

11.09.2022

A kingdom's ransom

BY

Khanya Mtshali

Although films like 'The Woman King' offer us a small glimpse into the past, they cannot give us the full story.

At the start of *The Woman King*, the action drama directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood, we're transported to the year 1823, when the transatlantic slave trade positioned Europe and parts of the Americas as global power players. Amidst the scramble for mass labor are the West African empires and traders, presented with the opportunity of enriching themselves through the sale of men, women, and children abducted from surrounding territories. At the center of these violent conquests is Dahomey, a respectable kingdom that has just seized a group of captives from the mighty Oyo empire. Having long acknowledged the reign of their imperial neighbors, the triumph over the Oyo sees Dahomey emerge as a formidable nation in its own right, backed by a fearsome all-woman army called the Agojie.

While the manufacturing of palm oil has generated some prosperity for this monarchy, it cannot match the volume of European armor, weaponry, and precious metals exchanged for the trafficking of Africans. Throughout the film, the question of whether to accelerate the pursuit of slave trade riches is debated by the Dahomian leadership. Can this kingdom withstand the temptations of blood-soaked abundance? Will it be outpaced by rival monarchies rushing to get a share of the loot? And is there a spiritual cost for treating the commodification of human beings as strategic bartering?

If this description reads like the blurb for a fantasy novel, it's because *The Woman King* is a whimsical portrayal of the real-life conflicts involving Dahomey and the Agojie army. The film treats the enslavement of Africans as a backdrop for the virtues of this reimagined West African kingdom, depicting the Agojie as virtuous feminists with prophetically anti-colonial beliefs. In

reality, the Dahomey empire was one of the biggest profiteers of the slave trade, using goods acquired from Europe to expand its reach around what would now be considered southern Benin.

The film banks on the novelty of the Agojie as a diversity lottery ticket, hoping the optics of a 19th-century black woman army will appease market demands for feel-good female empowerment. Yet the brutality of this regiment struck fear in the communities and villages it raided for capture. Earning the name the “Dahomey Amazons” from the French, they developed a reputation for carrying out gruesome attacks, some of which ended in beheadings and eviscerations. Dahomey was certainly not the only African monarchy to partake in the slave trade, but their historical makeover in *The Woman King* can land as callous and insensitive, especially for the descendants of enslaved Africans.

Around the time of the film's premiere, the hashtag #BOYCOTTTHEWOMANKING circulated on Twitter. Accounts aligned to the African Descendants of Slavery (ADOS), a movement calling for political, economic, and cultural distinctions to be made between black immigrants and black American descendants of slavery, criticized *The Woman King*'s handling of the slave trade. Despite being reported as a backlash, the hashtag failed to trend widely—many of the ADOS accounts resembled the kind of bots manufactured for doxxing. In an interview with *Variety* about the alleged furor, American actor Viola Davis, who co-produced and starred in the movie, stated that “most of [*The Woman King*] is fictionalized...it [had] to be.” Yet, when the film was commissioned by TriStar Pictures in 2018, almost a year after being pitched, it was billed as “a powerful true story” that would reveal “one of history's greatest forgotten stories ... where an army of African warrior women staved off slavery, colonialism, and intertribal warfare to unify a nation.”

Prince-Bythewood attempted to clarify this mixed messaging, telling *The Hollywood Reporter* that the accuracy of Dahomey and the Agojie's stance on the slave trade, which was questioned by 1619 Project founder Nikole Hannah-Jones of all people, was part of “the first conversations” she had with the team. In addition, Prince-Bythewood was adamant that the film would not gloss over these realities, explaining that they were “going to tell the truth” and not “shy away from anything.” However, she emphasized that it was equally important to highlight the value of “overcoming and fighting for what's right.” This further indicates that the appeal of *The Woman King* was hinged on a supposedly accurate account of anti-colonial, pro-woman bravery, touching on a buffet of topical issues that would speak to a liberal audience. It's not unusual for moviegoers to take an interest in the historical accuracy of a period film. But if it peddles a misinterpretation of a difficult past, even down to the suggestion that its people and stories are “forgotten,” it prompts some inquiry into the ethics of these practices.

This is especially the case when its producers tout its “potential to be a game changer for women of color everywhere.” Interestingly, the story for *The Woman King* was based on a novelized retelling by Maria Bello, another co-producer, with a screenplay from writer Dana Stevens. After a trip to Benin in 2015, where she was introduced to the history of the Agojie, Bello wrote the story, which she envisioned as an African feminist answer to *Braveheart*. She gave the manuscript to fellow producer Cathy Schulman, who saw the opportunity to “make an all-black female action movie.” The financial success of Marvel’s *Black Panther*, which grossed over \$1.3 billion globally, fortified the commercial prospects for *The Woman King*, proving that action films with a predominantly black cast could soar at the box office.

It’s not productive to rehash the race reductionist arguments that defined the cultural appropriation squabbles of yesteryear. But it’s almost satirical that a film heralded as a cinematic revolution for women of color on the continent and in the diaspora presumably was authored by two white American women. This isn’t to suggest that white Westerners have no right to take an interest in African stories—that alone would render every African literature and history department obsolete! But given the sanctimonious marketing of the film, you’d at least expect some of the script’s authorship to resemble the world *The Woman King* has been praised for creating. It goes to show that even when it means well, Hollywood is impressively bad at being inclusive, especially behind the scenes.

That said, if you’re able to look past the hokey sloganeering, *The Woman King* is actually a highly watchable movie. It’s one of the few action drama hybrids with a plot that isn’t convoluted, non-existent, or stuffed with references that require you to sit through 37 prequels just to understand a two-minute exchange between two characters. For the most part, the action scenes are organized to showcase the different strengths of the Agojie, with fight coordinator, Jénel Stevens, extracting the very best out of the actors on screen. Quite selfishly, I wished some of the battle scenes, particularly the one where the Agojie raid the Oyo camp, were slightly longer, with fewer cut shots, and more specific details on the army’s military strategies.

Shot in different parts of South Africa, the kingdom of Dahomey has a homely regality to it, conveying the trappings of pre-colonial affluence. In addition, the Agojie’s uniforms are elaborate yet understated, letting you know that these women mean business. It’s a testament to costume designer Gersha Phillips’ research and taste, which prioritizes functionality without compromising on beauty. Her use of cowry shells, hand-dyed batik cotton, fine embroidery, as well as more practical items like pouches and arm bands, work together to illustrate that we’re dealing with a warrior nation here.

Through the character Nanisca, the veteran general of the Agojie regiment, the film follows through on Bello’s promise to give the world an African woman shaped in the image of William Wallace. Stoically played by Viola Davis, her position on the slave trade is clear: there are less

reprehensible ways of acquiring wealth and power. As the brawn and brains behind the army's fiercest battles, her values have been informed by the traumatic experiences and wars that she's survived, deepening her loyalty to Dahomey.

Davis's performance has grit and vulnerability, eschewing the harsh overacting which made her turn as Michelle Obama in Showtime's *The First Lady*, unintentionally clumsy. This muted approach also elevates the sappy, platitudinal writing that crops up in *The Woman King*. In one scene, Nanisca tells a crying Nawi, thoughtfully characterized by South African actor Thuso Mbedu, that "to be a warrior, you must kill your tears." On its own, the line has the literary finesse of a sentimental WhatsApp status caption. But when delivered by Davis, it has the gravitas of a matriarchal leader whose native tongue is tough love.

While Nanisca represents an older generation's sense of duty and honor, Nawi symbolizes a younger generation's desire to escape the sexist limitations of their environment. Having fought off marital arrangements from her father, one of which sees her fight back against a man who raises his hand to her, she is determined to fulfill her childhood dream of being an Agojie. Mbedu articulates Nawi's efforts to reconcile her fears, desires, and ambitions with youthful urgency. Her performance of this balancing act is one of the few times the identity politicking of the film does not feel so hamfisted and gimmicky. Rather, Mbedu strikes a chord with the audience, who may have been or met a Nawi in their lifetime.

She also displays the reckless abandon of a young person who is just as capable of sabotaging their potential, as they are of realizing it. In one scene, Nawi and her army friends get into trouble by fiddling with a test mannequin that will later prove to be a valuable piece of information for the Agojie. For the time being, the prank annoys Nanisca, who, in addition to battling her own demons, is facing pressure from the royal court to join the slave trade. She reprimands Nawi, accusing her of having an easy life. The barb stings our cherubic protagonist, who breaks into heavy sobbing. "I did not have an easy life," she says, defiantly. It's a credit to Mbedu's talents that this sulky line elicits our sympathies. We may not know everything this young girl has gone through, but we get a sense that she's gone through a lot.

There were a couple of times where I felt Mbedu could've hammed up Nawi's precociousness through firmer direction from Prince-Bythewood. However, I did suspect the uneven writing was to blame. At times, it was unnecessarily somber, if not robotic, causing some cast members to sound like they were voicing the African versions of Alexa and Siri. Decolonized voice assistants aside, there was definitely more room for Nawi to be more playful and feisty. An example of when Mbedu executes this brilliantly is the scene with Nanisca in a rock cave pool, where she remarks, "all our lives, they tell us stories about the Agojie, that you have magic. You look like a regular old woman to me."

A character who does have a lighthearted sense of mischief is Izogie, the talented soldier who shows Nawi that being an Agojie doesn't need to spell the end of fun. If Nanisca mentors Nawi from a cool distance, Izogie is down with her in the trenches, dishing out wisdom, discipline, and big-sisterly ribbings that the newbie takes in stride. British actor Lashana Lynch is a charismatic force who complements everyone she shares the screen with. Not too dissimilarly, Amenza, played by Ugandan-British actor Sheila Atim, is the reliable second-in-command who grounds Nanisca, giving her honest counsel, and sororal comfort that she'll never admit to needing. We can imagine a similar dynamic taking shape between Nawi and Izogie (if only), who share the same passion for being an Agojie.

This brings me to King Ghezo, the empire's fresh-faced monarch, played by British-Nigerian actor, John Boyega. It feels sacrilegious to be effusive about one of the few male characters in the film, but his scenes were some of my favorites in *The Woman King*. Boyega is outstanding as the irreverent, melodramatic, and self-aggrandizing King Ghezo. We're not told how he came to be king, but we get the sense that he was crowned too young. He is the definition of a small boy in a big man's world. But in his defense, Ghezo is under much stress, having been forced to solicit European arms from the Oyo. The move makes him reconsider whether Dahomey, which has only sold prisoners of war, should cut out the middleman, and work more closely with these no-good white traders.

But even when he's mulling over serious decisions, Ghezo has the swagger of a petulant prince, battling to adjust to his responsibilities as king. He glides through the royal court with the authority of a jester, looking to one of his wives, advisers, and even Nanisca to make decisions for him. As his inner circle go back and forth over their empire's position on the slave trade, he wavers in between, not because he's undecided, but because he's morally pliable. This is evident in how he privately scolds Nanisca for disobeying his commands, only to take credit for her actions publicly. Boyega volleys his intonation and pitch, courtesy of borrowing the mannerisms of his Yoruba father, which accentuates all of Ghezo's wishy-washy tendencies.

However, it wouldn't be a review of a film set in Africa if there was no mention of accents. In the past, I'd have spent most of the movie scrutinizing every cast member's accent to determine, mostly, who got it wrong. Though I wasn't always clued up on the linguistic nuances in different regions of the continent, I assumed I could tell whether I was hearing *the real thing*. Over the years, I've realized that subpar dialogue is a major contributor to the insulting African accents that Hollywood has terrorized us with. In addition to sounding like Old Testament prophets, African characters always speak slowly and lyrically, giving the impression that there are zero fast, rambling, incoherent, or giddy talkers on this continent. In *The Woman King*, I appreciated how each actor, be it from the continent or the diaspora, infused their own localized affectations into the Dahomian accent. Without sounding too tender, there was something collaboratively African about hearing all these idiosyncrasies in the movie. At no point did it sound chaotic or

distracting. In fact, it reminded me of watching South African soapies, where characters talk to one another in one of the country's 11 official languages with their various accents and dialects.

The release of films like *The Woman King* and *Black Panther* creates a strange kind of pressure for black writers, journalists, and critics who are often, if not only, called on to make sense of these cultural productions for a mostly white liberal readership. Seizing on the opportunity to have their work widely read, especially in a legacy publication, there's a forensic tone to these reviews, which either place political responsibilities on glossy Hollywood productions, or confuse uplifting displays of representation for resistance art. Nonetheless, a part of me was curious about the kind of film *The Woman King* could have been if it refrained from taking liberties with the Agojie's role in the slave trade. The excesses of identity politics have nurtured a self-regarding approach towards the unsavory legacies of people who look like us, compelling us to affix them with identities and beliefs that mirror our own. But even if we weren't so egotistical, I'm not convinced we'd find it unchallenging to come to terms with the actions of our forebears. Sometimes the truth is too painful, even for those of us who search for it. If I didn't feel obliged to anticipate and counter the racist arguments from slavery and colonialism apologists, I can't say for sure whether I could've handled watching the real actions of the Agojie onscreen.

Several years ago, the American writer and free speech absolutist Thomas Chatterton Williams wrote a surprisingly thoughtful essay in *n+1*, where he described feeling an "ancestral ache" when confronted with "Sambo-like dolls and figurines" in the homes of his friends in Paris. Chatterton Williams' idea of an inherited agony might account for why representing the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism touches on a raw nerve for many. It might also explain the creative distortions in *The Woman King*, which I'm still not convinced were entirely necessary. However, the film has made me reflect on the censorious attitudes emerging from the "trauma porn" discourse, in which people have called for fewer to no films on some of black history's harrowing legacies.

Although I oppose the idea of ignoring films that tackle uncomfortable subject matter, I also know this viewing experience is not easy. Perhaps we need to concede that while films like *The Woman King* can offer us a small glimpse into the past, they cannot give us the full story.

About the Author

Khanya Mtshali is a writer and critic from Johannesburg, South Africa.