



Review:

**Laura S. Grillo,
*An Intimate Rebuke:
Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa*
(Durham: Duke University Press, 2018)**

UMASOM BLESSING AMOS

In her book *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa*, Laura Grillo intensively analyzes West African women's demonstration of spiritual and moral power using their genitals: Female Genital Power (FGP). She argues that although these women may not hold political power, their genital power influences the affairs of their societies. Grillo aims to trace the history of FGP in West Africa and to reveal the genealogy of matrifocality and its importance in the formation of West African societies. Grillo argues that the erosion of women's rights by colonialism has jeopardized the moral foundation of West African communal life. She illuminates the power that women hold by using their genitals to assert their desires, which is a spectacular phenomenon.

For example, the *Egbiki*, found particularly in Cote d'Ivoire, is conducted by elderly women before the *Dipri* festival to purify the village and ward off evil. The women circle the village



naked; they slap their genitals and bare breasts and, with pestles, pound the ground. This ritual curses and wards off evil, allowing for a successful *Dipri* festival the next day. Women's bodies are considered sacred, so no one else is allowed to look upon their nakedness during this display of FGP. It is believed that anyone who lays eyes on their nudity will be cursed.

Grillo emphasizes that not all women participate in these ritual of FGP; post-menopausal women feature in them, as the emphasis is not on women's capacity to reproduce. Women in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial West Africa have employed FGP to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with policies and, also, to act as spiritual weapons. Grillo argues against the ideas of Cheikh Anta Diop and Ifi Amadiume, who wrote that the origin of West African society rests on matriarchy. Grillo, however, asserts that matriarchy did not mark the civilization of West African societies but rather it was a matrifocal morality, where the female elders are held in high esteem and are bearers of ultimate moral authority. The FGP rituals are remnants of that esteem and authority.

The book is divided into three parts, focusing on the themes of Homeliness, Worldliness and Timeliness. Part One has three chapters; here, FGP practices are assessed in the context of local spiritual practices where these acts are seen as the highest authority in the society. Here, also, is a refutation of the belief that women have always been victims of male dominance, as Grillo shows they have, rather, been a moral force. Against the idea that women cannot stand nor speak for themselves, Grillo's book demonstrates the power women show when asserting their desires and demonstrating their discomfort on any subject matter. Part Two argues that matrifocal morality was the basis of alliances among ethnic groups in West Africa. This part also points out post-menopausal women's role in standing against post-colonial violence. They stand as a moral authority which has the capacity both to authorize rulership and to chastise the abuse of power by political leaders. For example, women employed FGP against the Ivorian government during the civil war, which led to death for many of them. This mortal danger, however, did not hinder them from mobilizing again to protest against the government. Part Three emphasizes that women's use of FGP is a timely intervention as an emergency measure. During the Ivorian civil war, sexual violence was identified as an arena for conflict between the factions, and Ivorian women, both young and old, suffered horrifically. These widespread rapes also violated the source of women's spiritual authority and the base of their power. Afterwards, elderly women mobilized and advocated for the indemnification of female victims, which was almost being neglected.

Grillo succeeds in contributing immensely to Women's Studies by introducing a new perspective on the influence of matrifocal morality, based on her rich ethnographic collection from the oral tradition. She lived in Cote d'Ivoire for three years in order to

gather and have firsthand information about the topic, which is supplemented with a vast literature of published books and articles, newspaper publications, online publications, and unpublished materials.

This book is well suited for students and academics looking to learn about Female Genital Power. Including 'West Africa' in the title is a stretch, though, as her focus is mainly on Cote d'Ivoire, even though she references some other parts of West Africa, like Nigeria, in her book. Despite this, it is a good addition to gender studies scholarship. I found this book particularly interesting because it was easy to read and her personal experiences made it the more relatable. It should inspire other scholars to research on FGP in other parts of Africa.

About the reviewer

Umasom Blessing Amos holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies and Diplomacy and Master of Arts degree in History from University of Benin, Benin City. Her research interests are in women, gender studies, and ethnic studies in the Niger Delta region and other aspects of Nigerian history.