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

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2. MATRIFOCAL MORALITY

FGP and the Foundation of “Home”

While men in principle hold political authority and power, women control the ritual power that makes political rule possible.
—Jacob Obafemi Kehinde Olupona, “Women’s Rituals, Kingship and Power among the Ondo-Yoruba of Nigeria”

The King sucks the breast of the Queen Mother.
—Asante proverb, in Beverly J. Stoeltje, “Asante Queen Mothers”

The conception of the innate power of woman and her sex is not an artifact of a particular culture; it is not unique to the Abidji or to the wider class of Akan ethnicities to which the Abidji belong, nor is it limited to the traditions of Côte d’Ivoire. Moreover, the understanding of primacy and the potent force of woman is not germane to the spiritual sphere of religion alone. So critical is the construct of female genital power as an emblem of moral authority that it has been a keystone of structural rulership and the underpinning of political and social organization in Africa for centuries.

A persistent and preponderant misconception about women in Africa is that everywhere they have been martyrs of traditional society. Through the deforming 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” (Djibo 2001, 26). This bias has informed even contemporary scholarship, including, and perhaps especially, by early feminists who on the one hand mistakenly presupposed the homogeneity of women as a group on the basis of their oppressed status while on the other hand portrayed the average Third World woman as leading “an essentially truncated life” by comparison to those in the “liberated” West (Mohanty 2003, 22). With these underlying presuppositions comes the concomitant and equally mistaken presumption that the westernization of Africa brought with it women’s emancipa-
tion and their greater valorization. In fact, “while the asymmetry of relations between males and females, with the dominance of the first over the second, was not totally unknown in [traditional African] societies in former time, it seems that they are accentuated today, tending to worsen under the effect of the forces of modernization” (Djibo 2001, 16).

Historical records dating back centuries show that throughout West Africa, and especially along the southern rainforest region from Senegal to Cameroon, where kinship systems are either matrilineal or traced through bilineal descent, female power is understood to be primary and paramount. It is primary because woman is the progenitor, and the mother-child bond, which constitutes the basis of the family unit, is the source of a fundamental morality on which all society depends. It is paramount because the Mothers are understood to be the living embodiment of the ancestors and, as such, are guardians of that moral order. This ancient ideology has not only informed the nature of rulership of the great African empires and kingdoms, but also prevailed as the basis for leadership among the more typical stateless societies of Africa, communities that resisted hierarchical forms of rulership. The fundamental moral principles on which the whole of social order rests were most forcefully sanctioned through the ritual appeal to female genital power.

Without resorting to panegyric on the situation of women or creating an apologia for an imagined female “golden age” or even an ancient matriarchy in Africa, this chapter aims to demonstrate that at the foundation of West African civilization is the widespread and deeply rooted conception that Woman is the innate bearer of spiritual power, the seat of moral authority, and the provenance of legitimacy for worldly rulership. On this basis I argue that the concept of matrifocal morality is the grounding construct and orienting ideology upon which civilization is founded and represents the values of home. It is most strongly articulated through the fierce ritual rhetoric of the rite of female genital power (FGP).

*Kings and “Women-Kings”: Spiritual Empowerment of Worldly Authority*

As was long the case in Europe, kingship in Africa was considered to derive its power from a sacred source. From Mali to Nigeria, when a king took the throne he had to be ritually invested with female qualities. In “Initiation, Royalty and Femininity in Black Africa,” Alfred Adler (2007) underscores that both the rituals of male initiation and the investiture of kings make strong symbolic associations between the male subjects and Woman, inculcating and
making them embody female traits. Transcripts from the ancient kingdom of Ségou (present-day Mali) indicate that the griots and other notables who controlled the deep knowledge behind the esoteric ritual code were clear about the ideas and values behind such performative engendering practices. Court documents assert that “power is female: to obtain what he wants, the king must know how to humble himself . . . to act with femininity”; they also state that “in the beginning, woman was born to be king. Man is only wood, without offspring” (87). As a result, the kings were “doubled” with a parallel line of royalty, overseeing a complementary order of existence. The first was “masculine, indicated by material show of force, the other feminine, enigmatic, as efficacious as impotent, and . . . that would certainly be called ‘magical’” (Bazin 1988, 379). In the nineteenth century in the state of Ségou, the male persons in this second category of kings were known as “women-kings.” These Traoré king-priests were structurally identified as women and therefore considered the source of power of the royal clan.

Among the Traoré clan the women-kings did not control military arms, “a notion that Malians of today [still identify] with the modern state and with its administrative apparatus” (Adler 2007, 81). By contrast, they were 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” (77). The woman-king’s acquired symbolic sexual duality enabled him to assume the moral attributes required of his office. He would wear female attire and comport himself with the humility characteristic of ideal womanhood to embody plenitude and completeness. Adler suggests this practice amounts to hermaphroditism (85).1 In extreme instances of intentional gender conflation, a future Traoré king of the Bambara would be secluded and actually castrated. “Castrating the king is a means of ‘preparing’ his body and making it susceptible for different appreciations: one can see in it not de-virilization, a half-change in sex, but the means of obtaining a state of maximum purity to increase his power” (425). This was thought to be the case of the famous fourteenth-century king of the ancient Mali empire, Mansa Musa.2 “The term masa [or mansa], when employed absolutely, generally refers to the office of a sovereign, whereas ma’samuso means ‘woman-kings’” (378). Thus this legendary ruler was literally a “woman king.”

The premise that royal power is derived from the female and dependent on identification with the spiritual domain in which women excel is also asserted in myth. One account tells how the Traoré clan, associated with the Ségou royal lineage, gained its political power through the maternal line and its female divinity.
The Traoré had given one of their sisters to a “genie,” *jine*, in exchange for which they received power. Actually, this legend is only one variation of a great West African myth tracing the origins and the end of the Wagadu Empire (the former Ghana). [In it] the serpent Bida, master of the subterranean waters and master of the gold on which the power of the empire rested, demanded the annual sacrifice of a young virgin in order to continue to dispense its acts of generosity. The first of these victims was a young girl of the Traoré clan, which obtained royalty in return. (Adler 2007, 85)

The parallel to the myth of the origin of Dipri is unmistakable. Even the name *Bida* evokes the name of the Abidji founding ancestor, Bidyo. Certainly, the subregion has a well-established history of migration and cultural diffusion, accounting for similar mythic themes. The story is evidence of the widespread “orienting schemes, and systems of presumption” (Rabinow et al. 2008, 107) that I suggest are still determinative in West Africa, namely that home is founded on moral authority with a female source.

The Malian myth and ritual together demonstrate that alignment with female power was deemed necessary for the state to gain political legitimacy and to use its authority judiciously. The institution of the woman-king and the small network of those holding this title eventually became subsumed by male-dominated kingdoms. They eventually served the community in a more modest capacity as judges and peacemakers, an indication that the power that they maintained was grounded in moral authority with a female source.

This idea that female power is the critical underpinning of kingship endures and continues to authorize the kingship and invest it with sacrality. 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. Pupupu is believed to have been the twin sister of Oduduwa, the legendary founder of the Yoruba, alternatively represented as the daughter of one of his twin offspring. “In the origin myth . . . she was accorded the rank of a Yoruba king” (Olupona 1991, 26). According to tradition, she ruled until great old age, when she installed her son as her substitute, inaugurating male rule. However, every succeeding king has derived authority from his mythic descent from Pupupu. From this, it is evident that “Ondo society lives with the paradox of a suppressed female ruler and political authority that has been replaced by female ritual power” (Olupona 1997, 318).

Yet even in the absence of a female in the overt position of political authority, women have safeguarded the preserve of female power through a parallel
office, that of a ritual ruler who presided over the spiritual domain. “Since the change in chieftancy from female to male, women nevertheless have the right to have a woman leader, Lobun, also referred to as Oba Obinrin (woman king)” (Olupona 1991, 47). Her status in relationship to the king is “described as a mother-son relationship” (Lawuyi and Olupona 1987, 102). Certainly it is more than one of maternal nurture, for the spiritual authority of the Lobun is so great that “the office of Lobun is surrounded with mysteries and taboos” (Olupona 1991, 47). She is considered “ritually pure, dangerous and ambiguous” (Lawuyi and Olupona 1987, 102). The spiritual supremacy of the Lobun is clear in that she is the “ritual sponsor” of the king (102). Her major duty is to oversee the king’s installation (Olupona 1991, 47). In fact, “without the Lobun no king can be enthroned” (37). The political authority and power of a male king therefore cannot be considered absolute, for it is bound to “an equally significant ritual authority and power which women control” (Olupona 1997, 315–16). For this reason, Ondo-Yoruba “insist that the ‘source of ultimate value’ is portrayed as female” (316).

Significantly, “Yorùbá society authorizes males to take on appearances perceived and valued as female”; it was incumbent on the king and male sovereigns to “parade in procession wearing female clothing . . . [and] braid their hair in womanly plaits” (Olupona 2005, 75). In other words, the Ondo-Yoruba king was made to appear as a woman-king and signify that he had been invested with the fulsome moral qualities of gender-surpassing beings. Nevertheless, the king requires legitimation from the Mothers to succeed. Olupona details a moment during a ritual of sacred kingship that clearly shows their power is supreme and must therefore be assuaged: “Yoruba women of age and experience are endowed with ‘innate’ power, and they in turn [offer reassurance] . . . knowing that the king needs their assurance of acceptance. The king needs their consent and goodwill even before he enters his father’s own house. . . . Yoruba women are ‘openly loved, secretly feared’” (Olupona 2011, 136, emphasis mine). The Yoruba associate such esoteric and ambiguous spiritual knowledge, especially in the hands of women, with àjé. “This power, which Western cultures often describe as ‘witchcraft,’ in Yorùbá cosmology refers more specifically to the power of our mothers. The Yorùbá understand that women possess innate spiritual power to control males, and indeed the universe, used to their own advantage against the assumed supremacy of patriarchy. . . . [the Mothers draw on] a means of activism to counter male oppression” (Olupona 2005, 80, emphasis mine). While he does not name this form of activism, it suggests the ritual prescription that is FGP.

In the Oyo Yoruba tradition, in precolonial times, “the aláàfin (ruler) of Oyó traditionally had to kneel down for only one person— . . . the iyámode”
a high official of the female sex. Her office was “to worship the spirits of the departed kings, calling out their égúngún [ancestors]... The king looks upon her as his father” (Oyewúmí 2005b, 105, emphasis mine). With this detail Oyèrónké Oyewúmí underscores that in ritual context a person with female anatomy can be given the designation and office of a male, demonstrating gender fluidity in Yoruba society. She goes on to discuss the posture of propitiation in this and other ritual contexts, offering another detail worth scrutiny. “The propitiations and thank-offerings to the lineage ancestors during the first two days of the Egúngún (annual festival of ancestor veneration) are named ikúnlè... [This posture] was the preferred position of giving birth in traditional society and is central to the construction of motherhood. This position, ikúnlè abiyanmo (the kneeling of a mother in labor), is elaborated as the ultimate moment of human submission to the will of the divine” (105). It is also the very posture that Yoruba women of Ekiti assumed during a public protest in 2009, when the Mothers deployed FGP to rebuke government corruption and election fraud (Jeremy 2009). This direct and self-conscious association between the appeal to the female sex in the traditional religious context and its deployment in politics, even today, demonstrates just how fundamental is the principle to the whole of social life and just how deeply embedded it is in the West African social imaginary.

Queens and Queen Mothers: Female Moral Authority

Despite the supposed “cooling quality” of female spiritual power, detailed accounts by early Arab voyagers chronicle the exploits of remarkable queens and legendary female leaders from Senegal to Niger, some who ruled as “hotly” as their male counterparts. Among them is the celebrated sixteenth-century warrior Queen Amina of Zaria (contemporary Nigeria), whose military conquests over thirty years expanded Hausa territory (Djibo 2001, 38). 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 Akyaa, who took up arms to lead the final military stand against British colonial forces in Ghana in 1896 (Barnes 1997, 11). While these cases demonstrate that African women were indeed forceful rulers, the focus on the military strength and exploits of female political authorities betrays the preoccupations of chroniclers for whom the great states, their dynasties, and battles of conquest are the earmarks of history. Their accounts obscure a subtler conception of rulership in Africa in which secular might was always
tempered and conditioned by spiritual and moral authority, the purview of women.

The office of queen mother, even more prevalent in West Africa, overtly links the structural authority of rulership to the spiritual and moral power embodied in women. The use of the English term *queen mother* to African female rulers seems to have been introduced by the British, but the office differs considerably from that of the English Queen Victoria from whom the term was evidently derived. Etymologies of titles in various indigenous languages indicate that such an authority is the “female chief, the female head or senior woman of a matrilineage” (Gilbert 1993, 5). In dual-sexed polities that maintain a system of complementary rulership by a male monarch and a queen mother, the appointment of *both* rulers is based on female kinship. Therefore, even the male monarch represents the matriline (Stoeltje 1997, 53). As the head of the royal matrilineage from which a king must be a descendant, the queen mother may indeed emblematize “the procreative power of royal women, without whom the kingship would cease to exist” (Olupona 1997, 323). However, the power of the queen mother does not reside in her actual reproductive capacity, for even a barren woman could occupy the role. “Were she to be infertile, it . . . would not disqualify her from the position” (Gilbert 1993, 6). It may well be her duty to sustain the lineage system and the prestige of her matrilineage in rulership, but she does so through the selection of her coregent.

Indeed, the queen mother’s most well-defined and politically significant role was her prerogative to nominate a candidate for this office from her matrikin. Selection had significant ramifications for the clan as well as for national politics. Various competing clans endeavored to form alliances of marriage to create dynastic houses of royal patrifiliation even within this system of matrilineal succession. “Competition for the golden stool [the royal seat of power] . . . was endemic because there were no fixed rules of succession. . . . Consequently the rotation of kingship . . . followed the vagaries of effective political power and manipulation” (Aidoo 1977, 15). The rotation of kingship through the various lines of descent and the vagaries in structural power reflect the abiding interests of maintaining a balance of visible and invisible power, structural and affective alliances, and matrilineal and patrilineal interests. The complexities involved in determining dynastic succession demonstrate an intricate braiding of matrilineality with patrifiliation, such that male and female interests are twinned and inextricably bound in rulership.

If the queen mother is often mistaken to be the representative of maternity itself, the office is just as frequently imagined to be an institutionalization of the supportive nurturer. The error may derive from the fact that the queen
mother’s male coregent is almost always her junior in age and that she serves as principal advisor. However, “the queen mother’s position was not merely an elevated domestic role, arising out of the mother-son relationship, as has frequently been assumed by anthropologists” (33n5, italics mine). Rather, she served by virtue of the “moral quality of wisdom, knowledge, emotion, compassion, all that pertains to her as a woman and is not bestowed by male officials” (Gilbert 1993, 9, emphasis mine). That innate moral superiority gave her unique prerogatives; she was the only one permitted to criticize him publicly in the court. Should he fail her standards, “she had the right to initiate his deposition” (Aidoo 1977, 11). Her vigilant supervision over the king, her right to challenge his judgment, and her ultimate power to impeach him, especially on moral grounds, all demonstrate that what might appear to be a subordinate conciliating role was in actuality a significant office with real clout grounded in supreme values.

This is also demonstrated in the nature of the queen mother’s essential duties. In precolonial Africa, her presence was required “whenever important matters of state were to be decided. She also had to hear all judicial cases involving the sacred oaths of the state” (Berger and White 1999, 87, emphasis mine). Her leadership required that she impart the knowledge and wisdom that she embodied as “mother of the clan” (Stoeltje 1997, 58). The function and legitimacy of her authority derive from her moral power as head of the matrilineage. Therefore, while Rattray said of the Ashante queen mother that she is “the personification of motherhood” (123, 85), the office of motherhood and its qualities are distinctly more than that of a protective nurturer.7 The queen mother’s overriding authority was spiritual and moral.

The queen mother was also “entitled to, and did have, her own separate court” (Berger and White 1999, 87).8 That she maintained her own military forces indicates the independence of this regent, while her military might clearly dissociates her role from that of a mere counselor or maternal support. Just as a male woman-king is symbolically made to encompass both genders, the queen mother “is symbolically in some respects not a woman, but a person with the innate quality of a woman who moves in a man's sphere of action” (Gilbert 1993, 9). Her royal attire not only distinguishes her from commoners, but differentiates her from other women as well. She wears her ceremonial cloth “draped in the traditional manner (much as a man) rather than a sewn blouse worn over a cloth wrapper” (6). So the queen mother bears the insignia of masculine power as much as she embodies her innate female power. The gender ambiguity of rulers of both sexes is thus made to reflect the qualities of amorphous spiritual beings and ancestors to share the fulsomeness of their power and moral authority.
In precolonial states of the Asante (Ashanti) Empire of present-day Ghana, the queen mother (Oheme) ruled with her male junior (Asantehene). Together the regents had jurisdiction over males and females respectively but “in recognition of the Ohema’s significant status, her stool [the seat of power] (Okonua panyin) was considered the senior one” (Ogbomo 2005, 51). That seniority of office was best captured by her capacity to advise, because the wisdom achieved by moral discernment is paramount. In contemporary Ghana, the office of the queen mother endures. Perhaps because power is usually conceived in the nominal sense, as an instrument that must be visible in strongly structural forms of authority, some maintain that today the Akan queen mother “has little direct state authority and her legal jurisdiction is limited and ill-defined” (Gilbert 1993, 9). However, it is apparent that her critical duty is still to assert her moral supremacy and vigilantly maintain justice. The “new king swears his oath of allegiance first to her,” and it is only she who can unseat an unjust king (8).

Presiding over ritual situations, she serves as spiritual protector against the immoral use of power. She is invoked in arbitrations as the ultimate judge, “creator and destroyer,” making decisions on the basis of her moral authority as representative of the “weeping” ancestors who grieve over the betrayal of mandates (8).

Today the queen mother of the Akuepem oversees ceremonies pertaining to women and, most tellingly, is responsible for organizing the ritual performance called Aworabe, “a ritual to keep away disease or bring rain in which nude women pound the street with pestles at night. This rite drawing upon women’s dangerous creative power is rarely performed today and the present Queen Mother does not participate in it” (Gilbert 1993, 9). The parallels to Egbiki are evident. The consistent constellation of critical gestures, especially female nudity or genital exposure and the pounding of pestles, constitutes the essence of the evocation of FGP. Worth noting is that the queen mother herself does not take part in the women’s ritual of FGP. Rather, as the structural ruler presiding over worldly matters with tangible forces, she bears the same gender ambiguity as a woman-king. Therefore, she relies on the Mothers to deploy their female genital power in the invisible realm on behalf of the community. The performance does not displace structural rulership; its authority is of a different order altogether.

In Nigeria, among the Igbo east of the Niger River, the dual-sex system was originally ruled by two monarchs, a male Obi, concerned with the interests of the male community, and female Omu, charged with oversight of female concerns. However, the Omu reigned supreme as the “mother of the whole community” (Okonjo 1976, 47). The Omu had her own council of female titled
nobles (the ilogo) who “could challenge male authority . . . until men capitulated to their demands” (48). These actions were not based on antagonism but rather were intended to reinforce harmonious relationship and adequate representation of the respective needs of both sexes.

In an interview in the early 1970s, the Omu made mention of a particular duty of moral oversight with which she and her cabinet were charged: “If there is drought, we curse whoever caused it. If there is sickness and people are dying, my cabinet goes naked in the night with live brands to curse whoever brought it. If there is sickness in the next town, I do something with my cabinet to insure that sickness does not enter this town. There are medicines we make at the entrance to the town. These are just a few of my duties. I am the mother of the people” (50). The reference is clearly to that commanding rite that I am calling “female genital power.”

The preeminence of FGP as the overarching moral force is so fundamental to West African cosmology and the prominence of female genital power is so pervasive in society that some refer to the bilateral system of rulership sustained by the Asante and related Akan peoples to this day as a “covert gy-nocracy” (Pritchard et al. 2010). The appeal to FGP continues still in contexts both “religious” and “worldly.”

Stateless Societies, Dual-Sexed Systems, and Collective Self-Rule

To this point I have been highlighting ways in which women in traditional African societies enjoyed positions of power within the structures of the state. Western history generally privileges these hierarchical social orders and judges the empires, kingdoms, and states, which most closely parallel the political achievements of the West, to be more advanced and a measure of “civilization” in Africa and elsewhere. Discussing African women’s history, Margaret Strobel remarked, “Unless the group had a queen or queen mother or female chief, [both oral and written accounts of African history] usually ignore women” (Strobel 1982, 510). In the colonial period, “government documents tended to report women only when they are problems, as carriers of venereal disease, as prostitutes or illegal beer brewers” (510). An exclusive focus on empires, kingdoms, and other institutions of structural power would recapitulate the view of society that precluded colonialists from acknowledging the degree to which African women were powerful and enjoyed the status, rights, and privileges attendant to it in precolonial society. Moreover, these biases distort the view of African civilization in other substantial ways. Ifi Amadiume (1987) claims that what has been especially eclipsed is the predominance and importance of
the so-called stateless societies. Not coincidentally, it is in such societies that women enjoyed the greatest autonomy and authority.

This nonhierarchical and power-sharing type of social organization long endured as the most prevalent form of governance in Africa and still persists as local custom today. However, classifying such societies as stateless reproduces the kind of epistemological violence perpetrated by colonial imperialism that rendered women, as political entities, invisible. The negative qualifier *stateless* necessarily forces one to conceive of these societies in terms of what they lack. Identifying them as acephalous, literally *without* a head or ruler, similarly casts them in negative terms and conveys the implicit judgment that such societies are inferior, lacking in strategy and self-conscious agency. With the formulation also comes the presumption that without a ruling head these states would necessarily have been smaller or less powerful than kingdoms. In fact, such societies were often more powerful and of greater size than the much-vaunted kingdoms (Amadiume 1987, 24–26). A concomitant insinuation is that such forms of governance were preliminary, or primitive, destined to be superseded by the more efficient style of governance embodied by the hierarchical state. Underscoring that such societies were self-consciously devised to reject structural hierarchy in favor of a more egalitarian system of governance, Amadiume recommends classifying such societies instead as anti-state. This classification has the merit of emphasizing that they were intentionally devised as an alternative to hierarchical rulership. But, I suggest that it perpetuates the basic mistake of casting this form of social organization in terms of a negation. Rather than underscoring their antithetical stand, I propose a classification that underlines the collective and cooperative nature of these systems and particularly the way power is shared between the sexes and cycles through age sets that govern collectively.

One option might be to refer to such societies as systems of *collective bilateral self-rule*, or simply as “dual-sexed collectively governed” societies. The “dual-sex systems characteristic of most African societies” were structured as complementary self-governing and mutually sustaining bodies, with each sex managing its own affairs (Moran 1989, 454). In such systems, women are not conceived to be “the complementary opposites or the appendages of men. Instead, women and men seem to constitute different orders of human beings” (454). As far as the women are concerned, “given the cultural constructions of gender . . . men simply cannot represent women and their interests and vice-versa” (455). Therefore, women’s associations tend to their own political and economic interests and wield their greatest influence through their collective mobilization of their networks.
Even in dual-sexed systems that operate through parallel structures of governance, women’s authority ultimately prevailed through the women’s associations. In the case of the Grebo of Liberia, for example, the elected leader of the women’s council, the *Blo Nyene* (literally “Earth Woman”), has the power to veto decisions made by the men’s council (453). Her ultimate veto power over the political decisions of men gives her the kind of superseding authority that the queen mother enjoyed over male regents in the more hierarchically arranged sovereign states. The title “Earth Woman” associates her with the primordial divinity and source of all sustenance, while suggestively paralleling the office of the Earth Priest who typically oversees the religious duties that attend to land and agricultural fertility. As we have seen, these, in turn, authorize structural authority. Therefore, even in an overtly patriarchal and patrilineal society, it is female power that serves as the foundational underpinning.

A similar phenomenon was documented among the Igbo in precolonial Nigeria by Ifi Amadiume in her groundbreaking work *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987). The state of Nri was organized around divine kingship. However, the town of Nnobi was maintained as an independent religious center that paid homage to the river goddess Idemili, whose cult was “superior to the cult of ancestors” (19). Its central shrine was occupied by a titled woman called “The Great Woman,” the *Agba Ekwe*, who symbolized concepts of womanhood derived from the goddess (54). Although the Nnobi were a clan organized as a dual-sexed system, with men dealing with male affairs and women with female affairs, the women’s council, *Inyom Nnobi*, ruled supreme, standing “above the descent-based organization” (57). This is because it too was headed by the Agba Ekwe. She was also known as *Eze Nwanyi* (female king) (174). As in the case of the leader of the Grebo women’s society, she held the most forceful instrument of political authority—the right of veto. Unlike titled men, whose positions of power could be challenged, “the position of the Agba Ekwe . . . was never disputed” (55). The overriding arbitrating power granted to the senior titled woman would have been granted on the basis of this elder’s moral authority. This is made clear through ritual gesture: in matters of deadlocked quarrels, it was the Agbe Ekwe who “had the last word when she stuck her long pointed staff in the ground” (67).

At the clan level Nnobi society was organized according to patrilineal descent, yet the female line held a place of privilege. Children of daughters occupied a special category within the patrilineages. Identified by the title *nwadiana*, these offspring of women enjoyed special “honor, respect and indulgence” (63). At the same time, there existed a privileged *matrilineal* bond among siblings who were “children of one womb.” The “spirit of common motherhood” instilled an
especially strong code of conduct, one based on truth, mutual respect, and justice (58). This intimate bond was enforced by “supernatural sanction,” Ibenne, a deity without shrine, believed to punish immorality or betrayal of the members with an unforgiving fatal blow (62, emphasis mine). While Amadiume suggests that such traditions point to a prior and latent matriarchy, I suggest that they demonstrate an active and enduring matrifocal morality, identifying which bonds are most profound and what values are to be most revered. These values are fiercely enforced with the merciless sanction of FGP.

Women’s Associations, Secret Societies, and Social Sanctions

What African women may have lacked in terms of structural authority, they made up for through the command of their innate spiritual force. This is “manifested in the general belief that, even though women did not have the real symbol of authority in the form of an ofo [an object held by titled people], their mere gesture of protest, either by knocking the pestle used for pounding food, or their hands, on the ground, could be very effective in causing sickness in the village” (182). Here again we see the pounding of the pestle or striking the earth as an invocation to the primary goddess herself for succor and the implementation of a curse that, launched as a moral rebuke, is without mercy or compromise.

Like others writing on the Igbo, Amadiume cites the notorious unwillingness of elderly women to convert to Christianity and their active resistance to the missions that attacked indigenous religious cults, mentioning in particular the “dancing women’s movement of 1925” (120). Almost twenty years later, when a zealous Christian defiantly killed a python in violation of taboo, it provoked a manifestation of “indigenous female militancy” vividly recalled today. The women “marched half naked to the provincial headquarters, Onitsha, to besiege the resident’s office. [Receiving an inadequate reaction] they returned to Nnobi, went straight to the man’s house and razed it to the ground. . . . Two weeks after the incident, the man is said to have died” (122). Elsewhere Amadiume recounts the incident and specified that the women “put a curse on him and the following morning, he was dead” (130). While there is no mention here of genital exposure by the outraged elders, the defense of sacred values by “half-naked” women evoking a curse suggests that they were drawing on this same moral power.

Because theirs was a magico-spiritual power to expel evil as well as a juridical prerogative, women elders were often called upon to intervene in other situations of social crisis, such as epidemics, deemed the result of witchcraft:
“Among the Isoko at Iyede (Niger-delta) whenever an epidemic or frequent deaths . . . occurred, the male elders called upon the women’s organisation [sic] to perform rituals. *Stripping naked at night the women toured the village cursing evil doers*” (Ogbomo 2005, 68, emphasis mine). As in the case of Egbiki, men were expected to hide and refrain from seeing this, and violators were punished. When the most general interests of society are in the greatest jeopardy, the rite of FGP is called for, commanding a power greater than the governing wisdom or even the physical might of armies could offer.

The combination of innate spiritual power, moral supremacy, and worldly savvy is one not easily countered. The force is best illustrated by an incident in Nigeria in 1977. When the Women’s Council of Nnobi agitated to protest the increasing infringement of women’s rights and duties, police arrested their leaders. In response, women were called to “war” and “the pagans were allowed to come fortified with all their sorcery” (153). Recognizing that the women’s “institution was too powerful . . . like a state within a state,” the police released the leaders to avert violence (153, emphasis mine). The association of collective action and militancy with ritual and “mystical” aspects of “pagan” tradition, such as aggressive medicines, constitutes the full measure of female genital power.

More overtly “religious” in nature than the women’s councils are the so-called secret societies and other “power associations” (McGovern 2011, 74) that cut across the vertical axis of social organization. Elders who control esoteric forms of knowledge traditionally dominate these associations, the membership of which is restricted to one sex. Alliances of this kind in traditional West African civilizations include masking societies, which bear the responsibility for transmitting the deepest values of society through ritual and its associated plastic arts as a visual canon. Other such “power associations” include the secret societies of blacksmiths, hunters, and midwives (57). Throughout West Africa the concept of secrecy is less a matter of withholding information or knowledge than it is an issue of its proper management in the hands of agents authorized to handle its power. Knowledge must be shared only at the appropriate time, to those prepared to receive it in the spirit that ensures that it will be put to use in the intended manner (cf. Bellman 1984). The secret constitutes the manner in which knowledge is communicated and the authorization to transmit it appropriately. The duty of societies that control such esoteric knowledge and sacred power is a religious as much as a social obligation, underscored by the secrecy that surrounds initiation to manage the exercise of its practices.

All-female secret societies long served as a wellspring of collective women’s power. Their secret was that they embodied foundational moral authority as a
mighty spiritual arm. An example is the secret society of the Ibibio women of Nigeria, *Ebere*, literally “women of the land.” It functioned to “safeguard Ibibio women against the tyranny of their menfolk” and protect “the spirit of womanhood,” while the complementary male secret society was to defend the territory of the Ibibio people as warriors” (Ifeka-Moller 1975, 139). Here again we see an analogy actively drawn between warriors and women’s spiritual warfare.

Another purpose of the secret society is to cultivate a new generation of youth and indoctrinate them as capable adult members of society. Initiation into the society transmits knowledge and inculcates values through a long period of segregated instruction and ritual. One of the best-known societies of this kind is the ancient, widespread, and enduring male society, *Poro*, and its female counterpart, *Sande*. These societies, introduced to the region by the Mende people as early as the eleventh century, are vast networks extending across a geographic expanse that outstripped any of the ancient empires or states. The case of the Mende chief Madame Yoko illustrates the point. Taking command after the death of her husband, she ruled in Sierra Leone from 1885 to 1905. While “Mende women had a long history of political activity, which included becoming chiefs of towns,” Madame Yoko’s rise to power and control of significant territories was attributed to Sande (Berger and White 1999, 89). Even today the Poro and Sande societies transcend ethnicity and nationality as well, extending from Sierra Leone to Liberia, Guinea, and Côte d’Ivoire. Their deep cultural roots and widespread political influence are so great that such associations might be classified among the stateless societies.

Some scholars have maintained that women’s societies were limited to relatively few instances and provided only nominal structural power while reinforcing the kind of hierarchy that favored male domination in society at large. Ifeka-Moller, for example, argued that women’s societies “adopted the dominant ranking system of men when creating their own hierarchies of officials” and in so doing recapitulated the “pervasive power of men” (Ifeka-Moller 1975, 134). However, a parallel structure of governance does not indicate subservience. While both the male and female associations of this kind controlled “the secrets of political power and reproductive health” (Chauveau and Richards 2008, 519), the female counterpart is generally acknowledged to have been stronger (Bledsoe 1980; MacCormack 1979). It is a well-known ethnographic fact that in Africa the eldest and most senior among women are often initiated into exclusively male societies and may even ascend to their highest rank. For example, the all-male masking society of the Dogon of Mali (*Awe*) is headed by a matron who bears the title *Yasigin*. She is also referred to by the name of the primordial ancestress and mythic founder of the mask, *Satimbé*. Significantly,
the power of these masks does not reside in the sculpted wood face covering or headdress, but rather in the raffia fibers of the costume dyed red to represent the female blood (cf. Griaule and Dieterlen 1965; Pernet 1992). Just as the age set relies on the women elders for empowerment during wartime, the secret societies, in inducting a matron as their titular head, reveal their dependence on the knowledge and power that the women command to the greatest degree. The phenomenon suggests that women elders represent the essential values and mandates that sustained the whole of society.¹¹

The superiority of Sande over Poro is also evident in this way. Like Poro, Sande is a masking society. It presents a rare instance in which women make and don the masks that represent them and the cultural ideals they embody. Through its iconography, the principal mask, *Sowei*, communicates ideals of womanhood and female power. Its helmet style, completely encompassing the head, and the smooth distended forehead of the face are reminiscent of the swollen belly of a pregnant woman. The elaborately plaited coiffure is intended to reinforce the identification of woman with Great Mother Earth and her abundant flora, and detailed plaiting renders homage to the river goddess. The archetypal carvings at the crest, comprised of three or five segmented petals, spread like an exotic flower. Protruding unabashedly like the spread labia, the female sex is glorified as that most secret and sacred locus of female power (Boone 1986; Grillo 1999, 11).¹² The head of the Sande society is also called “Sowei,” and this matron is not only a member of Poro, but holds the highest rank among all its members.

Above all is the secret of the women elders, an embodied knowledge that exceeds all other means to confront evil and restore society to wholeness. When the postmenopausal matrons perform their nocturnal dance, their manifestation overrides the vertical structures of rulership, including gerontocracy.¹³ Their imprecations are stronger than all mere secular rulings and even surpass the authority of other spiritual powers. They represent the predominant force that cuts across all planes of existence and embody morality as the source of power on the African frontier.

**Age Sets and the Associated Authority of FGP**

The most widespread form of stateless governance in West Africa is the age set (or “age-class”) system. Youth are organized into age-based peer groups that take no account of clan or lineage. While the age set system comprises both men and women, only males are initiated collectively. The rite of passage is designed to undercut any social rank or distinctions among its members
to inculcate solidarity and cooperation, since throughout the course of their lives they will carry out their mutual duties as a group. As the eight age sets are promoted in rank (for example, every eight years through a sixty-four-year life cycle, or “generation,” as in the Adioukrrou case) they take on a different charge, beginning as warriors and ending as arbiters in juridical matters before retirement. Thus, the senior class of elders assumes responsibility as the principal governing body, serving in the capacity of decision makers and judges during the final years of its generation. At the conclusion of their term the successive generation takes their place, confirmed in a ceremony of collective promotion of all the age grades. The retired elders, if they live long enough, are reinitiated with the incoming youth in the new junior class in the subsequent “Festival of Generations” eight years later. Among the Abidji of Côte d’Ivoire, “Each age class is the ‘husband’ of the younger age class and the ‘wife’ of the elder class” (Memel-Fotè 1980, 60–61).¹⁴

There are marked differences in the details of the way that the different groups of the southern Lagoon region (lagunaires) celebrate the initiation into the new generation. Nevertheless, all of their Festival of Generations ceremonies do share common features, highlighting what is sacrosanct. One feature is the commemoration of ancestors and the consecration of initiates during a secret visit to the sacred springs.¹⁵ The other is the pageantry of wealth during which the initiates are publicly paraded through the central axis of the village. The young men don expensive cloth wrappers (imported kente cloth) and tie silken scarves around their foreheads or chests. They wear heavy necklaces and other gold jewelry laden with traditional ancestral ornaments that have been commissioned by the family and handed down through successive generations to indicate the collective wealth of the matrilineage. Their skin is daubed with a yellow chalky substance representing gold dust. These details reiterate “the attire worn by the women who brought up the rear of the procession in Akye ceremonies, and suggests that the men were intentionally copying female attire” (Visonà 2010, 157). Visonà calls this “cross-dressing.” I suggest their dress is not about mimicry as parody but is rather a ritual means to invest [Latin: investire, to clothe] the young male warriors with the powers of the matriclan that they are being called to defend.¹⁶ As Visonà rightly notes, “Specific aspects of the preparation and the final appearance of the war captains, the leading warriors of each age-set, suggest that female qualities have deeper religious significance,” and men are visually represented in association with them during the initiatory spectacles (158). The war captains, significantly “chosen from specific, prominent matriclans” (138), are attended by their mothers and grasp worn pestles. Most significantly, “around the head of every Akye war captain was the quintessential female item, a woman’s [red] loin-
matrifocal morality

Among the Lagunaires and peoples of the forest zone in the southeastern Côte d’Ivoire, the terms used to designate the institution of the age set and the showy ceremony of their initiation are very similar, indicating a deeply rooted common source: for the Abê as well as the Akyé-lépin people in the Lagoon region, the term used is fokwé (or fokué). The Akyé say fonkwe; Abouré use fakwe; the Akyan, fotchwe; while the Adioukrou refer to both the age set and initiatory ceremony as fatchwe. This simple linguistic survey demonstrates that “under this term fokwé, we are dealing with an institution that is truly regional” (Memel-Fotê and Brunet-Jailly 2007, 711). More significant is the fact that the term fokwé is also widely used as the local name for the rite of appeal to FGPR as a form of spiritual warfare. For example, the Tchaman call their “traditional women’s religious mystique” “Fokwè,” and the Abbey refer to it as “Fakwè” (Bahi 2006, 99). The semantic similarities among the terms for the institution of the age set, the ceremony of initiation into a new generation, and the ritual of FGPR reveal something fundamental about their common nature and purpose: their grounding in the moral authority that belongs to the Mothers and their commitment to serve the society founded on it.

In her observations of numerous age set initiations among Lagoon peoples during the 1980s, Monica Blackman Visonà (2010) observed a preliminary rite performed by Akye women in the village of Memni at dawn: “The women chanted, rang bells, and danced slowly in a circle. . . . I followed a group of about twenty of these women to the end of town, where they entered at the graveyard . . . to pour out libations. . . . Finally the women asked me to stay behind while they walked down the road leading out of town. There they threw away the refuse they had collected in the street” (145).

Later, her interpreter explained that “this was a ceremony called Gbona Api (from gbon, to curse), and that it was danced by women who were ‘strong’ (who had supernatural power) to curse sorcerers” (145). Clearly this is a version of the rite of appeal to FGPR performed as a protective cleansing and comparable to Egbiki, the women’s ritual eviction of evil through their curse. The secret aspect of their performance, shielded from her observation, likely involved nudity and the powerful appeal to their genitals. Visonà’s further inquiries and the elaboration of the significance of Gbona Api made explicit the consonance with other performances of FGPR: “When Gbona Api is performed at night, the women wear only loincloths, strike the ground with used pestles, and chant ‘Bekania.’ This links their protective ceremony with the nocturnal dances of the Baule and other Akan peoples (Vogel 1998, 59).
In many Akan regions, women who are faced with a major crisis such as disease or warfare will walk through the community naked or stripped to their loincloths. Men stay inside their houses so that they will not see the women’s procession” (145).

The Gbôna Api ritual precedes and protects the initiation of the Akye age set just as Egbiki precedes and protects the Adioukrou youth performing the dangerous feats of Kpol. But the degree to which FGp is the underpinning of the age set is most clearly exemplified by the close association of the women’s rite as spiritual combat and the final ordeal required of age set initiates in pre-colonial times: an expedition to an enemy village to bring back the bloody heads of victims. During the men’s expedition, back in the village the women, naked and smeared with kaolin clay, sang and danced to offer “magical” support of the warriors’ mission (Memel-Fonté and Brunet-Jailly 2007, 712). Upon their return to the village the initiates also danced in the central square. Once they were ritually purified and shaved, the youth “inaugurated a new season of their existence, that of full citizenship, patriot warriors, having a place of autonomy and deliberative voice in the political assembly of the village” (713). With their simultaneous performance of mystical combat, the women elders not only protected the new generation of warrior-citizens but initiated them as protectors of the matrikin who surrounded them in the formal parades.

The Ivoirian ethnographer Harris Memel-Fonté claimed that “of all social structures the age classes seems the least sacred… Given the fact that it has no genie, nor place of worship, nor interdiction, nor clergy… [and] insofar as they integrate and transcend the clans, the age classes are the structures that correspond most to the general interests of society” (Memel-Fonté 1980, 135, emphasis mine). However, the fokwé, as an initiatory society, not only teaches techniques of war but, through its close alliance with the female elders, also empowers youth to handle military force as a spiritual as well as a protective arm of society. In a discussion of women’s affairs in Côte d’Ivoire with Mme Geneviève Bro-Grébé, who was at the time a minister of the Ivoirian government and former executive director of the Ivoirian Network of Women’s Organizations (RIOF), she volunteered that among the Akyé-lépin, and more precisely in her natal village, Grand-Alépé, the women’s traditional rite is used more extensively as a protective intervention made on the spiritual plane: “In my village they call it Fokwé… When there is a danger, women strip naked—but that’s at two o’clock, or three o’clock in the morning that it’s done because men must not see. Legend says that it brings misfortune to men who look upon it. So, it’s done very late in the night to exorcise, chase away, evil” (Interview, April 2010). The village’s website therefore asserts that “the Fokué [sic] is a practice that is simul-
taneously a cultural, structural and sacred institution” (Village de Grand-Alépé 2012, emphasis mine). Therefore, the knowledge that the female overseers of the initiation embody, and the spiritual power that they lend to the age set by symbolic association, give the fokwé a religious inflection. The women elders provide a sacramental quality to the youths’ initiatory investiture as warriors.

Together, the age set and the rite of FGP represent the twinned defense of home—one military and the other spiritual. Given the overlapping terminology, Memel-Foté implies that the age set system called “fokwé” later lent its name to the women’s rite; however, I suggest that it was the reverse. Women’s spiritual power had primacy and remained the focal point for social order, while the age sets, instituted to support that order, were governed by women’s moral authority.

Mmobomme: FGP as Spiritual Warfare

In addition to shaping the structures of rulership in West Africa, the idea that women elders dominated the moral and spiritual domain positioned women to intercede in times of social calamity or upheaval with FGP. Its magico-religious force supersedes all worldly evils. An important case is that of Mmobomme, a “distinctly female form of spiritual warfare” performed by the Asante and other ethnicities categorized as Akan, a cultural group situated along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea (Akyeampong and Obeng 2005, 30). In times of war, Asante women would perform daily ritual chants, proceeding through the villages in partial nudity and pounding empty mortars with pestles as a form of “spiritual torture of Asante’s enemies” until the male soldiers returned (30). Just as Eg-biki’s curses expel the evils of witchcraft, Mmobomme aimed to strike a mortal blow to the enemy. Documentation by “at least twenty sources written by European observers between 1784 and 1903 covering the whole region between the lower Bandama River (in what is now Côte d’Ivoire) and the Volta” indicate that women performed mmobomme widely (Jones 1993, 548).

Most interpreters recognize the religious nature of the women’s acts, but in so doing ascribe to them merely symbolic significance. For example, underscoring that the women’s “magico-religious gestures” imitated warriors’ acts, Jones deems the rite to be a mock battle, intended largely to provide spiritual support to actual warfare: “omen carried fufu pestles to the crossroads outside the town, in order to remove misfortune. They might also stage a mock battle: in 1784, for instance, the women of Accra fought one another with wooden sabres while their men were at war; in Akropong a century later the women, having tied cords and other objects around their feet, fought one another with whips shaped like guns” (552, emphasis mine).
Yet, as we have seen in Egbiki, the act of carrying, pounding, and discarding pestles is critical to women’s spiritual battle against evil, with consequences equally dire hanging in the balance. Therefore, the pestle here appears to be more than a symbolic element of a “mock battle,” but an actual arm used in a real battle fought on a spiritual plane. For this very reason, “in Asante, at least, the women responsible for mmobomme were obliged to lead the same sort of ascetic life as the men in the war camp—eating no tomatoes, for instance, and bathing only in cold water” (Ramseyer and Kuhne 1875, 292–93)” (Jones 1993, 556). That is, the women, whose action was deemed to have actual instrumental force, were not only engaged in support of the real war fought by men, but in a parallel kind of warfare.

If women’s spiritual warfare is made consonant with male battles, their spiritual power is nevertheless superior, for it not only kills the enemy, it also purifies bloodshed. The Ndenye (an ethnic group in southern Côte d’Ivoire classified as Akan) perform Mmobomme when a pregnant woman dies, for “a pregnant woman is like a warrior who fights against death” (Perrot 1987, 168). So too, among the Bété, a patrilineal group in the south-central region of Côte d’Ivoire, FGP functions to ward off such a menace: “The death of a woman in childbirth is seen as a threat to the community as a whole and is therefore followed by a ritual ceremony in which naked women drive men out of the village and assume power for a few days, subjecting the men to hunger and isolation” (Perrot 1982, 32n1, emphasis mine). Only the rite of FGP had the purifying and sanctifying power to restore the grounds for wholesome society.

**Adjanou in Côte d’Ivoire: Warfare and Conscription**

Among the Baulé (Baoulé), one of the most populous ethnicities in Côte d’Ivoire, women elders call their rite of FGP **Adjanou**. Enacted to evict evil and banish death, Adjanou offers protection whenever the collective is imperiled. At the same time, it is an act of spiritual warfare comparable in form and substance to Mmobomme: “The extreme case was that of Baule women, who at such times of crisis performed a dance (adjanu) in which their body was covered in white cloth and only the genitalia were exposed—a reversal of the normal state of affairs, when such exposure was considered (by men) almost as dangerous as menstruation” (Jones 1993, 557, emphasis mine).

As early as 1894 the French ethnographer Maurice Delafosse documented **Adjanou (Adjanu)**. On that particular occasion, women gathered to perform it as a ritual of public excoriation of Okou, a local man who had violated the community’s moral code. Treating him as the Asante women who performed
Mmobomme treated war enemies, the Baulé women stripped and chanted curses. Their song reviled Okou with overt sexual insult, accusing him of bestiality and impotence. Even as they abased him by ridiculing his inadequacy, they demonstrated their own potent “bottom power.” “The women concluded the ceremony by making violent thrusts of the buttocks in the direction of the enemy country, singing: ‘My arse (mon derrière) for Okou’” (550).

The public denunciation of a single individual may seem to be a negligible expression of power. However, such public rebuke could bring down leaders. As Amadiume noted, “If dictators emerged in the leadership they could not monopolize [power] . . . there were devices for removing them . . . [including] the Women’s council and women’s movement” (Amadiume 1997, 103). Moreover, the overriding moral authority of the women elders over the age set is most forcefully demonstrated by their use of FGP to shame men in this same way in order to press the men into military service. In precolonial Côte d’Ivoire, through dance and ritual techniques used in the war-dances of fokwé and the curses of Egbiki, the women would scorn and abuse able-bodied men who remained in the village during wartime. “The objects of attack were not only the enemy but also any man fit to bear arms who had remained at home. . . . During their dancing the women would encircle such a man, shower him with ridicule and abuse, and then perhaps beat him with sticks, stones, whisks cut from palm fronds or whips made of cotton threads. Women in Asante sang special songs (called kosa-ankome, ‘coward’) which could drive war-shirkers to suicide. Alternatively, . . . they might castrate him” (Jones 1993, 553–54, emphasis mine).

The women’s collective action enlisted men to support the principles and structure of matrifocal society, on pain of a humiliating social death. Clearly more than mere supporters of male warriors, the Mothers’ moral chastisement actively conscripted men for the defense of home.

**Matrifocal Morality: An Alternative to the Theory of Matriarchy**

In her groundbreaking work *Reinventing Africa*, Ifi Amadiume contends that Western interpreters of African history, even feminists, go to great lengths to avoid reaching what for her is the obvious conclusion that abundant evidence supports the early and persistent existence of matriarchy. She rails against European feminists who make “derogatory dismissal” of maternity as essentialist and limiting to women’s choices: “The very thought of women’s power being based on the logic of motherhood has proved offensive to many Western feminists. . . . In the African system of matriarchy, it was women’s means of empowerment” (Amadiume 1997, 114). It is this attitude that keeps Western
interpreters from recognizing the principles that she claims are foundational to African society: “love, nurturance and protection derived from womb symbolism” (82). For Amadiume, the classification is warranted on the basis that West African societies have been founded on “a strong ideology of motherhood, and a general moral principle of love” (101). Yet we see that it is not love, at least not the warm sentiment of gentle care that Westerners generally associate with maternity, that the female elders manifest in their offices or collective rituals. Nor is their empowerment founded in actual motherhood. Rather, 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. The most compelling articulation of these principles and their most potent sanction is the terrible curse imposed through FGP. Therefore, I suggest that it is not matriarchy—the structural organization of society that privileges female authority—but matrifocal morality that undergirds African society.

Under patriarchy, women are so dominated and subordinated as to be objectified and reduced to instruments of exchange, but in the African systems that Amadiume calls “matriarchy” women never subjugated men in this way. In those systems in which women occupied great rank, African men enjoyed a parallel place in the structures of the social order. Even in overt matrilineal societies, men are afforded offices of governance. To reject the term matriarchy is not to dismiss the authority and power of African women in history but to recognize that under that authority there was greater balance between the sexes. We must look further than overt social forms and functions to the more subtle, “subjugated knowledges” that have informed the many complex forms of governance throughout the region over time. I suggest that the key to their organization lies not in structural arrangements at all, but in what Victor Turner (1969) famously called the invisible “anti-structural” bonds that make society cohere. More specifically, I propose that the stateless societies were founded on an ethical principle, one that forges allegiance, establishes cooperation based on justice, and fosters the means to thwart the menace of evil from every quarter. That founding principle is matrifocal morality. It is an irrefutable ethical demand, rooted in those most primary familial bonds, and vigilantly maintained through the sanctions of FGP.

As early as 1978 Wendy James made a similar proposal, suggesting that the term matrifocality best described the arrangement of a system as strongly focused on female power as that of the Asante, who are ruled by a queen mother and are matrilineal. She employs matrifocality to signal “the moral primacy of
biological motherhood in the definition of social relations” (James 1978, 150, emphasis mine). The premise that I propose instead, matrifocal morality, modifies the perspective slightly, shifting from a focus on the centrality of the mother’s position and the structure of matrilineal descent or rulership to a moral position that informs the ethical relations in all societies, regardless of the system of descent or the sex of the ruler. What defines that moral position is a matter that lies beyond the personal, affective ties to the basic family unit, however. As James herself recognized, “Even in the strongly and notoriously patrilineal societies of Africa, we may also find clues to the presence of underlying matrifocal ideas” (155–56). It is the precise nature of those ideas, extending beyond that of women’s child-bearing capacity, that must be more fully articulated.19

A conceptual model to demonstrate the construct of matrifocal morality might be elaborated in the figure of a DNA helix in which two lateral strands stand for the discrete but parallel domains: the two “different orders of beings” in the dual-sexed order, men and women. In this analogy, these vertical axes are comprised of men’s and women’s councils, initiatory societies, and the hierarchical ranks within them. In these sequences, seniority is a controlling factor. What joins these two sides like the rungs of nucleotides in DNA are the generations of children, male and female alike, who come together in age sets. This secondary structure is interactive and responsible for the shape that the society assumes. In societies governed by collective self-rule, each generation comes of age and assumes its collective office to govern society as a whole. The rungs show the dual-sexed system to be linked inextricably. But their operation can only be fully explained by another, less structural, factor.

A tertiary structure (with no physical correlation in an actual DNA model) is an additional straight vertical axis suspended like a plumb line between the two lateral strands. This central strand represents an invisible but compelling matrifocality and its moral demands. It serves as the ballast in the midst of competing interests. This stabilizing force is vigilantly monitored and most vigorously enforced through the act of FGP. Its power is like the invisible stacking force that is at play in DNA, attracting the bases above and below it on the same strand and providing overall stability.

Ifi Amadiume comes close to suggesting such a schema, proposing that beyond matrilineage or patrilineage is “a third classificatory system, the non-gendered collective . . . based on non-discriminatory matriarchal collectivism, as a unifying moral code and culture” (Amadiume 2002, 43). The concept of matrifocal morality embodied in the “non-gendered,” or rather supra-gendered, Mothers spells out precisely what this third system is and on what basis the moral code unifies various types of societies in West Africa.
As Amadiume made clear, the fundamental affective bond in West African society is not the nuclear family (father-mother-child), but the more primary social unit, that of mother and child. The tight stacking of the maternal bond and the obligations to siblings of one womb also informs the overall shape of society. It pulls the balanced order to one side, twisting the structure in such a way that its interests prevail. In matrilineal societies it is especially clear how the two strands of the dual-sexed order twist in a spiral descent as inheritance follows a transfer of goods through a familial line according to the identity of the mother of the inheriting male. Since inheritance is not passed directly from father to son but moves through the maternal line, matrifocality forces the staircase to turn to accommodate the diagonal direction of succession, and descent is slanted toward the female side. As a nephew inherits through his mother’s brother and then passes it on to his sister’s son, goods are literally rotated through the generations, with wealth and power revolving through maternal lines that connect the men (those who inherit or pass inheritance) and women (sisters and mothers who are the determining figures in the line of descent). The twist of inheritance across male and female domains more tightly coils the threads of society, drawing the fabric of interdependence tighter. Yet even in societies more complexly organized, the moral plumb line is represented by the senior member of the matrilineage or women’s council who adjudicates and makes the supreme pronouncements of law.

In *Reinventing Africa*, Amadiume acknowledges this tendency for even dual-sex systems to tilt toward the matrifocal side. She therefore challenges the prevalent view of the dual-sex system as a “a ‘harmonious dualism’ between men and women,” arguing that it “embodied two oppositional or contesting systems, the balance tilting and changing all the time; that was the gender politics” (Amadiume 1997, 93–94). Demonstrating the existence of “a flexible gender system, and a third non-gendered classificatory system,” she implies that it mediates gender antagonism and “minimizes conflict” (129). By contrast, I suggest that it is not the recognition of the Mothers themselves as a third nongender that mediates conflict but the pervasive values of matrifocal morality that guide the dynamics of society.

Thus African social systems were hinged on an invisible principle, giving to its many forms a characteristic twist that is difficult to identify structurally. Matrifocal morality provides society with a stable system as long as the covert line and the principles that sustain it are respected. When social stability is threatened, the elder women, representing that central force, mobilize to restore order of this dynamic. With this model as a guide, the age set system too, so varied and complex, can be understood as the political scaffolding built to support the fundamental and compelling moral code. It is in defense of its
principles that the young men go to war, while the women elders incite and support those young men with their own spiritual warfare, the rite of FGP.

Of course, the analogy is imprecise, but this DNA-like model provides a concrete vision for the kinds of social operations whose complexity and subtlety have caused them to be overlooked (by colonial administrators) or to be deemed too unwieldy to survive development. Providing for extended kinship ties, as required under matriliny, presumably poses a distinct disadvantage in a competitive economy based on individual effort, and for this reason, in the early years of development economics in Africa after national independence, it was suggested that increasing wealth and economic differentiation would inevitably lead to its demise. By comparison, patrilineal descent is so simple, its rules so straightforward, and its sustainability through one male’s potential to bearing heirs with many wives so much less potentially problematic than a line dependent on one woman’s fertility, that the persistence of matriliny cannot be readily explained without appealing to a compelling principle. As Mary Douglas observed, “The general impression of these analyses is that among kinship systems matriliny is a cumbersome dinosaur. Its survival seems to be a matter for wonder” (Douglas 1969, 123). Despite the pressures of colonialism, Christianization, and globalization, matriliny has endured. Yet identifying the invisible principle responsible, and around which society pivots, is by no means a simple matter: “Society is more than a diagram, and where the matrilineal principle is enshrined, for whatever practical or symbolic purpose, the nodal position by women must be more than a diagrammatic matter. There must surely be evaluative connotations, even a theory of the central focus provided by women . . . [and this] invites us to look further, not necessarily for ‘female rule’ in a crude power sense, but for equally strong affirmations of the central qualities, even the primacy, of women’s position” (James 1978, 149).

The theory that illuminates the central focus that the Mothers provide is matrifocal morality. It is not an instrument of matriarchy, in diametric opposition to patriarchy “in a crude power sense,” but a central and grounding principle that renders the social dynamics synergistic rather than conflictual. It is as much embedded in social structure as it is derived from a code of ethics. It is the integral but invisible balancing constraint on the patriarchal structure, “checking the development of totalitarian patriarchy and monolithism” (Ama-diume 2005, 96). Matrifocal morality stands as the firm backbone of African societies, their complex rules of descent, self-governing rulership, and intertwining dual-sex systems.

With this brief historical survey and few examples, it is clear that the concept of matrifocal morality and its sanction through FGP has shaped structural
rulership in West Africa and has served as a means by which women have both exercised political influence and enforced critical spiritual values undergirding society. In what follows I show how FGP was used across West Africa during the colonial era as an arm in the struggles against foreign domination, especially in situations that threatened women’s traditional rights or infringed upon women’s domains and prerogatives. Their appeal to FGP pushed back against the new structural impositions that ignored women as a social force, marginalized women as economic players, and undermined gender relations in a way that disenfranchised African women. These mobilizations continued even after independence as women sought to reassert the moral force of justice and make the postcolonial state accountable to foundational local knowledge. Drawing on documentation of those courageous interventions, I underscore that the struggle has always been at once a worldly as well as an unworldly spiritual battle, waged on the invisible plane, to rebuke the assault on the moral fundamentals of African civilization.