

Part I. Home and the Unhomely

THE FOUNDATIONAL NATURE
OF FEMALE GENITAL POWER



The “unhomely” is a paradigmatic colonial
and post-colonial condition.

—HOMI K. BHABHA, *The Location of Culture*

Home is the most intimate of domains. It is founded on affective bonds and the moral commitments to the immediate family that naturally arise from those bonds. Home defines the familiar; it is the locus of safety, the domain of custom, and the ground of identity. Home is therefore more than an inhabited territory; it is the social habitus itself. Home is the net of the social imaginary that catches and organizes experiences and casts them as significant events. Yet at the heart of home is the uncanny, which in West African cultures is referred to with discreet and disquieting reference to genies, witches, and the ambiguous powers of women. The Mothers therefore simultaneously stand for the essential bonds and values of home while paradoxically wielding the most dangerous and unhomely invisible force.

Their power is not primarily structural in nature, but effected as a fundamental moral value seamlessly woven into various patterns of social organization, from monarchies to secret societies. The moral mandates that Mothers embody and aggressively sanction through FGP especially informed the most prominent form of governance in the West African region, collective self-rule.

A consistent undercurrent in the dynamics of social organization throughout the region, matrifocal morality can therefore be understood to be the very foundation of home, the essential yet inchoate element that lends cultural coherence to the region, and the construct that best defines the local episteme.

This is not to say that FGP is a timeless tradition, rooted in a primordial past and remaining an ever-stagnant or unchanging practice. Tradition is always innovative and accommodating to history; the Mothers' vigorous interventions in worldly affairs, from precolonial alliances to anti-colonial nationalist efforts to current political crises, including the recent Ivoirian civil war, amply testify to its timeliness. Those women who appeal to FGP have acted as self-conscious, strategic players in efforts to resist the systematic unhoming of African society from foundational values.