

Volume 2: Chapter 3

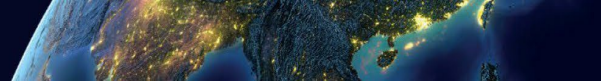
Source 3.1

Letter from King Afonso I of Kongo (Nzinga Mbemba) to King João III of Portugal (1526)

At the end of the fifteenth century, the largest state in Central West Africa was the kingdom of Kongo. In 1483, Portuguese mariners reached the mouth of the Congo River, and the King Nzinga Mbemba sent emissaries to return with them to Portugal. When they returned in 1491, they brought Catholic missionaries and European trade items, including firearms. The king converted to Christianity and ruled under the Christian name Afonso I. He supported the missionaries' effort to convert his subjects, and encouraged trade and cultural exchange with the Portuguese. However, by the 1520s, the trade caused disruptions, demographic decline, and instability in the Kongo kingdom. Afonso I wrote many letters to the Portuguese king, João III, seeking to limit and control trade with Portuguese merchants.

Sire, Your Highness knows that our kingdom is losing its way, and we must provide the solution that this situation calls for. The cause of our troubles is the excessive permissiveness with which your trading agents and officials allow the men who come to this kingdom to establish shops and sell merchandise. These men engage in practices that we strictly forbid, and they scatter throughout our kingdom and dominions in such large numbers that many of our vassals, who had pledged obedience to us, have now renounced their obedience because they have a greater abundance of goods available to them than we do. Previously, they had been satisfied with the goods we provided them, and they remained subject to our laws and their vassalage to us. This disrupts both God's service and the security and peace of our state and our kingdoms.

However, we do not consider this harm as terrible as what we suffer each day when these traders carry away our native-born countrymen and the children of our nobles and



vassals as well as relatives of ours. This continues because thieves and unscrupulous men, driven by their greed for goods from your kingdom, snatch them and sell them to these traders. Sire, this corruption and depravity has reached such a level that our homeland is becoming completely depopulated. Your Highness should not tolerate this situation, nor is it to your benefit. In order to avoid it, we need only priests and a few people to teach in our kingdoms' schools. We have even less need of additional goods, except for wine and flour for the blessed Sacrament, and we request Your Highness's help in this matter. Please instruct your trading agents to send neither traders nor trading goods here because we do not wish to carry out trade and export slaves. Once again, we beg Your Highness to agree to this request. Otherwise, we will not be able to relieve this unmistakable suffering. May our Lord protect and hold Your Highness in his mercy and guide you to do this holy service. I kiss Your Highness's hands many times over. ...

Source: John K. Thornton, *Afonso I Mvemba a Nzinga, King of Kongo: His Life and Correspondence* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2023): 203.

- Specifically, what does this letter reveal about the ways in which trade with the Portuguese caused instability in the kingdom of Kongo?
- How do you interpret Afonso I's views of slavery and the slave trade?
- What does this letter tell us about the relationship between the monarchs of Kongo and Portugal?