

Queen Njinga of Ndongo and Performances of Power
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Abstract: This paper concerns the different ways in which Queen Njinga, the 16th century ruler of present-day Angola, performed power. It argues that she was able to leverage various tools, including forces such as material wealth, tradition, religion, and masculinity, in order to both demonstrate and make manifest her power.

Introduction

Queen Njinga of Ndongo, whose “masculine valour Reigns also in a womanly breast,” performed power in a variety of ways (Cavazzi, circ. 1668/2008). When Njinga took power in Ndongo, a kingdom in what is now Angola, the Portuguese had considerable interest in what the kingdom could do for them in regards to the lucrative slave trade (Thornton, 1991; Heywood, 2017). As such, Njinga’s reign was strife with conflict, as the Portuguese continuously set up their own rulers in opposition to her rule (Heywood, 2017). Njinga likewise refused to ally herself with the Portuguese, only coming to an agreement with the foreign power toward the end of her life (Heywood, 2017). As someone whose reign was contested—in part due to her sex—Njinga’s various strategies for demonstrating her power were crucial. She used diverse ideas of gender, power, presentation, possession, tradition, heritage, masculinity, and Christianity in order to present herself according to different conceptions of power.

The *Missione Evangelica*, a source which details many aspects of Njinga’s life and from which many of the examples of Njinga’s performances of power in this paper are drawn, was written by Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, an Italian missionary. He arrived in Angola in 1654, and spent his first several years there in the court of one of Njinga’s rivals, Ngola Hari (Thornton, 1991). *Missione Evangelica* is a synthesis of both what Cavazzi learned of Njinga from others in his travels, including members of Ngola Hari’s court, as well as what he learned while in Njinga’s court. Consequently, the document is colored by the bias of both Njinga’s enemies and supporters, as well as of course his own. As a Christian missionary who would have understood Njinga and her culture from the perspective of an outsider, Cavazzi is certainly primed to view some of Njinga’s actions more favorably than others. His stated purpose in writing the *Missione Evangelica* was “to speak of [the Kings of Dongo’s] virtues, but also to speak of their vices,” something that he claims to uphold in his writings of Njinga as well (Cavazzi, circ. 1668/2008).

Part 1: Gender as Performance, Gender as Power

The different meanings of gender and their various consequences are crucial for the framing of this paper. In “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” Joan Scott defines gender as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and ... a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (1986). At the heart of ideas about gender, essentially, are ideas about individuals’ relationships within a society, how people are meant to act in these relationships, and how power dynamics are meant to function within them. Gender is inextricably tied to power, an idea that will be crucial here.

For the purposes of this paper, another critical idea concerning theories of gender comes from Judith Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theatre.” In this article, Butler argued that gender is a performative act, and thus can be considered something that one does (1988). A body’s gender is a performance that is viewed according to a culture’s norms, and the viewers can therefore see both ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to perform one’s gender (Butler, 1988). Additionally, this performance is equally

valid regardless of biological sex, though sex may affect the performance's reception (Butler, 1988).

In tying these two ideas together, this paper posits that if gender is a performance, and gender is power, then power too can be performed (E. Jacob, lecture, October 4, 2021). Throughout her reign, Njinga made constant attempts to perform her power using a variety of different strategies. Though the role of her gender was not always explicit in these performances, it was still a crucial factor in how they were perceived.

Part 2: Presentation as Power, Possessions as Power

One of the most famous stories surrounding Queen Njinga occurred before she was the queen of Ndongo. As a representative of her brother, then the king of Ndongo, Njinga was sent to negotiate with the Portuguese. There, Njinga clearly demonstrated that she knew how to perform power. Cavazzi wrote that “on the day of the public audience she appeared dressed in a remarkable way according to the custom of black people, accompanied by a good number of pages & waiting women” (circ. 1668/2008). Njinga displayed her power and high status through her dress and through her accompaniment by a large party of people. Heywood wrote that this procession of people, all richly dressed, would have traveled through the kingdom, making many witness to this demonstration of power. The public nature of this procession too, would have made the occasion not just a demonstration of Njinga's—and Ndongo's—power for the Portuguese, but also a way to display her power to her (or her brother's) own citizens of Ndongo (Heywood, 2017).

But Njinga's display of her power did not end there. Cavazzi continued to write that when Njinga arrived to where she was supposed to negotiate with the Portuguese:

For her to sit on a carpet had been prepared with a Cushion on the ground according to the custom of black people, but when she saw she was not given a magnificent & showy Chair she called one of her waiting women, & sat on her as if she had been a Chair, rising & sitting down as necessary, & explained her Embassy with much acuteness and intelligence of mind; she gave her political reasons which, although she was a black Ethiopian, were well founded, as if she had been a Semiramis, a Zenobia, or the Queen of the Amazons, and excused her brother's youthful acts, asking for peace & quiet in the Kingdom, etc (circ. 1668/2008).

There are two points of note here. The first is the actual incident surrounding the text—Njinga's refusal to sit on the floor, and her use of another person as a chair in order to do so. With this one action, Njinga asserted her power in many ways. First, she refused to be seated in a lower position than the Europeans, demanding to be treated as an equal. Second, the demonstration of sitting upon another person is a very powerful image that would have conveyed the control she had over her subjects to the members of the embassy. Indeed, the second point of note shows how the Europeans reacted to this display of power and pride. Cavazzi wrote admiringly of the way that Njinga presented herself, stating that “although she was a black Ethiopian, [her

arguments were], as if she had been a Semiramis, a Zenobia, or the Queen of the Amazons.” Njinga is undoubtedly looked down upon by the Europeans for being Black. Yet, she is able to transcend this through her presentation of herself. She performs her power by forcing the Portuguese to see her as an equal through both her use of the human chair and her elegant and well-reasoned arguments.

But Njinga’s demonstration of power did not end there. At the end of the meeting, Njinga left the Europeans with one final impression of her power. Cavazzi wrote:

[Njinga] left the chair on which she was sitting, which was her waiting woman, which made the bystanders laugh, & when she realised this she answered that it was not a mistake, but because her King’s Ambassador was not accustomed to sitting the second time where he had sat before, being rich in such Chairs, & she left that one, there being no lack of someone else to take her place, and this gave everyone cause to realise Ginga’s pride & ambition (circ. 1668/2008).

Choosing to leave behind her ‘chair’ further emphasized the power that Njinga held over both that particular woman and her (or her brother’s) subjects in general. She claimed to be “rich in such Chairs,” a fact which meant that there was no lack of someone else to take her place. In this very public display of her power, she of course showed her control of that particular woman, but was also sure to emphasize the fact that this particular instance of control was not unusual, and that she would be able to call upon a vast number of people to do the same. This demonstration worked: Cavazzi wrote that it “gave everyone cause to realise Ginga’s pride & ambition,” and in this way she established herself as a formidable power. Njinga used this moment with the Embassy to demonstrate her power both through her presentation—her rich dress, her intelligence, her quick arguments—and through the possessions allotted to her through her powerful status, including the people that she was able to control.

Part 3: Tradition as Power, Heritage as Power

One of the other important appeals Njinga made to her power was through the power traditionally afforded to someone in her position. As Thornton argued, one of the foundations of Ndongo’s constitution was based on precedent (1991), and Njinga does not fail to appeal to tradition to earn the respect of her people. One tradition that Njinga referred to was her religious authority and the local religious practices. As Heywood pointed out, Njinga “expanded the role of indigenous beliefs and customs beyond what they had occupied during her grandfather’s and father’s reigns” (2017). One example of this can be found in the *Missione Evangelica*. Cavazzi wrote that Njinga “did not fail to perform various heathen Ceremonies in order to have a successful journey back to the King’s court, & removing the christian weapons with which she went armed and which she kept in their repositories, she armed herself with the satanic Relics customarily used by these Ethiopians and sold by their priests” (circ. 1668/2008). Though the description is heavily laced with Cavazzi’s scornful language due to his lack of respect for non-Christian religions, it is clear that on the journey that is described, Njinga performed ceremonies and carried relics meant to safeguard their journey. While this may have diminished her

credibility in the eyes of Cavazzi and the other Europeans, her refusal to ignore her own religious traditions likely had the opposite effect in the eyes of her people. In the event that disaster struck along their journey, for example, failure to perform the accepted religious practices would likely have been met with scorn.

This was not the only way that Njinga appealed to tradition. Generally, she followed the customs of leaders. One such example involves a military instrument which Cavazzi called the *longa*. On the importance of the instrument, Cavazzi wrote that: “without this warlike sound the laws, rites & customs cannot be truly practised, & one cannot call oneself a true Giaga, & be a legitimate Lord” (circ. 1668/2008). But Cavazzi tells us that this was an instrument that was given to Njinga that she did not fail to make use of.

Another tradition that Njinga appealed to was her heritage. Though Thornton and Miller may disagree on whether or not Njinga’s right to rule through her heritage was legitimate, they both agree that this was something that she used to argue for her right to rule (1991; 1975). Cavazzi too opens his *Missione Evangelica* with “the descent of the Ancestors of Queen Ginga,” clearly having viewed her heritage as important (circ. 1668/2008). These appeals to recognize her power were rewarded. The two quotes above are followed shortly by a segment in which Cavazzi wrote that her people “looked at her as their natural Lady & honoured & revered her as a demi-goddess,” and that it was for this reason that the Portuguese feared Njinga so greatly and so vehemently tried to destroy her.

Part 4: Masculinity as Power

Here, both Butler’s and Scott’s ideas surrounding gender, performance, and power take center stage. Gender is a performance, and different individuals are able to perform either a masculine or feminine gender, though this performance may be perceived differently depending on the sex of the performer (Butler, 1988). Gender, too, is about power, with the masculine in the empowered position (Scott, 1986). For Njinga, sex was impediment to her goals. As both Thornton and Miller pointed out, Njinga’s female status would have delegitimized her claim to the throne, as there was no true precedent for a ‘good’ female leader in Ndongo (1991; 1975). In fact, Njinga did not begin her reign as a ruler in her own right, instead beginning as a regent for her brother’s son, who she eventually had killed in order to officially take power (Thornton, 1991). Njinga’s femaleness was something that she had to carefully navigate in the duration of her rule.

Thornton explained one strategy that Njinga took in order to mitigate the crime of her femaleness. He wrote: “At some point in the 1640s Njinga decided to ‘become a man’...Njinga's husbands became her ‘concubines’, and she took several at the same time. She required these husbands to dress in women's clothes and to sleep among her maids in waiting” (Thornton, 1991). Since upper-class women in the Kongo engaged in a similar form of polygyny, there was some precedent for Njinga’s actions. Thornton further argued that Njinga’s performance of masculinity was “reinforced” by “engaging in virile pursuits,” pointing to her prowess in battle

and to her willingness to lead her troops herself. As Heywood explained, Njinga quite literally “decided that her inner circle and followers should regard her as a man, not a woman” (2017).

Njinga leveraged her ability to perform as a man in order to tap into the power that being perceived as masculine lent her. By engaging in masculine pursuits, such as the possession of multiple concubines or fighting on the battlefield, Njinga was able to show herself to be a masculine person, as would have been considered appropriate to her status as a leader. For this reason, Cavazzi admiringly described Njinga as someone whose “masculine valour Reigns also in a womanly breast” (circ. 1668/2008).

Part 5: Christianity as Power

Though Njinga had technically converted to Christianity much earlier in her life, she had not begun to fully live in the manner of a Christian until much later in her life, after she had ceased to live as an Imbangala (Heywood, 2017). In this period of her life, Njinga again redefined her image, and was portrayed by Cavazzi in a completely different manner. Her new image, a result of the legitimacy her new religious convictions lent her, allowed her to strengthen ties to the Portuguese (Heywood, 2017). Whether or not Njinga’s newfound religious convictions were genuine are difficult to determine. Heywood certainly seems to argue that they were, but *Njinga of Angola* does not provide any meaningful evidence to distinguish between the genuine nature of Njinga’s conversion to the Imbangala lifestyle versus her conversion to Christianity. However, for the sake of this argument, whether or not Njinga was genuinely Christian is moot. Regardless of her intentions, Njinga still used her position as a Christian to leverage her power and to position herself better with the Portuguese. One example of her more calculating use of Christianity can be found with Njinga only committing to monogamy at the behest of the European missionaries, a decision that Heywood claimed was made based on the status this decision would afford her. While this is certainly not proof that Njinga’s religious beliefs were disingenuous, it does demonstrate that she understood that her religious beliefs could also be used for power.

The Njinga in Cavazzi’s texts who has officially decided to ‘genuinely’ become Christian is a wholly new Njinga. On her, Cavazzi wrote, “The Queen did not neglect to visit the invalids every day like a compassionate mother” (circ. 1668/2008). The language Cavazzi uses is notable here for several reasons. First, Cavazzi’s choice to describe Njinga as “mother” is a stark contrast from his earlier description of someone whose “masculine valour Reigns also in a womanly breast.” While earlier Cavazzi had acknowledged Njinga as a woman who was able to wield masculine traits, Cavazzi instead portrays her here in a traditionally feminine role, that of the mother. Second, Cavazzi specifically described the motherhood that Njinga performs as “compassionate,” further emphasizing the gentle and kindhearted nature of the role. This strikes a stark contrast with Cavazzi’s earlier description of Njinga as someone who had “lost her right to the honourable? Epithet ‘merciful & compassionate’ appropriate to women.” Third, Cavazzi told us that Njinga earned this status of mother through the fact that she “did not neglect to visit the invalids every day.” It is the nurturing act of demonstrating care that earns her this title.

Essentially, through Cavazzi's eyes, Njinga was able to use her new Christian persona to perform her gender in a way she had not before. Instead of earning respect through her 'unusually' masculine traits, she adhered to the European's understanding of what it means to be a woman.

Njinga's ability to be a Christian in her presentation of herself and of her gender earned her the respect of the Europeans. In his introduction, Cavazzi made a great distinction between the uncommitted Christian Njinga of the past and the fully converted Njinga of the 'present', stating that "I briefly describe to you...[Njinga's] life, her customs, the barbarities and cruelties she committed in the past, so that when her vice is noted, the virtue should also be manifest which she shows at the present time, in contrast to the past" (circ. 1668/2008). Cavazzi went on to laud Njinga's character, despite clearly holding her previous morals in low regard. Njinga's new positioning of herself did not go unrewarded as it allowed her to be respected by the Europeans as something other than a fearsome enemy. This respect in turn earned her another form of power.

Njinga's new position as a Christian allowed her to be acknowledged by the Pope. On the occasion that Njinga received a letter from the Pope, she again presented herself as a Christian. Cavazzi wrote of the ceremony in which she received this letter, detailing how grand the ceremony was and how many people came to see her being presented with the letter: "her Vassals, and innumerable people who had come to the feast" (circ. 1668/2008). In this way, Njinga's presentation in this ceremony was very purposefully public. Cavazzi also detailed how Njinga chose to present herself at this event: "she wore round her neck a beautiful gold brocade purse on a chain, in which was the Pope's letter and a little statue of our Lady the Most Holy Virgin of the Most Holy Connection in an oval of gold encircled with the finest pearls; and when she rose and set it down, she raised it first to her head, and kissed it with great effect and devotion." In this way, Njinga demonstrated her power in two main ways. First, she proudly displayed her wealth—Cavazzi wrote of "a beautiful gold brocade purse" and "an oval of gold encircled with the finest pearls"—emphasizing her high status. And second, she used these fine items to put her status as a Christian on display. It is this richly decorated purse that held the Pope's letter and the statue of Mary made from the finest material. Toward the end of her life, Njinga reformed her presentation of herself, but continued to use her presentation of herself to perform her power.

Conclusion

Njinga was multitalented in her performances of power, able to leverage presentation, possession, tradition, heritage, masculinity, and Christianity to suit her purposes. Her performances themselves gave her power; through acting powerful, she became powerful. Yet if Njinga's power was a performance, both real and a matter of presentation, who was the audience? It was not a universal one. Njinga's reign occurred during a clash of cultures, and not all of her shows could have unanimous appeal. The respect that she showed to her own religion, for example, helped to earn her the loyalty of her people, but was likewise revolting to the Europeans. On the other hand, her public performances of Christianity toward the end of her life

were clearly for a European audience. Njinga was able to wield a variety of performances and maintain a deep awareness of her different audiences, performing her power in the manner best suited to appeal to those watching her.

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