

*The Woman King's* Erasure of The Kingdom of Dahomey's Involvement in the Transatlantic  
Slave Trade

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Through Gina Prince-Bythewood's film, *The Woman King*, the Kingdom of Dahomey, West Africa, is depicted as an economic powerhouse among the kingdoms of Africa. The empowerment of women is a central theme of this recent Hollywood release through the all-woman army known as the Agojie. Throughout, women are the driving force of the nation's defense and security. Along with the powerful representation of women throughout the film, the creators do an accurate job demonstrating the wealth within the Kingdom of Dahomey. For example, King Ghezo, the nation's leader during this time, trades and gives tribute to other kingdoms in Africa, such as The Oyo Empire, demonstrating their involvement in trade. Through this trade, they received valuable items such as cowrie shells, worn by characters such as Nanisca, the leader of the Agojie. Even though the film engages the audience through action sequences and drama, there is an overall lack of accuracy regarding The Kingdom of Dahomey's involvement in the slave trade. Despite Dahomey being depicted as liberators, they were indeed far from this. Not only did they acknowledge the slave trade, but they actively participated and profited off of its nature.

The Kingdom of Dahomey, located in present-day Southern Benin, found a market of economic growth through the slave trade. During the early 1600s, Europeans dominated the slave trade along the coasts of Africa<sup>1</sup>. The increase of plantations in The Americas, and their need for physical labor, led to the rise of slavery. European slavers began setting up camps and

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 9.

castles along the Bight of Benin<sup>2</sup>, and Dahomey began taking advantage of this newfound opportunity- they would provide the Europeans with enslaved people, albeit, for a price. Europeans began sending diplomats to the Dahomey, where they would discuss the price and delivery of enslaved people. In addition to cowrie shells for decoration and currency, the Kingdom typically received cloth, guns, and Brazilian Tobacco in exchange for human lives<sup>3</sup>. The means of capturing the enslaved people was nothing short of horrific or unusual. In comparison to other forms of slavery, for example indigenous Americans forced labor, Africans were captured through more “creative” and biased ways. Warfare, raiding, kidnapping, and judicial procedures were all used to acquire slaves from nations around Benin<sup>4</sup>. These enslaved people were mainly sent to Brazil, where they would work on sugar plantations in horrendous conditions<sup>5</sup>. Other enslaved individuals would also be transported and forced to work in mines, coffee plantations, or even work as nannies to families. At the time, King Agaja, the ruler of Dahomey, was in full support of this trade<sup>6</sup>. In a letter written by an English trader, Bulfinch Lamb, taken captive in 1724, he reports Agaja saying, “he wants ships to come to some place only for his slaves, and bring such things as are only fit for such a king of he.”<sup>7</sup> Although the warriors in the Kingdom of Dahomey were not known to be liberators, some enslaved victims of captured nations were accepted in the Agojie army force. These minuscule circumstances do not change Dahomey’s profit off the slave trade. The Kingdom was working side by side with the European slave traders to gain economic growth and expansion of their kingdom. Their dominance in the slave trade continued until the 1890s.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>3</sup> Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Law “Dahomey and the Slave Trade: Reflections on the Historiography of the Rise of Dahomey.” *The Journal of African History* 27 (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 243.

<sup>7</sup> William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea* (John Nourse, 1744), 174.

Even though the Kingdom of Dahomey is portrayed in the light of heroic liberators in the movie, the actualities were quite the contrary. It is fair to argue that Gina Prince-Bythewood, the director, does a wonderful job of discussing a fully female military, increasing the agenda of women's power. However, the inability to discuss the advantages that Dahomey reaped in slavery does not demonstrate a clear history to the audience. As seen in the first minutes of the movie, the pre-context to the movie creates an automatic protagonist and antagonist<sup>8</sup>. The Oyo Empire is seen as a gruesome enemy, attacking the Kingdom of Dahomey's stability. Starting off the movie with these wrong facts creates a mood for the rest of the film, giving an audience unversed in the history of the slave trade and Africa the wrong information. Even though Oyo and Dahomey have historically been in conflict with each other, the film depicts Oyo to be the villains of the movie.

To start off the movie's inconsistencies, there needs to be a discussion about the trading of horses, guns, and powder for enslaved individuals. In order to advantage themselves over enemies during wars and conflicts, nations would ride horses for speed and proficiency. Many goods, including enslaved individuals, were traded to increase power and advantages of a nation. As seen in the first appearance of the Oyo people, they arrive at their burned town, riding horses and holding guns<sup>9</sup>. They are seen as extremely violent due to their easy involvement with slavery. Conflicting these images, the Dahomey are also equipped with guns and gunpowder. Even though Dahomey is equipped with these advantages, they do not use them in battle with the Oyo. Why would they train with these weapons, but only go to conflicts with spears? As the Agojie train their members, they have weapons to practice aim<sup>10</sup>. The story's main trainee, Nawi,

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<sup>8</sup> *The Woman King*, directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood (TriStar Productions, 2022), 0:53 to 1:53

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:47.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27:52.

even provides the idea to use powder to make explosions<sup>11</sup>. It is no secret that the Dahomey was rich due to internal and international trade, but how were guns acquired without the involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade<sup>12</sup>? The avoidance of these factors increases the unreliability of the film, erasing a present involvement in slavery.

Throughout the film, European involvement within the western African kingdoms demonstrates the rising incorporation of slavery as an economic force. Historically, the French, English, Portuguese, and Dutch built markets on the western coast of Africa, commonly called the “Slave Coast”<sup>13</sup>. In order to compensate for these intrusions, African nations began trading to acquire new goods and materials. These factors are seen consistently since the Dahomey wear cowrie shells to promote wealth and establish their power<sup>14</sup>. Although Dahomey was rich and powerful, there was a persistent effort to strengthen its interior against outside forces. Wars with nations, especially the Oyo, instilled the fear of slave raiding into the hearts of Africans of the time. The movie does a wonderful job demonstrating this fear but does not quite do justice in explaining Dahomey’s previous involvement in slavery. The creators of the film present the Oyo are presented as the main contributors of slavery; we see scenes of them talking to European merchants and traders to increase their power over other nations<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, King Ghezo acts friendly toward the merchants, treating them as friends rather than the slave traders that they are<sup>16</sup>. He acts as though he has seen them before, illustrating their shared previous trading history, maybe involving slavery. Some of the Dahomey people, especially the Agojie, focus on liberating the nation and changing their economic patterns. Although the movie attempts to depict their attitudes as optimistic for the future, the true history of Dahomey continued to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 30:30

<sup>12</sup> Rachael Pasierowska, February 22, 2023. PowerPoint p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> *The Woman King*, 14:41 to 17:50

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 52:20 to 52:50.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 56:40.

practice slavery past the 1820s. After the war with Oyo, and arguably much earlier, Dahomey becomes the powerhouse force of slavery on the western coast of Africa<sup>17</sup>. Even though this film does discuss Dahomey's involvement in slavery, there is a lack of openness behind the motivations, continuation, and benefit that tied together Dahomey and the institution of slavery.

In order for a movie to be powerful, there needs to be credibility and transparency. This movie introduces an important and sensitive topic in an incoherent way. How can a nation be considered a liberator of enslaved persons if they clearly participated in the slave trade? Due to the negative mood toward the Oyo Kingdom, Dahomey is automatically represented as the positive force of the story. For an audience that is not versed on the background of the subject, they will likely walk away with a firm belief that Dahomey was anti-slavery.

While demonstrating historical events within a society dominated by entertainment and capitalism, production companies and creators need to be aware of the fears of fictionalization. Viola Davis, who plays Nanisca within the movie, demonstrates the impact that entertainment has on movies driven in by the past, "If we just told a history lesson, which we very well could have, that would be a documentary,.. Unfortunately, people wouldn't be in the theaters doing the same thing we saw this weekend"<sup>18</sup>. How does the media value fictionalized work from those grounded in historical research? Through this age of comic and superhero movies, ones that center on ideas of good versus evil and what it means to be a hero, audiences look for that rare optimism and good nature. Like Davis' concerns, audiences may have seen this movie as "boring" or depicting a story that is rooted in evil traditions. Should production companies and media personale make historical movies that tell the story truthfully or that cater to ideals of

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<sup>17</sup> Law "Dahomey and the Slave Trade: Reflections on the Historiography of the Rise of Dahomey." *The Journal of African History* 27, (1986), 242.

<sup>18</sup> Squires, Bethy. "The Woman King's Stars Speak out on the Film's Historical Accuracy." *Vulture*, September 20, 2022. <https://www.vulture.com/2022/09/viola-davis-john-boyega-the-woman-king-historical-accuracy.html>.

Hollywood? In the process of manipulating a story to appeal to audience needs, a story, particularly one involving such a sensitive topic, provides a misinformed narrative to audiences. This, in its own way, changes the history of the offender and the victim. Although certain stories may need to be slightly adjusted to easier explain events to a broader audience, such a topic like slavery does not need to be removed from history as much as it already has.

This is why *The Woman King* raises such controversies. A film, especially one based on historical events, needs to be based on accuracy, taking into account primary sources of the time. As the media world continues to grow and be more available to the public, films represent tools of education and resources for interested individuals about a certain topic. In order for a story to be told to its full potential, directors and filmmakers should be obligated to research further and to not “remove” a part of history. One has to be proud of their work, willing to represent accurate history to continue to teach an audience about the past.

*The Woman King* is a great example of sugarcoating history in order to share a specific narrative or story. Prince-Bythewood successfully teaches her audience about an all-woman army that crushed their opponents and protected the Kingdom of Dahomey. However, in sharing their story, *The Woman King* completely leaves out the Dahomey’s involvement and willingness to participate in the slave trade. Not only that, but they are also shown freeing enslaved Africans. This did not go unnoticed by their audience or those knowledgeable on the subject. The release of the movie was met with immediate backlash. The hashtag #boycotthewomanking trended on Twitter after the movie's release and many individuals- including a large number of scholars of African history and slavery from across the world- expressed their disapproval of the fictional aspects of a movie that is supposed to be based on real-life events. future filmmakers interested in making historical films can and should learn from the example of *The Woman King*. When

one makes a film approaching a subject as horrendous as slavery, it is important not twist the truth for your own narrative.



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