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LINDA M. HEYWOOD. *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 310. \$29.95.

The life and times of Queen Njinga (1582–1663), legendary leader of the Mbundu people of west-central Africa, were marked by the dramatic expansion of the European slave trade in this corner of the Atlantic. An estimated eight hundred thousand slaves were shipped from the Portuguese city of Luanda and neighboring ports in this period alone, mainly on Iberian vessels destined to Brazil and Spanish America. To sustain their slave-trading activities in the South Atlantic, the Portuguese extended their political influence in the hinterland of Luanda through warfare and alliances with African rulers. The expanding Portuguese domain, named Angola after a local political title, specifically encroached on the Mbundu kingdom of Ndongo, where many chiefs were either forced or enticed to swear allegiance to the king of Portugal, convert to Christianity, and pay tribute (usually slaves) to the governor in Luanda. Portuguese incursions had been crippling the Ndongo polity for almost half a century when, in 1624, a young female descendant of Ndongo's ruling lineage was elected queen and refused to submit to Portugal's imperial ambitions.

Linda M. Heywood's long awaited study of Queen Njinga is a combination of military history and biography. Using official Portuguese correspondence, the accounts of the Capuchin missionaries Antonio da Gaeta and Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi (Njinga's "biographers") and several other printed and archival sources, Heywood chronicles the history of Njinga from her rise to power in a crumbling Ndongo to her death as ~~the~~ leader of the adjacent kingdom of Matamba. Njinga emerged on the political scene as Ndongo's diplomatic envoy to Luanda in 1622, a memorable event at which she was baptized and affirmed her position as Ndongo's chief

negotiator with Portugal. But after her ascension to the Ndongo throne was thwarted by the Portuguese, she fought them and the man they installed as the official head of Ndongo, Ngola Hari, for about two decades, until in 1648 Portugal accepted her status as independent ruler of Matamba. During this time, she built alliances with neighboring Imbangala and Dembo rulers, the king of Kongo, as well as the Dutch West India Company, who were engaged in their own battles with Portugal over the control of Angola. Indeed, one of the book's many strengths is that, by narrating Njinga's military campaigns and diplomatic relations with different local and international players, it shows the complex political environment of west-central Africa in the seventeenth century. Heywood also effectively depicts an African region descending into a state of flux under the impact of the Atlantic slave trade. In Angola, alliances were as easily broken as they were made, warfare was constant, and the result was a steady stream of captives, of whom every year thousands were sent as slaves to the Americas. While Heywood occasionally tends to portray Njinga as an African heroine warding off a belligerent Portuguese empire (an image Angolan nationalists cultivated in the twentieth century), she also makes clear ~~does not hide the truth~~ that Njinga was a killer, captor, and slave dealer herself. Indeed, Njinga's control of inland slave markets gave her leverage in her negotiations with Portugal.

But Heywood's detailed narrative of Njinga's diplomatic and military engagements really comes to life in the sections describing the impact of gender and religion on Njinga's political career, and this reader would have enjoyed even lengthier treatments of these important themes. One of the reasons the Portuguese would not accept Njinga as legitimate ruler of Ndongo, Heywood argues, was that she was a woman. The Portuguese acted on an "early modern European model" of politics, which excluded women from power, whereas, because in Ndongo women often occupied important positions in government, for Njinga leadership came naturally

**Commented [RE1]:** Something seems to have gotten left out here. What is the subject of the second predicate, "engaged"?

(98). Meanwhile, after her conquest of Matamba in 1635, Njinga claimed a male identity for herself and forced her husband to dress like a woman. [Heywood suggests that](#) Imbangala culture, which Njinga had embraced by then, might have inspired her to “de-gender,” although another famous case from nearby Kongo, where [a young healer named](#) Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita (1684–1706) claimed to be Saint Anthony, suggests that gender transformations [occurred throughout](#) [happened more often in](#) west-central Africa.

Commented [RE2]: More often than what?

The final chapter, describing Njinga’s attempt to Christianize Matamba with the help of Capuchin missionaries after the peace of 1648, which allegedly implied her rejection of Mbundu and Imbangala belief systems, is fascinating. But here some discussion of Christianity’s place in the local religious landscape would have been helpful to readers trying to understand this transformation. If Njinga was deeply wedded to Mbundu political traditions, as Heywood argues throughout the book, and if, as most scholars would agree, politics and religion were inseparable in central Africa, then what did it mean for Njinga and her followers to become Christian? In the end, Njinga only managed to blend some Catholic rituals into Mbundu culture, which suggests that a form of syncretism was always the most likely outcome of Njinga’s conversion, contrary to the dogmatism of her Capuchin informers.

Readers might also have appreciated a more open discussion of the book’s source material, especially in the chapters reconstructing the early parts of Njinga’s life. Here the book relies heavily on the “firsthand” reports of the military chronicler António de Oliveira de Cadornega and the missionaries Gaeta and Cavazzi. But they only arrived in Angola at a later stage and began to collect information on Njinga’s past, including oral testimony from the queen herself, in the 1650s. The fact that Njinga’s life was already the stuff of legend before she died makes the gleaning of evidence from their accounts extremely challenging. Rather than

undermining the validity of Njinga's life story, however, showing how these authors were instrumental in cultivating myths about Njinga's accomplishments would have enhanced that story's authenticity.

Minor questions like these aside, Heywood convincingly reveals the story of a key political figure in the Atlantic World during the seventeenth century, an African woman who left a major mark on her country, and whom her European enemies and allies came to recognize as their equal. With this book, in short, Heywood has done African and Atlantic history a great service.

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