentrism

I join Piot and other postcolonial scholars who are “committed to writing histories that disrupt the conventional grand narratives . . . [or that] deny agency to subaltern groups” (Piot 1999, 6). Attempting to write a new critical history presents another problem, however. Language is itself a hallmark of colonial imperialism.

Most postcolonial theorists write from the privileged site of a neocolonial educational system, and the very use of European languages necessarily imports a Eurocentric analytical frame. From this situation, despite the laudable intention “to give voice and agency to the subaltern” (Piot 1999, 6), the subaltern—as Gayatri Spivak so famously argued—cannot and does not “speak” (Spivak 1988). Always incommensurate with the experience of the subaltern, representation of the “other” through words seems to be, at best, mimicry. It distorts the depiction of the other even as the text itself reproduces the hegemonic discourse of the foreign academic world. At worst, the attempt to have the subaltern speak through this discourse amounts to mere “ventriloquism,” a projection of their voice through the scholar’s own (Bewes 2006). The postcolonial project may well falter under such preoccupation with burdened terminology and the task of refiguring its own conceptual frameworks. Combined with that is a seeming need for self-denunciation, as if “by engaging in relentless self-examination [it] will be able to keep itself free from the hubris of modernity” (Benavides 1998, 200). Too great a concern over the avoidance of the fraught terms or antiquated constructs risks overshadowing the subject at hand and obscuring other media of expression in which the subaltern—one who is *not* identical to the colonial theorist—may in fact be “speaking” (Grillo 2015).

It is for this very reason that I turn my attention primarily to the ritual performances of FGP as a powerful form of self-representation in the actors' own local terms. The embodied performances of the Mothers simultaneously communicate vulnerability and lament, judgment and condemnation, yet do so without depending on language to bear their message (L. Grillo, 2013). The rebuke is accomplished without forcing anyone to narrate her trauma, without words that can be mistranslated or misconstrued, without negotiations that can be compromised. Those who deploy FGP are not speaking in the idiom of the (post)colonial world at all, but sidestep the problem of language altogether. Moreover, their ritual protest has a unique ability to stir public consciousness precisely because it is nondiscursive, making its case in the immediacy of the moment. The Mothers deploy traditional custom as a timely response to the contemporary situation and with a view to effecting change.

Genealogy and the Matri-Archive

The distinctive cultural element that extends beyond the limited scope of ethnicity is the still-vital construct that informs the episteme of West Africa: an understanding of the consonance between spiritual power and political authority, whose common source is woman. More precisely, it is female elders known as “the Mothers” who embody this power and who invoke it through the ritual appeal to FGP.

The aim of this study is not only to trace the conventional history of the institution of FGP in West Africa but also to unearth the “genealogy” of matri-focality—to reveal the history that has no history, that has remained invisible because it has not been given value (Foucault 1977). The object of undertaking such a genealogical inquiry is to identify the source of that which endures in the local social imaginary even after the structural institutions that reflected those values have been dismantled and/or eclipsed. In this case, it is only in the vestiges, remnants, or refuse of history that we can locate evidence.⁵ These archives of African history can be excavated in overlooked details of ethnography, unearthed through evidence and experience in the field, and extracted from oral histories.

Doing a genealogical history of FGP as a matri-archive posits no evolutionist trajectory. My premise is that Africa's societies and civilizations did indeed change, informed by their own intense heterogeneity, migratory dynamics, and cultural fluidity as much as by contact with the West or the modern world system. I certainly do not endorse the notion of a necessary and relentless progression from “the primitive” toward the development of a more sophisticated

manifestation of a higher social order. In fact, the thrust of the argument of the book supports the opposite view: that the erosion of women's associations and women's rights has jeopardized the moral foundation of communal life.

It is certain that female genital power is grounded in religious and cultural constructs that are constitutive of certain ethnic identities. Even so, it is not primarily to this smaller notion of the local that I refer when I use this term. Rather, I suggest that the phenomenon of FGP—the unique conception of it and the ubiquitous appeal to it across a wide geographical expanse and for an extensive period of time—is uniquely African. The ritual rhetoric of FGP is one of the “sacred silent languages [that have operated as] the media through which the great global communities of the past were imagined” (Anderson 1991, 14). My objective is to reveal it to be the invisible (secret and hidden, but also overlooked and ignored) ingredient that lends to Africa a palpable yet ill-defined coherence and to show FGP to be the essential construct informing the African social landscape, responsible for forging much of the sub-Saharan region as a great global community.

Contemporary practices of FGP demonstrate just how adaptive and strategic this tradition continues to be, serving as a vital form of resistance to the postcolonial state and to the international pressures that increasingly inform civil unrest. The shocking spectacle of women's naked confrontation with politicians and armed troops is a formidable means to (re)awaken sensibility to the *local social imaginary*—that is, the “implicit background that makes possible communal practices and a widely shared sense of their legitimacy” (Steger 2008, 6). Its enduring eloquence shows that social imaginary to have considerable inventive ability and demonstrates that indigenous traditions can and still do have a bearing on the global situation.

An Intimate Rebuke

The repeated executions of FGP from the earliest chronicled incidents to present-day manifestations to which I call attention here therefore present a new kind of history, “intelligible only within a cultural tradition but, potentially, standing some critical distance part from it, . . . a startling reinterpretation, *an intimate rebuke*” (Lonsdale 2000, 14, emphasis mine). FGP is, indeed, “intimate” in its reference to the most private bodily parts. However, its intimacy is also cultural; those who are called the Mothers stand for the most intimate social unit, the mother-child bond, that is sacrosanct and the basis for the ethical relations on which West African society was founded. For those with deep inside knowledge of African tradition, the curse that is implied by their exhibition is a rebuke in the strongest of terms. In recent decades, the act is poignantly

intimate also in that it no longer points to the injustices, indignities, and violations of foreign colonials, but is aimed at the forces of African society itself and their own postcolonial states. It especially condemns the most heinous violation of that sacred source, sexual violence.

Côte d'Ivoire is emerging from more than a decade of civil war and horrific violence. The repeated public enactments of FGP there present a striking, visible argument about political morality and stand as a warning of the calamitous result of ignoring religious values on which African society was founded. They show that the women's indigenous ritual is "far from unfathomable or irrelevant" (Lonsdale 2000, 15), but keenly applicable in the fractured and bloodied struggles being played out across Africa and the economic and social ruin that has been the result.

*Emergent Constructs for an Urgent Situation:
Unhomeliness, Worldliness, Timeliness*

The situation in Côte d'Ivoire is emergent, in both the sense of calling for prompt, urgent attention and as something arising as a natural or logical consequence. What has given rise to the dire and crying situation of Ivoirian women is postcolonialism—that is to say, the aftermath of colonialism and the fractious enterprise of nation building. At the same time, and not unrelatedly, is the pressing need in the academy to find new concepts and methods that are better suited to interpret today's globalized world. Even the very terms *religion*, *gender*, and *postcolonialism* have been challenged as empty, invented, unstable, and misplaced (Bhabha 1994; Dubuisson 2003; Oyewùmí 1997a; Radhakrishnan 1993). Postmodernism ushered in a distrust of grand theories, challenged received ideologies, and disturbed conventional understandings of such basic notions and made us aware of the ways in which these constructs can themselves foster domination, exclusion, and violence. Their application to our increasingly complex world is questionable, making "examples of using the older concepts on contemporary material . . . sound like they [are parodies]" (Rabinow and Marcus 2008, 43). Throughout this work I draw instead on emergent concepts that lend themselves better to what Edward Said called the "bristling paradox" (1989, 213) that characterizes the contemporary postcolonial situation: *unhomeliness, worldliness, and timeliness*. My adoption of these new constructs and my repeated use of them as themes offer an alternative theoretical scaffold on which to review the facts. They allow me to interrogate and shift the more familiar but troubling terms such as *tradition* or *the local* in light of the practice of FGP without jettisoning them altogether.

Nigerian scholar of African gender studies Oyèrónké Oyewùmí pointed out that “African experiences rarely inform theory in any field of study; at best such experiences are exceptionalized” (Oyewùmí 1997b, 18). In drawing on African historical and social reality to inform postcolonial thought, this study aims to make a corrective, even as it pushes beyond its typical impasses. By sustaining the tripartite focus on unhomeliness, worldliness, and timeliness simultaneously throughout this work, I wish to suggest that the appeal to female genital power is its own potent and “volatile mixture” of matters of vital concern in today’s world: religion, gender, and postcolonial politics (Joy 2006). My intention is to use these new constructs to turn attention away from theorists’ “obsessive focus” on postcolonialism as theory at the expense of postcolonialism-as-activism (Radhakrishnan 1993, 751), and, moreover, to highlight female genital power in West Africa as activism against postcolonialism.

UNHOMELINESS

The term *unhomely* speaks to the uncomfortable and uninviting reality of postcoloniality for the colonized and the colonizing subject alike. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha adopts the term *unhomeliness* to signal “the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world” that is “a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition” (Bhabha 1994, 13). To be “unhomed” implies not only displacement of the colonial but also an intrusion of global politics into the local, experienced as the disruptive imposition of political agenda on personal lives. In this new world order “nobody will feel fully at home” (Bewes 2006, 47).

“The unhomely” is the situation in Côte d’Ivoire, whose very name (Ivory Coast) suggests its legacy of colonial exploitation and commodification at its origin. It also signals the invention of this nation as an artificial entity. The extremely heterogeneous population grouped within its arbitrary borders was made more diverse in its postindependence heyday when those borders remained open to a swell of refugees fleeing surrounding impoverished and warring African states. It is no coincidence that a generation later the civil war was fueled by fractious discourses about “belonging” and “Ivoirianness” (*Ivoirité*). It is an unhomed country, peopled by the displaced—immigrant laborers contesting traditional land rights; “street urchins” born into the metropole, unmoored from any grounding in indigenous culture; women who are losing their rightful place in the visible structures of society and its invisible cultural underpinning that are the moral values they traditionally embody.

In the context of civil war, it is also no surprise that a traditional construct that speaks to the terrible destructive forces of evil prevails: witchcraft. By now it is a cliché that the postcolonial African state, visiting its unpredictable forces

of evil on its suffering populace, is likened to a witch. The witch represents the opposite of “home.” Witchcraft overturns all social conventions, disrupts the familiarity and safety of the immediate social circle, and operates by uncanny means. But uncanny powers are equally ascribed to those who fight fire with fire and deploy mystical resources on an invisible plane to effect good. This is the paradoxical unhomeliness that the Mothers possess. Because FGP effects the most potent curse, it also has an unsettling and alien nature. The rite bears the character of the unhomely, a quality Freud (2003 [1919]) associated with the uncanny. It is “the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light” (Bhabha 1994, 14). Accordingly, when the secret ritual alluding to women’s intimate parts is inverted and made a public spectacle, it is an expression of the unhomely *par excellence*. Introducing unhomeliness allows for a new consideration of the enduring conception of witchcraft in contemporary struggles for power and moral might. Such ideas are constitutive of local worlds. They define an “ontological-cultural epistemology that is coincidental with a certain practice of the world—a world moment, a world that understands its space as a place that is ‘not at home’” (Long 2004, 90).

Finally, the construct of unhomeliness allows for a consideration of the progressive unhoming of women from their central place in originally matrifocal and matrilineal traditions that is at the heart of the unhomeliness of the postcolonial condition today. Female genital power as activism also resists the usurpation of women’s place and power, challenges imported gender ideology, and provides a vehicle by which these African women reassert their own self-defined essentialism. The appeal of the Mothers to the female genitals as the seat and innate source of their spiritual power makes it clear that their femaleness is a condition of their agency. It is essential—both a necessary condition and defining attribute of the agents of FGP. But in West African cultures postmenopausal women, belonging to a distinct subset of womanhood, comprise a category of being that surpasses gender as it is construed in the West. The reiteration of FGP as public rebuke can therefore also be seen as a profound resistance to the unhomely imposition of gender and repressive gendered roles increasingly assigned to African women as colonial institutions—like patriarchal forms of naming and inheritance—that have been adopted into law.

WORLDLINESS

Edward Said invoked the ambiguous concept of worldliness as a particularly apt characterization of academic disciplines, like anthropology, that are “predicated on the fact of otherness and difference” but that today no longer begin with abstract projections about that “other”; instead the scholar is “remanded

into the actual world,” to the sites of a cultural situation where differences are realized (Said 1989, 212). Adopting a worldly approach means moving away from preoccupation with religion, gender, or postcolonialism as reified constructs from which to interpret cultural dynamics and turning instead to concrete instances governing reality on the ground.

African women’s execution of FGP as political activism is itself a worldly enterprise. Its tactics are shrewd and strategic. It demonstrates worldliness, in the sense of being grounded in the affairs of “the secular world, as opposed to being ‘otherworldly,’ and also bears ‘the quality of a practiced, slightly jaded *savoir faire*, worldly wise and street smart” (Said 1989, 212–13). The repeated deployment of FGP evinces both a sophisticated take on secular politics and a savvy use of civil disobedience to gain leverage on that worldly stage. Yet the Mothers’ worldly engagement does not entirely dispense with the otherworldly concerns of moral authority and spiritual power. Women’s spectacle creates a profoundly charged liminal situation, an “in-between” reality that challenges oppositional positions, offering an “interstitial intimacy” between the private and public, the past and present, the mythical and historical, the social and spiritual (Bhabha 1994, 19). More practical than the espousal of merely religious ideas and more profound than a merely political demonstration, FGP represents a conjuncture of both these domains. FGP is worldly too in that it has served as the moral foundation of social structure, the basis for social organization and alliance, and has provided the sanction of worldly rulership and the source of its legitimate authority.

TIMELINESS

One thinks of the timely as an intervention that occurs at a propitious moment, enhancing its efficacy. Timely acts are situated in particular historic instants, just as worldly ones are situated in particular places, and both involve reflexivity. Certainly, the women’s ritual protests, as self-conscious acts of contestation, are necessarily timely, aiming to have consequences in the unfolding history in which they play an immediate part. Women’s activism stands in contrast with the untimeliness of the scholarly production, which always happens “after the fact” (Geertz 1995) and which always “preserves a certain critical distance” (Rabinow and Marcus 2008, 58).⁶

The timeliness of female genital power in the context of politics can also be contrasted with the supposed timelessness of religious tradition and the presumed ahistoricity of myth and ritual. From this vantage point, tradition is easily dismissed, relegated to the profound time of mythic origins. Insofar as *tradition* refers to a timeless past, it is at best irrelevant in the face of globalizing forces; at worst, tradition serves as a conservative ideology that keeps the

subaltern in a position of subservience to the interests of an elite. As Richards eloquently asserts, “Postcolonialism . . . *has little time* for the remembrance of *profound time*” (Richards 2007, 350, emphasis mine). I concur with Richards and other postcolonial theorists, like Gayatri Spivak, who forcefully assert that “nostalgia for lost origins” is an untimely preoccupation and detrimental to the critique of imperialism that our times demand (Spivak 1988, 291). However, I suggest that the rituals of FGP, by contrast, consciously affirm the relevance of history, including mythic history, to real politics. They are acts of re-collection in both senses of the word—remembrance and gathering. They engage collective memory, reminding those with eyes to see what women’s presence and power have meant to African society, serving as a bridge between the distant past and the immediate moment. The Mothers’ recollection of the repressed history of their status as bearers of moral authority doesn’t romanticize or fetishize tradition but uses it as a point of interrogation of the present.

Organization of the Work

The book is divided into three parts, each giving prominent focus to one of these themes. Under the banner of one of these new constructs, each section considers the phenomenon of FGP from a new angle that aims to shed light on a uniquely African epistemology, one that offers a very different appraisal from that of the West about the foundation, nature, and way of transmitting knowledge. This approach suggests that the more common understanding of the problematic terms *religion*, *tradition*, *ethnicity*, *gender*, and *postcolonial politics* may be reconsidered in this light and even recovered as viable ways of speaking about their inextricably intertwined nature in the context of West Africa. The overarching structure of the book is also designed to suggest that such constructs, when considered as a synergistic whole in the form of FGP, offer a reappraisal of African history and the contemporary Ivoirian crisis.

Part I, “Home and the Unhomely: The Foundational Nature of Female Genital Power,” situates the practice in the context of religious traditions in West Africa and shows it to function as a touchstone for the values that establish home.

Chapter 1, “Genies, Witches, and Women: Locating Female Powers,” is based on my fieldwork investigations of Dipri and Egbiki, the local enactment of FGP as anti-witchcraft. The aim of this chapter is to situate the phenomenon of FGP in the intimate context of local spiritual practices where they are regularly rehearsed and where their acts have the deepest resonance. It draws on fieldwork spanning three decades and engages an intimate account

and deep hermeneutical reading of the Abidji festival, its parallel celebration among the matrilineal Adioukrou, and women's rite that overarches both.

Chapter 2, "Matrifocal Morality: FGP and the Foundation of 'Home,'" aims to correct the predominant, persistent misconception about African women: that they have everywhere and always been the victims of cultural oppression and male dominance, subservient and in perpetual servitude, mute and without agency. While some have contended that "women's story is not the substance of great narratives" (Spivak 1988, 287), the history of Africa suggests that it is, in fact, a remarkable one, not an imagined female golden age or invented myth. It is the subject of griots' oral chronicles, of voyagers' ancient records, and colonial narratives alike. Therefore, without resorting to panegyric on the situation of women, this chapter establishes that the conception of FGP is a foundational moral force and shows that the tradition of appeal to it is both widespread and deeply rooted.

Scholars like Diop (1978) and Amadiume (1997) have argued that the origin of West African society rests on *matriarchy*, a structural organization of society. This chapter argues that, even along the coast of West Africa where matrilineal societies have long been in existence and still endure, it is not matriarchy that most profoundly marked the region's civilization as its founding order, but a less structural matter, a principle that I call "matrifocal morality."⁷ While matriarchy or matriliney makes the line of descent from a particular woman a primary concern, matrifocality is not necessarily linked to the structural organization or the hierarchical offices within a given society. It is a values system that holds the female elders in esteem as the bearers of ultimate moral authority. On the basis of historical evidence and applying Foucault's genealogical method, the chapter presents matrifocal morality as an underlying principle common to West African society, the foundation of the unique "ontological-cultural epistemology" that lends an inchoate cultural coherence to the region (Long 2004, 90).⁸

Gender criticism has exposed the enduring tendency of Western thinkers to make universalizing assumptions and project homogeneity on all women and perhaps especially "Third World" women who are presumed to be unable to speak for themselves. Chapter 3, "Gender and Resistance: The 'Strategic Essentialism' of FGP," undertakes a historical and comparative review of various cases of African women's collective mobilizations and ritualized protests across West Africa in terms of three sorts of "gender troubles": (1) the troubles that African women *faced* as gender roles shifted; (2) the trouble that African women intentionally *created* to disrupt these "unhoming" forces with their ancient rite; and (3) the trouble that *Western interpreters* have shown when attempting to identify the phenomenon of FGP as a unique appraisal of gender and politics.⁹

While some scholars of gender in Africa eschew the very construct of gender as essentialist and an imposition of white Western feminist theory, I suggest that the postmenopausal women who voluntarily take up the duty to carry out the rite—whether in secreted ritual or as an act of public rebuke—self-consciously define themselves as belonging to a special subset of women. No longer defined by their reproductive function, they surpass the limits of spiritual power ascribed to either gender alone. In performing FGP these postmenopausal women become agents who engender power (pun intended) in a unique way and assert their prerogatives as the bearers of supreme moral authority.

This chapter argues that the performances of FGP are occasions in which African women elders assert their own self-defining essentialist identity as women of a particular kind. At the same time, the performances are themselves strategic efforts to resist the gender ideologies imported and imposed by colonialism and the Christian missions and defend the prerogatives and interests of African women that are being undermined. Therefore, theirs is a “*strategic* essentialism” (Joy 2006). African women’s use of FGP embodies a unique appraisal of gender while engaging spiritual and moral matters under the most pressing political exigencies.

Part II, “Worldliness: FGP in the Making of Ethnicity, Alliance, and War in Côte d’Ivoire,” argues that the principle that undergirds FGP is the founding knowledge and binding power on which West African civilizations were established. It shows how the matrifocal morality that the Mothers embody operated as the basis for the consolidation of ethnic groups and for alliances among them. The overarching argument here is that FGP, as a founding moral principle, helped establish alliances, allowing diverse peoples to meet in what was once the forest frontier to assimilate and form new identities and solidarities. However, I underscore that the principle of matrifocal morality and the practice of the appeal to FGP also ultimately supersede any particular ethnicity.

The ritual embodiment of moral authority stands as the ultimate sanction, both authorizing rulership and worldly powers and chastising their abuse. This worldly function of FGP has salience under the pressure of globalization and the recent civil war. Although the war is largely interpreted as an ethnic conflict, the women’s collective manifestations reflect a solidarity that supersedes ethnic divisions. Moreover, their ritual condemnation of the violence represents a timely critique of the politics of the postcolonial state that has capitalized on such distinctions.

Chapter 4, “Founding Knowledge/Binding Power: The Moral Foundations of Ethnicity and Alliance,” returns to the particular context of Côte d’Ivoire and a puzzlement surrounding Dipri and the Abidji women’s rite called

“Egbiki.” It investigates FGP as a common feature of social life that allowed the Abidji and Adioukrou peoples to share Dipri as a defining cult, despite the many structural differences between these two ethnic groups. A primary aim is to investigate the “*internal* vision of power” (Memel-Fotê 1980, 12) that enabled disparate peoples on the African forest frontier to consolidate as distinct sociopolitical entities and to establish critical alliances among them. These new polities do not necessarily fit the classic definition of *ethnic group*, in the sense of a group classed according to common racial order or bloodline. Other features also enable people to affiliate and consolidate as ethnicities, including language or common culture. I am proposing that in Côte d’Ivoire, a principle feature of such common culture was matrifocal morality.

While ethnicity has been vilified as the source of a backward-turning tribalism and violence responsible for Côte d’Ivoire’s civil wars, this chapter returns to the original dynamics of ethnic politics to show FGP as the original means of establishing strategic peacetime alliances.

Chapter 5, “Women at the Checkpoint: Challenging the Forces of Civil War,” introduces the dynamics of Côte d’Ivoire’s decade-long strife and demonstrates that, although largely overlooked by journalists and scholars alike, the rhetorical work of the female elders deploying FGP has been as critical as other discursive tropes at play in the political arena. This chapter offers a rereading of the history of the Ivoirian civil war, which is generally cast as a result of ethnic infighting and divisions along religious lines. Given that the women’s collective mobilizations appeal to overarching spiritual principles on which communal life depends and that are fundamental to interethnic alliances, their call for moral accountability surpasses the politics of ethnicity. Their activism therefore asserts a “portable identity” of a different kind (McGovern 2011). The Mothers’ sanctions against the violent usurpation of power by youth are also shown to be surprisingly effective as a civilizing force. I argue that FGP is “part of the moral calculus of power,” an indispensable ingredient of legitimate rulership that the state cannot afford to overlook (Lonsdale 1986, 141).

Part III, “Timeliness: Urgent Situations and Emergent Critiques,” shifts attention from the *space* on which the battle is waged—land and bodies—to the *timeliness* of women’s interventions as *emergency* measures today. It underscores that the women’s engagement of FGP is not a nostalgic rehearsal of timeless tradition but a timely intervention that interrogates the present situation.

In the midst of the civil war and its protracted aftermath, Ivoirian women were often the targets of horrific sexual violence. Women’s bodies became sites of the contest of power where society’s unhomely dislocation was forcefully enacted. Rape and other sexual torture violently rend a woman’s body and her

body from herself, even as they rip the seams of society in civil war. These most intimate violations assault the very source of civilization by attacking the female foundations of social identity for matrilineal societies. Chapter 6, “Violation and Deployment: FGP in Politics in Côte d’Ivoire,” documents not only women’s victimization but also their strategic response to the contemporary crisis. Their collective mobilization offers a new *emergent* critique of the state accountability, especially in light of efforts toward truth and reconciliation. The Mothers have been forceful advocates for the indemnification of women victims of war, once again agitating for action through FGP.

Chapter 7, “Memory, Memorialization, and Morality,” shows that, in contrast with state amnesia, its tendency to forget the wrongs of war and the culture of impunity for those in political power, the demonstrations of the Mothers actively recollect fundamental ethical mandates and stir civil society to demand accountability. The confrontation between the Mothers and the state is therefore a battle to control memory as much as direct morality.

The state attempts to co-opt collective memory and control a public account of history through the physical monuments it erects. Another way of domesticating history is by featuring certain traditions as a cultural heritage for which it purports to serve as protective guardian. Under its auspices, tradition is manipulated to serve as an emblem of the state. The Mothers’ vivid performances are not so easily contained, controlled, or co-opted. The active engagement of FGP defies inscription and resists becoming monumentalized or memorialized. Instead, their embodied rebukes bring into focus the lost values of the fractured state.

The Conclusion, “An Intimate Rebuke: A Local Critique in the Global Postcolony,” suggests that African women’s mobilizations and their collective deployment of FGP in the political arena serve as a time-honored engagement of *civil society*, one that still has an effective reach in the globalizing world. While it is beyond the purview of this academic study to offer solutions to the profound problems challenging Ivoirian society, revealing the women’s acts to be efforts to recollect the moral state may suggest possibilities for meaningful approaches to them. It presents the ritual of FGP as an eloquent commentary on power, offering a potentially rich new source of insight into the current plight of Africa.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. I am coining this term, conscious that it stands as a counter to other, better-known but heinous ritual practices in Africa referring to women's genitals: FGM (female genital mutilation) and FGC (female genital cutting). Excision, now illegal in Côte d'Ivoire as elsewhere in West Africa, has no correlation with the rite that appeals to FGP. While neither the Abidji nor the Adioukrou people—who were the subjects of my fieldwork—traditionally practice genital cutting (or even any form of scarification), it is certain that other people whose traditions do include female excision simultaneously hold “the Mothers” in high regard and acknowledge their power, including their female genital power. A case in point is the Sande secret society, discussed in chapter 1.

2. “Baoulé” is variously spelled “Baoule,” “Baulé,” “Baule,” “Bawule.”

3. In 1910 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl forwarded the hypothesis that the traditions of non-Western peoples reflected the “prelogical mentality,” characterized by an “undifferentiated consciousness” that did not distinguish between myth and history and that enabled “mystical participation” (*participation mystique*). Although Lévy-Bruhl later abandoned this hypothesis, it was obstinately maintained by other influential thinkers of the modern era, notably Carl Gustav Jung, who refused to abandon the discredited projection (Jung 1958, vol. 11, 817n28). Such ideas still circulate in the popular Western imagination.

4. This idea that societies without writing were without reflexivity was largely given currency by Karl Jaspers's lamentable theory of an Axial Age, an imagined period that supposedly signaled a metaphysical breakthrough and transcendence over the fixed ideologies of the past, “tradition.” The Axial Age thesis elevated the Western values associated with modernity to the status of universal standards against which all cultural development can presumably be measured. It pits “higher” civilizations—those with writing—against societies that entrap its members in a “closed predicament”: the “other” remains unaware of alternative worldviews or systems and unable to transcend a limiting and stagnant social definition. Robin Horton's influential essay “African Traditional Thought and Western Science” (Horton 1967), which relied on the thesis to compare African thought with Western natural science, failed to discredit the thesis but reinforced its applicability to the African case.

5. In referring to vestiges I do not mean to imply that I am making an appeal to an evolutionist view of the history of humanity or attempting to reinvigorate the antiquated imperial theory that presumed Africa to be a fossilized remnant of the earliest cultures.

6. This is not to say that scholarship has no import in history. Certainly, we are far too aware of the devastating complicity of theory and politics. As Said put it, anthropology was “often [the] direct agent of political dominance” (Said 1989, 219–20).

7. As a domain, the moral extends beyond any particular ethical code. That is, I use the term *moral* to designate behavior that is sanctioned by conscience and values that are so deeply engrained as to become embodied, “second nature,” and part of the cultural “habitus” (Bourdieu 1977, 72–95). Ethics, by contrast, refers to prescribed principles and the discipline of enforcing commonly held standards of right behavior. The two may overlap, but I attempt to maintain a distinction throughout, choosing the phrase *matrifocal morality* to signal the deeper and more affective nature of FGP and its distinction from particular “religious” mandates.

8. The proposition that matrifocal morality is an underlying principle common to West African society is quite distinct from the imagined ur-matriarchy that inspired Bachofen, Gimbutas, and proponents of a primordial goddess tradition. My thesis is not concerned with any universalizing theory about the origins of humanity. Instead, I maintain that this uniquely African phenomenon must be appreciated in its own terms and as an expression of a *particular* “ontological-cultural epistemology” that is not universally applicable (Long 2004, 90).

9. Even as I show that early female scholars’ misguided application of feminist ideology to the interpretation of African women’s mobilizations and ritual protests led to a distorted appraisal of their cause, I also warn against facile but misplaced comparison with political demonstrations using female nudity that have recently appeared on the sociopolitical landscape in the West, such as those of the women of the Ukrainian political group Femen.

1. GENIES, WITCHES, AND WOMEN

1. *Adioukrou* is variously spelled in the literature as *Adjukru*, *Adyoukrou*, *Adyukru*, *Ajukru*, or according to the more authentic, phonetic version, *Odjukru*. I use the most common contemporary spelling except when quoting ethnographers such as Memel-Fotè, who prefers *Odjukru*.

2. In what follows, I will refer to the consonant festivals of Dipri and Kpol as “Dipri,” unless quoting or referring to a practice that is unique to the *Adioukrou* (Kpol) tradition.

3. A fuller discussion of witchcraft will follow.

4. *Genie* is an adaptation of the Arabic word *djinn* [Arabic: الجنّـي al-jinnī], referring to a spiritual being who inhabits a usually invisible realm, though able to interact physically with people in the visible world. Like human beings the genies are neither good nor evil, but exercise free will. Such beings are mentioned in the Qur’an as well as in Arabic folklore. The long history of Arabic and Islamic influence on sub-Saharan West Africa accounts for the adoption of the term. The English word *genie* is derived from Latin *genius*, originally referring to a guardian spirit that guided destiny. Africans speaking European languages regularly and unselfconsciously use *genie*, though their indigenous languages have their own precise terms. For the Abidji, the word is *Eikpa*, and the genies of the