

Weaponizing Gender: Inquisition Records and Portuguese Slavery in West Africa

Bronwen Everill¹

Gender has long been important to the historiography of slavery in the Atlantic World: the ratio of men to women in the numbers of enslaved captives trafficked across the Atlantic, the role of women in creating new Afro-European families on the West African coast, and, increasingly, the experiences of enslaved women in the Americas. Kwasi Konadu brings a new emphasis to the study of this topic within Africa with a shift away from the women who aligned their fortunes with the arriving Europeans or those who were fully absorbed into the Atlantic world through sale into American slavery. Instead, the many Black women of the fortress in his title offer a glimpse of “normal” life for the women caught up in the global Portuguese Empire “and all its machinations” (16).

Drawing on the rich Inquisition archives, Konadu paints a detailed portrait of the lives of three African women in the early modern Portuguese world. This book is global history at its best—fine-grained storytelling that shows the complexity of the identification, the opportunities, the agency, and the suffocating constraints of life in a time of global maritime, commercial, and enslaving empires.

Konadu’s choice of these three women is intended to highlight the archival presence of enslaved women, African women, and gendered topics in sources otherwise assumed to be silent. The author’s expertise with Inquisition sources is matched by a detailed knowledge of cultural history in the region of Elmina, something that allows the women’s stories to be more than solely the paper record of their interactions with the Portuguese Empire and the Catholic Church. This beautifully written microhistory should be an instant classic in the genre, and the stories of Graça, Mónica, and Adwoa should be widely known.

Graça was born between 1470 and 1480, though her Inquisition trial didn’t take place until she was 60 or 70 years old. Mónica’s story takes place in the 1550s, and Adwoa’s in the 1570s. The overlap allows Konadu to make clear the pace and unevenness of change in the century between Graça’s birth and the Elmina fortress of Adwoa’s time. Both Graça and Mónica faced the religious courts for their failure to adhere to Catholic doctrine.

¹ University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom. *E-mail:* bce21@cam.ac.uk

Graça was a baker, enslaved to the state with a group of other women who all worked for the Portuguese stationed at Elmina fortress. Graça had been baptized but was called before the Inquisition because some other women accused her of practicing “sorcery and idolatry” (36). Graça was condemned to exile in Portugal, since she was “a chattel belonging to the King” (43). There, she faced a trial that hinged on the question of whether, having been baptized, anyone had bothered to teach her any religious doctrine. Although there was a convincing case, the argument allowed the punishment to fit the supposed crime: Graça would spend the rest of her life at the Monastery of Santa Clara in Lisbon.

Mónica was also accused of witchcraft, specifically of poisoning a Black woman from Portugal, Ana Fernandes. But this was only one of a litany of allegations that made up the case against her as her former friends turned against her. Ultimately exiled, like Graça, she was sentenced to imprisonment in the College of the Doctrine of the Faith “so that she might be instructed there” (89).

The final chapter, on Adwoa, makes clear why the Portuguese were tolerated on the coast: because “Adena’s leadership used Portuguese protection to become independent of their Akan overlords—Fetu and Eguafo—but to remain so necessitated that they forfeit partial sovereignty to Portuguese officials at São Jorge da Mina” (97). And by the 1630s, the Portuguese were replaced by the Dutch and eventually the British. As the experience of these women shows, even as early as the late fifteenth century, “Portugal ran a slaving enterprise on African soil, importing all the legal, institutional, and monetary structures necessary for transatlantic slaving” (16). What they do not show is a story of easy religious domination or rapid political disintegration upon Portuguese arrival.

The empire of these stories is fragmentary and random, and therefore all the more terrifyingly Kafkaesque. But the empire also gained its power through its ability to instigate fights between women and weaponize them against each other. Graça was condemned by another enslaved woman, one in a relationship with the Portuguese man who first brought her to trial for sorcery and idolatry. Mónica’s fight with Ana Fernandes was the cause of her Inquisition trial. In both cases, small disputes were seized on by Portuguese authorities as a means of exerting their control. In both cases, these small disputes turned into life-altering disasters because of the power of invoking witchcraft accusations. In fact, it was this role of women that led to the title of the book. In Mónica’s case it was the witness, Maria Domingues, who had “heard many black women of this fortress say that . . . Mónica . . . had a pot in which she kept the names of all the captains and officials and gentlemen, saying in those ceremonies that they should all be for her, and do her good, and favor her, and not

send her to Portugal” (74). The hope for protection from arbitrary rule, the chance to win a small victory over a bitter rival and the hope that good behavior and the right patron would be on your side if a rival turned on you, the small favors doled out to favorite slaves, the agency of seeking to retain some control in the shifting sands of Portuguese rule—this was the nightmare of enslavement and imperialism for the many women of the fortress and their descendants.

Reference

Konadu, Kwasi (2022). *Many Black Women of this Fortress: Graça, Mónica and Adwoa, Three Enslaved Women of Portugal's African Empire*. London: Hurst & Company.

Bionote/Nota Biográfica

BRONWEN EVERILL is Director of the Centre of African Studies at the University of Cambridge and a fellow and lecturer at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. Her most recent book is *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition* (Harvard University Press, 2020).

BRONWEN EVERILL é diretora do Centro de Estudos Africanos da Universidade de Cambridge e pesquisadora e leitora afiliada ao Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. O seu livro mais recente é *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition* (Harvard University Press, 2020).