

“The Woman King”: Traditional Africa and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Feature film depicts the 19th century Kingdom of Dahomey and the impact of European interventions in West African society

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Film: The Woman King

Director: Gina Prince-Bythewood

Writers: Dana Stevens and Maria Bello

Musical Score: Terrance Blanchard

Edited By: Terilyn A. Shropshire

Starring: Viola Davis, Thuso Mbedu, Lashana Lynch, Sheila Atim and John Boyega

This blockbusting film has prompted tremendous interests and discussion on the history of European colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade.

After the first weekend of its commercial premiere in the United States from September 16-18, it was the highest revenue generating movie nationally.

An historical fictionalized account centered around the Agojie, the woman warriors of the Dahomey civilization in West Africa encompassing what is modern day Republic of Benin, comes at a time when Africa is continuing to exert its personality and viewpoints on continental and global issues. While at the same time debates and political struggles are raging in the U.S. over whether or not the actual history of African enslavement and its role

in the ascendancy of western imperialism should be taught in the public schools.

These disputes over the teaching of African and African American history along with their social affairs have been instigated by those seeking to maintain institutional racism by denying the realities of the past and the contemporary period. Racial tensions are escalating in the U.S. as the demographic shifts in the ethnic composition of the country continue making inevitable its transitions to a majority people of color state.

Although this film is not a documentary in the sense that it refrains from referencing and replicating the actual historical occurrences of the early 19th century when the European trade in African people continued despite efforts by the British to outlaw the practice after 1806. The British prohibition of the slave trade was only a mechanism to usher in a more efficient form of national oppression and economic exploitation under colonialism.

However, the existence of the Dahomey Kingdom and the Agojie women warriors are well documented by historians concerned with African societal development and the rise of European imperialism. In addition, throughout ancient and pre-colonial African history there are warrior women who fought to unify their people and to resist outside domination.

The Atlantic Slave Trade as an economic system disrupted and underdeveloped traditional African societies and kingdoms. Greater consolidation of nations and states were well underway during the advent of the interventions by Spain and Portugal during the 15th century in West Africa.

This film focuses on the role of the Portuguese enslavers who kidnapped and exported many Africans to the South American state of Brazil. Slavery in Brazil lasted longer than in any other region of the Western hemisphere ending after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1888.

Accounts of the origins of this particular fictional representation says that Maria Bello came up with the idea of a feature film after a visit to Benin in 2015. The film was taken to several studios before it was finally accepted by TriStar Pictures in 2017.

Nonetheless, it was not given the go ahead until 2020, right at the time that the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown production on many films throughout the world. The production of the movie started in November 2021 in the Republic of South Africa. Soon afterwards the resurgence of the pandemic through the prevalence of the Omicron variant halted the project.

During the early months of 2022, the production began once again and was completed within a matter of months. The initial premiere was held at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 9.

The majority of reviews of *The Woman King* since its Toronto opening have been overwhelmingly positive. Viola Davis, who has appeared in dozens of films over the last few years has been praised for her depiction of the principal character General Nanisca of the Agojie warriors. She was loyal to King Ghezo in her training and orientation of the Agojie in their struggles against the neighboring dominant Oyo Kingdom.

Who Were the Agojie Warriors?

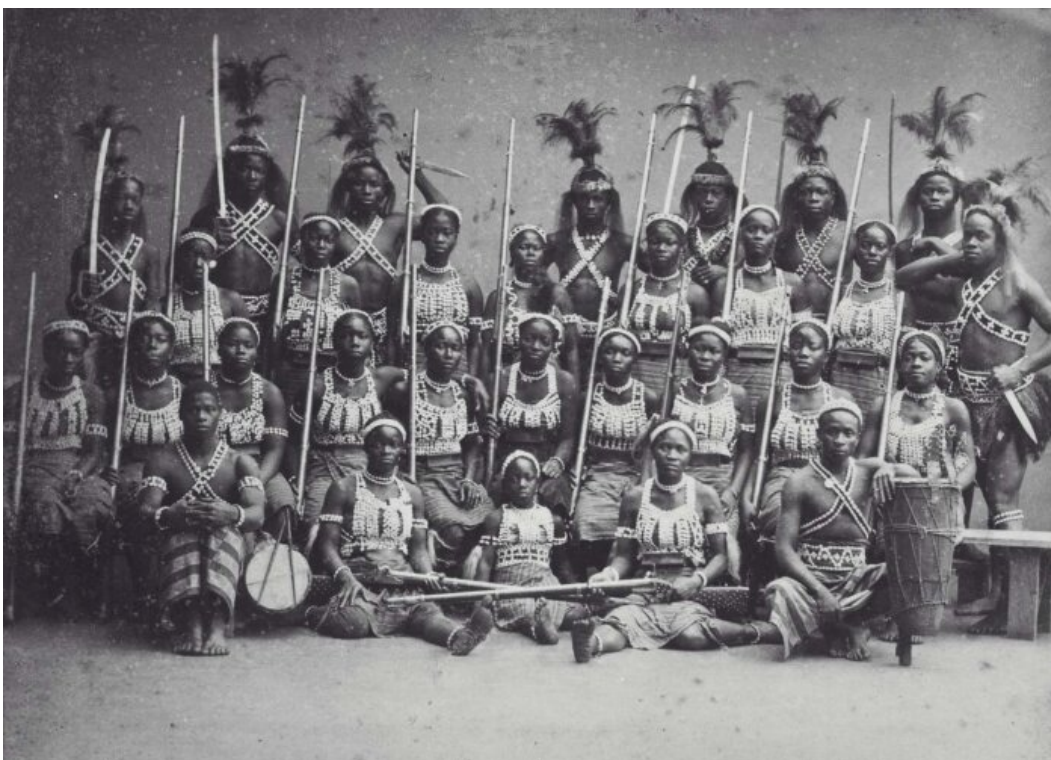
These women and their military roles within society can be traced back until the early 17th century. The units were said to have existed for nearly two centuries and played an essential part in the expansion of the Dahomey Kingdom between the 17th and late 19th centuries.

They were described by French colonialists as Amazon women. Their training was intense while they served directly under the direction of the Kings. The women enjoyed prominence and protection within Dahomey and were completely dedicated to security and defense of the Kingdom.

[According to one account](#) written by Veronica Mwanza on the character of the Agojie:

“By the mid-19th century, there were about 1,000 and 6,000 warrior women who were huntresses, riflemen, reapers, archers and gunners. The Kingdom was always at war with its neighbors. The Agoji women fought in numerous slave raids as prisoners were required for the slave trade.

In the latter half of the 19th century, European intrusion into West Africa gained pace. King Behanzin who was considered the 11th and last king of the Dahomey began fighting the French forces in the first war, known as the Franco-Dahomean war. Many Agoji women took part in the battle and defended themselves using hand to hand combat. Despite the European praises, the Agoji warriors were defeated with many of them being gunned down. During the Second Franco-Dahomean war, Agoji were being assigned to mainly target French soldiers. The war lasted seven weeks and was fought even more ruthlessly than the first one. The French however prevailed after 23 separate battles, but only after bringing in the Foreign Legion, armed with machine guns. The defeat led to the end of the Dahomean Kingdom.”



Dahomey Agojie Women Warrior Agojie (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

Dahomey became a French colony like many other territories throughout the continent between the 15th and 19th centuries. The resistance to slavery and colonialism transformed into the movements for national independence after the first and second imperialist world wars of the early and mid-20th century.

The Struggle for African Unity Continues

Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, Spain, Netherlands, Denmark, Germany and the U.S. all maintained colonies and neo-colonies in Africa and in the Western hemisphere. Even in the 21st, the legacy of enslavement and colonialism remains on the African continent and in the Diaspora. It has been thoroughly documented by many historians that the profits, land and waterways attained by European imperialism are responsible for the present day international unequal division of labor and economic power.

Nanisca and King Ghezo state repeatedly during the film that the slave trade was designed to destroy Africa and its people. The film presents a depiction of the complexities of the slave system and how it was critical in the destruction of African civilizations.

Today, Africa is still under pressure to conform to the political and economic imperatives of imperialism. Sanctions are often imposed on those independent African states which refuse to follow the dictates of the ruling classes of Western Europe and North America.

An outright war was waged in 2011 to overthrow and destroy the government of the North African state of Libya which sought to foster unity and economic development. The destruction of Libya, then the most prosperous state on the continent, had ripple effects which spread throughout the entire regions of North and West Africa.

Until Africa unites, the continent and its people will not know peace and stability. African unity, as many leaders have said throughout modern history, cannot be achieved without the genuine independence and sovereignty of its people from imperialism.

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