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## Woman Warriors: The Fighting Women of *The Woman King* and *Black Panther*

By Rossandra Martinez and Daniela Bedolla

The 2022 film, *The Woman King*, dramatizes the story of Agoji, women warriors, and their fight against a new enemy, the Oyo, who were threatening their kingdom and way of life. Directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood, and starring Viola Davis, and Thuso Mbedu, *The Woman King* is a realistic dramatization of the Agoji warriors. The Agoji warriors, or Dahomey Amazons from the Dahomey Kingdom, were gathered by King Houegbadja (1645-1685), and later his son established “[them] as bodyguards armed with muskets used as Militia to conquer neighboring kingdoms.” King Houegbadja is credited as the First King of Dahomey.<sup>1</sup> The Agoji warriors are said to have been made up of hunters known as the “gbeto” and were later made up of slaves from conquests in neighboring villages.

*The Woman King* has revolutionized cinematography of black actors with proper lighting and showcasing their beauty. As acknowledged by Prince-Bythewood in a *Variety* conversation with Ryan Coogler, the director of *Black Panther*, “I don’t know that *Woman King* would be made if you didn’t do what you did with *Black Panther*.”<sup>2</sup> The 2018 Marvel film *Black Panther* is set in the fictional kingdom of Wakanda, an uncolonized African Kingdom, tucked far away from modern society. The hero, King T’Challa, is protected by a group of warrior women; the Dora Milaje resemble the historical real world Agojie warriors. In their joint interview Coogler and Prince-Bythewood discussed the intentions of *Black Panther* and *The Woman King* and how their

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<sup>1</sup> About: Houegbadja, *DBpedia.org*. Accessed May 17, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> “Ryan Coogler & Gina Prince-Bythewood | Directors on Directors,” *Vanity Fair*, 2022, 5:48.

movies reshaped black history storytelling and representation of black actors in film. Prince-Bythewood is known for directing and creating black stories such as *Love & Basketball* (2000) and *Disappearing Acts* (2000). According to Coogler, Prince-Bythewood created movies with characters that provided a safe space for black audiences. Coogler has also been a successful and phenomenal director with moving stories as seen in *Fruitvale Station* and *Creed*. Coogler stated his intentions for his movies, “I thought that I wanted to make things that I could relate to, movies that I would want to see.” *The Woman King* and *Black Panther* seek to decolonize black history storytelling and historical dramatizations of prominent black stories such as the Agojie warriors of Dahomey. Some of the key themes of *The Woman King* (2022) were community, sisterhood, and loyalty. It is through these two film adaptations that mainstream audiences are able to restore black women’s voices to history while using these discoveries to transform present-day gender relations.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The Woman King***

The Dahomey Kingdom was a major regional Western African power in the 1700s and a massive player in the Atlantic Slave Trade in 1852. It was located in present day Benin. Even though Dahomey was a Western African kingdom in the slave trade, it still was in need of protection from other slave traders and competing kingdoms.<sup>4</sup> According to Mellan Solly, “[t]his 6,000-strong force, known as the Agojie, raided villages under cover of darkness, took captives and slashed off resisters’ heads to return to their king as trophies of war,” it was, “[t]hrough these actions, the Agojie established Dahomey’s preeminence over neighboring kingdoms and became known by European visitors as “Amazons” due to

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<sup>3</sup> Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner, and Kevin Passmore, *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 164.

<sup>4</sup> Mwanza, Accessed March 10, 2023.

their similarities to the warrior women of Greek myth.”<sup>5</sup> Later, in the 1800s, more soldiers were recruited from foreign captives.”<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 is a photograph of real Agojie warriors, it is important to note their appearance. They wield spears, knives, and their bodies are exposed. This is an intentional decision to cover the most important body parts and have enough range of movement to run and fight. As seen in *The Woman King*, the Agojie rub palm oil on themselves when preparing and sharpen their nails into claws. These women warriors were the protectors of the Dahomey Kingdom, they were highly skilled and loyal warriors. A key difference between this photo and the Agojie in *The Woman King* is the absence of headwear, despite this difference, *The Woman King* dresses Agoji warriors in relatively similar outfits as shown in Figure 3.

As Figure 1 and 2 show, the Dahomey were community oriented, as “the tribal groups, possibly forced to move due to the slave trade, coalesced around a highly centralised, strict military culture which was aimed at securing and eventually expanding the borders of the small kingdom.”<sup>7</sup> *The Woman King* seeks to capture the community as shown in Figures 1 and 2. Akin Mckenzie attempted to capture the essence of *The Woman King*’s West African landscape. However, the production had to replicate the Dahomey kingdom in South Africa.

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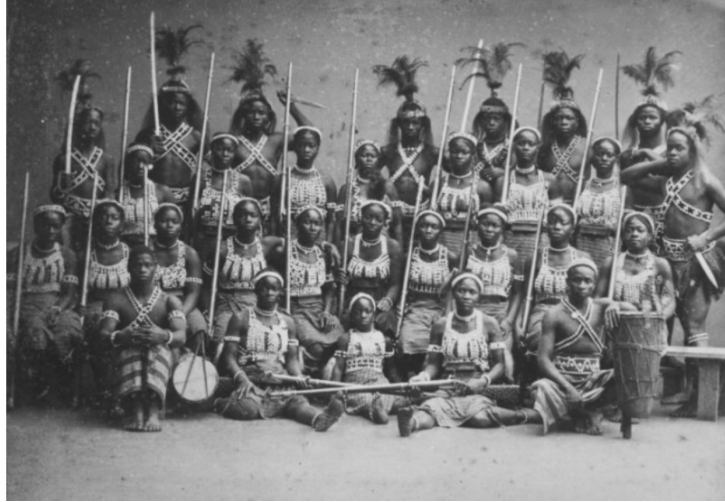
<sup>5</sup> Mellan Solly, “The Real Warriors Behind ‘The Woman King,’” *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 15, 2022. Accessed March 14, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Veronica Mwanza, “Exploring the History of the Agoji, the Warrior Women of the Dahomey Kingdom,” *The Best of Africa*, October 21, 2020. Accessed March 10, 2023.

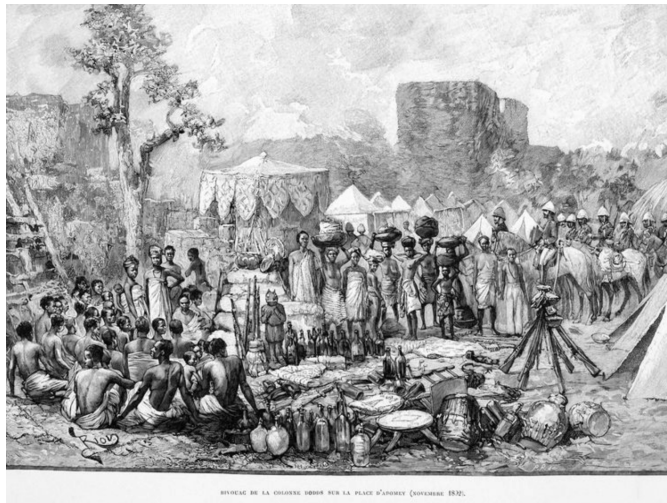
<sup>7</sup> “The History of the Kingdom of Dahomey,” *Black History Month.org*, November 28, 2019. Accessed March 15, 2023.  
<https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/pre-colonial-history/the-history-of-the-kingdom-of-dahomey/>



*Woman Warriors*



*Figure 1: 'Dahomey Amazons,' visiting Paris, France; ca.1891.<sup>8</sup>*



*Figure 2: In 1892, the French, led by Colonel Alfred-Amédée Dodds, a Senegalese mulatto, invaded Dahomey.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> "The History of the Kingdom of Dahomey," *Black History Month.org*.

<sup>9</sup> "The History of the Kingdom of Dahomey," *Black History Month.org*.

*The Woman King* reestablishes women's voices in history and decolonizes historical representations of black voice and history. Nanisca, portrayed by Viola Davis, is a key political figure as the matriarch of the Dahomey Kingdom. She is the *miganon* (general) that leads the Agojie and a pillar of the kingdom. As a sign of respect to the female warriors, other members of the kingdom were not able to look upon the Agojie when they returned from battle. A member of the Dahomey said to their child, "The king does not allow us to look upon the Agojie."<sup>10</sup> Inside the palace gates male and female soldiers were separated, and women were trained and prepared for battle. The Dahomey palace is a symbol of unity and power, allowing recruits to look at Agojie promoted equality and levels soldiers on the same playing field. Izogie is Nanisca's second in command and is responsible for training and approving incoming soldiers. Nawi is a new recruit eager to begin training, Nawi has not conformed to her family's wishes of becoming a bride and being sold for livestock, so she feels validated once she begins training for the Agojie. Izogie says to Nawi upon entering the doors between male and female quarters, "Beyond this wall is a palace of women."<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that Nawi's family attempted arranged marriages for her and was outcast because she would not match with any suitor, so the palace where Agojie trained was a place of solace for her.

As depicted in *The Woman King*, the Oyo were rivals of Dahomey, "a powerful Yoruba state in what is now southwestern Nigeria."<sup>12</sup> This remains true to history as "Dahomey paid tribute to Oyo for many decades in the 18th century, but at the same time was feared by surrounding smaller kingdoms."<sup>13</sup> Its access to European trade and its dominance over the kingdoms of Allada and Hueda made the port of Ouidah the major trading port in the whole region throughout the 18th century. General Oda is head of the

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<sup>10</sup> *The Woman King*, directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2022), 8:35. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80218506>

<sup>11</sup> *The Woman King*, 12:45.

<sup>12</sup> Solly, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> "Dahomey and Oyo," *African Kingdoms*.

## Woman Warriors

Oyo, the rival of the Dahomey, tensions were high between the two kingdoms due to the traumatic background surrounding Oda and Nanisca. General Oda raped Nanisca as a young girl which fuels her hatred for him, as this is shown in the climax of battle. Initially, the Agojie were meant to break bread with the Oyo, but Nanisca puts herself in danger in order to fulfill her need to destroy Oda. The rape depicted in *The Woman King* has not been confirmed as a true event since this is speculation and a dramatized retelling of history. However, the names Nanisca and Nawi are the real names of Agojie warriors. Key differences between the Oyo and Dahomey were the use of horses and manpower. Dahomey trained the Agojie to be skilled fighters to protect the wellbeing of their people. *The Woman King* pans to different scenes between female and male soldiers practicing in designated areas of the palace. Izogie says to Nawi, “In the palace you do not have to look away.”<sup>14</sup>



Figure 3: Viola Davis (left) with other Agojie preparing for battle.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *The Woman King*, 11:45.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Thompson. ‘The Woman King’ reigns supreme, *NPR*, September 16, 2022, [://www.npr.org/transcripts/1120745166](https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1120745166)

### **Critics**

Director Gina Bythewood apparently attempted to maintain integrity of the retelling of Dahomey history, so she worked closely with “Leonard Wantchekon, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University, who was also a historical advisor on the film.”<sup>16</sup> This sentiment was shared by other viewers in that the actual Dahomey Kingdom was a major player in the slave trade, whereas in *The Woman King*, the Dahomey were against slavery, King Ghezo stated multiple times with Portuguese slave traders that his people were not a commodity and not to be sold. However, the real King Ghezo did free the Dahomey from slavery, “As historian Robin Law notes, Dahomey emerged as a key player in the trafficking of West Africans between the 1680s and early 1700s, selling its captives to European traders whose presence and demand fueled the industry—and, in turn, the monumental scale of Dahomey’s warfare.”<sup>17</sup> According to Solly, “Dahomey emerged as a key player in the trafficking of West Africans between the 1680s and early 1700s.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, critics of films discussing slavery are worried that Hollywood is capitalizing on black pain and trauma. Some viewers feel that *The Woman King* added to the misconceptions of African cultures and history while perpetuating the idea of “barbaric and savage Africans.” Another critic, Filipe Freitas states, “Somewhere between a historical African ballad and a feminist epic, *The Woman King* is spectacularly unacademic, annoyingly predictable, and blatantly contrived. The basic and uninteresting screenplay, written by Dana Stevens, misfires in its stereotypical archetypes, failing to connect in a compelling fashion.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Laura Zornosa, “The Complicated History Behind The Woman King” *TIME*, September 22, 2022. Accessed May 20, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Solly, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Solly, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Filipe Freitas, “The Woman King,” *Always Good Movies*, January 25, 2023, <https://alwaysgoodmovies.com/reviews/the-woman-king-2022>

Directed by Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther* “celebrates African aesthetics, language, and cultural traditions with a healthy dose of Afrofuturism.”<sup>20</sup> Coogler brought to life the superhero that looked like him—a person of color. The review aggregator, Rotten Tomatoes, reported an approval rating of 96%, with an average score of 8.3/10, based on 532 reviews.<sup>21</sup> According to one critic Brain Eggert describes the film as an “unabashed and defiant political viewpoint, supplementing its superhero genre mechanics with a relevant commentary on history, racism, and human injustice.” Another critic, Robert Daniels, describes *Black Panther*, as “a moment, not just for Marvel fans and Disney stans, but it was the rare instance of a film purporting itself to be a cultural movement, and succeeding.” American film critic Peter Travers of the *Rolling Stone*, called it unlike any other Marvel film, “an exhilarating triumph on every level from writing, directing, acting, production design, costumes, music, special effects to you name it.”<sup>22</sup> However long before its premiere in 2018, *Black Panther* was in the works since 1992 in becoming a film. Actor and producer Wesley Snipes felt that Hollywood was not portraying Africa appropriately.<sup>23</sup> Snipes believed there was a misinterpretation of African culture and its people, but Snipes felt *Black Panther* can “highlight the majesty of the continent of Africa.”<sup>24</sup> Twenty-six years later the film *Black Panther* not only highlighted the majesty of Africa, but it also catapulted many actors of color to get leading roles in the film industry.

Marvel Studios reintroduced the world to *Black Panther*, on February 16, 2018. The readaptation of the comic superhero was finally given the chance to display his culture, strength, and intelligence to the world on the big screen. *Black Panther* is an

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<sup>20</sup> “Black Panther,” *Rottentomatoes.com*, accessed May 23, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> “Black Panther.”

<sup>22</sup> Peter Travers, “Black Panther Review: Marvel’s History-Making Superhero Movies Masterpiece,” *Rollingstone.com*, accessed May 23, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Josh Eells, “The Black Panther Revolution,” *Rollingstone.com*, February 8, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Eells, “The Black Panther Revolution.”

adaptation of a superhero origin story designed for mass consumption by Marvel fans of all ages. The film not only captivated the world with its bright colors, riffs on African customs, and major fighting scenes, but the audience—new and old—saw Black Panther as a symbol of diversity within American society; something that was much needed. Directed by Ryan Coogler, starring Chadwick Boseman as King T'Challa, or the titular Black Panther, Letitia Wright as Shuri, King T'Challa's smart and ambitious little sister, Michael B. Jordan as Erik Killmonger, and Danai Gurira character named Okoye, is the leader of the elite-female-warrior group named Dora Milaje. Okoye fights side by side with the Black Panther, when his title and country is threatened by his cousin Erik Killmonger. The Dora Milaje or also known as "Adored Ones" play a major role within the film and comics, however many lack the knowledge of the real-life female warriors, such as the Agoji, that inspired the creation of the Dora Milaje. In other words, the Dora Milaje are a window into a true if not forgotten piece of history. Unlike *The Woman King*, *Black Panther* is based on a fictional country, Wakanda, that was born out of the imagination of legendary comic book novelist Stan Lee.

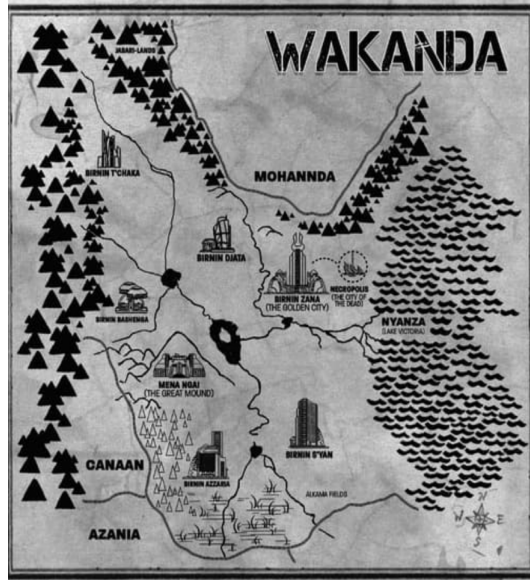


Figure 4: Historic map and the surrounding territories (Marvel Studios).<sup>25</sup>

Both *The Woman King* and *Black Panther* feature African women in warrior roles generally portrayed by men, especially in the historical action-epic genre.<sup>26</sup> While both films have men in leading roles, the women are the overall object of the narrative. The Dora Milaje in *Black Panther*, sworn to protect the king, are the daughters of the eighteen tribes of Wakanda.<sup>27</sup> Their sole duty was to ensure the protection of the king, the Black Panther—similar to that of the Agojie. *The Woman King* is a tale inspired by the true story of real warriors. Although the film’s purpose is also to entertain first and foremost, it must somewhat realistically realize

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<sup>25</sup> Karama, Horne. *Black Panther: Protectors of Wakanda: A History and Training Manual of the Dora Milaje from the Marvel Universe* (Epic Ink, 2022), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Liam Crowley, “The Woman King’s Jenel Stevens A Explains the Difference Between The Agojie and Black Panther Dora Milaje,” *ComicBook.com*, September 19, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> “Dora Milaje,” *Marvel.com*, accessed May 23, 2023.

what women were truly like in the 19th century. As they were real-life warriors notable for their ferocity in battle, the Agojie's tactics, weaponry, and fighting styles were designed to be historically accurate and efficient.<sup>28</sup> In *The Woman King*, as Nanisca is preparing the Agojie for battle she cries:

For 19 years Dahomey has lived under the thumb of the Agojie, when it rains our ancestors weep for the pain we have felt in a dark house of ships bound for distant shores, when the wind blows our ancestors push us to march into battle against those who enslave us. When our ancestors demand we rip the shackles of doubt from our minds and fight with courage, we fight not just for today but for the future. We are the spear of victory, we are the plane of freedom, we are Dahomey.<sup>29</sup>

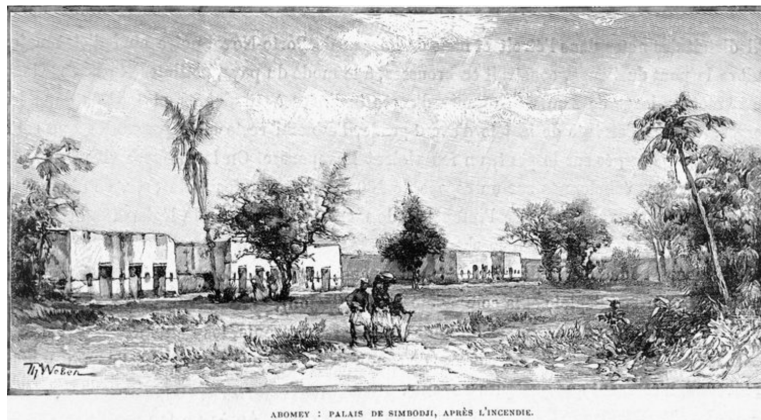


Figure 5: Royal palace at Abomey (Dahomey), after a fire in 1895. Source: *La France au Dahomey* – New York Public Library.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Brandon Louis, “How The Woman King’s Agojie Differ From Black Panther’s Dora Milaje,” *Screenrant.com*, September 19, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> *The Woman King*, 1:20:01.

<sup>30</sup> “Dahomey and Oyo” *African Kingdoms*, <https://africankingdoms.co.uk/dahomey-2/#>



Both films had different adaptations of their “costumes.” *The Woman King* Agojie warriors wear traditional clothing. While *Black Panther* Dora Milaje “customers” are more technologically advanced. Due to the discovery of vibranium. Vibranium was discovered by Warrior Shaman and Chief of the Panther Clan Olumo or Bashenga the Knower. After the discovery of vibranium, Wakandan intellectuals began to study the potential of vibranium and discovered that the purest forms of vibranium could not be handled, because it would cause an irreversible mutation on humans.<sup>31</sup> The Dora Milaje from the beginning are warrior-like and the Dora Milaje made their debut in 1998 in *Black Panther* Vol. 3, No. 1. written by Christopher Priest. From the depictions within the comics, the Dora Milaje were more feminine, with long, straight hair, red miniskirts, and high stiletto heels.<sup>32</sup> The image of a stereotypical woman hypersexualized with skintight costumes that accentuate their curves. This image of women as sexual deviants is a deep-rooted issue within black storytelling, as there is a fetishization and black women’s hair and bodies are infantilized.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “What Does It Take To Become A Member of the Dora Milaje,” *Marvel.com*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.marvel.com/articles/culture-lifestyle/dora-milaje-protectors-of-wakanda-karama-horne#>

<sup>32</sup> Jamie Broadnax, “Get to know The Dora Milaje, Black Panther’s Mighty Women Warriors,” *Vox.com*, February 21, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Broadnax, “Get to know The Dora Milaje, Black Panther’s Mighty Women Warriors.”



Figure 6: *Black Panther Vol. 3, No. 1.*<sup>34</sup>

In the comic world, the Dora Milaje are Black Panther's "wives-in-training."<sup>35</sup> According to costume designer Ruth Carter, they wanted "them [to] have a presence, more of a strength of authority." The Dora Milaje are responsible for the protection of the king, so by removing all stereotypical representations of a "sexy" female warrior allow costume designers to recreate a suit that represented fierce, beauty and strength.<sup>36</sup> In the film, *Black Panther*, the Dora Milaje wear full bodied armor made from vibranium.

<sup>34</sup> Broadnax, "Get to know The Dora Milaje, Black Panther's Mighty Women Warriors."

<sup>35</sup> Russ Burlingame, "Black Panther Costume Designer on the Upgrades to the Dora Milaje," *Comicbook.com*, January 30, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Eric Francisco, "Black Panther Oscars: Costume Designer Explains Dora Milaje Armor," *Inverse.com*, January 23, 2019.



Figure 7: Florence Kasumba (left) and Danai Gurira Marvel Studios' *Black Panther*.<sup>37</sup>

The audience are shown the upgraded costumes. Red and gold are the main colors throughout the suits. The color red represents strength, passion and courage,<sup>38</sup> while gold represents prosperity, optimism and confidence.<sup>39</sup> Costume designer Ruth E. Carter referenced the Maasai, Himba, Dogon, Basotho, Tuareg, Turkana, Xhosa, Zulu, Suri and Dinka people in her designs.<sup>40</sup> The Dora Milaje suits are similar to that of the King T'Challa's Black Panther suit. Ruth Carter describes how making these changes made the Dora Milaje's development from comic book to film look more as "real warriors:"

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<sup>37</sup> Arica L. Coleman, "There's a True Story Behind Black Panther's Strong Women. Here's Why That Matters," *Time.com*, February 22, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Jacob Olesen, "Red Color Meaning: The Color Red Symbolizes Passion and Energy," *Colormeans.com*, accessed May 21, 2023, <https://www.colormeans.com/red-color-meaning-the-color-red/>

<sup>39</sup> Olesen, "Gold Color Meaning: The Color Gold Symbolizes Wealth and Success."

<sup>40</sup> Booth Moore, "Black Panther Costumer Designer Talks Tribal Tech Inspirations," *Thehollywoodreporter.com*, January 15, 2018.

They were protecting the king. And two, T'Challa being the Black Panther -- is walking around in this skin suit. We didn't want the guy in the skin suit walking around with the girls in the bathing suits. We developed it more as a real warrior might be developed," she added. "Real warriors who need their arms protected and need to have shields and armor and weaponry and shoes - like they're really gonna go to battle."<sup>41</sup>

Far from the comic book clothing, the Dora Milaje suits are a representation of what warriors look like. The costumes evolved and as the second part of *Black Panther* hit theaters, we see how the Dora Milaje suits continue to evolve. As for the *Woman King*, viewers are presented with a traditional African attire. Costume designer Gersha Phillips drew upon African tradition while creating the outfits for the film. Phillips describes her process by doing research to achieve a real representation of the Agojie. Phillips describes her time working alongside a historian to attain the intricate design for the Agojie:

Working with an actual historian who was able to dispel what Agojie should wear in terms of chest plates. Because that was a big thing, understanding whether they were going to wear those cowries and chest plates. We found those pictures from around 1870 – 1890 that is on Google. But what we realized with the help of the historian was that those photos were a redress of the Agojie for the World's Fair.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Russ Burlingame, "Black Panther Costume Designer on the Upgrades to the Dora Milaje," *Comicbook.com*, January 30, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Spencer Williams, "Designing The Costumes of The Woman King: An Interview with Costume Designer, Gersha Phillips," *Theartofcostume.com*, January 18, 2023.

Phillips mentions how the Agojie wore baggy pants, and originally designed the costume with the concept of baggy pants in mind. However, she incorporated wrap skirts—also seen in historical archives.<sup>43</sup> By incorporating wrapped skirts it allowed the women to move more freely. A difference between *The Woman King* and *Black Panther* is the difference of each character’s costumes—especially when it comes to the main characters of each film. Okoye, played by Danai Gurira, is the leader of the warrior group and the king’s most trusted advisor. She described the Dora Milaje as “unapologetically feminine and ferocious” in a recent interview, a claim that cannot be disputed once you see her slinging a spear.<sup>44</sup> There are many different components that make up the Okoye suit. For instance, the harness (symbol of protection) is made up of “tabards” which are decorative beaded works that are inspired by the Turkana tribe of Africa.<sup>45</sup> Okoye’s shoulder armor was gold, while the rest of the Dora Milaje wore silver. Okoye wore gold shoulder armor to signify her leadership.<sup>46</sup> Something of great significance is Okoye head tattoo. Several members of the Dora Milaje have tattoos but Okoye is the only one with the head tattoo. The symbolism of her head tattoo is not only for her established position, but it is meant to represent a “fighter pilot helmet.”<sup>47</sup> The “fighter pilot helmet” tattoo was time consuming, but according to Costume designer Ruth Carter “we wanted to take traditional tattoos and amplify them, so they looked more modern.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Russ Burlingame, “Black Panther Costume Designer on the Upgrades to the Dora Milaje,” *Comicbook.com*, January 30, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> “The Real-Life Warrior Women Who Inspired Black Panther’s Dora Milaje are Totally Fierce,” *Fournine.com*, accessed May 22, 2023. <https://fournine.net/entertainment/real-life-warrior-women-inspired-black-panthers-dora-milaje-totally-fierce>

<sup>45</sup> “Okoye and The Dora Milaje,” *BlackPantherCostum.me*, accessed May 23, 2023 <https://www.blackpanthercostu.me/dora-milaje/>

<sup>46</sup> “Okoye and The Dora Milaje.”

<sup>47</sup> “Okoye and The Dora Milaje.”

<sup>48</sup> “Okoye and The Dora Milaje.”

Nanisca, similar to Okoye, she too has different attire, yet similar to the rest of the members of the Agojie. Nanisca the general for the Agojie, and just like Okoye are the central components of what makes the Agojie and Dora Milaje great. Unlike the Dora Milaje, the Agojie did not have vibranium, nor precious metals that decorated their attire, on the other hand the use of traditional African attire that Gersha Phillips used to create costumes that represent the character. The Agojie were spiritual, and they believed in being guided and protected when they fought. Phillips acknowledged the information, and created each costume according to the character's personality.



*Figure 8: Viola Davis (center), with other Agojie preparing for battle.<sup>49</sup>*

Each costume was made to represent each warrior. All warriors had different symbols that represented their beliefs.

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<sup>49</sup> Dominique Somda, "Woman King is worth watching: but be aware that its take on history is problematic," *Theconversation.com*, October 5, 2022.

Nanisca's design needed to be different from the rest of the Agojie. Due to her ranking, the more elaborate the design. As for the others, fabrics with metallic embroidery were used. Most importantly, the use of shells was part of the intricate design and a historical gesture the Agojie had in their clothing. Phillips integrated cowry shells into the movie's costumes. "When the warriors won battles, the king would give them as gifts, or he would give the shells as jewelry," she notes. Phillips designed a sash and headpiece with cowry shells for Davis' Gen. Nanisca, while other warriors had the shells woven into their head jewelry, armbands, belts or pouches."<sup>50</sup> Another aesthetic difference between the Agojie and Dora Milaje was their movements and fighting styles, and weaponry. The *Woman King's* fight choreographer, Jénel Stevens, explains how the movie's Agojie warriors differ from the Black Panther's Dora Milaje. The Agojie and the fictional Dora Milaje were given different fighting styles and movements because of the purpose of their projects. The Agojie were more direct and "functional" as there was "no fantasy to it," as their movements were designed for "killing somebody else."<sup>51</sup> Stevens describes how all moments of the Agojie are in sync. Each movement is connected to each other and followed by each other. Each warrior emphasizes different movements and weapons that allow the Agojie to move without any flaws. In the film, *The Woman King*, the actors had to learn and train a fighting system that comes out of the Philippines called Kali. Leaning on Kali, the actors emphasize a variety of both impact and edged weapons, as well as dramatic joint locks and grappling.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Jazz Tangcay, "The Woman King: How Costume Designer Gersha Phillips Relied on African Artisans to Create Warrior Costumes," *Varitey.com*, September 9, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Shachat, "Tailored Stuntwork on The Woman King Turned Each Character Into a Warrior," *Indiewire.com*, November 22, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Shachat, "Tailored Stuntwork on The Woman King Turned Each Character Into a Warrior," *Indiewire.com*, November 22, 2022.



Figure 9: Lashana Lynch in a fighting scene.<sup>53</sup>

For the Agojie their weaponry, not only consisted of a machete as their main weapon, but the Agojie used their nails and weight to fight off the enemies. Producer Cathy Schulman explains how the Agojie used their nails and weight to fight off the enemies. “The kind of things they do to prepare are really quite incredible,” Schulman said. “They sharpen their nails into points. They learn how to use their own strength and their own body weight to take down numerous men for every one woman who stands.”<sup>54</sup> The machete, similar to their attire, was personalized to the warrior. The *Woman King* shows how the Agojie trained and fought with the machetes. Weapons coordinator Prince-Bythewood, mentions how each machete had “beautifully detailed art”<sup>55</sup> on the handle that was personalized for the warrior. The Agojie were spiritual,

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<sup>53</sup> *The Woman King*, 1:26:36.

<sup>54</sup> Fred Topel, “The Woman King: 4 Ways the Real Agojie Woman Defeated Male Armies,” *Showbizcheatsheet.com*, December 13, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Fred Topel, “The Woman King: 4 Ways the Real Agojie Women Defeated Male Armies,” *Showbizcheatsheet.com*, December 13, 2022.



but what is fascinating is how personal they made weapons, and clothing. That is something that is not translated over to *Black Panther* Dora Milaje. The Dora Milaje, a team of Wakandan women trained from birth to be some of the best fighters in the world when it comes to martial arts, hand-to-hand combat, and weaponry.<sup>56</sup> The Dora Milaje primary choice of weapon was the spear. Similar to Agojie, the Dora Milaje use their weight strategically and outthink their opponents combining speed, flexibility, and skill to outwit opponents to win.<sup>57</sup> Spear, also known as the sonic spear, is made out of vibranium, giving the Dora Milaje the upper-hand then that to the Agojie. In the film, Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) describes the spear as a “handheld sonic cannon powerful enough to stop at a tank.”<sup>58</sup> The capability of the spear is like no other. It is slender in size and easily collapsible; the spear is incredibly resistant.



Figure 10: Danai Gurira (left), Lupita Nyong'o, and Florence Kasumba; *Black Panther*, 2018.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> “The Woman King,” *Historyvshollywood.com*, accessed May 22, 2023

<sup>57</sup> Jeanine T. Abraham, “Wakanda Forever and Exploring the Dora Milaje’s Beauty of Combat,” *Blackgirlnerds.com*, accessed May 22, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> *Black Panther*, (2018), Marvel Studios, 1:41:47.

<sup>59</sup> Jamie Broadnax, “Get to know the Dora Milaje, Black Panther’s mighty women warriors,” *Vox.com*, February 21, 2018.

The sonic spear is incredibly resistant, and capable of piercing through other solid materials and withstand the impact of a SUV coming at full speed.<sup>60</sup> As previously mentioned, the Dora Milaje had the upper-hand then that to the Agojie. One would say the suits the Dora Milaje wear should also be taken into consideration as a form of weapon. The use of vibranium allowed the Dora Milaje to succeed in ways that the Agojie could not. However, although both the Agojie and Dora Milaje share differences and similarities, the true constant between both warrior groups is that their true weapon would be themselves.

### **Conclusion**

*The Woman King* is inspired by the true story of real warriors and protectors of the Dahomey Kingdom. Although there were aspects dramatized for entertainment, Prince-Bythewood sought to be as accurate as possible to provide a platform for these warriors of nineteenth century Africa. First and foremost, *The Woman King* illustrates what the Agojie experienced in the nineteenth century during the slave trade and combating surrounding kingdoms such as the Oyo. As they were real-life warriors notable for their ferocity in battle, the Agojie's tactics, weaponry, and fighting styles were designed to be historically accurate and efficient. Both *The Woman King* and *Black Panther* feature African women in warrior roles generally portrayed by men, especially in the historical action-epic genre. Both movies attempt to decolonize Black/African culture and representation of Black history in film. Furthermore, directors Coogler and Prince-Bythewood attempt to highlight Africa as a symbol of strength to counter assumptions of weakness due to its history of colonization, which they feel primarily has failed to take account of the modern racist view of African people. The kingdom of Wakanda in *Black Panther* reinforces Africa as a monolith and uncolonized, thus a hidden

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<sup>60</sup> "Vibranium Spear," *Marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com*, accessed May 23, 2023. [https://marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com/wiki/Vibranium\\_Spear](https://marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com/wiki/Vibranium_Spear)

gem within Africa. *The Woman King* provides a semi-accurate representation of the Agojie; however, the Dora Milaje provides a fictional representation of the Agojie in the Marvel Universe. Both depictions of the Agojie create a space in filmography for black voices and histories, which gives room for a more inclusive and diverse industry. Prince-Bythewood and Coogler continue to create films where black actors are shot in proper lighting and stories that push against stereotypes. It is through these two film adaptations that mainstream audiences are able to restore black women's voices to history while using these discoveries to transform present-day gender relations.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner, and Kevin Passmore, *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

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