Forging traditions

A ‘straight’ account of a ruler adept at manipulating her image

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NJINGA OF ANGOLA
Africa’s warrior queen

Professor Heywood presents both conversions as complex personally and politically, but ultimately concludes that both were designed to defend against Portuguese attacks on the autonomy of her joint kingdom of Matamba and Ndongo.

Njinga of Angola seamlessly knits together the complete set of sources on the Queen, which include missionary accounts, letters, colonial records, previous histories of Angola and Dutch West India Company records. Njinga has appealed to writers of all stripes since her death, including missionaries sent to Angola, the Marquis de Sade, G. W. F. Hegel and, more recently, Angola’s ruling party, the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola. Heywood has cleared away the noise of these mostly fantastical accounts and assembled as straight a biography as is possible. Indeed, Njinga of Angola, which took nine years of research, sets out to replace interpretation and sensationalism with facts.

Factuality is not clearly established in the main sources, however. The Angolan historian Beatriz Henrique wrote about relying on second-hand accounts and the “shifting semantic field of certain terms” between oral and written history for the interior kingdoms. To answer such historiographical challenges, Heywood emphasizes Njinga’s words through the many letters she wrote, as well as government and company records. Nevertheless, most of what we know about Njinga comes from two missionary accounts: Antonio da Gaeta’s La maravigliosa conversi- one alla santa fede di Cristo della Regina Singa (1669) and Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi’s Istoria descrittiva de’ tre regni Congo, Matamba et Angola (1687).

From Cavazzi, for example, we learn about an Imbangala war ritual in which an infant is killed and pulverized with a mortar, and the liquid spread over the body in preparation for battle. Heywood provides a footnote that reads, “Cavazzi, who provides the full story of the Imbangala practice, may have embellished the story for his seventeenth-century readers”. Several paragraphs later, when Heywood tells us that Njinga performed the same act in order to take on the persona of a warrior, she only provides the footnote to the Cavazzi source. Given the history of this particular story’s use in pro-imperialist propaganda, some comment on its veracity within the main text might have been useful, even at the risk of interrupting the narrative. On the other hand, the account is in a chapter that argues Njinga modelled herself on a female Imbangala figurehead, using actions meant to strike fear into the enemy: “It was immaterial to Njinga whether the reputation of the formidable ancestress Tembo a Ndumbo was based on actual historical facts or had been embellished to provide a foundational story for the Imbangalas”.

Angola celebrated the 350th anniversary of Njinga’s death in 2013, and there are calls for a more robust “usable past” by members of the Black Lives Matter and Fees Must Fall movements. One of the most intriguing aspects of Njinga is her cunning manipulation of gender norms and roles: marrying a man but making him dress in female clothing, supposedly keeping both male and female concubines, and choosing carefully what ceremonial clothing and jewellery to wear at each phase of her career. Heywood preserves all of the complexity of Njinga and her political movements in a book that provides the most complete and foundational history of Queen Njinga.