



**AFRICAN ODYSSEYS**

# The Woman King

+ intro and Q&A

The Agojie were an all-female unit of warriors who protected the African kingdom of Dahomey in the 1800s. The story follows the emotionally epic journey of General Nanisca who trains the next generation of recruits to defend their way of life and fight against enslavement.

Presented by Dr Michelle Asantewa, a member of the African Odysseys steering Committee, the screening will be followed by a discussion of its themes and treatment of African history.

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There is a paradox in the kenning-like title of this latest feature from director Gina Prince-Bythewood (*Love & Basketball*, 2000; *The Secret Life of Bees*, 2008; *The Old Guard*, 2020). A 'woman king' is surely a queen – but unlike Shante (Jayme Lawson), the chief consort to King Ghezo (John Boyega) and a woman who very much desires the luxurious, sheltered life of a conventional queen, the Agojie, a group whose very name means 'king's wives', in no way conform to the expectations of their gender: they are the king's female guard, preferring the hardship and discipline of a warrior's life to the sex, marriage, baby-making and domestic servitude that would otherwise be their lot. 'Woman King', it will emerge, is a near-mythical status conferred upon a woman whom the king regards as his equal in counsel and vision. Equality, however, is an elusive idea here, under constant negotiation.

There are other contradictions. For while *The Woman King* is set in a particular time and place – the West African Kingdom of Dahomey in 1823 – and while Ghezo was an actual king and the Agojie were an actual fighting force under him, other characters are more nebulous. The middle-aged Agojie general Nanisca (Viola Davis) is named after a real person, except that that person joined the 'Dahomey Amazons' as a teenager over half a century later, in 1889. Similarly, Nawi (Thuso Mbedu), the 19-year-old recruited to the Agojie after violently rejecting the older man her family has chosen to be her husband, is named after an actual woman said to have been the last surviving Agojie, who claimed to have fought as a teenager in the Second Franco-Dahomean War in 1892 (some 70 years after the film's events), and who lived till 1979!

So Dana Stevens' screenplay (from a story she wrote with Maria Bello) plays fast and loose with historical chronology, while even the recorded names Nanisca and Nawi are Anglicised versions, with no close equivalent in the local Fon language. Other characters, like Nanisca's tough lieutenants Amenza (Sheila Atim) and Izogie (Lashana Lynch), or the Portuguese-Brazilian slaver Santo Ferreira (Hero Fiennes Tiffin) and his half-Dahomean companion Malik (Jordan Bolger), are fictions (although Ghezo did have close relations with the Brazilian slave trader Francisco Félix de Sousa). Even as the film concedes from the outset the uncomfortable truth that the real Dahomey under Ghezo was no less actively involved in slave-trading than its enemy the Oyo Empire, it also implies that by the film's end, such practices, at Nanisca's urging, would soon be replaced with palm oil production – whereas in reality, Ghezo was still selling into slavery both captives from raids (often conducted by the Agojie) and even Dahomey's own citizens till the end of his reign three

decades later. Let's not even mention the mass human sacrifices carried out annually in the Kingdom – after all, the film does not mention them.

None of this really matters. For with its rape-revenge plotting (Nanisca's opposition to the Oyo general Oba Ade, played by Jimmy Odukoya, is deeply personal), its improbable reunion of a long-estranged mother and daughter, its emancipating romance and its exploits of derring-do, *The Woman King* keeps reminding us that it is a myth, and that its play on history is exaggerated and idealised. Indeed, its empowered women have not a little in common with the all-female militia (in fact modelled on the Agojie) in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) or the Amazon army in Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017), making this a sort of superhero story *avant la lettre* set in an African past. Prince-Bythewood's film is not so much accurately recreating the past as allegorising a timeless struggle – for liberation, for equality and for progress – and it creatively engenders a brief moment when men and women, white and Black, find an agreeable accommodation with each other and together overcome oppression.

Certainly *The Woman King* is an adventure epic, full of vicious close-quarters battles and daring rescues, but it is also an exemplary intersectional feminist call to arms for the African sisterhood to keep building on the achievements of their female ancestors and to keep fighting – and dancing – as they did, or might have done, back in Dahomey, with or without the approval of their patriarch, in a film itself written, directed, shot and edited by an ensemble of women.

**Anton Bitel, *Sight and Sound*, November 2022**

**Dr Michelle Yaa Asantewa** was born in Guyana, South America in 1969. She migrated to the UK to reunite with her mother in 1980. Her interest in African traditional spiritual practices and cultural identity prompted her to do a PhD on the Guyanese Komfa ritual. She taught English Literature, Editing and Creative Writing at London Metropolitan University and currently facilitates writing workshops as an Independent Scholar. She set up Way Wive Wordz Publishing, Editing and Tuition Services, an education platform to accommodate a range of learning and creative aspirations. Her first novel *Elijah* and poetry collection *The Awakening and Other Poems* were self-published in 2014. *Guyanese Komfa: The Ritual Art of Trance* – her PhD thesis, *Something Buried in the Yard* and *Mama Lou Tales: A Folkloric biography of a Guyanese Elder*, were published in 2016. She lives in London. She writes a regular blog: [waywivewordzspiritualcreative](http://waywivewordzspiritualcreative) that highlights a range of cultural, educational, creative a spiritual experiences.

**Robin Walker**, also known as The Black History Man, is one of the UK's most pre-eminent African scholars. Born in London, Walker read economics at LSE before studying African World Studies under Dr Femi Biko and later Kenny Bakie. Since 1992 Robin has been lecturing in adult education, universities and conferences on African World Studies, Egyptology and Black History. Robin has authored or co-authored 13 books, including classic titles such as *Classical Splendour*, *Roots of Black History* *Sword, Seal and Koran*, the best study there has ever been on the Songhai Empire of West Africa (*Everyday life in a West African Empire*). Perhaps his most notable and critically acclaimed work is the title *When We Ruled*, which is hailed as the single most advanced historical synthesis on the history of Africa and its people to date. This established Walker as a leading authority on African studies in the English-speaking world.

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## THE WOMAN KING

*Directed by:* Gina Prince-Bythewood  
*©:* Inc. TriStar Productions, eOne Features LLC, TSG Entertainment II LLC  
*Production Companies:* JuVee Productions, Welle Entertainment  
*Presented by:* eOne, TriStar Pictures, TSG Entertainment II  
*South African Production Services:* Known Associates Entertainment  
*Executive Producer:* Peter McAleese  
*Produced by:* Cathy Schulman, Viola Davis, Julius Tennon, Maria Bello  
*Unit Production Manager:* Mayra Garcia  
*1st Assistant Director:* Dale Butler  
*Script Supervisor:* Morag Cameron  
*Casting by:* Aisha Coley  
*Screenplay by:* Dana Stevens  
*Story by:* Maria Bello, Dana Stevens  
*Director of Photography:* Polly Morgan  
*Visual Effects Supervisor:* Sara Bennett  
*Special Effects Supervisor:* Cordell McQueen  
*Edited by:* Terilyn A. Shropshire  
*Production Designer:* Akin McKenzie  
*Supervising Art Director:* Christophe Dalberg  
*Set Decorator:* Birrie Le Roux  
*Costume Designer:* Gersha Phillips  
*Music by:* Terence Blanchard  
*Sound Designer:* Jay Wilkinson  
*Production [Sound] Mixer:* Derek Mansvelt

*Re-recording Mixers:* Kevin O'Connell, Tony Lamberti  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Becky Sullivan  
*Sound Effects Editor:* Hector Gika  
*Stunt Coordinator/Fight Coordinator:* Daniel Hernandez  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Grant Powell  
*Fight Coordinators:* Johnny Gao, Filip Ciprian Florian, Stuart Jacob Williamson

## Cast

Viola Davis (*Nanisca*)  
Thuso Mbedu (*Nawi*)  
Lashana Lynch (*Izogbie*)  
Sheila Atim (*Amenza*)  
Hero Fiennes Tiffin (*Santo Ferreira*)  
John Boyega (*King Ghezo*)  
Jayme Lawson (*Shante*)  
Adrienne Warren (*Ode*)  
Masali Baduza (*Fumbe*)  
Jordan Bolger (*Malik Diallo*)  
Jimmy Odukoya (*Oba Ade*)

USA/Canada 2022  
135 mins

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## REGULAR PROGRAMME

**Art in the Making: News from Nowhere + intro by Rowan Bain, Principle Curator at William Morris Gallery TBC**  
Thu 5 Jan 18:20  
**African Odysseys: Hussein Shariffe: A Life Between Exile and Homecoming**  
Sat 7 Jan 12:00-17:00  
**Seniors' Free Matinee: UK Theatrical Premiere: Wild and Free, Twice Daily + Q&A**  
Mon 9 Jan 14:00  
**Silent Cinema: Metropolis + intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator**  
Sun 15 Jan 14:40  
**Projecting the Archive: Thunder in the City + intro by Jo Botting, BFI Curator**  
Tue 17 Jan 18:20  
**Experimenta: Nation's Finest, Putting Down Roots and Birthing + Q&A**  
Wed 25 Jan 18:15  
**Relaxed Screening: The Hidden Fortress + intro & discussion**  
Mon 30 Jan 18:00

## IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

**Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: All the Beauty and the Bloodshed**  
Sat 14 Jan 18:10  
**TV Preview: The Gold + Q&A with Hugh Bonneville, Jack Lowden, Dominic Cooper, Charlotte Spencer, director Aniel Karia and writer Neil Forsyth**  
Tue 17 Jan 18:15  
**MilkTea Presents Better Luck Tomorrow + virtual Q&A with Justin Lin**  
Sun 22 Jan 15:00  
**Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI**  
Mon 23 Jan 18:30  
**TV Preview: Nolly + Q&A with writer Russell T Davies, cast member Mark Gatiss, executive producer Nicola Shindler and director Peter Hoar**  
Thu 26 Jan 18:10  
**Film Sounds: A Conversation between Mark Jenkin and Peter Strickland**  
Sun 29 Jan 13:00

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