



*Njinga of Angola:
Africa's Warrior Queen*

Linda M. Heywood

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Review by: Toby Green



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 Queen Njinga of Angola was the longest-reigning monarch in West-Central Africa in the seventeenth century. Though this was an era of political struggle and ecological crisis, and a series of devastating wars may have engulfed Africa as well as large parts of the world (for example: the collapse of the Ming dynasty; the Fronde in France; the English Civil War), Njinga ruled from 1624 to 1663 as Queen of Ndongo and Matamba. A political and spiritual leader, her longevity as ruler was testament both to her remarkable political strategizing, and to her courage and strength as a human being.

In this groundbreaking book, historian Linda M. Heywood has written not merely an ordinary biography of a leading figure of a ruling family: this is the first detailed biography ever written of a seventeenth-century African woman. That this is the case emphasises what a remarkable achievement this book is, and how much work remains to be done in the field of pre-colonial African history.

For strangers to the field, some context may be required. Njinga took power in Ndongo (located in the centre-north of the modern-day Republic of Angola) at a moment of terrible crisis. The Portuguese settlement at Luanda had been founded almost 50 years before, in 1575. This proto-colonial outpost had precipitated entrenched periods of warfare, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade had grown exponentially. Local chiefs, known as *sobas*, were soon required to provide tributes of captives to the Portuguese governor of Angola. The population plummeted, as people fled and died in the wars. The demands for tribute were soon impossible to meet. All of this precipitated a crisis in Ndongo, and when the Ngola (king) of Ndongo died in spring 1624 through poisoning, a void was left that was filled by Njinga.

One element that may surprise some readers is the sheer volume of sources available to Heywood to research this book. There are, in fact, large numbers of extant documents available for the study of seventeenth-century West-Central Africa. Many of these were published in fifteen volumes by the Franciscan historian António Brásio, and others are scattered across archives in Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal. In many ways, therefore, Heywood's challenge was not to locate enough material but to marshal it in a compelling and meaningful way. This Heywood does superbly. Her narrative is focussed on Njinga's strength as a leader who was frequently able to defy the Portuguese colonial forces. She expertly considers exchanges of letters and

internal Portuguese correspondence in order to demonstrate Njinga's skills as a diplomat and negotiator, and the repeated problems that she was able to cause for the Portuguese governors at Luanda. She also emphasises Njinga's military leadership, and the religious framework that underpinned the way in which Njinga saw her cause.

The combination of female military and religious leadership is very important to understanding society in West-Central Africa at this time. Heywood argues convincingly that it was Njinga's early success in pushing back against the Portuguese forces at Luanda, and the innovative political strategies she employed (welcoming escaped slaves, for instance), which inclined the people of Ndongo to accept her as their queen. This was then cemented by Njinga's charismatic leadership of troops into military engagements, and also by her initial rejection of Christianity (in contrast to the Portuguese puppet, Ngola Hari, whom the Portuguese governor tried to install in Njinga's place).

The first half of the book deals with Njinga's meteoric rise to power, and her tireless quest to both mobilise Ndongo's resistance and escape her pursuers, sent to capture her by the governor at Luanda. Thereafter, however, Njinga's actions were ever more circumscribed by the wider political events then engulfing West-Central Africa. The Dutch invaded Luanda in 1641, and Njinga sought an alliance with them, spotting an opportunity to deal the Portuguese and their slave trade a fatal blow. The Dutch, however, betrayed her, and when the Portuguese retook Luanda in 1648 Njinga was left having to perform a very delicate balancing act with her former enemies.

Many of the last fifteen years of Njinga's life were spent trying to reconcile personal, political, and spiritual conflicts. One of the main priorities was the freeing of her sister, Barbara—long a hostage of the Portuguese at Luanda. Overall, Heywood depicts Njinga as a consummate political strategist and pragmatist. Recognising the ascendancy of the Portuguese, she converted to Catholicism, but did so with a mind to strengthening the hand of her people and of Ndongo as far as possible. Accepting the political and historical realities into which she had been born, and facing them with energy and defiance, allowed her to remain a consummate foe of the wider colonial process throughout her remarkable career.

As this review makes clear, most people will learn an enormous amount about both Njinga and the contexts in which she lived from this book. Linda Heywood has performed a great service to early modern historiography in bringing an African queen to the front and centre stage of the seventeenth

century, and in revealing what a complex and resourceful ruler she was in the face of some of the harshest of challenges of her age.

TOBY GREEN

King's College, London