Laura Grillo’s *An Intimate Rebuke* is a fascinating exploration of ‘Female Genital Power’ (FGP), which she defines as women’s ‘innate spiritual power [that] embodies moral authority’ (p. 2). This particular conceptualization of women’s power differs from the usual scholarly analyses, in that it focuses on the genitals and women’s moral authority rather than on the womb and women’s reproductive capacity. FGP, which Grillo explains is ambiguous – taking the form of either a protective rite or dreaded curse (or both simultaneously) – is the most serious kind of rebuke in Côte d’Ivoire, the book’s country of focus, and beyond. In examining FGP, Grillo offers ‘a reappraisal of African history and the contemporary Ivoirian crisis’ (p. 14).

The book is based on research spanning three decades. Grillo explains (pp. 21–2) that her marriage to an Ivoirian man provided her with a privileged position from which to explore African perspectives on the practices of witchcraft and FGP. In addition to participant-observation and archival research, Grillo collaborated with an Ivoirian sociologist to administer a survey assessing students’ knowledge of the meanings of some common gestures in African art and religion that signify women’s power.

The book consists of three parts. Part 1 situates FGP historically, analyzing its connection to indigenous constructions of religion, gender, and power. Grillo’s discussion of these interconnected themes both emphasizes FGP’s ‘local’ dimensions – its connection to place and reflection of African values – and highlights its capacity for change as it adjusts to novel present
circumstances. Part 2 examines FGP’s relationship to politics and ethnicity in Côte d’Ivoire. In documenting the persistence of the practice throughout distinct historical periods, Grillo invites her readers to reimagine African history, not from the conventional top-down perspective, but rather – and quite literally – from the bottom-up, considering women’s ‘bottom power’ (p. 116) as expressed through FGP. Part 3 is the most contemporary and heaviest of the three parts, as it examines the themes of sexual violence and memorialization, and considers recent acts of FGP as protest against the state. In examining women’s appeals through FGP, Grillo argues that the practice has long been and still remains the most powerful rebuke by women deployed ‘at the most critical moments of social crisis … to uproot evil’ (p. 53).

What does such a rebuke actually look like? Grillo presents numerous historical and contemporary examples throughout the book, all of which share a few common features. In Chapter 1, for example, she describes the ‘secret and nocturnal rite of protection’ (p. 24) of Ekbiki. This preliminary rite occurs early in the morning before the 24-hour ritual of Dipiri, or ‘The Yam Festival’ (p. 21), which is simultaneously a harvest celebration, an initiation ritual, and a collective funeral for the ancestors. Members of the Abidji and Adioukrou peoples, neighboring ethnic groups in Côte d’Ivoire’s southern forest region, practice the ritual. In performing Ekbiki, a group of female elders, called ‘the Mothers,’ (p. 2) cross the village, nude. They pound the ground with wooden pestles, cursing witches that threaten to harm the initiates by preventing their wounds from healing and causing them to hemorrhage. The Mothers bathe their own genitals in a mixture of water, urine, and other sacred ingredients, which they sprinkle across the road to ensnare witches. Finally, they throw their pestles in the bush and seal it off. Men are forbidden from seeing the Mothers perform Ekbiki; if they were to do so, they would die. Grillo explains that over the years, Western scholars have misinterpreted the gender dynamics of the ritual, describing men at the center of society and women on its margins. A more accurate interpretation, she contends, sees women’s power as central to the ritual and the force upon which men’s own power rests. This and countless other examples of FGP lead Grillo to conclude that society itself depends on ‘female blood and powerful female forces associated with the earth and earthly places …’ (p. 27).

A closer look at the ‘conduits of spiritual power’ (p. 2) who perform FGP elucidates this point. ‘The Mothers’ are postmenopausal women and represent the mother-child bond, which Grillo describes as the most fundamental social relationship in African societies. Their spiritual power emanates from their genitals and stems in part from gender ambiguity.
Beyond their reproductive years, the Mothers are betwixt and between, straddling the categories of maleness and femaleness, and as such are considered ‘the living embodiment of the ancestors’ (p. 55). Most importantly, however, the Mothers’ power rests on the foundational construct of ‘matrifocal morality,’ which includes the values and principles of respect, justice, and home. Civilization itself is thought to depend on this construct, which is articulated most strongly through FGP. As Grillo writes, the Mothers’ genitals ‘symbolically represent the essential values and social mandates upon which legitimate authority rests’ (p. 44). Like the power they wield, the Mothers are ambiguous: they fight witches and are themselves considered witches, whose curse combats the spiritual, social, and political evils that threaten society. They are, as Grillo puts it, simultaneously ‘revered and feared’ (p. 43).

An intellectually stimulating, albeit dense read, Grillo’s book makes numerous contributions to the study of gender, religion, and the body in Africa. Chapter 1 includes a comprehensive review of anthropological and historical works on witchcraft. Grillo critiques the association in the West of witchcraft and ‘the occult’ with the antithesis of ‘religion,’ as this has perpetuated stereotypical representations and unfortunate misunderstandings of religion on the continent. In Africa, Grillo contends, witchcraft is ultimately about power, which is complex and ambiguous and embodies both good and evil. Grillo writes: ‘Given that in African ontologies, power is conceived as an ambiguous force, two paradoxically opposing conceptions of witchcraft are equally prevalent in the popular social imaginary’ (p. 38).

Grillo enhances our understanding of power in non-Western societies more generally. She demonstrates through specific ethnographic examples the fact that scholars frequently missed the subtle fact that in Africa, political power – often associated with men – is usually tempered by spiritual power, which is the domain of women. Secular and spiritual power, she contends, are inextricably intertwined in Africa. Because women’s power was often less visible than men’s power, however, it was often misinterpreted, downplayed, or overlooked altogether by colonial officials, missionaries, and scholars, all of whom were predominantly Western, male, and oblivious to its cultural complexity.

Grillo’s reinterpretation of classical works by anthropologists and historians furthers our understanding of religion both in and beyond Africa. She pushes the boundary between religious studies and theology, challenging her readers to accept that FGP-associated practices, such as pounding wooden pestles into the ground or cross-dressing, are not simply symbolic of gendered powers, but are rather ‘real’ acts of spiritual warfare with
ontological consequences for bodies and the worlds they inhabit. In asserting that spiritual power is as important as political power, Grillo's work poses a challenge to Western secular thought.

Grillo's treatment of ethnicity in Chapter 4 is also noteworthy. Like many African countries, Côte d'Ivoire exhibits striking ethnic diversity, with ‘at least sixty distinct ethnic groups considered indigenous to its territory’ (p. 121). Multiple identifications, migration, and assimilation further complicate the ethnic landscape. While Grillo acknowledges that ethnicity is not a primordial construct, but rather one that is actively constructed and negotiated through time, she makes the important observation that local people often view ethnic groups as ‘real social entities with long histories and deep roots’ (p. 126), and that ethnicity – no matter how ‘imagined’ – has material consequences in people’s actual lives. Côte d’Ivoire’s civil war, for example, was fueled in large part by debates about ethnic belonging and claims to citizenship. Grillo pays special attention to how Ivoirians themselves think about and define an ethnic group in complicated ways, both as a ‘sociocultural entity’ and as a ‘political polity with whom people actively identify’ (p. 126).

One of the strengths of Grillo’s treatment of ethnicity is that it challenges the common binary of idealist-constructivist versus instrumentalist conceptualizations. She argues: ‘ethnicity is neither a romantic fiction nor a mere opportunistic liaison recently constructed for political ends, but a historical reality and a critical feature of the social landscape’ (p. 154). Another strength is that it sheds new light on the cultural coherence of West Africa’s forest zone, which scholars have attempted to explain. Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff, for example, proposed the ‘frontier hypothesis,’ which stated that small groups broke away from a larger central polity in search of autonomy in the periphery. But in Grillo’s mind, sociopolitical factors fall short of accounting for the region’s cultural continuity. She contends that matrifocal morality – which emphasized hospitality toward strangers and women’s responsibility for protecting social justice, and was embodied and perpetuated over time through the practice of FGP – is a more likely explanation.

Chapter 6 examines the role of FGP in addressing the evils of Côte d’Ivoire’s civil war, in which sexual violence was a ‘widespread weapon of war’ (p. 176) enacted on female bodies, including those of infants and elders. Grillo argues that despite the horrors they endured, women were not simply powerless victims; rather, they organized and led public protests against abuses of power and for basic human rights. Grillo discusses numerous examples in which women employed FGP to end political violence, covering their naked bodies with white clay, wielding branches,
and gesturing suggestively in the streets. In their coverage of the civil war, foreign journalists downplayed women’s activities or missed the deep religious significance of their performances of FGC, which Grillo describes as ‘history-making acts of civil society’ (p. 197). In an unexpected methodological shift, Grillo took her study online, where she analyzed social media posts about FGC. The ensuing debate presented in Chapter 7 – in which some Africans express embarrassment over this ‘backward’ practice while others in defense blame the ‘new’ religions of Islam and Christianity for the loss of ‘traditional’ African culture – is so rich and intellectually stimulating that it merits a separate project.

Throughout the book Grillo makes the important point that FGP remains undertheorized and has been downplayed or misinterpreted by historians and anthropologists alike. One compelling example occurred in 1971, when Kono women in Sierra Leone engaged in FGP to protest against increased competition between their own subsistence farming and men’s commercial farming. Scholars interpreted women’s ritual rebuke through FGP as a ‘ritual of rebellion’ (p. 100), a concept associated with anthropologist Max Gluckman: Kono women, who were losing power through the decline of their subsistence activities, ritually usurped male power and authority to help them endure (and accept) changing conditions. But Grillo argues that this interpretation is inaccurate: women did not need to appropriate men’s powers, as they had real power in their own right, a power that they engaged through ritual. In performing FGP, they demanded ‘the fundamental respect for the values they embodied, a respect that in turns guarantees women’s rights’ (p. 103).

Despite her attempt to address stereotypical, essentialized, or exoticized understandings of African religions and African women, Grillo’s book ends up reproducing some of these, in part due to the book’s tone and use of antiquated language rarely used by scholars of Africa today, such as ‘cult,’ ‘ancient tradition,’ and ‘magic.’ This does not detract, however, from the book’s many merits and would itself serve as an excellent discussion point for students and scholars alike. The book would be a welcome addition to courses in anthropology, women’s and gender studies, African studies, and religious studies at both graduate and advanced undergraduate levels.