

Introduction

The Preamble

In a 2014 newspaper story, “Women Arrest Boko Haram Fighters in Borno,” Hausa journalist Hamza Idris reports on a mysterious incident that throws light on the conviction held by African peoples about the interconnectedness of the human and spiritual worlds, and the forces therein.¹ Illustrating the belief in the ability of human beings to tap into this unseen world of spirits and channel their extraordinary powers to influence activity in the visible human world, the article captures the interconnectivity between the two worlds:

Some women in Gwoza town of Borno State are said to have arrested seven Boko Haram² fighters who wreaked havoc in the town on Sunday. Shortly after their arrest[,], angry youth and vigilantes in the town rallied and lynched [the terrorists]. . . . Some residents who spoke to *Daily Trust* attributed the daring arrest by the women [to] mystical powers. Sources in Gwoza said many insurgents had earlier in the day intercepted

a vehicle loaded with bread, slaughtered four of the occupants[,] and drove the vehicle towards Sambisa Forest. . . . A witness from Gwoza, who did not want his name mentioned, said, “After seizing the vehicle conveying the bread and other valuables in Gwoza . . . some of the insurgents moved towards the Sambisa (Forest) and met some women on the way[:]” *“The insurgents wanted to attack the women but their guns did not work. They tried hitting them with the boot [sic] of their guns but mysteriously, all the hands of the insurgents hung until youth and vigilantes in the area mobilized and killed them.”* . . . Mohammed Gava, the chairman of local vigilantes in Borno State[,] confirmed the incident[:] “When the gunmen were moving out of Gwoza, most people fled to safety but those women refused to flee. I think the insurgents were angry and wanted to attack them but met their Waterloo.”³

Ascribing the women’s brazen arrest of the Boko Haram terrorists to “mystical powers,” directed by these women, to paralyze the insurgent’s guns and immobilize their hands is an attribution that reads true for the over three thousand nations of people who inhabit the African continent. It is this belief in the interconnectedness between the human and spiritual worlds and in the viability of power flowing from spirits to humans that we witness in the explanation of the Gwoza women’s action. And it is these various elucidations, conceptualized from an African-centered perspective, about the ways in which African women and/or the female spiritual

principle exhibit power, influence, and authority that *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa* seeks to highlight.

Methods, Focus, and Definitions

One of the central features of African historiography has been the fact that Africans produced fewer documents that historians have traditionally considered to be “evidence”—government reports, letters, diaries, travel logs, wills, and property records. This has meant that until recently the voices and the worldview of Africans were completely excluded from major works of African history—a fact compounded in reconstructions of African women and gendered worlds.

With limited access to the traditional sources that scholars typically use to document their work, African-centered gender historians have necessarily had to find new methods to explore the voices of people who have historically been denied a voice. This text is part of that intellectual odyssey, functioning as a corrective while utilizing, where available, African-derived sources, including language/linguistics, the meaning and significance of names, metaphors, symbolism, cosmology, chronicles, songs, folktales, proverbs, oral traditions, and traditions of creation, to record the worldview and experiences of African women who did not leave written evidence of their lives in their own voices.

Regrettably, this African-/gendered-centered source material is not evenly or consistently distributed across

the continent. Thus, this narrative, in places, may seem to privilege one African region—for instance, the privileging of West Africa in the “Merchant Queens” chapter—over some others. When documenting early African women and gendered worlds, this lacuna is further amplified by an unevenness of available source material across time and space, resulting in histories that may appear incomplete and regionally fractured or unbalanced.

The chapters within this book have been thematically and roughly chronologically organized, with reference to regional space and time. When and wherever possible, I have sought to establish sustained change over time within reconstructions of particularized narratives. However, due to the regional- and time-specific porosity of certain source material, this has not always been possible. Thus, in those instances, I work to establish change over time by reading and analyzing one regionally based and time-defined case study against another, and in the process, pooling to completeness, an overall historical narrative.

While paying homage to the diversity of lived experience on so vast a continent, I have necessarily, in this short history, had to generalize certain African gendered realities that read true across regions and periods. I have done this not to be reductionist about the complexities of African realities but rather to present an overall narrative that is uncompromised in its accessibility and scope.

From Amma⁴ to *inkosazana*,⁵ Sobekneferu⁶ to Nzingha,⁷ Nehanda⁸ to Ahebi Ugbabe,⁹ the *kandakes* of Meroë¹⁰ to Omu Okwei,¹¹ and the daughters or *umuada* of Igboland, *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa* documents the worlds and life histories of elite African females, female principles, and (wo)men of privilege. It centers the diverse forms and systems of leadership, as well as complexities of female power at the highest level, in a multiplicity of distinct African societies.

I use the terms “female principle” and “female spiritual principle” to speak to—and give voice to—the totality of leadership and authoritative roles occupied by female entities in Africa. These terms are inclusive and speak to the manifestations of all dimensions of femaleness in society, be they in the human, seen, world (female principle) or the spiritual, unseen, world (female spiritual principle). In the human world, the female principle is embodied in women’s roles as overseers and females of privilege, including women leaders of their people or wives of male leaders. These women exercise great power, authority, and influence publicly, temporally, and in spiritual/religious spheres. My focus on the female spiritual principle (i.e., female spiritual monarchs like rain queens, spirit mediums, priestesses, goddesses, masked spirits, *sangomas*, *female* medicines, and prophetesses) is informed by African cosmology, which recognizes the existence of two distinct but interconnected worlds—the human visible or physical world,

and the more powerful and commanding spiritual invisible world. This understanding consequently allows me to underscore the power, influence, and authority of the African Great God, a spiritual force that in most African cosmological reasoning inhabits a space that is neither male nor female but is essentially a balance of male and female forces, male and female principles.

The terms “African females” and “(wo)men” also encourage an investigation into the place and power of gendered females and males in African societies. These “gendered females” include biological males who transform themselves into women. “Gendered males” include biological females or (wo)men who transform themselves into men. These transformations are encouraged by a milieu that recognizes that biological sex and gender do not coincide; that gender is a social construct and is flexible and fluid, allowing biological women to become gendered men, and biological men, gendered women. This phenomenon gives rise to distinctive African categories such as female husband, male priestess, female headman, female king, and female pharaoh.

In political matters (chapters 1 and 2), as in African cosmology, Africans recognize two political constituencies—the human and the spiritual. The gods and goddesses, or put differently, spiritual monarchs, were the real rulers of African communities and towns, and human beings were merely there to interpret the will of the spirits.¹² These spiritual monarchs occupied the spiritual political constituency and wielded

supernatural power in the human world over human beings. Conversely, the female principle of (wo)men leaders, including queens, queen mothers, princesses, merchant queens, and *female* kings, are highlighted in my discussion of African (wo)men's leadership roles in the human political constituency. Throughout the narrative, the connection between African worlds and political constituencies is documented.

In economic matters (chapter 3), African women owned the marketplace. They controlled it and defined its rules and regulations. The marketplace, although physically located in the human world, is connected, in important ways, to the spiritual world, in the sense that most African markets have a market deity in charge of the market. Thus, whether African women engage in local or long-distance trade, pottery making, weaving, or farming, the most accomplished of these women, otherwise known as merchant or market queens, understand, nurture, and subsume the power inherent in upholding the interconnectedness between the physical and spiritual worlds, often translating these connections into powerful expressions of economic power.

Let me now say a word or two about my conceptualization of power, influence, and authority. What are the differences among them? In this book, I use the term "power" to mean the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events. "Influence" means the capacity to have an effect on the character, development, or behavior of someone or

something. And “authority” means the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. It is my contention that African females, (wo)men, and the female spiritual principle have always held power, influence, and authority. And it is the myriad ways in which the totality of elite African (fe)male expression and manifestation has held power, influence, and authority that is the subject of this book.

The African Worldview: A Case for African Centeredness and Balance

Where one thing stands, something else will stand beside it.

—Igbo proverb

The African world is a world of dualities. African people identify two worlds: The human or physical/visible world is made up of the heavens, earth, and waters. It is the world of human beings and of natural forces and phenomena. The nonhuman or spiritual/invisible world is a world of divine beings, of good and bad spirits, and of departed ancestors. It is the unseen world, the world that we cannot see. These worlds are not separate, but like two halves of a kola nut, they are connected, and make up one continuous, complete, and whole African world. The visible and invisible worlds commune and interact with each other.

The African world is cyclical. This is why most Africans believe in reincarnation—the never-ending cycle

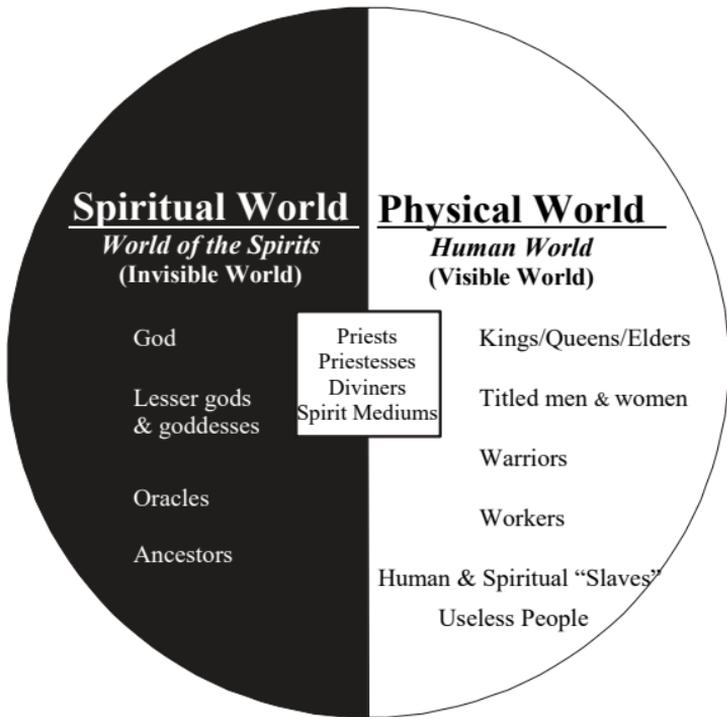


Figure I.1. The African worldview. Diagram by Nwando Achebe.

of life. A person is born, grows old, dies, and is reborn, and the cycle continues. The pouring of libation to the ancestors in Africa symbolizes the establishment of a connection between the physical human world (where libation is poured) and the spiritual nonhuman world of ancestors and spirits who inhabit the bowels of the earth. Ancestors (the reborn) also appear in the human world during periods of crisis or celebration. They are able to influence the fortunes of the living. They appear as masked spirits who protect the society as community guards or police; as courts of arbitration, which provide

binding spiritual justice in trials among human beings; or as entertainers, enthralling viewers with the beauty of the masquerade dance during celebratory periods in the life of the community, such as festivals.

Africans believe that the human and nonhuman worlds are too big to contemplate. They believe that there are spirits all around them. There are too many for one to even know; therefore, they have mediums to help explain the universe. These mediums—diviners, priests, priestesses, and spirit mediums—are special human beings. They are born into the human world but are endowed with spiritual abilities.

At the zenith of the spiritual world is God. The African God is neither male nor female (see chapter 1). God is a supernatural force that balances both male and female principles. There are as many African names for God as there are peoples—over three thousand. For instance, the Acholi of Uganda call God *Jok*; the Asante and Fante of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, *Nyame*; the Azande of Sudan, *Mbori* or *Mboli*; and the Lovedu of South Africa, *Mwari*.

God is too great to behold. Thus, She/He is assisted by a pantheon of more accessible lesser gods and goddesses. These lesser gods and goddesses are autonomous yet interdependent. They are personifications of natural phenomena. Their jurisdictions are localized. Africans have gods and goddess of land, lightning, thunder, streams, rivers, and so on. Some of these deities are neither totally male nor totally female but embody the

duality of male and female forces that African cosmology so commonly elevates. For instance, the rainbow snake *ayida-weddo* god(dess) of the Fon people of Benin is believed to possess this balance of male (the red part of the rainbow) and female (the blue part of the rainbow) principles.

Oracles are forces that explain the past and predict the future. Like gods and goddesses, oracles can be either male or female. The word “oracle” derives from the Latin *orare* (to speak). Oracles, through their priests and priestesses, “speak” their predictions and explanations.

As alluded to earlier, priests, priestesses, diviners, and spirit mediums are human beings who have been endowed with spiritual abilities to decipher, interpret, and communicate the worlds of the spirits. In general, priests and priestesses are attached to a given deity and serve to articulate the pronouncements of that deity. African cosmology typically calls for a balancing of male and female principles in the relationships between mediums and spiritual forces. Thus, when there is a god, that god is most likely served by a priestess; and when there is a goddess, the goddess is most likely served by a priest. For instance, among the Igbo of Nigeria the goddess, *ani*, is served by the priest, *ezeani*; and the Egyptian goddess of fertility, nature, and animals, *serket*, is served by a priest. It is this same balance that is also witnessed in African constructions of the Great God as both male and female.

Diviners, unlike priests and priestesses, are not attached to particular deities. They are special human

beings who work for society at large, casting beads or cowrie shells (Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria) or copper lances (Burundi), practicing invocation (Nyole, Uganda), using baskets (BaKongo of Kongo), counting stars (Amhara of Ethiopia), evoking trances (Baule of Côte d'Ivoire), using animals (Zande, Kapsiki, and Higi of Cameroon; Baule), and consulting astrological and numerological texts (Swahili) to form, understand, and explain the present and to predict events in the future. They are inspired by a god or goddess to foresee, to gain insight into a question.

Spirit mediums are human beings who mediate communication between the spirits of the dead and human beings. They do this through actual possession, in a trance or spirit channeling. The spirit of the deceased speaks through these mediums, relaying important information and messages of support. Taken collectively, these special individuals that inhabit the in-between worlds are the human voices of the unseen world, a world that they explain to human beings.

The physical visible world is the world of human beings: men, women, and children. This world, like the spiritual world, is hierarchical, and depending on the kind of society—centralized or egalitarian—is led either by kings and queens, or male and female elders, in a dual-sex or complementary fashion. Women in Africa have authority and influence because of their own achievements, not those of their husbands. Thus, a queen or queen mother is powerful in her own right as a ruler,

and not because she is married to a king or is his birth mother. In fact, queen mothers in the African system are not necessarily mothers of a sitting king.

Next in rank to these leaders of their societies are the titled men and women. Like the queens, queen mothers, or female elders, titled women are recognized for their own achievements and not those of their husbands. All African societies have male and female warriors, whose job it is to protect their societies from their enemies. The Amazons of Dahomey, an all-female regiment of warriors, who operated in the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, were particularly powerful and led their kingdom from victory to victory.

In Africa, all able-bodied individuals regardless of gender are expected to contribute to society by working outside their homes. African women have always worked, and can be seen, even today, carrying their babies on their backs while going back and forth between the farm and marketplace.

Indigenous “slavery” can be both empowering and disempowering for the enslaved. “Slavery” in Africa is not a permanent condition. Enslaved persons work for their masters, for a given period of time, after which they are able to manumit themselves and either stay in the community of their masters or find their way back to their natal communities. African “slaves” who are attached to the spiritual world either as wives, daughters, or sons of deities find their station in society elevated because of their relationship to the said deity. In many

ways, this relationship serves to empower them in relation to mere mortals.

At the very bottom of the physical world's hierarchy are useless people. These are able-bodied men and women who refuse to work. They are deemed useless because they are not contributing to society in meaningful ways.

Chapter Outline

Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa highlights the similarities and differences in (fe)male leadership experiences in various geographical spaces, times, and settings in Africa. From centralized to small-scale egalitarian societies, patrilineal to matrilineal systems, North Africa to Africa south of the Sahara, this book provides an overview of a representative group of remarkable African (wo)men and/or female spiritual principles who occupied, and continue to occupy, positions of power, authority, and influence.

This introduction serves to place the authority, influence, and power of African women and the female principle in proper context. What does it mean to be influential or powerful? Why is it important to frame our conversations about female power, authority, and influence around realities in both the spiritual and the physical worlds? This chapter presents these and other questions, while setting up the trajectory of the rest of the book.

Chapter 1, "Spiritual Monarchs: God, Rain Queens, Spirit Mediums, and Goddesses," locates the sources of

female spiritual and ritual power within various African communities. I also consider the ritual leadership of female gendered spiritual forces such as goddesses, oracles, and female medicines and their human helpers (e.g., priestesses, diviners, spirit mediums, and prophetesses). Case studies of Lovedu rain queens; Nyamwezi and Shona spirit mediums, including Nehanda; Igbo and Yoruba priestesses of gods, *male* priestesses of goddesses; and South African *sangomas* are highlighted.

Chapter 2, “Queens, Queen Mothers, Princesses, and Daughters,” documents the lives and times of a representative sample of African princesses, queens, and queen mothers from different parts of Africa at different times, including queens Nefertiti of Egypt and Amina of Hausaland; queen mothers Labotsibeni Mdluli of Swaziland (now Eswatini) and Yaa Asantewa of Ejisu, Asanteland; and princesses Inikpi of the Igala Kingdom and Magogo of Zululand. These women exerted considerable influence over men’s offices. It also documents the place that daughters in egalitarian societies occupy. The chapter poses the questions: To whom were these women accountable? On whose behalf did they exercise power?

African women were known for their economic acumen, and they often formed complex socioeconomic networks with other women and used these networks to empower themselves. Chapter 3, “Merchant Queens,” explores the power and influence of women commodity leaders, association leaders, and leaders of market

organizations, courts, and police forces. Case studies of West African merchant queens like Madam Efunroye Tinubu, Omu Okwei, other *Omus* (Nigeria), and market *ahemma* (Ghana) are highlighted. So are the life histories of some West African Mama or Nana Benzs.

Chapter 4, “*Female* Headmen, Kings, and Paramount Chiefs,” highlights the flexibility and fluidity of the African gender system that allowed women to become men, and men, women. It does this through the lens of (fe)male leaders who transformed themselves into gendered males and achieved political power and clout, occupying positions that were traditionally regarded as male. The lives and times of *female* kings like Hatshepsut, who dressed and ruled as pharaoh; Ebulejonu, the first *female* king of the Igala monarchy; Headman Wangu wa Makeri of Gĩkũyũland, colonial Kenya; and Paramount Chief Mosadi Seboko of the Baledite people of Botswana are highlighted.

Chapter 5, “African Women Today,” brings the narrative of women’s power, influence, and authority to the present. It does this by exploring women’s leadership at the highest levels, be they presidents or vice presidents, legislators, senators, or ministers; high-profile women business entrepreneurs; or leaders of megachurches and in the Islamic faith.