

GROUP 5.1 Introduction to the Kingdom of Kongo

FACT FILE

The Kingdom of Kongo lies on the west coast of central Africa in modern-day Congo and Angola. The kingdom was financially successful due to the regional traffic in slaves, ivory, and copper along the Congo River. The advent of Portuguese traders in the late 15th century CE helped to advance the slave trade in the area. Kongo rulers were converted to Christianity, but as each side sought to rule the other, ties with the Europeans worsened. The Kongo kingdom eventually fell in the early 18th century CE due to internal conflicts and losses to rival neighbouring kingdoms.

Let's find out more about the Kingdom of Kongo!



The kingdom, which was formed in the late 14th century CE as a result of the union of several regional principalities that had existed since the latter half of the first millennium CE, was situated on the western coast of central Africa, south of the Congo River (previously known as the Zaire River). A rich and well-watered plateau right below the western end of the Congo River was home to Mbanza Kongo, the capital of Kongo, which was ruled by Bantu-speaking people.

When the kingdom was at its peak, in the 15th and 16th centuries CE, it controlled about 150 miles of the coast, extending from the Congo River in the north to a point just south of the Cuanza River in the south, and about 250 miles of central African interior, reaching the Kwango River.

GEOGRAPHY

- The Kongo Kingdom is situated in west-central Africa. The Kongo Kingdom first appeared in the late 1400s and later joined the Portuguese colony of Angola.
- The Kongo Kingdom is home to natural resources including diamonds, gold, uranium, copper, and more.
- Current climate and geography challenges include deforestation, misuse of pastures, and water pollution.

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GROUP 5.2

How did the Kingdom of Kongo become so powerful?

- The kingdom, which was formed in the late 14th century CE as a result of the union of several regional principalities that had existed since the latter half of the first millennium CE, was situated on the western coast of central Africa, south of the Congo River (previously known as the Zaire River). A rich and well-watered plateau right below the western end of the Congo River was home to Mbanza Kongo, the capital of Kongo, which was ruled by Bantu-speaking people.
- Lack of early written materials and the problematic reality that nearly all later narratives were authored by Europeans make it difficult to understand the early history of the Kingdom of Kongo. This implies that since European accounts were written from the perspective of conquerors and outsiders, it is important to be sceptical of them. Another problem is that local chroniclers—those who wrote from an insider's perspective—made conclusions based on how clans were organised in more recent history, such as the Congolese historian Petelo Boka.
- Nonetheless, it is widely accepted that the formation of the Kingdom of Kongo resulted from the both voluntary and unwillful integration of neighbouring states around a single core state.
- Early territorial expansion of the Kongo Kingdom was mostly accomplished by voluntary agreements with smaller neighbouring powers.
- Some historians prefer to refer to states that resemble the Kingdom of Kongo as "commonwealths" rather than "kingdoms" since they were founded in part on collaboration, marital connections, and mutual understanding as opposed to conquest. Conquest was a bigger factor in the Kingdom's later territorial expansion.
- When the kingdom was at its peak, in the 15th and 16th centuries CE, it controlled about 150 miles of the coast, extending from the Congo River in the north to a point just south of the Cuanza River in the south, and about 250 miles of central African interior, reaching the Kwango River.

Situation in West-Central Africa in c. 1400: Reasons for the Rise of Kongo

When the Portuguese arrived in Kongo in 1482 the kingdom was already well-established. Although there are no written records for the pre-Portuguese period, oral traditions taken down in the 15th and 16th centuries give a good idea of how Kongo had arisen and what the basis of its political authority was.

The capital of Kongo was situated at Mbanza Kongo, later called São Salvador by the Portuguese. Mbanza Kongo lay at the confluence of various trade routes linking the forest and coastal zones, where forest products and coastal products (salt; the shells called *nzimbu* fished at the Island of Luanda) could be exchanged. This may explain why it was chosen as the site of the Kongo capital, although it is worth noting that the city was sited in a natural fortress, on a high plateau above the surrounding region.

Traditions collected in the early 17th century suggested that the ruling clan of Kongo, the *Mwissikongo*, had migrated south across the Congo river, probably at some time in the 14th century, and had then conquered the peoples living there and established the kingdom. Modern historians however have questioned this narrative. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins noted that accounts of "stranger kings" migrating to a new region and forming a kingdom are common to many peoples around the world. John Thornton has suggested that the early Kongo kingdom, probably forged at some time around the late 14th century, was characterised more by federation than conquest. On this account, Kongo kings arrived and forged alliances with provincial rulers in which each guaranteed the succession of the other's heirs. The different clans were held together by the power of the king of Kongo who was called the *manikongo*. The *manikongo's* power may have related to the ability to work iron, since many oral traditions associate the founders of Kongo with the blacksmith class, as is also the case in the Angolan kingdom of Ndongo to the south.

The nature of power structures in early Kongo was deeply related to household patterns; a point stressed for the Republic of Guinea by the historian Emily Lynn Osborn. In Kongo, the core of political and household authority was the *kanda*, or lineage. Migration formed a central aspect of how the *kandas* spread their power and built up the alliances which came to constitute the kingdom. With the apparent migration of people across the Congo river, members of one *kanda* migrated and formed alliances with new peoples through marriage. In a pattern familiar to many parts of Africa - such as the Guinea-Bissau region and among the Akan peoples of modern Ghana to the north - descent was principally matrilineal, through the

maternal line; that is, the line of those who were resident in a place when members of the *kandas* appeared and married among them. For this reason of matrilineal descent and inheritance, sons often lived with their maternal uncles. In this way, lineages spread, and so did the political authority at the heart of the federation, which was ruled by the *manikongo*.

This structure of federal power, constructed through expansion of *kandas* and the household alliances which they built, allowed Kongo's power to stretch very widely prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. Many sources tell us that Kongolese political power was recognised to the north in the kingdom of Loango (now in the modern Republic of Congo) and to the south in Ndongo (the major kingdom found to the east of Luanda in the modern Republic of Angola). This is clear through the fact that the major source of the *nzimbu* shells which constituted Kongo's core currency was at Luanda, and through the fact that the king of Loango was also given the title *mani*.

By the time that the Portuguese arrived, therefore, a strong core of Kongo culture had been established. Kongo was a deeply hierarchical society, something which the Portuguese recognised and understood. Power was vested in a ruling class, the *Mwissikongo*, and there was a strong division between the *mbanza* (town) and *vata* (village). One 1491 account compared Mbanza Kongo to the Portuguese city of Évora, and so clearly it was already a fully established urban space before the Portuguese arrival. The capital derived its surpluses from the *vata*, whose residents, though sometimes freeborn Kongos, were often members of subordinate and even slave castes.

GROUP 5.3 How was the Kingdom of Kongo ruled?

GOVERNMENT

- In the Kongo Kingdom, monarchy is the system of government. Because they were regarded as family back then, the monarchs and other authorities were highly respected.
- The political system of the Kongo Kingdom was comparable to a democratic one in that it represented the views of the citizens.

TRADE AND GOVERNMENT

- With well over 2 million residents at its height, the kingdom of Kongo flourished owing to commerce in slaves, cow skins, salt, copper, and ivory. The latter trade, which included rotating marketplaces that appeared in cities on set days of the week and sold slaves sourced from the upper reaches of the Congo River, was particularly lucrative and well-regulated. The kingdom not only imported things but also made its own through specialised groups of craftspeople including weavers (who created the famed raffia textiles of Kongo), potters, and metalworkers.
- The established employment of spiral nzimbu shells, a shell currency that originated on the offshore island of Luanda, about 150 miles distant, as a medium of payments amongst the people of the forest and grasslands of west-central Africa, is a sign of the extent of commerce between these groups.
- The shells were first intended to store riches and as a benchmark for determining the worth of other items, but they eventually started to be used like coins to purchase products and labour.
- Rival equatorial African kingdoms included Loango and Tio, both to the north of Kongo, and the loose confederation of tribes of Ndongo to the south, which did not have exclusive trading rights in the area (modern Angola).
- The Kongo kingdom was highly centralised, with a single monarch known as the nkani, selecting regional governors across his territory. These governors in turn elected local leaders and procured tribute from local chiefs, including ivory, millet, palm wine, and leopard and lion skins, which they then sent to the monarch at Mbanza Kongo.
- At grand yearly festivities that included vast quantities of beer drinking and feasting, tributes were paid. Chiefs and officials earned the king's favour, military protection, and certain tangible benefits like culinary delicacies and clothes in exchange for their contributions. The paying of tribute also had a religious component because it was seen as a method to keep both royal and divine favour.
- Kongo kings could be identified by their official regalia, which comprised of a headpiece, throne, stool, drum, and ivory and copper jewellery. The

monarch had a regular army of slaves under his command that, by the late 16th century CE, had between 16,000 and 20,000 soldiers. The king was revered as a direct connection to the spiritual dimension and as a protector of the people from natural disasters like sickness and hunger.

- The king had the title "nzambi mpungu," which means "superior spirit" or "supreme creator," however only his office was considered as sacred. King weddings to famous shrine guardians like the mani kabunga, who had looked after the shrine bearing that name since long before the Kingdom of Kongo was founded, served to further this belief.
- A council of around a dozen elders, made up of high-ranking members of the aristocracy (the mwisikongo), which predominated Kongo society, provided the monarch with more temporal advice.
- The aristocrats belonged to a variety of historic family lineages, and most of their income came from trade since the tsetse fly prevented extensive cow breeding in the area and also because owning property was irrelevant due to the small population.
- The tax officer and his staff, the chief of justice, the chief of police, and the official in command of the messenger service were important roles in the centralised administration.
- The free or babuta (farmers and craftsmen) and the unfree or babika comprised the rest of society (slaves who were war captives or those unable to pay their debts).

GROUP 5.4 What did the people in the Kingdom of Kongo believe?

RELIGION

- The Nzambi Kalungo, the Kongo's creator and source of strength, was worshipped by the Kongo people.
- Additionally, they held a belief in lesser spirits and ancestors as well as the notion that evil, chaos, and injustice are caused by impure human motivations like greed, jealousy, or hatred.
- Though some Kongo resisted because they thought the Portuguese were using Christianity as a tool to subjugate them, Christianity was later introduced by the Portuguese and eventually became a widely practised religion in the Kongo.
- Kinguismo and Kinbangism, which combined traditional and Christian components, were other traditional beliefs.

CHRISTIANITY

- The Portuguese colonised the offshore islands of Sao Tome and Principe in 1470, which led to a boom in Kongo's slave markets. Clothing made of cotton, silk, glazed porcelain, glass mirrors, knives, and beads made of glass were given to the Kongolese in exchange. Only the privileged he favoured had access to these goods because the king tightly regulated their usage.
- Following the efforts of Christian missionaries who first arrived in the area in 1491 CE, some Kongo kings converted to Christianity, with King Afonso I being the first.
- The unusual but sparkling rites of the new religion and its apparent connection with prosperous European traders raised the king's status in the eyes of his followers.



- Churches were established, the capital was renamed Sao Salvador, Catholicism was made the official religion of the royal household, and Affonso even succeeded in getting the Pope to approve the appointment of a Kongo bishop.
- The spread of Christianity in the area was greatly aided in the second half of the 17th century CE when Italian Capuchin missionaries began to focus on Kongo.
- The kingdom's art would be permanently altered by the religion, which incorporated elements like the cross and proportional rules from Europe while fusing them with the locals' love of stylisation and geometric decoration to create unique statues, pottery, masks, and relief carvings in everything from copper to ivory as well as woven fabrics.
- In addition to bringing religion, the Portuguese also introduced crops from the Americas, such as maize, cassava,

and tobacco, as well as technical skills (masonry, carpentry, and stock-breeding), as part of a larger strategy to westernise Kongo and turn it into a trusted trading partner and a base from which to conquer large portions of central Africa. In the end, however, and similarly to other parts of the continent where the Portuguese were active, the Europeans' greed and ineffective political and religious intervention only served to bring about both their own downfall and that of the native ruler.

- The Portuguese, who were stationed on the island of Sao Tome, started to overthrow the Kongo king and undertake their own attacks to capture slaves from interior Africa, or they simply abducted the Kongoleses themselves, which strained relations. Now, there was a large need for slave labour to work the sugarcane fields in Brazil and Sao Tome.
- Additionally, the Portuguese aspired to rule the kingdom's copper mines, enforce their own set of laws, and convert the entire community- not just the ruling class—to Christianity.



The Portuguese and the Kongo King

- The Kongo kings saw the need of getting rid of the Portuguese from their trading relations and realised that by constructing their own fleet, they could convey products to the eager European market themselves.
- The two sides got into a fight about this and were suspicious of one another's motives.
- The Kongo kings came to

understand that their traditional position as the political, religious, and economic leaders of the kingdom was being threatened by the unhindered smuggling of slaves and the spread of Christianity, even though the local form of that religion incorporated and coexisted with ancient indigenous beliefs.

GROUP 5.5 How and why did the Kingdom of Kongo fall?

- The decline of the kingdom began in the middle of the 16th century CE when the Portuguese relocated their interests farther south to the region of Ndongo because they were turned off by the interference of Kongo's regulations on trade. In 1556 CE, the latter kingdom had already routed the Kongo army.
- The Kongo kings also experienced internal conflict as a result of rising public discontent over the ever-rising taxes levied against them by an aristocracy eager to acquire expensive foreign goods. The king found it more and more difficult to keep the loyalty of the regional governors since they were enticed to engage directly with the growing number of European traders in the area once the Dutch colonists arrived in the early 17th century CE.
- Around 1568 CE, a mysterious band of warriors known as the Jaga attacked Kongo from the south (or east), and the angry and overburdened people of Kongo rose in favour of them, causing an even larger crisis to arise from beyond the kingdom. Even though the Kongo royal family was able to flee to an outlying island and subsequently mount a partial retaliation after receiving backing from the Portuguese, civil warfare amongst competing heir apparent continued to destroy the kingdom.
- The Kongo was severely defeated by their southern neighbours in the Battle of Mbwila in 1665 CE. The Kongo kings were never able to bounce back from the defeat. Even Sao Salvador was sacked and left in 1678 CE as civil conflicts continued to rage there. Even though the title "King of Kongo" was still in use by 1710 CE, the Kingdom of Kongo had all but ceased to exist as a separate nation. The various trading associations that built alliance networks and trading communities rather than nations took control of the whole region. At some point in the early 20th century CE, the Kongo area was included into the Portuguese province of Angola.
- The Portuguese referred to Ndongo as Angola (after the title of the kingdom's ruler, "ngola"). Ndongo grew into a powerful regional kingdom thanks to its relationship with the Portuguese. The Portuguese founded a small coastal colony in 1575 which grew over the centuries. Finally, Portuguese forces landed in Ndongo with the hopes to conquer the region and establish a vast slave-supplying colony (Angola).
- Queen Nzinga (1623-1663) led a strong resistance against Portuguese forces for forty years. She dressed as a male warrior when leading troops in battle and insisted that her subjects refer to her as a king. She even would sometimes travel as a male, bringing "concubines" – young men dressed as women companions of the "king." She effectively mobilized central African people against the Portuguese



Figure 1. Queen Nzinga

& was a cunning strategist and effective military leader. The Kingdom of Kongo participated with the Queen's forces in battles against the Portuguese.

- When Nzinga died, Portuguese forces faced less capable resistance, and they both extended and tightened their control over Angola, the first European colony in sub-Saharan Africa. Portugal returned its attention to Kongo, especially when the King of Kongo began to negotiate a new relationship with Spain (Portugal's natural enemy). The king was killed by Portuguese forces based in Angola, triggering a Civil War in Kongo. Tens of thousands fleeing the conflict or caught up in the battles were deported as slaves to English, French, Dutch and Portuguese merchants every year.