

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 317. African Amazons

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Forbidden from sleeping with men, the Egozi,

the regiment of immensely fierce female warriors who fought for the Kingdom of Dahomey, were recruited when young and forced to undergo the kind of military training that would turn most of us into conscientious objectors.

One British traveler described how the women were forced to scramble across dense thickets of acacia thorns

without anything to protect their feet from bleeding.

Other tests were designed to desensitize them to the horrors of combat.

Every year, new recruits of both sexes were required to mount a platform 16 feet high, pick up baskets containing bound and gagged prisoners of war, and hurl them over the parapet to a baying mob below.

And in perhaps the most horribly memorable detail,

a French officer called Jean Beol,

watched as a teenage recruit called Naniska,

who had not yet killed anyone,

was brought before a captured young man whose hands were bound.

According to Beol, she swung her sword three times with both hands, then calmly cut the last flesh that attached the head to the trunk.

She then squeezed the blood off her weapon and swallowed it.

Nice. Now, that was top historian of Africa, Dominic Sambrook.

Oh, my word.

Writing in unheard UNHERD and Dominic,

you were prompted to write that article.

Yeah, based on my own close research age.

Yes, well, that's very evident.

But that was inspired by The Woman King, a film that came out last September.

Yes, the Viola Davis, John Bega film,

which is about the formidable Amazon warriors of Dahomey.

At least that's how they were presented, wasn't it?

So then there was a huge storm, if you remember,

because Dahomey was a kingdom, an empire based partly on slavery.

So there's a huge storm about whether or not these characters

should be portrayed as anti-slavery freedom fighters,

as they were in the film,

or whether this was reducing the historical record.

And lots of people on social media got really agitated

and tore lumps out of each other about it.

And I thought, I'm going to wade in.

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I thought this is a great opportunity to talk about my favorite subjects, which are blood and guts.

That's how I did.

And so you took it.

Yeah.

Okay.

And so this idea that there were regiments of what European observers at the time called Amazons.

It's obviously, I mean, it's a kind of incredible detail.

It seems barely plausible.

But then I met Luke Pepperer, who is an anthropologist, historian, a broadcaster.

And Luke, you're busy writing a book, Motherland, 500,000 Years of African History, Cultures and Identity, which I think will be coming out in 2025.

And you said that this theme of Amazons in Africa, that I wasn't just kind of projecting Eurocentric fantasies.

Please reassure me that I wasn't,

that this is something that is actually a feature of various places in Africa.

Yeah.

No, definitely.

I mean, female fighting forces, soldiers, military commanders, it's something that's very much a feature of African societies and African cultures.

I mean, dating all the way back to that of Kush,

which existed and was once in modern day Sudan, began in about 5,000 BC, ended at about 350 AD.

And there was a period from about 200 BC to about 100, 200 AD,

where they actually had female rulers, the Kandakes,

who also led campaigns against the Egyptians, against the Romans.

So the most famous is Omani Uranus, who in sort of 26 to 23, 22 BC, fought against the Romans, who had just conquered Egypt.

And we're also trying to annex Kush as well.

I mean, what's interesting obviously about the Amazons in sort of the Causal Mediterranean, is that there's a kind of, there's almost an inbuilt fear,

because the Amazons of that ilk are basically like an all female society, who don't even allow men to live in their society.

Like it's very, it's like, what would happen if all the rules of society were completely reversed?

And so I'd say one thing I would say is that there's a bit more of a balance in the reality of the African societies.

But you can definitely see why that attitude of Amazons,

or at least the perception of Amazons came across to the Europeans who were,

or Mediterranean, or ancient Mediterranean, whoever,

who encountered the female commanders of the female soldiers

that existed in numerous African societies and cultures for 2000 years.

So the Amazons have popped up a few times in the rest of history.

Alexander the Great was supposed to have met the Amazons.

We talked about in our series, recent series about Columbus,

about how at one point some of the instructions that he has when he goes out are,

see if you can find where the Amazons are.

So when Europeans go to Africa, and I mean, obviously all this reflects this kind of fascination,

this sort of probably quite heavily sexualized fascination with kind of new bile female warriors,

and this sort of belief that it's exotic, but it's also forbidden,

it's transgressive, and all of this sort of stuff.

Is there any sense, I mean, I know we're massively generalizing,

because we're talking about different societies at different points in time.

But do you think there's a sense in Africa, as there is in Europe,

that female warriors are transgressive, but sort of also sexy, as it were, glamorous,

or is the more of a sense that they're just mundane, they're part of,

you know, of course, societies have female warriors, that's completely natural, completely normal?

Oh, that's a great question. I would say actually mundane, just because, you know, like I said in

Africa tends to be, it's not just a feature, for example, of the military, it's actually a feature

of all of society where you're going to have female counterparts to male positions in society.

You know, for example, in Kush, you know, in ancient Kush, and actually, you know, even

non-societies like the 9th century, asanteven and Dahomey, there's basically an ideology of

duology and dualism, which is essentially that in order for aspects of society to function,

you need a male and female counterpart working together, and that's often reflected in the

belief systems as well. Usually, the main gods of, you know, a lot of these African cultures are

actually, you know, either they're both male and female, so they're actually of two sexes, or

they're of the two sexes fused into one, and it's only by, you know, that connection, that fusion,

that actually that God comes into being. So you see it even, for example, in political institutions,

so in ancient Kush, from at least the 8th century BC, you, for example, have, you know,

the institution of the queen mother there is very strong, so the king rules, but the queen

mother, i.e., the mother of the king, is the most important person in the kingdom, even though

she's not the one actually in charge of the day-to-day operation of state, and that is the king.

And kingship in Kush and in other African societies, you know, in fact, quite a few,

is elective, meaning that there's a council who decides who the best prince is, and they make

him the leader, and then what happens is that his mother ends up becoming the queen mother and

becomes the most powerful person, you know, in society. But the king has quite an interest in

relationship with his mother and with his wife, and all three are needed, and the wife and the

mother represent the female counterpart, and the king and usually the brothers represent the male

counterpart, and both are needed in order to rule the state for it to, you know, believe to be

functioning effectively. So that goes for the military as well. That goes even for the household.

So it pervades all parts of society.

But Luke, there are examples, aren't there? Also, not just queen mothers, but of women who rule

as queens, who have the rule of an entire people. And you mentioned that you have a particular

favourite, don't you? Oh, yeah.

She was the first person that you nominated when we started discussing this subject.

So this is in the Jenga of Ndongo. Yes.

Have I pronounced that right? So tell us about her because she is, I'm ashamed to say I'd never heard of her, but having read up on her, she really is an amazing figure.

Yeah, she's quite amazing. And, you know, really interesting because I think she's, she has this aspect definitely of being her own because of what she achieved, but actually the brutality that characterised not only her time, but also her rule, you know, and the things she did sometimes to her own people and also to the Portuguese who were fighting, makes her quite a fascinating figure. And, you know...

I mean, she's not just Indiradhan, is she?

No, definitely not.

She's 17th century.

So she's a 17th century ruler of the kingdom of Ndongo, which is what was once in Northern Angola, what's now Northern Angola. And she's actually the first female ruler of that kingdom.

So women are treated, you know, actually fairly well in that kingdom, equally in that kingdom, you know, they're not considered property, they can divorce their husbands if they like, go back to their father's family, even elite women, so royal women like in Jenga was.

So she was part of the royal family of Ndongo, was allowed and she said was allowed to sit in on, you know, the meetings of her father's political councils and military councils,

etc. But she was actually the first to solve female ruler of that kingdom. Because actually female rulers, even though they'd been female ancestors, you know, there wasn't actually a precedent of a woman being totally in charge of the kingdom. So she was unique in that regard.

But, you know, she comes to power, you know, she comes to power in the mid 17th century.

But, you know, it's really just after the Portuguese have gained quite a strong foothold in West Central Africa. First with the kingdom of Congo, which is nearby just northwest of Ndongo.

Yeah. And then with Ndongo itself, and the Ndongo rulers of the late 15th century, early 16th century, are quite keen initially to build relationships with the Portuguese because they see Congo, you know, it was also a rival kingdom, gaining goods and power and weaponry, etc.

And they want a piece of that. But then afterwards, and this being in the late 16th century, the Portuguese attempt to found a colony in Ndongo, the colony of Angola, because they're, you know, they're making alliances with the king, sometimes the king, including actually in Jenga's grandfather and father, are using them to fight, you know, rebellious nobles.

But then, you know, when the Portuguese, for example, defeat these nobles, sometimes conquering the lands and they fall out with the kings. And then obviously they wanted to found their own colony as well based on because they start making, you know, inroads deeper into West Central Africa,

come across Congo. And this puts them at odds with the rulers of Ndongo. So they fall out as well. And this is really this tense and conflict ridden period that precedes in Jenga's rule.

But she's not trained to be queen, is she? She has military training, I think, as a girl, but she doesn't. Yeah. Her brother is king first. Her brother is king first. So yeah, I mean, she did have training in regard because actually she was, you know, as the story goes, she was actually her father's favorite. Right. So Angola and Bande is her father. And, you know, she's recognized as being special, as being particularly talented. I mean, she's born in the 1580s and in the Breach position with her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. And this is seen as being an auspicious sign. And when the Ambundu, that's the name of the inhabitants of the kingdom of

Ndongo,

see her being born in this position, you know, they actually say, oh, my mother, you know, there's a sense that she's destined for greatness. So she's taken really under her father's wing. She's the best at throwing the axe, which is, and the axe is like a symbol of Ndongan, you know, authority, rule, authority. So her brother hates it, doesn't he? And you can see why. I mean, if you're, oh yeah, yeah, your big sister is better at throwing an axe than you are.

Oh yeah. No, no, no. So there's a resentment there. I mean, Angola's weapons in Bande Angola is actually assassinated by his own men. There's a rebellious sober in the North called Gavulo. And, you know, the Portuguese are also, you know, engaging in conquering activities in the region. And, you know, his men, his men and his nobles basically see him as a weak figure. So what they do is they trick him into, they say that, you know, their forces need help, you know, by a river in the North where this sober is rebelling. And they take him there and then his own men turn on him and assassinate him. And then what happens after that is there's a power grab by Angola and Bande, because he really wants to be king. He wants to prove himself to his father and to his people. So I mean, he just goes on a killing spree. I mean, it's sort of like, you know, a 17th century GT8. He kills everybody. But not in Jenga, not his sister. Not in Jenga or his sister. So he has, apart from in Jenga, he has two other sisters, Cambo and Fungi. So he doesn't kill them, but he kills in Jenga's son, for example. In Jenga has a baby son with one of her male concubines. God, imagine Christmas. I don't know if he was invited, to be honest.

To be honest. I mean, as interesting point you raise there, because actually having, you know, assassinated him in Jenga goes east. She actually, you know, exiles herself to the kingdom of Matamba. And, you know, she's there for quite a few years. But, you know, he assassinates his, you know, his uncles and, you know, his brothers and their sons. And I mean, he just, you know, it kills everybody. He seeks his power. Yeah, no, he is a terrifying figure. I mean, possibly, mildly psychopathic.

But am I right that he then needs in Jenga to come back and negotiate on his behalf with the Portuguese? Because she can speak Portuguese.

She can speak Portuguese, yeah.

So is she Christian by this point?

No, not by this point.

But she's been raised by Portuguese missionary, so she can speak the language.

Obviously, you know, the Portuguese were a feature of the Andongan court. So she has exposure to that. But she's also very proud of her and would do heritage. So you're right. When she's in Matamba, I mean, in Gunurban is failing miserably against the Portuguese. He wanted to keep the integrity of his kingdom and he's just failing. Like the Portuguese are still conquering and the Portuguese make a deal with these group of marauding militants or former soldiers called in Bangalore. They're basically like mercenaries. The Portuguese make a deal with them and they actually sack the capital of Andonga, Capasca, twice.

Okay. So that's not going well.

Not going well. So anyway, he calls back in Jenga from Matamba, not only because she's popular, but because he knows that she also, you know, dislikes the Portuguese and wants them out of the region. And like you said, has this exposure to Portuguese

culture. She's a lot more worldly than he is. Calls him back, sends him to Luanda, which is also the capital of Angola, right on the right on the coast. And that's the Portuguese stronghold given to them by the Congolese, actually. So that's the Portuguese stronghold. So in 1622, he sends her there to negotiate a deal and he wants the Portuguese to, you know, give back part to the kingdom to, you know, to help him against the in Bangalore, because the in Bangalore, once they've destroyed the kingdom, you know, they just leave the Portuguese and they go back and sack it again. Like they don't take orders for anybody. So he wants to help. And actually when, you know, you mentioned Christianity, it's as part of this negotiation in exchange for Portuguese, you know, support and peace that Injinga agrees to be baptized. She takes the name Ana de Souza and has, you know, a Catholic godmother and is baptized as part of that, as part of that deal. When she goes to do these negotiations, is this the Portuguese are all sitting down and they don't give her a chair? And so she orders an attendant and sits on the attendant. Is that, is that story true? That is true. Yeah, yeah. It's very regal behavior. Yeah. There's an even an engraving of it, which is really interesting. You can see images, you know, because it's definitely one of the most sort of engaging moments. But that's true. I mean, whenever the Portuguese conquered the nobles, the nobles called sobers, whenever they conquered them and made them sign, you know, submission pleasures afterwards and even during the pleasure, used to make them sit on the floor. Whereas the Portuguese governor used to sit on this gold embroidered velvet chair. So it was to reinforce and also act as a symbol of that, of that submission. And then they try to do the same to Injinga because they want her to sign, you know, the submission deal and they don't give her a chair. And she calls over one of her female attendants to make a chair. She just sort of goes down on, you know, her hands and knees. And Injinga sits on her and, you know, apparently conducts the negotiation for hours just in that position. This is promising that she's going to be a great queen. Oh, yeah. I mean, this is very much the kind of behavior you want. So her brother dies and she becomes queen. Yeah. And then what happens? So her brother dies, she becomes queen. She's always trying to, you know, she engages in a policy of trying to make peace first rather than war. I mean, she's actually trying to reach out to the Portuguese, but she's very keen on not submitting to them. So she's trying to engage in deals with the Portuguese governors and, you know, they're having none of it. So it's actually after that that she initiates a rebellion against the Portuguese. She sends her messages into all of the air, you know, basically where the Portuguese plantations in West Central Africa, they have people working there and tells them, you know, her messages tell them that, you know, she's standing up to the Portuguese and that they need to support her. There's a period of maybe 20 or 30 years where she's essentially trying to make peace with the Portuguese, failing, then battling with them. The Portuguese are pursuing her, you know, on different islands on a stronghold. And, you know, she's, she's trying to remain one step ahead of them, trying to engage in peace. But, you know, it's essentially, you know, conflict ridden for you decades against the Portuguese as she's trying to maintain the integrity of the kingdom of Andonga. And then how does she get involved with, is it Cassangé? Cassangé, yeah, the in Bangala. So as I mentioned, there's this sort of, you know, there's this back and forth conflict. Actually, she makes a deal with Cassangés after a major loss of the Portuguese. You know, she loses terribly to the Portuguese in the late 20s and, you know,

her forces have been decimated and she needs more soldiers. So she makes a deal with this in Bangala leader called Cassangé. And as part of the deal, she not only has to give up her symbols of all authority and agreed to marry him, but she also has to become an in Bangala herself. So she goes through the rituals to become an in Bangala. And that's a colossal deal. Big deal. Huge deal. That's giving up her own cultural heritage to embrace that of their traditional enemies, right? Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't consider the in Bangala to be their traditional enemies per se, but it's definitely contrary to in Bundu custom. You're totally right in that regard. I mean, the in Bangala are lawless, like, you know, for the most part, right? You know, they live by pillaging and, you know, and some of the things that she has to do, and or Elisa said, as she has to do in the in Bangala camp, including, you know, a blood oath ceremony where she has to drink the blood of the in Bangala and that kind of thing, run very contrary to in Bundu customs, exactly like you say. Just a quick question on that. So I was reading about that, that she drinks human blood. She has to use some sort of oil made from a slain baby or something. Yeah, crush baby one of her attendants. Yeah. Right. And is that stuff just projection and fantasy? Or is that did that really happen? You know, it's so difficult to say. I mean, given the brutality of the in Bangala, I'm not, you know, I don't know if I would, you know, rule it completely out. One thing I would say is that whether or not it was a European invention is something different. It could be a Portuguese invention. But then again, I wouldn't necessarily blame Portuguese. It could actually be something that the in Bangala, you know, either say themselves, because their whole thing was about to inspire fear, right, and people's around the place. So it could either be from them, or, you know, it's metaphorical, they're different explanations. But it could actually be, yeah, you know, because an agenda seems to be an absolute liberal. And absolutely worse. So, so she goes to war with the kingdom of Matamba. Oh, yeah. Is that right? And she conquers them and takes the queen captive. Yeah, Mwonga. Yeah. And so she should properly put the queen to death.

But instead, she, it's very liberal Democrat behavior. She just brands her. Oh, Tom, that's just that's snowfakery. Absolutely snowfakery. Absolutely. I mean, especially this time. Yeah. Absolutely. And takes her daughters into service as her warriors. Yes, yes. Well, she, yeah, she adopts her daughter. You're right. Doesn't slay Mwonga, the queen of Matamba, brands and sends her into exile to rule another part of the kingdom. But she does shortly after snowfakery. Yeah, snowfakery. But I think it's partly because she has a reverence for royalty. I think that was actually it, to be honest. Okay. So it's like Elizabeth the first not wanting to kill Mary Queen of Scots. Exactly. Exactly. I think it's not spinning roll blood. Yeah. So at this point, is she ruling very much as a queen? I as an identifiably female monarch? Or is she, you know, doing that thing where she's ruling as a king, but she just happens to be a queen, if you know what I mean. So in other words, does she, does she dress and behave as a man or as a woman? That's a good question. She definitely doesn't, you know, shy away from being feminine, you know, in certain regards. Like she has, you know, tons of male concubines, etc. But then there is also that behavior where she makes her some of her male concubines, you know, dress up as women and then acts as, you know, okay, man. So it's part of right. And her bodyguard is female. So her soldiers are female and her concubines are male. And there's kind of full scale cross dressing going on. I mean, she has, yeah, like you said, close female, you know, attendants and generals and all the rest of it, who exactly those were, we're not sure. But she also has

female concubines. But then also that wasn't unusual in terms of, you know, women being allowed to have relationships with multiple men. And especially if they're royal women, you see it in other places as well. Right. Yeah. And so what's happening with Cassangé, meanwhile, because he doesn't seem the kind of guy who would, he would necessarily be happy with his wife keeping large lambs of men dressed as women. Yeah, with concubines. Yeah. I mean, Cassangé, Cassangé himself has, you know, says he has up to like 30 sons or something. He's a lad. So, I mean, he's probably busy. He's probably busy himself. But that's true. But how are they getting on? Are they still a fixture? Yeah, I mean, there's still, you know, in lines between them, how strong this is after the conquest of because she's still using, you know, in Bangalore forces, she uses them to conquer, you know, to conquer Matamba. I mean, you know, afterwards Cassangé also wants to found his own kingdom, actually. So he's sort of getting closer with the Portuguese. So there does seem to be a freezing of relations between them. But she's still relying on his, his, you know, his quote unquote manpower. And so she, what is it, going into the kind of the 1630s, she becomes more and more powerful. Yeah. She enters into an alliance with the Dutch. She starts applying them with slaves. Well, that's an interesting point, isn't it? Because that goes back to that thing we were talking about in the beginning about the, the Tahomey. Yeah, the Tahomey, the warrants of Tahomey. So she is slave taking. That's a pretty established military practice. Is it for the, for that kingdom? Yes. But I think, you know, when it comes to Africa, obviously, there's two kinds of the slavery that's happening in Africa, i.e. the types of people that Injinga itself has in her service, are probably better described as serfs. Now, this is not to suggest that it's fun. Not that it's fine, but then also that Africans aren't, you know, in saving people to sell them to, you know, for example, you know, knowing, knowing full well that they're going to be traded across the Atlantic. But actually, what's happening in Africa and the reason Injinga is angry, for example, with the Portuguese is because they're enslaving them largely as well, free in Bandu citizens. So that's an issue. And so by building this alliance with the Dutch, and she's got her terrifying husband as well. Yeah. She's able to essentially to rebuild the power of her own people. Yeah. And she ends up able to essentially kind of reconstitute it and to establish peace treaty with the Portuguese. Is that right? Yeah. Yeah. But I mean, she makes a alliance with the Dutch, but the Dutch actually let her down. So this is in the 1640s and she agrees to supply. Oh, well, so from the way with the Dutch, Tom, so often the way, you know, they form an alliance in the 1640s and they're supposed to storm, you know, Luanda, make it up. But what happens are the Portuguese send reinforcements from South America and they start bombarding because the Dutch have taken Luanda. Oh, so this is all part of the First World War, Dominic. So Tom's theory, Luke, the Dutch Portuguese war, global war. Yes. Exactly. It's all part of the Dutch coming into and taking, you know, the Atlantic trade from the, you know, from the Portuguese, but also in South America as well. I mean, they take, you know, the sugar-producing regions of Northeast Brazil. But Injinga is able to capitalize on it, basically. Yeah, she's able to capitalize on it. But like I said, you know, they make a deal to storm the capital and essentially when it looks hopeless, the Dutch go ahead to Luanda and board ships and take off, you know, whilst Injinga is waiting, you know, for the order or at least, you know, for them to make their assault, their combined assault on the capital. So then she has to, you know, try other strategies. So what she does is again, she does the sort of, I mean, two, three-pronged strategy really. So from Matamba, which is before she conquers Matamba,

she's essentially a guerrilla, you know, she's engaging in guerrilla warfare. She doesn't actually have a base until she captures Matamba after instigating the rebellion. But she engages, you know, quite a lot with the Capuchin missionaries and she writes to the Pope and she tries to get recognized as a Christian monarch. That's one big thing that she does.

And does that work?

It does. Yeah, yeah, it does. The Capuchins because they're very keen to start missionary work in Indonga and they want her to give up the traditional practices in Bangala rights.

So her state starts to become, she starts to Christianize. Is that right?

Yeah. So she starts to Christianize. Probably, I would say, I mean, it's always hard to say because obviously, like I said, she becomes baptized in the 1620s, but definitely in the 50s particularly, 1650s, 1660s, she Christianizes, but she's also launching attacks against Indongo because the Portuguese have installed a puppet king there. So she's launching attacks against him, you know, putting on the military pressure. She's closing the slave markets. The Portuguese are relying on to supply their plantations in Brazil. And she's also trying to reach a diplomatic conclusion. So she's actually doing all of these things. That's why she's renowned as a very capable leader. You know, her strategic mind is unbelievable. So she's doing all these things at once in order to bring the Portuguese to the negotiating table. But at this time, they also have, you know, her sister can go in captivity as well. So she's keen to get her back, you know, so they capture her, you know, a few years before. And one of her sisters actually has been drowned by the Portuguese also having been captured because she's sending, she's sending letters, you know, she's in Portuguese captivity and she's sending letters to Indongo via secret spy network telling her about Portuguese movement. And the Portuguese discover these and, you know,

and execute her. So only one sister remains. So one part of the reason she does this as well, especially after the Dutch failure is to really bring the Portuguese to the negotiating table because she wants her sister back. It works at the end, you know, all of her strategies sort of converge. The Portuguese, I mean, her military war was probably the main thing, you know, the overseas council, you know, basically tell the Portuguese governors to behave themselves like they're spending, you're spending so many resources fighting this one woman and we're losing money,

hand over fist, you know, end it. Like, please stop. So that is actually, I think it's actually a military, you know, activities in particular and the fact that she's open to peace that brings the Portuguese to the negotiating table in the early to mid 1660s. So it works. Her strategy works. It works. I mean, and, you know, they sign a deal. The Portuguese in the initial contract, because there's a bit of a back and forth between what the terms are going to be, you know, contracts and deals go. And, you know, the Portuguese initially want to want to put in the in the treaty that she has to supply slaves, like a tribute of slaves every year to the Portuguese king. And she asked them to take that out. I mean, not not because, you know, again, not because she's like, well, not because she's well, not because she's anti slavery, plus say, but because that would mean that indongo is a vassal, you know, as a submitter state to the Portuguese. And she asked them to take them out of the Portuguese do. And actually, she gains back most of, you know, the original kingdom of indonga and is recognized as the queen of Natamba. But then comes to a very pathetic end. She dies of a throat infection. Yeah, dies of a throat. But she's old. This is the thing. She dies in her bed, doesn't she? I mean,

that's an amazing feat for a warrior queen. She's 75. She's been fighting us Portuguese for 60 years. 75. Wow. That's pretty good going. That is good going. A large part of what she's been in the field. You know, in fact, what she says, she thanks her soldiers after the peace is affected. One of the things she said is I'm tired. Like, I've been doing this for six years. I've been in the field. I'm an old woman. I just want to live in my sister in peace. Like Tom after a podcast. Exactly. What an amazing woman. And thanks so much for introducing me to her. I'm very ashamed. I'd never heard of her. Doesn't she appear in the Marquis de Sade, Tom? Yeah, she does, I think. He claimed that she had 50 to 60 men dressed as women in her harem, and they had to fight the death for the privilege and duty of spending the night with her. Right. I don't know about the second, the first bar's true. People say that about Cleopatra and stuff as well. I believe that was brilliant. So I think we can definitely not share up as an African Amazon. Let's take a break now. And then when we come back, we'll look at the Dahomey Warriors, but also we'll look at some Amazons who are very close to your heart, the Ashanti Queen Mothers, because you are Ashanti, aren't you? Yes, indeed. And the Ashanti are very much friends of the show. We did an episode on them. So when we come back, the Ashanti Queen Mothers.

She might have been anywhere between 40 and 50, rather round faced with a small straight nose, a fine brow and a short broad-lipped mouth. Her skin was jet black and plump. And then you met the eyes. And in a sudden chill rush of fear, realized that all you had heard was true. And the horrors you had seen needed no further explanation. They were small and bright and evil as the snakes, unblinking with the depth of cruelty and malice that was terrifying. So Tom and Luke Pepper, you will of course know that that comes from one of our very best sources on 19th century Africa, the papers of Sahari Flashman, who in the novel Flashman's Lady by George Woodall Fraser, he pitches up at the court of Rana Valona, the mad monarch of Madagascar, a tremendous figure. We'll come to her in just a second. But Luke, you are talking us through African Queens and African Amazons, African female warriors. And we were promised that you would talk about Ashanti Queen Mothers, for whom you have a tondress, I believe. Yes, yes. So I'm Ashanti myself. And this is one of the first things that I got into, especially when researching African history, and they even know of Ashanti Queen Mothers myself on my paternal grandmother's side. So very close to my heart indeed. And so what's so unique about Ashanti Queen Mothers? What makes them distinctive? So this is Ghana, isn't it? This is the kind of great kingdom 17th century, right the way up to the colonial period. Exactly. So now we're looking at modern day Ghana, the Ashanti Empire founded in the early 18th century. And they have a golden stool, don't they, which is? The golden stool, exactly the symbol of the of the Ashanti and an axe as the king's throne, although it's not actually allowed to, nobody's allowed to sit on it, always kept on its side. But Ashanti is unique. Well, actually, probably not unique, I would say, but it's definitely very unusual, even in Africa, actually, for being both a matriarchal and a matrilineal society. So women rule the roost in all kinds of ways. And the Queen Mother is the most important political figure in the Ashanti authority. So that is what's quite unusual about it, is that we have this one figure who has a say in so many aspects of society, and who has power unrivaled, and a lot of the societies in Africa, but also over the world, and everything that an Ashanti person is connected to their mother. But the Queen Mother

is the mother of the Ashanti King. And so who is the most celebrated, the most marshally proficient of the Queen Mother's?

Probably Yaa Santewa, who, yeah, who fought against the British in the early, you know, the war of the Golden Stool. It's a great war.

It's a great war, because she refused to give up the Golden Stool when it was demanded of the Ashanti

by the British. And, you know, she ends up losing in his exile to the Seychelles. But, you know, she stood up, because a lot of the Ashanti kings, you know, they actually had quite good relationships with the British, and they weren't keen to fight. And she, you know, lambasted them and said, you know, you weak men, and, you know, this wouldn't happen at the time of your ancestors and all that kind of thing, and then leads a resistance against them. So she's probably... So this is the end of the 19th century, is it?

End of the 19th century, early 20th. She's probably the best known and the most revered as well. So a lot of Munganans, including my own sister, in fact, is named after her, called Yaa Joa, which was her name, and then Yaa Santewa, when she obtained her title, and she became Queen Mother.

And so as the Queen Mother, do you have the power of command? Do you wield the power of life and death, any of these kinds of things? It will tell us the truth. Yeah, good question.

I mean, what you most have, actually, so it's a more kind of power behind the throwing type situation. So the King rules, I mean, we were talking about Kush earlier, it's sort of that kind of situation. But the Queen decides, has the final say on who the King is going to be.

So Kingship and Ashanti is also elective. And there's actually a council of elders, the Busu Satiri, who decides on the next King and the people from all matters of the spectrum, in terms of being from politics, from military, or wherever. But if they choose someone with whom the Queen Mother is not happy, she can veto. She's the only one has power to veto that decision. And she's the only one who can order the Ashanti. Even in front of his councillors and his advisors can give him instruction. Go into your bedroom. Essentially. Yeah, essentially. She's the only one who can give him instructions. And in fact, she stands, you know, when King is assisted in council, she is to his right, just behind him. And that's so that if she's threatened in any way a burn out of spear, he can actually leap in front of her to protect her. So she has incredible spiritual, you know, symbolic and political authority. But she doesn't actually handle the day to day, you know, so for example, she doesn't usually she doesn't lead, let's say, for example, the army, but she can summon them to war. Yes. But when the King goes, right, okay, she's put in charge of the state. So that qualifies her to rank as an African Amazon. Just one question about the Ashanti. So there is obviously still the King of the Ashanti. So is there still a Queen Mother? There is still a Queen Mother. Yeah. And is she still regarded in the same sort of the same respect and or as a predecessor?

Yeah, same respect, same reverence. She's not as public a figure. Right. So even exactly, you know, with the kind of power she wields. But you know, with those two to the second, yeah, his mother, you know, she's she's very much power behind the frame. In fact, he wouldn't have become, you know, King if not for, you know, her authority and her say so. But usually, I mean, it's more flexible now, usually, like I said, was the mother, but now could be announced as like a senior female relative. So whether it's even exactly his mother, probably it's but not too sure. So Queen Aunt. Queen Aunt, indeed, indeed.

So they all sound great. But Dominic opened this segment with a description of of a, perhaps possibly slightly more terrifying sounding figure.

That was actually the only bit of Flashman's Lady about her that I could read out without the podcast being canceled immediately. So Luke, Ranavelona, the mad monarch of Madagascar. So she's 19th century. Yeah. And this is a period where the British and the French are both kind of throwing their weight, expanding, moving into Africa, all that kind of thing. Yeah. And she takes a stand against this. And it's her reputation as a mad monarch with eyes like snakes that convey pure evil. Is this a reflection of European propaganda? Because I cross with her because they're being kicked out? Or is it actually true?

Do you know what? I think it's largely a reflection. And to be honest, that's not to say that Ranavelona

wasn't brutal in her own way. I think she was. But a lot of the sources you have are basically 19th century London missionaries who don't have issues. So I mean, you're like, there's definitely a certain perspective. And actually, one of the few sources we have from a Malagasy woman in the 1850s, there's an Austrian traveler, Ida Pfeiffer, who goes to Madagascar and she meets the Queen and she describes her in sort of a similar way to in the novel of the Flashman's Lady.

That she said that she actually wasn't as bad as all that, honestly. But the fact that she's considered mad or having gone mad at the end of a reign, I think is an exaggeration. But she definitely wasn't. In terms of, for the ordinary Marina, it was definitely a harsh raid to be under because she was uber-traditional. That was the aspect is that she wanted to, because her husband, who she gains the throne from after he dies, Radima was quite open to European and Christian influence. And she was the complete opposite. So she institutes a lot of these. And even in some respects, quite, and definitely to us today, archaic and brutal, you know, institutions of traditional Marina society, which especially to 19th century Europeans was really quite shocking. So I think that's where that comes from.

So like what, Luke? That's what all the listeners want, I think.

Yeah. So the tanguana, which is like a trial by ordeal. So what happens is if someone is accused of a particular crime, usually, it doesn't happen often. It's usually very serious crimes, like, you know, being like treason. What happens is that they're fed a meal of rice and three pieces of chicken skin, and then also the kernel of the seeds of a tanguana plant. And then they're fed lots of water in order to throw up what they've just eaten. And if they throw up all three of the chicken skins, they're considered innocent. But if they don't throw up any, you know, less, less than three, they're considered guilty and put to death.

That's a very baroque trial, isn't it?

Yeah, I know. But what happens is that Radima, again, being wanting to cozy up to the British and particularly, actually takes, you know, British arms and agrees to have them trained militarily. I mean, you know, his troops, he agrees not to use this trial on human beings. And Rana Valona instead on dogs.

On dogs.

On dogs. So he's like, all right, we'll do it on dogs.

Hopefully that'll be fine for you. And Rana Valona takes it back.

So this isn't because the dogs themselves have offended, it's because the dog belongs to the... Probably belongs to the person or is standing in for the person.

Yeah.

So you could be accused, Tom, and you could, you have a cat, for example.

Edith. And Edith could stand in for you in this trial. And if she vomited up the chicken skins.

Yes. She would vomit it up. I mean, I don't want to go into details, but...

She's got form.

There is no orifice she is not voiding at the moment.

Oh, right. Nice. That's happening live. Fantastic.

I'm not going to go into the details.

But I mean, so if she's going around killing pets,

no wonder she has an evil reputation with the British.

Well, no, no, no, she takes it back to killing humans. That's what...

That's what... Right. I mean, the thing is, the British are probably more upset about dogs being killed.

Probably, yeah.

Yeah. But she's killing Christians. Isn't that the key thing?

There's that in terms of taking back, but then it's a persecution of Christians,

like I say, just because she's uber-traditionally. So she holds these grand meetings where she

tells Christians to denounce themselves. And if you're sort of damned, if you do damned,

if you don't, if they do come forward, some of them maybe tell us to pay a small fine,

but others executed when there's a Christian prophet who's come up with his own socratic

religion, mixing aspects of Christianity with the traditional marina religion,

because he used to be a guardian priest of one of the marina gods.

He's put on trial and he's executed. She has like a spy network. She used to root out Christianity.

And yeah. So I mean, and she launches a fair few during her reign in the 30s and the 40s,

1830s, 1840s persecutions against Christians, which obviously doesn't sit well with Europeans,

but then also, there were quite a few people who were converting in the kingdom as well.

So it's a bit of a reign of terror.

Is it true, the statistics I've read, that the population of Madagascar in her rule,

halved, went from five million to two and a half million?

No, I don't think that's true, honestly. I think that's a bit of an exaggeration.

Oh, that's not true.

We'll say that. But for example, when she's rooting out, there are some people who are dying from,

not just for example, the persecutions. I mean, sometimes hundreds or even thousands of

Christians over the course of her reign. But also, people who are dying,

for example, from overwork, I mean, she initiates, for example, like a buffalo hunt

lays her on her reign. And Radima didn't believe in building roads because he thought that they'd

aid the advance of an enemy army. And she, in accordance with his wishes, also didn't build

proper roads. But then she organizes for all of her nobles and their households to join her on

this buffalo hunt in the 40s. And she gets some of her people to basically build the road as

they're traversing. But she hadn't organized for the provisions as well. So these constructors are

just dropping like flies and being dumped into open graves and then more are being used to

something exaggeration. So I think that's, it's from also those kinds of things.

There's a tremendous seed in the Flashman book. So have you had the Flashman book, Tom?

Years ago.

So Flashman pitches up in Madagascar. He serves as her military advisor and sort of,

and concubine actually, it's Stud. And may I, Stud is the word. And Stud. So he's constantly being, he's in terror of his life. And he's sort of being dragged around by her. And he has to sort of perform on cue. And he's quaking in his boots. But he does so. But there are scenes where he will have just performed with her. And then she will sort of imperiously brush to a sun, go out onto the balcony. And down below, they've got lots of suspected Christians. So to, who are quaking themselves down below, she'll point at a group of them and she'll just say, burning. And then she'll point to another group and say, boiling. And go through all this. That's, that's very Amazonian behavior.

That's quite funny. She did do it quite often, actually. These orders would be read by, you know, a member of her judiciary or something. So she wasn't actually doing it herself in terms of pointing out who would be killed, but she would be giving orders for them to carry out.

But I think one of the reasons maybe she ranks, you know, would rank as an Amazon is that actually, you know, the, the British and the French launcher combined attack against her and against the coast. Essentially, they're, they're pushed back. It ends up failing. And, you know, she then afterwards launches embargoes against the British. So she says she's not going to import or export cows to the Mauritius and the French, you know, the French island of Grignon. And, you know, afterwards, you know, the merchants on those islands actually end up paying her a fine at the time, \$15,000. That's what she demands in exchange for what she considered an insult. Okay. So you can see why she'd have a, why she'd have a bad rep. Exactly. But obviously there's a complete cancer narrative to all this, isn't there? Which would be, you could tell this whole story and you could say this is a story of heroic resistance of leadership under tremendous, you know, a little bit like in Jinka in the first half. You can, you can for sure. Because there is, you know, quite a lot of pressure. And, you know, one thing she wants from the French, for example, is to be recognized as the Queen of Madagascar. They won't give it to her. And, you know, the, you know, the French and the British are engaging in activity in this area, military, economic, political. And because she's an uber-traditionist, you know, when her forces defeat the British French invasion, she's seen as being a hero amongst them. But then also there were a lot of Marina who suffered as well, especially those who adopted Christianity. So yeah. The way in which these stories about Amazons are interpreted and reinterpreted, depending on where you're standing, what your perspective is, brings us back to the, the topic that we began this podcast with, the Dahomey warriors. So what's your take on them? I mean, these, these did exist. They did. Now, see, it's quite interesting because they weren't always, for instance, a fighting unit in the army, in the Dahomey army. They became that later on, and actually they start off as a bodyguard and a mostly ceremonial bodyguard for the king. There was a Dahomean custom, which I'm not sure the origins of, but there was a Dahomean custom that like no man was allowed to sleep overnight at the king's palace. So if he wanted to have a bodyguard, he had to form them of women. That's what he said. So yeah, I mean, it has to be done. Initially, these were actually his wives, you know, that's actually where the name, you know, Aghosi or Aghosi comes from. It literally means king's wives, you know, or they're known as Mina, our mothers. So they're actually initially taken from the female group at the palace, at the royal palace. So as men in the 18th century, they act for the most part as a bodyguard. And actually there are reports in the traditions of Dahomey of when, for example, there were power struggles and when different factions were fighting against each other for rule of the kingdom, or there were coups, the women protected their king. It happened

actually when Giza, who is the woman king, the king, the king and the woman king. So when Giza comes to power, he comes to power via a coup. And the women of the person from who takes the throne are said to have fought very bravely in his defense before Giza comes to power.

So in the 18th century, obviously Giza comes by 19th century, but the 18th century, the Dahomey and Amazons are very much like a ceremonial, partly militaristic bodyguard. And it's actually Giza himself has credit for transforming them into a proper fighting unit in the army where they're used in wars against other powers. And they are used to capture slaves and to sell slaves to European powers. Is that right? I think, you know, the way that that would be, you know, broken down is that obviously they engage in battles with other groups in Africa. So for example, that fights against the Yoruba. And then the majority, and this is what actually happened with the majority of the slave people in Dahomey, especially in the 18th century under the king, for instance, Agarja, is that most of the people captives of war would be used as serfs in Dahomey. And then what was left over would then be traded to Europeans and their fates, you know, unknown, not really sure. But they weren't actually sent out on specific slave raiding expeditions, but they often captured people in war who then went on to be sold as slaves here. And Luke, that description that Dominic gave us in his immortal prose that I read out at the beginning of the episode, and not in any way to impugn his status as a historian of Africa. What? But all that kind of stuff about the Spartan upbringing, kind of running barefoot on thorns and chopping off heads and things. Yeah. Is this accurate as far as we know, or is Dominic making it up? I'm not making it up. It's from their traveler's stories, Tom. French officers and whatnot. Right. So I mean, okay, okay.

French officers, yeah, as part of the training regime, I mean, you know, whether they were, you know, as a bloody as obviously to be debated, but there was actually quite a hard training regime because, you know, the women, you know, the Dahomian women and the unit of female soldiers and Dahomian army are reckoned by a lot of the accounts of 18th and 19th century European

travelers to be a lot better fighters than, then, you know, the men of the army as well, better at, you know, braver and better using muskets. And actually, there are a lot of traditions, for example, when, you know, the Dahomians are fighting against, you know, towns of the Eurobar, for instance, that when the men are pushed back is actually the women who go in and secure, you know, the, you know, who helped them win the battle at the end. So they definitely had come through a rigorous process, also very few of them. I mean, they start off numbering the maximum 800 and on the Giza, where they're sort of institutionalized and expanded, they go to about 3000. And, you know, their makeup, you know, the way they're constituted and the way they operate in the field is similar to how the main Dahomian army or at least the male Dahomian army also operates. So they're utilized, you know, very much and, you know, very effectively, they're not like a support unit or anything like that. They are very much, you know, an important unit of the Dahomian army.

I suppose there's two things I would say. One is that, so for example, that French officer, Jean-Bael, who is describing the woman who kills a captured young man, she cuts his head off. Naniska.

I mean, it's perfectly possible, of course, that is being staged right in and to impress the French. You know, that it's not necessarily the norm, but this is a big demonstration. Going back to what you said in the first half.

Yeah. People want to be thought of as fearsome and formidable and all the rest. Want to be thought of as fearsome. Very true. I mean, essentially risk is the weather. I don't know, possibly, I don't know about the drinking of the blood, but I mean, the Dahomians definitely did decapitate, you know, because actually the heads, that was actually one of the things that you used to take to the king and you'd be paid per head that you gave to the king. Right.

And then again, as European reports, apparently reports of heads, you know, rotting like, you know, by the palaces of the Dahomian kings. And but I think actually there was a system of, you know, getting paid for giving, you know, heads or life captives, ideally, but, you know, decapitated heads to the king and you get paid for it. So.

Well, that was the other thing I was going to say, though, is that we can't ever quite get away from the fact that so much of this story. And indeed, you could, I mean, if you were being harsh, you would say even the fact that we're doing this as a podcast is a reflection of a sort of prurient European fascination.

Yes. Yeah.

And to some extent, even the success of a film like *The Woman King*, there's a slight folk memory of this sort of, oh, glamorous, sexy, but also incredibly violent. Yeah.

You know, do you not think that? Do you think that's fair, Luke?

I think so. But I think also sometimes a reflection of the times, you know, when I mean, I'm a big fan of world history, whenever I read, you know, the history of the crusades, or if you're reading about, you know, the wars in Europe, World War Two, I mean, you just see that, you know, this is just an aspect of history, either the people are fascinated by or sometimes just the sign of, you know, the sign of the times then. I mean, you know, in *Jenga*, for example, was, you know, was, was, was a large extent a victim of circumstance. You know, she didn't set out to engage in what she did. The Dahomians didn't set her, but it's true actually as well. There's a kind of fascination. But also, you know, it was, it was an aspect of in the same way that, you know, different European powers, or, you know, in China or India, wherever, you had different groups fighting against each other. It's just that you had the, you know, similar thing happening in Africa, especially in, you know, in these brutal periods.

But you don't think the fact that they're women makes it more?

Oh, women specifically?

Yeah.

I think from the European perspective, yes. I think from an African sense of, like we were saying earlier on, it's not that unusual, but it's definitely something that's just not, and I don't think there's anything right or wrong about this per se. It's just the way that the cultures have developed. You know, there are multiple theories put for why, you know, Africa does have, you know, female, female figs in Africa become, you know, important in so many different aspects. And it's, you know, related to environment, but also religion and culture. I mean, you know, so many, so many different explanations. But, you know, in an African context, not seen as unusual, but definitely in a, in a Western context, having, you know, women, you know, fighting in that, in that regard. So, you know, up in the front line and, and also obviously the Victorian ideals about women being held up on a pedestal and they can't do this and they have to be

led up. There's a lot more cultural, you know, weight for them, not so that I think, I think you're right. I think it is, but I think that's just simply because, and it's arbitrary. It's just simply because of the way certain societies in Africa developed and simply the way certain societies in Europe are developed. Well, Luke, what a fascinating tour d'horizon.

And I really think you shouldn't come on any more podcasts and you should just devote yourself to finishing your book, Motherland, 500,000 Years of African History, Opera and Identity, because I cannot wait to read it. Thank you. And obviously, when I say don't come on any more podcasts, I'm excluding it because it would be wonderful to have you back and tour other aspects of African history. Thank you so much. So much for that. Thank you everyone for listening and we'll be back very soon with more history, more history dope, as Reagan might have put it. Bye bye. Bye bye. Bye bye.

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