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# Nbandi, Ana Nzinga “Queen Ginga”

(1582–1663),

Nicolette M. Kostiw

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a seventeenth-century ruler of the kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba in the Imbangala region of West Central Africa (modern-day Angola), was born to one of the female slave dependents of the royal court. Born in 1582, she was later baptized as “Ana” but is alternately referred to as “Ginga,” “Njinga,” or “Nzinga” in documents from the period. Her life began during an era of violent political upheaval in Ndongo, as the Portuguese crown took control of the region and the Imbangala mounted a bloody expansion campaign toward the coast. In 1617, her brother murdered her father to become king. Ascending to the throne in 1624, her rule corresponded with increased efforts by the Portuguese Crown to convert the region to Christianity, and with the projection of the commercial interests of several European nations in slave trading.

When her brother died in 1624, Ginga became regent of the Mbundu people. Dissatisfied, she murdered her 8-year-old nephew and took power in the absence of other heirs. Upon ascending the throne, Queen Ginga overturned the pro-Dutch policies of her predecessor and opened up her kingdom to Portuguese slave traders and Christian missionaries—even getting baptized herself. An economic rivalry had developed between Dutch and Portuguese traders during this period, and African leaders like Queen Ginga exploited the power they held to favor one nation over another.

After many years of favoring the Dutch, Ginga’s pro-Portuguese policies were unpopular among the Mbundu, and she violently repressed the opposition. Political alliances with the Portuguese quickly fell apart, and by the end of 1624 the Iberians selected a puppet ruler to challenge her power. Forced to look outside Mbundu lands for political support, Queen Ginga courted the collaboration of roaming groups of Imbangala warriors, slaves who had run away from Portuguese traders, and others lacking distinct political allegiances. In a ritual “marriage” ceremony, Queen Ginga became the *tembanza* (a female leader with political and military authority) of the Imbangala. Although initially beneficial for gaining military control of expanded territories and sabotaging Portuguese trade routes, this alliance also eventually disintegrated. She attempted to flee the pursuit of the Portuguese army in 1629, but was forced to retreat to the Matamba region.

Located between the Kambo and Wamba Rivers, Matamba had an ancient history of female rulers, but it was lacking leadership by the 1630s. Queen Ginga became their sovereign and, from Matamba, built an army and used slave trading to increase the wealth and power of the region. Through military attacks, she forced the Portuguese to redirect slave routes through Matamba, while at the same time soliciting connections with Dutch traders on the coast near the port city of Luanda. When the Dutch

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took Luanda from the Portuguese in the 1640s, their partnership with Queen Ginga proved lucrative for Matamba in slave sales. The military alliance between Matamba and the Dutch managed to keep the Portuguese out of Luanda until 1648.

In the 1650s, Queen Ginga used her wealth to bolster her political influence in the eyes of both the Portuguese and the Matamba. To further secure her political networks, she married several well-positioned men from different regions in the 1630s and 1640s. It was also during this period that she decided “to become a man” by personally leading her troops into battle and calling her husbands “concubines.” She even required her husbands to dress in women’s clothing and be housed with her handmaids.

A formal peace agreement with Portuguese authorities was signed in Luanda in 1656, echoing similar concessions given by Queen Ginga in 1622. Portuguese slavers controlled trade route lands, and the Catholic Church was once again permitted to send missionaries. Queen Ginga even reconverted to Christianity as a strategic step for ensuring partnership with the Portuguese. In exchange, Matamba received Portuguese economic and military protection. Her astute political maneuverings were, as Joseph Miller (1975) has argued, how she “[overcame] the disadvantages of her lowly origins, her alienation from the kin groups of her state, doubts about her occupation of a title whose previous occupant she had murdered, and her sex” (p. 213).

The Portuguese alliance with Matamba crumbled after her death in 1663. Armed conflicts between the Portuguese and Mbundu people flared, in addition to internal fighting over her Portuguese-appointed successor in Matamba, Dona Barbara. Matamba kin groups selected their own leaders, who tried, unsuccessfully, to expel the Portuguese and overthrow Dona Barbara. Her death in 1666 sparked a civil war that evolved into a prolonged cycle of conflict over rightful rule between indigenous and European groups.

Although the Portuguese accepted Queen Ginga as a lawful Christian ruler, the Mbundu erased her presence from oral tradition. The divergent treatment of her memory by contemporaries has sparked debate among scholars about her place within Angolan history. In the 1970s, Joseph Miller was the first to utilize sources outside Ndongo, and he concluded that Queen Ginga was a political chameleon constantly compensating for her lack of legitimacy as a ruler. Adriano Parreira used Portuguese sources in the 1990s to argue against Miller’s claim about Queen Ginga’s illegitimacy, maintaining that her controversial nature did not necessarily imply a lack of political authority. Also in the 1990s, John Thornton delved deeper into African origins of customary law and constitutionality to deconstruct Queen Ginga’s fame and expose the complex question of legality unearthed by Miller and Parreira. More recent studies by Thornton and Cathy Skidmore-Hess emphasize the decisive role that religion and gender played in her forty years as queen, and also help explain the contentious legacy they left behind.

Whether a heroine or a devious opportunist, the mythology surrounding Queen Ginga transformed her into a popular culture icon both in Angola and abroad. The image of Queen Ginga, as an African warrior queen and indigenous advocate, became enmeshed in Latin American syncretic religious rituals in places like Brazil. As late as the nineteenth century, Carnival celebrations in Brazil included the satirical election of an African king and a “Queen Xinga.” Most conspicuously, in the Afro-Brazilian martial art of capoeira, the term *gingar* (to roll, move, or sway in self-defense) bears a striking resemblance to Queen Ginga’s name, perhaps hinting at her imprint on ideas about resistance within popular historical memory. In the twentieth century, her story was co-opted by Angolan nationalist

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movements in the 1960s and 1970s, who converted her into a proto-nationalist figure and courageous rebel in the face of European dominance. Across the Atlantic world, Queen Ginga is remembered as an unconventional ruler who negotiated attempts by European powers to expand economic and religious influence in precolonial Africa.

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