

BOOK REVIEW

Laura S. Grillo. *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. 284 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$26.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781478001553.

An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa posits that the moral authority of women links all African societies south of the Sahara. Laura S. Grillo draws upon a large body of ethnographic literature, interviews, founding myths, human rights reports, media coverage, and secondary literature that document women's intimate rituals to convincingly show women's moral authority as the real force that protects and underpins political authority in West Africa. The ritual performances documented here offer evidence of "a powerful form of self-representation in the actors' own local terms" (8)—terms that Grillo argues allow her to circumvent the complications of representation in postcolonial scholarship.

While Ifi Amadiume's groundbreaking work demonstrated African matriarchy as a means of empowerment for women, Grillo contends that it is not motherhood from which women's power comes but instead moral principle. "It is the principles of justice and respect for the most intimate social bonds for which the women stand and fiercely defend with ruthless righteousness. These bonds are rooted in the primacy of the mother-child unit and matrilineal kinship. It is the *moral principle* and not the social structure that is most vigorously enforced." She argues that it is "matrifocal *morality* that undergirds African society" (75–76) and thus, this power is rooted not in the womb, but rather in the vulva.

Female Genital Power (FGP) is the constellation of gestures enacted to rebuke and curse the "asexual, gender-surpassing, supernatural power" (93) deployed in spiritual warfare to maintain and defend this matrifocal morality. The three parts of the book are centered around the three constructs with which the author analyzes FGP in terms of postcolonialism as activism: unhomeliness, worldliness, and timeliness.

Part One establishes FGP as the basis for home in West Africa. Chapter One demonstrates FGP as an anti-witchcraft ritual in which rites such as the Egbiki of the Abidji people in Côte d'Ivoire are "an *intimate* rebuke of evil, carried out in light of indigenous conceptions about how it is

perpetuated and in the local idiom of collective moral sensibility” (41). It is not a woman’s procreative capacity but rather the innate power to curse, a moral force assumed by elder females beyond childbearing years. Chapter Two develops Grillo’s ideas of the principle of matrifocal morality. Chapter Three then reviews historical performances of women’s collective FGP in public struggles against colonial rule, particularly against practices that impinged on women’s rights. Here, Grillo extends the existing scholarship on women’s collective mobilization to argue that in deploying FGP, post-menopausal African women drew on a self-constructed “strategic essentialism” to defend moral principle as well as rights due to them as guardians of the moral principle (84–85).

The second part of the book turns to how this matrifocal morality enabled both consolidation of ethnic groups and the alliances among them in what became Côte d’Ivoire. In Chapter Four, Grillo mines origin myths for “subjugated knowledges” to offer a history of the region’s Abidji and Adioukrou peoples from the perspective of female power. She convincingly argues that FGP served as a “founding knowledge,” a shared moral domain that gives a cultural coherence to the forest region (128). Mining legends for what has been obscured, this chapter would benefit from a greater elucidation of the sources. A significant historical literature has considered how such sources are themselves embedded in historical moments.


Chapter Five looks at how the region’s underpinning morality shaped the unfolding of the civil war. Here, Grillo takes issue with Mike McGovern’s recent scholarly analysis of the war. She shows how his treatment of ethnic identity and misinterpretation of intergenerational tensions obscures the role of women elders and therefore fails to adequately explain the war.

Part Three turns to the timeliness of FGP, appeals to which always occur in critical moments. While women’s power has not continued uninterrupted over time, “there remains deeply embedded in the social imaginary a set of rules and mechanisms” for enforcing such (179). Chapter Six looks at how Ivoirian women have turned to FGP to respond to war and its brutal sexual violence through both collective organization as well as more spontaneous initiatives. The last chapter turns to post-war nation building through memory and monuments. Grillo shows how the state’s turn to indigenous tradition neglected to include women. In doing so, the government rules without the legitimacy of moral authority.

The book is at its best here in Part Three, where Grillo grounds her analysis in these dated, specific enactments of FGP. This is also true of Chapter Three, where she carefully reinterprets historical acts of mobilization in West Africa previously analyzed by scholars to show how “the Mothers,” as she refers to the postmenopausal women elders, drew upon FGP in moral defense or condemnation across West Africa.

Ultimately, Grillo demonstrates how knowledge of the moral authority of women elders remained and remains embedded in West Africa and that

women enact FGP to defend not only social equity and justice but also their own rights. *An Intimate Rebuke* will be required reading for all future analysis of women's authority and mobilization.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2020.32

For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Arnfred, Signe. 2015. "Female Sexuality as Capacity and Power? Reconceptualizing Sexualities in Africa." *African Studies Review* 58 (3): 149–70. doi:10.1017/asr.2015.78.

Gordon, Natasha M. 1997. "'Tonguing the Body': Placing Female Circumcision within African Feminist Discourse." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 25 (2): 24–27. doi:10.1017/S1548450500005448.

Kouba, Leonard J., and Judith Muasher. 1985. "Female Circumcision in Africa: An Overview." *African Studies Review* 28 (1): 95–110. doi:10.2307/524569.