

BOOK REVIEW

Kwasi Konadu. *Many Black Women of this Fortress: Graça, Mónica and Adwoa, Three Enslaved Women of Portugal's African Empire*. London: Hurst, 2022. 176 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Index. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781787386976.

In *Many Black Women of this Fortress: Graça, Mónica and Adwoa, Three Enslaved Women of Portugal's African Empire*, Kwasi Konadu introduces us to a trio of African women from the sixteenth century, finding whispers of their lives in records and reports from West African explorers and traders and Inquisition archives. He illuminates how the intersection of slavery, race, and religious belief were core elements of empire-building, and foregrounds the violence of that history. While these stories add to our scant knowledge about little-researched women from that era, their lives are still, as Konadu recognizes, presented primarily from the biased observations of European men. The Inquisition records include words attributed to Graça, but those are known only because a European clerk chronicled the court proceedings. Issues of language and translation, as well as the chasm between the beliefs and practices of these women and those of the Catholic investigators, had an impact on the accuracy and veracity of the material that has survived.

The result is a tantalizing and frustrating experience. All three women were enslaved, and they worked at the fortress of São Jorge da Mina, in what is today Ghana. They mainly performed domestic chores and sometimes participated in relationships with Portuguese men. Graça was accused of continuing her “pagan” beliefs and practices, and she was unable to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of Catholicism when questioned, despite having been baptized as a Christian. There is relatively extensive documentation of her trial in Lisbon, where she was brought from her home on the West African coast. The recorded statements include her responses to the formulaic questioning of the inquisitors as well as testimony from other women who worked alongside her. Mónica had a similar experience, though the information about her is scantier. Mónica was manumitted and involved in a personal dispute with another African woman, which possibly centered on jealousy related to a Portuguese man. It appears that he was obsessed with Mónica, bringing her back to the fort to continue their relationship after she had been removed due to the argumentative nature of her residence there.

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Her story acknowledges the sexual abuse of African women at the fort, where they were outnumbered eight to one by European men (67, 77–78). She was known as a healer, and her work with traditional medicines was the pretext for exiling her to Lisbon for a hearing in the Inquisition court. She was not convicted but remained in Portugal following her questioning.

Adwoa, the third woman of this study, is almost a cipher, with her brief chapter relying on what Konadu calls “informed speculation” (101). Phrases such as “Adwoa would have been acutely aware” (105) reveal the limitations of the available evidence. Even Graça’s life is often described with references such as, “there were African women, including the likes of Graça,” who cooked good food (34), indicating how little is known about her beyond some vague details about comparable women. Even less is acknowledged about their lives in an adjacent African village that they frequented, including their lives before they were enslaved. Though Konadu brings in details of local societies drawn from travelers’ reports, the women, their lives, and their thoughts, remain obscure.

The intriguing narrative is ill-served by technical issues. Frequently a lengthy paragraph, replete with quotes and other detailed information, has a single footnote that lists several sources. At one point, the text states that “Graça experimented with an assortment of breads and baked goods,” as part of a paragraph on Portuguese baking preferences and the global expansion of maize cultivation in the sixteenth century (35). The footnote for the paragraph includes five sources, including an archival folder, books by contemporaneous observers, and monographs from modern scholars (151). Daily domestic work was an essential part of empire-building, and this reference to Graça’s innovative baking could illustrate a concrete contribution from African women, but that aspect is not sufficiently explored. Some footnotes are muddled; in one example, a paragraph on weather has no footnote, but a reference about weather conditions appears two paragraphs later (44–45, 153–154). I also was mystified by the lack of any reference to comparable work on African women in the Lusophone empire (especially work by Philip Havik, including *Silences and Soundbytes: The Gendered Dynamics of Trade and Brokerage in the Pre-Colonial Guinea Bissau Region* [Lit Verlag, 2004]). I applaud the inclusion of many maps and other images, some in color, but the lack of a bibliography is regrettable.

Despite these problems, the stories of these three women add significant information about women’s lives on the West African coast in the earliest years of European colonialism. They suffered from hard work, sexual violence by Portuguese men, and attacks on their spiritual and cultural beliefs. Seemingly lost for generations, these women have been vibrantly brought to our attention, and their narratives prove that European colonial history is only partially understood when African women are excluded.

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