

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

Vol. 5, No. 1 (Jan. 2020)

A Publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*
With U.S. offices at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission
at Boston University

©2020 *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB.org)



The *Journal of African Christian Biography* was launched in 2016 to complement and make stories from the on-line *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (www.DACB.org) more readily accessible and immediately useful in African congregations and classrooms.

Now published quarterly, with all issues available on line, the intent of the *JACB* is to promote the research, publication, and use of African Christian biography within Africa by serving as an academically credible but publicly accessible source of information on Christianity across the continent. Content will always include biographies already available in the database itself, but original contributions related to African Christian biography or to African church history are also welcome. While the policy of the *DACB* itself has been to restrict biographical content to subjects who are deceased, the *JACB* plans to include interviews with select living African church leaders and academics.

Send all editorial correspondence to: jjbonk@bu.edu and joacb@bu.edu.

Editor: Jonathan Bonk

Associate Editors: Jesse Mugambi, Dana Robert, Nimi Wariboko

Managing Editor: Michèle Sigg

Book Notes Editor: Frances (Beth) Restruck

Contributing Editors:

Esther Acolatse

Madipoane Masenya

Gabriel Leonard Allen

Jesse Mugambi

James N. Amanze

Philomena Njeri Mwaura

Deji Isaac Ayegboyin

Paul Nchoji Nkwi

Edison Muhindo Kalengyo

Thomas Oduro

Jean-Claude Loba Mkole

Evangelos E. M. Thiani

ISSN 2572-0651

The *Journal of African Christian Biography* is a publication of *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at Boston University School of Theology, 745 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA. 02215, U.S.A.

ADVERTISING: Please address any questions regarding advertising in the *JACB* to Managing Editor Michèle Sigg at dacb@bu.edu

SUBSCRIPTIONS: Sign up for a free subscription to the *JACB* on the *DACB* homepage and at www.dacb.org/journal/

Table of Contents

Introduction to the January 2020 Issue	4
Kimpa Vita (A).....	4
Kimpa Vita (B).....	6
Kimpa Vita (C).....	7
The Life and Visions of Krəstos Šämra, a Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Woman Saint By Wendy Laura Belcher.....	9
Queen Njinga and Her Faiths: Religion and Politics in Seventeenth- Century Angola By Linda M. Heywood.....	32
Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa Compiled by Beth Restricks, Head, BU African Studies Library	48

Graphics from the Wikimedia commons and Adire African Textiles,
<https://www.adireafricantextiles.com/> (with permission).

Introduction to the January 2020 Issue: Three Women of the Fifteenth to Seventeenth Century

The three women whose stories are featured in the pages of this issue were all fierce and determined leaders who radically changed their cultural, spiritual, or political contexts. Kimpa Vita's life is narrated in three DACB biographies, while the stories of Krəstos Šämra and Queen Njinga appear in two articles serialized from the volume *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges* (Cluster Publications, 2018).

Kimpa Vita (1682-1706) led what is probably the earliest religio-political indigenous movement in Africa—an attempt to unify the kingdom for which the Portuguese burned her at the stake. Nevertheless, that tragic ending did not diminish her legacy which continues in the contemporary African Independent Church (AIC) movement of which she is considered the forerunner.

Next, Wendy Belcher presents the story of Krəstos Šämra (mid-15th to early 16th century) who was the founder of a monastery and a spiritual leader in the same category as such “visionary medieval women saints as the English Christians Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe” (p. 11). Today, she is the most popular female saint in Ethiopia, especially among women, and the annual festival in her honor draws large crowds to the monastery she founded on Lake Ṭana. Belcher's article is just as much the story of Krəstos Šämra herself as it is of the *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra*, the hagiographical text from which her story is drawn.

And finally, Queen Njinga (1582-1663) was an astute politician with extraordinary diplomatic acumen who struggled to resist Portuguese rule. Linda Heywood's article explores “the torturous route that Queen Njinga of Ndongo and Matamba took towards Roman Catholicism” (p. 33), in particular how, in her rise to power, she did not hesitate to use her Christian baptism as a political ploy to gain influence and prestige among her people. Nevertheless, according to Heywood, her deathbed confession “leaves no doubt that, however she lived her life, she died a convert to Catholic Christianity” (p. 47).

It is generally quite daunting to retrieve historical accounts of women, especially in Africa, because of the lack of written sources. Belcher points out, “Almost nothing is known about the lives of medieval African women. In the absence of information, many assume they all lived short, brutish lives” (p. 20). For this reason, the *Journal of African Christian Biography* is proud to offer to our readers the stories of these exceptional women from the early modern period.

Michèle Miller Sigg
Managing Editor

valid conclusions. Purposive sampling method was used to select sixty church leaders while random sampling method was used to select 184 lay congregations. The study was conducted through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and closed-ended questionnaires. Findings were presented in forms of narratives, figures and percentages that were cross tabulated. The findings showed that although women were spiritually gifted, they were concentrated in the low cadres of the churches under study. This positioning had been occasioned by limited understanding of Pentecostal gender ideology, the literal interpretation of scripture, the influence of traditional Gikuyu culture, and the lack of theological training. It was deemed necessary for members of the churches under study to acquire theological education. This was in order for them to understand their identity and hence the Pentecostal beliefs, critical approaches to the Bible, and the need for self-criticism. Some of the study recommendations include, among others, that the churches under study utilize grammatical-historical method in interpreting the biblical texts used to position women and further do a critical analysis of the biblical and Gikuyu cultures. The hope is that through this and other studies, the marginalization of women would be deconstructed and the churches would empower women. Suggestions were made that further study could be done on other areas such as the history of these churches, their salvation doctrine, and their spiritual healing methods.

time women have been discouraged to exercise their spiritual gifts fully due to different interpretations and understandings of the Bible and cultural prejudices.

Today, the ministry of women is evident in every sphere of the church. In the ACK diocese of Kirinyaga, women are rendering an important service to the church. They are participating and contributing to both the physical and spiritual needs and to the development of the church. Their ministry includes being leaders in various women church groups and congregations; being evangelists; serving as worship leaders; preaching; doing pastoral work; music; managing church stewardship and generosity; supporting the clergy; helping in the construction of churches, vicarages, church halls, kitchens, nursery schools, and dispensaries; running weekly fellowships; singing in choirs; teaching children in the Sunday school; advising the youth; doing hospitality; ensuring cleanliness; engaging in charity and social work. They are also serving as ordained clergy in the parishes. The church needs to identify, recognize, and encourage women's spiritual gifts which enable them to fulfill these ministries. The research findings indicate that very few women are involved in the higher decision making bodies of the church. In considering the ministry of the church, gender should not be the determining factor but the calling, competence, and ability of the persons. Women should be empowered as well as men and equal opportunities for the ministry should be accorded to them without any discrimination.

Migwi, Joseph Maina. **The Place of Women in Selected African Pentecostal Churches in Limuru Sub-County Kiambu County, Kenya.** Kenyatta University. Thesis, Master of Arts (M.A.) in Religious Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences. 2016.

<http://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/handle/123456789/14996>

Abstract: This study investigated the positioning of women in three African Pentecostal churches in Limuru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya. It was noted that Pentecostals believe in the democratization of charisma because all Pentecostal members have the possibility of possessing spiritual gifts such as those of leadership. However, the three selected indigenous Pentecostal churches were officially denying women administrative church leadership positions. The objective of the study was thus to assess this positioning of women, the informing factors, and ways that could enhance the inclusion of women in administrative church leadership. A theoretical framework made of social construction theory and engendering cultural hermeneutics theory was utilized. The study was done using a mixed method: qualitative and quantitative approaches were concurrently used to collect and analyze data and both findings were corroborated to draw

Kimpa Vita (A)

Alternative Spellings: Dona Beatrice

1682-1706

The Antonian Movement

Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola

Kimpa Vita was a popular female prophet in the kingdom of the Kongo, a precursor of the prophetic figures of the independent churches, and the creator of a movement that used Christian symbols but revitalized traditional Kongo cultural roots.

The latter half of the seventeenth century was one of cultural disintegration and political disarray in the Kongo (which included parts of present-day Congo, Zaïre, and Angola). Portuguese forces had defeated the Kongo, the Christianity of AFONSO I had fallen into syncretism, a mix of Christian and African traditional religions, and three ruling families contended for power. Into this political and cultural vacuum a number of messianic prophets arose to proclaim their socio-religious visions. The most important of these was Kimpa Vita, a young girl who believed herself possessed by the spirit of St. Anthony of Padua, a popular Catholic saint and miracle worker. She began preaching in the Kongolese city of San Salvador, which she said God wished restored as the capital. Her call to unity drew strong support among the peasants, who flocked to the city, which Kimpa identified as the biblical Bethlehem. She told her followers that Jesus, Mary and other Christian saints were really Kongolese.

Kimpa conspired with the general of Pedro IV, one of the contenders for the throne, but she was captured. Both Kimpa and her baby - conceived by her "guardian angel" - were burned at the stake for heresy, at the instigation of Capuchin missionaries.

The Antonian movement, which Kimpa began, outlasted her. The Kongo king Pedro IV used it to unify and renew his kingdom. Her ideas remained among the peasants, appearing in various messianic cults until, two centuries later, it took new form in the preaching of Simon KIMBANGU.

Norbert C. Brockman

Bibliography:

Dictionary of African Biography. Algonac, MI, and New York: Reference Publications, vol. 1, 1977; vol. 2, 1979.

Lipschutz, Mark R., and R. Kent Rasmussen. *Dictionary of African Historical*

Biography. 2nd edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Collateral sources:

Thornton, John K. *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

This article is reproduced, with permission, from *An African Biographical Dictionary*, copyright © 1994, edited by Norbert C. Brockman, Santa Barbara, California. All rights reserved.

Kimpa Vita (B)

1682-1706

The Antonian Movement

Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola

Known by her Christian name, Dona Beatrice, she emerged as a popular prophetic figure after a long period of political decline among the Kongo. She claimed to be the incarnation of the Portuguese Saint Anthony. For two years she preached a form of Christian anti-Catholicism which emphasized traditional Kongo symbolism and cultural roots. The Kongo king, Pedro IV, under pressure from missionaries at his court, had her burned at the stake as a heretic. Her Antonian church survived her passing and briefly provided a focus for the revitalization of the kingdom in the 18th century.

Mark R. Lipschutz and R. Kent Rasmussen

Bibliography:

Jadin, Louis. "Le Congo et la secte des Antoniens. . . 1694-1718." *Bulletin de l'institut historique belge de Rome* (1961): 411-615.

Balandier, Georges. *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo*. Translated by H. Weaver. New York: Pantheon Books, 1968.

This article is reproduced, with permission, from *Dictionary of African Historical Biography*, 2nd edition, copyright © 1986, by Mark R. Lipschutz and R. Kent Rasmussen, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California.

rulers in history, a woman who rivaled Elizabeth I and Catherine the Great in political cunning and military prowess. Linda Heywood offers the first full-length study in English of Queen Njinga's long life and political influence, revealing how this Cleopatra of central Africa skillfully navigated—and ultimately transcended—the ruthless, male-dominated power struggles of her time.

In 1626, after being deposed by the Portuguese, she transformed herself into a prolific slave trader and ferocious military leader, waging wars against the Portuguese colonizers and their African allies. Surviving multiple attempts to kill her, Njinga conquered the neighboring state of Matamba and ruled as queen of Ndongo-Matamba. At the height of her reign in the 1640s Njinga ruled almost one-quarter of modern-day northern Angola. Toward the end of her life, weary of war, she made peace with Portugal and converted to Christianity, though her devotion to the new faith was questioned.

Who was Queen Njinga? There is no simple answer. In a world where women were subjugated by men, she repeatedly outmaneuvered her male competitors and flouted gender norms, taking both male and female lovers. Today, Njinga is revered in Angola as a national heroine and honored in folk religions, and her complex legacy continues to resonate, forming a crucial part of the collective memory of the Afro-Atlantic world." ([Harvard University Press](#))

Open Access – Theses

Mwangi, Magdaline N. **Women ministry in the church at the grassroots level: a case study of the Anglican Church of Kenya in Ngirambu Archdeaconry of the Diocese of Kirinyaga**. University of Nairobi. Thesis, Master of Arts (M.A.) in Philosophy and Religious Studies. 2011.

<http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke:8080/handle/123456789/3124>

Abstract: This study focuses on the ministry of women in the Anglican Church of Kenya in Ngirambu archdeaconry of the diocese of Kirinyaga. It argues that women's contribution and participation in the life of the church at the grassroots level is very important and has enabled it to stabilize. In many congregations there are more women than men and therefore their contribution is more than that of men. This study shows that in the Bible women were involved in the church ministry right from its beginning. It has also traced their ministry in the history of the church. The research indicates how their ministry is diverse. There has been an effort by the church to support their ministry. However the study also reveals that in some cases their ministry is not fully recognized and thus women face many challenges and hindrances. For a long

Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman. Princeton University Press, 2015. \$39.95 ([Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0691164215)) ISBN-10: 0691164215 ; ISBN-13: 978-0691164212

Description: “This award-winning English translation is of the earliest-known book-length biography of an African woman, and one of the few lives of an African woman written by Africans before the nineteenth century. As such, it makes available for the first time this exceedingly rare and valuable picture of the experiences and thoughts of Africans, especially women, before the modern era. It is also an extraordinary account of a remarkable life—full of vivid dialogue, heartbreak, and triumph.

The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros (1672) tells the story of an Ethiopian saint who led a successful nonviolent movement to preserve African Christian beliefs in the face of European proto-colonialism. When the Jesuits tried to convert the Ethiopians from their ancient form of Christianity, Walatta Petros (1592-1642), a noblewoman and the wife of one of the emperor’s counselors, risked her life by leaving her husband, who supported the conversion effort, and leading the struggle against the Jesuits. After her death, her disciples wrote this book, praising her as a friend of women, a devoted reader, a skilled preacher, and a radical leader. One of the earliest stories of African resistance to European influence, this biography also provides a picture of domestic life, including Walatta Petros’s celibate life-long relationship with a female companion.

Richly illustrated with dozens of color illustrations from early manuscripts, this groundbreaking volume provides an authoritative and highly readable translation along with an extensive introduction. Other features include a chronology of Walatta Petros’s life, maps, a comprehensive glossary, and detailed notes on textual variants.

Readers can read the whole book or can leap right into the story of the saint’s life, which runs from pages 77 to 272 (with lots of notes, so in effect about 100 pages of reading). Instructors may think about assigning the Preface (pp. xvii-xxxiv), to orient students, and the section titled “The Translation of the Life-Struggles of Walatta Petros” (pp. 77-272).” ([Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0691164215))

Heywood, Linda M. **Njinga of Angola: Africa’s Warrior Queen.** Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Reprint edition, 2019. \$12.99 ([Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0674237447)) ISBN-10: 0674237447 ; ISBN-13: 978-0674237445

Description: “Though largely unknown in the Western world, the seventeenth-century African queen Njinga was one of the most multifaceted

All rights reserved.

Kimpa Vita (C)

1685-1706

The Antonian Movement

Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola

Kimpa Vita (circa 1685-July 2, 1706), whose baptized name was Dona Beatriz, founded a religious sect known as the Antonians. The goal of this movement was to restore the fortunes of the once glorious kingdom of Kongo and to Africanize Christianity.

After October 1665, when the Portuguese had defeated the Kongo army, the capital San Salvador was abandoned and the ruling dynasty was split by rivalry between the Ki-Mpanza and the Ki-Nlaza families. Members of these families ruled at three different locations, San Salvador, Bula, 100 km (60 mi) northwest of San Salvador, and Kibangu, south of San Salvador near Ambriz. Within the context of the political confusion and moral despair which gripped the kingdom in the late 1600s and early 1700s, several religious figures arose wishing to reunify the state and instill hope in the people.

The most important prophet was the young Kimpa Vita, or Dona Beatriz, who believed she had received a visitation from the popular Saint Anthony. According to Kimpa Vita, Saint Anthony became incarnate in her body so that she actually was the saint. Compelled by the Christian God to announce his word and to restore the former Kongo capital San Salvador, Kimpa Vita began preaching in the ruined city.

Rejecting missionary domination over Christianity, Kimpa Vita taught that Jesus Christ actually had been born in San Salvador which she called Bethlehem, that he had been baptized at Nzundi, about 150 km (100 mi) north of the capital, which she named Nazareth, and that Jesus Christ, the Holy Virgin Mary, and Saint Francis were black people of the Kongo. Furthermore, Kimpa Vita prophesied that God would punish the people if they did not immediately return to San Salvador. Initially most of the chiefs did not support her, but the common people, longing for unity and peace, joined the movement in great numbers. They believed that the Christian God was, at long last, responding to the plight of the Kongo kingdom and that he would provide great wealth for the inhabitants.

About the same time, Mpanzu Mvemba, or Pedro IV, who was the Mani Kibangu (ruler of Kibangu), gained recognition as Mani Kongo (ruler of the entire Kongo) and attempted to reunify the once powerful Kongo state. Thus,

he sent his general Pedro Constantino with an army towards San Salvador to build villages and plant gardens in preparation for people to resettle the old capital. Hoping himself to gain control of a reunified Kongo, however, Constantino joined with Kimpa Vita against Pedro IV. Pedro IV, who did not want to lose control of his kingdom, came north from Kibangu to defeat the rebels.

Arrested with a baby, whom she claimed had been conceived with her guardian angel, Kimpa Vita was tried for crimes against the crown and the Christian faith. At the instigation of Capuchin missionaries, both she and the child were burned at the stake on July 2, 1706. Kimpa Vita played a major role in the renewal and reunification of the previously divided Kongo kingdom. Together with Mpanzu Mvemba or Pedro IV, she was responsible for briefly restoring the Kongo in the early 1700s. Although she died shortly after she began preaching, her politico-religious ideas inspired messianic movements struggling against colonial oppression and exploitation two centuries later. The prophet Simon Kimbangu has frequently been regarded as the spiritual and political descendant of the martyred Kimpa Vita.

Tsimba Mabilia

Bibliography:

G. Balandier, *La vie quotidienne au royaume du Kongo du XVIème au XVIIIème siècle*, Paris, 1965, English translation by Helen Weaver published as *Daily Life in the Kingdom of Kongo from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, New York, 1968; L. de Luques, *Relations sur le Congo: 1700-1717*, (“Narratives on the Congo: 1700-1717”), French translation by J. Cuvelier, Brussels, 1953; L. Julien, “Le Congo et la secte des Antoniens, Restauration du royaume sous Pedro IV et la ‘Saint Antoine’ congolaise: 1694-1718” (“The Congo and the Antoine Sect, Restoration of the Realm Under Pedro IV and the Congolese ‘Saint Anthony’”), *Bulletin de l’Institut Historique Belge de Roma*, XXXIII, 1961, p. 411; W. G. L. Randles, *L’ancien royaume du Kongo des origines à la fin du XIXème siècle* (“The Ancient Kingdom of Kongo from its Origins to the End of the 19th Century”), Paris, The Hague, 1968.

This article was reprinted from *The Encyclopaedia Africana Dictionary of African Biography* (In 20 Volumes). Volume Two: Sierra Leone-Zaire. Ed. L. H. OfosuAppiah. New York: Reference Publications Inc., 1979. All rights reserved.

content is especially aimed at students who prepare for the ministry and for Christian education. The book is, however, also invaluable for all scholars of the History of Christianity.” ([Amazon.com](#))

Duárté, Jose Manual. **Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita: A Visionária do Reino do Congo.** (Portuguese Edition) Lisbon: Chiado Books, 2019. [\\$36.00 \(Amazon\)](#) ; [3 Euros \(ebook\); 12 Euros \(paper\)](#), [Chiado Books](#). ISBN-10: 989526092X, ISBN-13: 978-9895260928

Description: “Porque escrever este pequeno contributo para ajudar a conhecer em Portugal a figura notável de Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita? Em primeiro lugar, porque sempre estranhámos que, com raríssimas exceções de pequenos meios académicos, esta figura fosse entre nós quase totalmente desconhecida. Em segundo lugar, porque se trata de uma mulher africana que, nos finais dos sec. XVII e início do sec. XVIII, desempenhou um papel político, mítico-religioso e profético, para procurar salvar e fazer reviver o reino kongo com um carisma português.” [Amazon.com](#) (Translation: “Why write this small contribution to help Portugal learn of the notable figure Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita? First of all, because it is surprising that this figure, with the exception of a few academic works, has remained largely unknown. Secondly, because this is an African woman, who at the end of the 17th century and beginning of the 18th, played a political, mythical, religious and prophetic role in seeking to save and revive the Kingdom of Kongo.”)

About the author: “José Duarte de Jesus, nascido em Lisboa em 1935, é formado em História e Filosofia pela U. Lisboa e doutorado em História das Relações Internacionais pela U. Nova. Foi diplomata, tendo servido em vários países e como embaixador foi acreditado em Kinshasa, Brazzaville, Bangui, Bujumbura e Kigali, assim como em Pequim, Pyongyang e Ulan Bator e acabado a carreira no Canada. Depois de jubilado tem sido docente universitário convidado e investigador no Instituto do Oriente (ISCSP-UL) e no IPRI(UNL).” ([Chiado Books](#)) (Translation: “José Duarte de Jesus was born in Lison in 1935, has a degree in History and Philosophy from the University of Lisbon and a doctorate in the History of International Relations from Universidade Nova. He has been a diplomat, serving in various countries and as ambassador in Kinshasa, Brazzaville, Bangui, Bujumbura, and Kigali. Also Pequim, Pyongyang, Ulan Bator and lastly, Canada. He has since served as a guest professor at the Instituto do Oriente (ISCSP-UL) and IPRI(UNL).”)

Galawdewos (Author), Wendy Laura Belcher (Translator), Michael Kleiner (Translator). **The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A**

Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa

Compiled by Beth Restrick, Head, BU African Studies Library

Paas, Steven. **Christianity in Eurafrica: A History of the Church in Europe and Africa.** Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing. \$40.00 ([Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)) 2017. ISBN-10: 0998147729 ; ISBN-13: 978-0998147727

Description: “Nothing has bound Africa and Europe more together than the history of Christianity. From Paradise onwards, the Church has been the communion of believers. As the Body of Jesus Christ, she started in Jerusalem. Through the proclamation of the Gospel, the Church soon reached parts of Africa and the Atlantic Coast, from where—after the Middle Ages and particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries—it took deep root in Sub-Saharan Africa. Today, in post-modern times, African Christianity is being challenged to re-plant the Church in secularized Europe.

This textbook for learners and teachers of the History of the Church focuses on the West and the South, on Europe and Africa, the continents whose histories have been increasingly intertwined since Antiquity. Since the 1960s, the classical dependence of the South on the North has changed dramatically. There is a clear shift in the center of gravity of Christianity from the north to the south Atlantic, making African Christianity increasingly important. The future of European Christianity largely depends on a much-needed shift to mission-mindedness in the African churches.

Christianity in Eurafrica is an impressive book, meticulously researched and well written by a professional scholar. The first chapter includes some valuable historiographical guidelines for writing and understanding the History of the Church. In its first part, the book traces the history of the Church in the Middle East and Europe, explaining the roots of theological diversity to this day. In the second part, the author narrates how the Faith moved south, took root in African soil and grew independently. Many pictures and illustrations serve to further enliven the account. Steven Paas taught Theology in Malawi for many years. He writes from a deep knowledge of and love for the Lord’s Church, especially in Africa and Europe.

This textbook on the history of Christianity in two continents fits with the curricula of institutions of theological training in Africa and the West. The

The Life and Visions of Krəstos Śämra, a Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Woman Saint

By Wendy Laura Belcher
(translations with Michael Kleiner)

Three thousand years of writing in Africa has yielded perhaps ten known biographies of African women written by Africans before the nineteenth century.¹ Autobiographies by premodern African women are even rarer; an early hagiography about an Ethiopian woman, however, may constitute such a text. *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* (The Life-Struggles of Krəstos Śämra [Christ Delights in Her]), written in an Ethiopian monastery sometime between 1450 and 1508, is about a saintly woman who lived in the fifteenth century (no exact dates of her birth or death appear in her hagiography).² The text gives a short overview of Krəstos Śämra’s life in the third person, but then proceeds in the first person as Krəstos Śämra describes a series of her religious visions, including one in which she attempts to reconcile Christ and Satan. Although the text contains a few biographical details about her, it is more of an intellectual autobiography, the narrative of one woman’s philosophy and her belief in the possibilities for healing a broken world. As such, this text expands our understanding of the global female

¹. Perhaps the earliest book-length biography of an African woman is *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* (Life-Struggles of Wälättä Peṭros [Daughter of (St) Peter]), a hagiography of an Ethiopian woman who led a nonviolent religious movement against European incursions in the 1600s. See Gälawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*, trans. and ed. Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015). Earlier editions of this work include *Vitae sanctorum indigenarum*, 1, *Acta S. Walatta Petros*, ed. Carlo Conti Rossini, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 68; *Scriptores Aethiopici* 30 (Rome: Karolus de Luigi; Paris: Carolus Poussielgue Bibliopola; Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1912; repr., 1954). *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* is filled with major and minor historical figures, events, and places as well as having been written by her followers just thirty years after Wälättä Peṭros’s death. It constitutes an oral history with many anecdotes by those who knew her and proceeds largely as the narrative of an entire particular life, with almost no miraculous events.

². Filəppos, *Atti di Krestos Samra*, ed. Enrico Cerulli, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (Leuven: L. Durbecq, 1956). Krəstos Śämra’s name is also spelled in Latin letters as Christos Samra, Kirstos Semra, Krestos Samra, Kristos Samra, and Kristos Semra, all attempts to transcribe her proper name as it appears in the characters (called *fidäl*) of the ancient language of Gəʿəz: ክርስቶስ:ሠምራ.

visionary tradition, which tends to be oriented more toward reconciliation than damnation. Krəstos Šämra must be placed alongside such visionary medieval women saints as the English Christians Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, the Muslims Rabia of Basri and Lalla Aziza, and the Hindu Mirabai. Despite its value, her hagiography has been translated only into Amharic and Italian; in this chapter portions appear in English for the first time.³

Today, Krəstos Šämra is Ethiopia's most popular female saint. Thousands attend her annual festival at the wealthy monastery she founded, at G^wang^wət, on southeastern Lake Tana, in the Ethiopian highlands. Her festival day is August 30; many online videos record the pilgrimages, hymns, and celebrations in her honor.⁴ Churches and monasteries in Ethiopia are named after her and devoted to her. She holds a special place in women's hearts as the saint most likely to help women conceive, give birth to a healthy child, and survive childbirth.

The Text as Autobiography

Before turning to the content of this fascinating text and a translation of two of its most interesting sections, let us consider whether this text should be called an autobiography, specifically, an African woman's autobiography. Researchers can never know for sure if *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra* represents the actual words of a particular woman, faithfully recorded. Several elements of the text militate against such a conclusion; several other elements support the conclusion. Having considered both options, I see no compelling reason to dispute *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra's* own claim that it represents the autobiography of an African woman.

One element militating against calling the work an autobiography is that the saint did not handwrite it herself. That is, the text's scribe is a monk named Filəppos, who claims that he was Krəstos Šämra's amanuensis, hearing directly from her the true story of her life and thought and writing it down. Quite a few hagiographies of women are as-told-to documents with male amanuenses,

³. *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra* (Addis Ababa: Täsfa Gäbrä Šəllase, 1983); *Atti di Krestos Samra*, trans. Enrico Cerulli.

⁴. For instance, 1bulgew, "Ethiopia: Kristos Semra (ቅድስት ክርስቶስ ሰምራ)," accessed October 24, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=27Z6ZT6Gtdc; Tewahdo Haymanot, "New Eritrean Orthodox Bekal Kidanki Kristos Semra," accessed October 24, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIvmsx2xIIc; Lonely Planet, "Ethiopia's Kristos Samra Festival—Lonely Planet Travel Video," accessed October 24, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sttEEkb4K5c.

church. Still questions remain. How deep was her commitment to Catholic Christianity? To what extent was her late return to Christianity a strategic move to make sure Matamba remained independent of Portuguese control? Like the question of Njinga's legitimacy, the question of her commitment to Christianity was being debated even as she lay on her deathbed. The traditional priests and her advisors insisted that she be buried with traditional rites, while the Capuchin Cavazzi argued that she had asked on her deathbed to be buried with Christian rites dressed in the Capuchin habit that she had obtained from Gaeta.

These questions resurfaced not more than a month after Njinga's death, when both the Africans and the Portuguese held public ceremonies to commemorate her life. To the Europeans, Njinga died a Christian. The governor and the other important men dressed in mourning cloths as they attended the public ceremony. The proceedings included a church ceremony, with private funds provided to cover the expenses. The Africans, however, saw things differently. They held a separate ceremony, which followed both African and European conventions, to celebrate Njinga's life. The thousands of Africans who attended praised Njinga's life, but some would not accept her death. They blamed the missionaries, accusing the "Capuchins [of being] magicians who with witchcraft had done their Queen to death . . . because there was a rumor among the Ethiopians that Queen Ginga would not die."¹¹³

We will never know how deeply committed Njinga was to the Christian faith during her lifetime. She operated in a political universe undergoing upheaval, and her religious alignment shifted depending on the political situation she faced. But the description that Cavazzi, the Capuchin Italian missionary who lived in Njinga's court from 1658 to 1663, gives of her deathbed confession before he administered the last rites leaves no doubt that, however she lived her life, she died a convert to Catholic Christianity.

Linda M. Heywood is professor of African history and the history of the African diaspora and African American studies at Boston University. She is the author of *Contested Power in Angola: 1840s to the Present* (Univ. of Rochester Press, 2009), editor of *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), and coauthor with John Thornton of *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), winner of the Melville Herskovits Award in 2008. Her most recent book is *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2017).

¹¹³. Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 208–9.

battlefield but had thrown it into the bush. During the night, however, he dreamed that the crucifix had spoken to him with these words: “You took me in war and abused me, pick me up and take me to your lady, if you do not, you cannot leave.” The following morning, the stunned general went back to the woods, where he found part of the wooden crucifix (without the cross). Wrapping it in skin, he carried it to Njinga. On receiving the cross-less crucifix and hearing this hardened general relate his experience, Njinga carefully took what was left of the crucifix, put it in a secluded wing of her courtyard, and for the next six months meditated daily in front of it.¹¹² Thus, by the time missionaries arrived in Matamba to hand over her sister and to begin the process of converting her people and kingdom, Njinga was on her way to becoming an exemplary Catholic.

The first thing she did once the peace treaty had been signed and her beloved sister Dona Barbara had been delivered safely to her in Matamba was to begin the process of becoming a true Christian as an example for her people. Even in taking this step, however, Njinga had to consult her *Xingulas* (spirit mediums) so that they could contact the spirit of her brother and her Imbangala allies so that they could approve her decision to give up the traditional religion. Once their approval was received, however, Njinga did not look back. She publicly burned all the ritual objects associated with the old religion, kissed the robes of the missionaries, and allowed them to prepare her for a Christian marriage and the life of a Christian. To prepare the way for the Christian revolution she hoped to bring about in Matamba, she proclaimed that all her people should marry according to Christian rites, that a church should be built to commemorate the faith, that women would be allowed to give birth in the *ukilombos* (a practice that had been forbidden), and that all babies born should be baptized. Four thousand babies were baptized shortly after the missionary Gaeta arrived in Matamba. For the next eight years, until her death in 1663, Njinga dedicated her life to the cause of rebuilding Matamba as a Christian state. Not only did she participate in building the church that she named Santa Maria de Matamba, but she welcomed the priests who came to Matamba and went to daily confession to ask for forgiveness for her former life. She would build other churches as well, and also wrote to the pope and to the Propaganda Fide asking for more priests to staff the churches and to open schools for her people.

Conclusion

On the surface, Njinga died as a Christian who had been totally reconciled to the

¹¹². Gaeta, *La meravigliosa conversione*, bk. 11:115.

and scholars must always be concerned about what role the male scribe had in distorting or shaping the female saint’s narrative due to sexist conventional views of women. Many scholars assert the value of such texts, while noting the need to read between their lines.⁵ I think it is fair to assume, with these scholars, that the male scribe Filōppos may have gotten certain details wrong or may have occasionally crafted the text in ways not directly authorized by Krastos Šāmra. At the same time, he may also have corrected certain details that Krastos Šāmra got wrong, or included true material that she left out. A scribe may drive a text away from the lived truth of a life or toward it. Also, women are not exempt from conventional views about women that cause them to present their own lives in certain lights. In the end, however, a text handwritten directly by the saint herself would not be open to questions about its authenticity as an autobiography.

Another element weighing against concluding that *Gädlä Krastos Šāmra* is an autobiography is that it is a hagiography, a life genre biased toward the celebratory and with an unstable relation to the real. Scholars often dismiss hagiographies as antihistorical falsehoods that invent the miraculous in order to manufacture a saint. *Gädlä Krastos Šāmra* does manifest some of the common fantastical tropes of hagiography; for instance, a woman is raised from the dead, and the saint prays for years without food and while standing in water. Otherwise, however, *Gädlä Krastos Šāmra* firmly relegates the fantastical to the realm of vision. Yes, the saint flies, but only in her visions, not in her regular life. Furthermore, scholarship has repeatedly shown that historical truth claims in Gəʿəz texts have validity.⁶ *Gädlä Krastos Šāmra* contains historical information not found elsewhere about the progression of diseases such as the bubonic plague, the rise of new cities, the development of travel routes among regions, and the ownership and treatment of slaves. If Krastos Šāmra chose to tell her own life story as miraculous, that cannot be seen as vitiating its status as autobiography.

⁵. See, for example, Sue E. Houchins and Baltasar Fra-Moliner, *Black Bride of Christ: Chicaba, an African Nun in Eighteenth-Century Spain* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 2016); *ibid.*, “The Saint’s Life of Sister Chicaba, c. 1676–1748: An As-Told-To Slave Narrative,” in *Afro-Latino Voices: Narratives from the Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic World, 1550–1812*, ed. Kathryn Joy McKnight and Leo J. Garofalo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 214–39; Christine Rapp Dombrowski, “The Making of a Romantic Female Hagiography” (PhD diss., Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2008); June Mecham, “Reading between the Lines: Compilation, Variation, and the Recovery of an Authentic Female Voice in the *Dornenkron* Prayer Books from Wienhausen,” *Journal of Medieval History* 29, no. 2 (2003), 109–28.

⁶. For one example, see Gälawdewos, *Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*, 26–30.

No memoir is entirely true; no person remembers her or his life precisely. We may say that it is an unreliable autobiography, but we cannot say it is not an autobiography.

Elements supporting a conclusion that *Gädlä Krastos Šämra* is an autobiography include the fact that the work does not fit the profile of a text that is either fraudulently invented or the ravings of a lunatic. As to the first possibility, a monk's motive for a wholesale invention of a woman's autobiography is difficult to imagine. It is true that some premodern Christian authors attributed their works to others; for instance, the unknown seventh-century author of *Pseudo-Methodius* falsely claimed it was written by the famous fourth-century church father Methodius.⁷ His purpose was clear: to accrue prestige to the text. Attributing one's work to a woman would have had the opposite effect, however, making it less prestigious. A monk would be unlikely to invent a female author, who would be, by definition, more abject and less trustworthy. Indeed, it would have been more likely for a woman author to have invented a male scribe to frame and set up her own text, thus lending it the authority of a male narrator. Even if a monk were motivated to invent a hagiography, the very fact that *Gädlä Krastos Šämra* claims to be an autobiography is evidence that it is. That is, a monk bent on inventing a believable hagiography would choose a more traditional form. *Gädlä Krastos Šämra* is the only one of the hundreds of Ethiopian hagiographies to represent itself as a first-person account. If, for example, a monk heard about a famous woman who had died fifty years before and whom many considered a saint, and he decided to invent a text, he would choose the usual biographical mode of hagiography. He would be unlikely to invent a brand-new style, an autobiographical mode. Many Ethiopian hagiographies were written long after their saintly subjects died; a direct account by the saint was not remotely necessary to sainthood.

The second possibility—assuming that the monk was not fraudulently inventing, but was a mentally ill person who honestly believed that the voices in his head were real—is not supported by the text; it does not read as such. Certainly, persons can have delusions that are internally consistent and even logical, but in general, their thinking is disordered. By contrast, *Gädlä Krastos Šämra* is carefully structured and written, without dire warnings, digressions, or peculiar language. Encounters with the supernatural happen only in visions, often told with humor. If the author was simply confusing with reality his own visions

⁷ *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius. An Alexandrian World Chronicle*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Garstad, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012).

people.¹¹⁰ She again indicated her willingness to have her ambassador receive baptism. At the same time she turned her attention to devising strategies for using religious diplomacy to achieve peace with the Portuguese, obtaining the release of her sister Barbara from the Portuguese, and—her very central aim—making sure that Matamba and the areas of Ndongo that she still controlled would maintain their independence. All her efforts during the last thirteen years of her life were devoted to these issues. The religious diplomacy she adopted allowed her to succeed.

The coming of a new governor, Luis Martins de Sousa Chichorro, who arrived on October 7, 1654, to set up his administration, provided her with an opening. His rule began with several quick military campaigns, but Njinga—who in 1650 had written directly to the Capuchins who had come from Rome to do missionary work in Angola—recruited the Capuchins as her allies against the Portuguese and the Jesuits. By 1656 Njinga's Capuchin allies, along with the several ambassadors that she kept sending to Luanda, succeeded in convincing a reluctant governor and a skeptical Council in Luanda that it was in the best interest of the Portuguese king and the colony to accept Njinga's request for peace. With the peace treaty that both parties signed, the Portuguese agreed to release her sister Barbara, and in turn Njinga promised, among other things, that she would return to the Catholic faith, give up Imbangala rituals, allow her people to be baptized, and pay 230 slaves.¹¹¹

Although it is impossible to reconstruct fully the sequence of events that led Njinga to conduct the negotiations with the Portuguese which issued in the release of Barbara, to sign a peace treaty with the Portuguese, to welcome Capuchin missionaries to her court at Matamba, and to place increasing reliance on the Capuchin missionaries as well as religious ambassadors, some clues into her achievement are available. The change began in 1655 while her army was attacking lands lying to the east of Mbwila, the semi-autonomous region of Christian Kongo. As she related the story to Antonio Gaeta (the Capuchin priest who was present in 1656 at the signing of the peace treaty between Njinga and the Portuguese), six months before Gaeta's arrival at her court, the general of Njinga's army, Njinga Mona, had captured a crucifix that had been left on the

¹¹⁰ See, for example, "Carta do Padre Serafim de Cartona aos Cardeis de Propaganda Fide," June 5, 1651, in *MMA*, 11:43; Letters of Father Serafim de Cartona ao Provincial da Toscana, May 15, 1652, in *MMA*, 11:191–92; and Carta do Padre Serafim de Cartona Á Propaganda Fide, October 2, 1655, in *MMA*, 11:444–46.

¹¹¹ For the peace agreement, see "Capitulações do Governor de Angola com a Rainha Dona Ana J," April 10, 1657, in *MMA*, ed. Brasília, 12:57–60.

Kongo, who had sent them to congratulate Njinga for her victories against the Portuguese. The Portuguese accused the two priests of disloyalty, since during the Dutch invasion in 1641 they had desecrated the Cathedral in São Salvador by placing in it a large puppet (*estufemo*) dressed like a Dutchman and saying this was their restorer.¹⁰⁷ Not only did the Catholic priests (both African and European) have crucial roles to play in the *quilombo*, but Njinga continued to consult the traditional practitioners as well. These personages occupied “a favored place” in the courtyard, where the fronts of their houses prominently displayed the items of their trade, including the “animal skins, roots of trees, and herbs” that were so crucial in their ceremonies.¹⁰⁸

Although Njinga—reinforced by four hundred Dutch troops and some eight thousand of her own elite archers—made a major counterattack in 1647, the war proved disastrous. In the end, the battles of 1646–47 against the Portuguese made Njinga lose on both the military and personal fronts. Her fickle Dutch allies abandoned her and sought peace with the Portuguese. Graça’s self-incriminating letters, which the Portuguese found underneath the chapel in the camp, brought Njinga’s sister the ultimate punishment for her loyalty. Portuguese troops dropped Graça into one of the whirlpools in the Kwanza River, where she immediately disappeared. Njinga’s sister Barbara became a prisoner and would go on to be one of the principal issues in Njinga’s later peace negotiations with the Portuguese. Although Njinga continued to harass the Portuguese forces, with the expulsion of the Dutch from Angola in 1648 and the military reinforcement that the Portuguese received from Brazil, she had little prospect of winning her cause against the Portuguese on the battlefield.

Njinga Comes Full Circle: Rapprochement with Roman Catholicism

Although in the immediate aftermath of her 1648 defeat Njinga gave little indication that she would not continue her wars against the Portuguese, the murder of one sister and the imprisonment of the other must have weighed heavily on her. By 1650 the Portuguese may have concluded that Njinga had been sufficiently humbled by her military defeat, but Njinga did not give up on religious diplomacy and she turned to missionaries.¹⁰⁹ Between 1650 and 1656, Njinga began a writing campaign to the Capuchin missionaries in Luanda, indicating her willingness to have missionaries come to Matamba to baptize her

¹⁰⁷. Consulta ao Conselho Ultramarino, August 12, 1665, in *MMA*, vol. 12.

¹⁰⁸. Cadornega, *História Geral*, 2:412–28.

¹⁰⁹. Salvador de Correia to King, October 6, 1650, in *MMA*, 10:571.

of a woman telling him her visions, then one would expect the text to be more dreamy and mystical and to be more insistent about its truth claims. In contrast, Krastos Šāmra’s visions of the divine are remarkably embodied and non-fanciful.

For all these reasons, given what I know at this point, I see no reason to dispute *Gädlä Krastos Šāmra*’s own claim that it represents the autobiography of an African woman. As such, it represents one of the earliest autobiographies by an African woman.

Historical Context

The fifteenth century has long been seen as a bridge, connecting periods (the medieval and the early modern) and continents (as European exploration opened up Africa and the New World). This characterization is particularly true for Ethiopia, which converted to Christianity in the fourth century, early developed an elaborate monastic system complete with scriptoria, and began to send delegations to European nations in the 1400s, where it had a strong impact on European history by appearing in force at the Council of Florence (1431–49). There, they claimed that the Christian king, Prester John (oft heard of but never seen), was in their land and eager for contact with Europe. Partly as a result, the Portuguese began to explore Africa, laying the groundwork for colonialism. Within several decades, the first Europeans arrived in Ethiopia; not long after, Ethiopians sent missives demanding assistance against the Islamic incursions that had destroyed the neighboring Christian states over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Cristóvão (or Christopher) da Gama arrived with Portuguese troops in the mid-1500s to turn the tide, enabling the Christian kingdom to survive another five hundred years. Jesuit missionaries soon followed.

Thus, Ethiopian literature of the fifteenth century is a literature of contact, whether documenting the highland state’s constant warfare with the medieval multiethnic Islamic states on its eastern border or Ethiopia’s increasing interaction with European military and religious groups. Perhaps owing to this increased contact with multiple states, Ethiopia began a period of rising literary production in the fourteenth century, with poetry, hagiographies, and historical chronicles proliferating. Although seventeenth-century Ethiopia tends to garner more attention from scholars—due to the Jesuit presence in Ethiopia—that century cannot properly be understood without understanding its gestation in the military and cultural conflicts of the fifteenth century as well as the fifteenth century’s literary and religious transformations.

The towering figure of fifteenth-century Ethiopia is Emperor Zär’ä Ya’eqob, who ruled for three and a half decades during Krastos Šāmra’s lifetime,

from 1434 to 1469. He was a powerful military leader who instituted a mountain prison for all male heirs of recent monarchs, an innovation that entered Milton's *Paradise Lost* and informed Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*.⁸ He was also an important religious and literary figure due to his role in reforming the church and solidifying Ethiopians' reverence for the Virgin Mary. In the 1440s, he galvanized the cult of Mary in Ethiopia by sponsoring the translation from Arabic of a number of folktales about the Virgin Mary, some of which had originated in Europe. They became the vast compendium known as *Tä'ammärä Maryam* (Miracles of Mary).⁹ He also wrote many original works in praise of her, in one of which he inveighs against female genital cutting, and he founded a monastery in her honor.¹⁰ Soon many other Ethiopians were writing original hymns and poems in praise of Mary. They translated Arabic Christian texts, particularly Egyptian hagiographies of the early Church Fathers, and thereby expanded literary boundaries. *Gädlä Krastos Sämrä* arose in this fertile context, one of the earliest original hagiographies in the Ethiopian tradition.

Genre of the Text and African Women Saints

Gädlä Krastos Sämrä is an example of a distinctive Ethiopian genre called a *gädl* (spiritual struggle; plural: *gädlät*), used to tell the inspirational story of a saint's life. This genre began to be written in the fourteenth century and flourished until the end of the seventeenth century. Though *gädlät* constitute the most common form of original text in Gə'əz and are a vital archive of African literature, they have been almost entirely unexplored. Selamawit Mecca, a foremost authority on Ethiopian saints, calculates that of the hundreds of Ethiopian saints at least 108 have *gädlät*.¹¹ Yet, despite the importance of these texts, only four Ethiopian saints have had their *gädl* translated into English. Those saints are the male

⁸. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Early English Books Online (London: printed, and are to be sold by Peter Parker, . . . Robert Boulter, . . . and Matthias Walker, 1667); Samuel Johnson, *The Prince [Rasselas] of Abissinia: A Tale in Two Volumes*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online: Range 237 (Dublin, Ireland: printed for G. and A. Ewing, and H. Bradley, 1759).

⁹. Ewa Balicka-Witakowska and Alessandro Bausi, "Tä'ammärä Maryam," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 4:789–93.

¹⁰. Teodros Kiros, "Zara Yacob: A Seventeenth Century Ethiopian Founder of Modernity in Africa," in *Explorations in African Political Thought: Identity, Community, Ethics*, ed. Teodros Kiros (London: Routledge, 2001), 69–79.

¹¹. Selamawit Mecca, "Bound Bodies: Representation of Ethiopian Women Saints in Gə'əz Hagiographies" (PhD diss., Addis Ababa University, 2015).

who loved and respected her as their God."¹⁰⁵ As Njinga's reputation as a political leader grew, so too did her reputation as a spirit-possessed person. Her many spectacular escapes from Portuguese forces attempting to capture her only enhanced her spiritual reputation the more. Throughout the 1630s she adopted all the rituals of the Imbangala mercenaries she led, and she and her Ndongo subjects made one daring escape after another. She harassed allies of the Portuguese and encouraged her Ndongo *kijicos* ("subjects," whom the Portuguese called their "slaves") to join her cause. By the time she succeeded in conquering the neighboring kingdom of Matamba, in the early 1630s, her status as a religious and political figure was recognized by Africans far and wide.

From her base in Matamba, Njinga continued the fight. In this struggle she relied on both Christian and African spiritual guidance as an essential element in her strategy. This fact became evident when the Portuguese routed her forces in battle in 1646 in the Dembos area at Cavanga, where she had built her *kilombo*. With a force of more than 20,000 men—including African archers, the troops of Njinga's rival Hari Ngola, seasoned Portuguese residents skilled in local warfare, freed slaves of the Portuguese, and Imbangala mercenaries—they overcame the combined Dutch, Njinga, and Dembos forces that had previously been successfully attacking them. They succeeded in capturing Njinga's camp, and she and her Dutch and African allies were forced to abandon the *kilombo* they had occupied.

Booty from the captured camp, which the Portuguese forces looted before burning, provided evidence of the important role that both Christianity and Ndongo indigenous religious beliefs and rituals held for Njinga. Cadornega, who participated in the attack, believed that "the devil had fooled her or her diviners, assuring them of a major victory against the Portuguese."¹⁰⁶ The Portuguese forces, on entering the camp, were scandalized to find a "diabolical house" where Njinga's priests did their rituals. Next to the house was another house that turned out to be a church with an altar, where a priest, Jeronimo de Sequeira, whom Njinga had imprisoned, was forced to say mass for Njinga. In fact, Njinga treated the priest well, calling him *Nganga Angola* (Father Angola), and he often answered her with the response "*Calunga, Calunga queto*" (Heaven, Our Heaven). (They also found under the altar several letters that Njinga had received from her sister Dona Graça, whom the Portuguese had imprisoned.)

In addition to Sequeira, Njinga had in the camp two Congo priests, named Miguel de Medeiros and Miguel de Castro, relatives of Garcia II, King of

¹⁰⁵. Cadornega, *História Geral*, 1:132.

¹⁰⁶. Cadornega, *História Geral*, 1:399.

correspondence with the Portuguese governor that she was ready to live as a Christian and to allow her people to be baptized, she never believed that she should abandon the traditional beliefs and rituals. She knew that these were crucial for her position as a legitimate ruler. Thus, whenever Njinga was about to make a major political decision, she called on the indigenous religious practitioners for advice. For example, in 1626 when the Portuguese cornered her in the first major campaign that Fernão de Sousa made against her and when she was ready to capitulate, she took time out to call on the advice of her late brother through the religious practitioners who always accompanied her. Cavazzi relates that as the troops stood ready to lay down their arms, the *shingilla* (traditional priest) gave her her dead brother's response that "to become a vassal of the Portuguese was to lose freedom and become slaves instead of lords and that it was better to retain one's liberty by flight."¹⁰¹ In gratitude, Njinga sacrificed "fourteen of the most beautiful young girls of her court" and fled, so that when the Portuguese arrived at her camp on the island in the Cuanza where she had moved, all they came upon were "the fourteen dead girls without any sign of force or rope."¹⁰²

After her flight, as she went from one place to the other struggling to keep ahead of the Portuguese and to exercise control over the growing bands of refugees and mercenaries that she attracted to her cause, Njinga repeatedly called on her spiritual advisors for advice and used traditional means to maintain power. For example, in 1628 she sent her rival Angola Aire—whom the Portuguese had put on the throne of Ndongo and whom Njinga claimed was her slave—an object that consisted of "fetishes that these heathens fear more than arms." De Sousa reported that the threat was so effective that "the king lost confidence and felt great fear . . . not having the spirit to trust her neither resolving to take his army out."¹⁰³ Indeed, for several decades following her baptism in 1622, Njinga willingly tolerated and participated in her own Kimbundu religious rituals as well as those of the Imbangala mercenaries she led.¹⁰⁴ In fact, so powerful a spiritual figure had Njinga become after she had joined forces with the Imbangala against the Portuguese that Cadornega, the soldier-historian who participated in the 1626–27 campaigns against her, wrote that "this valorous king as they called her, and Queen because she is a woman, wanted to finish us off, sent against us those

founders of the two different Ethiopian monastic houses—Saint Ἔστίφανος and Saint Tākla Haymanot—as well as the male saint Māba'a Šəyon and the woman saint Wälättä Peṭros.¹² Unfortunately, Wallis Budge's translation of *Gädlä Tākla Haymanot*, perhaps the most influential hagiography in Ethiopia, is not available online and is to be found in very few libraries.

After compiling information from a variety of sources in Amharic, English, and Italian, Selamawit Mecca believes there are no fewer than twenty-one Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahaḍo Church women saints.¹³ To put this in context, the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* documents 243 African Christian women from various denominations (about 35 from Madagascar, 29 from South Africa, 27 from Ethiopia, 18 each from Uganda and Nigeria, 16 from Swaziland, and so on). The Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahaḍo Church women saints are, from the thirteenth century, Mäsqäl Kəbra; from the fourteenth century, Zena Maryam; from the fifteenth century, Krəstos Šämra and Sälome; from the sixteenth century, Mägdälawit, Maryam Kəbra, and Ḥleni; from the seventeenth century, Wälättä Peṭros, Ḥḥətä Krəstos, Ḥmmä Šänkor, Ḥmmä Wätät, Fəqərtä Krəstos, Wälättä Maryam, and Wälättä Pawlos; from unknown

¹². Tāwäldä Mädḥən, *The Gəʿəz Acts of Abba Ἔστίφανος of Gʿəndagʿənde*, trans. and ed. Getatchew Haile, 2 vols., Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 620 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006); Anonymous, *The Lives of Maba' Seyon and Gabra Krestos*, trans. E. A. Wallis Budge, Lady Meux Manuscript, vol. 1 (London: W. Griggs, 1898); Tākla Šəyon, *The Life of Takla Haymanot in the Version of Dabra Libanos and the Miracles of Takla Haymanot in the Version of Dabra Libanos, and the Book of the Riches of Kings*, trans. E. A. Wallis Budge, Lady Meux (London: W. Griggs, 1906); Gälawdewos, *Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*.

¹³. Aklilä Bərḥän, *Mārḥa ləbuma* [Following wisdom] (Addis Ababa: n.p., 1951); Ḥərūy Wäldä Šəllase, *Bäʿityoḥya yännuggäññu bägʿəzənnā bamarəñña qʿanqʿa yätəšəfu yäməšəḥəft kətur* [A catalog of the books written in Gəʿəz and Amharic which can be found in Ethiopia] (Addis Ababa: Goha Šabah Printing Press, 1928); Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke, "Bibliography of the Ethiopic Hagiographic Traditions," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 13, no. 2 (1975): 57–102; George Wynn Brereton Huntingford, "Saints of Mediaeval Ethiopia," *Abba Salama* 10 (1979): 257–341; Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Yä-Amarəñña yä-Bətä Krəstiyān mägəbä qalat* [Amharic Church dictionary], 6 vols. (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Culture, 1989–90); Osvaldo Raineri, "Santi della chiesa Etiopica," in *Bibliotheca sanctorum orientaliū: Enciclopedia dei santi: Le chiese orientali*, ed. Juan Nadal Cañellas, Stefano Virgulin, and Giovanni Guaita (Rome: Città nuova, 1999); Kefyalew Merahi [Käfyälāw Märaḥi], *Saints and Monasteries in Ethiopia*, vol. 2 (Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Press, 2003); Siegbert Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, 5 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003–2015).

¹⁰¹. Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 38.

¹⁰². Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 38.

¹⁰³. Heintze, *Fontes*, 2:197.

¹⁰⁴. António de Oliveira de Cadornega, *História Geral das Guerras Angolanas, 1680–1681*, ed. José Matia Delgado (Lisbon: Agência-Geral do Ultramar, 1972), 1:121.

centuries, Əhətä Petros, Maryam Əntä Əfrät, Şäbälä Maryam, Wälättä Sämayat, Wälättä Şəyon, Şəge Səllase, and Tsäbälä Maryam. Although more hagiographies may be discovered, Selamawit Mecca's extensive archival and field research has identified only eight Ethiopian women saints with hagiographies: Mäsqäl Kəbra, Zena Maryam, Krəstos Sämra, Əleni, Wälättä Pētros, Fəqərtä Krəstos, Wälättä Maryam, and Maryam Əntä Əfrät. The rest of the women saints are known partly from oral traditions and partly through entries in local synaxariums, a type of source needing more scholarship.¹⁴ Previous to the translation of *Gädlä Wälättä Pētros*, none of the women's hagiographies had been translated into English, and it alone had been translated into any European language.¹⁵

To cast a wider net, with few exceptions the hagiographies of women saints of Africa or of African descent in general have not been well served with translations. One of the exceptions is the publication in English translation of the life of Chicaba, a seventeenth-century Afro-Spanish saint, also called Sor Teresa de Santo Domingo.¹⁶ Chicaba was born around 1676 off the coast of Mina in West Africa, captured and enslaved at the age of nine, transported to Spain, and purchased by the wife of a marquis. Upon the death of her owner in 1703, Chicaba entered a Dominican convent where she was not allowed to become a nun but forced to become a *donada orbeata* (servant to the other nuns). She soon, however, became well known as a faith healer and mystic. Chicaba's hagiography, titled *Compendio de la Vida Ejemplar de la Venerable Madre Sor Teresa Juliana de Santo Domingo*, was written in 1752 in Salamanca by Father Paniagua, a Spanish man, but using her autobiographical writings. Another scholar is working on editing and translating short works about men and women saints of African descent in Colonial Spanish America, including Úrsula de Jesús, Estefanía de San José, and Juana Esperanza de San Alberto.¹⁷ For instance, Juana Esperanza de San Alberto was a seventeenth-century Afro-Mexican saint, born in West Africa in

¹⁴. The Ethiopian Synaxarium (called *Sənkəssar* in Gə'əz) includes tales about foreign and local saints, organized by feast day, so that the relevant tales can be read aloud in church on the correct day. Although the core was translated from Arabic in the 1400s, tales of many Ethiopian saints have been added to the compilation since. Further, each church's synaxarium may be slightly different from others because it includes tales on very local saints, those from the parish or district.

¹⁵. Gälawdewos, *Vita di Walatta Piētros*, trans. Lanfranco Ricci, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 316; Scriptorum Aethiopicorum 61 (Leuven: Secrétariat du CSCO, 1970).

¹⁶. Houchins and Fra-Molinero, *Black Bride of Christ*.

¹⁷. Larissa Brewer-García, *Saints' Lives of the Early Black Atlantic: An Anthology of Hagiographies Edited and Translated from Spanish* (forthcoming).

word that Njinga had reneged on her promise to return the slaves who had fled to Ndongo and who he believed were being drafted into Njinga's army, thereby giving her the military edge, de Sousa immediately sent missives for the two missionaries who were on their way to Ndongo to return to the Portuguese fort at Embaca.⁹⁷ Religion remained a crucial factor in the political relations between Njinga and the Portuguese from 1624 until her death in 1663.

Years of Flight and Struggle

Although in 1623 Njinga had dissuaded her brother from accepting Christianity, unsurprisingly, a couple years later, in 1625, she allowed both her sisters, Cambo and Fungi, to be baptized with great pomp in Luanda. They took, respectively, "Dona (Lady) Barbara" and "Dona (Lady) Graça" as their baptismal names.⁹⁸ Both served as Njinga's spies during the years they lived in Luanda and at the Portuguese fort at Massangano. In 1657 Njinga succeeded in getting the Portuguese to release her sister Cambo/Barbara. Her younger sister Fungi/Graça had lost her life by drowning when she was placed in one of the rapids of the Cuanza River, the Portuguese having found out that she had been acting as a spy for Njinga during her years in captivity. They found evidence of this only in 1646 when they captured Njinga's *kilombo*, a military camp that she had set up not too far from the Portuguese fort at Massangano.⁹⁹

The fact is that from the very beginning of her relationship with the Portuguese, Njinga did not hesitate to use religion to achieve her main political goal of preserving the independence of Ndongo. Religion was central to Njinga's approach to diplomacy. The Portuguese appreciated this fact, for they too used religion as a central aspect of their political maneuvering in Central Africa. Indeed, in 1626 when Governor de Sousa had to justify his shift from negotiating with Njinga to planning a war against her, a step that the king had expressly forbidden in the charter that de Sousa had received, he argued his case for war not before the secular authorities, but before "the religious teachers, the lettered clergy, [and] the vicar General," who all supported the position that "the war was just and necessary."¹⁰⁰

However eager Njinga was to demonstrate through written

⁹⁷. "Carta de Fernão de Sousa," August 20, 1625, in *MMA*, 7:361.

⁹⁸. Beatrix Heintze, *Fontes para a história de Angola do século XVII* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner-Verlag-Wiesbaden, 1985), 2:196; Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 29.

⁹⁹. For details of this incident, see Heywood, *Queen Njinga of Angola*, 150–52.

¹⁰⁰. Letter of Fernão de Sousa to the King, February 21, 1626, in *MMA*, 7:419.

do with Njinga's political ambitions. By 1624 Ngola Mbandi was dead! His partisans, and later the Portuguese, would accuse her of poisoning her brother, while others argued that he was actually depressed, for resistance against the Portuguese had done nothing to improve Ndongo's chance of remaining independent. The Portuguese continued to incorporate large chunks of Ndongo into the colony they called Angola.

Njinga, in the meantime, had seen her fortunes improve. She had been elected "Lady of Ndongo" and wasted no time in sending a letter to the newly-arrived governor Fernão de Sousa, indicating that she wanted to resolve her political differences with the Portuguese and to allow "Fathers of the Company" to baptize those of her people who wished to become Christians. Indeed, Njinga even promised to allow her *tendala*, the highest official, to be baptized if he desired and indicated that she would ask the bishop to build churches.⁹⁴ But there was a quid pro quo to Njinga's willingness to open her kingdom to missionaries. As de Sousa explained to the king in Portugal, Njinga stipulated in her letter that she would allow the missionaries into Ndongo only if the Portuguese removed the fort they had illegally built in her lands at Embaca, just a few miles from the capital Kabasa.⁹⁵

Although the Jesuit hierarchy in Portugal was eager to accept Njinga's word, believing that such an event would open "a great door for evangelization," officials in Luanda were skeptical.⁹⁶ Indeed, Fernão de Sousa claimed that Njinga's request for priests was due more to fear of Portuguese arms than to devotion. De Sousa's response to Njinga's request was no different from the policy that had characterized Afro-Portuguese relations since the year 1483, when the first Portuguese mission to Central Africa arrived in the Kingdom of the Kongo. For both the Portuguese and the Africans, conversion to Christianity had both political and religious dimensions. For the Portuguese, conversion represented political submission to Portuguese imperialism, while for the Africans, Christian conversion advanced their own local political agendas.

For example, when governor Fernão de Sousa promised that he would give safe passage to the two missionary fathers Jeronimo Vogado and Francisco Paconio who were willing to go directly to Njinga's court in Kabasa, he insisted that Njinga first return "the slaves who had fled from this kingdom." Receiving

⁹⁴ Fernão de Sousa to the King, August 12, 1624, in *MMA*, 7:248–50.

⁹⁵ Fernão de Sousa to the King, August 12, 1624, in *MMA*, 7:248–50.

⁹⁶ "Notícias da Africa Ocidental (1624–1625)," in *MMA*, 7:300; Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 128–29.

the Bran ethnic group in the late 1500s, but captured as a child and sold as a slave to work in Mexico. She served in a convent for sixty-eight years and died on October 10, 1679, healing many devotees after her death. More needs to be done to bring these works by and about black women saints to light.

The Text's Female Subject

The saint featured in *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* was not a meek and virginal holy woman, but a woman fierce in all aspects of life. Born into a wealthy and pious family from a frontier province in the Christian Ethiopian empire, she was married to the son of the emperor's own priest (priests can be married in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwəḥədo Church). The emperor looked upon Krəstos Śämra as a daughter and showered her with revenue and servants. A strong woman, she gave birth to nine sons and two daughters (see Appendix 1, an English translation of the beginning of *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra*).¹⁸

The changing point in her life arose from the temptations of class, probably when she was about forty years old. Having become enraged with a maidservant, probably a slave, she thrust a firebrand down her throat. When the maidservant died, a horrified Krəstos Śämra promised God that she would devote her life to him should he resurrect the maidservant. When he did, Krəstos Śämra promptly left for Däbrä Libanos, Ethiopia's most famous monastic community, to become a nun. She took her youngest child with her, but when she arrived she was told that no males were allowed into the nunnery. Committed to fulfilling her promise, she abandoned the child on the side of the road (fortunately, another nun saved him and, disobeying the same rule, raised him).

As is typical, Krəstos Śämra spent two years as a novice before becoming a nun, and the text provides important historical and religious information about Ethiopian monasticism during this period. She then left for Lake Ṭana, a place known for its many monasteries with devoted ascetic monks and nuns, to live the life of a hermit (Ethiopian monasticism has both cenobitic [communal] and eremitic [individual] forms). As her first remarkable act, she spent twelve years praying several hours a day in the waters of the lake, an act popular among devout Ethiopians. Living in solitude, she moved around the lake, staying at famous monasteries such as Narga Śəllase and Ṭana Qirqos. During this period, she had many visions, in which she spoke with the angels and saints as well as Christ and his mother.

Then the biblical patriarchs came to her in a dream and told her to settle

¹⁸ The text clearly states that she had nine sons, pace other sources.

at G^wangut, also on Lake Ṭana, for they told her that the entire world would come there to prostrate themselves at her feet. So she gave up the life of a hermit and founded a monastery, even though living in community was something she, and many other Ethiopian saints, saw as more difficult than being a hermit. A monk named Yəshāq helped her by building a church, training female novices, and celebrating the liturgy. Afterward she withdrew once again into solitude, standing in a pit for three years and in the lake for another three years. When death was near, she told a scribe named Filəppos her life story and thirty of her visions. Later at the monastery of Däbrä Libanos he wrote both down, recording her visions in a vivid and lively first-person account. She was buried at G^wangut, where her monastery is today.

Her visions are not presented in abstract mystical language but are quite concrete, including clear stories about repentant magicians, fragments of consecrated bread that fly, abjecting the body by sucking Christ's wounds, and meeting Satan in his guise as head of the church. In one, she demands that Christ forgive all the damned and then travels to hell to plead with Satan to accept Christ's pardon so that human beings will no longer suffer due to their enmity (see Appendix 2 for an English translation of this section).

Krəstos Śāmra was a nun dedicated to extreme asceticism who founded an important monastic community in the ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwəhədo Church. Through her hagiography, readers gain a better understanding of how medieval Ethiopian texts represent gender roles and theology, thereby enabling complication of received understandings of Christian texts in general. Krəstos Śāmra is not a sentimental figure, not someone who nurtures through affectionate kindness and sweet indulgence, but someone who puts God before family and who is willing to leave her own child to die in order to fulfill her obligations to the divine. She is sovereign over an everyday African world where a sneezing child is not adorable but a cold hand reaching from the grave, where eating only once a day is the norm, not a diet, and where happening down the wrong road at the wrong time can lead to a life of slavery in a land far from anyone who speaks your language.

For her, God and Satan, Mary and the saints, angels and demons are not abstractions living on high, but neighbors to be importuned and chastised for their complacency regarding human suffering. Krəstos Śāmra even debates with Christ, pressing him like a disobedient son to forgive humanity. In one of her miracles, a man was using a plant for magical protection. When Krəstos Śāmra prayed to Christ that the man be forgiven for practicing magic, Christ responded that he would not forgive him because the man had used the plant demonically. In a typical moment, she responded by arguing with Christ, pointing out, "You

encouraged her to be baptized while lavishly entertaining her during her stay in Luanda. As Cavazzi wrote, Njinga, "moved by the cogent reasons of the Zealous governor . . . yielded like wax to flame."⁹¹ Njinga, at forty years, took the baptismal name of Azevedo's wife Ana, who also served as her godmother, and the surname de Sousa, the same as governor João Correia de Sousa (1621–22), who also served as her godfather. Feted publicly by the Luanda settlers and showered with presents, including silver and gold, Njinga left Luanda to return in triumph to her brother's court at Kabasa.

Njinga's commitment to her new faith was tested as soon as the Portuguese Christian escorts the governor had provided left her at the city's edge and she turned her attention to the two-hundred-mile journey back to Kabasa. She was familiar with the dangers she confronted—the raging rapids on the River Cuanza, the likelihood of encountering crocodiles and other marine animals that could swallow a man, and the elephants, pythons, and other wild animals that could appear unexpectedly from the forests that bordered the passageways and carry off members of her party. However much Njinga's baptism may have meant to her, it was not to the rosary and other Christian relics that the priests and other well-wishers in Luanda had given her that she turned for reassurance and guidance. She called on her own priests who had accompanied her to say the prayers and to do the time-tested ceremonies and rituals to her ancestors.⁹²

After her safe arrival back in Kabasa, Njinga's new political career began. She now harnessed both the prestige that Christianity offered and the traditional rituals of Ndongo to enhance her position as the sister of a reigning *ngola* and as the daughter of a royal lineage who might one day become *ngola*. Thus, she did not discard the new Christian ritual objects she had acquired but instead stored them in the same *misete* (ritual repository) that held the bones and other religious paraphernalia that were essential to the exercise of power in Ndongo.⁹³

From the time of her arrival back at court, Njinga deployed her new status to improve her political position among her partisans in Kabasa. In fact, Ngola Mbandi was sufficiently impressed with the new status that Christian baptism conferred on Njinga that he soon requested the Portuguese to send priests to his court so that he also could learn the Catholic faith and be baptized. Viewing this as a threat to her own rising status, Njinga vigorously discouraged Ngola Mbandi from being baptized, arguing that as Ngola he had to safeguard the traditional religious rituals. The real reason for this advice, however, had to

⁹¹. Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 26.

⁹². See Heywood, *Queen Njinga of Angola*, 75–76.

⁹³. Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 27.

ingratiating themselves with the Portuguese. Thus Njinga's decision to be baptized was a means both to gain some advantages at the court of Ndongo by successfully negotiating a peace treaty with the Portuguese and at the same time to impress Portuguese officials with her sincerity and willingness to convert.

During her months in Luanda, Njinga exhibited her ability to mix politics with religion. For example, when she appeared for the audience with Correia de Sousa, she planned for all contingencies. She knew that the governor would want to treat her as the Portuguese treated some of the subordinate rulers whom they had conquered. Njinga's strategy was to show that she represented an independent African kingdom. As such she entered the hall "dressed in a remarkable way according to the custom of black people, accompanied by a good many pages and waiting women."⁸⁸ She was acutely aware that a successful public display of power was crucial for the success of her mission. More important, however, Njinga's intent was to enhance her own prestige among her people. Thus she insisted on protocol. Indeed, when the governor placed a rug on the floor and beckoned her to sit, as was the usual custom when Portuguese officials in the area were dealing with Africans, Njinga refused to sit on the rug. As Njinga and others in her court related the incident to the Capuchin missionary Cavazzi several years later,

when she saw she was not given a magnificent and showy chair she called one of her waiting-women, and sat on her as if she had been a chair, rising and sitting down as necessary, and explained her embassy with much acuteness and intelligence of mind.⁸⁹

Njinga displayed remarkable diplomatic skill at this meeting, agreeing with those parts of the proposal that called for the King of Ndongo to ally with the Portuguese, but wisely arguing that she could not agree that her brother should pay an annual tribute to the King of Portugal as the governor was insisting. She rightly argued that "he who is born free . . . should maintain himself in freedom, and not submit to others, and so lose freedom which is so esteemed by all, as there is nothing worse nor more abhorred than slavery."⁹⁰

But Njinga did agree to be baptized before leaving Luanda. The details are murky. Ana da Silva, her host, would certainly have played a role in Njinga's baptism. Cavazzi believed, however, that it was the governor himself who

⁸⁸. Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 25.

⁸⁹. Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 24–25.

⁹⁰. Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 24–26.

created the plants!" Christ bowed to this argument and forgave the man. It is for tactics like this that the scholar Ephraim Isaac has reportedly called her "the mother of peace" and an Ethiopian female philosopher.¹⁹

That Krastos Šāmra is considered a folk hero despite murdering her maid and abandoning her son, receiving the devotion of many women in Ethiopia over the centuries, makes her representative of the small but important stream in Christian sainthood of women who defied the norms of femininity. Krastos Šāmra is an important model for Ethiopian women of putting the life of individual spiritual reflection before the comforts and obligations of family.

Krastos Šāmra both aligns with and differs from other women saints such as the visionaries Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe (whose lives were roughly contemporaneous with her own, spanning from the fourteenth century into the fifteenth); the penitent sinners Saint Mary of Egypt (a prostitute), Saint Pelagia of Antioch (a courtesan convert), and Saint Mary/Marinos (one of the so-called transvestite nuns); the non-Chalcedonian female religious leaders Saint Euphemia and Saint Susanna; and, as mentioned earlier, the Sufi female mystics Rabia Basri and Lalla Aziza as well as the later Hindu mystic poet Mirabai. Further comparison might be made with early Christian saints such as Augustine's mother, Saint Monica (Algeria, 331–87) and Efigênia (a first-century "Ethiopian" saint revered in eighteenth-century Brazil), or with much later diasporic saints such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth (nineteenth-century African American saints). Others include Josephine Bakhita (1869–1947), a Sudanese slave who became a Roman Catholic nun, living and ministering in Italy for forty-five years, and now being considered for canonization, and Mokhola, the twentieth-century Moroccan saint.

Almost nothing is known about the lives of medieval African women. In the absence of information, many assume they all lived short, brutish lives. *Gädlä Krastos Šāmra* gives a glimpse of the agency of such women—the control some had over their destinies, the vital role some played in the church, and the way some women's thought shaped church theology.

Further, hagiographies aid scholars of Africa's religious, literary, and social history by providing a clearer view of the mystical streak in African

¹⁹. Solomon Gebre-Medhin, "Ethiopia: Ethiopian Herald Interview with Prof Ephraim Issac" (March 4, 2015), accessed October 24, 2016, <http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/2015/03/04/ethiopia-ethiopian-herald-interview-with-T>, Blogger of De Birahn Blogspot, "Saint Kirstos Semra: The First Ethiopian/International Female Philosopher" (June 8, 2011), accessed October 24, 2016, <http://debirhan.com/?p=530>.

Christianity and its association with women saints. Clarified as well are the distinctive views of the human body present among those churches that rejected the Council of Chalcedon's stance on the dual nature of Christ. As the forms and topoi of Ethiopian hagiography develop, they foreground additional topics of interest such as the genre's poems praising saints from the head to the toe; historical changes of the period, including medicinal responses to disease; racial views of slaves; trade relations with Muslims; an increase in pilgrimages; and the rise of towns near monastic centers. *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra* represents an expressive look into the mind of the medieval Ethiopian characterized by colorful stories, a focus on women's lives, and an unusual generic structure.

Scholarship on the Text

Krəstos Šämra is mentioned in passing in various travel guides, manuscript catalogs, articles, and even one US young adult novel.²⁰ Some encyclopedia entries have appeared in English about the saint.²¹ But only two works have appeared outside of Ethiopia that treat the saint at any length.

The first article to be devoted to the topic is Selamawit Mecca's discussion of Ethiopian women saints.²² In the article she focuses on *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra* in particular but also discusses how Ethiopian women's hagiographies represent women more generally. She concludes that the role of women in these texts is not one of breaking out of traditional models of femininity; instead they maintain social order by providing "emergency solutions" to a variety of cultural crises. Mecca argues that the women's hagiographies are not feminist tracts, but rather depict the women saints as without wisdom or autonomy. As proof, she

²⁰. Philip Briggs, *Ethiopia*, 7th ed. (Bucks, Eng.: Bradt Travel Guides, 2015); Elizabeth Wein, *Black Dove, White Raven* (Los Angeles: Hyperion, 2015); Steven Kaplan, "Seen but Not Heard: Children and Childhood in Medieval Ethiopian Hagiographies," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 30, no. 3 (1997): 539–53; Richard Pankhurst, "The History of Famine and Pestilence in Ethiopia Prior to the Founding of Gondär," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, no. 2 (1972): 37–64; Steven Kaplan, "Hagiographies and the History of Medieval Ethiopia," *History in Africa* 8 (1981): 107–23; Christine Chaillot, "The Ancient Oriental Churches," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield-Tucker (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 131–69.

²¹. Denis Nosnitsin, "Krəstos Šämra," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*; Wendy Laura Belcher, "Kristos Samra," Wikipedia, accessed October 24, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristos_Samra.

²². Mecca, "Hagiographies of Ethiopian Female Saints."

to power in 1617, two years before the Portuguese governor Vasconcelas and his Imbangala allies attacked Ndongo, and had found it difficult to prevent disgruntled vassals from joining the Portuguese invaders. He also found it taxing to protect others who faced growing Portuguese demands for tribute in slaves and warriors (*guerra preta*). While her brother was proving no match for the Portuguese, the astute Njinga had been building up her fortunes at court. Indeed, long before her brother Mbandi selected her as his envoy to the Portuguese, Njinga presented such a threat to Mbandi that tradition indicates he had her only son (his own nephew) murdered and caused her two sisters to be infertile.⁸⁶ Whether these events happened or not, Mbandi and Njinga were estranged and Njinga was not living with her brother when he reached out to her to head the peace negotiations with the Portuguese. Although outwardly welcoming her estranged brother's demand that she head the diplomatic mission to the Portuguese in Luanda, Njinga was planning her own political combat. Christian conversion and forgiveness were certainly far from Njinga's mind.

Njinga, Christianity, and African Religion

Instead, when Njinga agreed to head the mission to Luanda, she regarded it as an opportunity to further her own political standing among influential members in Ndongo's court. When she arrived in Luanda at the head of a large Mbundu delegation (composed of slaves sent as presents to the Portuguese, personal attendants, musicians, and the like), Njinga was housed with one of the most well-respected Portuguese officials, called Payo de Araujo de Azevedo, and his wife Ana da Silva. (He had the title of *Capitão-Mor* but did not carry out any official functions or receive a salary from the king.) Njinga saw Catholic Christianity up close during her time in de Azevedo's household, especially under the guidance of de Azevedo's wife, Ana da Silva. She certainly would have been keenly aware that the Portuguese would ask her to be baptized, and, since her brother Ngola Mbandi had given her permission to submit to baptism as a way of consolidating peace with the Portuguese, she did not resist the entreaties of the Portuguese when they pressed her to be baptized before returning to Ndongo.⁸⁷ As an astute student of history and politics, Njinga would have been aware of the history of Kongo's conversion and the privileged status that Kongo had achieved as a Christian kingdom. She would also have been aware of the many disgruntled local leaders in Ndongo, some of whom had sought baptism as a way of

⁸⁶. Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 23–25.

⁸⁷. Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica," 24.

the Kindonga islands in the Kwanza River, one of the many capitals of Ndongo kings.

At this point of crisis, Ngola Mbandi selected Njinga to head a diplomatic mission to Luanda to signal to the newly arrived Governor João Correia de Sousa that he was ready to make peace. When asked by her brother, she went to Luanda and conducted successful peace negotiations. Moreover, when pressed by Governor de Sousa, Njinga decided to remain in Luanda, learn more about Christian beliefs, and be baptized at the age of forty. From her own background as the daughter and granddaughter of past *ngolas* and as the sister of the present *ngola*, Njinga's engagement with Christianity—as will be shown—can be seen as politically motivated. Her decision to be baptized came about because of her desire to see Ndongo remain an independent state, rather than because of the depth of her conviction. Her engagement with the local ideas of the magical, ritual, and legal dimensions of leadership had similar motivations.

Njinga and Spirituality: The Early Years

If Giovanni Cavazzi, one of the Capuchin missionaries who ministered to Njinga from 1657 to her death in 1663, is to be believed, as a child Njinga was brought up in the local religion and was comfortable practicing it. He relates that she received her name Njinga (from *kujinga*, Kimbundu for “to twist, turn, or wrap”) because she was born with the umbilical cord tied around her neck, adding that the name was meant to describe a person who was destined to be proud, haughty, ambitious, and arrogant.⁸⁴ Njinga told another missionary, Antonio da Gaeta da Napoli, that, as her father's favorite child, she had been taught all the traditions by him. Gaeta himself comments that he was impressed with her knowledge of the art of military dancing and by her ability to wield the battle axe, skills that her people associated with leadership.⁸⁵

Signs of Njinga's political acumen and her willingness to use religion to advance her own agenda in her quest for legitimacy surfaced long before her famous meeting with João Correia de Sousa in 1622. Nor was Ngola Mbandi's choice of his sister Njinga to lead the diplomatic mission to Luanda made without political calculation. In 1621 Mbandi faced a major political crisis. He had come

⁸⁴. Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, “Missione Evangelica nel Regno de Congo,” vol. A (unpublished Araldi manuscripts, n.d.), bk. 2 (hereinafter Cavazzi, “Missione Evangelica,” with page numbers).

⁸⁵. Antonio da Gaeta, *La maravigliosa conversione alla santa fede di Cristo della regina Singa e del suo regno di Matamba nell'Africa meridionale* (Naples, 1669).

points out that Krastos Šämra is pictured as capable of the arrogant foolishness of killing a servant, a violent act no male saint is depicted as having committed. Also, the saint describes herself as a “weak woman” in need of male assistance and many of “her” miracles are actually performed by the Archangel Michael.²³ Although I see the women's hagiographies as providing stronger depictions of female agency, Mecca offers powerful arguments for seeing the hagiographies as invidiously sexist.

In her book on slavery, the historian of medieval Ethiopia Marie-Laure Derat makes use of representations of slavery in *Gädlä Krastos Šämra*, giving a close reading of the anecdote about the saint killing her servant, a slave.²⁴ As she points out, no other Ethiopian saint kills someone. But the death is perhaps tolerated in this case because the person killed is a slave, and a female slave at that. While the saint is distraught about the sin she has brought on herself, she does not seem to be distraught about the life of the slave herself. Further, Krastos Šämra does not seem to face any murder charges. “This episode demonstrates the power of life and death that a master had over a slave in Ethiopia; otherwise, such a story would never be credited to a saint. It is only because the victim is a slave that the murder is of little importance.”²⁵

Translations, Editions, and Manuscripts

Gädlä Krastos Šämra has received previous attention; the Italian scholar Enrico Cerulli published a two-volume Gəʿəz edition and Italian translation in 1956. It contains a fifteen-page introduction in Italian that focuses on dating the manuscript, rather than historicizing or contextualizing the text. Cerulli's translation has some peculiarities; he translated poetry as prose, failed to correct or comment on grammatical mistakes, and worked with just two manuscripts. As a result, he omitted over a dozen miracles found in at least three other manuscripts and did not include alternate ending stanzas to the hagiography's poem. Together the omissions are substantial, constituting 25 percent of the full text. Like other early Gəʿəz texts, *Gädlä Krastos Šämra* is repeatedly elliptical, with words and phrases seemingly missing—a phenomenon of Gəʿəz manuscripts that

²³. Mecca, “Hagiographies of Ethiopian Female Saints,” 164.

²⁴. Marie-Laure Derat, “Chrétien et musulmans d'Éthiopie face à la traite et à l'esclavage aux XVe et XVIe siècles,” in *Traites et esclavages en Afrique orientale et dans l'océan Indien*, ed. Thomas Vernet et al. (Paris: Centre d'Études des Mondes Africains, 2012), 126–40.

²⁵. Derat, “Chrétien et musulmans d'Éthiopie,” p. 126; my translation.

bears greater attention.

Not many copies of *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra* exist. The important 1960s and 1970s microfilming project titled the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) is archived at the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML), Collegeville, Minnesota. It claims to have three manuscripts of *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra*, but inspection shows them to be Amharic-Gəʿəz paraphrases of the text, not the original. A priority should be placed on preserving more of the copies of *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra* to be found in Ethiopia, especially at the saint's monastery on Lake Ṭana. On a previous translation project, Michael Kleiner and I found that manuscripts digitized in Ethiopia had fewer errors and provided more historical material than did manuscripts located in Europe. Following is a list of all currently known manuscripts, whether digital facsimiles or original parchment manuscripts, and their availability. When dates are known, they are given in both the Ethiopian calendar (EC) year and the Western calendar year (which is seven or eight years ahead of the Ethiopian one, depending on the time of year).

1. MS A. Cerulli manuscript: undated manuscript that the Italian consulate had transcribed at ʾĒstifanos Monastery of Ḥayq in Ethiopia in the 1940s; the transcript is now in the Vatican Library (Cerulli collection, Etiopico 176 and Etiopico 277). Lacks the two poems and some miracles.
2. MS B. Aeth. E. 4: nineteenth-century manuscript (made between 1813 and 1847) now at Oxford University's Bodleian Library. Ullendorff catalog no. 78 states that it consists of 98 folios and 3 illuminations.²⁶ Lacks the two poems and some miracles. (Documented in Cerulli's print edition, called MS B there.)
3. MS C. EMML 8582: seventeenth-century manuscript microfilmed at the saint's monastery on Lake Ṭana.²⁷ (Although this manuscript is not available from HMML, because the microfilm made in the 1970s was done poorly and is now too light to digitize, it remains at the saint's

²⁶. Edward Ullendorff, *Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library*, vol. 2, *Catalogi Codd. Mss. Bibliothecae Bodleianae, pars vii* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951).

²⁷. William F. Macomber and Getatchew Haile, eds., *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa, and for the Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library, Collegeville*, 10 vols. (Collegeville, MN: Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library, St. John's Abbey and University, 1975–1993).

regimento given to João Correia de Sousa in 1616 called on him to “do all in his power to have peace and friendship” with the king of Angola and to ensure that the king “agree to have our faith preached in his kingdom.”⁸²

Official directives notwithstanding, the king and people of Ndongo had no reason to trust the Portuguese governors—or the missionaries—who came with royal *regimentos* that required them to spread Christianity and to make only just wars. In point of fact, instead of performing baptisms and converting the rulers and peoples in the region, de Novais and subsequent royal officials made constant wars in their desire to establish a permanent coastal enclave and strategic military outposts along the Kwanza River for their slave trading activities.

When Njinga, the sister of the ruling Ngola Mbandi, traveled to Luanda in 1622, she had already from her infancy lived through the horror and devastation that the Portuguese armies, supported by their priests, had inflicted on Ndongo. She believed that their military and political successes against her country had been in part due to the Christian ideology that protected them. The first building constructed in every outpost the Portuguese built in Ndongo was a church. Although the African priests who accompanied the *ngolas* in their battles against the Portuguese performed all the rituals to the ancestors at the rivers and the base of the massive mountains that tradition dictated were necessary, the Ndongo forces were no match for the Portuguese armies with their firearms and the ferocious African allies (Imbangalas) that they recruited. Indeed, for five years before Njinga's diplomatic mission to Luanda, she had been witness to some of the most vicious of the Portuguese military campaigns against her people. In this period, Luis de Vasconcelas, one of the Portuguese governors, recruited several companies of non-Kimbundu-speaking Imbangalas who depopulated villages and sent thousands of her people to slavery “across the salt water.”⁸³

During his term as governor of Angola (1617–21), Vasconcelas's relentless wars and slave raids considerably weakened Ndongo, and the Portuguese carved out swaths of territory whose local representatives were required to send tribute in slaves as well as soldiers (*guerra preta*) to fight alongside regular Portuguese troops. Indeed, Vanconcelas succeeded in exporting more than 50,000 slaves and left a major humanitarian crisis with significant numbers among the remaining population becoming refugees in their own land. This humanitarian crisis had so weakened the Ndongo state that Ngola Mbandi and his household were forced to flee from their court at Kabasa and take refuge on

⁸². “Regimento do Governador de Angola,” March 9, 1616, in *MMA*, 6:258.

⁸³. See, for example, Linda M. Heywood, *Queen Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2017), 219–20.

devastating wars against the rulers of Ndongo.

Obstacles to successful missionary undertaking in Ndongo were many. On the Portuguese side, the priests who accompanied the diplomatic and military missions were part of Portugal's larger objectives for commerce and territorial conquest in Central Africa. King Sebastião of Portugal sent the first Catholic Christian mission to Ndongo in 1560 in response to at least three requests for missionaries that the leaders of Ndongo had sent to Portugal between 1518 and the 1550s. The group's members, led by Paulo Dias de Novais but also including two Jesuits, were required to "meet with the King of Angola and . . . make him and his people Christian, as has been done with the king of Congo."⁸⁰ Despite these lofty goals, no large-scale conversion was forthcoming. Furthermore, when Paulo Dias de Novais returned to Angola in 1575, seven years before Njinga's birth, conversion to Christianity was playing second fiddle to the military, mining, and slave trading objectives of the Portuguese in Ndongo. Portuguese success in conquering parts of Ndongo did lead to the conversion of several important local rulers whose territories were forcibly incorporated into the new Portuguese colony of Angola. Many of these rulers, however, sought baptism only as a way of avoiding being subject to Portuguese arms and to obtain military protection from the demands of their overlord, the king of Ndongo.

From the point of view of the Catholic kings of Spain and Portugal, religion was not devoid of politics, and in Angola, conversion of Africans to Christianity was an essential part of a larger design to expand their political presence. Thus, even before the two missions that de Novais undertook in 1560 and 1575, conversion of the king and his people figured prominently in royal directives. De Novais, and others who followed him, were required to work on converting the Africans, and members of the Jesuit and later Capuchin and Dominican orders who obtained permission to enter Central Africa were all supposed to undertake such conversion efforts. For example, Bento Banho Cardoso, nominated as governor in 1611, was required to "work as much as possible for peace and friendship with the king of Angola" and, above all, to see that the king agreed "to spread our Holy Faith in his kingdom."⁸¹ Similarly, the

Publicações e Biblioteca, 1952–71), vols. 12–15 (Lisbon: Academia Portuguesa da História, 1981–88) (hereinafter *MMA*), 1:431–32. See also "Missão do Padre Cornelio Gomes no Congo" (1554), in *MMA*, 2:362.

⁸⁰. "Instrução Régia à Paulo Dias de Novais," December 20, 1559, in *MMA*, 2:446–48.

⁸¹. "Regimento do Governador de Angola," September 22, 1611, in *MMA*, 6:26.

- monastery on Lake Ṭana, according to report.)
4. MS D. EMMML 8573: eighteenth-century manuscript microfilmed at the saint's monastery on Lake Ṭana. (Although this manuscript is not available from HMML, because this series of microfilms never left Ethiopia and can be viewed only at the National Archive and Library of Ethiopia, which does not make digital copies and is frequently closed, it remains at the saint's monastery on Lake Ṭana, according to report.)
 5. MS E. EMDL 147: twenty-first-century manuscript (1994 EC; 2001–2 CE) at Mäkanä Ḥəywät Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus church in Mäqäle, Təgray. 67 folios, no illuminations. Lacks the two poems and some miracles. Available from HMML.
 6. MS F. EMDL 627: twentieth-century manuscript digitized at Däbrä Sälamä Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus 'Addi Gudom in Təgray. 71 folios, no illuminations. Lacks one poem. Available from HMML.
 7. MS G. EMDL 663: twenty-first-century manuscript (1996 EC; 2003–4 CE) digitized at Šəgʷala Maryam in Təgray. 46 folios, one illumination. Lacks one poem. Available from HMML.
 8. MS H. EMMML 1211: twentieth-century paper manuscript (1963 EC; 1970–1 CE) microfilmed at Holy Trinity Church Library in Addis Ababa. It has sections in Gəʿəz that paraphrase *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra* and then sections in Amharic that translate the paraphrase, so it is not the text we call *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra*. Although listed in the catalog as "Dirsane Kirstos Samera," its title is *Zəkrä wəddaseha lä-əmmənä Krəstos Šämra* (A record of our Mother Kristos Samra's praise).
 9. MS I. EMIP 00650: twentieth-century parchment manuscript digitized at Mäkanä Iyäsus Seminary Library in Addis Ababa. Same text as MS H. Three images.²⁸
 10. MS J. EMMML 2949: twentieth-century parchment manuscript microfilmed in the private library of "Qəs Asfaw Walda Šelläsē" in Entoṭṭo, Addis Ababa. In Amharic.
 11. MS K. Däbrä Libanos Monastery is reputed to have a copy; since the original text was made in this monastery, it is perhaps even the urtext.
 12. MS L. Däbrä Tabor Monastery is reputed to have a copy.

Conclusion

²⁸. For a description, see Kesis Melaku Terefe et al., *Catalogue of the Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project*, vol. 7, *Codices 601–654: The Meseret Sebbat Le-Ab Collection of Mekane Yesus Seminary, Addis Ababa* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

Gädlä Krəstos Šämra is just one example of Ethiopia's thousands of original texts, less than 5 percent of which are available in any European language though all are invaluable to the fields of African history, literature, and religion. This hagiography of an Ethiopian woman offers insights into the lives and thought of medieval African women, the development of the forms and tropes of hagiography as a genre, medieval African Christian theology, and the non-Chalcedonian doctrine of the Ethiopian, Egyptian, Syrian, Armenian, and Indian churches. To date, however, Selamawit Mecca's article is the only scholarly text to address this saint or her hagiography at length.²⁹ Clearly, more work is needed to interpret, analyze, and translate this extraordinary text. It is my hope that this article lays out some fruitful directions for that work.

Wendy Laura Belcher is associate professor of African literature at Princeton University with a joint appointment in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Department of African American Studies. She is the author of *Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* (Oxford, 2012), a finalist for the Bethwell A. Ogot Award for best book on East Africa. With Michael Kleiner she translated *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* (Princeton, 2015).

Appendix 1: Beginning of *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra*

English translation by Michael Kleiner and Wendy Laura Belcher

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, one God.

The birthplace of our mother Kristos Samra³⁰ was a town from among the towns of Shawa.³¹ There was a man in that town, extremely rich in gold,

²⁹. Selamawit Mecca, "Hagiographies of Ethiopian Female Saints: With Special Reference to *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra* and *Gädlä Fəqertä Krəstos*," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2006): 153–67.

³⁰. *Krəstos Šämra* (Christ delights in her).

³¹. *Šäwa* is the region in central Ethiopia where today's capital Addis Ababa, a late-nineteenth-century foundation, is located. In the fifteenth century, Ethiopia did not extend as far south as it does today, so during *Krəstos Šämra*'s time *Šäwa* was a southern frontier province. The itinerant royal court frequently stayed there.

The present chapter examines the torturous route that Queen Njinga of Ndongo and Matamba took towards Roman Catholicism. It argues that spirituality played a central role in the decisions she made between 1622 and 1663 as she attempted to gain power and establish legitimacy in central Angola. The chapter further situates Njinga's spirituality in the context of both the indigenous African belief system and Roman Catholicism and shows how Njinga appropriated elements from both traditions to serve her political aims.

Politics, Christianity, and Afro-Portuguese Relations

Njinga's mixture of politics and religion was influenced by the Afro-Portuguese conventions of diplomacy that emerged in 1491 when the leader of the Kingdom of Kongo, King Nzinga a Nkuwu, voluntarily converted to Christianity along with his close relatives. Before Nkuwu's conversion, political leadership in the region, as elsewhere in the premodern world, was imbedded in local ideas that combined magical, religious or ritual, and legal elements. Following Nkuwu's conversion to Christianity, the close ties that developed between the Kongo leadership and Catholic Portugal as well as with the Vatican had a major impact on politics and religion in Central Africa. In Kongo itself, King Afonso (1509–43), the elder son of Nzinga a Nkuwu, explained his military victory over his pagan brother in religious terms by rationalizing later that the figure of the Christian Saint James Major, the patron saint of Portugal, so frightened his brother and his brother's supporters that they fled from the battlefield. From Afonso's time, to be considered a legitimate ruler of Kongo, a person had to be a Christian, and a Catholic missionary had to take part in his coronation.

In Ndongo, Kongo's neighbor to the south, Christian ideas and rituals never replaced the local magical, ritual, and legal beliefs and practices to which the people required a candidate aspiring for political leadership to conform. Local custom endured in Ndongo even though between 1518 and Njinga's birth in 1582 a total of three Portuguese embassies had arrived there in response to the request of the ruling *ngolas* for the Portuguese king to send missionaries to convert them and their people.⁷⁸ Every one of those missions failed in that effort.⁷⁹ After the failure of the last mission, in 1575, the Portuguese made many

⁷⁸. *Ngola* (similar to "king") was the title given to the rulers of the Ndongo Kingdom. The current country of Angola derives its name from this title.

⁷⁹. The earliest mission was in 1520. See, for example, Regimento to Manuel Pacheco and Baltasar de Castro, February 16, 1520, in *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, ed. António Brásio, 1st ser., vols. 1–11 (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar, Divisão de

Queen Njinga and Her Faiths: Religion and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Angola

By Linda M. Heywood

Over the last several decades, a number of historians have written articles about Angola's most famous precolonial ruler, Njinga of Ndongo and Matamba, who lived from 1582 to 1663.⁷⁵ Njinga struggled to maintain the independence of Ndongo against Portuguese aggression and became the dominant African player in the politics of Angola from 1624 until her death in 1663. Most studies of Njinga have centered on Ndongo's political culture and how Njinga fit into it. In general the question they have sought to answer is whether as a female Njinga was a legitimate ruler when she became the head of Ndongo following her brother's death in 1624. John Thornton and Joseph Miller, two outstanding scholars of early Central African history, have taken different sides on the issue of Njinga's legitimacy. Whereas Miller argued that Njinga had no political legitimacy and gained power through force and manipulation, Thornton suggested that Njinga based her claim to rule Ndongo on the Mbundu system of lineages as recorded in traditions and that, according to these traditions, Njinga was a legitimate ruler.⁷⁶ Although Thornton, Miller, and others who have studied her life have noted the role of religion in the political decisions that Njinga made, no in-depth study exists of how she used religion as a strategy for obtaining power and for ensuring Ndongo's independence. Indeed, the only scholar who has interrogated religion in Njinga's life is Cathy Skidmore-Hess in her 1995 University of Wisconsin–Madison PhD dissertation, "Queen Njinga, 1582–1663: Ritual, Power, and Gender in the Life of a Precolonial African Ruler." Although her dissertation remains unpublished, Skidmore-Hess's 2013 chapter, "Njinga of Matamba and the Politics of Catholicism," is an excellent contribution to the study of Njinga's place in seventeenth-century central African history.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Njinga also appears in the records as Nzinga, Dona Ana de Sousa, Ana de Souza, Zhingá, N'Zhingá, Jinga, and Ngola Ana Nzinga Mbande.

⁷⁶ See Joseph C. Miller, "Nzinga of Matamba in a New Perspective," *Journal of African History* 16, no. 2 (1975): 201–16; John K. Thornton, "Legitimacy and Political Power: Queen Njinga, 1624–1663," *Journal of African History* 32, no. 1 (1991): 25–40.

⁷⁷ Cathy Skidmore-Hess, "Njinga of Matamba and the Politics of Catholicism," in *Women and Religion in the Atlantic Age, 1550–1900*, ed. Emily Clarke and Mary Laven (Farnham, Surrey, Eng.: Ashgate, 2013), 123–40.

silver, and fine garments; in manservants and maidservants;³² in horses and in mules. That man's name was Dargoni;³³ his wife's name was Iléni,³⁴ [named after that] God-fearing woman whose fame had spread to³⁵ the remotest parts of the world. Together Dargoni and Iléni conceived this woman, our wise and humble mother Kristos Samra. They raised her in keeping with the family's lofty status³⁶ and were glad about her beauty.

When Kristos Samra had grown up and reached puberty,³⁷ her parents

32. Lit., *agbært wä-a'əmat* (male-servants and female-servants). It is quite likely these men and women were slaves.

33. MS A: *Därg'äni*; MS B: *Därsäg'äni*. Neither variant has a clear meaning in Gəʿəz or Amharic. The father's name in MS A (pronounced *Därgoni*) may be connected with Amharic *därgoñña* (one who receives a stipend or allowance; see Thomas Leiper Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary* [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990], 1758). By contrast, if MS B's variant is taken to be the original form, an interpretation on the basis of Amharic becomes even more elusive (*Därsäg'äni* < *Där[rä]sä g'än[n]e* = He came to my side / He supported me) and a Gəʿəz interpretation definitely can be excluded. Against this background, the name might come from one of the Cushitic languages of Ethiopia, which could imply that the saint's father's ancestors were not from one of the dominant groups of Ethiopia. A different, later manuscript about the saint gives his name as *Şäräsəhani*, a distortion corroborating the thesis that the original name did not have meaning in Amharic or Gəʿəz.

34. *Īleni* (Helen, from an original Greek *Helénē*). Since Krəstos Šämra's mother was not famous around the world, it is likely that she was named after the fourth-century Saint Helen, who claimed to have excavated remnants of Christ's original cross in Jerusalem and was the mother of Constantine the Great, who established Christianity in the Roman Empire. She could not have been named after Īleni, the famous medieval Ethiopian queen, who lived from around 1431 to 1522, but who was still living when this text was written. That queen was reputedly childless, married to an emperor, and not yet famous when Krəstos Šämra's mother was born and being named.

35. Lit., *zä-əmu' zenaha wəstä* (whose story had been heard in).

36. Lit., *bä-k'əllu kəbr* (with all dignity).

37. Lit., *bäṣṣha* (to reach or arrive). The use of Gəʿəz *bäṣṣha* appears to be modeled upon the parallel Amharic term *därräsä*, which not only means "to arrive, to reach," but also "to reach maturity, to become sexually mature" (Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary*, 1736). Enrico Cerulli translates differently: *quando fu cresciuta ed adulta* (when she was grown up and an adult). The age of puberty in Ethiopia was generally sixteen or seventeen (Desalegn Zegeye, Berihun Megabiaw, and Abay Mulu, "Age at Menarche and the Menstrual Pattern of Secondary School Adolescents in Northwest Ethiopia," *BMC Women's Health* 9, no. 1 [2009]: 29).

married her³⁸ to a man called Samra Giyorgis,³⁹ a son of Iyasus Moʿa,⁴⁰ Chaplain of His Majesty.⁴¹ Samra Giyorgis, whose lineage began from the family of Itsa Sargwah,⁴² was a companion of the king, wealthy in the possessions of this transient world, but also surrounded by the grace of the Holy Spirit.⁴³ When he saw the beauty of his bride, our mother Kristos Samra, he loved her very much. The spirit of strength and of wisdom was abundant in her,⁴⁴ [as was] the spirit of intelligence and insight.⁴⁵ Her entire appearance was pleasing; down to her feet, there was nothing ugly about her. Her cheeks were as red⁴⁶ as the rind of a pomegranate, her eyes were like the morning star. Furthermore, her fingers were even,⁴⁷ her lips luscious,⁴⁸ and her nose straight.⁴⁹ Her replies were sweetly worded; her tongue was eloquent,⁵⁰ her speech pleasant and clever. The grace of God, the assistance of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit the Helper⁵¹ attended her. Everybody who saw her marveled and rejoiced over her beauty.

Her father-in-law, [Iyasus Moʿa], even prophesied about her, saying:

38. Lit., *astäwasäbawwa*, which Cerulli incorrectly renders as *la promiserò* (they promised her).

39. *Šämrä Giyorgis* ([St.] George delights [in him]). He was a priest.

40. *Iyasus Moʿa* (Christ has vanquished).

41. Lit., *qesä haḍe* (priest of His Majesty). Since Šämrä Giyorgis is still a young unmarried man here, he is not the *qesä haḍe*; rather, his father is. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Church, priests are allowed to marry.

42. *ʿĪḍa Särgwa* (The wood [of the Holy Cross] is her adornment). The name's feminine possessive element makes it clear that this person is a female ancestor, renowned at the time the scribe wrote. Nothing, however, is known about ʿĪḍa Särgwa now.

43. B: *wä-ʿadi kəllul bā-šägga mänfäs qəddus*; A omits *kəllul* (surrounded).

44. Lit., *wä-məluʾ laʿleha* (full upon her).

45. Lit., *məkrä* [acc.], which Cerulli should have amended to the required nominative *məkr*; Filəppos, *Gadla Krestos Samra* (Ethiopic).

46. The highland peoples of Ethiopia considered themselves red, not black.

47. Lit., *zäwḡ* (alike). Cerulli: *erano accostate* (lay next to each other); Filəppos, *Gadla Krestos Samra* (Italian).

48. Lit., *qəssumat* (seasoned or tasty).

49. Lit., *qäwwam* (tall or erect).

50. Lit., *awšəʾotä qala təʾum šaʾšaʾ afuḡa* (the response of her words sweet, eloquent her mouth).

51. Lit., *päraqliḡos* (from the Greek *Paraclete* [Helper or Advocate]), as in John 14:16, 26.

After Satan had said this, he came to me and told me, “I’ve been looking for you for a long time. Today you have finally come to my home.”

At this point, I replied to him, “Come out quickly! Our Lord has pardoned you, as well as those who are yours.”

When I said this to him, he became enraged.⁷² He seized my left hand and dragged me down to the lowest level of Sheʿol. However, Saint Michael came to my [aid], following me with his sword of fire in his hands. [With it,] he then struck that abominable [creature] who knows no mercy.

My brothers, what can I tell you about the wailing that arose in that hour! All the [captive] souls [p. 47] swarmed me like bees. [Fortunately], the number of souls who escaped from [hell] on the wings of Saint Michael and on my own wings was something like 100,000. I was delighted when I saw how happy those souls were. I frolicked among them just like a young calf; I was like a horse that races in the king’s presence.

After that, I went to [Christ] my creator, and prostrated myself to the glory of his rule. I said to him, “Is this how you have judged, O Lord?”

He replied, “Have you taken some booty from the hands of the devil?”

I replied, “Yes, my lord, I have, through your power.”

Now he summoned Saint Michael, the head of the angels, and said to him, “Go, take those souls to the home of my dear Kristos Samra.”

At that point I asked him, “Where is that home of mine, my lord?”

He replied, “Your home shall be with my mother [in heaven]. I hereby give you the name of Batra Maryam⁷³ and commission you as my mother’s shoes⁷⁴ and adorn you with great grace and majesty. Blessed are all who love you.” [p. 47]

72. Lit., [fidäl] (his heart burnt like fire).

73. *Bäträ Maryam* (Staff of Mary).

74. To be subservient to the divine is a great honor.

mercy or shall I punish them? Please judge [for yourself], my dear Kristos Samra.”

When Christ had said these things to me, I fell on my face and said to him, “Why do you tell me all the time: ‘Judge [for yourself]?’ You judge, please! Can a servant pass judgment together with his master, or a maidservant together with her mistress? Don’t treat me in this way, O lord! [I merely ask.] Is there any wood that doesn’t smoke [when burned], are there humans who don’t sin? So, pardon them, without questions.”

So Christ replied, “Please tell me your heart’s desire, my dear Kristos Samra, that which is in your heart.”

At that point I replied to him as follows, “My lord, I would like you to pardon the devil,⁶⁶ and for all humanity⁶⁷ to be saved from being condemned to [eternal] suffering. Truly, you don’t desire the sinner’s death, but rather his turning back [from sin]!⁶⁸ This is why I say to you: ‘Pardon the devil!’ Don’t think that I like to say all these things to you. Rather, [I do it] for the sake of Adam and his offspring, because their flesh is my flesh.”

After I had said these things to Christ, our Lord replied with a laugh, “You’re asking me for a difficult thing, my dear Kristos Samra! Many saints who were before you have not asked me for this.” [p. 46]

After saying this, Christ summoned Saint Michael, the head of the angels. He said to him, “Go and take her to Sheol,⁶⁹ because she has asked me to liberate the devil from the [realm of] punishment with [eternal] suffering.”

Immediately, Saint Michael, the head of the angels, took me with him to Sheol. As we were on our way, I said to Saint Michael, head of the angels, “From now on, all humanity shall find rest because I believe that the devil wants to be pardoned and not to be Lord God.”

Then we arrived in hell.⁷⁰ My brothers, what can I tell you about the suffering that is found there? I saw people biting each other as if they were dogs.

Then Saint Michael, the head of the angels, said to me, “Summon the devil [and find out] if he wants to be saved.”

So I called out for him, in the language of the angels, “Satan!”⁷¹

Instantly, Satan shouted [back], in a loud voice, “Who calls out for me, in the place where I am Lord God of many hosts?”

⁶⁶ Lit., *Diyabəlos*.

⁶⁷ Lit., [fidäl] (children of Eve). And below.

⁶⁸ Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11.

⁶⁹ Lit., *Si’ol*, from Hebrew לִישׁוֹן, the place of the dead, the nether world.

⁷⁰ Lit., *gāhännäm* (hell).

⁷¹ Lit., *Satəna’el*.

“This is an exalted woman,” and he honored her as if she was his lady.⁵²

Then Kristos Samra bore her husband Samra Giyorgis children: nine boys and two girls. She raised them and taught them all God’s Law.

The king also loved and honored Kristos Samra. He gave her maidservants from among his palatial attendants,⁵³ marked⁵⁴ with the royal mark, to escort her. They walked with her in their set orders, eighty-six on her right and eighty-six on her left, so all of them together numbered 172.⁵⁵

Kristos Samra’s mule was from beyond the sea; her veil⁵⁶—that is, her facial veil⁵⁷—as well as [her] garments were as fine as the royal women’s garments. The King of Ethiopia, the Anointed of God, favored her with much gold and silver, with shoes of gold, and with all these honors so that her name should be exalted. Truly,⁵⁸ he loved her very much, just like a daughter who had sprung

⁵² Lit., *əgzəʔt* (lady, mistress), which is devoid of erotic overtones. Rather, it is evocative of the Holy Virgin, who in Gəʕəz is regularly addressed as *əgzəʔənä* (Our Lady).

⁵³ Lit., *əmənnä däqqä şərhu* (from the servants of his palace or bedchamber). Cerulli: *di quelle della Corte* (from among those of the Court). The word *däqq* can also mean disciples or children and, as part of the standard phrase “children of the house,” slaves. Since the next phrase describes them as having a royal mark, presumably a permanent brand or tattoo, they are almost certainly slaves. The Romans were the first to brand slaves.

⁵⁴ AB: *həruman* (masc. pl.), which Cerulli should have changed to the required *hərumat* (fem. pl.) because the reference is to the maidservants (*aʕəmat*).

⁵⁵ For a discussion of this passage, see Derat, “Chrétien et musulmans d’Éthiopie,” 129.

⁵⁶ Lit., *gəlbabi*, where the dictionaries only document *gəlbab* and *gəlbabe* (August Dillmann, *Lexicon linguae Aethiopicæ, cum indice Latino* [Leipzig: Weigel, 1865], 1139; Wolf Leslau, *Concise Dictionary of Gəʕəz (Classical Ethiopic)* [Wisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989], 201). Regarding Ethiopian women wearing veils when they travelled, see Pedro Páez, *Pedro Páez’s History of Ethiopia, 1622*, ed. Isabel Boavida, Hervé Pennec, and Manuel João Ramos, trans. Christopher J. Tribe (Burlington, VT: Ashgate for the Hakluyt Society, 2011), 2.274, 405.

⁵⁷ A: *məstəkar*, B: *mästəkar*. The term is undocumented in the Gəʕəz dictionaries (Dillmann, *Lexicon linguae Aethiopicæ, cum indice Latino*, 177, 570; Leslau, *Concise Dictionary of Gəʕəz (Classical Ethiopic)*, 35, 109). Cerulli convincingly suggests that the term corresponds to Amharic *mästänkariya* (long veil women use to cover the face); see Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary*, 214, 19.

⁵⁸ Lit., *əsmä* (truly or because). Therefore, this word could be interpreted as the end of the previous sentence, changing the clauses’ meaning to “so that her name should be exalted because he loved her very much.”

from his loins. All this was granted⁵⁹ to Kristos Samra because it so pleased God, her creator.

Appendix 2: Anecdote about Satan in *Gädlä Krastos Sämrä*

English translation by Michael Kleiner and Wendy Laura Belcher

[p. 44] Then my lord⁶⁰ Jesus Christ came to me, in great glory. When I saw him, I fell at my Lord God's⁶¹ feet. Immediately, however, he raised me up with his holy and blessed hands without blemish.

Then he said to me, "Don't be afraid, my dear Kristos Samra. Rather, tell me your heart's desire."

I replied, "If you permit your maidservant [to ask], tell me why you created our father Adam in your image and likeness,⁶² and why you were crucified on the wood of the cross. Was it not for the sake of Adam and his offspring?"

Christ replied, "Yes, I was crucified for their sake."

So I said to him, "If your crucifixion happened for their sake, pardon [all] those who have died, from Abel up to now and in eternity, O Lord! Truly, you are merciful, slow to be angered, given to compassion, and righteous. There is no other God than you, you are all-powerful, and nothing is impossible for you; the entire earth does not [even] fill your hands."

Now Christ replied to me with these words, "Please judge [for yourself], my dear Kristos Samra. [Weigh] the sins that Adam and his offspring have committed [against] the cross that I, your creator, carried in the court of Caiaphas and Annas with Pontius Pilate as their superior:⁶³ If they are weighed on the scales, which one is heavier? Does not my suffering [in human hands], which I received on [Good] Friday, weigh heavier?"

When Christ said this to me, I trembled and fell to the ground. Immediately, he raised me up again with his holy hands and asked me, "All the tribulation that I suffered, for whom do you think it was? [p. 45] As the prophet Isaiah says, 'He came to be slaughtered like a sheep, and like a sheep that does not give a sound⁶⁴ before him who shears it, he too did not open his mouth despite his suffering.'⁶⁵ As scripture said, I was crucified on a wooden cross—a wicked servant slapped my face, impure people spat on me, and Pilate, sitting on his throne, ordered me to be whipped. Thus was I treated: Shall I show humanity

⁶⁰. Lit., *əgzi*⁷ (master or lord), which can be used for God or for a worldly ruler, owner, or chief.

⁶¹. Lit., *amlak* (Lord or God), which can be used only for a heavenly ruler.

⁶². Note that she addresses Christ the Son as the Creator, even though he is not God the Father.

⁶³. Lit., *Qäyafa . . . Ḥanna . . . Pīlaṭos Pēnṭenawi*. See John 18:12–14.

⁶⁴. Lit., [fidäl] (does not speak).

⁶⁵. Isaiah 53:7, with slight differences from the Protestant Bible. See the Septuagint.

59. Lit., *yətgäbbär lati* (was done to her).