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Mapping Sovereignty Njinga, Missionary Writing and the Ambivalences of African Legibility

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Abstract

The article examines Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecucolo's *Istorica descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola* (1687) as a key text in the seventeenth-century Catholic effort to render West Central Africa legible within a Christian epistemological framework. Produced under the auspices of Propaganda Fide, Cavazzi's chronicle translates African political sovereignty – most notably that of Queen Njinga of Matamba – into a moralized narrative of sin, conversion, and redemption. Drawing on Cavazzi's firsthand experience as Njinga's confessor, as well as the visual regime established by Paolo da Lorena's engravings, the article shows how admiration and censure coexist within missionary representation. Rather than dismissing such accounts as purely didactic or exploitative, the present essay situates them within a broader historiographical dialogue that includes the more empathetic portrayals of Antonio da Gaeta and Francesco Maria Gioia, as well as modern historical reconstructions by John Thornton and Linda Heywood. Mobilizing theoretical frameworks from Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Martin Jay, and Robyn Wiegman, the article analyzes how space, vision, and racialized visibility structure missionary knowledge. It argues that Capuchin texts functioned simultaneously as ethnographic records and performative scripts that sought to regulate bodies and territories, yet inadvertently opened sites of negotiation and resistance.

Keywords: Capuchin Missionary Discourse, Scopic Regimes, Spatial Representation and Sovereignty, Transcultural Negotiation, West Central Africa

1. Introduction

Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecucolo (1621-1678), a Capuchin chronicler, played a crucial role in documenting the cultural and political dynamics of seventeenth-century West Central Africa. His *Istorica descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola* (1687), produced under the auspices of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide), participates in a broader enterprise that sought to translate local

realities into a sacralized framework and contributes to a wider narrative of global Catholicism. In this sense, his work transforms the complex sovereignty of Black rulers into a tale of sin and redemption.¹ The book is divided into three sections – on customs, religion, and history of the three kingdoms – and includes his first-hand account of Queen Njinga of Matamba, whom he served as confessor in the 1660s. Enriched by Paolo da Lorena's engravings, the text blends observation with allegory, presenting Njinga's reign as both exotic and instructive. The resulting image oscillates between admiration and disapproval, offering valuable insight into how non-Western polities were framed through the language of conversion (Thornton n.d.; Bassani 1987; Fromont 2022).

Yet, as recent scholarship suggests, such representations cannot be dismissed as mere exercises in exploiting the alleged moral nature of the heathens for the edification of believers at home. Earlier writings, such as Antonio da Gaeta and Francesco Maria Gioia's *La meravigliosa conversione alla santa fede di Cristo della regina Singa* (1669), reveal alternative portrayals that praise Njinga's prudence, intelligence, and spiritual agency. Reading these texts alongside Cavazzi reveals the internal fractures of their evangelizing rhetoric – its simultaneous wonder and anxiety in the face of the African other, whose own ways of understanding the world required a transcultural negotiation to align with European missionary logic (Filesi 1967; Mastrogregori 2023). Meanwhile, John Thornton's *A History of West Central Africa to 1850* (2020) reframes this character as an architect of modernity, whose reign redefined statecraft through acts of cultural translation and performative diplomacy. This historiographical dialogue – from da Gaeta's hagiographic empathy to Cavazzi's moralization and Thornton's historicization – finds its most comprehensive articulation in L.M. Heywood's *Njinga of Angola* (2017), which maps the shifting epistemes that have shaped the queen's legacy across centuries.

Building on this layered genealogy, the present article reinterprets these works as maps that operate at the intersection of belief, geography, and power. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's concept of spatial practice (1984), Henri Lefebvre's production of space (1991), Martin Jay's analysis of visual regimes (2011), and Robyn Wiegman's study of racial visibility (1995), the article examines how Africa is constructed as a legible geography for Christian spectatorship. Through these works by travelers commissioned to spread the word of God, we see the emergence of ethnographic records as well as performative scripts that reorder distant realms according to their understanding. Ultimately, the present study contends that, although the missionaries' intentions were guided by apostolic zeal, their depictions of Njinga frequently assumed a voyeuristic quality, regulating both bodies and spaces through the lens of European norms. By situating Cavazzi within the continuum of da Gaeta's prayer and Thornton's reconstruction, the present article reclaims the portraits of this ruler as sites of resistance and translation, where queenship rearticulates itself through the very discourses that sought to contain it.

Though often mediated by accounts such as Cavazzi's and da Gaeta's, Njinga must be understood within the geopolitical realities of her time. Her actions and representations were shaped by a polycentric field of trade, diplomacy, and warfare linking Ndongo, Matamba, and Kongo to Portuguese and Dutch imperial projects, papal authority, and the shifting Iberian order of the seventeenth-century Atlantic – an arena in which African rulers themselves actively solicited, redirected, and contested Western power. Unlike colonial subjects, Njinga retained sovereignty and actively negotiated her position within these overlapping spheres of influence.

¹ The present article compares the original 1687 Italian edition with the following edition, from which the quotations are taken: Cavazzi 1965. All passages from the Lisboa 1965 edition are quoted in the English translation by the author of the present article.

Within this framework, she emerges both as a figure of conversion in the eyes of missionaries and as a sovereign actor whose legacy traverses the boundaries between faith, local autonomy, European interest, and transatlantic entanglements.

This article, therefore, unfolds along two intersecting trajectories. The first examines the textual economies through which Capuchin reports translated their experience into the grammar of Christian doctrine, producing representations that shaped the understanding of their readers back home without necessarily exercising direct political power. The second traces the material and geopolitical dimensions in which these writings circulated, situating them within networks of commerce, diplomacy, and occasional coercion. Read together, these perspectives reveal how missionary observation and textualization intersected with broader socioeconomic structures: religious imaginaries, articulated by the pens of traveling preachers, opened a vantage point through which Western audiences interpreted societies abroad, while African agency, negotiation, and sovereignty remained central to shaping the contours of this transcultural engagement. The said accounts fashioned Njinga through overlapping registers aimed at Christian audiences. Yet, for contemporary analysis, her figure repeatedly exceeded those interpretations, revealing both the reach and the limits of this mediation.

2. From Text to Effigy: Njinga at the Crossroads of Semiotics, Visual Discourses, and Political Imagination

The Atlantic world was forged through the expansion of a mercantilist-capitalist economy whose circulation of free and unfree labor structured an immense transoceanic system of interdependence. However violent and coercive these dynamics were, they generated extraterritorial spaces where local and global realities converged without neatly reproducing colonial models. Indeed, the political terrain of West Central Africa – particularly the polities of Ndongo and Matamba under Queen Njinga – does not fit the standard template of subjugation. These were arenas of negotiation marked by partial entanglement rather than unilateral domination. Within this heterogeneous context, missionary, imperial, and commercial actors operated alongside native sovereigns whose agency disrupted any straightforward reading of Western hegemony. This section situates these symbolic and material frictions within that more complex setting, revealing the tensions between Christian notions of civility and the demonizing rhetoric of ‘paganism’, the cleric, sailor, and soldier historian’s compulsion to classify and represent alterity, and the enduring influence of visualities shaped by both European knowledge regimes and vernacular political self-fashioning (Curtin 1969; Gilroy 1993; Shaw 2002; Matory 2005; Sweet 2011).

The narrative opens with an encounter in a place that chroniclers once framed as exotic: the Fortress of São Miguel de Luanda. As one of the principal slave-exporting ports of the South Atlantic, it became a nodal point not of simple imposition but of a layered strategic terrain involving white settlers, African states, mercenary groups, missionaries, interlopers, and shifting factions within Ndongo and Kongo. Constructed in 1624 amid mounting external threats – particularly Dutch incursions pursued in alliance with Kongo – the fortress functioned less as an initial instrument of Portuguese expansion than as a belated defensive anchor in an already contested space. From this fortified site flowed commercial, diplomatic, and military exchanges with surrounding kingdoms, including those ruled by the figure under study; these interactions, ranging from diplomatic embassies to slave-raiding alliances, formed the broader circuit within which several travelers produced their textual representations of Njinga’s world.

With Angolan independence centuries later, the fortress was transformed by the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) into an Armed Forces Museum, a palimpsest of militarized memory where the violence of slavery meets the triumphal narrative of nation-

alist struggle. Within this reframed space, the presence of Njinga takes on heightened semiotic force. Her statue – striding across the parade ground, richly adorned, ax raised – is not merely a nationalist monument but a condensed icon of political resilience whose meanings remain contested, oscillating between African, European, missionary, and postcolonial interpretive regimes. The statue’s heroic posture, projecting martial determination and sovereign pride, resonates with the complex archive through which travelers first encountered the real person it depicts. Ever since da Gaeta’s *La meravigliosa conversione*, Western thinkers – from the Duchess D’Abrantes to Castilhon, Sade, and Hegel – have appropriated her as evidence for competing theories of gender, race, or Black historicity. In a parallel movement, Njinga survived in oral traditions carried to Brazil, becoming a touchstone for Afro-Brazilian memory and resistance (Heintze 1984 and 1987; Heywood 2009; Fonseca 2012, 2014; Franco 2019). This heterogeneous circulation – pictorial, written, oral, and spatial – mirrors the multiple modes through which Njinga’s story has been mediated, from early modern textual accounts to postcolonial memorial practices, including the statue commissioned from a North Korean artist and once installed in Kinaxixi, at the heart of Luanda, where people regularly married in her shadow, as well as the MPLA’s repurposing of the fort’s preexisting museum infrastructure.

Crucially, as outlined earlier, Cavazzi cannot be understood simply as a functionary; the Capuchins were invited by the independent Kingdom of Kongo and operated through ecclesiastical rather than imperial chains of authority. Yet his narrative deploys a common semiotic repertoire: tropes of idolatry, duplicity, theatrical kingship, and spiritual volatility that framed African politics through a nascent supremacist optic. His representations gain interpretive depth when set against da Gaeta and Gioia’s account, which depicts her with admiration, attributing to her strategic clarity and political intelligence that Cavazzi often obscures or moralizes.

The contrast between the two Capuchins – Cavazzi’s ambivalent condemnations versus da Gaeta’s sympathetic appraisal – reveals the internal plurality of missionary textuality. Overlaying these voices is the more militarized perspective of António de Oliveira de Cadornega, whose *História Geral das Guerras Angolanas* (1680) captures the Portuguese view from the battlefield, emphasizing her military acumen, shifting alliances, and relentless defiance. This heterogeneity is further complicated by the fact that, although Cavazzi was directly embedded at the queen’s court, his observations were filtered through the Catholic Reformation’s polemical campaign against ‘superstition’ – a denunciatory idiom applied as forcefully to European practices under inquisitorial scrutiny as to those of Njinga or Kongo – while other accounts relied more heavily on derivative or secondhand testimony.

Even so, despite the richness and complexity of the record, the sources are in agreement that Njinga’s world was governed by strategic action, where territorial elites, priests, soldiers, and merchants navigated overlapping sovereignties. John Thornton’s *A History of West Central Africa to 1850* (2020) is indispensable here, for it demonstrates that the continent’s political life was neither static nor peripheral but defined by highly adaptive forms of statecraft. He shows how rulers in Ndongo – Matamba and the wider region operated within dense diplomatic landscapes full of shifting partnerships. Thornton also foregrounds their religious pluralism – Catholicism, Kongo Christianity, and various Central African cosmologies – as a dynamic field in which legitimacy was negotiated rather than imposed. Warfare, far from being a simple reaction to foreign incursions, was embedded in long-standing dynamics of power accumulation and geographical reorganization. Njinga’s reign unfolded at the epicenter of these transformations, and much of what chroniclers struggled to interpret was precisely this sophisticated interplay of pragmatism, ritual displays of authority, and multi-sited spiritual practice.

In the seventeenth century, Angola and its hinterlands had become the largest supplier of enslaved labor for Brazil and Spanish America. Like other leaders, Njinga engaged in the trade, leveraging pacts and ecclesiastical intermediaries to secure her position while simultaneously resisting Portuguese encroachment. Her 1622 diplomatic mission to Luanda – where she was baptized Ana de Souza – was emblematic of this ambivalence. Conversion did not indicate submission but rather a calculated maneuver within a terrain shaped by civil wars, Dutch invasions, and attempts to fragment Ndongo internally (Skidmore Hess 1995; Caldeira 2015; Herrendorf 2024). These dynamics expose the tragic ambiguities of her legacy: a sovereign fighting for autonomy while enmeshed in the human trafficking networks of the Atlantic economy. Her later embrace of missionary evangelization and ‘idol-cleansing’ campaigns must likewise be read not as capitulation but as sagacity, an effort to mobilize Christian symbolism to consolidate rule. Such acts, simultaneously political and spiritual, perplexed observers from overseas. Cavazzi interpreted them through the viewpoints of unprincipled behavior; da Gaeta framed them as evidence of intelligence; De Oliveira de Cadornega treated them as tactical adaptations. Their discordant readings reveal more about their own beliefs, semiotic systems, and logics of visibility than about the queen herself.

Ultimately, Njinga’s image oscillates between triumph and compromise, independence and violence, rebellion and appropriation. Her contemporary monument at São Miguel crystallizes these tensions: an icon of anticolonial nationalism forged through stories shaped partly by missionary suspicion, partly by romantic exoticism, and partly by Afro-diasporic reclamation. What survives of her in the archive is thus neither a transparent portrait nor a fabrication but a palimpsest of competing translations. Understanding her place within the Atlantic world requires attending to the interplay between writing, symbolism, and agency – all operating within a ground of contested meanings that resists easy categorization.

3. *Making Africa Intelligible: Missionary Writing and Local Sovereignty*

To contemplate Njinga’s trail across secular and clerical registers is to confront the epistemological entanglement of religion, representation, and power in the early interoceanic worlds – an entanglement whose outcomes shift markedly from one locale to another. And yet, for all their variation, a common logic runs through these transcultural circuits: at the moment of being consumed as bibliography in metropolitan areas, the devotional and the geopolitical functioned as intersecting cartographies for the reader. J.H. Elliott (2006) observes that, in the Iberian confessional and cultural expansion, spreading the true faith to reform new territories was a profoundly symbolic endeavor. Through ecclesiastical, linguistic, and visual proceedings, they sought to make space ‘intelligible’ – primarily for the understanding of their own civilizing agents, rather than for the newly encountered populations. The proliferation of such accounts during this period documents this operation.

Considered collectively, Cadornega’s military history and the missionary chronicles of Cavazzi and da Gaeta and Gioia reveal notable parallels in their construction of intelligibility. Still, unlike proselytizers in the colonies, their work unfolded within independent polities. Their descriptive impulse – cataloguing the topography, rituals, and rulers – was a form of scholarly analysis rather than direct control by archive-building. In other words, the perceptions of these writers had to confront the facts of African sovereignty. In this sense, they operated within a field of reciprocal recognition and negotiation. At the same time, these missionary relations circulated within the expanding system that linked West Central Africa, Europe, and the Americas through trade, warfare, and the traffic in human lives. The same pages that recorded spiritual

difference also documented complex political engagement with the West, translating the Black performative enactment of rule and diplomacy into narrative tropes, rather than reproducing the conditions of actual submission.

By following Njinga's presence through these archives and the interoceanic networks of textual production – where travelers recorded distant realities for a public far across the seas – this study contends that these books acted as transcoding devices: they rendered autonomous sovereignties readable through the idiom of civilization and salvation while indirectly reflecting global hierarchies of power. What emerges is not a simple binary between faith and empire, but a continuum. In this overlapping field, zeal, representation, and emergent European rationalities intersected with African agency in the production of notions of space, authority, and subjectivity.

The Capuchin project in Kongo, Ndongo, and Matamba operated through invitation, mediation and negotiation rather than direct annexation. Yet, as in coexisting colonial spheres, the work of conversion and the subsequent tale of that work constituted a form of ordering: to preach the teachings of the Church was to integrate distant realities into a coherent moral universe, to record that endeavor was to structure the perception of that truth (Thomas 1997; France 2008; Wheat 2016). In this missionary-ethnographic corpus – as in much of the work of their contemporaries – geography and theology coalesce into a single enterprise of comprehensibility. In this regard, documentary illustrations, such as the detailed Angolan map shown here, represented valuable findings. These maps, along with the descriptions they enabled, framed African space in ways legible to viewers across the Catholic West.

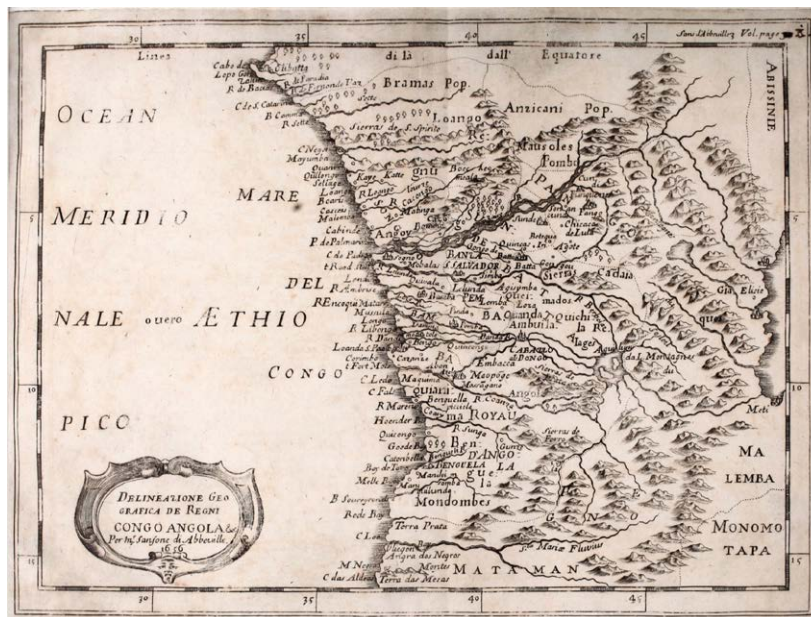


Figure 1 – Map of Angola, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo (1687), *Istorica descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola*, Bologna, Giacomo Monti²

² Public Domain, <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t0wq6cp2v&seq=23>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

At the same time, these depictions did not directly translate into political control: for the clergy, scholars, and occasional colonial agents who consulted them, they offered guidance for navigating the complexities of regional kingdoms and states – always within a context carefully choreographed by Njinga, her counselors, and other dignitaries. Through staged acts and careful conduct in the presence of chroniclers or the informants who reported to them, these historical actors had relative control of the terms of encounter and orchestrated displays of power, causing the eventual texts to reflect not only what happened but also, perhaps inadvertently, their deliberate capacity for action.

This produces a particular oscillation of meaning: on the one hand, these discourses document topography, fauna, flora, and other geographic features as they appeared to the eye, but this observation was rooted in the ethnocentric assumption that the Christian man must reveal the ‘true’ form of the land (Sandiford 2003; Fromont 2011, 2014). Through his depictions of Angola, Matamba, and Kongo, these archival records move beyond mere documentation: their work constructs – if unintentionally – a legible blueprint of difference, translating unfamiliar territories into forms that could be interpreted and circulated in Europe. In doing so, they reinforced prevailing notions of distorted nature, exotic environments, and the continent’s supposed inferiority (Davis 1966; Thornton 1979; Casabó Suqué 2007; García Novo 2010). In this sense, they reflect the impulse to record, the need for figures and diagrams to organize information, and the use of conceptual taxonomy based on outside standards.

Yet as stated before, beyond landscape, their ordering of human initiative was always contingent: interactions were negotiated within local frameworks that limited the scope of Western interpretive authority. As a result, African rituals and political structures were rendered in ways that codified difference – but not in a manner that eradicated local agency. What these interpretations created was what Martin Jay terms a *scopic regime*, where observation presumes authority, but not coercion. A *scopic regime* refers to a historically and culturally specific system of seeing in which perception is structured, interpreted, and endowed with the power to define perceived external phenomena – such as a socially ‘othered’ group – from a standpoint that is assumed to be normative, establishing the rules or standards by which these phenomena are judged. It does not merely describe acts of looking; rather, it determines what can be seen, who is permitted to see, and how what is seen is interpreted and communicated (Wiegman 1995; Jay 2011).

Such is a way to link vision to knowledge, producing an epistemic legitimacy that shapes understanding without relying on violence. These regimes were deeply connected to the creation of a sense of alterity between the West and non-Western societies. Missionary tales, travel narratives, and other forms of visual engagement transformed distant peoples and practices into discernible categories, reinforcing ideas of their alleged orthodoxy while constructing the ‘Other’ as knowable and fundamentally different. Through these practices, seeing and defining became inseparable, and the sight itself became a tool for establishing the boundaries of human, cultural, and moral difference. Accordingly, the books analyzed here reinforced well-established frameworks of scholarship while capturing only one angle of complex societies – the one that was possible to see based on their own logic. That is why their legibility must be read as conditional and mediated, reflecting the interaction between the guests’ curiosity, their doctrinal concerns, and the native’s self-assertion. Thus, the concept of descriptive, spatial, and social translation – mediating not between Central West Africa and Latin Christianity as such, but between distinct and competing Christianities, including an established Kongolese Christian tradition and a post-Reformation Latin Catholicism – stands at the core of this analysis.

Especially telling, this case complicates any assumption of a unified, monolithic Western intellectual dominance: in one respect, these Christian authors render overseas societies as

systematically ‘knowable’, participating in the production of biased epistemologies (as Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy notes, representations of Blackness shifted from the fantastical and exotic toward the supposedly rational and comprehensible) (2020). Nonetheless, their very same writings reveal the limits of that knowledge, as the complexity of the protagonists they described continually exceeded the biases imposed upon them – an irony that underscores both the ambition and the epistemic precariousness of their enterprise.

4. *Semiotic Battlefields and Scopic Power: Negotiating Space, Narrative, and Iconography*

From a theoretical perspective, the said processes resonate with Michel de Certeau’s concept of practice, in which social actors navigate, appropriate, and reinterpret structures imposed upon them. This operation is not only valid for our chroniclers; in the cases studied here, the actions of African subjects shaped the meaning of events even as outsiders recorded them. Likewise, Henri Lefebvre’s notions (1991) highlight that space is not a neutral backdrop, but an active site of negotiation and power (see also de Certeau 1984). Positioned between being present in a foreign land – recording word of mouth or what they encountered – and sending those encounters back home for publication to a readership with whom they shared a common culture, the travelers’ texts, maps, and ethnographies can be read simultaneously as translations, instruments of epistemic ordering and as windows into the negotiated production of space, authority, and social meaning in Central West Africa. These accounts constitute a layer of this socially produced field – legible and codified for their fellow countrymen – yet always refracted through a second layer, the self-directed acts of the people they sought to categorize.

4.1 *Conversion as Spectacle and Text: Cavazzi’s Imagery and Gioia’s Mediation*

Capturing these crossroads was not solely the work of sojourners like Cavazzi. Paolo da Lorena, the engraver responsible for illustrating his manuscript, added a further layer of mediation. Although he reworked Cavazzi’s own paintings – presumably made from life – he did so far from Angola, relying on the chronicler’s descriptions to construct scenes such as Njinga’s baptism. Unlike some images based on eyewitness accounts, such as Ndembo Tembo or the old kings of Angola, the baptism scene was imagined to signify both a historical episode and the Catholic mission’s unfolding triumph. This *a posteriori* process introduced a new spatial dimension: the events that the priest claimed to have witnessed were re-cast in Italy, translated into pictures by someone who never encountered the landscape, the actors, or the ritual contexts firsthand. These engravings were thus not merely decorative. They were ideological instruments that visualized the missionary project, transforming textual testimony into a devotional spectacle. In doing so, they reinforced an imagined geography of conversion – one in which African rulers, depicted in moments of sacramental submission, embodied both spiritual transformation and political alignment. This baptism, like those of other elites, became a pictorial argument for the church’s success: a visual theology that joined artistic practice, missionary ambition, and the spatial circuitry of scopic epistemes.

The baptismal depiction exemplifies this dynamic, symbolizing the progressive integration of Central African kingdoms into Christendom alongside their farewell to false beliefs. Further evidence from letters, records, testimonies, and contemporary scholars supports the notion that these evangelical endeavors were often crafted to forge a lasting alliance between religious and political power (Fonseca 2012, 2014; Mata 2014; Pinto 2014; Glasgow 2018). Examined in this analysis, the portrait underscores these interwoven cultural and spiritual transitions (see Figure 3). By involving these leaders, Cavazzi and others working alongside him sought to bridge cultural

gaps, finding ways to acknowledge and incorporate native views while subtly encouraging the assimilation of Catholicism. Again, this image, which shows Africans and Europeans in worship, helps explain the idea of evangelization as a right of the gentile subject. The precept of the physical and spiritual encounter is integral to God's providential design for new black Christians (Cavazzi 1965). It is very telling, however, how such a narrative conveniently overlooks the centuries-old Christian traditions already present in the region before these missionaries' arrival.

Positional configuration once again serves as a key interpretive device, allowing metropolitan readers to make sense of distant events: this sense of coming together is visible in the classical copy-book model depiction of humans as if they were equal in their belonging to the universal church and universal models of human representation. However, the biases remain. The cross-cultural community of worshipers is mostly separated (with blacks kneeling and whites standing), and skin color and the laws of counterpoise become marks of difference. This positioning reinforces an unambiguous sense of superiority. Visually, it underscores inequality, where the African community is portrayed as needing spiritual guidance while the Western figures are positioned as agents of salvation. It reflects the missionary's fantasy of a superior Christian identity that differs from pagan idolatry.

The *Istorica descrizione* presents, then, a scopic regime that portrays black societies as backward and chaotic, thus positioning them as ripe for European transformation. The anthropogenic and natural landscape is rendered as an unwritten page, needing to be filled with the values, systems, and beliefs of civilizing agents, whose mission is portrayed as benevolent and crucial. At the outset, the African, unworthy of true humanity unless 'redeemed' through conversion, is framed as spiritually and socially deficient. Following this, Cavazzi reduces the population to an imagined state of disorder, failing to recognize the complexity and diversity of native cultural systems.



Figure 2 – Njinga's Baptism, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo (1687), *Istorica Descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola*, Bologna, Giacomo Monti, 606³

³ Public Domain, <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t0wq6cp2v&seq=646>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

Moreover, the author ignores the complexity of the relationships between these religious envoys and the local elites. Figures like Njinga leveraged Christianity as a strategic tool for consolidating power and expanding political influence in a rapidly changing context. The text, however, frames these alliances solely through the analytical lights of European benevolence, relegating African rulers to passive subjects of change rather than active participants in shaping these encounters. This viewpoint is further reinforced by the visual rhetoric accompanying the chronicle, which depicts a rigid, hierarchical relationship. Africans are portrayed as occupying a subordinated role, awaiting salvation from their Christian counterparts, who are visually positioned as the enlightened and noble rulers of the world.

Without the pictorial splendor of Cavazzi's work, *La meravigliosa conversione* offers a more restrained perspective, particularly in how Capuchin narratives amplify the ideological power of transcultural encoding. Although attributed to Francesco Gioia, the text is essentially a reworking of a single earlier relation by Antonio da Gaeta, rather than a compilation of letters or a synthesis of multiple accounts sent to Europe. Da Gaeta, who arrived in the region around 1650 and served in Ndongo and Matamba until his death in the early 1660s, provided the original account that Gioia later adapted for publication in Naples in 1669. In his introduction, Gioia (in da Gaeta and Gioia 1669) explicitly states that the work was extracted from the account of another author, making clear that the text does not claim full authorial originality. This admission underscores the mediated nature of the publication and highlights the importance of recognizing how his perspective is shaped by the interpretations, emphases, and intentions embedded in his source. Attending to this mediation is crucial for analyzing how the portrayal of Njinga is filtered and reframed through editorial intervention rather than direct eyewitness testimony, organizing the story within a triumphalist and hagiographic register.

The illustration presented here operates semiotically as a dense visual text that encodes these theological and cultural meanings through a carefully structured system of signs. At its center stands the crucified Christ, vertically positioned as the image's dominant signifier of salvation and sacrifice. The inscription INRI reinforces the biblical narrative, while the wounds and posture anchor the scene in themes of suffering, redemption, and divine intervention. Around a vertical axis, kneeling figures gesture toward the crucifix in postures of devotion. Their gazes redirect the viewer's attention to Christ, semiotically encoding the act of conversion and echoing the Queen's turn toward Christian faith. Text anchors the depiction and amplifies its message. The Latin caption – *Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel, qui facit mirabilia solus*⁴ – frames the scene within scriptural authority, while the Psalm reference guides interpretation toward divine action and truth. The inclusion of terms such as *Ethiopes* and *reges terrae* extends the scene's meaning into a global horizon, casting conversion not as a local accident but as part of a universal evangelizing mission.

⁴ 'Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone works wonders' (Psalm 72:18).

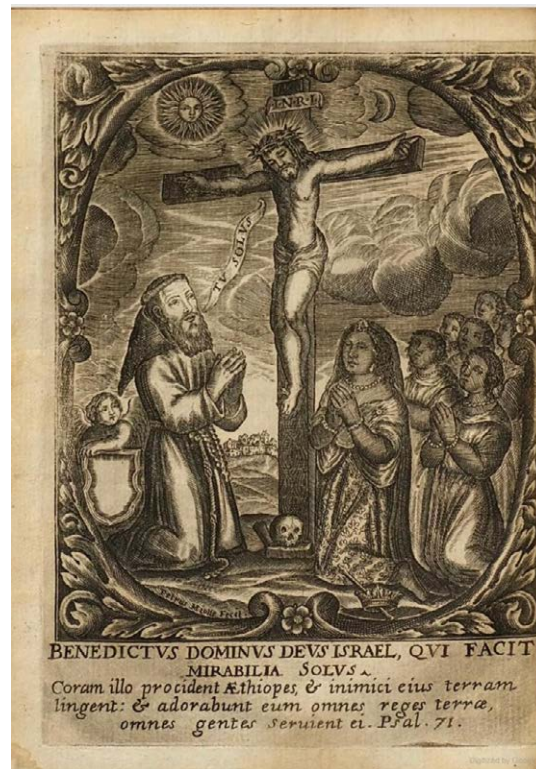


Figure 3 – Frontispiece, Antonio da Gaeta and Francesco Maria Gioia (1669), *La maravigliosa conversione alla santa fede di Cristo della regina Singa e del suo regno di Matamba nell’Africa meridionale*, Napoli, Giacinto Passaro⁵

The previous discussion directs us to another key aspect of the *Istorica descrizione*: the link between knowledge and power, as proselytizing required priests to have a basic understanding of cultural practices to effectively spread the new religion. One possible interpretation of Cavazzi’s account is that the spread of Catholicism required a strategic compromise – demanding patience and a deliberate attempt to understand and document African customs. This approach allowed missionaries to promote the perceived superiority of the gospel while supporting the broader goals of the Church. This approach aligned with the founding of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622, which aimed to oversee and coordinate the global transmission of Christian teachings (Zhang 2023). Before this institutional milestone, however, the church’s envoys were already producing detailed diaries, accounts, and treatises that served both as tools of evangelization and intellectual contributions, expanding knowledge of geography, society, and natural history.

Cavazzi reflects this ethnographic tone, offering in-depth examinations of West Central African faiths, political systems, and traditions. Vital to this mission were the maps and engravings produced during the period. The depiction of Angola and its surrounding kingdoms

⁵ Public Domain, <<https://books.google.com.co/books/content?id=-0F0CTJBx4oC&hl=es&pg=PR28&img=1&zoom=3&sig=ACfU3U2TQAgBrJ9LujpeZ9Lo4dBoDL2krg&cw=1025>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

presented before, for example, not only served as instructional tools but also signified the broader spiritual and political reach of European influence. Through the precision of cartography, such maps reinforced the perceived dominance of Western knowledge over the 'ignorance' of the 'African pagans' whom the missionaries sought to convert.

The rationale behind this supremacy was grounded in the notion of a purported Black abnormality. This idea is explicitly introduced in the text through Cavazzi's portrayal of the inhabitants of the area as 'barbarous, ruthless Africans who always crave human flesh' (1965, 72), which corresponds closely with the accompanying visual component. By invoking cannibalism, the missionary dehumanizes Indigenous identity, justifying the need for conversion and reinforcing viewpoints that legitimize the newly asserted orthodoxy as a civilizing force – despite the region's long-standing, though unevenly distributed, Christian traditions. Historical realities help explain this perceived anomaly, which stems from a significant aspect of the early modern visual regime: the influence of ancient authors and travel stories on explorers and writers. These sources often depicted unfamiliar lands as populated by grotesque and fictional races, reinforcing distorted perceptions of the world beyond Europe.

However, epistemological shifts marked a turning point by the time Cavazzi's work was written. The fantastical elements – such as the *Mirabilia* and *exotica* prevalent in previous accounts of exploration and geographical chronicles – were being replaced by a growing emphasis on accuracy and observation. This transition reflected a departure from reliance on myths, as the portrayal of distant lands as monstrous and aberrant began to give way to a more precise understanding of these territories' realities (Sandoval 1956; Aubrey 1993; Vaughan and Mason Vaughan 1997; Ramey 2008; Davies 2016). Yet, these bizarre ideas – that perhaps haunted the readers – left an indelible mark that continues to echo in the perspective of the text. Shaped by Western ideology, Cavazzi cannot escape the influence of his biases despite his attempts to present an objective report. His volume leaves little to the imagination in its depiction of Njinga, a cannibalistic, bloodthirsty figure steeped in devil worship, consumed by a 'bestial hatred against all male children' (Cavazzi 1965, 66).

Njinga, by this time engaged in a war against the Portuguese, is depicted as a horrifying figure, serving as an embodiment of personal monstrosity. This portrayal reflects how the resistance of African peoples is often framed as an aberration – deemed a deviance from the so-called enlightened norms of the sojourners. In Cavazzi's view, Njinga's defiance is not merely a political or military act, but is pathologized as something unnatural, subverting his own ideas of civilization. Such images, however, are not merely descriptions of individual behavior; they are strategic constructions aimed at destabilizing the very concept of African humanity. Her supposed dreadfulness, particularly her inhuman revulsion towards masculinity and the inversion of gender norms, exposes the chronicler's deeper desire for othering. The queen is marked as evil not just because of her resistance to external violence but because she transgresses the boundaries of sexual, power, and racial roles established from afar. Therefore, her representation reflects the need to redefine her as a 'non-person', denying her humanity, agency, and relevance (Erickson and Hulse 2000; Grier, Jones, and Casander 2018; Ndiaye and Markey 2023).

This inverted characterization is further reinforced by Cavazzi's relation of one of Njinga's most famous – and perhaps fictional – episodes, which intertwines both the fear of African women and cultures as alien, bizarre, and treacherous, with the anxiety over effeminizing luxury as a sign of sinfulness. During her 1625 embassy in Luanda, Njinga made a dramatic entrance into the audience room during a meeting with the Portuguese Governor Correia de Sousa. Her arrival was a calculated political move. Dressed in luxurious clothing and adorned with jewelry, she commanded attention

as a royal envoy, fully authorized to conduct one-on-one negotiations with the colonial authorities. However, as the negotiations unfolded, Njinga soon became aware of a well-known symbolic stratagem: while Correia de Sousa sat upon a lofty, opulent chair, the seating arrangement for Njinga – and other local dignitaries – was a series of velvet cushions placed on the floor. This arrangement was intentionally designed to emphasize her subordination. Njinga, however, firmly refused to accept such indignity. In an elegant display of rebelliousness, she arrogantly ordered one of the women from her own entourage to assume a chair position. To the astonishment of the European witnesses, the attendant remained seated in that position throughout the entire conversation.



Figure 4 – Njinga Seated on a Servant, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo (1687), *Istorica Descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola*, Bologna, Giacomo Monti, 605⁶

Mediated witnessing is fundamental in the subsequent construction of these semi-legendary events. Though Cavazzi did not arrive in Angola until several decades later, he freely incorporated this earlier episode into his rendering. He did so by drawing on a wide range of sources: written reports circulating within the Capuchin network, letters and administrative documents preserved by ecclesiastical and colonial authorities, as well as interviews and sustained discussions with Njinga herself and with her ministers, alongside the oral testimony of missionaries, soldiers, officials, and local informants who claimed direct or inherited knowledge of these incidents (Heywood and Thornton 2007). The religious order itself maintained a strong institutional memory of key moments, particularly those involving conflicts and royal encounters. Given the heterogeneity of these channels, the precise point of origin of particular narrative elements cannot always be securely identified. Significantly, this episode is not attested in the extensive correspondence of De Sousa, who arrived as governor in 1624 and whose letters include both retrospective reflections and ongoing administrative concerns. The essayist, however, wove these

⁶ Public Domain, <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t0wq6cp2v&seq=645>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

materials into a continuous history, framing the past as a necessary precursor to the developments he personally observed. In this way, his chronicle also functions as a selective and retrospective reimagining, rather than a transparent recovery of a single source tradition.

By this very operation, the twofold nature of this semantical sphere – moving between the chronotope of the narrated past and the chronotope of the writer's present – creates a scopical regime sustained entirely by Euro-Christian epistemologies. Here, the ambiguities of hearsay provide fertile ground for the repetition of established truths. Still, like the negatives of a photograph, these layers allow us to infer some sense from what is absent: deliberate or accidental omissions become highly revealing of a certain human will. What is not said can be as telling as what is proclaimed, exposing the contours of desire, intention, and prejudice embedded within the text.

4.2 *Agency Spilling Over the Narrative's Brim*

Abusive as it may appear, the human-chair chapter not only defied the established power dynamics but also exemplified Njinga's refusal to conform to foreign norms, asserting both her autonomy and strength in the face of any attempts at subjugation.⁷ By utilizing the body of her servant in an act of noncompliance, Njinga effectively reclaims control over the symbolic dynamics of the encounter. Her actions signify a deliberate subversion of the prescribed roles of non-European female dignitaries in that situation. In doing so, she constructs an alternative spatial order where the hierarchy is leveled, the colonial authority is no longer elevated, and her own leadership is brought to an equal standing. This episode mirrors the characteristics observed in the other engravings when examined through its graphic system. It presents the contraposition of black and white, civilized and uncivilized, Christian and heathen – all of them oppositions embedded in Cavazzi's pictorial framework. Njinga, however, navigates these semantics in ambiguous ways, and her image, like her legacy, remains contradictory.

I have stated before that the viewpoints on these cultural shocks were not indivisible, that other Capuchin essayists were less inclined to disparage West Africans. Part of the differences in da Gaeta and Gioia's dynamic Njinga and Cavazzi's vilified one stems from their manner of shaping the plot. The latter's moralizing gaze works to discredit her, while the former, though likewise judgmental, channels their evaluations toward constructing her as a female lead. If you are thinking about your target audience, this move succeeds in crafting a recognizable logic pattern – ultimately, it is no different from what other historians have done before. It also has the advantage of revealing agency. While in the previous case, Njinga's power to act spills over the rim of the argument – perceptible to the modern reader almost against the author's intent – in *La meravigliosa conversione*, it appears far more directly. The thirteenth chapter, "The Queen falls gravely ill with quinsy and becomes inflamed with invoking and imploring the help of the Purest Virgin Mary", recounts a pivotal drama: the Queen's sudden illness following the completion of a church. At first glance, this episode appears as a simple medical misfortune. However, when examined through a sign-based perspective, it reveals a complex interplay of meanings and power relations (da Gaeta and Gioia 1669, 127).

The Queen's body becomes a contested site where indigenous cosmologies and Christian teleology struggle for dominance, and the missionary's narrative transforms illness into a rhetorical instrument for legitimizing Catholic religious authority. Symptoms like pain and fever

⁷ This article renders this episode as described in Heywood 2017, 62. Also see the version of Cavazzi 1965, 68.

function as signifiers whose signified oscillates between two semantic avenues. For the story's idolatrous antagonists, the illness indexes punishment for opening the door to the Christian enemy and abandoning ancestral gods, reinforcing their cosmological order. For the narrative truth of the author, possible readers, and for the figure cast as the protagonist, it symbolizes a spiritual trial – a test of faith orchestrated by God to affirm Njinga's sincerity in conversion. This duality illustrates the tension inherent in early transcultural engagements: the same phenomenon is encoded with radically different meanings depending on the code applied.

Unlike Cavazzi, who frames Njinga's femininity as aberrant, *La maravigliosa conversione's* invocation of the Virgin Mary introduces an iconic and symbolic layer to the text. Iconically, Mary embodies purity and maternal care, offering a comforting visual motif in the face of mortal danger. Symbolically, she operates as a guarantor of spiritual truth, neutralizing indigenous interpretations of the pathology. By framing the Queen's recovery as contingent upon Marian intercession, the text constructs a chain of final causes: sickness, prayer, divine aid, and reaffirmation of conversion. This narrative also aligns with hagiographic tropes, positioning the Queen as a proto-saint whose suffering validates the superiority of Christian womanly virtue.

Supporting this significance is the fact that both the primary agent and the plot trace an arc from precariousness to strength. The physical deterioration serves as proof of vulnerability – not only biological but ideological. Da Gaeta, as is quoted by Gioia, explicitly acknowledges his fear that the Queen's death would render his efforts futile, exposing the fragility of the conversion project. This anxiety underscores the dependence of evangelization on the symbolic capital of elite converts. Njinga's body thus becomes a semiotic battlefield where competing cultural systems – idolatry and Christianity – vie for hermeneutic supremacy. Yet, in the interest of a legible storyline, her survival, framed as God's will, retroactively legitimizes their own enterprise and delegitimizes African deities. When this happens, both the writer and their readership reaffirm their assumption of epistemic centrality.

As we seek to understand figures like Njinga amidst all this complexity, the question arises: can we see her beyond the biased knowledge production that has shaped our perceptions of her? To this point, my analysis highlights the significant role that travel accounts played in influencing views of humanity, exploring the intersection of Blackness, religion, and cultural differences, often framed in exotic terms. However, these depictions also bring to light the tangle of prejudices and naiveties that were widespread at the time. Scholars and artists such as Cavazzi and da Lorena contributed to constructing and maintaining rigid distinctions between 'standard' white societies and so-called 'inferior' peoples, thus reinforcing harmful binaries in Western thinking. It is worth noting, however, that Njinga herself also intervened in this field of representation through a small corpus of letters she authored, some of which have been edited and translated by Heywood. These writings, though limited in number and circulation, nonetheless register a local perspective articulated in her own political voice. Perhaps it is this more empowered Njinga – one that gestures toward a more nuanced African subjectivity – that a different sort of intellectuals, such as da Gaeta and Gioia, allow to come through.

5. *Njinga's Trail in the Wake of Scopic Regimes*

Sadly, the enduring influence of these epistemic regimes remains inescapable in the present. In this section, attention is given to the deficiencies of contemporary historical perspectives on African presences in the archive, which remain profoundly limited, often presenting a unidimensional account that neglects the richness and complexity of these histories. Such a limited

perspective erases the multifaceted dimensions of their presence in modernity, reducing Njinga to an instrument of external historical narratives rather than portraying her as a true queen, grappling with political challenges and asserting agency. As James H. Sweet aptly observes, omission is a pervasive currency in the field:

Approaches largely fail to accommodate African Historical perspectives, either on their own terms or as integral parts of a tightly braided Atlantic world. As one historian recently put it, if the category of the Atlantic is to mean anything, it ought to include Africa, but there seems to be no room for this often overlooked fourth continent in most new versions of the Atlantic. (2014, 4)

Truth be told, the distorting of history through the lens of Western erudition shaped not just the records but the very reality of transcultural exchanges. These actions reified stereotypes and impeded the recognition of these cultures as equal participants in global modernity. The distorted portrayal of their words, deeds, and societal structures ensured that future generations – particularly those within metropolitan powers – viewed non-Europeans as static and in need of control or transformation, rather than as dynamic and self-determining. Again, much of the contemporary perceptions of these issues still reveal these shortcomings.

This raises the issue of whether it is possible to construct an Atlantic history without perpetuating the fetish of African victimization and whether the African role in African history can truly be reclaimed. Sweet (2014) suggests approaching this challenge with a two-tiered framework for source work: prioritizing linguistic, cultural, and social history as a primary base while using inquisitorial records, travel literature, censuses, ethnographies, periodicals, township records, and maps as a secondary base. By integrating these two levels, it becomes possible to transcend the methodological inadequacies of current perspectives. To achieve this, however, the illusion of a transparent historical narrative must also be discarded. Even where African-authored texts do survive – as in the correspondence of Kongolese rulers such as Afonso I, Garcia II, and other early modern kings – their preservation, translation, and circulation are themselves embedded within European archival regimes and priorities. Historiographic work is shaped by the social conceptions of both the past and the present. Historians rank events hierarchically, operating within perspectives that are far from universal or impartial. This begs the question: Who is speaking when early modern incursions into Africa are narrated, and under what conditions are African voices rendered legible?

There are historical instances that strongly validate the self-directed actions of native subjects or communities – instances that require reading carefully between the lines to uncover their full significance. In many of these cases, the narratives frequently underscore the credulity of observers projecting their own expectations onto reality. In this regard, António de Oliveira de Cadornega's description of Queen Njinga as 'uma rainha de grande coração'⁸ in his *História Geral das Guerras Angolanas* is not incidental; it reflects the narrative logic of imperial values (1940, vol. 1, 53). Framed as a military chronicle, the work privileges valor and strategic acumen as central virtues. Within this heroic code, courage becomes a universal currency – admired even in adversaries – because it amplifies the epic tone of the story and legitimizes Portuguese victories. By elevating Njinga to a figure of exceptional bravery, Cadornega magnifies the difficulty of conquest: defeating a formidable opponent enhances prestige.

It must be acknowledged that so many nuances make the recovery of agency complex. Cavazzi and da Gaeta depict Njinga's femininity either as a violation or as an embodiment of

⁸ (a woman of great heart). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

a female ideal, while Cadornega reframes her through the lexicon of war, allowing admiration without challenging the patriarchal and ethnocentric norms that structure his report. Although their portrayals differ, they ultimately share more common ground than one might assume – two sides of the same coin. In *História Geral*, the queen becomes exceptional, not exemplary, a singular anomaly whose greatness ultimately confirms the inevitability of Portuguese triumph. Her courage thus becomes instrumental, reinforcing a teleological plot that moves from African resistance to European victory. In his account, this victory is not framed as total annihilation but as a providential and symbolic closure: Njinga's peace treaty with the Portuguese and her conversion to Christianity are presented as decisive acts of submission.

Having said that, she emerges as a woman of resolute action – a fact that shapes the antagonisms inscribed in her descriptions. This idea is reinforced by subtextual readings of ancestor consultation, a significant manifestation of authority in seventeenth-century Angola. For Cavazzi, such practices were dismissed as mere devil worship; however, they constituted rituals that legitimized Njinga's power, framing her rule as divinely sanctioned and guided by the wisdom of powerful ancestral spirits. From the perspective of our religious emissary, though, the event is mediated by a pronounced bias, which distorts the true spiritual significance of the practice:

After the death of Ngola Mbandi . . . she gathered some bones from his corpse and kept them in a coffin covered with crudely made silver lids and rich rugs, honoring that infernal putrefaction as their tutelary idol, with all the particular ministers, with sacrifices, pyres, and incense. (Cavazzi 1965, 73)

The remains traveled with the queen's entourage and were consulted in cases of special significance. Ritualized communication with the deceased played a central role in the sociopolitical systems of Central West Africa, and Njinga's reign was no exception (Piętek and Rubinkowska-Anioł 2018). During one of her battles against the Portuguese, messengers from her rivals proposed a new treaty, which included a promise to return provinces previously under European control. Unsure of the best course of action, she decided to consult the remains of her brother for guidance on a matter of great importance.

According to Cavazzi, who was by then engaged in the conversion of a still-undecided queen, the response emerged through a remarkable séance involving possessed *xingulas*, spirit mediums who voiced their judgment on the proposed treaty. Summoned by her former catechist and now principal religious guide, Calixto Zelotes dos Reis Magros, the spirits delivered a clear and uncanny message: surrender would lead to death and the loss of freedom. Njinga chose not to succumb. Rather than capitulate, she interpreted the ritual verdict as authorization to retreat temporarily, later fighting and defeating her enemies under more favorable conditions. Although this strategy ultimately proved short-lived, it nevertheless demonstrated her capacity to translate ritual consultation into decisive military action. That night, with Njinga leading them, the army silently evaded their adversaries.

This passage provides a glimpse into the complex interplay between diplomacy, military strategy, and cult practices surrounding ancestors in Njinga's leadership. The consultation of Ngola Mbandi during a critical moment illustrates the deeply ingrained role of spiritual guidance in royal decision-making. The queen's use of traditional beliefs and her eventual military retreat exemplify her astuteness as a ruler. While Cavazzi interpreted the entire event as yet another example of the African 'savagery' he despised, he may have been overlooking something more significant. His description of Njinga's actions as 'bloodthirsty witchcraft' (1965, 78) reveals his disdain, yet in doing so, he unknowingly preserved a moment that exemplifies the queen's strategic acumen.

That Njinga was exceptionally clever in navigating the diplomatic, economic, and religious challenges of her time is an undeniable truth. Facing the threat of Portuguese expansion at her doorstep, a Dutch army entering the fray from Europe, and local challenges to her authority, she was at a pivotal moment, which she interpreted with remarkable skill. Njinga was crafty enough to offer alliances, military aid, and even the exchange of slaves in return for her family members and other notables. All of this was possible because, although Njinga herself did not speak Portuguese, many officials and members of her court were educated in Western-style institutions.

As Linda Heywood (2009) points out, contact with Catholic culture acquainted the Central African nobility with European political concepts, so, unsurprisingly, Njinga's writings demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of Western views on war, politics, and faith. Heywood has compiled diplomatic correspondence between Njinga and her European counterparts, which showcases her skillful use of religious language, which is employed with a clear political purpose. The following is an excerpt from her letter to the Vatican's Propaganda Fide, dated August 1651. She adeptly played the conversion card to argue that the Portuguese wars were unjust since they were being waged against fellow Catholics:

I confess I am very obliged to Your Lordships for this kindness, for now we have knowledge of the one true God that we did not have before. For this reason; we had remained deceived by our idolatrous beliefs, possessed by the devil. God's compassion toward us is great, even though we are undeserving of his divine mercy on account of our grave sins. Nevertheless, mercy is what He is offering us through the arrival of the *capuchin* father, and now I live with my body and soul at peace. May our Lord Jesus Christ be served by allowing us to reciprocate the benevolence you confer upon us, so that we may not deserve greater punishment for our sins. If Your Lordships send us other *capuchin* friars, we will welcome them with open arms, for there are many people in our kingdom ready to receive the Holy Baptism. (Heywood 2009, 45)

Her rhetoric operates as a form of negotiation: she expresses gratitude for the mission work while aligning herself with the recipient's cause and simultaneously asserting her sovereignty. This strategic skill helps explain why Njinga's legacy cannot be captured through narrow ethnographic accounts or early visual portrayals, which often distort or oversimplify her complexity.

6. *Concluding Thoughts*

Lefebvre (1991) and de Certeau (1984) can help us read Njinga more tactically: her campaigns reorganized political geography, challenging an alleged Western dominance that existed more forcefully in Portuguese claims than in political reality, while her alliances, mobility, and symbolic gestures operated as 'arts of doing' within imposed – and persistently unstable – structures. In the meantime, her capacity for decisive action overflows the male, Catholic, literate gaze that sought to vilify, admire, or instrumentalize her. If we return to the symbolism of the statue in São Miguel, we observe a parallel order of meaning that directly challenges presuppositions of voicelessness. Today, this iconic figure embodies a heroic political ideal, conveying defiance in the face of the immense adversities of her time. Even amidst the tangled strands of her representations, the queen's legacy resonates through local histories and emerges from the cracks in the records.

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