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BOOK REVIEW

An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa

Laura S. Grillo. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018 (ISBN 978-1-478-00155-3)

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An Intimate Rebuke is a must-read for Africanists, historians, political philosophers, and scholars of religion at the very least, and for feminists generally. No understanding of Africa is complete without accounting for the perspectives of women on the continent. No global feminism is viable without heeding African women's voices. And no study of religion is worthwhile if it fails to acknowledge the sophistication of ritual practices that persist without written texts.

Laura Grillo's book opens new vistas on the study of women's ritual practice in West Africa and beyond, focusing on the deployment of what she calls "female genital power." The phrase denotes those practices by which postmenopausal women, whom Grillo calls the "Mothers," publicly expose and slap their genitalia and breasts as signs of opprobrium, sometimes while urinating and spitting. They do so when outraged by men's political misconduct—a censure against which there is no recourse. Women may deploy such power while dancing or marching, painted in kaolin and wearing black fabric while wielding branches, pestles, pots, or their own loincloths, creating a rich repertoire of symbolic action (2, 189, 193, 195, 196).

Grillo contends that female genital power reflects women's positions as the arbiters of ethics in precolonial West Africa, roles that women reassert in times of turmoil for the purpose of refounding social morality. She therefore calls the embodied memory that keeps female genital power alive the "matri-archive," which she describes as the repository of a

> history that has no history, that has remained invisible because it has not been given a value … 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…. 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. (8)

Most recently, women returned to the matri-archive during the nearly decade-long political crisis that Côte d'Ivoire suffered from 2002 to 2011, in which the "Mothers" dramatically called on warmongering men to end their violence.

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Grillo's book, then, is of methodological interest because of the way in which she combines ethnographic as well as historical approaches. It is an engaging, innovative account of both the author's field research on ritual practices in southern Côte d'Ivoire among Abidji and Adioukrou communities and her historical study of similar practices across the region and Africa.

Grillo draws on a broad range of research, both primary and secondary, in the service of a genealogy of women's ritual power, reading against the grain of Western-derived academic disciplines. Her study thus decolonizes the practices of anthropology, history, and religious studies, reaffirming African women's agency and "matrifocal morality" (76) in shaping their societies through rituals that *they* control. In this respect, she follows in the footsteps of Ifi Amadiume, documenting unexpected sources of women's authority, while also pointing readers toward African forms of knowledge that burst the bonds of Western understanding (Amadiume 1987, 1997). In this latter sense, Grillo fulfills Vincent Mudimbe's implicit expectation of an epistemology that can recognize both the practical and theoretical dimensions of African "gnosis" (Mudimbe 1988).

Although Grillo avoids making political recommendations about how the "Mothers" should deploy their power amid current tensions in West Africa, I cannot help but think, after having read her book, that politicians would do well to include, in "high-level" negotiations, the kinds of women about whom Grillo writes. In civil-war-era Liberia, for example, as Grillo notes, women surrounded the conference hall where Charles Taylor and his rivals were meeting to discuss a ceasefire. When the men became distracted from the task at hand, women barred the exits to compel the men to agree to a peace deal. Police quickly arrived to arrest the women's leader, "Leymah Gbowee, the coordinator of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace"—that is, until she threated to strip publicly in protest. The police immediately desisted (107–8):

> Moreover, Gen. Abdusalami Abubakar, the Nigerian statesman appointed by ECOWAS to moderate the talks, emerged from the building and ensured that the women were allowed to remain. This marked the turning point that forced the talks, in Gbowee's words, "to be real peace talks and not a circus." (108, citing Reticker 2008)

On that occasion, the "Mothers" vindicated their performative authority to restore moral order in its absence, independently of state-based or international institutions, in a remarkable act of stateswomanship.

For all these reasons, Grillo's book is more than an academic study, which is what makes it so exceptional. It is also a visionary manifesto on the potential of women to shape history through ritual. As such, it extends religious analysis beyond the realm of religion as commonly understood, without reducing ritual to instrumental politics. Grillo recognizes that female genital power stands, for its practitioners, outside the usual confines of time and space, much like myth, pre-existing the foundation of society, while abiding into the present.

According to Grillo, even young people recognize the relevant symbols of the Mothers' rituals:

> In particular, they correctly indicated that "if you were to see an old women [*sic*] in a group of protesters strip naked" one should interpret her intention "as a threat that she would use her innate power." Many also correctly identified the meaning of a woman striking the ground with a pestle as a "sign of a curse." That so many

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> recognized and understood this most significant aspect of [female genital power] as a public rebuke was a surprising and important finding, suggesting that the matri-archive still does operate as functional memory among Ivoirian youth. (220)

Yet practitioners of female genital power have also adapted their rituals as markers of cultural difference, maintaining overlapping practices while telling different histories of their associations with them.

For example, in southeastern Côte d'Ivoire, in the Abidji villages of Gomon, Sahuyé, and Yaobou, which belong to a single clan, and also in the Adioukrou villages of Orbaff and Yassap (117, 248, n. 1), young men go into trance annually to cut, then heal themselves thanks to a force that they attribute to female riverine power to whom their ancestors once sacrificed a baby girl (21–24, 26–29). In other words, a subgroup each of Abidji and Adioukrou-speakers share a single ritual festival—called *Dipri* in Abidji, *Kpol* in Adioukrou (31). Yet "Abidji society is patrilineal, while the Adioukrou are matrilineal" (117). In addition, "the Abidji are governed by the senior member of the founding lineage under the guidance of a council composed of other elders," whereas the "Adioukrou society, by contrast, is a more overtly acephalous one, governed by collective rule" (118). Finally, both groups share two different origin stories of their involvement in *Dipri* and *Kpol* (26–32), which justifies their common practice of the rite as a cross-cultural alliance. Neither population affirmed either a structural-functionalist or postmodern view of ethnicity.

Grillo consequently takes to task Mike McGovern's approach to ethnicity in his study of Côte d'Ivoire's 2002–2011 crisis (McGovern 2011). McGovern, according to Grillo, considers ethnic communities as "constructed rather than natural entities," and ethnic alliances, such as that between Abidji and Adioukrou, as "a simple matter or facile affair," resulting from a mere "shift in identity" (125). However, the very complexity of the Abidji–Adioukrou alliance, joining, as it does, two communities structured by contrasting forms of social organization, must have resulted from more than circumstance: namely, Grillo avers, a foundational orientation to history and social morality grounded in women's genital power—a kind of identity that McGovern would call "portable" but that he denies to the societies of southern Côte d'Ivoire that he alleges are stateless and antihistorical (McGovern 2011, 50–53).

Grillo argues, *contra* McGovern, that the Mothers ground both a sense of history *and* social stability in embodied ritual practice:

> 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 … 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. (2; see also 163)

According to the local narratives of *Dipri*/*Kpol*'s origins mentioned above, for example, the Mothers have long mediated the power to create and renew alliances and refound society, especially in times of moral disintegration.

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Grillo depicts in exhaustive detail the fearlessness of Ivoirian women across ethnicities, languages, and religions during the Ivoirian Crisis, chronicling the women's appeal to a shared sense of female genital power from a range of political vantage points. Even as women endured rape and sexual slavery during Côte d'Ivoire's armed conflicts (175–85), they used female genital power to call public attention to violence and injustice.

In response, soldiers "abducted … raped, tortured, and killed" four women in central Côte d'Ivoire in December of 2002 (187). In 2003, naked women among 200 Mothers who had halted the motorcade of French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin urinated on the vehicles to protest the presence of French troops in the country and to support then-President Laurent Gbagbo (189). Likewise, in November of 2004, women stripped before French soldiers at Abidjan's historic Hôtel Ivoire, which French forces had commandeered as a headquarters. Again, the women proclaimed their support for Gbagbo and opposition to the French, whom they thought might "overthrow President Gbagbo" (191–92). In 2008, women across Abidjan and in some locales in the interior marched "to protest the sudden surge in prices of food and staples" (192): "*Their faces smeared with kaolin, they were armed with old pots to make the maximum noise in the hope of being heard and eventually understood*" (193, emphasis Grillo's, citing Silué 2008).

In February of 2010, women again stripped naked, this time in the town of Didiévi, to defy the district governor—and, through him, President Gbagbo—after Gbagbo had imposed "cuts of electricity and water … to punish the districts presumed to favor his political opponent. [The women] declared that they no longer regarded Gbagbo as head of state" (193). Then, a year later, in February of 2011, women gathered and danced in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire's political capital and birthplace of its first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, to condemn the fighting that followed the contested presidential election of 2010, which both President Gbagbo and his political opponent and current president, Alassane Ouattara, claimed they had won (193–95). That same month, pro-Gbagbo forces killed Ouattara loyalists at an opposition demonstration in Abidjan. In response, women took to the streets from February through March, in both Abidjan and Grand-Bassam, "to demand that Gbagbo step down." And, on March 3, in the Abidjan borough of Abobo, the military opened fire, killing seven women (195–96).

Grillo portrays such protests as "history-making acts of civil society," critiquing journalists for writing "a merely political rendition of events," only to "misconstrue their true significance" (197). She places women's agency at the center of the Ivoirian Crisis while offering a more nuanced outlook than McGovern's on both ethnic and national identities. As an Ivoirianist too, I find Grillo's insights indispensable for interpreting recent Ivoirian history. I now place them, in closing, in a broader context to foreground their importance.

Grillo highlights how Adioukrou (135), Asante, Baoulé, Bron, and various other Mothers in Côte d'Ivoire (73–75, 160, 194–95, 246, n. 18), as well as women in Angola and Nigeria (87, 246, n. 17), have used female genital power to engage in "spiritual warfare" (1, 160). Marie Miran-Guyon, in an earlier work, wrote of a complementary, broader Ivoirian concern with such agency: "a majority of Ivoirians lived and diagnosed these crises as a spiritual anarchy, as mystical wars, inscribed at once in the visible and invisible worlds" (Miran-Guyon 2015, 37, my translation). As much as female genital power reflects the Mothers' foundational, moral status, it also existed side by side with, during the Ivoirian Crisis, a more *popular*, ethical preoccupation with the state and the nation.

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Members of the male Senufo Poro Society similarly embody a primordial social morality expressed in ritual (Förster 2019). And, during the Ivoirian Crisis, Muslim Manding and Muslim and Catholic Senufo-speaking *dozo* hunters joined rebel forces and reputedly used their power objects, rituals, and sorcery to make themselves invisible and invulnerable to bullets while combating the Islamophobic regime of Laurent Gbagbo (Hellweg 2011, 214–24; Miran-Guyon 2015, 75–98). Like the Mothers, *dozo* hunters claimed to embody a primordial ethical authority grounded in ritual practices that reflect an ancestral, even mythical reputation for founding villages and populating regions, generating social life, as a result, across West Africa (Hellweg 2011, 55, 111–24). *Dozo*s were nonetheless inconsistent in realizing their moral ideals since they engaged in murderous violence during Côte d'Ivoire's civil wars (Hellweg, Palas, and Koné 2015).

The Mothers, likewise, alternately supported President Gbagbo or his rival, Alassane Ouattara, both of whom had blood on their hands. I am therefore wary of imputing any ethical infallibility to African ritual agents, regardless of their historical claims or gender. Yet gendered bodies, whether of Mothers, Poro initiates, or *dozo* hunters, offer striking metaphors and mediums, as Mary Douglas first argued, for distinguishing the primally pure from the politically dangerous (Douglas 1966). I compare the Mothers, Poro members, and *dozo*s not to deny the ultimacy of women's moral authority or to criticize Grillo's exclusive focus on the Mothers, whom scholars and policy-makers have too long overlooked. I do so, instead, to situate the Mothers as one constituency among many in Côte d'Ivoire who have drawn on gendered ritual performances to sustain alternative forms of civil society in opposition to state-sponsored and rebel-sewn violence. Grillo's genealogy of how African women have crafted and used such distinctions is, accordingly, a vital resource for reorienting our *global* understanding of politics.

In sum, *An Intimate Rebuke* provides scholars and students alike with a profound appreciation of women's moral authority in Africa while inciting observers of political transitions across the continent, and globe, to see gender and ritual as pragmatic idioms with which to generate new forms of political awareness in an embodied, ethical mode that challenges banal, statist visions of politics as institutionally disembodied, genderless, or—worse—male. Grillo's insights, learned from the Mothers, should change our understanding of politics and political analysis altogether—in Africa and the Global South, as well as across the Global North.

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