

Linda M. Heywood

Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 320. Hb, \$29.95.

Biographies of early modern queens abound. Women like Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great, and Isabella of Spain have been the subject of countless books. Yet, this biographical tradition, focusing on powerful women as politicians, diplomats, and cultural arbiters does not extend beyond Europe, despite the existence of female leaders and warriors across the globe between 1500 and 1800. Linda M. Heywood, Professor of African American Studies and History at Boston University, aims to expand and transcend this tradition by writing the first full-length biography of Njinga (1583–1663), the queen of the central African kingdom of Ndongo-Matamba. Njinga, like other early modern monarchs, played an important role in the process of state formation. Unlike European queens, however, Njinga was not a promoter of colonization, but rather resisted it, waging a forty-year guerilla war against Portuguese attempts to conquer Angola.

Heywood's biography of Njinga is a gripping account of a queen and the world she shaped. Although organized as a chronological narrative, the author does pay attention to "themes of power, leadership, gender, and spirituality" (3). It is also part of a burgeoning literature on West Central Africa and its connections to the Atlantic world between 1480 and 1850. Much of this scholarship focuses on the diasporic dimensions of this area and the millions of captives sent to the Americas. By focusing on Njinga, Heywood helps us better understand how and why the Portuguese trafficked so many Angolans into slavery. Njinga's life also demonstrates that Africans were not just hapless victims of European colonization, but actively resisted incursion, enslavement, and displacement.

The book opens with background on the formation of the kingdom of Ndongo, its relationships with its neighbors, and the Portuguese attempts to colonize Angola. Born into this context, Njinga grew up in a kingdom under constant assault by the Portuguese. Around the age of forty, Njinga emerged as Ndongo's chief diplomat, serving under her brother, the erstwhile king. During a huge summit held in Luanda, the Portuguese colonial capital, in 1622, Njinga proved herself an adept politician. She also received baptism as a token of her willingness to negotiate, beginning a fraught relationship with the Catholic Church.

When her brother died in 1626, Njinga took charge. For the next thirty years, rarely a year would go by without conflict. Eventually, the Portuguese drove Njinga away from her kingdom, where in exile, she became a member of the

Imbangala. A violent, warrior belief system that worshipped death, mayhem, and war, being Imbangala allowed Njinga to attract large numbers of followers and conquered entire kingdoms, such as Matamba. To thwart the Portuguese, Njinga also allied with the Dutch when they captured Luanda in the 1640s. By the middle of 1650s, however, the war had begun to take its toll, as much of the population had been displaced or sold away. Looking for a way to bring both peace and to protect her kingdom's sovereignty, Njinga embraced Catholicism, inviting Capuchin missionaries into her lands. She hoped that Rome would recognize Ndongo-Matamba as a Christian kingdom and thus prevent further Portuguese attacks.

To reconstruct this fascinating life, Heywood draws from a wide variety of sources. Most important is Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi de Montecucolo's *Missione evangelica nel Regno di Congo*. Cavazzi, an Italian Capuchin priest, lived with Njinga during the final years of her life, served as her confessor, and recorded her biography and the history of Angola. In addition to Cavazzi, Heywood uses Portuguese colonial documents from both Lisbon and Angola and records of the Dutch West India Company. These provide insight into how Europeans regarded Njinga, often believing she was a powerful, respected ruler and fierce warrior. Finally, the author examines the accounts of the Jesuit priests, such as those of Fathers Baltasar Barreira, Diogo da Costa, and Pero Rodrigues who travelled with the Portuguese. These documents provide keen insight into the cultural and political worlds of the Mbundu, Njinga's ethnic group.

As these Jesuit accounts suggest, readers of this journal will be particularly interested in this biography. Heywood reminds us that the "Jesuits [...] played a central role as the religious arm of the Portuguese conquest of Angola" (168). They were one of the main beneficiaries of this colonial endeavor, yielding not only souls, but also tracts of land and slaves. Heywood also offers a different perspective of the Jesuits. Given their extensive writings about the Americas, Asia, and Africa, they usually control the narrative. By reading these documents across the grain, however, Heywood shows the Jesuits in a less glorious light. Their relationship to the colonial state and the assistance they provided in defeating Ndongo was why Njinga demanded Capuchin missionaries when she decided to create a Christian kingdom.

Overall this is a compelling biography, but there are two issues. First, the author does not always interrogate the sources. The book is, in many ways, a catalog of atrocities including massacres, infanticide, and cannibalism. Many of these acts could be attributed to Njinga herself. While she was a member of the Imbangala for decades, it is still important to remember that accounts of these horrors come from European sources. It behooved priests, soldiers, and

colonial administrators to present Njinga as evil. To leave these biases unaddressed, as the author does in many places, could leave readers to believe that Njinga was as tyrannical as Europeans portrayed her. Second, following the introduction and first chapter that sets the context, the biography is hyper-focused on Njinga. While that makes sense in some ways, it excludes important background, such as the unification of Spain and Portugal (1580–1640), which affected the course of Njinga's reign. Likewise, readers never learn the fate of Ndongo-Matamba following Njinga's death.

These are minor criticisms, however. Njinga's life is fascinating and Heywood narrates it in a well-paced and enthralling manner. For that reason and given its moderate length, this book would be perfect for assigning to undergraduates or for non-specialist readers. Perhaps, most importantly, Heywood decisively demonstrates that Njinga belongs in the pantheon of powerful early-modern queens.

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