

Catachresis in Côte d'Ivoire: Female Genital Power in Religious Ritual and Political Resistance

LAURA S. GRILLO*

Abstract

Ivoirian women vehemently protest the violence and calamity of civil war by deploying an embodied rhetoric of ritual, appealing to the traditional religious concept of "Female Genital Power." I propose that their imagistic resistance to the postcolonial state represents a *catachresis*, with a few interesting twists. Most salient is that what women reinscribe onto the political scene is not as a feature of the imperial culture but the concept-metaphors of indigenous religion, and especially the image of Woman as the source of moral and spiritual power from which proceeds all political, religious, and juridical authority. Whereas the logocentrism of the academy, and postcolonial theory in particular, leads to aporia, ritual remands scholars into the situation of the actual world, where women are actively engaged in self-representation that both defies projected depictions of them and rejects their absence from state conceptions of power.

Keywords

religion; ritual; gender; resistance; postcolonial (theory); Africa (women)

Author affiliation

Laura S. Grillo serves as Professor in the Mythological Studies program at Pacifica Graduate Institute (USA). She earned her PhD in History of Religions from the University of Chicago, following an M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary and an A.B. in Religious Studies from Brown University. She has lived and worked in both Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya. For her earlier work on West African divination, she was awarded research grants from the *National Endowment for*

* Correspondence: Laura S. Grillo, 239 Lambert Rd., Carpinteria, CA 93013, USA.

Email: lgrillo@pacific.edu

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the Humanities, the American Academy of Religions and the West Africa Research Association and enjoyed Postdoctoral Fellowships at the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religions at The University of Chicago and The Coleman Center for African Studies at UCLA. Her current work, a book on "Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in Côte d'Ivoire," was supported with a Postdoctoral Fellowship at Harvard Divinity School in the Spring of 2013.

O, cock, stop this ostentation, for we all came out of the egg-shell
– Asante proverb¹

Ceremonial nakedness greatly increases the magico-religious power of woman, and the chief attribute of the Great Mother is her nakedness.
– Mircea Eliade²

Violation and Deployment

In November 2010, after 8 years of repeated delays, Côte d'Ivoire held a presidential election. Northerner Alassan Ouattara and his 'rebel' forces narrowly won the majority, but the incumbent, Laurent Gbagbo, contested the results and refused to cede power. A 5-month standoff ensued, reigniting the barely dormant civil war. Both warring factions perpetrated violent assaults on the civilian population, especially targeting women.

Even before the post-election turmoil in Côte d'Ivoire, from the eruption of the coup d'état in 2002 through the turbulent period of 'no peace-no war' that followed, women have been victims of brutal sexual violence. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch documented that thousands of women and girls were raped, abducted into sexual slavery, and tortured. Horrific sexual abuse included induced miscarriages and forced acts of incest. Yet such atrocities were ignored by the foreign media while the international community, rallying for democratic elections and a 'non-violent' transition, tolerated impunity.

Ivoirian women have not only been victims, however. During the war and after, women spearheaded the most visible demonstrations of protest against abuses of power and calls for basic rights. In March 2011 when, on the occasion of International Women's Day, Ivoirian women gathered in peaceful protest of post-election violence, government soldiers shot dead seven women. Their killing and the surrounding frenzy, captured on amateur video and circulated on YouTube, finally grabbed the headlines.³

¹ E. Akyeamong and P. Obeng, 'Spirituality, Gender and Power in Asante History' in O. Oyewùmi (ed.) *African Gender Studies: a Reader*, New York: Palgrave 2005, 23–48: 41.

² M. Eliade, 'Masks: Mythical and Ritual Origins' in *Encyclopaedia of World Art*, New York: McGraw-Hill 1968, vol. 8, col. 521–525.

³ 'Ivory Coast: Anti-Gbagbo Protesters Killed in Abidjan' in *BBC*, 8 March 2011, Accessed 24 May 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12682492>; 'International Women's Day: Defiant Women March at Site of Grisly Killings' in *CNN*, 9 March 2011, Accessed 26 November 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-09/world/ivory.coast.women_1_abidjan-ivory-coast-laurent-gbagbo?_s=PM:WORLD.

The Ivoirian press recognized the historic roots of such women's uprisings. In 2008 when women demonstrated against the sharp rise in food prices, their collective action was likened to the now-celebrated 1949 march of a multi-ethnic coalition of more than 2000 women from Abidjan to Grand Bassam to demand the release of African liberation leaders arrested by French colonials. But what local journalists reference only obliquely, and the foreign press entirely ignores, is the religious foundation and ritual rhetoric informing the acts of those early protestors and contemporary demonstrators alike. The women appear smeared in white kaolin clay, a symbol of power whose source is the watery depths from which both women and spirits are said to emerge. They wield branches, implements for conjuring blessing and curse, are draped with leaves associated with magico-medicinal protection, and some strip naked, dance and gesture suggestively. Failing to interpret such expression, journalists offer a 'merely' political rendition of events and misconstrue their true significance.⁴

The women's naked gyrations are much more than a lewd affront to the powers of state that they counter. At their foundation is a widespread cultural principle that Woman, as the source of life, is power incarnate. In African traditional religions spiritual power is conceived as an ambiguous force. It must be respected and properly channelled if it is to support life, or it can be deadly. In West Africa 'power associated with sexuality and reproduction is especially strong, and potentially dangerous [but] ...female genital power is especially potent.'⁵ To some degree all women, by virtue of their reproductive capacity, bear an innate power in keeping with the creative force of divinities and the sustaining blessing of the ancestors. Elderly women, beyond childbearing age, have a greater capacity yet; as the living embodiment of the ancestors, revered as the guardians of the moral order, the 'Mothers' play a critical role as its sustainers. Like the ancestors, they are the channel of life-sustaining blessing and may also effect the most potent of curses, making appeal to the spiritual locus of their power, their sex.

Aware of the ritual potency of their nudity and the conjuration of their sex, women have used it to intercede in calamitous situations. In Côte d'Ivoire today, women's political activism exploits this strong rhetorical form. Transposing their acts from the ritual sphere to the political arena, they make the private, secret ritual a public spectacle in order to condemn and threaten those who have abused moral convention.

I want to suggest in this paper that the women's performances occupy the space 'between' discursive language and 'primitive' symbolic gesture, and that the Ivoirian women themselves represent the 'bridge' that links the reified community of nation-state with the disseminated and forgotten alterity that has been excluded from its discourse.⁶ But if the women's expression is to shape

⁴ L. Grillo, 'Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics: Violation and Deployment in Southern Côte d'Ivoire' in *Cultural Anthropology Online* 14 May 2012, Accessed 23 July 2013, <http://production.culanth.org/fieldsights/196-female-genital-power-in-ritual-and-politics-violation-and-deployment-in-southern-cote-d-ivoire>.

⁵ P. Stevens Jr., 'Women's Aggressive Use of Genital Power in Africa' in *Transcultural Psychiatry* 43:4 (2006), 592–599: 593.

⁶ H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge 1994.

either politics or postcolonial theory, it must first be recognized and understood as the authentic, poetic and articulate speech of the subaltern that it is.

Religion, Gender and Power in West Africa

The persistent and preponderant misconception about women in Africa is that everywhere they have been martyrs of traditional society. Through the distortive prism of missionaries, ethnologists, and administrators, colonial ideology reduced the image of women to a cliché, as 'beings deprived of the most fundamental rights, living in absolute submission, veritable beasts of burden, at the limits of servitude'.⁷ This bias has informed even contemporary scholarship including, and perhaps especially, feminist scholars who mistakenly presuppose the homogeneity of women on the basis of their oppressed status. With that comes the concomitant and equally mistaken presumption that the westernization of Africa brought with it women's emancipation and their greater valorization. In *Feminism without Borders*, Chandra Mohanty warns that too often 'an elision takes place between "women" as a discursively constructed group and "woman" as material subjects of their own history'.⁸ To avoid the monolithic categorization of woman, including *both* 'overstated images of victimized and empowered womanhood', I consider gender with reference to concrete historical practices in West Africa.⁹

Historical records dating back centuries show that throughout West Africa, and especially along the southern rainforest region from Senegal to Cameroun where kinship systems are either matrilineal or traced through bi-lineal descent, the generative power of the female sex is understood to be primary and paramount. Consequently, women in pre-colonial Africa enjoyed prestige and social privileges unequalled in the present day:

In general, colonial rulers came from societies that did not recognize women's collective political power as legitimate. Once in control of West and Central Africa, they simply ignored the institutionalized power that women held in many precolonial societies. This attitude contributed to the erosion of women's political power, which was further undermined by missionaries who attacked its religious underpinning.¹⁰

Without resorting to panegyric on the situation of women or an apologia for an imagined female 'golden age', I aim here to establish the fundament of the widespread and deeply rooted tradition to which contemporary female demonstrators allude, in order to show how their acts represent an empowering *catachresis* in the contemporary post-colonial political situation. That fundament is an indigenous 'religious' conception of Woman as the source of life, the innate

⁷ H. Djibo, *La participation des femmes Africaines à la vie politique: Les exemples du Sénégal et du Niger*, Collection Sociétés Africaines et Diaspora, Paris: Harmattan 2001, 26.

⁸ C.T. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2003, 23.

⁹ Mohanty, *Feminism*, 248, emphasis mine.

¹⁰ I. Berger and E.F. White, *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1999, 102.

bearer of spiritual power, the seat of moral authority and the provenance of legitimacy for worldly rulership.

Queen Mothers, Kings, Woman-Kings, and Female Spiritual Authority

Traditionally, the authority of African states was closely tied to the spiritual power embodied in woman. The office of Queen Mother, prevalent in West Africa, is a politically significant one. While the Queen Mother traditionally maintained her own court and military forces, even more critical was her prerogative to select the king, usually a junior (son or nephew) from among her matrikin, to serve as co-regent. She emblemized the overriding matrilineage, and 'the procreative power of royal women, without whom the kingship would cease to exist.'¹¹

The pairing of male and female rulers enabled both 'hot' and 'cool' qualities to be invested in rulership. 'The unique qualities of the queen mother balanced those of the king; ... her "main attribute [being] the *moral quality* of wisdom, knowledge, emotion, compassion"' bestowed through her counsel.¹² Nevertheless, detailed accounts by early Arab voyagers chronicle the exploits of remarkable queens and legendary female leaders from Senegal to Niger who ruled as 'hotly' as their male counterparts. Among them is the celebrated 16th-century warrior-Queen Amina of Zaria (contemporary Nigeria), whose military conquests over 30 years expanded Hausa territory.¹³ History bears account of more contemporary but equally powerful women rulers in West Africa, such as the heroic Queen Mother of the Asante Empire Yaa Asantewaa, who in 1900 led the final military stand against British colonial forces in Ghana. To this day the Asante and related Akan peoples sustain a bi-lateral system of rulership described by some as a 'covert gynocracy'.¹⁴

Even in situations where kings ruled without Queen Mothers, women had to sanctify rulers for them to enjoy legitimacy. The absence of a female in a position of political authority would be replaced by their representation through a ritual priest(ess) who presided over land, fertility and the spiritual domain, and moreover by the symbolic association of the king himself with generative female power. From Mali to Nigeria, when kings took the throne they had to be ritually invested with female qualities. In the ancient kingdom of Ségou (in present-day Mali), royalty included a category known as 'women-kings'. Considered able to prevent violent conflicts or even restore peace by the force of their word alone, they were 'equally charged with performing the sacrificial rites of fecundity'.¹⁵ In contrast to the *kele-masa*, 'warrior kings', they did have military

¹¹ J.K. Olupona, 'Women's Rituals, Kingship and Power among the Ondo-Yoruba of Nigeria' in F.E.S. Kaplan, (ed.) *Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses, and Power: Case Studies in African Gender*, New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1997, 315–336: 323.

¹² Akyeampong and Obeng, 'Spirituality', 29, emphasis mine.

¹³ Djibo, 'La Participation', 38.

¹⁴ A. Pritchard, E. Jones and F. Gibson, *The Akan Queen Mothers in Ghana and the Implications of Covert Gynocracy*, University of Wales Cardiff School of Management, 2010.

¹⁵ A. Adler, 'Initiation, royauté et fémininité en Afrique Noire. En deça ou au-delà de la différence des sexes: Logique politique ou logique initiatique?' in *L'Homme* 183 (2007), 77–115: 81–82.

command but were symbolically identified as women. The 'woman-king' would wear female attire and comport himself with the humility characteristic of ideal womanhood. In extreme instances, the designated king was actually castrated.¹⁶ The woman-king's acquired symbolic sexual duality enabled him to assume the moral attributes required of his office.

Even today the idea that female power is the critical underpinning of rulership endures. Among the Ondo Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, the authority of the male Oba (king) is derived from his descent from the famed first ruler, the female 'woman-king', Pupupu. 'Since the change in chieftaincy from female to male, women nevertheless have the right to have a woman leader, Lobun, also referred to as Oba Obinrin (woman king).'¹⁷ Her major duty is to serve as the chief ritual specialist overseeing the installation of the king. In fact, 'without the Lobun no king can be enthroned.'¹⁸

The principle that woman is the spiritual source of earthly authority has endured for centuries and undergirded women's self-governing institutions, sustaining their political influence even in the absence of a female ruler. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, for example, women defended their rights and dignity against those that violated them with a collective ritual of sanction known as 'sitting on a man':

To 'sit on' or 'make war on' a man involved gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs ... banging on his hut with the pestles women used for pounding yams, and perhaps demolishing his hut or plastering it with mud. ...until he repented.¹⁹

It was not only the enforcement of women's interests that engendered their mobilization. Any calamity or upheaval threatening the community might elicit their moral censure and spiritual intervention. In pre-colonial Ghana, Asante women performed a ritual called *mmomomme*, a 'distinctly female form of spiritual warfare'.²⁰

When Asante troops were at war, Asante women in the villages would perform daily *ritual chants* until the troops returned, *processing in partial nudity from one end of the village to the other*. This ritual protected the soldiers at war, and sometimes involved women *pounding empty mortars with pestles* as a form of spiritual torture of Asante's enemies.²¹

As we shall see, such rituals drawing on women's spiritual power have endured as both religious *and* political forms of resistance and redress to violations of moral values that sustain African traditions, instantiated in women's bodies.

¹⁶ J. Bazin, 'Princes désarmés, corps dangereux. Les 'rois-femmes' de la region de Seg' in *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* (1988), 28:3-4: 375-441.

¹⁷ J.K. Olupona, *Kingship, Religion and Rituals in a Nigerian Community*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1991, 47.

¹⁸ Olupona, *Kingship*, 37.

¹⁹ J. Van Allen, "'Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women' in *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6:2 (1972), 165-181: 170.

²⁰ Akyeampong and Obeng, 'Spirituality', 30.

²¹ Akyeampong and Obeng, 'Spirituality', 30, emphasis mine.

Sokroyibé: Female Genital Power in Contemporary Religious Ritual in Côte d'Ivoire

In 1980 and again in 2010 I conducted fieldwork among the Abidji in southern Côte d'Ivoire and attended several performances of a ritual known as Dipri. It is a hyper-masculine and sensational ritual in which male initiates, possessed by the river spirit to whom they are consecrated, stab themselves in the abdomen. They are instantly healed by their ritual elders whose prior initiation vested them with this supernatural power. Elsewhere I have analyzed how the sensational show of men's blood mirrors the potent flow of uterine blood, allowing men to symbolically assume women's generative power.²² For our purposes here what is more important than an exegesis of the ritual proper is the fact that Dipri cannot proceed without the preliminary nocturnal rite demonstrating the fundamental supremacy of female genital power.

On the evening before Dipri, the village is ritually sealed; after nightfall no one may enter or exit. In the small hours of the morning, under the cover of darkness, women elders gather to perform Sokroyibé, the rite of protection and blessing. The women strip naked. They cry out an invitation to all mature women to join them in their work, and warn the population to retreat, since it is dangerous, especially for men, to look on the nakedness of 'the Mothers'. The women cross the village, chanting and pounding the ground with old broken or well-worn pestles, cursing any witches who might use their powers to keep the initiates' wounds from healing. At the opposite end of the village, the women wash their genitals with water, which they sprinkle across the road in order to 'trap' witches and to bar the way from these evil-doers.²³

While Dipri appears to be a 'gendered distribution of male authority and order, with men at the centre and women at the margins', the indispensability of Sokroyibé makes clear that Woman's power is the real force that protects all male initiates who stab themselves and supersedes the magical prowess of the men who heal them.²⁴ Sokroyibé is not the only ritual instance that attests to the pre-eminence of female genital power. Among the Abidji, the female genitals as the locus of great power, even receive blood sacrifices, such as chickens (as does the female river spirit who presides over Dipri). And women use their sex like a weapon with the curse, 'May my lopò catch you!'²⁵

Female Genital Power in Contemporary Politics

Not only do African women traditionally call upon their genital power to intercede in the context of spiritual contests, but they also do so in situations of social calamity. In the Abidji village of Sahuyé in 2009, the chief ceremonial

²² L. Grillo, 'Contested Powers and Power Contests: Sex and Power in Ritual and Politics in Post-Civil War Côte d'Ivoire', Paper Presented to the *American Academy of Religion*, Montréal, Canada, November 2009.

²³ F. Lafargue, *Religion, magie, sorcellerie des Abidji en Côte d'Ivoire*, Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines 1976, 193–194.

²⁴ A. Apter, *Beyond Words: Discourse and Critical Agency in Africa*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2007, 122.

²⁵ Lafargue, *Abidji*, 194.

priest ('Chef de Terre') told me, 'when there is an epidemic that someone sent to do harm, women strip naked; they carry wooden sticks or old pestles and walk through the village singing and calling down on the witch all that they can evoke' (i.e., curses). The village chief confirmed this saying, 'Woman is much respected. ... Woman annuls all that is bad. In the old days, when there was a military draft, and the colonials would come to the village to choose young men in good health, in the night the women would sing so that the White man wouldn't take our children into slavery. In our region, we don't like the military.'

Perhaps the most famous example of the use of female genital power to confront the deterioration of women's rights and autonomy under colonial rule is the Nigerian case known as The Women's War. In 1929 Igbo and Ibibio women rioted to protest British colonial administration's plans to tax their income. They used the same traditional networks and mechanisms for mobilizing the ritual of sanction known as 'sitting on a man': 'Thousands of women showed up at native administration centres dressed in the same unusual way: wearing short loincloths, their faces smeared with charcoal or ashes, their heads bound with young ferns [symbolizing war], and in their hands carrying sticks wreathed with young palms...used to invoke the powers of the female ancestors.'²⁶ They 'gestured most obscenely and became spirit-possessed.'²⁷

In 1954, prior to Ghana's independence, women there too called on 'the power of *mmomomme*' using naked protest that 'evoked Asante notions of spiritual power' as an integral part of the National Liberation Movement.²⁸ In Northwest Cameroon elderly women still deploy 'Takembeng', a 'culturally legitimate etiquette of moral censure' to protest perceived affronts by state authority.²⁹ The 'Mami Takembeng' 'strip naked, defecate in public, and in other ways behave in a manner contrary to the usual rules of decorum' as a form of protest.³⁰

In Côte d'Ivoire, as well, such ritual-as-activism has mobilized women in both the colonial and post-colonial situation. In fact the renowned Ivoirian women's uprising in 1949 was more than a march upon the colonial stronghold in Grand Bassam; once there the women 'turned to a precolonial form of protest when they angrily used a symbolic ritual, *Adjanou*, that relied on verbal and visual insults, including nudity'.³¹ These women showed themselves to be self-conscious critics and activists, drawing on female genital power as an ancient stratagem to reassert indigenous values.

More recently, in 2002, at the urging of 'young patriots' to resist the attack that ignited the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, Nanan Kolia Tano, female chief of the Baoulé village Douakandro, organized five elderly women to execute *Adjanou*, described as a 'mystical' dance performed in the nude, to ward off the

²⁶ Allen, 'Sitting on a Man', 174–175.

²⁷ C. Ifeka-Moller, "'Sitting on a Man": A Reply to Judith Van Allen' in *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 7:2 (1973), 317–318: 318.

²⁸ Akyeampong and Obeng, 'Spirituality', 42.

²⁹ S. Diduk, 'The Civility of Incivility: Grassroots Political Activism, Female Farmers, and the Cameroon State' in *African Studies Review* 47:2 (2004), 27–54: 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

³¹ Berger and White, *Women*, 103.

cataclysm. They danced for 7 days until Rebel soldiers abducted and killed all but the chief.³² In 2003, when the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dominique de Villepin, arrived to broker a coalition government, naked women blocked his exit from the Ivoirian presidential palace³³ and urinated on the wheels of his motorcade.³⁴ In February 2011 during the violent upheavals that followed the highly contested presidential election, several dozen *Adjanou* dancers appeared in Treichville to protest 'their children's arbitrary abduction' by Gbagbo's Republican Guard and brandished their *kodjo* (cache-sexe) to 'thrash the enemy.'³⁵ That month in Yamoussoukro hundreds of kaolin-smeared women occupied the late President Houphouët-Boigny's residence to perform *Adjanou* continuously to condemn 'the deplorable state of the country's affairs', undertaking what the organizer called a 'spiritual combat', drawing on the realm in which, 'the strength and the power belong to Woman.'³⁶

The ritual performances of female genital power made public in the political arena have been history-making acts of civil society. Through their ancient ritual rhetoric, unadulterated by the loss in translation that plagues language, these women eloquently condemn political power unchecked by moral authority. In Côte d'Ivoire, the women's deployment of female genital power as a call to restore the moral underpinnings of the state shows the state's widespread sexual violation of women to be even more reprehensible, as it sets in high relief government's critical missing ingredient.³⁷

Female Genital Power as Catachresis

Gayatri Spivak evoked *catachresis* as a process in which 'the colonized take and reinscribe something that exists...as a feature of imperial culture' and adopt it in post-colonial society 'as an empowering avenue of self-determination'.³⁸ Moreover, as Richards notes, *catachresis* is used in postcolonial theory to denote:

'a concept-metaphor without an adequate referent', 'reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding', 'pervert[ing] its embedded context'

³² N.B.D. "'Un génocide des Baoulé est mis en oeuvre": Massacre des danseuses d'adjanou L'unique rescapée témoigne', *L'Inter* 3 March 2003, Accessed 6 May 2010, http://www.leconservateur.net/Guie_Roi_baoule.htm.

³³ G. Bro-Grébé, Former Ivoirian Minister of Sports and Leisure, personal interview, Abidjan 26 April 2010.

³⁴ J.B. Gueye, 'Sourires de l'Hôtel Ivoire' blog in *AbidjanDirect* 2004, Accessed 2 December 2011, <http://www.abidjandirect.net/index2.php?page=poli&id=2334>.

³⁵ Radiosun 24 February 2011, 'Manifestations des femmes danseuses d'Adjanou violemment dispersées', Accessed 29 November 2011, <http://www.radiosun.fr/sun-news/5760-abidjan-manifestation-de>.

³⁶ Le Mandat 17 February 2011, 'Yamoussoukro/Usurpation of Power: The Revolt of Women from the City and Villages', Accessed 5 June 2011, <http://news.abidjan.net/h/391509.html>.

³⁷ Grillo, 'Violation and Deployment'.

³⁸ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, New York: Routledge 2000, 34.

(Spivak 1987; Bhabha 1994, p. 183). Catachresis describes postcolonial praxis as the wilful disregard of decorum: mixing metaphors, making inappropriate conjunctions, switching codes to foreground the productive 'friction' of worlds which collide.³⁹

I propose that the enactment of female genital power in Côte d'Ivoire exemplifies the kind of productive praxis categorized as *catachresis*, but with a few interesting twists.

First, what Ivoirian women re-inscribe is not something appropriated from the *colonial* domain, but a feature of *traditional* society. Nevertheless, their code-switching move is just as empowering a means for reasserting self-determination, if not more so. Drawing on indigenous conceptions and modes of expression, these women assert 'a concept-metaphor for which there is no historical referent' in the *post-colonial* situation. The Adjanou dancers 'seize the apparatus of value-coding' and transpose it from the traditional religious realm onto the political sphere. In this way the performance 'perverts' the context in which their acts are traditionally embedded. This displacement from the sacred to the secular arena produces remarkable reversals: the normally secret, concealed event is turned into a public spectacle in which the most intimate body parts, normally shielded from view by taboo, are exposed to shame the viewer. This transgressive act demonstrates a 'wilful disregard of decorum', shocking spectators with its brazen display.

In the context of Côte d'Ivoire's civil war, the naked lament of elderly women demonstrators takes on an especially poignant cast, showing that the 'colliding worlds' are now internal and domestic, and their 'friction' is tragic. Their 'traditional' act in this revolutionary situation signals the degree to which the dismantling dynamics of colonialism have been internalized by the state and continue to disrupt, undermine and marginalize the foundations of African civilization.

Insofar as Adjanou is a traditional ritual, it is part of the foundational 'social imaginary', 'a repository of cultural artefacts, images, and inscriptions through and by which social life is both represented and constituted.'⁴⁰ Its embodied imagery asserts the supremacy of women as progenitors of community and spiritual anchors of civilization, a visible reminder that their blessing is critical to the successful negotiation of worldly power. The nakedness of the mother, and in particular the female genitalia, is so powerful that looking upon it is taboo; therefore the 'image' is an invisible, imagined one, but no less representative of moral values upon which social life is made possible. Enacted in the political arena, Adjanou 'seizes the apparatus of value encoding' in a way that does not import a western trope, or depend on it to bear the message of the subaltern. Instead, the act as a political manifestation demonstrates that the 'concept-metaphor without an adequate referent' in the post-colonial situation is Woman.

³⁹ D. Richards, 'Another Architecture', in *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds*, Classical Presences. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007, 349–409: 352.

⁴⁰ Richards, 'Architecture', 352.

Postcolonial Theory and African Modes of Expression

Language, Logocentricity and the Impossibility of Representation

Pondering who may represent the 'Third World', at an academic conference Spivak asks a colleague, 'Isn't it "Eurocentric" to choose only...writers who write in the consciousness of marginality?' The provisional answer offered is, 'One must begin somewhere.'⁴¹ For most postcolonial theorists, that 'somewhere' is usually the 'privileged site of a neo-colonial educational system' and its elite.⁴² In effect, Spivak is answering her famous question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in the negative. The self-conscious voice of the truly marginalized is by its very nature inaccessible and an oppressed group can only be spoken for. The result is what one critic calls 'ventriloquism', in which post-colonial scholars project the voice of the marginal through their own.⁴³

Spivak and other post-colonial scholars who are 'natives too' show themselves to be caught in a particular conundrum. The structure that they 'inhabit intimately' and cannot refuse is the academy of which they are an inextricable part and its discourse in which they are deeply invested.⁴⁴ What makes the position of such postcolonial theorists especially problematic is the inadequacy of language itself. The problem is not only language's semantic insufficiency; it is the burden that language (and its demand for translation) bears as the particular hallmark of colonial imperialism.

Logocentrism, at the heart of the crisis of representation that haunts post-colonial theory, results in a crippling aporia. The preoccupation with language, its limits and its incommensurability with the experience of the subaltern overshadows other media of expression and obscures other domains in which the subaltern – one who is *not* identical to the colonial theorist – may in fact be 'speaking'.

Ritual: Alternative Expression from Somewhere Else

I suggest that the 'somewhere' from which one rightly begins is the local situation. In that context the subaltern 'speaks' using the syntax of ritual, a medium that is less readily co-opted by imperialist hegemony. The performers of Adjanou are not 'speaking' in the idiom of the (post)colonial world at all, and therefore avoid mimicry and ventriloquism. It is precisely this sidestepping that renders their gesture so powerful. Adjanou simultaneously communicates vulnerability and lament, outrage and protest, judgment and condemnation, yet does so without importing a western trope or depending on discursive language to bear its message.

⁴¹ G. Spivak, 'Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value' in P. Collier and H. Geyer-Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory Today*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1990, 219–239: 223.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ T. Bewes, 'Shame, Ventriloquy, and the Problem of the Cliché in Caryl Phillips' in *Cultural Critique* 63 (April 2006), 33–60.

⁴⁴ Spivak, 'Poststructuralism', 225.

The appeal to ritual avoids the impasse so characteristic of the post-colonial scholar, forced to use the language of the colonial or its concept-metaphors to critique it. By contrast, the effect of women's unambiguous act is immediately dismantling: In 1961, in Abeokuta, Nigerian Yoruba women rose in revolt against unfair taxation and when the police came to disperse the crowd, 'the women brandished their menstruation cloths [causing] the police to take to their heels.'⁴⁵ Thirty years later in Cameroon, women protesting the government's arrest of a popular opposition leader knelt down naked and held their breasts in a gesture of implicit threat, and the soldiers fled.⁴⁶ With a similar gesture, during the Yoruba Oroyeye festival in Nigeria 'old women past their childbearing years wreak havoc on public offenders'.⁴⁷ In all these situations, the great dangers associated violating the taboo of looking on the nakedness of the Mothers or countering their spiritual force elicits immediate response.

Drawing on these same ritual tropes Ivoirian women resist their inscription into the subjugating dynamics of the post-colonial nation-state. Unlike those scholars, characterized by Spivak as 'proto-colonial subjects', who embrace the very structures they disavow, these indigenous women stand on less ambivalent ground. The space that they 'inhabit intimately' is that of their very bodies and the firm ground of tradition. The women manifesting female genital power effectively displace the displaced intellectuals as the self-professed 'saviours of marginality'.⁴⁸ Their displays are revelatory spectacles that show the kind of power embodied in the female sex as the 'irreducible margin in the centre' of a just society.⁴⁹

'Women's Story' and Cultural Memory

In order to defend the position that the women's ritual in Côte d'Ivoire can be viewed as an *empowering catachresis*, it is necessary to consider more closely Spivak's contention that if the subaltern 'has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more deeply in the shadow'⁵⁰ for 'Women's story is not the substance of great narratives.'⁵¹

As I have shown, if only through brief example, the history of Africa suggests that 'Women's story' is, in fact, a remarkable one, not an imaginary 'golden age' or invented myth. It is the subject of griots' oral chronicles, of voyagers' ancient records, and colonial narrative alike. However, since colonialism, women's agency has been increasingly repressed and their power eroded. In Senegal today, for example, 'matrilineage practically exists only as a mental conception, as changes were introduced, especially along the lines of economic relations, which brought about its destruction.'⁵² Colonial domination reinforced the

⁴⁵ Stevens, 'Genital Power', 595.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 597.

⁴⁷ Apter, 'Beyond words', 94.

⁴⁸ Spivak, 'Poststructuralism', 226.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁰ G. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1988, 287.

⁵¹ Spivak, 'Poststructuralism', 235.

⁵² Djibo, 'La Participation', 74.

growing cleavage between the sexes by depriving women of the prerogatives of traditional institutions, and by imposing the European model of government, which caused unique categories ascribed to women in traditional dynasties to disappear.⁵³

In Côte d'Ivoire, as well, women's authority has been eroded and the active memory of female prestige is being lost. The ethos of respect and deference to women that was so palpable in Ivoirian culture only 30 years ago has left only a faint trace. The strongest echo of women's power resounds in these enduring rituals, for 'women today still occupy a preponderant place in the context of traditional religions.'⁵⁴ Women's reinsertion of traditional ideology into post-colonial politics is a strong refusal to be totally effaced.

I suggest that the performances of Adjanou and other such deployments of female genital power turn the tables on all the players of the post-colonial game, imposing their own jarring *catathresis* onto the scene. In the face of oppression, subjugation, and violence, these women do not engage in debate, negotiation or legal appeal. Instead they challenge the neo-colonial state with the living traditions that have precedence, both historical primacy and ethical pre-eminence. The ritual revivifies collective cultural memory and throws into high relief the gaping absence that only the 'Mothers' can fill – the moral force that lends legitimacy to rulership. With their nakedness, they bear (bare) witness to that more authentic authority.

Essentialism, Representation and the No-Thing

Mohanty laments that '...present-day scholarship tends to reproduce particular "globalized" representations of women' including: "'the victim of war crimes" ... "the-mother-of-the-nation" and "religious bearer of traditional culture and morality"'.⁵⁵ Actually, in the Ivoirian case, it is the local politicians who resort to romantic appeal to women as the 'mothers of the nation', with each side in turn calling upon them to defend their cause. However, women's demonstrations of female genital power defy such attempts to co-opt their representation in support of the nation-state. While the ritual does appeal to an ideal view of Woman as 'religious bearer of traditional culture and morality', it certainly doesn't depict a temperate, maternal nurturance of nationalism. Their naked confrontation with politicians and troops condemns their neglect of the fundamental ethical mandates that define African identity, authority and power. This ancient transgressive technique contests colonial conceptions of gender and disrupts women's inscription into the subjugating dynamics of the post-colonial state.

Making a spectacle through nudity is the kind of 'disclosure' that is characteristic of an empowering *catathresis*. Through their own self-(re)presentation of a striking visual kind, the women simultaneously excoriate, protest, and demand validation in the political landscape. This demand goes beyond *vertreten* – representation as proxy. The recognition they demand cannot be

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 83ff.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁵ Mohanty, *Feminism*, 247.

filled by a mandate for a quota, for it is – paradoxically – not about making an *appearance* within the apparatus of the state. That kind of representation is, according to Spivak, merely ‘elaborately staged’.⁵⁶ Rather, the demonstrations of female genital power insist on making room for the *invisible*, spiritual, and moral dimensions of life – the no-thing, the gap, the *différance* that women embody in respect of a logocentric representational regime.⁵⁷

Emergent: Situations and Concepts

The situation in Côte d’Ivoire is emergent, in both the sense of calling for prompt, urgent attention, and arising as a natural or logical consequence. What has given rise to the dire and crying situation of Ivoirian women is ‘postcoloniality’, that is to say, the aftermath of colonialism and the fractious enterprise of nation-building. At the same time, and not unrelatedly, there is a pressing need in the academy to find new concepts and methods that are better suited to interpret today’s globalized world; ‘Examples of using the older concepts on contemporary material... sound like they [are parodies]’.⁵⁸ Even the very terms ‘religion’, ‘gender’ and ‘postcoloniality’ have been challenged as empty, invented, unstable and misplaced.⁵⁹

In this concluding section I draw on emergent concepts in postcolonial theory that lend themselves better to what Edward Said called the ‘bristling paradox’ that characterizes the contemporary moment: *Worldliness, Unhomeliness and Timeliness*. My intention is to use these constructs to turn attention away from theorists’ ‘obsessive focus’ on postcoloniality as theory at the expense of postcoloniality as politics or activism; instead, I underscore how West African expression of female genital power is an example of postcoloniality-as-activism.⁶⁰ As Nigerian scholar of African gender studies, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí asserts, ‘African experiences rarely inform theory in any field of study; at best such experiences are exceptionalized’.⁶¹ 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.

‘Worldliness’

Edward Said invoked the ambiguous concept ‘Worldliness’ as a particularly apt characterization of academic disciplines, like anthropology, that are ‘predicated

⁵⁶ Spivak, ‘Speak?’, 106 footnote 12.

⁵⁷ J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Trans. Alan Bass), Brighton: Harvester Press 1982, 4.

⁵⁸ P. Rabinow and G.E. Marcus, *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*, Durham: Duke University Press 2008, 43.

⁵⁹ D. Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 2003; O. Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997; Bhabha, *Location*; R. Radhakrishnan, ‘Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity’ in *Callaloo* 16:4 (1993), 750–771.

⁶⁰ Radhakrishnan, ‘Postcoloniality’, 751.

⁶¹ Oyewùmí, *Invention*, 18.

on the fact of otherness and difference'; Today these qualifiers are understood to be 'profoundly conditioned... by their historical and worldly context.'⁶² As a result the scholar is 'remanded into the actual world', to the sites of a cultural situation where differences are realized.⁶³ Adopting a 'worldly approach' means moving away from preoccupation with 'religion' (or for that matter 'gender' or 'postcoloniality') as a reified entity, a totality that governs cultural dynamics, and turning instead to concrete ways in which such concerns are actualized. From this perspective, women's performance of female genital power can be seen to be more profound than a 'merely political' demonstration, and more practical than the espousal of 'merely religious' ideas. Instead, I suggest, their act represents a new, emergent conjuncture of these domains.

Ivoirian women reveal themselves (quite literally) to be agents in the world, exercising spiritual power even as they demand that the state recognize its centrality to worldly authority. These instances show that 'ritual' means more than a poetic quality of a social act; when taken outside their 'authorized' contexts, such actions still bear persuasive power and can thereby 'make history'.⁶⁴ This is worldliness in a very real sense.

Said underscores that 'Worldliness' carries both 'the idea of being in the secular world, as opposed to being 'otherworldly', and conveys 'the quality of a practiced, slightly jaded *savoir faire*, worldly wise and street smart'.⁶⁵ African women's use of this ritual as activism can be seen as part of the history of resistance that evinces both a sophisticated take on secular politics and a savvy about how to use civil disobedience to gain leverage on that worldly stage. It is shrewd and strategic. Yet their 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.⁶⁶

Ivoirian women's recollection of the innate and predominant power of 'The Mothers' restores to view an alternative appraisal of the condition of the female sex, one that is particular to West Africa. Their enactment of female genital power asserts the precedence of deep, local knowledge over the global order and the primacy of vernacular meanings and parochial identity over homogenizing secularization. It actively refutes the essentializing projections about gender that serve to marginalize women. This is a worldly act that does not capitulate to the totalizing ways of post-colonial globalization.

Mohanty argues that scholars can '[make] the case for the centrality of gender in processes of global restructuring' if they were to focus on 'unexpected and unpredictable sites of resistance to the often devastating effects of global restructuring on women.'⁶⁷ I propose that the women of Côte d'Ivoire are

⁶² Said, 'Representing', 213.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶⁴ J. Comaroff and J.L. Comaroff, *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993, xviii.

⁶⁵ Said, 'Representing', 212–13.

⁶⁶ Bhabha, *Location*, 19.

⁶⁷ Mohanty, *Feminism*, 245.

making the case themselves eloquently and with vigour. Their 'unexpected and unpredictable' site of resistance is the naked female body, which is also the locus of devastating sexual violation as warfare.

'Unhomeliness'

The term 'unhomely' speaks to the uncomfortable and uninviting situation of postcoloniality for the colonized and the colonizing subject alike. Bhabha adopts the notion of 'unhomeliness' to signal 'the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world' that is 'a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition'.⁶⁸ To be 'unhomed' implies not only displacement of colonial persons or the importation of colonial culture, but also indicates an intrusion of global politics into the local situation, experienced as the disruptive imposition of political agenda on personal lives. In this new world order 'nobody will feel fully at home.'⁶⁹

This is the situation in Côte d'Ivoire, whose very name (Ivory Coast) suggests its legacy of colonial exploitation and the commodification at its origin. The extremely heterogeneous population grouped within its arbitrary borders was made more diverse in its post-independence 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 fuelled by fractious discourse about 'belonging' and 'Ivoirianness' (Ivoirité). It is an unhomed country, peopled by the displaced: immigrant labourers 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.

The unhomely also characterizes inversions and perversions that result from such disorienting displacement; it is 'the name for everything that ought to have remained... secret and hidden but has come to light.'⁷⁰ Accordingly, when the secret ritual alluding to women's most secret parts is inverted and made a public spectacle, it is an expression of the 'unhomely', *par excellence*.

In 'making a spectacle' of themselves in public protest, the women demand to be seen, not as objectified beings upon which one may gaze, but as the material emblem of that which is missing from the post-colonial state: ethical accountability. Their naked bodies stand in startling contrast with the armour and artillery of military troops or the motorcades of political dignitaries. This inverted ritual is a mirror that holds up to view an image of the factors that have brought about the alienation from 'home' (i.e. authentic, indigenous culture, spiritual and morality) and the dislocation of the local by the imported apparatus of neo-colonial power.

Women's bodies have been the site of the contest of power where society's unhomely dislocation has been forcefully enacted. Rape and other sexual torture violently rend a woman's body and her body from herself, even as

⁶⁸ Bhabha, *Location*, 13.

⁶⁹ Bewes, 'Shame', 47.

⁷⁰ Bhabha, *Location*, 14.

they rip the seams of society in civil war. These most intimate violations are public acts of invasion intended to 'unhome' the victims and the surrounding populace.

In resorting to this traditional expression of calamity and protest, 'the Mothers' also make the female body the locus of public contestation. However in this case they make use of their most private being for their own disruptive agenda. These dynamics reflect Bhabha's observation that 'the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions...uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.'⁷¹

The Mothers' demonstrations are no mere theoretical critique, disengaged from the context that gives rise to the act and distinguishable from the moment of its expression. Their daring display is a '*critique engagée*', simultaneously embodying lament, judgment, protest and warning.⁷² Their outrageous spectacle is an expression of indignation that the Woman's central civilizing place has been displaced by the hyper-masculine forms of neo-colonial conflict. It protests that fundamental African values have been overshadowed by the ideologies of nation and state, leaving the halls of power morally bankrupt. Forcing men, particularly statesmen and their armed troops, to confront their naked bodies, the 'Mothers' perpetrate an epistemic aggression; Their act transgresses and disrupts the neo-colonial frame of reference that situates power in the political realm alone.

Bhabha observes that in cases of resistance to nationalism, 'the people will no longer be contained in that national discourse of the teleology of progress; ... the homogeneous time of social narratives. The liminality of the people... demands a "time" of narrative that is disavowed in the discourse of historicism', which the state represents.⁷³ Public manifestations of female genital power represent such a timely reappraisal of the dissembling trajectory of the nation that has unhomed women. Their discomfiting ('unhomely') revelation exposes the degree to which the Ivoirian state's adoption of the terms of modernity have alienated it from the civic virtues that traditionally define moral rulership. Their liminal act, simultaneously political and spiritual, refuses the further encroachment of foreign ideology upon the values of 'home'.

'Timeliness': Timeless Categories and Timely Acts

'Timeliness' is another emergent construct that can forward post-colonial analysis and inform activism. One thinks of 'the timely' as an intervention that occurs at a propitious moment, enhancing its efficacy. Timely acts or speech are situated in particular historic instants, just as worldly ones are situated in particular places, and both involve reflexivity. Certainly, these ritual protests are necessarily timely, aiming to have consequence in the unfolding history in which they play an immediate part. Women's activism stands in contrast with

⁷¹ Bhabha, *Location*, 13.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 216–217.

the 'untimeliness' of the scholarly production,⁷⁴ which always happens 'after the fact'.⁷⁵

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. Richards asserts that, 'Postcolonialism ... has little time for the remembrance of *profound time*.'⁷⁶ From this vantage point, tradition is easily dismissed, relegated to the 'profound time' of mythic origins. According to some theorists, traditions that refer to a timeless past are at best irrelevant in the face of globalizing forces, and at worst, themselves serve as the conservative ideology that keeps the subaltern in a position of subservience to the interests of an elite.⁷⁷ Spivak, for one, categorically states that she is 'committed to the notion that ... nostalgia for lost origins can be detrimental to the exploration of social realities within the critique of imperialism.'⁷⁸

While I concur that such nostalgia is an 'untimely' preoccupation, I suggest that these rituals of female genital power, 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 has 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. Spivak suggests that this is one avenue in which women do act as historical agents: 'women are curious, they have a knack of asking the outsider's uncanny questions', and these 'counterfactual presentation(s)' can be 'the motor of "effective" history'.⁷⁹ The uncanny question that Ivoirian women implicitly pose is whether the state can legitimately assume and maintain power without their authorizing benediction.

Conclusion

The traditional rituals of female genital power erupt on the political scene as a jarring and seemingly 'inappropriate' conjunction of indigenous religion with worldly events. The women's shocking exhibition intentionally inverts the domains of hidden and public, to forcefully reassert the values of the local over the homogenizing tenets of globalization using an eloquent medium of vernacular expression. These rituals of excoriation disrupt the modernist, colonial trajectory of the state and aggressively contest the foreign ideologies of gender and power that it adopted and perpetuates. Flouting decorum, they

⁷⁴ Rabinow and Marcus, *Designs*, 58.

⁷⁵ C. Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1995.

⁷⁶ Richards, 'Architecture', 350 emphasis mine.

⁷⁷ B. Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999.

⁷⁸ Spivak, 'Speak?', 291.

⁷⁹ Spivak, 'Poststructuralism', 235.

repudiate the effacement of women – their subjugation in society, their targeted victimization in ‘war’, and the neglect of the moral mandates that the ‘Mothers’ embody. Their insistence on these indigenous foundational principles is delivered with compelling urgency, making their ritual-as-activism a worldly and timely intervention that compellingly recalls to collective memory the fundamental values of ‘home.’ There is a productive postcolonial praxis that can be readily categorized as *catachresis* in Côte d’Ivoire.