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The wealth of Africa The kingdom of Kongo

Teachers' notes



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THE WEALTH OF AFRICA: USING THESE RESOURCES

This educational resource consists of 16 sets of resources on African civilisations, countries and themes.

Each set of resources includes:

- Teachers' notes
- Students' worksheets
- A presentation

Download the resources free at www.britishmuseum.org/schools

Teachers' notes

These are intended to provide background material for teachers, but can also be referred to by students who want more contextual information.

Students' worksheets

These are stand-alone worksheets which can be downloaded as classroom resources or viewed on the interactive whiteboard. They are self-contained, with tasks and questions and a limited number of sources in which the language has been slightly amended to make them more accessible to the likely reading ages of the students. They are also designed to be used independently of the teacher, e.g. for homework.

If teachers do not wish to spend more than one or two lessons on Kongo, then the sheets will prove ideal for small project work, with groups of students taking one sheet, finding interesting and relevant information, and reporting back to the rest of the class. A specimen lesson plan along these lines is given below.

Presentation

This provides a simpler and more visual introduction to the civilisation. It contains some of the images and sources found in the other sections, and can be shown on the whiteboard or used at home to give an overview of the main topics covered.

Your feedback

Please help the British Museum improve its educational resources for schools and teachers by giving your feedback. The first 250 teachers or tutors to complete the online survey before 12.00 on 1 September 2011 will receive a printed set of illustrations of African civilisations by artist Tayo Fatunla. Visit www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica to complete the survey and for terms and conditions.

LESSON SCHEME: KONGO IN AN HOUR

Aim

To decide how far Kongo was affected by arrival of the Portuguese.

Starter: Impressions of the kingdom of Kongo

Scroll quickly through the images in the presentation, and get feedback from students on their first impressions, especially on what the effects of contact with the Portuguese might have been. (10 minutes)

Research

Divide the class into groups with one group per resource sheet. Each group has to look at the question at the top of the sheet, and decide on the answer by studying the sources. The group should note 5–10 relevant facts that it can feed back to the rest of the class as evidence of its answer. (20 minutes)

Feedback

Each group feeds back its findings, opinion and evidence to the rest of the class, who could take notes. (15 minutes)

Discussion

The central question of how far Kongo was ruined by the Portuguese can be debated. (15 minutes)

Homework

e.g. The ambassador for the kingdom of Portugal defends his country's involvement in Kongo, or look at the presentation site if not already done in class, or do further research into one of the topics to find more information.

THE KINGDOM OF KONGO c. 1400–1857: TEACHERS' NOTES

Introduction

Central Africa, rich in mineral and natural resources, has for many hundreds of years been an important region for trade. Thousands of years ago, agriculturalist peoples moved into the area, and by the 1500s there was a centralised monarchy ruling the kingdom of Kongo. This section focuses on the relationship between the Portuguese and the kingdom of Kongo, from the 16th century onwards. It provides a fascinating study into the relationship between Europe and Africa several centuries before the recognised age of imperialism. The question of whether this contact exploited and ruined Kongo, or whether factions within Kongo manipulated it for their own ends, forms part of an important and interesting historical debate. There is little question, however, that the African kingdom came off worse in the long run.

Why study Kongo?

The resources focus particularly on different aspects of the Portuguese impact on Kongo, giving an insight into this early encounter between Europe and Africa. Later engagements in the region during the 19th Century, tended to be aggressive and deliberately exploitative, at least on the part of the Europeans, so it is interesting to contrast these with the more tentative (though arguably no less exploitative) behaviour of the Portuguese.

The idea of a strong and independent African state, after a brief and peaceful meeting with a handful of European explorers, converting to their religion, adopting their titles, names and some of their practices, allowing them a place and a role in their system, voluntarily acceding to their demands for slaves, taking on a more aggressive foreign policy to acquire these captives, and ultimately being attacked and taken over by them, is presents a superficial and tragic picture of events. The truth is more complex, but no less fascinating or thought-provoking.

A crucial issue is the conversion of Kongo to Christianity, and the underlying motivations for this, which were linked to political and economic realities. The topic raises interesting questions about the nature of dependence of one civilisation on another, about who was really exploiting who, about attitudes of both countries towards each other, about the effects of the slave trade on African domestic and foreign relations, and about relative levels of advancement. All of these are fertile areas for discussion.

For students of History following the National Curriculum, this fits in with the Key Stage 3 syllabus on the Slave Trade. By examining a country which was affected by the European demand for slaves, students can get a better idea of the impact of this trade on Africa, an aspect which is often ignored in textbooks.

Location

Kongo occupies a lush and fertile portion of the west coast of southern Africa, in the north of modern-day Angola, and south of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its capital Mbanza Kongo has reverted to its original name, after being São Salvador during the time of Portuguese influence. Kongo was the largest and most powerful state in Central Africa, with a highly centralised monarchy and an influential noble class. The capital was 'after 'In the 16th century... In the 16th century it was a neat, well-ordered town, which the Portuguese transformed with stone houses. Much of the population were located in villages around the capital, which made social, economic, military and political organisation easier.

The rest of the country was divided into six provinces, of which the most important in this period was probably Soyo because of its coastal location and links to the trade with the Portuguese. Its coastal location meant that Portuguese traders often went no further inland, and it gradually became a thorn in the side of the central government as it started conducting business transactions without reference to the king.

Early history

The history of Kongo dates from around 1400 with the union of two smaller kingdoms into one larger state. The first European contact came with the Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão in 1483. Taking some Kongo hostages back with him he returned two years later and journeyed inland to the capital, Mbanza Kongo. There, in 1491, he baptised the king as João I and his son, Afonso, and began building a stone church. The six chief nobles of the kingdom also converted and adopted Portuguese names and titles.

Afonso I

The next major Portuguese intervention came in 1506 after the death of João. Technically, his son Afonso could not become king due to complicated rules of succession, and Mpanzu was elected instead. The Portuguese, however, backed Afonso, the Christian 'candidate', and may have helped him defeat Mpanzu in a skirmish in the capital. Afonso expanded his borders, firmly established Christianity and forged strong links with Portugal by accepting certain Portuguese institutions, granting settlers special rights, and supplying slaves to Portuguese traders.

Afonso ruled until 1543, and provided the strong leadership needed to see these changes through. He did not, however, see everything going his way, especially with the Portuguese. He wrote and spoke Portuguese, and his letters, written in 1509-1541 to kings, government officials and bishops in Lisbon and Rome, as well as to the Vatican, give us a powerful insight into the workings of pre-colonial Africa and the Kongo state. The insatiable demand of Portuguese traders for captives to work the sugar plantations in São Tomé created instability within the kingdom, particularly when traders began dealing with provincial nobles and bypassing the crown. Afonso's anguished letters to the King of Portugal, and the increasingly dismissive responses, showed that the relationship was becoming more one-sided.

Afonso made repeated requests for priests, doctors, religious paraphernalia and even a boat to transport them, but the replies were that these would no longer be gifts but must be paid for in slaves. To meet the demands, Afonso was forced to undertake raids into neighbouring territories to secure captives, and may even have allowed those who were enslaved within the country, who were protected by Kongo law, to be sold. At the same time, however, Afonso introduced restrictions on the trade in captives in 1526, to try to ensure that slaves were not illegally exported.

Towards the end of his reign, Afonso began to experience serious threats from the coastal province of Soyo, which contained the main embarkation point for captives. The power of the kings of Kongo relied on a system of centralisation on the capital Mbanza Kongo. Those wanting advancement in the kingdom, including nobles, worked their way up by serving time in the provinces where they were expected to gather taxes and tribute for remission to the capital. If they performed well, they were rewarded by promotion to the capital. To keep the provinces weak and loyal they were deliberately kept underdeveloped.

In Soyo, however, Portuguese traders found a way to circumvent the tedious journey to the capital, and the resulting higher costs of slaves, by trading directly with local officials. Thus local officials in the province became rich and more independent-minded. There was also an issue of the holding of large numbers of captives in Soyo, awaiting embarkation in Portuguese ships that were often late. Some of these slaves were diverted by local officials to work in the province, and thus an alternative localised economy began to develop, weakening the power of the central authority.

In 1568, over 25 years after Afonso's death, there was an outbreak of violence known as the Jaga invasion which caused considerable disruption and violence. This was an attempt to gain direct access to European traders, and to break the king of Kongo's monopoly, and in order to repel the invaders, Kongo was forced to rely on Portuguese military support. The invasion coincided with a period of deep division in, and conflict within, the Kongo ruling elite, relating to succession rights. Two important consequences of this invasion and unrest were political and social reforms among the ruling elite, as well as the development of a new trade route based on cloth to compensate for the loss of the slave trade monopoly, both of which were factors contributing to a delay in the decline of the kingdom of Kongo. There is little explanation in Kongo records as to who the Jaga were. They have traditionally been assumed to be outsiders who invaded the kingdom, but no firm evidence has emerged as to where they came from or who they were. This has led historians to wonder whether it was an internal rebellion, perhaps from one of the provinces. At any rate, the conflict was only ended by Portuguese soldiers, reflecting not only the weakness of the kingdom, but also its increasing reliance on European help.

Decline

Increasing instability followed towards the end of the 16th century and later. This was not just down to the Portuguese presence, but more to do with problems over succession that afflicted many African societies. Primogeniture (the handing of the throne from father to son) was not an accepted principle and in Kongo, kingship was decided by an electoral college, which increased opportunities for intrigue and in-fighting.

From 1575, the Portuguese established a colony in Luanda, Angola, just to the south of Kongo, and some governors used the position to launch raids into Kongo to gather slaves, or in an attempt to take tracts of territory. In 1622, a full-scale Portuguese invasion from Angola was eventually beaten off, but in 1665, Kongo suffered a serious defeat at the battle of Mbwila, resulting in the deaths of the Kongolesse king Antonio I and many of his nobles. Kongo was plunged into half a century of civil war, which included the abandonment of the capital. Although Portugal did not effectively take over Kongo until 1857, its independence until then was severely reduced, and the power of the kings to control the whole country was broken.

Economy

The system of taxation, by which a hierarchy of collectors gathered in a portion of the resources produced by communities, defined the economic structure of the kingdom. When it came to the provincial leaders bringing taxes they had collected to the king, no amount was specified, but it was left to the whim of the king to decide whether enough had been offered. If he was not satisfied, it could mean the end of a career.

Agriculture was the basis of production. In the villages, land was owned communally and the harvests divided among families, with some set aside for the payment of taxes. Towns were reliant on forced labour to farm plantations that provided them with essentials. They also collected iron, copper, salt, ivory, animal hides and bark cloth from the villages. Some of these were traded with the Portuguese, and the trading relationships between the two kingdoms were strengthened by the conversion of Kongo to Christianity. The economy was heavily centred on the capital, with the provinces being kept relatively poor. Gradually, the export of slaves became a way of paying for the importation of European goods, and slavery became an important aspect of the economy. As currency, *nzimbu* (cowrie) shells were among the items used, being gathered from coastal waters within the kingdom and becoming the property of the king.

Historical interpretations

Basil Davidson is one of the main exponents of the theory that Kongo was corrupted and ruined by the European desire for slaves. He points to the rapid conversion to Christianity of the Kongo nobility, the apparently meek acceptance of all things Portuguese, including names, titles (counts, marquises, etc. and a new European-style royal coat of arms), education, and building styles, and then the gradual Portuguese interference in politics and the economy, culminating in the 17th-century invasions and colonisation. He sees the relationship between the two countries as having been 'colonial' right from the start.

This theory is disputed by John Thornton, who looks at the fact that it took the Portuguese nearly 400 years to get full control over Kongo, and decides on the basis of this that the relationship may not have been so one-sided as previously assumed. He suggests that the Portuguese were far from confident, and much more respectful, in their early dealings with the kings of Kongo, and that Afonso at least was smart enough to use the Portuguese in his bid for the throne, and to use his contacts with the Portuguese king, whom he always addressed as an equal (a courtesy that was reciprocated), to get European products and services. As usual, the truth may lie somewhere between these two extremes.

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