

Nwando Achebe. *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa*. Ohio Short Histories of Africa Series. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020. Illustrations. 224 pp. \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8214-2407-0.

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Published on H-Africa (April, 2021)

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Female Monarchs and Merchants of Power

In *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa*, Nwando Achebe goes beyond a synthesis of scholarship on powerful women in African history to open up new avenues for discussion about what constitutes female power. She advances the argument that female authority in African societies must be understood not only in terms of power in the physical world but also as it relates to the spiritual realm. Published under the Ohio Short Histories of Africa series, Achebe's book provides a compact yet authoritative account of the scores of influential African women across time while also paying close attention to gendered power by analyzing such categories as female husbands, male priestesses, female headmen, female king, and female pharaoh. Writing in the preface, Achebe states that the purpose of the book is to counter the legacy of colonialist interpretations of African worlds by Africanizing and feminizing knowledge. In so doing, her aim is to give voice to African perspectives and to center African women in the retelling of narratives about the past.

Organized into five chapters, an introduction, conclusion, notes, and bibliography, the work focuses on themes rather than on a chronological march through time. In the introduction, Achebe lays out her methodology. To address the silences,

gaps, and omissions of powerful women in the documentary record, Achebe relies on an analysis of African worldviews and develops the concept of the "female principle" and "female spirit principle" to communicate "the totality of leadership and authoritative roles occupied by female entities in Africa" (p. 23). To reconstruct African perspectives of power and authority, Achebe makes the case that the African worldview is one of dualities where the material and spiritual worlds are interconnected. She finds that whether in the seen or unseen worlds, African societies seek a balance between male leadership and female leadership that cuts across the socioeconomic or spiritual hierarchy. Consequently, power in the physical realm cannot be understood without considering power in the spiritual realm.

The book begins with an examination of the role of gods and goddesses, spirit mediums, diviners, healers, priests and priestesses, prophets and prophetesses, and rain queens. Chapter 1 outlines female power and authority in the spiritual world by explaining the gendered nature of African cosmologies and the transformation of African concepts of the Creator God from either a female, dual-gender (male and female) or a gender-neutral view to the idea of God as male as defined by

the Abrahamic religions. Achebe categorizes goddesses, oracles, and female medicines as “Great God’s Helpers.” This category includes ancient Egyptian goddesses Hathor and Nut of ancient Egypt, Oshun of the Yoruba (Nigeria), and Nimba of the Baga (Guinea) as well as such oracles as Arochukwu of eastern Nigeria and the identification of female medicines cultivated at specific moments to deal with such crises as the threat of slave raiding. This chapter explains the role of the Lovedu Rain Queens among the Sotho of southern Africa, and spirit mediums as a mechanism whereby women gained authority through spirit possession among such people as the Nyamwezi of East Africa. Achebe elaborates on the role of women in divination and healing, as priestesses or servants to deities, and as leaders of prophetic movements. This chapter lays the groundwork for the book by illustrating the complexity of the spirit world and the importance of the gender balance of power to African cosmologies. This chapter shows that in order to understand what female power means in the physical world, one must first understand how female power is conceived in the spiritual realm. In doing so, Achebe achieves her goal of Africanizing and feminizing knowledge about the African past.

Chapter 2 considers women who held positions of power that either equaled or complemented the power of the monarch or sovereign of African state systems. Achebe addresses the female principle among women who inherited titled offices through hereditary succession, women who held power as royal consorts and queen regents, and “elderly women who ruled as daughters” (p. 72). The chapter gives a wide range of examples from queens who ruled as regents in ancient Egypt, the royal women of ancient Meroe known as *kandake* (transliterated as *candaces*), empresses of Ethiopia, and the queen of ladies or the *iyalode* among the Yoruba. This chapter shows that African women ruled in their own right as equal to male rulers or as co-rulers with male chiefs, for example, the Asante (Ghana) para-

mount queen mothers (*ahemaa*) and paramount chiefs (*amanahene*). Other powerful women raised armies and played key roles in securing the well-being of the nation, such as Al-Kahina the “Berber Warrior queen” who led an army against Arab invasion (693-698) or the Ganda Queen Mothers of Buganda (Uganda) who had the authority to check the king’s excesses, determine the legitimacy of succession, and protect the nation. Achebe finds that princesses and warrior princesses occupied positions of authority as daughters or granddaughters of a ruling monarch or as the wife or widow of a prince. She also pays attention to the distinct nature of female authority in decentralized states where power is not hierarchical but vertical and where women wielded authority within the governing apparatus as a result of their age, their own accomplishments, and their role as daughters and wives.

Chapter 3 examines influential women in African economic life. Achebe argues that the prolific nature of market trade in precolonial West African societies and the central role that African women play in managing local market activities has conferred leadership status, political influence, and even high political office to women. We learn of esteemed Nigerian market women and merchants, for example, Iyaloja Madame Efunroye Tinubu of Abeokuta (ca. 1805-60s) and Omu Okwei (1872-43) of Igboland (Nigeria). Among the Asante women are *ahemaa* or titled women who lead the associations of various commodity trades and the *ahemafo* or the person who represents the interests of all the market traders in negotiations with the market manager and non-traders during times of crisis. The “Mama or Nana Benzs” of Lomé, Togo, carry this honorific title given to successful women who control the sale of printed African textiles, and thus possess chauffeur-driven Mercedes-Benzes. In highlighting West African women entrepreneurs, middlewomen, and commodity traders, Achebe makes the case that African women achieve leadership roles in society and political power as a result of their entrepreneurial acumen.

Chapter 4 uses case studies to show the flexibility of African gender systems that allows for women to assume maleness in order to rule as men. The most compact of the five chapters, this chapter covers a principle familiar to scholars of African gender studies but new to nonspecialists. Achebe explains the idea that for most African societies sex and gender do not coincide, allowing for women to become men and men to become women. Titled “Female Headmen, Kings and Paramount Chiefs,” this chapter explains how exceptional African women have transformed themselves into men to rule their societies in offices inhabited by men. The chapter gives a variety of examples, including Hatshepsut who ruled as pharaoh; Ebulejonu, the first female king of the Igala monarchy (Nigeria); King Nzingha of Ndongo (Angola), who dressed as a man and forbade her

subjects to address her as queen; Headman Wangu wa Makeri of Gikuyuland (colonial Kenya); Chief Mosadi Seboko of the Balete people of Botswana; and Ahebi Ugbabe, the female king of colonial Nigeria.

The final chapter of the work, “African Women Today,” brings the book to the present by considering how and why women have assumed leadership positions and achieved success in politics, religious life, and business. In doing so, the chapter shines a light on highly educated and successful African women. Achebe gives examples of women who have achieved the highest levels of political office from presidents to prime ministers, cabinet ministers, and legislators. We learn the biographies of influential women in the Christian Church movement (from denominational Christianity to African Independent Churches) and in Muslim societies across the continent where women have excelled as intellectuals, journalists, female clerics, and prayer leaders. Lastly, Achebe addresses African women “millionaires and billionaires” who constitute a “nouveau riche.” Achebe points out that women of this category vary from self-made entrepreneurs—such as Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu of Ethiopia, founder of one of Africa’s largest footwear companies—to those who have made a fortune by means of “inheritance-trust” or being “corruption-enabled” (p. 177). By telling the stories of contemporary women often not well known outside of the continent, the chapter illustrates the progress that African women have made in the struggle to “revitalize” the types of influential positions that women in Africa held prior to the colonial era (p. 151). This chapter demonstrates a through line from ancient Africa to the present. Whether considering the role of local market women, Mama Benzs or African women millionaires, entrepreneurship serves as a key mechanism for gaining power and authority for women in African societies.

Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa is a unique volume. It is suitable for special-

ist researchers and popular audiences alike. The book is written in such a way that one could read or teach each chapter independently. The book offers a useful companion for such texts as Kathleen Sheldon's *African Women: Early History to the Twenty-First Century* (2017) or Iris Berger and E. Frances White's *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa* (1999). Written in a concise yet nuanced manner, the book is accessible for undergraduate students and it contains critical analysis of key frameworks in African gender studies for researchers or graduate students. Although the plethora of examples may at times feel like a march across the continent, Achebe achieves the difficult task of covering change over time from ancient Africa to the present and showing similarities and differences between female power in all regions of the continent from North Africa, to South Africa, and from West and West Central Africa to East Africa and the Horn of Africa.

In the conclusion, Achebe writes that her goal is to “document the lives and worlds of elite African women and females of privilege” and to show the complexities of female power and diverse forms of leadership in African societies (p. 183). In centering African perspectives and feminizing knowledge about power and authority in Africa, this study chips away at common assumptions and stereotypes about the powerless or invisible African woman. As readers, we are the beneficiaries of Achebe's life-long study of powerful African women as we are of her lived experience as witness to the power of African womanhood, and as part of the continuum of influential African women.

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Citation: Hilary Jones. Review of Achebe, Nwando. *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. April, 2021.

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