

“The Woman King” and Misguided Historical Fiction by Prof. Manu Ampim

Viola Davis (General Nanisca): “Most of the story is fictionalized. It has to be.”

Dana Stevens (movie co-writer): “Use your imagination as you would in any story that wasn't historic then go back and marry your imagination to the history.”



I have been asked by many people to comment on the movie “The Woman King.” As a professional historian specializing in Africana Studies, I decided to break from my routine and offer some historical insight on the serious problems and contradictions of this highly fictionalized account of the West African empire of Dahomey in 1823 (and other time periods merged in). There continues to be widespread social media debates about the merits of watching and promoting this movie, and many are glad to see successful Black women empowered in starring roles, and it should be applauded when Black people are successful in their craft. However, the most eyebrow-raising responses in these debates have been from those who “enjoyed” watching two hours of Africans killing other Africans. They ignore that the warrior women (known as *Agojie*) were employed in the largest slave-trading empire in West Africa, but are presented as victims and heroes in the film.

The actual historical reality is that the Agojie were aiding its Dahomey empire to profiteer from selling other Africans into the local and trans-Atlantic slave trade. Such is the magic of Hollywood, where the victimizers are portrayed as courageous female heroes to be admired, and even glorified.

Creation of the Movie & Fictionalized Stories

“The Woman King” idea and script were created by two white women, Maria Bello and Dana Stevens, and their background and view of men provide important context for the making of “The Woman King,” and cannot be conveniently ignored.

Writer Dana Stevens (left) and Producer Cathy Schulman on the set of “The Woman King.”



Maria Bello (left) with her fiancé Dominique Crenn shortly after these women announced their engagement in 2020. Right photo.

According to the *Smithsonian Magazine* (September 15, 2022), Maria Bello first learned about the Agojie during a 2015 trip to Benin, and recognized the movie’s appeal of depicting these strong African women, so she persuaded producer Cathy Schulman to find a studio willing to finance the project.

In a September 16, 2022 interview with Screencraft, Stevens discussed the details of how she crafted “The Woman King.” She explained, “Use your imagination as you would in any story that wasn't historic then go back and marry your imagination to the history. ...[T]ry to keep within the lines of the truth but also **allow yourself to fictionalize things that will allow for an entertaining, dramatically-told movie.**” Steven even acknowledged that “Over the 150 years the Agojie women were in existence, the women did capture Africans and sell them into the slave trade,” but the movie significantly minimizes these cruel actions and never actually *shows* these crimes, but only mentions them in a few scenes. For instance, the main character *General Nanisca* (who became the “Woman King”) said to the king’s council in one scene that “the slave trade is the reason why we prosper,” but these cruel acts are never shown. She then mentioned palm oil and gold as alternative sources of wealth. ALL of the slavery scenes actually *shown* on screen were the Oyo Empire enslaving the Dahomeans, such as the opening scene showing a successful raid by the Agojie, who free Dahomey captives bound for enslavement from the clutches of the Oyo Empire.

It is insulting, but predictable, propaganda that the **only** kind and compassionate male in the movie is the light-skinned mixed-race Brazilian merchant *Malik*, who the young Agojie *Nawi* is fond of, and they develop an emotional attraction. The official trailer of “The Woman King” even shows *Nawi* and *Malik* in a passionate kissing scene, even though a relationship with any male was strictly forbidden within the Agojie ranks. On the other hand, *there is not a single dark-skinned African male on either the Dahomean or Oyo side who is shown with compassion, a respect for humanity, or worthy of Nawi risking punishment to pursue a love relationship with.* This is the same old Hollywood storyline by white feminist writers who show all Black men as brutish and the half-white male as the sole person worthy of affection and admiration, and who becomes an ally to *Nawi* and the Agojie. In fact, “The Woman King” presents the arch-enemy of Dahomey and the Agojie as the Oyo king, *Oba Ade*, rather than the Portuguese slave traders who *Malik* accompanied to Benin on a slaving voyage. The white feminist propaganda is straight forward, as **there are literally no good or honorable African men in the movie.**

The main plot of the movie is to show two West African kingdoms (Dahomey and Oyo) at war, and as Jimmy Odukoya (*Oba Ade*) said in a TVC News Nigeria interview “the whole goal...was for us to try and oppress each other.” During this struggle among the men for West African regional supremacy, the Agojie women emerge as heroes as they are led by *General Nanisca*, who helped the Dahomean *King Ghezo* defeat the Oyo, and she convinces him to end the slave trade and he then announces her as the “*Woman King*.”

Hollywood Magic

About a century ago, the film industry had become the most important vehicle for disseminating images and values, and Hollywood entertainment eventually became the most popular form of mass entertainment. The Hollywood industry supported writers who crafted a new image of American life and culture, and appealed to the public interest in romance, entertainment, and escapism. By the 1920s, there were widespread concerns that films *lower moral standards*, and in his influential 1926 article Harmon B. Stephens wrote, “It is not difficult to discover persons who are so hardened to vice and indecency that the most startling perversions make little impression upon them.” He also discussed the “sensational exploitation” of young viewers, but

this also carries over to adults whose naivety assumes that an entertaining movie is somehow a true history of the past, simply because a few *isolated elements* are “based on a true story.”

Films which distort history beyond recognition are often challenged or threatened with litigation, because of the irresponsible mythmaking presented in them that harm living individuals and their descendants. This was the case with the 1995 Disney movie “Pocahontas,” and the DreamWorks and Paramount film, “Dreamgirls” in 2006.

The opposition to “The Woman King” is no different, due to the fictionalized storyline and major distortions of historical facts, which is why there are adamant social media calls for a movie boycott. “The Woman King” saturates the viewer with skillful *sensational exploitation* throughout the film. The audience is watching a falsified presentation where the Dahomey historical enslavers of fellow Africans are magically presented as the victims fighting to become free. The movie sharply pivots away from the “based on a true story” claim, and solicits the misguided pride of many people who are only concerned with celebrating the powerful image of the Agojie warriors, who are shown in colorful uniforms and dazzling military training scenes. However, there are no dramatic scenes which allow the audience to *feel* the true magnitude of how the Dahomey empire built its entire wealth on slave trading and shocking brutality, and the Agojie were employed to sustain this wealth.

For example, in one falsified scene, King Ghezo’s royal throne was shown to indicate his authority, but it did not depict the fact that the legs of *this throne literally sit on top of four skulls of decapitated conquered enemies*. This was a careful manipulation of facts designed to sanitize the Dahomey brutality, and this visual misrepresentation passed over the heads of most unsuspecting viewers. Here is the actual throne of King Ghezo resting on the skulls of his African victims:



Throne of Dahomey King Ghezo, in the Historical Museum of Abomey. Source: “*Warrior Women*” (2019) documentary, Lupita Nyong’o.

The Real Agojie (Warrior Women)

Many people have falsely misrepresented “The Woman King” as a “true” history of the Dahomey. **Yet, there is no historical evidence of anyone referred to as the “woman king” among the Dahomey (Fon people) in the 1800s, or any other time**, so the very name of the film is *not* accurate. Likewise, the Dahomey oral history does not record any female ruler named *Nanisca*. We do know the 19th century story of an actual young Agojie recruit named *Nanisca*, who is reported to have beheaded an innocent victim (see below), but she did not become a “king.” Certainly, there are various female rulers in precolonial Africa, including powerful West African queen mothers, and women (such as Queen Ahangbe) who ruled as regents until their son or brother became of age, but it is misleading to speak of a “woman king” because the political and social role of the highly-respected *queen mother* is distinct from the role of the male kings.

The only documented instance of a "female king" in the Nigeria region is the Igbo (*not* Fon) woman, Ahebi Ugbabe, who became king in colonial Nigeria in the 1920s-1930s, about a century after "The Woman King" setting. The rise and fall of Ugbabe is documented by historian Nwando Achebe. [Also, see my 2006 essay for a list of the five ancient African female rulers in Kemet (Ancient Egypt)]. https://manuampim.com/hatshepsut_exhibit06.html

The historical Agojie numbered up to around 4,000-5,000 at any one time (less than half of all soldiers), and they were strong and fierce in their service of the Dahomey king. *They were forcibly recruited when they were slaves, war captives, and outcasts of their family, and thus the legendary Agojie warriors were brought together by the common element of dysfunction in their lives.* Every three years, the king demanded new conscripts from throughout the kingdom, and his officials recruited young girls, teenagers, and women up until around 34 years old, so they were usually forced into the Agojie ranks from very rough circumstances. In the movie, the main character, *General Nanisca* (Viola Davis) who becomes "The Woman King" is gang raped by a group of African men and impregnated earlier in her life, and she becomes a stern and emotionless person, as she tells the young recruit *Nawi*, "Your tears mean nothing. To be a warrior, you must kill your tears." Davis stated in a September 2022 Fandango interview that her character "Nanisca is a sexual assault survivor. She is gang raped. I mean that's it in a nutshell."

In the movie, *Nanisca* had to bury those brutal memories, which is why she is a survivor and tough leader without emotion in the film. The historical Agojie were married to the king and had to adhere to a strict code, where they were not allowed to marry, have children, or have sexual relations with men. Disobedience was punishable by death. Motherhood and caring would apparently make these female warriors less fierce. The Agojie went through a brutal training regimen, and *insensitivity training* was a core element of this process. Not only were they required to undergo difficult physical drills such as weapons training, hand-to-hand combat, and climbing through acacia thorns, but also how to decapitate someone with a few blows of the sword, and practice lifting and throwing bound captives off the top of buildings. For instance, new military recruits of both genders were required to mount a platform, pick up baskets containing bound and gagged African prisoners of war, and hurl them over the roof wall to their death, while there would be a frenzied mob below.



Dahomey male and female recruits throwing bound and gagged African prisoners of war over a wall to their death. Source: Public domain.

There are historical accounts of Agojie soldiers being ordered to carry out public executions. One example is the experience of Jean Bayol, a French colonial officer who visited the Dahomey capital of Abomey in December 1889 to negotiate a deal, and he was forced to watch a ceremony before he could see the king. The Agojie carried out cruel and senseless brutality to intimidate visitors as part of a ceremony under the authority of the king. In this ritual, a teenage recruit named *Nanisca* “who had not yet killed anyone,” was tested as she was brought to a young male prisoner who sat bound in a basket. Bayol stated that she walked to the prisoner:

“and 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.”

It was this fierceness that most unnerved Western observers as they recorded such stories of extreme Dahomey and Agojie brutality. In 2018, the Smithsonian Channel posted a video reenactment of this ceremony of *Nanisca* beheading a drugged African male victim.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/videos/this-african-warrior-ceremony-was-highly-intim/>



One of Agojie women warriors, with a musket, club, dagger—and her enemy's severed head. Source: Frederick Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (1851).

To minimize this vicious cruelty, “The Woman King” does not show beheaded African victims, nor is the throne of King Ghezo shown sitting on top of these beheaded victims, so the audience is spared the shocking and visual facts of Dahomean crimes. The Agojie are a symbol of strength and power, but they were also complicit in aiding the king in the slave trading and inhumane brutality against other Africans.

Lupita Nyong’o Documentary: “Warrior Women” (2019)

<https://www.smithsonianchannel.com/special/warrior-women-with-lupita-nyong>

After performing in “The Black Panther” (2018) as a spy named *Nakia* who helped protect the fictional place Wakanda, the award-winning and well-known actress Lupita Nyong’o was inspired to learn the factual history of these female warriors, who were featured in the film as the *Dora Milaje*. After this popular film, Nyong’o travelled to the Republic of Benin to learn more about these women and produce the “Warrior Women” documentary about the real historical Agojie.

This impressive 2019 documentary, produced by the Smithsonian Channel, exposes the historical crimes of the Agojie, but it is conveniently ignored by those who blindly promote the fictionalized “The Woman King” movie. Nyong’o presented this documented Agojie history three years before “The Woman King” was released. Yet, there was no fanfare to see it, and barely any discussion by the “The Black Panther” and “The Woman King” movie fans then or now. *This contradicts the old myth that “the movie will inspire people to study and learn the real history.”*

Nyong’o’s documentary provides excellent insight about the Agojie actions and history, and she even interviews a living former Agojie, and a victim of the Agojie. It is telling that the many African Americans promoting the fictionalized movie have not shown interest in promoting and praising the “Warrior Women” documentary. This reluctance is probably because in the 46-minute documentary, Nyong’o begins to realize that she was misinformed about the real history of the Agojie. She states,

“I came on this journey because I wanted to hear the people of Benin tell their own story of the women warriors of Dahomey. I’ve come to realize how far the reality of the Agojie is from the ideas I had when I first arrived.”

She later added, *“Any notion of the Agojie warriors being a beacon of enlightened feminism ...has long gone.”*

As she begins to learn “a lot about the violence that underpins this place,” Nyong’o is emotionally affected when she faces the camera and with a very tense expression states, *“To this very day Ghezo’s throne is still sitting on the skulls of the very people that were killed for that [purpose]. Wow!...That’s somebody’s ancestor.”*

Nyong’o was even more amazed when she and her Yoruba guide Martine went to the port of Ouidah (Whydah) to interview Dagba Eulalie (“Lali”), Martine’s mother. Lali recounted that her grandmother Yahga while fetching water with other women was kidnapped by the Agojie and trafficked to Abomey and sold to a Portuguese slave trader. Their family never saw her again. Lali said, “What the Agojie did was not good at all. Not good at all. They took my grandmother. They sold her and now I am here [Ouidah]. I know nobody from my mother’s family!”

While telling the story, Lali became emotional and lamented that she would never know this branch of her family. She then sang a Yoruba song to express her pain, and Martine broke down crying as she touched her mother and is consoled by Nyong’o who also began to cry. When Nyong’o asked Martine how could she forgive the Agojie, Martine said that she admires them for their strength and that it was not their fault, because the Agojie were trained to be as they were, and she even apologized for having to describe the Agojie as “savage.” This was a remarkable turning point for Nyong’o in her view of the Agojie.

In the final 10 minutes of the documentary, Nyong’o learned that these strong women are praised for their strength, but were brutal and responsible for facilitating the widespread kidnapping and enslavement of men, women and children who were from various African tribes. She explained her feelings about this revelation:

“It was very emotional, very overwhelming to consider that side of the story, you know. We’ve heard a lot about the valor of the Agojie, how unstoppable they were, but until now we hadn’t really, I hadn’t really, heard the other side of the story, you know. It came down from this historic, almost like glorious remembrance. As much as we highlight their strengths, we also have to acknowledge their crimes.”

In the final scene, Nyong’o is shown walking towards the Door of No Return in Ouidah, and states, *“The role of fantasy is to create the heroes that we cannot have in the real world, because people are complicated. That’s why you have things like the ‘Black Panther’. I think it is also really important to be aware of the truth, because you are better equipped to face the future.”*

It is extraordinary that many African Americans go to West Africa (Senegal, Ghana, Benin etc.) and consistently report on their traumatic experience and uncontrollable crying in the slave dungeons and at the Door of No Return. Yet, many of the same people ignore the savagery experienced by their enslaved African ancestors in order to celebrate a fictionalized movie about the Agojie women, who were among the culprits responsible for this cruelty and emotional pain.

After the release of her “Warrior Women” documentary, with its emotional criticism of the Agojie “crimes,” Nyong’o was no longer associated with “The Woman King” movie, in which she had already been cast in a starring role. She does not officially state why she pulled out of the movie, but there is an obvious and direct connection between her documenting the Agojie violence and brutality against innocent African victims, and her no longer playing in a role glorifying this horrendous violence.

For instance, in a March 1, 2018 press release, Sony Pictures announced that “Tristar Pictures Acquires Worldwide Rights to *The Woman King*.” The subtitle of this release was “Academy Award-Winning Actresses Viola Davis And Lupita Nyong’o To Star In West African Female Warrior Tale Based on True Events.” The release discusses that Nyong’o would play the young member of this all-female army named *Nawi*. Hannah Minghella, President of TriStar Pictures, stated that “The Woman King is the powerful story of a mother-daughter relationship. And there’s no-one more extraordinary than Viola Davis and Lupita Nyong’o to bring them to life.” Thus, Nyong’o was already cast as the young Agojie *Nawi*, but pulled out of this role *after* visiting Benin and documenting the real history of the Agojie. Nyong’o should be applauded for her integrity and putting principle above making money in a major movie. It should also be noted that Nyong’o is still cast in a leading role in the upcoming fictional movie, “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,” and this shows that she is still in good standing as an actress in this sequel of movies (see below). https://www.sonypictures.com/corp/press_releases/2018/03_18/030118_thewomanking.html



Lupita Nyong’o in Benin (left).



Dugba Eulalie (Lali) and her daughter

Promoting the “Warrior Women” Documentary

“The Woman King” fans promote the fictionalized movie as if it is somehow “a true story,” yet ignore Lupita Nyong’o’s documentary which destroys the fanciful view of the Agojie as a group of benign liberators fighting to stop slavery. Even when clips of Nyong’o’s documentary are posted on social media as a counter to misguided praise of the Agojie, this is consistently met with a dismissal of this documented historical account. The vast majority of African Americans have not bothered to watch the “Warrior Women” documentary, and then afterwards publicly acknowledge that they were wrong about glorifying the Agojie killings and Dahomey slave trading. The trivialization of the slave trade, even if a movie claims to be “inspired” by a true story, is not justified. *A basic question in these social media debates is why haven’t those who promote and defend the fictionalized “The Woman King” movie also promote the “Warrior Women” documentary with as much emotion and energy?*

Lupita Nyong’o’s documentary was released three years ago by the Smithsonian, the largest educational and research institution in the world, yet there was barely a mention of it by the “Black Panther” and “The Woman King” fans excited about an all-female army. We have to wonder why the obvious disconnect? Those movie fans that are looking for inspirational and **positive** examples of “strong Black women” can read my essay on the five female rulers of Kemet (Ancient Egypt), learn about the powerful line of Kandake queens of ancient Kush, or support the current work of NY Attorney General Letitia James, as she continues her extraordinary campaign to take down the most successful and influential white nationalist syndicate enterprise in America, the infamous Trump Organization.

King Ghezo (1818-1858)



King Ghezo in 1851. Source: Frederick Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans* (1851).

At the end of the movie, the audience is given a moral feel-good victory when *General Nanisca* succeeds in convincing King Ghezo that he should end the slave trade and replace this blood revenue with money from the palm-oil trade. He finally agrees with the wisdom of her words, and then makes her “The Woman King.” This is a very nice Hollywood ending, but there is no record of a “woman king” in Dahomey and unfortunately King Ghezo *never* stopped his slave trading.

The movie is accurate in portraying King Ghezo and the Agojie successfully freeing Dahomey from its tributary status under the Oyo Empire in 1823. But, the Dahomey central involvement in the slave trade, thoroughly documented in the historical records, is strategically minimized and softened in the film. During the entirety of his 40-year reign, King Ghezo continued the lucrative

raiding and trading of other African groups in the region. When it was no longer profitable for them, the British attempted to pressure Ghezo to stop this trade, but this trafficking did not end until it was forcibly stopped by a British naval blockade. This blockade forced Ghezo to finally sign an 1852 treaty to end slave trafficking, but five years later he resumed Dahomey raiding and slave trading. The Dahomeans were so entrenched in raiding, killing, kidnapping, and selling other Africans into slavery that they refused to end this brutal human trafficking, because the palm-oil revenue did not replace, but only supplemented, the lucrative slave trade profits.

In the late 1680s, Dahomey first emerged as a key player in the trafficking of West Africans, supplying and selling its captives to European traders whose demand fueled the industry—and, in turn, this drove the monumental scale of Dahomey's warfare and slave raiding. It is estimated that from 1801-1860 more than 444,700 Africans were deported from the port of Ouidah, Benin controlled by Dahomey, and about 22,500 were exported from this area between 1851-1860, including the 110 Africans on board the Clotilda slave ship in summer 1860 (see below). The port of Ouidah was one the greatest slave-trading ports during the 17th-19th centuries, and this area was aptly dubbed the "Slave Coast."

Although the majority of individuals taken prisoner by Dahomey were enslaved abroad in Brazil and the Caribbean, a significant number remained within the kingdom, where they served in the army, at the palace, on royal farms, or used for human sacrifice. In addition to its lucrative payoff, King Ghezo and other Dahomey rulers needed enslaved victims for an annual ceremony. The kings paid annual tribute to their ancestors at a spectacular gathering known as the Annual Custom, which in Fon religion centers around the ancestors, whose protection and benevolence is sought through yearly offerings. This ceremony culminated with the sacrifice of slaves and war captives. Ghezo continued this tradition throughout his reign and is one reason he never ended domestic slavery, and it helps explain Dahomey's continuance as a militaristic state raiding local tribes in the region.

The Annual Custom was only exceeded by the Grand Custom, which was held after the death of a ruler. When King Ghezo died in 1859, and was succeeded by his son Badohou, who took the throne name King Glele, more slaves and captives were needed for the Grand Custom ceremony in honor of Ghezo. On his accession to the throne in 1858 just before his father's death, Glele proclaimed that he was following the Dahomean traditions of this father. Two years later, British missionary Peter Bernasko reported that Glele stated, "War, bloodshed [i.e. human sacrifice] and slave selling had been left to him by his father, he could not avoid them."

Modern Victims of Dahomey Enslavement

After Ghezo died, King Glele (1858-1889) began to intensify the raiding and profitable slave trading, and thus the Dahomey slave trade flourished long after 1823, as was falsely presented in the fictional movie. The most complete story of a group of victims captured and sold into the trans-Atlantic slave is the documented accounts of Kossola (Cudjo Lewis) and 109 other Africans who were kidnapped by Glele's army, sold into slavery to American slave traders, and smuggled into Mobile, Alabama in 1860.

There are several books which document the horrendous Dahomey abuse of the victims forced onto the Clotilda, which is the last known slave ship that landed in the U.S. in July 1860. These

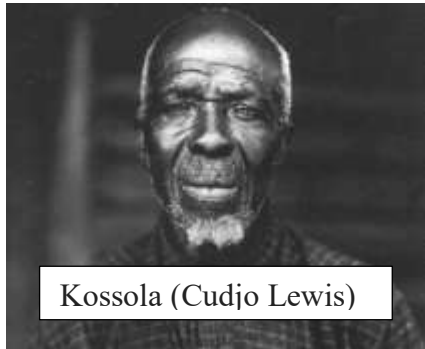
110 victims were enslaved by the Dahomeans warriors and sold to Timothy Meaher for \$100 each (twice the going rate of \$50-\$60 per head). Meaher reportedly bet **“a thousand dollars that inside two years I myself can bring a shipful of niggers right into Mobile Bay under the officers’ noses.”** He had \$9,000 in gold and rum to smuggle these enslaved Africans back to Mobile and not get caught. Meaher and his accomplice Captain William Foster (builder of the *Clotilda*) went about their plan and sailed from Mobile to Ouidah in March 1860, because it was the *Slave Coast* and well-known that the Dahomey kings were driving a profitable trade in slaves at Ouidah.

In his account of the *Clotilda*, Captain Foster gave the details of how he made the arrangement with an unnamed Dahomean prince to “buy a cargo of negroes for which I agreed to pay one hundred dollars per head.” After being detained for eight days, Foster was finally taken to meet King Glele to presumably approve the sale of these captives. Afterwards, Foster was taken by the prince to a warehouse where some 4,000 nude captives were so that he could select his “cargo.” The Dahomean officials offered to brand them, but Foster declined because he wanted no evidence that they were illegal captives. The 110 *Clotilda* captives arrived in Mobile on July 9, 1860, and were divided among William Foster, and Timothy Meaher and his family members. Foster burned the ship and sunk it to hide the evidence of his crime. The *Clotilda* remains and its artifacts were not discovered until 2018 (see below).

We have the first-hand accounts of these African victims, who shared their stories about being kidnapped and then enslaved in the barracoon (holding pen), and their journey during the infamous trans-Atlantic voyage. These victims who were sold by King Glele and the prince at the port of Ouidah were Hausa, Fon, Nupe, Ewe, Edo, and the majority were Yoruba. They were children, teenagers, and young adults from 5-23 years old who were brought to Ouidah and locked up in a slave barracoon until they were sold. They were farmers, fishermen, traders, and one former chief from the areas now known as the countries of Benin and Nigeria. There were an equal number of males and females chosen. Some were married while others were too young. The largest group of victims were prisoners of war who had been captured by the Agojie and Dahomean army during early morning attacks on their town. The others in this group were victims of kidnapping and slave raids.

After the Civil War ended U.S. slavery in 1865, the Africans who had been aboard the *Clotilda* were unsuccessful with gaining support for the return to their African homeland, so they pooled their resources and bought land in 1872 and formed *African Town* (now called Africatown), just 3 miles north of Mobile. The last of the original *Clotilda* survivors (Matilda McCrear) lived until 1940. The most noted Africatown leader was Kossola (Cudjo Lewis), who was among several survivors who told the story of their capture, being held in the barracoon for weeks, stripped of their clothes and butt naked, forced on the 70-day trans-Atlantic voyage, their enslavement in Alabama for five years, and then forming Africatown after they were free again.

In 1927 and 1928 during a series of interviews, Kossola told anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston this incredible story, but it was difficult for him to finish describing some of the experiences without being traumatized in reliving the details. He told the story of how the Dahomey King



Kossola (Cudjo Lewis)

Glele raided his town when the residents were asleep in the early dawn, killed and beheaded many people, and how their captured king at the orders of the Glele was beheaded by an Agojie for refusing to be taken prisoner and humiliated at the Dahomey capital of Abomey. After her deed, the Agojie then gave the severed head to King Glele as a gift. This was all done simply because the king of Kossola's town refused to pay tribute to the Dahomey. The king considered the Glele's night-time slave raiding while the town people were sleeping a cowardly act, not befitting of a legitimate man. Kossola said to

Hurston, "I see de people gittee killed so fast! De ole ones dey try run 'way from de house but dey dead by de door, and de women soldiers got dey head. Oh Lor'!" The nineteen-year-old Kossola remembers crying, pleading for his mother, and chained together with the other innocent captives, and being sick with the stench of the heads of his tribe members after the third day. The Dahomean enslavers then roasted the heads to prevent them from rotting any further.

After this harrowing experience and the ordeal of surviving Alabama slavery, thirty-two people founded **Africatown** (in Plateau, Alabama). It was a thriving community of 12,000 people with land, grocery and drug stores, gas stations, post offices, cleaners, barbershops, a school, and a church. Africatown survived as an independent community until it was incorporated into the City of Mobile in the 1950s. Today there are only old signs of "Africatown" but no visitor center or markers to give the history of this settlement, other than the Plateau Cemetery and bust of Cudjo Lewis in front of the Union Baptist Church (originally known as Old Landmark Baptist Church in 1869) that was founded by Rev. Henry McCrea and a dozen survivors of the *Clotilda* slave ship.

In April 2018, the first piece of *Clotilda* was uncovered in the Mobile River near Africatown and was the first hard evidence of this infamous ship to see the light of day in 158 years. The discovery was kept secret for a year, until the verification process was complete, and on May 22, 2019 the Alabama Historical Commission announced that the wreckage of the *Clotilda* had been found.

In 2013, King Dadah Dedjalagni Agoli Agbo, descendent of the Dahomey kings, apologized to the descendants of enslaved African victims, and he said that the responsibility for this tragedy belongs to both Western people and to the Dahomeans. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/323/video/>



King Dadah Dedjalagni Agoli Agbo



Africatown/Plateau Cemetery sign, and the tombstone of Kossola Cudjo Lewis, who died in 1935 at about 94 years old.



Bust of Kossola Cudjoe Lewis in front of the Union Baptist Church, of which he was a cofounder. Abache (Clara Turner) and Lewis pictured c. 1912, and they were among less than 10 remaining Clotilda survivors at the time.



Plight of the *Clotilda* Descendants

Today, the descendants of the Africatown founders live in Plateau/Africatown (now incorporated into Mobile), which is a poor neighborhood with blight, many dilapidated homes, and industrial pollution. Many residents can trace their family ancestry to specific enslaved Africans aboard the Clotilda. These descendants are now being victimized by the environmental pollution from chloroform emanating from the old paper mill factory, and hundreds of residents are still fighting for racial justice. There is a high cancer rate among the residents, and although no local-specific data exists, longtime residents report they are dying mostly from cancer before age 65. There are also other pollutants such as dust, sand, noise violations, and a terrible odor resulting from the operations of Vulcan Materials Company and Three Mile Drydock. These conditions have forced many of the residents to move from the area.

In 2017, a group of about 1,200 residents filed an industrial pollution lawsuit against International Paper, which had owned the now-closed paper plant. The papermaking company opened in Mobile in 1929 and closed 71 years later, but never cleaned up the industrial waste. The case was settled in 2020 for an undisclosed amount.

On July 19, 2020, on my WSYP-LP (95.1 FM) radio program, “Africana Studies With Prof. Manu Ampim,” I interviewed 99-year old former Africatown resident Dr. Walter Morris, who lived there from 1921 to 1931. His mother was a god-daughter of Kossola Cudjo Lewis, and Dr. Morris calls him “Uncle Cudjo.” He explained that Africatown was a happy and independent community, and it was protected by Cudjo, his sons, and other community members from intrusion by outsiders. He discussed his respect for African civilizations, and when discussing the current state of Plateau Morris stated there is “no relationship between dignity and poverty” in his criticism of the plight local Africatown residents endure.

The **Clotilda Descendants Association** (CDA) is one of the organizations dedicated to promoting remembrance of the legacy of their direct ancestors and the crimes perpetrated against these 110

Africans who were smuggled aboard the Clotilda. The CDA motto is “Never let the world forget!” and on July 9, 2022, in Africatown the CDA held the 162nd anniversary of the harrowing voyage that brought their ancestors to Mobile. The discovery of the actual remains of the Clotilda has given the descendants more support to tell and preserve the story of the Africans aboard this slave ship. Many of the descendants and supporters want a visitor center and museum in Plateau /Africatown. The completion of the Heritage House museum is behind schedule and the visitor center is still years away. The Bay Bridge Road now runs directly through Africatown, but there is land available to make the site a world class visitor



location to honor the victims who were kidnapped and sold into slavery by the Dahomey warriors.
<https://theclotildastory.com/>

“The Woman King” Sequel

The public has been effectively groomed to watch the sequel, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (November 2022), where the superhero King T’Challa will not be recast, and **this is a clear and direct message promoting the vanished Black male leadership**. Marvel Studios decision-makers, including the producer Nate Moore, claim that the late Chadwick Boseman (1976-2020) owns this role of T’Challa as the Black Panther, so they will not replace him. T’Challa’s younger sister Shuri and the Queen Mother Ramonda will now be the top leaders in charge of the mythical land “Wakanda.” This 3-movie series (*Black Panther*, *The Woman King*, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*) does not promote an accurate knowledge of African history but instead creates a mythical land, removes the Wakanda King T’Challa as the male leader, grossly misrepresents the slave trade, and glorifies women warriors who were callous and misused by the Dahomey kings. The one *documentary* directly related to this series is “Warrior Women,” which puts the Agojie actions in proper historical context, but it is largely ignored by the Dora Milaje and Agojie movie fans, because it strips away the convenient myths and exposes Agojie crimes. This is a classic blaxploitation series, which assaults any notion of a positive and whole Black family.

Another Episode of Blaxploitation

Blaxploitation was an ethnic subgenre of exploitation films in the 1970s, which capitalized on the success of social trends of the time, specific genres, and explicit and sometimes offensive content.

“The Woman King” is a black action film of interest to black audiences, it features Black actors who have agency in the film, and has the same elements of the old blaxploitation films from 50 years ago. **Hollywood movies have a major function of transmitting values**, and similar to the myriad of blaxploitation movies in the 1970s the Agojie women operate in a negative environment, and their crimes are ignored as long as the Black heroes win. The blaxploitation movie era emerged in 1971 with the Melvin Van Peebles’ film, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*. This X-rated film starred a male prostitute name Sweetback. In the movie, Sweetback evades the police and expresses his dislike for white authority. It was an independent production written, filmed, directed, and produced by Melvin Van Peebles (who also plays the title role), and it was made for “all the brothers and sisters who had enough of the man” (i.e. white male authority). However, it was the first of numerous blaxploitation films with primarily black casts, usually set in inner-city ghettos amid drug dealers, pimps, and with lots of sex and violence. This type of vice depicting black ghetto life had never been seen before on the silver screen, and was often overlooked by

Black audiences, which were enthralled to see African American actors in starring roles played against the White characters, who were often racist, corrupt, or incompetent.

After *Sweetback* grossed \$15.2 million as a low-budget film, Hollywood knew it could exploit the Black community, which was hungry for movie stars who they could identify with. There were over 100 blaxploitation films in the 1970s, which included notable ones such as *Shaft* (1971), *SuperFly* (1972), *Blacula* (1972), *Cool Breeze* (1972), *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), *The Mack* (1973), *Coffy* (1973) starring Pam Grier, *The Soul of Nigger Charley* (1973), *Boss Nigger* (1975), *Mandingo* (1975) and the crazy sequel *Drum* (1976). This was the beginning of a new era in commercial exploitation and the promotion of the criminal lifestyle. For instance in a crime drama, *Black Caesar* (1973) became head of the Black crime syndicate, and its sequel *Hell Up In Harlem* (1973) is a bloody battle to control the local drug trade. There are more murders and Black shooting victims in this latter movie than any one person can count in a 90-minute film.

One of the most iconic characters during this era was “John Shaft” (Richard Roundtree). He was a private detective in New York City who was always the coolest and toughest dude in the room. Shaft always beats up some guys, and was known as the legendary “sex machine,” with frequent sexual encounters with both Black and White women to show his dominance over them. The financial success of Shaft led to a sequel of movies, including *Shaft in Africa* (1973).

Blacula (1972) was a popular film and an example of this blind movie-going insanity, where even the mass killer Dracula had to be black. The plot of “Blacula” is that in the late 18th century an African prince named Mamuwalde visits Transylvania (in Romania) to convince Count Dracula to support him in his cause to end the slave trade, but he fails and Dracula kills and transforms him into a vampire. Mamuwalde is cursed with the name “Blacula” and entombed in Dracula's Castle for two centuries, until he re-emerges in Los Angeles in the 1970s, “where he is more horrifying than Dracula” and was billed as “Dracula’s soul brother,” because he too killed and sucked the blood of many innocent victims. This horror movie drew in audiences who saw that a Black man can kill victims with as much voracity as the white Count Dracula. It is difficult to find any positive value in this film, but we all watched it simply because there is an attitude against the slave trade and the leading character was an insane blood-sucking “soul brother.”

These new genres of films sparked a national debate about the pros and cons of their effect on the Black community. These blaxploitation films had a social impact of influencing cultural styles, ideas and behavior, and their legendary soundtracks became best-selling records, but due to the transmission of negative values there was huge protest against these films, and the blaxploitation movement died out in the late 1970s. While Huey Newton thought *Sweet Sweetback* was a revolutionary film for the Black community and should be watched by members of his Black Panther Party, there were organizations such as the Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB), which included the NAACP, CORE, and SCLC, launched in 1972 to stop this parade of new movies. Noted historians such as Donald Bogle argued that the blaxploitation film movement was indeed negative, and in 1974 Black psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint asserted,

"These movies glorify criminal life and encourage in black youth misguided feelings of machismo that are destructive to the community as a whole.... These films, with few exceptions, damage the well-being of all Afro-Americans. Negative black stereotypes are more subtle and neatly camouflaged than they were in the films of yesteryear, but the same insidious message is there:

blacks are violent, criminal, sex savages who imitate the white man's ways as best they can from their disadvantaged sanctuary in the ghetto."

Poussaint continued, "Movies of any type are seldom mere entertainment because they teach cultural values and influence behavior." Likewise, an August 1972 *Newsweek* magazine concluded that "the intent of the new black films is not art but the commercial exploitation of the repressed anger of a relatively powerless community."

Blaxploitation films proved that Black audiences would support black films as long as there were leading actors and job opportunities for Black talent in front of (and behind) the camera, *regardless of the debased values these films were peddling to the community*. In the end, the great progress made in the 1950s through early 1970s by the Civil Rights Movement, Human Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, and Black Arts Movement to take down white supremacy were effectively countered with images of individual capitalism, pimps, drug dealers, prostitutes, and gangsters. The rise of this urban vice in the Black community coincided with the meteoric rise of the blaxploitation movies in the 1970s. Unfortunately, this lesson of how the values and images in motion pictures influence real life has been lost to the many "The Woman King" revelers 50 years later, who are willing to ignore real Agojie crimes for a feel-good high.

Who Pays For Reparations?

A final issue rarely discussed in these social media debates is that the promotion of "*The Woman King*" *effectively undermines the global reparations movement and the African American claims to reparations for slavery*. The reparations movement has gained momentum in recent years, and one of its core positions is that continental Africans were *not* responsible for slavery and the slave trade. However, "The Woman King" contradicts this position and will harden attitudes in opposition to this assertion, as the advocates of this film approve of the Agojie actions within the Dahomey slave-trading empire, simply because the movie softens these bloody crimes and places African women as the central characters and heroes.



Port of Ouidah, Door of No Return

Who is supposed to pay reparations? The U.S. and Britain had officially stopped their participation in global human trafficking in the early 1800s, yet throughout their reigns Dahomey kings Ghezo and Glele continued for another 80 years to supply the Cuban and Brazilian slave markets, where there continued to be a demand for free African labor.

This essay is my response to many requests to address this 21st century blaxploitation film. In the future, I will continue my standing three-decade boycott of Hollywood make-believe movies that grossly distort the history of Africa. I will not waste another \$5.00 as I did in watching "The Woman King," because there are more important primary research and field study projects for me to conduct on the continent to further learn and teach about the *real history* of Africa.

October 26, 2022

Resources:

- Sylviane Diouf, [*Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America*](#) (2007).
- Zora Neale Hurston. *Barracoon*. Typescripts and hand-written draft, 1931. Published in 2018 as: *Hurston, Zora Neale, Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo."*
- Natalie S. Robertson, *The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Making of AfricaTown, USA: Spirit of Our Ancestors* (2008).
- Emma Langdon Roche, [*Historic Sketches of the South*](#) (1914).
- Netflix "Descendant" (2022). <https://www.netflix.com/title/81586731>