

Sketches of women, from the dusk of the Roman Empire to the dawn of the Enlightenment

Session 4 and 5: further reading.. Margery Kempe's 'autobiography' can be found in several editions, including a Penguin classic. For **Celia Fiennes** : *Through England on a side saddle*, published by Lulu in 2016.

Artemisia Gentileschi: the image of the female hero in Italian baroque art by Mary D Garrard 1989 is huge and definitive. Ruth Perry's *Mary Astell: an early English feminist* 1986 ditto. An extended essay on Queen Njinga is found in *Afro-Latino voices: narratives from the early Modern Ibero-Atlantic world 1550-1812* by KJ McNight and L Garofalo 2009. **Christine de Pizan: The order of the Rose: the life and ideas of Christine de Pizan** by Enid McCleod 1976.

Week 5. New worlds: the experiences of women engaging with Europeans in the colonial period

Anacaona (1474-1503) A damning Spanish account of interaction with a native population comes from the pen of a Dominican friar, Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566), whose experiences in Cuba in the 1510s turned him very much against the countrymen whom he was to accuse of genocide and atrocity. Of the many cruelties he recorded from the testimony of witnesses, few resonate so loudly as the story of Anacaona, a female Taino cazique, or chieftain, who ruled one of the five chiefdoms of Hispaniola (now Haiti in the west and the Dominican Republic in the east) in partnership with her brother Behechio. Their first substantial experience of European intentions towards them came in 1496, a mere four years after Cristophe Colón's famous voyage of exploration to the Indies. His brother, Bartholomé, had been appointed Adelanto, or Governor, under licence from Ferdinand and Isabella of Castille. But the Spanish hold on the island was extremely tenuous, constantly under threat from disease, food shortages and local hostility. Constantly on the move to find less hostile territory and new resources to support themselves, Colón's party marched west towards the long Xaraguá peninsula. They were met by the army of the cazique Behechio whose sister, Anacaona, was married to the chief of a neighbouring chiefdom – the sort of political alliance that in Anglo-Saxon England would have made her a peace-weaver. In Xaraguan society, according to the early Spanish chroniclers, royal heirs were chosen from the sons of the cazique's sister, giving her a peculiarly powerful status. The welcome afforded to Colón's force was promising, with elaborate rituals and gifts guaranteed to oil the wheels of diplomacy and, perhaps, to ensure Spanish support in the internal politics of the island...

Out came infinite people and many seniores and nobility, whose seats were of all the province of the king Behecchio and the queen, his sister, Anacaona, singing their songs and dancing their dances, which they called areytos, things that were very pleasant and agreeable to see, especially when their numbers were great. Out came thirty women, who were kept as wives of the king Behechio, all completely naked, only covering their private parts with half-skirts of cotton, white and very elaborate in their style of weaving, which they call naguas, which cover from the belt to the middle of the leg; they were carrying green branches in their hands, singing and dancing and jumping with moderation, as is suitable for women, and showing great peace, delight, happiness, and the spirit of a party. They all arrived in front of Don Bartolomé Colón, and they went down on their knees on the earth, with great reverence, and gave him the branches and palms which they carried in their hands...

The Spaniards were billeted in the houses of Behechio's village, set around a formal plaza with his own house, the largest, maintained as a place of feasting. Evidently the hospitality was both generous and sexually liberal. The following day, festivities were held – ball games, dancing and a mock battle that got alarmingly out of hand. Afterwards, the two parties got down to formal business...

After all of these fiestas and rejoicing, D. Bartolomé Colón spoke to the king Behechchio and this lady, his sister Anacaona, about how his brother the Almirante had been sent by the king and queen of Castille, who were very great kings and lords and had many kingdoms and people under their dominion, and that Colón had returned to Castille to see them and tell them of the many lords and people of this island who were already giving tribute, and of the tribute that they paid, and it was for this reason that the Adelantado had come to him and his kingdom, so that they might see him and be received as lords and in sign of their subservience they might give some tribute.

What the Spanish most need was food; and the cazique and his sister agreed to supply them with cassava bread and dried fish, as well as cotton, in return for being, broadly speaking, left alone. Early in the following year, 1497, the Spanish returned to collect their tribute. Again, they were fêted. Now Colón sent word along the coast for a caravel to be sailed along the coast to the nearest harbour, some six miles away from the village. Anacoana suggested that they go to meet the ship, staying overnight on the way in one of her own settlements, a sort of hamlet where she stored many of her own prestige goods. Among these were highly prized carved wooden objects such as chairs, of the dense, hard wood *lignum vitae* and, perhaps significantly, made by the women of the island...

The Lady presented Don Bartolomé with many of these seats, the most beautiful, which were all black and polished as if they were of azavaja; and offered all the other things which were for table service (and naguas of cotton, which were like little skirts carried by the women from the waist to midleg, woven of the same cotton, white and marvelous) and it pleased them for him to take whatever he would. They gave him four large balls of spun cotton so large that it pained a man to lift them.

Anacaona, then, was conducting her own, independent diplomacy with Colón, a reflection of her political and social status and, perhaps, an indication that she might be seeking a more intimate alliance with the new power in the land. When they arrived at the coast...

The king and the queen, his sister, each had canoes, very large and well painted and prepared, but the lady, being so regal, did not want to go in the canoe, but only with Don Bartolomé in the boat.

In return and, perhaps, as a gesture of superiority, the caravel fired off a number of its cannon, spreading general panic among the Taini until Colón's laughter convinced them that it was merely a display to amuse them. Six years later, in 1502, a new governor visited. Behechio had died and Anacaona was now queen of Xaraguá. The new Adelanto, Nicolás de Ovando, arrived without any knowledge of the previously cordial relations between Colón and the Xaraguan caziques, and was charged with controlling the unauthorised settlement of Spanish renegades in Xaraguan territory. The version of events told by Bartholomé de las Casas, in his *Short account of the destruction of the Indies*, is brief, and shocking. Anacaona prepared for the new governor's visit as she had before, and welcomed his party of soldiers with her customary hospitality. But...

... to this kingdom there came one day the governor who ruled this island, with sixty horse and three hundred foot or more, though those on horse be enough to lay waste to the entire island and Terra Firma. And above three hundred lords and nobles went out to him when he called them, promising them no harm, and he commanded that most of those lords be put by deceit and guile into a very large house of straw, and when they were closed up within, he ordered that the house be set a-fire and those lords and nobles be burned alive. And then they rushed upon all the others and put an infinite number of people to the sword, and the lady Anacaona, to show her the honour due her, they hanged her.

Anacaona's cameo role in the narrative of European conquest is all too short. Only Queen Njinga has left her own words to indicate something of her relations with the invaders. Even so, we can say that in the Americas and in Africa women's exercise of power and the political and social skills that went with it were part of the cultural repertoire. Parallel narratives recorded in their arts and crafts show that women made and displayed nuanced, complex but confident expressions of solidarity, value and capabilities.