LINDA HEYWOOD TELLS a story of how her elderly grandmother in Grenada, who raised the year-old baby after her mother died, would often repeat an inscrutable word that sounded like “boh-wah.” It wasn’t until many decades later, at a London archive dense with forgotten records, that Heywood held in her hands a faded document attesting to her Barbadian grandfather’s service in Her Majesty’s Navy in the Boer War. It turned out that her grandmother’s half-delirious chant resulted from her exhausting, but ultimately successful, bid to get the colonial government of Barbados to pay her the benefits due her husband, Joseph A. Maxwell, who died six months after his return from the front.

“I had goose pimples when I found the document,” says Heywood, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of history and director of the African American Studies Program. A scholar of the African diaspora, Heywood lives for moments like that one. “History should be uplifting,” says the globe-trotting polyglot, who never met an archive she didn’t love. In fact, it was in a dank archive in Lisbon that Heywood met her future husband,

A compact spitfire of a woman, Heywood seems to alight rather than sit. In her lively, Caribbean-spiced Queen's English, she tends to shift instantly from easy conversation into high-gear lecture mode. She does this in a Harvard Square café, her voice gaining volume and authority over an untouched lunch of chicken salad. Heywood’s verbosity might be unnerving were it not for the fact that she periodically halts to apologize for talking too much, or more important, that she can mesmerize with her swirl of the historic and the personal. She describes her expertise as memory as well as history. And when she speaks of her latest book subject, the charismatic Angolan precolonial Queen Njinga, it’s like being carried back to the year 1620.

A recent fellow at Harvard’s W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American History, Heywood had her DNA tested as part of the African American Lives, Genealogy, and Genetics project featured in a four-part PBS series and hosted by institute director Henry Louis Gates, Jr. She learned that her strongest genetic link is to the Fulani people, the world’s largest nomadic tribe, who span all of west Africa. Heywood, who holds a doctorate from Columbia University, doesn’t just study the African diaspora. She embodies it.

“Whenever I have a question about early African American history, I go to Linda Heywood and John Thornton first,” says Gates, Harvard's Alphonse Fletcher University Professor. “With their exhaustive knowledge of slave routes from Central and West Africa and of the slave trade in Africa, Latin America, and the American colonies, they are towering figures in the study of African slavery in particular and of the African diaspora in general.”

“When I was teaching at Howard University, I thought, I can’t teach this without learning my own background,” says Heywood, pulling up on her desktop an image of Maxwell’s naval records, a portrait of her grandmother, and a photo of herself and her sister as pouting children. Born in Tunapuna, Trinidad and Tobago, the girls were raised in Grenada and sent back to Trinidad as teenagers to live with a pair of aunts on their father’s side.

Heywood has become a vivid chronicler of Africans’ global migration, both voluntary and forced. The author of the 2000 book Contested Power in Angola, 1840s to the Present and many studies of the African diaspora and slavery, she is deep into research about Queen Njinga (pronounced En-‘jing-‘ah) a Mbandi, who might be expected to spark interest among only a handful of scholars. But Njinga, who was born around 1583 and whose cinematic life ended peacefully at 80, is a figure for our times, a potentate’s “king” as she led her troops in battle against them.

With the tentative title Queen Njinga a Mbandi: History, Gender, Memory and Nation in Angola and Brazil, the book will examine the rise of this pragmatic leader of Angola’s Ndongo Kingdom. Njinga has captured the imagination of many over the centuries, among them the Marquis de Sade, who revived the tale of how she kept a male harem and was in the habit of immolating its eager constituents after one night of lovemaking. But Heywood is probing Njinga’s often ruthless character and strident spirituality through a contemporary lens. How and why, for example, did the queen, her legendary pride reputedly foretold by the umbilical cord being wrapped around her neck at birth (in the Ndongo language, Kimbundu, kujinga means to twist or turn), become a symbol of nation building in modern Angola and how did her image migrate to Brazil? Google the queen, and you will find, among many other enterprises, an Angolan arts collective in her name, as well as a $200 Njinga doll.

For Heywood, who describes her research mode as “a sort of dreamlike state,” Njinga has become an almost constant companion. She has given voice to the queen at African history conferences; this past summer she and Thornton were invited to Angola by the Ministry of Culture, and Heywood was recently asked to address an Njinga conference in Rome. Her study is attracting attention not just for Njinga’s diva-like exploits (she ordered her aides to contort themselves into a chair so she would sit at eye-level with the Portuguese during one negotiation), but for her own dogged pursuit of primary sources, many unpublished, from the diaries of Capuchin missionaries to the ledgers of slave traders.

“Linda and I met in the archives in a bitterly cold January in Portugal,” says Thornton, describing his first glimpse of his wife of more than 30 years. Heywood’s table at the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino was near the only space heater, “and she’d gone off to England so I took her spot for a few weeks,” says the easygoing Californian with boyish features. “When she came back and found this guy in her seat, she took me out for coffee thinking she could get her seat back.” Based largely on their shared, obscure interests, the pair hit it off and took to sitting in her room until 2 a.m. “literally discussing archives,” says Thornton. In spite of appearances, they were just friends, and she soon went off to Luanda, he to Luusaka. He ended up proposing to her by mail six months after their time in Portugal. For two Africa scholars who could discuss historical theory until dawn,
become a vivid chronicler of Africans’ global migration.

Linda Heywood doesn’t just study the African diaspora. She embodies it. Heywood has a genetic link to the Fulani people, the world’s largest nomadic tribe, who span all of west Africa.
the union seemed fated. After their 15-year-old daughter uncovered her parents' early, tender correspondence, she bounded down the stairs saying, “Mom, your love letters have footnotes!”

WHO WAS NJINGA?

In a perennially recirculated artist’s likeness, Njinga wears an off-the-shoulder cloak with an ornate clasp, a domed crown and a stern, sideways glance. With her bobbed hair she resembles Josephine Baker costumed for the Parisian stage. Positioned for influence after her brother’s suicide, Njinga had widespread popular support as she negotiated with, then fought, the Portuguese. Instead of naming one of her succession of husbands king, she insisted on being called king herself, forcing her spouse to dress in women’s clothing. When another husband demanded she turn in her lunga, a symbol of political and military authority, her followers retained it, according to accounts of her life, and Njinga led her forces to take back an island strategic to her tribal power base. In these accounts, facts are likely to be interwoven with legend, says Heywood, who is on a mission to keep the two in their proper place.

Today the Kimbundu, Njinga’s tribe, comprise 23 percent of Angola’s population and form the core group of its ruling party. Heywood’s many research trips to Luanda were undeterred by one of the longest, bloodiest civil wars in recent history. Bordering the Atlantic, with the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the north and Namibia to the south, Angola gained independence from the Portuguese in 1975. Although it’s one of Africa’s major oil producers, the country remains one of the world’s poorest as it grapples with the cruel legacy of a 27-year civil war. During that struggle, Njinga was embraced as a symbol of the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the warring faction that, after the Portuguese, whom she spent most of her 60s and 70s fighting, she exploited the notion that a good soldier can do whatever he has to.”

Heywood speaks of Njinga, who she says is endlessly fascinating but hard to like. “I had to deal with her transformation from a royal woman with lots of concubines to a military leader and aggressive warrior who indulged in rituals such as human sacrifice and the ingestion of human flesh,” she says.

Heywood decided that the way to connect with Njinga was to try to understand her motives. “All she was trying to do was to get her kingdom back,” she says. “It was better to side with the devil than give in to the Portuguese, whom she spent most of her 60s and 70s fighting.

“She couldn’t be ordinary,” Heywood asserts. “She had to be a superwoman.” At her most powerful she established a strict code of punishing or killing men who committed indiscretions. “She had a particular dislike for men in this phase. She exploited the notion that a good soldier can do whatever he has to.”

Heywood has read many accounts of the queen’s spiritual side, as well as her famous rages. “I don’t have the talent to explain her pathology,” she says. “My reading of Njinga’s acceptance of being baptized, in 1620, is that the spiritual dimension of her personality had her convinced she’d be a good Christian. But as soon as she got back to the interior, she put away all her Christian icons and asked the local healers to protect her. She was very pragmatic. In 1655, when she signed the peace treaty with the Portuguese, she was one of the most contrite Christians. She built two churches and was buried in the Capuchin habit. It was a deep, deep conversion. She wrote several letters to the Pope and begged him for more missionaries.”

After her baptism, Njinga sent the Capuchins out among the people to rid the area of soothsayers, called xinguilas, ...
They are dispelling myths about precolonial Africa.

says Heywood. “These religious practitioners were useful to her in the past, but when she wants to transform the kingdom to Christianity, she turns against them, and she knows exactly how to deal with political and spiritual opposition,” often selling her enemies into slavery. “Once she does something, she goes all out. She’s an extremist.”

Heywood often speaks of Njinga in the present tense.

Because Njinga stood up to the Portuguese centuries ago, she is an icon in peacetime Angola today. Angolans “looked back in history to find icons,” says Heywood, who lived there from 1979 to 1980, “and she fulfills their requirements.”

When she returned in 2003, she visited a statue, an imposing incarnation of Njinga, in a renewed, prominent section of the capital of Luanda. “I was driving by the statue one day and saw women dressed in white paying tribute,” she says. “Njinga has become an empowerment figure.” Near the statue, Heywood distributed 150 questionnaires about the statue’s appeal among onlookers and picture-takers. She got numerous responses along the lines of: “We must go there. She gives off power.” These days Njinga is the subject of poems, has given her name to roads, and has her life portrayed pictorially on the walls of schools. “She resisted the Portuguese,” is the thinking, says Heywood. “She is a model for Angola.”

But to Heywood, Njinga’s legacy also inspires reflection on how to balance Christianity with traditional ways. As recently as 1957, a Capuchin missionary was on his way to Njinga’s grave site, but the locals, fearing he was a spy, refused to tell him its exact location. “There’s a legacy of suspicion,” says Heywood, “and Njinga is not just a memory—she’s a living political entity, resurrected for people’s use.”

AFRICAN SLAVERS: A RAW NERVE

There is no studying African history in the 15th through 17th centuries without examining the roots and growth of the African slave trade and the extent of native Africans’ participation. In an April 2010 op-ed column in the New York Times, Harvard’s Gates calls for an end to the slavery blame game, citing Heywood’s and Thornton’s research estimating that “90 percent of those shipped to the New World were enslaved by Africans and then sold to European traders. The sad truth,” he writes, “is that without complex business partnerships between African elites and European traders and commercial agents, the slave trade to the New World would have been impossible, at least on the scale it occurred.”

Gates’ main points were disputed by several letter writers, including Eric Foner, a Columbia University history professor. Thornton is familiar with this raw nerve. But in precolonial Africa, slaves represented the international currency, he says. It wasn’t possible to trade in regional currencies, such as shells—slaves were the one commodity that would work everywhere, he says, pointing out that records dating back to the 15th century reflect that tribal rulers such as the King of Dahomey (now Benin) offered payment in captives in dealings with the Portuguese. And many records survive from the Kongo Kingdom, where elite, literate Christians left detailed accounts of slave transactions, as did Muslim slave traders in Timbuktu, according to Thornton, who was once invited to speak about Justice in the African Slave Trade at a conference. He prepared a talk about the slave-trading leaders of Kongo and Dahomey, but got there to find the session was about reparations to descendants of slaves. Most of history is, of course, written by the literate, and in many cases historians have only a single, uncontested source to rely on, he says. The popular culture clings to what Thornton calls “the marine model—Europeans landing on shores and grabbing people.” But it is increasingly indisputable that the truth is complex, as Gates writes in the Times, “Slavery was a business, highly organized and lucrative for European buyers and African sellers alike.”

Both individually and as a team, Heywood and Thornton are shedding light on a period of African history often overlooked in textbooks, even on the college level. If they’re dispelling the marine model of slave plundering, they are also correcting the notion that precolonial Africa was isolated and illiterate. How many people, for example, know of the extent of Christianity in precolonial Africa? There was a cathedral in Kongo in the 1540s and surviving baptismal records from that century.

“Linda is a great asset to our African studies curriculum, because her work helps to connect Africa to the New World,” says Timothy Longman, director of BU’s African Studies Center, and a CAS visiting associate professor of political science. “Her work bridges the geographic divide between Africa and the Americas by looking at the historical connections between the history of regions from which slaves were taken—particularly Angola—with the regions where peoples were enslaved.”

Heywood and Thornton are on a bottomless treasure hunt, and are far too enthralled with their research to court controversy. As Heywood puts it, the way to discovery is through facts. “I can excite people without preaching,” she says. “I don’t preach. I’m a historian. I deal with the facts.”