

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

AFRICA'S WARRIOR QUEEN

Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen.

By Linda M. Heywood.

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Queen Njinga of Matamba, Angola (1512–1663) is a mythical figure comparable in many ways to the South African leader Shaka Zulu, and her life has likewise attracted widely divergent interpretations.¹ For Europeans in the early modern world, Njinga represented a savage and over-sexualized female despot. For Portuguese colonists, she demonstrated the need for colonial rule. For Christian missionaries, she stood as proof of the capacity of faith to transform cannibal into Christian. With African independence, Njinga inspired yet further interpretations, as she came to be understood as a resister to Portuguese colonialism, as a proto-nationalist defender of African sovereignty and, most recently, as a pioneer of women's political agency and leadership.

Linda Heywood's aim in this book is to reveal the real Njinga. In history as in myth, however, Njinga is difficult to pin down. Her political career, which spans from her claim to the Ndongo throne in the 1620s to her death as sovereign of Matamba in 1663, was characterized by shifting alliances and various sources of power and legitimacy. Due to her gender and lineage position, she never had strong claims on the Ndongo state, which had historically been ruled by the *ngola* titleholders who dominated Mbundu farmers. Despite her outsider position, she engineered support from the Portuguese to rule Ndongo, in part through her baptism in 1622. When the Portuguese found a more pliable rival titleholder to advance in her stead, Njinga turned to the fierce warrior Imbangala peoples as allies, and adopted their customs and ideology. This association gave her the opportunity to rule Matamba, a tributary of Ndongo and a polity with precedents for female rulership. The short-lived Dutch occupation of the Angolan port of Luanda (1641–8) led Njinga to forge an alliance with that European power against the Portuguese and her Ndongo rivals. Following the Portuguese defeat of the Dutch, Njinga negotiated another treaty with the Portuguese mediated by Roman Catholic Capuchin missionaries. From then on, Christianity and the Capuchins shored up Njinga's power over Matamba. Through all of these alliances, Njinga consistently relied upon warfare to generate her principal source of wealth, captives, which she traded as slaves for court luxuries and armaments.

1 On the historical interpretations that Shaka Zulu has inspired, see C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

Given this string of coalitions and record of political opportunism, the historiographical debate over Njinga has revolved around questions about the sources of her legitimacy and political power. Writing in this journal in 1975, Joseph Miller argued that Njinga defied Mbundu political norms in terms of her lineage, gender, and statecraft.² Insecurity led her to seek a range of allies, which meant that she was far from a proto-nationalist because she regarded Europeans and Africans as both friends and enemies. Indeed, Miller points out that Njinga invited Europeans to play key roles in her kingdom. In 1991, also in this journal, John Thornton drew on an emerging Portuguese-language historiography to make the case that Njinga's local legitimacy rested upon a firm foundation; he argued that her insecurity was not predetermined by her lineage and gender status. For Thornton, Njinga synthesized African and foreign (or Christian) political customs to become a Christian monarch who defended Angolan sovereignty.³ To fully illustrate the interpretive possibilities of Njinga's life and reign, and what is at stake in them, Heywood's biography should be read alongside Thornton's and Miller's articles.

Consistent with their longstanding collaboration, Heywood's representation of Njinga's life aligns with Thornton's.⁴ In the book here under review, Njinga's notions of political and religious legitimacy, while syncretic, still remain African. Indeed, Heywood's version of Njinga's life will not disappoint those readers in search of proto-nationalist heroes. Njinga, for Heywood, defends her rule as a female African sovereign against male white colonists and their Ndongo-Mbundu patriarchal allies. The best evidence Heywood produces for this interpretation is the refusal of Njinga to pay tribute to the Portuguese; she recognized that such an act would erode her political sovereignty. And yet Heywood also points out dissonances between Njinga's leadership and Mbundu political and religious customs. For example, Njinga aggressively promoted Christianity in her later life, in part to combat the influence of Mbundu and Imbangala religious specialists, while she also supported women's involvement in previously male-dominated spheres. Heywood's account of Njinga's inversion of gender norms in particular – her male harem and her marriage in old age to a young handsome boy – offers an important perspective on the role of women in African society and politics.⁵

Heywood's biography is a magnificently researched demonstration of the possibilities for archival reconstruction in Africanist historiography. Despite some vague allusions to the possibility of still-existing oral traditions told in the Mbundu hinterlands, the oral sources that Heywood relies upon were collected in the seventeenth century. (Miller's commentary on the absence of the Njinga in Mbundu oral traditions along with the presence of the Matamba Njinga title is instructive in this regard.) The abundance of rich archival material is the result of proximity of documentarians who lived close to her court, or fought against

2 J. Miller, 'Nzinga of Matamba in a new perspective', *The Journal of African History*, 16:2 (1975), 201–16.

3 J. Thornton, 'Legitimacy and political power: Queen Njinga, 1624–1663', *The Journal of African History*, 32:1 (1991), 25–40.

4 See L. Heywood and J. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge, 2007).

5 For a regional contrast of the roles of elite women in west-central Africa, see J. Thornton, 'Elite women in the kingdom of the Kongo: historical perspectives on women's political power', *The Journal of African History*, 47:3 (2006), 437–60.

it. There are three principal and well-known sources: two Capuchin missionaries, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi and Antonio da Gaeta, who were Njinga's close allies and confessors late in her life, and the Portuguese soldier and chronicler António de Cadornega, who provides a collection of eyewitness testimony. Dutch and Portuguese commercial and colonial records and Italian missionary correspondence offer some further details. Njinga's own representations appear in a few diplomatic letters to the Portuguese colonists and the papacy. Heywood's sympathetic biography is thus extricated from the colonial archive. But the reader finds limited detail on these sources in Heywood's epilogue and acknowledgements. The rationale for the choice and use of certain sources is not apparent, even in the endnotes which, given the interpretive challenges of the sources, are quite slim.

Instead of rehearsing these evidentiary and historiographic discussions, Heywood's detail-driven biography of Njinga communicates the political intrigues of seventeenth-century Angola to modern readers. That emphasis means that the scholarly framework and background remains underdeveloped or at least understated. Scholars and advanced students should supplement this remarkable biography with additional sources to fully appreciate its empirical and historiographic value.

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ISLAM AND REFORM IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa.

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Roman Loimeier is a leading scholar of Islam in Africa. He has been active in the field for more than thirty years, and he is one of the rare researchers to have conducted field and library research in regions throughout the continent. He started his career studying Islam in northern Nigeria, a project leading to his book *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (1997). He subsequently initiated a second research project in Senegal leading to the publication (in German) of *Secular State and Islamic Society: The Relationship Between Sufi Orders and Movements of Islamic Reform in Twentieth Century Senegal* (2001).⁶ After that, Loimeier opened a third sphere of field research centered in East Africa, which resulted in *Between Social Skills and Marketable Skills: The Politics of Islamic Education in 20th Century Zanzibar* (2009). In 2013, Roman Loimeier

6 R. Loimeier, *Säkularer Staat und Islamische Gesellschaft – Die Beziehungen zwischen Staat, Sufi-Bruderschaften und Islamischer Reformbewegung in Senegal im 20. Jahrhundert* (Münster, 2001).