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The wealth of Africa The kingdom of Kongo

Students' worksheets



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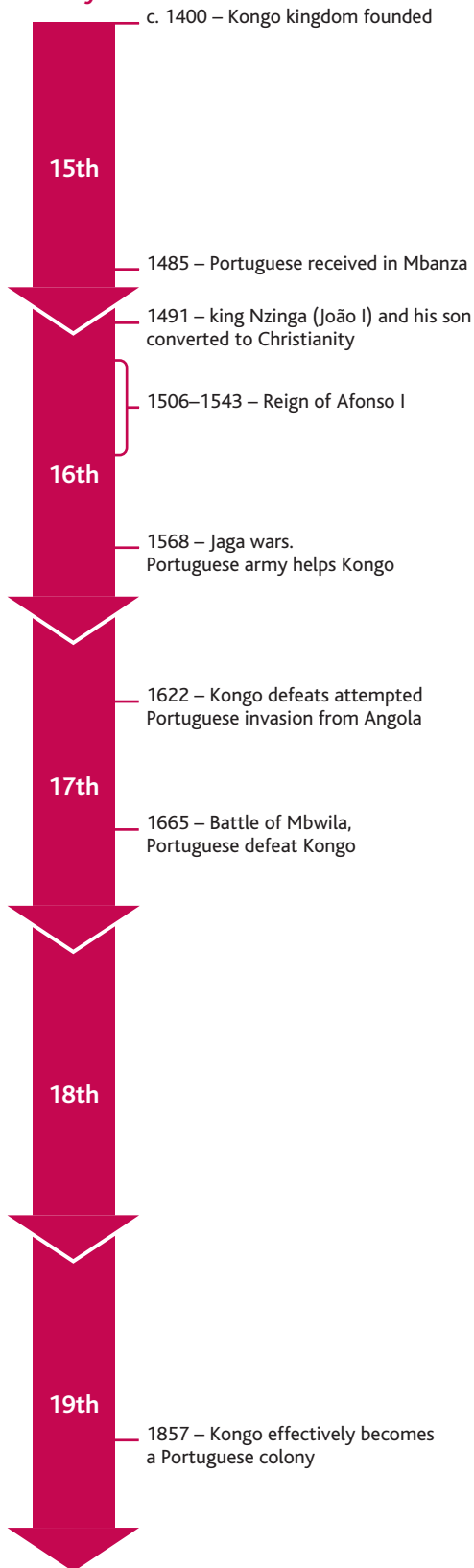
The CarAf Centre

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THE KINGDOM OF KONGO



Century AD



SHEET 1: WHAT KIND OF RELATIONSHIP DID THE KINGS OF KONGO AND PORTUGAL HAVE?

The meeting between the Portuguese explorers and the king of Kongo in 1485 was one of the first official contacts between Europeans and Africans south of the Sahara. The relationship between the two kings provides a fascinating glimpse of attitudes before the age of colonialism.

Source 1

'Most powerful and excellent king of Manycongo,' King Manuel [of Portugal] wrote from Lisbon in 1512... King Afonso [of Kongo] began his letters with the words 'Most high and powerful prince and king my brother.'

Davidson 1996: 138

Source 2

In 1506 the king of Kongo, Afonso, sent 500 manillas of copper to King Manuel of Portugal, the first of a series of gifts intended to cement the alliance between the two kings.

Herbert 1984: 140

Source 4

The 6 greatest chiefs were to be dukes; lesser notables were to be marquises, counts and barons; while the children of the king were to be princes and princesses.

Regimento or instructions of King Manuel of Portugal (1512), quoted in Davidson 1996: 140

Source 5

In the first two parts of the *regimento* it was provided that the Portuguese should help the king of Kongo towards a better organisation of his realm, introduce Portuguese ideas of law and warfare, build churches, teach Portuguese court etiquette. Local Portuguese were to be dealt with by Portuguese law.

Davidson 1996: 139

Source 6

In our kingdoms there is another great inconvenience which is of little service to God, and this is that many of our people, keenly desirous as they are of the goods 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...

Afonso to King João III (6 July 1526), quoted in Reader 1997: 367



Source 3: Copper manilla
British Museum

Questions

1. What does source 1 show about the relationship between the two kings?
2. What was the King of Portugal trying to achieve in his *regimento* (sources 4 and 5)?
3. How equal was the relationship?

SHEET 2: WHY DID KONGO BECOME CHRISTIAN?

The king of Kongo, Nzinga a Nkuwu (João I) seems to have converted readily enough to Christianity, but there is some debate as to whether he and his son, Afonso, were genuine, or whether it was done for political or economic reasons. The Portuguese may not have put religion first in accepting so many new converts either.

Source 1

Missionaries who went to Kongo accepted that all aspects of the culture that were not directly against the basic teaching of the Church were acceptable. Virtually the only behaviour needed to be a Christian was a simple declaration of faith and recognition of the Catholic Church as the only Church and the Pope as its head.

Thornton 1984: 152

Source 3

Christianity in Kongo fitted into the Kongo belief about the universe, especially the cult of earth and water spirits. As a result, Christianity could be adopted without any real disruption of former religious beliefs, but as for real conversion, it clearly did not occur.

Thornton 1984: 151–152

Source 4

King Afonso I of Kongo read religious books far into the night, often falling asleep over them, and astounded the priests with his knowledge.

Portuguese visitor Rui d'Aguiar, quoted in Thornton 1984: 155

Source 5

In Kongo, the ruling group was fully behind the religion, and found that recognising the supremacy of Rome in religious matters gave them some diplomatic leverage in Europe. As a result, Kongo was able to get the Pope to condemn the Portuguese invasion of southern Kongo in 1622.

Thornton 1984: 155

Source 6

João's son by his principle wife, who had been baptised Afonso, had a supreme interest in supporting the new Christian cult. He could not, in theory, succeed to the kingship. The Christian priests, however, regarded Afonso as the only legitimate heir. When João died in 1506, Afonso seized the throne.

Hilton 1985: 53



Source 2: Capuchin missionary celebrating Mass, Songo, Kingdom of Kongo, 1740s
Collo & Benso 1986: 115

Questions

1. What does source 3 suggest about why people in Kongo accepted Christianity?
2. Why else might Kongo have accepted Christianity?
3. What does source 1 suggest about how seriously the Portuguese took converting people?

SHEET 3: WHAT EFFECTS DID THE PORTUGUESE HAVE ON KONGO POLITICS?

One of the accusations against the Portuguese was that they interfered in the politics of Kongo and upset the balance between the noble families on which the election of the king depended. Afonso could not be king legally, but the Portuguese backed him.

Source 1

The kingdom was the most organised state that the Portuguese had yet found in Africa. The king ruled from a palace, accompanied by elaborate ceremony, through a network of officials and nobles who administered the provinces of the state to collect tribute in copper, iron, and slaves.

Collins & Burns 2007: 180

Source 3

The king was elected, technically by a set of traditional electors and actually by the most powerful members of the royal and main noble households. Thus, the succession was settled as a family dispute, but a family made more complex due to its size and extensiveness.

Thornton 1982: 330

Source 4

Direct Portuguese trading [with provincial nobles] threatened to destroy Afonso's hard-won position at the tip of the Kongo economic system... Other Portuguese began to seek slaves in the provinces and this threatened to undermine the whole economic and political basis of the state.

Hilton 1985: 58

Source 5

Afonso used not only the Atlantic [slave] trade to strengthen his political position; he also used Christianity as a royal cult under his direct control.

Hilton 1985: 60

Source 6

The king used the whites in the internal power struggle, receiving them with open arms.

Ekholm 1972: 18

Source 8

The Portuguese, settled in São Salvador, reinforced the royal power materially and spiritually. They altered a delicate balance in favour of royalty. They supplied the advantage of their technology and their manufactured goods, and they introduced incentives to trade. They were the carriers of a new religion, which was all the more warmly welcomed because it seemed to be extremely powerful.

Balandier 1968: 46



Source 2: Court of king of Kongo, late 16th century
Aa 1729: 51B



Source 7: Nobles, Kingdom of Kongo, late 16th century
Merolla 1726

Questions

1. What do sources 1 and 2 suggest about the power of the king?
2. Do sources 3 and 4 agree?
3. How did the Portuguese alter the political balance in Kongo?

SHEET 4: DID THE PORTUGUESE ENCOURAGE THE SLAVE TRADE IN KONGO?

There is no doubt that Kongo rulers took captives, and laws allowed enslavement within the kingdom. What is less clear is whether laws allowed the export of enslaved people, or whether the Portuguese made the acquiring of captives a greater priority than before.

Source 1

Afonso gave the Portuguese king's factor nzimbu shells to buy slaves and decreed that no-one else could buy them. There were, in fact, very few slaves available for purchase and scarcely any had so far been exported from Kongo. In order to secure the return gift Afonso had to raid the neighbouring Mbundu, newly acquired captives being the only people who could, at this time, be legally sold.

Hilton 1985: 57

Source 3

Although slavery was an integral part of Kongo society, the slave trade was not. By 1514 the Portuguese demand for slaves turned a domestic institution into an international trade. Afonso sought to restrict the trade by making it a royal monopoly. In frustration he abolished it by decree in 1526. Both policies failed.

Collins & Burns 2007: 184

Source 4

To the kings, in whom a taste for luxuries had been fostered, slave trading became an unavoidable solution to their need for foreign goods.

Birmingham 1977: 549

Source 5

It is quite clear that Afonso, and probably Kongo law in general, had little problem with either the holding of slaves, or their export from the country.

Thornton: King Afonso and the Slave Trade

Source 6

This expedition has cost us much: it would be unreasonable to send it home with empty hands. Although our principle wish is to serve God and the pleasure of the king of Kongo, none the less you will make him understand – as though speaking in our name – what he should do to fill the ships, whether with slaves, or copper, or ivory.

Instructions from King Manuel of Portugal to his envoy (1512),
quoted in Davidson 1996: 139–140

Source 7

Since slaves were not readily available inside Kongo, the kings began at an early stage to seek captives from outside. Border raids became a regular feature of the kingdom, and may have led to territorial expansion.

Birmingham 1977: 550



Source 2: Cowrie (*nzimbu*)
British Museum

Questions

1. How do sources 3 and 5 differ in what they say about enslavement?
2. Which point of view is backed by other sources?
3. Why did kings of Kongo start taking more captives?
4. How much was this the fault of the Portuguese?

SHEET 5: DID CONTACT WITH THE PORTUGUESE DAMAGE OR STRENGTHEN KONGO?

It has to be admitted that contact with the Portuguese changed Kongo. What is not so clear is whether this actually helped destroy the kingdom, or to delay its decline by strengthening and supporting it. Kongo wasn't fully colonised by the Portuguese until 1857, nearly 400 years later.

Source 1

By the 16th century, rulers became increasingly separated from their subjects, and traders became an increasingly powerful middle class. These changes were closely connected with the arrival of the Portuguese.

Birmingham 1977: 547–548

Source 2

The Portuguese enticed the Kongo aristocracy into embracing Catholicism. In doing so they created a relation of dependence that sparked dynastic conflicts and civil war and led eventually to the collapse of the kingdom.

Gondola 2002: 31

Source 4

Growth was stimulated by new Portuguese contributions to the ruling group in the form not only of goods but also of services by teachers, artisans, lawyers and priests.

Birmingham 1977: 548

Source 5

The first threat to the kingdom in the latter years of Afonso's reign came from provincial rulers. These were anxious to establish their own direct contacts with foreign merchants. The ones most affected were, of course, those nearest the coast, and the king had constant difficulty in maintaining their loyalty.

Birmingham 1977: 551

Source 6

The Jaga wars, which all but destroyed the Kongo kingdom in 1568, brought a Portuguese military invasion. This brought with it a new class of self-reliant traders, adventurers and rogues, who established themselves in a kingdom which, in their eyes, owed them a debt of gratitude.

Birmingham 1977: 552–553

Source 9

In 1665, at the great battle of Mbwila, King Antonio I and most of his nobles, court officials and 5,000 Kongolesse troops were killed [by the Portuguese invaders]. The kingdom of Kongo dissolved into petty chiefdoms and never recovered.

Collins 2007: 188

Source 3:
Men's clothing
styles (noble
and commoner),
Kongo, late
16th century
Astley 1745–7:
facing 248



Source 7: Drum with
European figure, from Kongo
British Museum

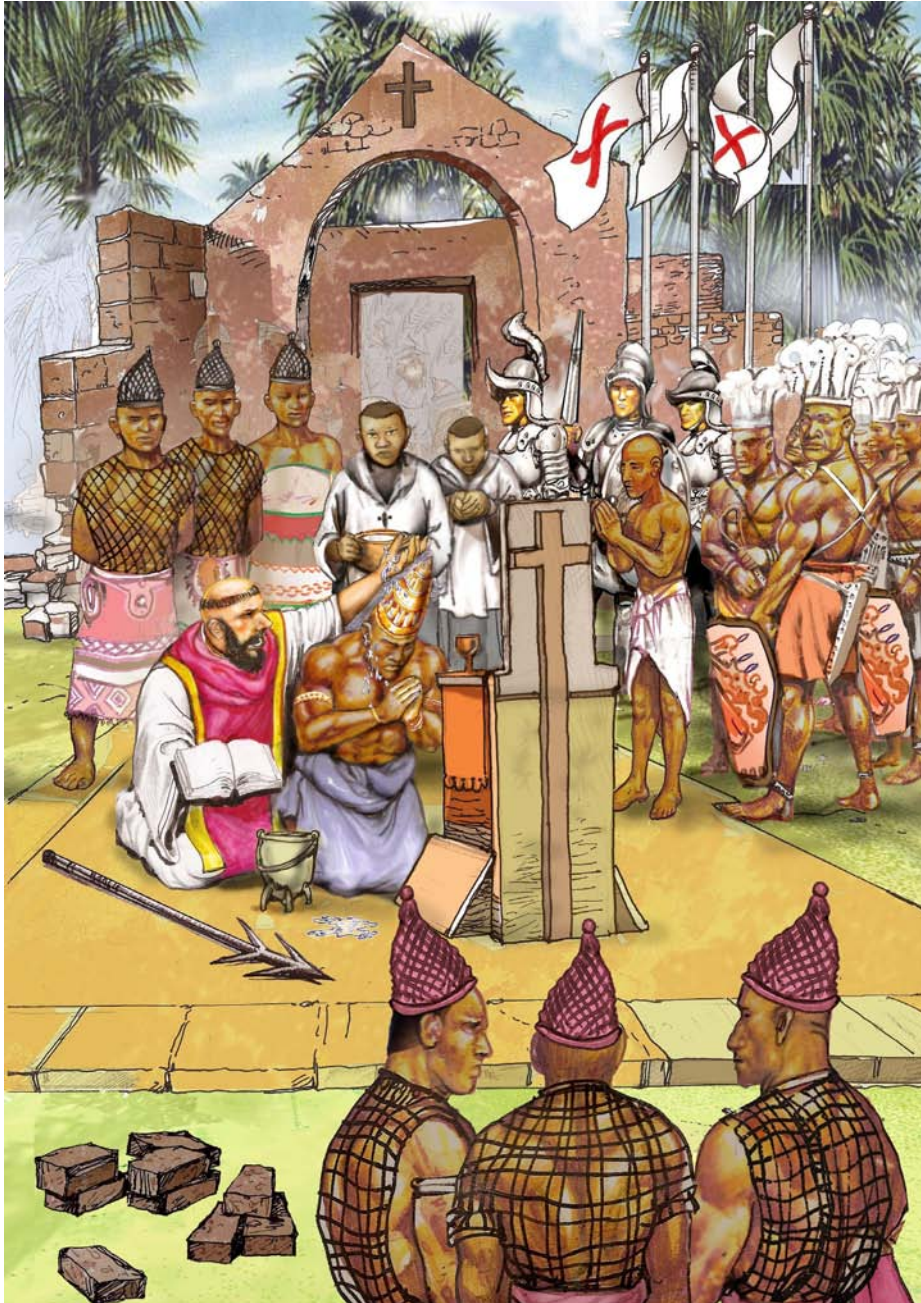


Source 8:
Nobleman's sword
British Museum

Questions

1. Why do you think the drum in source 7 is mounted on the figure of a European?
2. In what ways did its relationship with the Portuguese change Kongo?
3. Was the change the fault of the Portuguese alone?

**SHEET 6: THE BAPTISM OF JOÃO I AND
SIX OF HIS NOBLES, 1485**



Source 1: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla

Questions

1. What details in the picture fit in with what you have learnt about Kongo?
2. How useful is this picture for learning about Kongo?

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