

Teaching Africa in World History: Painting Scenes, Performing Stories, Creating Conversations

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Despite our modern surroundings, we transport ourselves back in time four centuries and across the Atlantic to a Portuguese outpost on the coast of Angola. Surrounded on three sides by some ninety students in an amphitheater-style classroom at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I throw myself onto the ground in the midst of recounting a chapter in African history. Crouching on all fours, my head down, I call out: "Who will play Queen Nzinga?!" My heart is racing, not knowing if I will get a response. After a few long seconds, one brave soul among the sea of students breaks the silence and quietly says, "I will." Relieved, I jump to my feet and exclaim, "Now let's give our queen a round of applause!" When I then ask for a volunteer to perform the role of a Portuguese official, several students raise their hands; the second time is always much easier.

It is the year 1622, and we are about to perform (improvisation-style) an extraordinary scene between Nzinga of the Kingdom of Ndongo and Portugal's imperial representative, Governor João Correia de Souza. The Atlantic slave trade is in full force in the early seventeenth century, when Nzinga, not yet queen, but emissary, steps onto the historical stage. The Portuguese, based in Luanda on the coast, have taken control of a considerable part of the interior with the help of the Imbangala, Ndongo's neighboring enemies, and are seeking to expand their realm and profits from the trade in human beings to Brazil, New Granada, and the Caribbean, where Central Africans are forcibly being taken by the tens of thousands to cultivate the land, work the mines, and serve the colonial elite.

War, which has been sweeping across the Atlantic, compels ever-changing alliances between Africans, as well as between Africans and Europeans. War captives are in abundance and slave raiding has become commonplace. The Kingdom of Ndongo, which Nzinga represents on behalf of her brother, the Ngola Mbande, itself runs several hundred miles inland. Her task: to negotiate a treaty that will keep her people safe from attack in exchange for routing new captives to the Portuguese. When she finally meets the governor to begin discussions, however, she is refused a seat. The governor, who is himself seated, does nothing. But in a move now performed by a student in the classroom, Nzinga signals to one of her female attendants (yours truly) who promptly gets (back) on all fours. The Ndongo special envoy calmly assumes her "seat," and gracefully, but forcefully, proceeds with the discussion. Not only is she successful in negotiating a treaty, but she does so on her own terms, as an equal.¹

¹Linda M. Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), and Patricia Romero, "Queen Nzinga of Angola," in *Problems in African History: The Precolonial Centuries*, ed. Robert O. Collins and Ruth Iyob (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2014), 175.