An Intimate Rebuke
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CONCLUSION: AN INTIMATE REBUKE
A Local Critique in the Global Postcolony

On Sunday July 24, 2011, in the square at Trocadero in Paris, operation “red Kodjo” was put into action. . . . Ivoirian women patriots, ever mobilized and determined, demonstrated their profound indignation and revolted against the tragic situation that their country is enduring.


Accountability: An Urgent Appeal, a Moral Demand

In a post–civil war society that is still seeking equilibrium, accountability is a critical and timely matter. As John Lonsdale remarked, “The idea of accountability seems noticeable for its comparative absence from the field of African studies. This is partly because it is a difficult concept to use, but also because some scholars have thought it to be irrelevant or even inappropriate to the African case” (Lonsdale 1986, 127). Nevertheless, matrifocal morality exercised in the form of FGP does hold authority accountable, and the Mothers’ collective action has always been “part of the moral calculus of power” in Africa (127).

Today those victimized by the horrors of the war, especially women, are demanding justice on ethical grounds and doing so in the vernacular terms of traditional calls for such reckoning; FGP may be the strongest weapon of the women victims of war crimes who continue to cry out for acknowledgment and retribution. In October 2015, the Collective of Women Victims in Côte d’Ivoire (CVCI) gathered at the headquarters of the National Commission for Reconciliation and the Indemnification of Victims (Conariv) in Abidjan to demand the list of those victims who were to be compensated. While three of their representatives were received, the demonstrators waited outside peacefully for hours, but when the police used force in an attempt to disperse them, the situation quickly degenerated. One of them, Bakayoko Anzata, was seized by three officers and beaten with truncheons. In angry response, elderly women
in the group began to strip and issue curses. The video embedded in the journalist’s report and posted on YouTube depicts the appeal to fgp as a spontaneous manifestation of righteous indignation and a courageous contest between violent force and moral might (Mel 2015). First one sees three elderly and corpulent women who have already exposed their breasts further remove their garments while women standing behind them nod with approval, wail, and shout. Others gesticulate angrily and argue with military personnel. The camera pans to another elder standing bare-breasted before an officer. A fourth, stripped to the waist, intentionally struts toward the camera, lets out a battle cry, and thrusts both arms in the air. The camera moves farther into the crowd of women, focusing on yet another who is slowly disrobing with deliberate concentration. A toothless old woman in a pink dress and headscarf stands beside her, staring at the camera as if to warn against the offense of its intrusive gaze. The video then cuts to a close-up of Bakayoko Anzata, whose camisole was torn in her scuffle with police. The woman beside her bears witness to what happened. “Here she is, she’s the one who they hit,” she says, pointing to the victim. “The one who they undressed and struck, here she is. Turn and show them your body.” We see that the flesh on the left side of her back between her bra and waist is marked with red welts. “They tore her clothing. . . .” The victim turns back to the camera, takes a piece of fabric and unfolds it and, holding it up to view, says, “He hit me and I tore off his epaulette. He told me to give it to him and I answered, ‘I won’t give it to you, in the name of God.’” Her voice trembles, and she jabs at the air. “As they killed my two big brothers, that is how God will kill them also. I didn’t come here because of hunger. If I came here it is for the sake of justice. God will bring justice. God shall punish them. In the name of God! If they betrayed justice, the justice of men, they cannot betray the justice of God. One cannot escape that justice. That justice will find them, God willing. They will never again repeat what they did, never again.” She waves her finger to emphasize the point. While this lament and appeal for divine retribution is expressed in the familiar terms of the Abrahamic faiths, it is no less a call for the kind of intervention that the Mothers make themselves and through a power as metaphysical as it is moral.

The scene then jumps, and the camera witnesses the execution of the curse of fgp. An old woman with naked sagging breasts stands before three young armed officers. She shouts and waves a finger of reproach and then gets down on her hands and knees in the ritual posture of malediction, the posture of childbirth. When she rises she hurls an angry remark in their direction with a gesture of contempt. Another elderly woman comes to lead her away while she continues her indignant imprecations. In a final take, yet another elder screams
as if overcome by frustration and fury and tears at her shirt, while two younger women restrain her. They pull the shirt back over her naked bosom and try to lead her away, but she breaks free and struts forward with a look of menacing determination. The crowd behind her begins a shrill incantation.

The use of FGP in political resistance not only disrupts the state agenda, it reveals that underneath the fragile overlay of the state is the more substantial substrata of indigenous reality that the African state cannot afford to ignore. The women are not demanding democratic representation but decrying the inadequacies of the political dynamic from the vantage point of a much deeper and older tradition. As Bakayoko Anzata put it, “If I came here it is for the sake of justice.” The women’s pressing appeal cast in the form of an ancient tradition draws attention not only to their immediate plight, but also to a critical issue in the time of postcolonialism across Africa: the demand for the ethical grounding of the state.

Female Agency and African Civil Society

In the face of widespread pessimism about the fate of Africa under the direction of brutal and bankrupt postcolonial regimes, some historians of Africa turned their attention to “the flesh and blood struggles of ordinary people” to show how they could stand up to the structures of injustice (Lonsdale 2000, 7). In recent decades women’s collective mobilizations have been featured in studies of African peasant revolts and the nationalist efforts that sprang up as a consequence. However, the myriad incidents appear in such studies “like weeds without any organizing principle other than their common humanity” (11). These fragmented depictions are given too narrow a geographic or temporal focus or are only considered in terms of their effect on the changing political landscape and mapped in terms of political victories or losses. Perhaps for that very reason, scholars and political actors alike have failed to consider the Mothers and their ritual rebuke as anything more than marginal players, auxiliaries to the central agents shaping society.

Writing as a political theorist in the 1980s and focusing especially on Côte d’Ivoire, Jean-François Bayart, for one, claimed that in Africa there was “no common cultural frame of reference” between groups that would even allow for the existence of the kind of horizontal associations that characterize civil society (Bayart 1986, 117–18). Given the ethnic diversity within Africa, Bayart supposed that there could be no “‘organisational principle’ capable of challenging absolute state control” (117–18, emphasis mine). The heterogeneity of Ivoirian society in particular seemed to him devoid of any unifying vision nec-
ecessary for broad collective effort, for civil society “exists only in so far as there is a self-consciousness of its existence and of its opposition to the state” (117, emphasis mine). In fact, the deployment of FGP has been a cornerstone of civil society throughout African history. If civil society is “the de facto binding, organizing principle of the political order” (Harbeson, Rothchild, and Chazan 1994, 4), then it seems clear that the founding knowledge and binding power instantiated by the Mothers eminently qualify. Matrifocal morality and the enactment of FGP as its enforcing sanction are imprinted on the local social imaginary, the “deep matrix for meaningful participation” (Steger 2008, 6), to such a degree that these principles and techniques constitute the “private sphere of material, cultural and political activities resisting the incursions of the state” that defines civil society (Fatton 1995, 67, emphasis mine). Casting the phenomenon in this way brings it into focus as a relevant, timely, and effective means of collective mobilization for the purpose of exerting influence on the state.

The performances of FGP in the political sphere are neither called for by political elites nor enacted by cosmopolitans. They are the product of “ordinary people” who bravely put themselves on the frontlines of contestation. They generate mobilization from the bottom up and, moreover, use their “bottom-power” to condemn breaches by the state by appealing to the local social imaginary. Ultimately what may make the deployment of FGP most effective as a form of civil society may be that very informal, impermanent, and fluid nature of the women’s networks, for they are not dependent on the state for their existence, nor are they seeking a collaborative relationship with it. The kind of power that is exercised through the ritual invocation of FGP by the anonymous Mothers is best understood as a dynamic in which “power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and . . . only exists in action . . . it is above all a relation of force” (Foucault and Gordon 1980, 89). The relation they are seeking is recognition through accountability. As the rite itself makes plain, power is not only in the possession of those “in power,” but is a force that must be exercised for the good if power is to have any legitimacy at all.

The Mothers’ mobilization and public action challenge “state legitimacy, and does so without presuming any necessary connection between legitimacy and democracy” (Harbeson, Rothchild, and Chazan 1994, 4). The activism of FGP underscores that accountability is the ruler’s imperative. The ultimate sanction is the forfeit of the right to rule. The presence of the Mothers on the political scene is a barometer of the degree to which the state is deemed legitimate by those for whom it matters most—the society it supposedly serves. The current situation in post–civil war, post-election Côte d’Ivoire is still precarious and will remain unstable unless the state attends to the demands of civil society.
The Effective Reach of FGP in a Cosmopolitan World

The interpenetration of religious and political discourse is now acute and the focus of much academic interest of late, but this conversation largely continues to exclude indigenous religions, and this despite their ongoing vitality on the continent and the degree to which the intangible heritage of FGP still profoundly informs a shared epistemology across West African ethnicities and national borders. As Africanist Jane Guyer noted, “In spite of the spiritual power in indigenous and syncretic movements, it is generally the orthodox, and therefore internationally connected, religious organizations that hold political power within the ‘establishment’ of civil society: the Catholic Church, the Muslim Brotherhoods, the Christian fundamentalist movement, the Anglican bishoprics” (Guyer 1994, 224). Yet all these established purveyors of “the sacredness of power” exclude women from office. Even when these institutions insist on inserting religion into the worldly arena, they deny women authority as instruments of its power.

The spontaneous uprisings of African women may be one arena in which the spiritual authority of women as the paramount arbiters of worldly legitimacy is apparent and most forcefully expressed. The elders who resort to the traditional ritual appeal of FGP do so in self-professed solidarity with the plight of a whole swath of the population—the unarmed and disenfranchised civilian populace squeezed between warring factions, not only left to their own devices by the state but also actively victimized by its wantonly cruel forces. Even distinctions of religious affiliation have not precluded Ivorian women’s sense of their fundamental solidarity based on their primacy as guardians of the moral order. In an ode to the suffering nation, an Ivorian blogger posted an impassioned “cry from the soul” in which one can hear reverberations of the ancient and ubiquitous reliance on the Mothers as the embodiment of the foundations of civilization and the bearers of an inviolable force:

I therefore say NO to the slaughter of my people! / I say NO to the slaughter of women, whether they wear pants or boubous! . . . / Whether they are Christian or Muslim. / Whether you like them or not, we must respect them as MOTHER of HUMANITY, SYMBOL of UNITY! / If there is anything special in the eyes of God, woman and the mother are part of it. / Whether one agrees with their opinion or not, one must know how to see God in them! / One must know how to respect what God put in them, for the good of every nation, every family, every human being for Eternity . . . / These women are not your adversaries, nor your enemies, even if they are supporters of the opposing camp. Never more That! (Kouamé 2011)
The Mothers’ righteous indignation and curse is an integral part of “the ideology of redemption—part religion, part morality—which characterizes much African politics . . . [and] the reflection of a fundamental existential demand which democracy will have to satisfy if it is to survive” (Bayart 1986, 123). Nevertheless, in today’s world, where globalization and international marketization are the major forces driving change, international organizations with religious affiliation (like World Vision or outreach and support programs of the World Council of Churches) overshadow those efforts at the local level and certainly eclipse the intervention of actors, like the Adjanou dancers, who seem unmoored from any formal organization. Indigenous forms of civil engagement are easily overlooked, and its stakeholders risk losing even more ground on the social landscape if their presence goes unrecognized or is not deemed viable. Without the international scope of those cosmopolitan bodies, can the enactments of FGP have any effective reach beyond the local?

At this juncture anthropologist and global studies theorist Arjun Appadurai is a welcome conversation partner. He shifts the understanding of “locality” away from the association of the term with geographic circumscription or parochial spheres of engagement and identity that have no bearing on the wider world of historical interconnection and mutual definition. He urges that we need to “get away from the idea that group identities necessarily imply that ‘cultures’ need to be seen as spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or ethnically homogeneous forms” (Appadurai 1995, 208). Instead, he suggests that “the local” refers to a “property of social life” (207) that must be actively produced to create a sustained ethos. This requires “hard and regular work” and is achieved through “complex social techniques that inscribe and embody the local” (205–6). Ritual is the most obvious and effective of these complex social techniques. The rituals of FGP are among those “legible and reproducible patterns of action” regularly carried out to produce the “meaningful life-world” that is locality (209). The “hard and regular work” they do is to awaken the public conscience and recollect moral imperatives. The ritual rhetoric of FGP, regularly rehearsed in Africa, is a recognizable standard representing both the “local” (read “West African”) moral values that the Mothers embody and the rallying cry against the evil of injustice, a demand that knows no border.

In 2011 the Ivoirian Association of Women Patriots in France gathered in the Place du Trocadero in Paris and brandished the “red kodjo,” the traditional female undergarment, not only to manifest “their profound indignation and their revolt against the tragic situation in which their country is living” but to curse the politicians deemed responsible for the ongoing suffering (Zeka 2011). Thus, in today’s globalizing world, the local values and techniques—so ubiquitous
throughout West Africa—have not remained constrained to the continent. Such use of FGP in the European metropole demonstrates how it is deployed in the diaspora as a “technique for the production of locality” (Appadurai 1995, 207). It is a “return to knowledge” of a local kind—self-consciously asserting its worth even in the wider geopolitical sphere. The return to this ancient rhetorical form is an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” through which “criticism performs its work” (Foucault and Gordon 1980, 81–82). And when the activism of the Mothers is broadcast on YouTube or given consideration within the wider phenomena of women’s nudity in public protest, the effective reach of these manifestations is more visible than ever. In the postcolonial and globalizing world, where “the task of producing locality . . . is increasingly a struggle” (Appadurai 1995, 213), performances of FGP revivify foundational values, ensuring that they remain vital and insisting on their contemporary relevance.

An Ancient Subterfuge

Postcolonial theorist R. Radhakrishnan made the astute and ironic comment that the term postcolonialism is hardly ever used within the ex-colonized world (1993, 750). Platitudes about the new postcolonial order do not apply to the actual local situation.

The reiteration of FGP in politics in Côte d’Ivoire has been an emergency response to the terrible incursions of postcolonial forces on the local. They have appeared as a refusal of the brutal violations and demeaning effacement of women, as well as the subjugations masquerading as development politics. The Mothers’ rehearsal of this ancient form of civil disobedience demonstrates that “tradition and modernity are not opposed but paired; ‘tradition is a moving image of the past, it is opposed not to modernity but to alienation’” (Rabinow et al. 2008, 58, emphasis mine). The rite of FGP is a mirror that holds up to view an image of the factors that have brought about the alienation from home and the dislocation of the local—the imported apparatus of neocolonial power.

The fierce enactment of FGP is no mere theoretical critique, but a “critique engagée” (Bhabha 1994, 33). The Mothers’ daring displays simultaneously embody lamentation, protest, and warning. When the Mothers crouch in the posture of childbirth they shame spectators with the reminder of the absolute primacy of woman as progenitor, the source of the primordial social bond, and the wellspring of moral obligation. When they expose their naked breasts and buttocks, slap their denuded bosoms, or bend over to display their bottoms with wanton defiance, there is no mistaking their intent to contest brute force with moral force. The spectacle is an expression of outrage that the centrality of women’s place has
been displaced in the hypermasculine forms of neocolonial conflict. It protests that fundamental African values have been overshadowed by the ideologies of nation and state, leaving the halls of power morally bankrupt. Adjanou and other manifestations of FGP in the contemporary political arena reject this unhoming disruption of their own more grounded epistemology and its grounding ethics.

The performers of Adjanou turn the tables on the players of the postcolonial game in yet another way. Their strategy does not rely on debate, negotiation, or jurisprudence but draws on a particular kind of power, the “ancient subterfuge” of ritual (Spivak 1988, 278). As a performative gesture, not articulated in word or text, the assertion of FGP escapes the problematic betrayal of language that typifies other forms of critique attempted by the subaltern and resists inscription into the postcolonial situation. The rite of FGP is an extracolonial discourse about the nature of power as a moral force. FGP embodies “a powerful repository of cultural knowledge that erases the rationalist and progressivist logics of the ‘canonical’ nation” (Bhabha 1994, 219).

Fighting Evil: Infrapolitical Rage and Moral Power

The portrait of the state as a bloodthirsty witch “sucking vital resources from an already debilitated society” (Fatton 1995, 76) is as common in scholarship on Africa as it is in the popular social imaginary. Using the cultural idiom of witchcraft as the source of evil, the Mothers fight fire with fire, countering the offense on the invisible, spiritual plane. Their threatening specter recovers the knowledge that has been repressed and obscured by the postcolonial state by bringing up the “unspeakable”—the evil inflicted on women and the whole suffering nation. The rite displaces the “regular” political discourse with a “supernatural” one that warns of the danger of neglecting moral authority in the wrangling for mere power. As a countermand of evil itself, their political rebuke in this form is a profound condemnation and profoundly damaging. Not only does FGP express “infrapolitical rage” (69), it is an actual weapon. For this reason the political regimes they condemn have every reason to fear it.

The image of a naked elderly woman standing before armed young men is, on one hand, a vivid commentary on power, showing that the battle for primacy is not a “struggle among equals” and that the “adversaries do not belong to a common space” (Foucault 1977, 150). On the other hand, while the Mothers appear naked and vulnerable, they present themselves as a superior force. Their emergence on the scene is always the occasion of contestation, and it is a battle that they clearly intend to win. They are not the kind of peacemakers who will accept a tepid détente. Those women enacting the ritual of FGP are warriors
undertaking a combat that asserts the dominance of their own system of values and rules. That is, FGP is “by no means designed to temper violence but rather to satisfy it” (150). Their condemnation of political forces that fail to measure up is adamant and menacing, a “violently imposed interpretation” (151) in its own right that seeks to “force its participation in a different game” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 108).

In contemporary postcolonial politics, women have been largely excluded from statecraft and made “other,” or at best made to serve the needs of the state in their projected image as mothers-of-the-nation. Their ritual reprimand rejects both. The activism of the Mothers refutes the dissembling forms of nationalism that replace moral foundations with the promises of modernity and rejects the forces of globalization that dismiss local values. The deployment of FGP announces that “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 (Bhabha 1994, 216–17). With their public manifestations they make a timely reappraisal of the trajectory of the nation and question its viability as home. The uncomfortable (unhomely) revelation of the state’s betrayal of those values stands as a refusal of further encroachment of foreign ideology upon the values of that home.

When the Mothers rise up to reprimand the state, their purpose is not to overthrow the government, but to rectify its distorted course of action. The women’s gathering and their ritual recollection of matrifocal morality therefore embodies a critique of power. Moreover, that critique retains a local character. The deployment of FGP in the public streets restores to the collective social imaginary the forgotten and overlooked moral imperatives of African tradition. While its purpose is to stir memory, it is not timeless but timely.

*Timely Acts: Local Civil Society in a Time of Global Politics*

The appearances of the Mothers are timely, both in the sense of providing a necessary and appropriate response to the times and in the sense of being charged with urgency. They are critical expressions of local knowledge that are especially relevant now. Like others caught up in the crisis of the times, the women who perform this public spectacle have “little time for the remembrance of profound time” (Richards 2007, 350, emphasis mine). The Mothers’ acts are recollections of the repressed history of their status as bearers of moral authority. But they don’t romanticize or fetishize tradition, nor do they stir nostalgia for the past.
Through FGP the submerged but still living traditions erupt into the present to interrogate and redirect the course of history.

The women’s uprisings and appeal to FGP today are dedicated to “bringing back to life that which has been put to sleep” by the instigators of collective amnesia (Shipley et al. 2010, 661). But this longing for justice is not just a nostalgic lament over a lost “precolonial Eden.” The deployment of FGP is a return to immortal mandates. It remains an abiding call to insurrection against their neglect. The Mothers invigorate a still vital yet subsumed ideal struggling to reassert itself—moral indignation and ethical righteousness. The performance of FGP draws on the “matri-archive” but has designs on the future.

With striking visual rhetoric, FGP challenges the apparatus of the neocolonial state with the living traditions that have precedence, both historical primacy and ethical preeminence. It recalls a fractured society back to the sustaining values of the matri-archive. It calls for accountability as a relevant reality now.

**The Intimacy of a Postcolonial Rebuke**

FGP makes plain that women are not just hapless corks bobbing on the violent and impersonal waves of history, but exercise agency, even “in tight corners”—that is, under conditions that are not of their own making (Lonsdale 2000, 6). African women have acted as determined and self-determining agents in circumstances that became increasingly tight, where their formal representation has all but disappeared and the social and economic constraints placed upon them have become increasingly repressive. The repeated organization and deployment of the ancient ritual of rebuke demonstrate an ongoing commitment to the dignity of women’s personhood, the inviolable principles embodied by their sex, and the necessity to intercede when they are in jeopardy.

In *Feminism without Borders*, T. Mohanty argues that scholars could “[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” (2003, 245). The women’s own self-representation in the execution of FGP figures as just such a point of departure for a new assessment of the crisis women face in the globalizing world.

The history of FGP presents a new kind of history, “intelligible only within a cultural tradition but, potentially, standing some critical distance part from it . . . a startling reinterpretation, an intimate rebuke” (Lonsdale 2000, 14, emphasis mine). The enactment of FGP is an “intimate rebuke” not only because of its reference to the most sacred and most secreted parts of the anatomy, but because
its expression of righteous indignation springs from the deepest values that define social affinity in African society and that define the local as home. In Côte d’Ivoire today, the women’s rebuke is poignantly intimate in that their public condemnation is no longer aimed at the injustices, indignities, and violations of a foreign colonial imperialism, but rather at those of their own postcolonial state.

Women’s bodies have been the site of the contest of power and the location where society’s unhomely dislocation has been forcefully enacted (Grillo 2013). Resorting to female genital power, women make the female body the locus of public contest, but they also self-consciously make use of it for their own disruptive agenda. Using the naked female body as the unexpected and unpredictable site of resistance, the women of Côte d’Ivoire refuse to allow themselves to be mere victims. Forcing men, particularly statesmen and their armed troops, to gaze on their naked bodies in violation of taboo, the Mothers perpetrate an epistemic violence upon the aggressors. With their public spectacle they demand to be seen, not as objectified beings, but as the material emblem of that which is missing from the postcolonial state: authentic representation in the form of ethical reciprocity.

The ritual rhetoric of FGP reveals the degree to which the Ivoirian state’s adoption of the terms of modernity alienates its people from a more authentic African identity and the civic virtues that traditionally define it. As a form of postcolonial activism, the appeal to FGP insists that the state ground itself in the long-standing ethical foundations of African society. “The state can never fully annihilate [this form of] civil society; civil society’s murmurs and ‘hidden transcripts’ are always potentially explosive, they constitute the invisible zone of resistance to domination” (Fatton 1995, 68). When the murmurs of discontent with the state grow louder, “commitments and attachments (sometimes mislabeled ‘primordial’) that characterize local subjectivities are more pressing, more continuous, and sometimes more distracting than the nation-state can afford” (Appadurai 1995, 215). Women elders risk bullets to agitate for justice. The shocking juxtaposition of their moral stance with the moral bankruptcy of military might without conscience stirs public consciousness and evokes condemnation in international courts as well as local villages and neighborhoods. If the nation-state cannot afford to build on these values, neither can it afford to ignore them.

With their very bodies, the women throw down the gauntlet of judgment and challenge to spiritual combat those who would dare defy them. The women’s public act of reprimand is an essential reminder of “what it once was to be fully achieved men and women,” morally responsible and engaged (Lonsdale 2000, 15). Such a vividly embodied recollection may still be instructive, if it is recognized for what it is: a warning about the unthinkable cataclysm that befalls a society without moral anchor.