

Angola's Warrior Queen Nzinga

When Portuguese slave traders first encountered the Mbundu in modern-day Angola, they couldn't have anticipated resistance from Queen Nzinga, an outstanding stateswoman who belongs to a fascinating history of African women warriors. When its influence in the transatlantic slave trade was threatened by England and France, Portugal, in the 16th century decided to shift its slave-trading activities and ventured deeper into the Congo and South West Africa. It was here that they encountered the Mbundu people whose land they would later call Angola, a derivative of the title of their ruler (*Ngola*).

Part of Nzinga's influence derived from her close observation of her father when he governed the kingdom. Even more ironic is the fact that her brother, Ngola Mbandi, heir to the throne, should have performed the eventual defiant and military role that she played. Her position as leader would be secured after her brother committed suicide following his failure to attain a peace treaty with the Portuguese.

Born around 1582 or 1583, the brilliant and courageous Queen Nzinga was determined not to submit to Portuguese rule and resisted the colonialists until her death at age 80 (or 81) on December 17, 1663. Even after she converted to Christianity, mainly to establish links with the Portuguese governor and achieve a peace treaty, the governor remained uncooperative, forcing her to take more decisive and potent action. Now with a new Christian name, Dona Anna de Souza, the queen formed an alliance with the Jaga people, married the Jaga chief and collaborated with them in mobilizing an army. Her alliance with the Jaga came to an end after the chief attacked the Kingdom of Matamba, which Nzinga and the Mbundu had initially conquered and occupied.

The queen found new alliance with the Dutch who were increasingly making inroads into Portugal's share of the slave trade, thus putting both nations at loggerhead. However, the Portuguese would rout the Dutch and, for security reasons, Nzinga retreated to the hills of Matamba where she established a formidable resistance army against the Portuguese. Her skills as a military strategist would soon be apparent in the guerilla tactics she used to fight the more technologically advanced Portuguese army. In her 60s she still undertook the task of leading her warriors herself. Queen Nzinga refused to surrender to the Portuguese until her death in 1663.

In more modern times, Angola would still adopt Nzinga's guerrilla tactics in resisting Portuguese occupation. The lengthy struggle eventually led to Angola's attainment of Independence on November 11, 1975.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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