




From the book: Anthology of Amazing Women:
Trailblazers Who Dared to be Different
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Illustrated by Nathan Collins

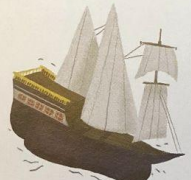


ANA NZINGA

During the sixteenth century, Portuguese slave traders, feeling the pinch from English and French rivals, looked for new territory farther along the African coast. Knowing their spears were useless against the aggressors' firearms, some nations made deals, sending a few of their people into slavery to save the rest; others captured members of rival tribes to save their own. But Nzinga had no intention of giving the slave traders anything at all.

Nzinga was born around 1582, the daughter of Ngola, head of the Ndongo kingdom, in modern-day Angola. She and her brother Mbandi were trained in hunting, archery, diplomacy, and trade. Nzinga excelled, even learning Portuguese from a priest her father had captured. Ngola started a campaign against the Portuguese colonialists, and when he died, Mbandi became king.

The Portuguese suggested a treaty with Mbandi, and Nzinga was sent to conduct negotiations. She was reluctant; she didn't see why she should deal with slave traders. She was further insulted when the governor sat on a large throne and she was given a mat on the floor. Furious, she made one of her servants kneel on the mat and sat on him! The talks went well, but it wasn't long before the Portuguese went back on their word and the slave traders returned to their old tricks.



In 1626, Mbandi died, Nzinga became king. She refused to let her subjects call her "queen." When the Portuguese increased their attacks and burned her city, Nzinga retreated to the mountains to regroup. She founded a new kingdom, Matamba, and began a war. For three decades, Nzinga would personally lead battles and guerrilla raids against her old enemy. Her sisters, Mukambu and Kifunji, were her closest advisors, and there were many women in her wider council who also served in the army.

Nzinga offered sanctuary to runaway slaves and Portuguese-trained African soldiers. She sent ambassadors through west and central Africa, hoping to create a coalition of African armies. Nzinga found a temporary ally in the Dutch, and the combined forces expelled the Portuguese out of Angola, but she was soon forced back into Matamba.

Nzinga changed her approach, now concentrating on building her kingdom as a trading power, though she would still lead her troops into battle when necessary. She died in 1661, at the age of eighty one, having built a nation who could trade with Europeans on equal terms. She was laid to rest in her leopard skins with her bow over her shoulder and arrows in her hand.

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