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10-2021

## [Book Review] Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa by Nwando Achebe

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### Citation Details

Alozie, B. Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa by Nwando Achebe in African Studies Review in African Studies Review 64, 2 (October 2021), E1-E3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.31>

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# BOOK REVIEW

**Nwando Achebe. *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa*.** Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2020. 224 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$16.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8214-2407-0.

Have you ever heard of small but mighty? *Female Monarchs* aptly fits that description. Traveling through time and across the African continent in a roughly chronological order, Nwando Achebe uses a slew of case studies to (re)frame and (re)tell the African-gendered narrative in solidly African-centered and gendered terms. Breaking from Western perspectives and relying on distinctly African-derived sources and methods, she weaves together the worlds and experiences of African females who occupied positions of power, authority, and influence. In *Female Monarchs*, the author not only restores voice and dignity to a people but also places elite African women at the center of ancient and contemporary history.

At the core of her thesis is the phenomenon of “gendered males” and “gendered females,” which refers to the way that the interconnected universe allows biological males to transform themselves into females and biological females to transform themselves into males. Achebe argues that “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” (24). This phenomenon gives rise to distinctive African categories such as female husbands, male priestesses, female headmen, female kings, and female pharaohs. All of which the author expertly explores. Achebe’s portrayal of their combined power, authority, and influence leads to an analogous examination of contemporary African women as prominent political officeholders, religious leaders, and entrepreneurs.

*Female Monarchs* starts off with an introduction contextualizing the authority, influence, and power of African women. The first two chapters account for the two realities of African cosmology: the physical world of humans and the invisible, spiritual realm of gods, goddesses, and occult forces. The author locates the sources of female spiritual and ritual powers within various African communities and documents the lives of a representative sample of African princesses, queens, and queen mothers such as

Maselekwane Modjadji I, Ahhotep, Nefertiti, Amina, Hwanjile, and Tassi Hangbe, from different parts of Africa and different historical situations. Chapter Three demonstrates the power and influence of women commodity/market leaders, association leaders, and leaders of organizations, courts, and police forces. Some of these merchant queens include Efuronye Tinubu, Omu Okwei, Maggy Lawson, and Justine Chodaton. By connecting the physicality of the marketplace to the spiritual world, Achebe contends that these “merchant or market queens” were able to “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” (25). In Chapter Four, “*Female Headmen, Kings, and Paramount Chiefs*,” the author makes an insightful revelation. Through the lens of seven women leaders, she reveals the fluidity and flexibility of the African gender system, which allowed women to become men and vice versa. This translated into leadership, which allowed some exceptional African women such as Nzingha, Wangu wa Makeri, and Ahebi Ugbabe to transform themselves into gendered men in order to rule their societies, not as princesses or queens, but as headmen, paramount kings, and chiefs. Chapter Five relates the narrative to the present by exploring modern African women’s leadership roles at the highest levels in three important spheres of political, religious, and economic endeavor. She discusses the lives of notable women such as Elizabeth Domitien and Mana Sitti Jamaladdin. Achebe concludes by answering the question she asked in the preface to her book: “whose histories, whose stories, whose archives?” (11), to which she emphatically responds: “... *our* [her]stories, *our* stories, *our* archives” (184).

Unquestionably, Achebe tells her story with every stroke of pride, truth, and Africanness. *Female Monarchs* has numerous strengths. It is compelling, unfiltered, and unapologetic in its African-centered narrative and in feminizing knowledge. Also, Achebe goes beyond already-known characters to introduce readers to African women whose stories they are unlikely to learn from other sources, from the lives of famous Queens Ahhotep and Amina to less well-known figures such as King Ahebi, the first female king of colonial Nigeria, and Isabel dos Santos, Africa’s richest woman and the continent’s most powerful and influential businesswoman. Most refreshingly, this pocket-sized book, with its beautiful art cover, is thoroughly engaging and accessible. While reading, one can easily forget that it is not a work of fiction, due to its almost cinematic narrative style. The reader feels included in a conversation with a seasoned expert who is mindful of her audience and does not talk down to them.

One shortfall of the book is its uneven chronological sequence, which made it difficult for the author to “establish sustained change over time within reconstructions of particularized narratives” (22). This is not surprising, given the regional and time-specific porosity of her source materials across a vast continent—a challenge which the author acknowledges. Also, the book’s brevity means that Achebe cannot go into extensive detail about each historical perspective or character. Admirably, she provides just enough

of an overview of each woman's history to whet the reader's appetite, but not so much that it bogs down the reading experience. Overall, *Female Monarchs* is a must-read for all lovers of women's history and a great resource for teaching feminism, sexuality, queer identities, and governance in Africa. Indeed, Achebe deserves high praise for her very powerful contribution to gender and African history.

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doi:[10.1017/asr.2021.31](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.31)

### For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Geiger, Susan. 1999. "Women and Gender in African Studies." *African Studies Review*, 42 (3): 21–33. doi:[10.2307/525201](https://doi.org/10.2307/525201).
- Kapteijns, Lidwien and Vianello, Alessandra. 2017. "Women's Legal Agency and Property in the Court Records of Late Nineteenth-Century Brava." *History in Africa*, 44: 133–97. doi:[10.1017/hia.2017.2](https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2017.2).
- Shettima, Kole Ahmed. 1995. "Engendering Nigeria's Third Republic." *African Studies Review*, 38 (3): 61–98. doi:[10.2307/524793](https://doi.org/10.2307/524793).