

King Afonso I, Letter to King John III of Portugal

In 1490, the Portuguese converted the son of a Kongo king to Christianity and then helped him take his father's throne. The new king, born Nzinga Mbemba, was renamed Afonso. King Afonso soon realized that his relationship with Portugal had extremely negative consequences, as can be seen from this letter to King John III of Portugal in 1526. In this letter, the king of Kongo appeals to the king of Portugal to end the slave trade.

Sir, Your Highness 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 agents 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...



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, keenly desirous as they are of the wares 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...

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 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.¹ 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.



Name _____ Date _____ Period ____ Class _____

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Directions: Read and annotate the letter and answer the following questions.

1. How did King Afonso become a Catholic?
2. According to King Afonso, why are his vassals no longer obeying him? How had he been keeping them obedient in the past?
3. In order to get more luxury goods from Europe, what are some of King Afonso's people doing?
4. What does King Afonso ask of King John?
5. Why does King Afonso think King John will listen to him?
6. Based on what you know about the slave trade, do you think King John fulfilled the request? Why?
7. Who do you think deserves blame for the slave trade, King John, King Afonso, or both? Explain.