



F&A Series: 'African women's anti-witchcraft: what kind of faith-based activism is this?'



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1 hour ago



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Throughout West Africa, women's political activism has exploited the widely held traditional religious belief that postmenopausal elders are the living embodiment of the ancestors, and as such bear an innate spiritual power to enforce the moral mandates that are the fundament of a just society. The locus of this spiritual power is the female genitalia.

In a nocturnal rite of anti-witchcraft, "the Mothers" gather and *strip naked*. They bathe their genitals and use the water as an aspersion to lay a trap for witches and to seal the village against evils. Smeared with white kaolin river clay, a spiritually potent substance, they wield branches or pound the ground with old pestles to curse evil-doers and evict the invisible forces that threaten the community. It is a taboo – especially for men – to look upon the rite, which is said to be so potent that those who defy their sanction risk death.

These self-empowered elders also perform the rite in the context of daytime protests, as the ultimate condemnation of the immoral use of worldly power. In public manifestations, women gather, sometimes in organized mobilizations, sometimes in spontaneous acts of solidarity, to rebuke reprehensible violations that can no longer be tolerated or ignored. Time and again they appear with white-streaked faces, brandishing leaves. They bare their breasts or buttocks, or slap at their genitals while hurling curses. The women's vulnerable nakedness seemingly stands in sharp contrast to the armed military forces. But the appeal to "Female Genital Power" (FGP) actually confronts their physical aggressors with a superior weapon. Faced with the taboo against looking upon the

Mothers' naked curse and fearing its power, even armed soldiers flee.

My book, *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa* (Duke, 2018), focuses on the history of the phenomenon, especially in Côte d'Ivoire. It features women's deployment of FGP during and between two civil wars, from 2002-2011. And it details women's strategic and spontaneous evocations of their genital curse as a last recourse in the subsequent struggles against the post-war culture of impunity and partisan justice. The public appeal to FGP is an intentionally shocking spectacle. It presents a formidable challenge that cannot be ignored. It awakens public moral conscience and stirs ire.

Although these women's collective mobilizations and their ritual rebuke are obviously a striking form of activism, does the deployment of FGP qualify as an act of "faith"? The pairing of the terms "faith" and "activism" especially connotes the Christian tradition, which maintains that true belief results in good works. Faith is the very process by which the "new Jerusalem" is made. Fidelity to the way of Jesus requires commitment to live in alignment with his example of responsiveness and responsibility to one another in the hope of ushering in the reign of justice and mercy. Can the African women's evocation of invisible powers rightly be likened to such prophetic ministries?

To make the case that FGP constitutes faith-based activism, we must first dissociate the term "faith" from any *particular* religion. I propose that, in keeping with its Latin root *fides*, "faith" be understood first and foremost as fidelity. Religious or spiritual faith is not only blind trust or belief in the unseen, but also and especially allegiance to a *moral vision* that orients free will and guides collective agency. Faith is a matter of acting in alignment with core values, grounded in the conviction of their virtue, and sustained by the impetus of hope that, through ethical intervention, things can change.

Certainly the women who call upon FGP do believe and trust in the unseen spiritual force that gives their curse efficacy, and so do many of those they condemn. Just as forceful is the widely-shared West African ethical principle that I call "matrifocal morality," that asserts the spiritual primacy of Woman. As the original progenitor, especially Woman embodies "firstness," and so – even in patriarchal societies – respectful duty is owed to a mother and to maternal kin. However, women gain their full *spiritual* potential after menopause, when they cease their reproductive social roles and transcend gender. As "Mothers" of all, they embody the ancestors' moral legacy. FGP enforces adherence to those founding values that first established human society. "Matrifocal morality" is so fundamental to the local episteme that adherence to its premise transcends differences of ethnicity, polity, national identity or "religious" affiliation (which in West Africa usually refers to the Abrahamic traditions).

The deployment of FGP as public protest is an "intimate rebuke" not only in its reference to women's most private bodily parts. It is also intimate because it is aimed at the injustices, indignities and violations of their own leaders and the post-colonial states that exercise power without moral compass. The appeal to FGP vividly reminds the public what no ruler can afford to forget and no state can be allowed to neglect: worldly power is only legitimate if it is supported by moral authority. Driven by moral outrage, the women's rite is fueled by the fervor of fidelity to their duty to confront evil and protect the vulnerable for the sake of the whole of society.

The Nobel Peace Prize winning activist Leymah Gbowee's long struggle to end the civil war in *Liberia* culminated in a significant incident that illustrates the ubiquity of FGP in West Africa and its real force. The acclaimed 2008 documentary "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," chronicles Gbowee's leadership of a women's inter-ethnic, inter-faith, and non-violent movement that relentlessly agitated for the end to the 14-year long war. When formal peace talks finally convened in Ghana, the women's coalition traveled there to continue their pressure. When the prolonged and seemingly frivolous proceedings stalled, the women staged a sit-in at the doors, linking arms to prevent participants from leaving until they reached a resolution. The authorities came to arrest Gbowee. With indignant defiance she announced, "I am going to strip naked!" (Reticker 2008). The Nigerian statesman appointed to moderate the peace negotiations recognized the profundity of the threat. He diffused the situation and returned to the talks, bringing about a swift settlement. Although Gbowee is a devout Christian and attributes her leadership to a prophetic call by God to "Gather the women and pray for peace," it was her appeal to FGP that ultimately carried the spiritual weight necessary to bring the results that the women's activism, without this faith, could not.

The public appeal to the traditional African rite of FGP is indeed faith-based activism. This intimate rebuke is more than a political act of civil disobedience; it is rooted in a vision of a higher authority. It mandates a greater good.

Written By: Dr Laura S Grillo

Feature Image Credit: Dr Laura S Grillo – taken in Orbaff, Côte d’Ivoire in 2010

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