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Intellectual Traditions of Pre-Colonial Africa

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Afonso of Kongo: The Evils of the Slave Trade¹

The kingdom of the Congo or Kongo arose in the early centuries A.D., in the west-central region of Africa traversed by the Zaire River. A farming people, the Congolese were also skilled in metal-working, pottery, and weaving. In 1506 a contender for the throne, Nzinga Mbemba, seized control of the country through a dynastic dispute. He was aided by the Portuguese who had by this time established a presence on the West African coast. After his conversion to Christianity, Mbemba came to be known as King Afonso I. In maintaining diplomatic ties with the Portuguese, he was thus able to communicate his wishes and displeasures both to the Portuguese king as well as to the pope in Rome.

During his reign, Afonso exchanged letters with the king of Portugal as well as with the pope in Rome. As a Christian convert, King Afonso I also made political use of that religion as a royal cult, which served to undermine the tradition-based authority of his political competitors. Employing guns purchased from the Portuguese, Afonso embarked on a path of conquest that significantly enlarged the political domain of the Kongo.

As the transatlantic slave trade began to expand in the sixteenth century, Afonso embarked on a series of military campaigns with neighboring states, thus increasing the number of captives who could be sold on the coast as slaves. However, Afonso I also used his political influence with the Portuguese to protect his own subjects from enslavement. Nevertheless, in time the ruler of the Kongo became disenchanted with the Portuguese, fearing that their slaving activities were undermining his royal authority. The Congolese king issued an edict curtailing Portuguese activities to the area around the capital city of Mbanza Kongo, also called San Salvador.

¹Basil Davidson, *The African Past: Chronicles from Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: Curtis Brown, Ltd., 1964), pp. 191-94.

[1526] Sir, Your Highness [of Portugal] should know how our Kingdom is being lost in so many ways that it is convenient to provide for the necessary remedy, since this is caused by the excessive freedom given by your factors and officials to the men and merchants who are allowed to come to this Kingdom to set up shops with goods and many things which have been prohibited by us, and which they spread throughout our Kingdoms and Domains in such an abundance that many of our vassals, whom we had in obedience, do not comply because they have the things in greater abundance than we ourselves; and it was with these things that we had them content and subjected under our vassalage and jurisdiction, so it is doing a great harm not only to the service of God, but the security and peace of our Kingdoms and State as well.

And we cannot reckon how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives, because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab them wishing to have the things and wares of this Kingdom which they are ambitious of; they grab them and get them to be sold; and so great, Sir, is the corruption and licentiousness that our country is being completely depopulated, and Your Highness should not agree with this nor accept it as in your service. And to avoid it we need from those [your] Kingdoms no more than some priests and a few people to teach in schools, and no other goods except wine and flour for the holy sacrament. That is why we beg of Your Highness to help and assist us in this matter, commanding your factors that they should not send here either merchants or wares, because it is *our will that in these Kingdoms there should not be any trade of slaves nor outlet for them*. Concerning what is referred above, again we beg of Your Highness to agree with it, since otherwise we cannot remedy such an obvious damage. Pray Our Lord in His mercy to have Your Highness under His guard and let you do for ever the things of His service. I kiss your hand many times.

At our town of Congo, written on the sixth day of July,
João Teixeira did it in 1526.

The King, Dom Afonso.

[On the back of this letter the following can be read:

To the most powerful and excellent prince Dom João, King our Brother.]

The Origins of Slaving

[1526] Moreover, Sir, in our Kingdoms there is another great inconvenience which is of little service to God, and this is that many of our people [natives], keenly desirous as they are of the water and things of your Kingdoms, which are brought here by your people, and in order to satisfy their voracious appetite, seize many of our people, freed and exempt men; and very often it happens that they kidnap even noblemen and the sons of noblemen, and our relatives, and take them to be sold to the white men who are in our Kingdoms; and for this purpose they have concealed them, and others are brought during the night so that they might not be recognized.

Source: From Basil Davidson, *The African Past*, Copyright © 1964 by Basil Davidson. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.

And as soon as they are taken by the white men they are immediately ironed and branded with fire, and when they are carried to be embarked, if they are caught by our guards' men the whites allege that they have bought them but they cannot say from whom so that it is our duty to do justice and to restore to the freemen their freedom, but it cannot be done if your subjects feel offended, as they claim to be.

And to avoid such a great evil we passed a law so that any white man living in our Kingdoms and wanting to purchase goods in any way should first inform three of our noblemen and officials of our court whom we rely upon in this matter, and these are Dom Pedro Manipanza and Dom Manuel Manissaba, our chief usher, and Gonçalo Pires our chief freighter, who should investigate if the mentioned goods are captives or free men, and if cleared by them there will be no further doubt nor embargo for them to be taken and embarked. But if the white men do not comply with it they will lose the aforementioned goods. And if we do them this favor and concession it is for the part Your Highness has in it, since we know that it is in your service too that these goods are taken from our Kingdom, otherwise we should not consent to this.

A Call for Aid

[1526] Sir, Your Highness has been kind enough to write to us saying that we should ask in our letters for anything we need, and that we shall be provided with everything, and as the peace and the health of our Kingdom depend on us, and as there are among us old folks and people who have lived for many days, it happens that we have continuously many and different diseases which put us very often in such a weakness that we reach almost the last extreme; and the same happens to our children, relatives and natives owing to the lack in this country of physicians and surgeons who might know how to cure properly such diseases. And as we have got neither dispensaries nor drugs which might help us in this formlessness, many of those who had been already confirmed and instructed in the holy faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ perish and die, and the rest of the people in their majority cure themselves with herbs and breads and other ancient methods, so that they put all their faith in the mentioned herbs and ceremonies if they live, and believe that they are saved if they die; and this is not much in the service of God.

And to avoid such a great error and inconvenience, since it is from God in the first place and then from your Kingdoms and from Your Highness that all the good and drugs and medicines have come to save us, we beg of you to be agreeable and kind enough to send us two physicians and two apothecaries and one surgeon, so that they may come with their drug-stores and all the necessary things to stay in our Kingdoms, because we are in extreme need of them all and each of them. We shall do them all good and shall benefit them by all means, since they are sent by Your Highness, whom we thank for your work in their coming. We beg of Your Highness as a great favor to do this for us, because besides being good in itself it is in the service of God as we have said above.

[Extracts from letter of King Afonso to King of Portugal dated Oct. 18, 1526. By hand of Dom João Teixeira.]

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The Ovimbundu of Angola: Katiukaila and His Wife Ngeve¹

In the sixteenth century a new state arose among the Ndongo subgroup of the Mbundu peoples, who inhabited the territory on the southern border of Kongo. The title of its ruler, that is, ngola, came to signify the name of the country, Angola. One of the most famous leaders of this state was Anna Nzanga, who came to the throne in 1623. The Portuguese, having reached Angola in 1483, became engaged in a series of conflicts with the rulers of Angola, because of the unwillingness of the Angolan rulers to support Portuguese slaving activities. However, even without the support of the interior states, the Portuguese were able to transform the coast of Angola into one of the primary entrepôts for the slave trade.

Among the Mbundu descendants of the Ndongo state are the two principal sub-groups. The Kimbundu occupy the coastal regions of Angola and the Ovimbundu inhabit the interior and south of the country. The oral literature of both groups is characterized by a rhythm created through verbal repetition and by the use of common themes such as the dilemmas created by regional differences in marital customs and by complicated in-laws.

Once there was a country in which it was law that a man must promise, when he married, to be buried with the corpse of his mother-in-law, whenever she should die.

In that country was a girl named Ngeve, who was desired by a young man named Katiukaila. When he came to discuss engagement with her parents, they explained to him the ancient custom of their country that every man marrying a girl from this country must promise that he will consent to be buried along with the girl's mother, even if he is not yet senile when his mother-in-law dies. After the young man had

¹Martin Emais, *Unbundu: Folktales from Angola* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 174-77. Source: From *Unbundu: Folktales from Angola* by Martin Emais, © 1962 by Martin Emais. Used by permission of Beacon Press, Boston.