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Women of Power: Queens, Traders, and Revolutionaries in African History

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Introduction

This book places women at the center of African political and economic history. From ancient courts along the Nile to twentieth-century market stalls and concert stages, African women exercised authority, built trade networks, and mobilized communities to resist domination. The title, *Women of Power: Queens, Traders, and Revolutionaries in African History*, signals our commitment to a pan-African lens, while the subtitle underscores the through line of leadership, economic agency, and resistance from antiquity to the modern era. Rather than treating women as marginal actors or footnotes to male-centered narratives, we follow their decisions, alliances, and ideas as engines of change.

Our approach is both biographical and thematic. Readers encounter rulers such as the kandakes of Kush, strategist-queens like Amina of Zazzau and Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba, and movement leaders such as Yaa Asantewaa and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. Alongside these figures, we map the worlds of market queens, guild organizers, Swahili merchant households, spiritual authorities, and cultural workers whose influence flowed through credit, kinship, ritual, and song. The result is not a parade of “exceptional women,” but a sustained analysis of institutions—queenship, markets, religious offices, and resistance networks—that regularly positioned women as decision-makers.

The evidence base is deliberately wide. We draw on oral traditions and praise poetry; Arabic, Ge'ez, and Amharic chronicles; European travelogues and colonial archives; court cases about property and marriage; shipping manifests and caravan accounts; newspapers, photographs, textiles, architecture, and recorded music. Throughout, “source-based profiles” provide educators and students with curated primary excerpts, guiding questions, and classroom-ready context. These profiles foreground the craft of history: how claims are built, contested, and revised when multiple kinds of sources speak in different registers.

A central theme is economic agency. Markets across Africa were not merely places of exchange but sites of governance, regulation, and moral economy. Women managed credit, set prices, enforced standards, and negotiated with states—precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial. From the Swahili waqf endowments that underwrote commerce and education to the Nana Benz who transformed West African textile trade in the twentieth century, we reveal how control over goods, routes, and reputations shaped political outcomes as much as armies and treaties did.

Another thread is resistance. African women organized tax strikes, supply chains, intelligence networks, and cultural campaigns that redefined the boundaries of the

possible. Whether confronting imperial expansion in the Sahel, reworking legal codes at the Cape, or using print, pulpit, and performance to galvanize public opinion, they crafted repertoires of defiance suited to local conditions yet resonant across the continent. By following these strategies, we see how households, markets, and shrines became staging grounds for revolution and reform.

Finally, this book is designed as a bridge between scholarship and the classroom. Each chapter pairs narrative synthesis with teachable materials—maps, timelines, and discussion prompts—alongside suggestions for comparative modules that connect Africa to the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic worlds. We attend to language and naming, explain transliteration choices, and flag debates where evidence is thin or interpretations diverge. The goal is both analytic clarity and pedagogical utility: a resource that equips readers to question archives, recognize women's centrality to political economy, and tell fuller histories.

Women of Power invites you to read across regions and centuries with an eye for connection—how queenship in one setting resonates with market governance in another, how spiritual authority shades into statecraft, and how local protests feed transnational solidarities. Taken together, these chapters argue that when we center women's leadership, economic action, and resistance, African history looks not only different but more accurate.

CHAPTER ONE: Re-centering Women in African Histories: Questions, Methods, and Sources

For too long, the grand narratives of African history have often resembled a sparsely populated stage, with male figures dominating the spotlight. Kings, warriors, and colonial administrators strode across the historical landscape, leaving women relegated to the wings, if they appeared at all. When women were mentioned, it was frequently in supporting roles—as wives, mothers, or daughters of "important" men, rather than as significant actors in their own right. This book aims to change that by deliberately re-centering women, recognizing their profound impact on political, economic, and social transformations across the African continent.

The absence of women in historical accounts isn't unique to Africa; it's a pervasive issue in global historiography, often stemming from patriarchal biases inherent in past record-keeping and interpretation. However, in the context of African history, this oversight is particularly glaring given the demonstrable influence and agency women wielded in many societies before, during, and after colonial rule. Pre-colonial African societies, far from being uniformly patriarchal, exhibited a wide spectrum of gender relations, with women frequently holding significant power and influence in various spheres.

One of the primary challenges in re-centering women in African histories lies in the nature of historical sources themselves. Traditional archives, often products of colonial administrations or male-dominated indigenous record-keeping, tend to be silent on women's lives or present them through a biased lens. Colonial officials, for instance, often had limited and indirect contact with African women, and their records often overlooked or misunderstood women's spheres of influence. This doesn't mean women were absent from history; it means their stories were often recorded in different ways or were simply not deemed worthy of official documentation by those in power.

Therefore, historians of African women must become adept historical detectives, employing a diverse toolkit of methods and sources to piece together these often-fragmented narratives. This involves "reading against the grain" of colonial documents, carefully extracting valuable information while filtering out the prejudices of European officials. It also necessitates a broader definition of "source material" that extends beyond written records to include oral traditions, praise poetry, cultural artifacts, linguistic analysis, and even the landscape itself.

Oral traditions, passed down through generations, are a rich, albeit complex, source of information. These narratives, often preserved by griots, elders, and community

storytellers, can reveal women's leadership roles, their economic activities, and their contributions to social and political life. However, oral histories require careful interpretation, as they can evolve over time and may reflect contemporary social values as much as past realities. Cross-referencing these accounts with other forms of evidence is crucial for historical accuracy.

Material culture also offers invaluable insights. Textiles, pottery, adornments, and architectural styles can speak volumes about women's economic contributions, their social status, and their aesthetic expressions. For example, the intricate weaving techniques in Sokoto or the significance of specific garments can illuminate women's roles in trade and cultural preservation. Similarly, the layout of homes and villages can provide clues about gendered divisions of labor and social organization.

Linguistics, too, can be a powerful tool. The presence of gender-neutral language in certain African societies, like among the Yoruba, where social roles were based on seniority rather than strict gender, challenges Western-imposed notions of patriarchy. Examining terms related to power, leadership, and economic activity can reveal the historical fluidity of gender roles and the ways in which women's authority was conceptualized and expressed.

The study of African women's history has blossomed since the 1970s, propelled by the global feminist movement and a growing recognition within academia of the need for more inclusive historical narratives. Early scholarship focused on establishing women's presence as historical actors, demonstrating that they were active and not merely passive participants. This initial wave of research highlighted women's roles in economic change, political activism, and resistance movements.

However, simply adding women to existing historical frameworks is not enough. Re-centering women demands a fundamental shift in perspective, moving beyond simply documenting "great women" to understanding the broader systems and institutions that enabled or constrained female agency. This includes exploring the nuances of gender as a social construct, recognizing that "maleness or femaleness" influenced historical events and experiences. It also means challenging the traditional periodization of history, which often aligns with male-dominated political events, to instead consider cycles and rhythms more relevant to women's lives, such as those related to agriculture, reproduction, and community organization.

Understanding the diversity of pre-colonial African social structures is paramount. Matrilineal societies, where descent and inheritance are traced through the mother's line, offered women significant power and autonomy, particularly in matters of land and family. In such societies, women often had considerable sway over decisions related to land and leadership, even if formal leadership positions were held by men. The Akan people of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, exemplify matriliney, where identity, inheritance, and chieftaincy are passed through the mother's clan, and Queen

Mothers play a crucial role in selecting chiefs and advising on governance.

Beyond matrilineal systems, many African societies employed "dual-sex political systems" where parallel institutions of governance existed for men and women, each managing their own affairs. This ensured that women's voices were represented in decision-making processes and that their interests were addressed. The Benin queen mothers, the Dahomey, the Asante, and the Buganda queen mothers all exemplify arrangements that ensured women's involvement in the socio-economic and political affairs of their communities. Such structures reveal a complex understanding of power that often eludes Western, patriarchal frameworks.

The arrival of Islam and Christianity, and later colonialism, significantly altered these pre-existing gender dynamics. Often, colonial administrations imposed European patriarchal norms, undermining the political and economic power women had traditionally held. For example, colonial legal systems often granted men precedence over women in matters of marriage and divorce, disrupting customary laws that may have afforded women greater rights. The focus on male chiefs and leaders by colonial powers also led to the marginalization of female leaders and institutions.

However, even under these pressures, African women consistently found ways to assert their agency and resist new forms of subjugation. They participated actively in nationalist movements, sometimes with motivations distinct from those of men, such as concerns over taxation or the desire to improve female education. They mobilized through market associations, religious organizations, and clandestine networks, demonstrating a remarkable resilience in the face of shifting power structures.

The challenge, and indeed the opportunity, for this book is to weave these diverse threads into a coherent and compelling narrative. It means asking new questions: Not just "What did women do?" but "How did gender shape political economies?" and "How did women's experiences fundamentally alter the course of African history?" It means recognizing that women were not a monolithic group, and their experiences differed significantly based on social class, cultural norms, religious background, ethnicity, and political structures.

Ultimately, re-centering women in African histories is not merely about correcting past omissions; it is about achieving a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the continent's past. When we acknowledge the full spectrum of human experience and agency, the historical landscape becomes richer, more complex, and ultimately, more truthful. This book endeavors to provide that fuller picture, illuminating the queens, traders, and revolutionaries who, despite often being overlooked, were indispensable architects of African societies.

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