

## The King of the Congo Writes to the King of Portugal (1526)<sup>4</sup>

*In 1481, a Portuguese explorer happened upon the mouth of the enormous Congo River, and within a decade Portuguese soldiers, traders, and missionaries had made their way inland to Mbanza Congo, the capital of the powerful Kingdom of Congo, establishing a European presence that persisted for centuries. The king of the Congo welcomed the Portuguese intruders who traded European items of all kinds – particularly guns – for such local goods as ivory and, especially, slaves. Portuguese missionaries converted some young Congolese to Christianity, including Mzinga Mbemba Afonso, who became king in 1506 and ruled the Congo for almost forty years. In 1526, concerned about the disastrous consequences of Portuguese trade for both his kingdom and his rule, Afonso wrote King Joao III of Portugal. Afonso's letters, excerpted here in an English translation of the original Portuguese, are among the very few surviving documents written by an African in the sixteenth century. The letters reveal Afonso's difficult dilemma: how to take advantage of certain features of contact with the Portuguese while avoiding the undesirable – and ultimately destructive – consequences.*

King Afonso to King João III of Portugal

Mbanza, Congo, July 6, 1526

My Lord,

On June 26, we heard of the arrival in our harbor of one of Your Highness' ships. This made us truly glad for it had been a long time since any of your ships had docked in our kingdom bringing with it news of Your Highness which, as one would expect, we had often desired to hear. Moreover we are almost entirely lacking wine and flour for the holy sacrifice....

My Lord, Your Highness must 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 agents and officials to the men and merchants who are allowed to come to this Kingdom to setup 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 Kingdoms no more than some priests and a few people to reach 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 to 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 forever the things of His service, I kiss your hands many times.

King Afonso to King João III of Portugal

Mbanza, Congo, October 18, 1526

My Lord,

Your Highness wrote to have us ask him in our letters everything that we need. He would provide us with everything. The peace and well-being of our kingdoms lie, after God, on our life. However we are old already and we have often been affected by various diseases which weaken us to our last resources. The same diseases also strike our sons, relatives and countrymen. Yet in this kingdom we have neither doctors nor surgeons who would know how to administer the appropriate treatment to such infirmities. Also, we have neither pharmacies nor the most efficient medicines. Thus, because we have nothing, many of those who are already educated in the truths of Our Lord Jesus Christ's holy faith die! Most of the inhabitants cure themselves with herbs and various woods or turn to traditional rites. If they survive, their faith in those herbs and rites grows and if they die they believe they are saved which does not favor God's service.

To prevent such damageable erring, since, after God, it is from Your Highness that we receive in our kingdoms all the cures for health, we ask Your Highness to send here two doctors,

two pharmacists and one surgeon. Let them come and stay in our kingdoms with all their medicines and tools for we need each of them very much. We shall grant them many favors, because they will be sent by Your Highness; should Your Highness agree to have them work here. We beg Your Highness in urgency to accept to send them to us because this matter is not simply about granting a particular favor but also about serving God for all the reasons we just gave you.

There is, my Lord, another great obstacle to the service of God in our kingdoms. Many of our subjects greatly covet the goods which your men bring in our kingdoms from Portugal. To quench this uncontrollable thirst they kidnap many of our free or freed black subjects, even nobles, sons of noblemen and even our relatives. They sell them to the white men who are in our kingdom after having delivered their prisoners in secret or during the night in order not to be recognized. As soon as the captives are under the white men's power they are branded. This is how they are found by our guards when they board the ships. The white men then explain that they were bought but they cannot say from whom. Yet it is our duty, as the prisoners claim, to do justice and set them free. To prevent such incidents we have decreed that all white men buying slaves in our kingdoms, however it may happen, should first inform three noblemen and officers of our court to whom I entrusted this control....They will check whether the slaves are not actually free men. If they are found to be slaves nothing will prevent anyone from having them and taking them aboard. However, should the opposite be true, the captives will be taken away from the white men. We gave our consent to this favor and these services because of Your Highness' participation in this trade. Indeed we know that it is for your service that these slaves are taken from our kingdoms. If it were not so, we would not agree to it for the reasons we have already given you.

We inform Your Highness of all this so that your subjects will not come to you and say it is otherwise. Indeed they tell Your Highness many lies to keep your mind from remembering the obligations you have towards us and our kingdom for God's service. It seems to us that it would be a great favor if you could let us know through one of your letters what you think of these dispositions.

We kiss Your Highness' hands many times my Lord.