development, but never really quite ventured to fully incorporate it into their narratives. Now, in her new book on Portuguese and political scientists alike who are keen on understanding the drama that has wreaked havoc in central Africa in the wake of the Cold War and continues to afflict the entire area. The rise of the *gendarma katangais*, skillfully chronicled by Kanes and Lammer as the proverbial phoenix, may be key to understanding central Africa’s predicaments and conflicts.

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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 to 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 encompased 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. Heewood’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 prated and archival sources, Heewood chronicles the history of Njinga from her rise to power in a crumbling Ndongo to her death as 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. Heewood 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 Heewood occasionally tends to portray Njinga as an African heroine waging off a belligerent Portuguese empire (an image Angolan nationalists cultivated in the twentieth century), she also makes clear 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 Heewood’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 (98). Meanwhile, after her conquest of Matamba in 1635, Njinga made a male ally for herself and forced her husband to dress like a woman. Heywood suggests that Inbangala 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 Bombeiz Kipma Vita (1644–1706) claimed to be Saint Anthony, suggests that gender transformations occurred throughout west-central Africa.

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 Antônio de Oliveira de Cadorna and the missionary Gaeta and rivied in Angola at a later stage in her career. But what is most striking is the lack of evidence from their letters. Rather than underpinning life story, however, showing how instrumental in cultivating myth and shibboleths would have enhanced.

Minor questions like these only reveal the story of a key African woman who left a major mark on her European enemies and allies, in her equal. With this book, in spite African and Atlantic history a great step forward.


Skilfully combining the findings of anthropologists, ecologists, and historians, Katheryn M. De Luna constructs a new approach to the many different peoples who lived in what is now central and southern Zaire, analyzing the way Botswana speakers of the Lunda-speaking people—ancestors of today’s 20,000-strong population from ca. 1300 to the present—constructed a vocabulary of trade, and effected the lives of the people who were affected by contact and cultural influences. De Luna’s study of 17th and 18th centuries 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.

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Sub-Saharan Africa


Skillfully combining the findings of archaeologists, climatologists, and ecological historians, and historical linguists with her own linguistic and ethnographic research, Kathryn M. de Luna constructs a "deep history" of innovation, borrowing and inventive adaptation by Botaw-speaking people—ancestors of today’s Tonga, subjects of Elizabeth Colson’s celebrated ethnographic corpus—in what is now central and southern Zambia. Centering her analysis on the way Botaw speakers and their linguistic predecessors provisioned themselves and spoke about their work and one another, de Luna traces Botaw history from ca. 1000 B.C.E. to the recent past, using reconstructed proto- vocabularies to trace a changing lexicon of fame, respect, and authority as well as of flora, fauna, and material objects, and to reflect on the political practices and affective lives of the people who used them. Understanding the distinctive methodology that underpins her study, de Luna’s narrative covers a breathtaking chronological expanse—then ends where most historians of central southern Africa begin, with the first incursions of Portuguese and Swahili slave and ivory traders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Subsistence, de Luna explains, is not simply a story of what people eat and how they procure their food, but brings together technology, environmental knowledge, labor organization, and relations of authority, as well as travel, exchange, and distribution, allowing the careful student to develop a rich account of social and cultural life in the distant past from slim, often seemingly intractable, evidence. By focusing on the ways in which people engaged with their environment and with one another to secure their subsistence, de Luna teases out an analysis of Botaw speakers’ social relations and politics as well as their methods of food procurement. Rather than being a hinterland of the centralized states and a place for the caches of material wealth that have captured previous historians’ attention, she argues, the central frontier of the Kafue floodplain and adjacent territories was a site of innovative adaptations to changing environmental and social conditions. Shifting attention from what previous scholars have called the institutional deficits of the area’s twentieth-century inhabitants, de Luna urges historians to recognize and appreciate the achievements of earlier societies that were organized around “the contingencies of decentralized political structures” as well as “the durability of ancient idioms for success and influence” that allow us to study them (224-225).

Building on the methods and findings of historical linguists, de Luna not only presents a rich account of Botaw-speaking peoples’ lifeways over three millennia, but also uses the Botaw story to question and/or modify long-established paradigms of comparative social history. Rather than assume that ancient peoples organized their entire ways of life around one dominant mode of subsistence, de Luna uses the Botaw example to suggest that people have often deployed multiple subsistence strategies in varying combinations as they sought to cope with major shifts in climate, invented new tools, techniques, and vocabularies to meet their needs, and experimented with others gleaned from neighbors or migrants. For example, de Luna argues that, having established cereal agriculture as a regular part of their subsistence repertoire, Botaw speakers had time to experiment with new kinds of wild food, leading to an increase in the proportion of collected foods in their diet, and giving rise to a novel “politics of reputation based on knowledge about the bush” (62). Botaw history, she suggests, complicates the familiar paradigm of the Neolithic Revolution, in which agriculture replaced hunting and gathering, paving the way for centralized political systems built on the control of agricultural surplus, but also challenges the analytical distinction between “collection” and “production” that has informed so much thinking about economic and political life throughout human history.

Much of de Luna’s richly detailed and often ingenious study rests on intricate systems of lexical derivations, sound shifts, and informed hypotheses that historical linguists have developed to reconstruct ancient languages from systematic comparisons of contemporary ones. She combines those linguistic conclusions with climatic, ecological and archaeological evidence to write history in the absence of archives. Developed by several generations of scholars, the methods of historical linguistics are specialized and highly complex, and I am not qualified to evaluate de Luna’s use of them—beyond expressing profound admiration for her erudition and the evident care she has used in engaging with the work of previous scholars and crafting her own. For me, one of the highlights of reading this book is the way it challenges familiar generalizations about African “development,” and suggests new ways of thinking about relations between material, social, and intellectual processes in local contexts and on a broader scale—in Africa and elsewhere.

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