

SLAVERY AND ITS TRANSFORMATION IN THE KINGDOM OF KONGO: 1491–1800*

BY LINDA M. HEYWOOD

Boston University

ABSTRACT: Studies of slavery in Africa during the period of the Atlantic slave trade have largely ignored questions of how political processes affected enslavement during the period and also the extent to which notions of who could be enslaved were modified. Documentation for the kingdom of Kongo during the 1500s to 1800 allows us to explore how the trade was sustained and the social and political dynamics behind it. In a state that consistently exported large numbers of slaves throughout the period of the trade, kings of Kongo at first observed quite a pronounced distinction between foreign-born captives subject to enslavement and sale in the Atlantic trade and freeborn Kongos who were largely protected from enslavement and sale overseas. In time, however, the distinctions that separated foreign-born and Kongos fell apart as later political authorities and others disregarded such distinctions and all Kongos became subject to enslavement and sale overseas. This was a product of internal Kongo conflicts, which witnessed the collapse of institutions and the redefinition of polity, what it meant to be a citizen or freeborn, and who could be enslaved.

KEY WORDS: Central Africa, Angola, Congo – Democratic Republic of, currencies, money, economic, precolonial, slavery, slave trade.

INTRODUCTION

THE issue of the Atlantic slave trade and its impact on the social and political structures in African societies was the subject of discussions several decades ago. During the early 1960s Walter Rodney and John D. Fage engaged in a lively debate concerning the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on African societies. Rodney claimed that European demand for slaves intensified slavery in Africa, while Fage countered that slavery already existed in West Africa and European merchants tapped into an existing supply for their slaves.¹ Later scholars such as Paul Lovejoy, informed by Rodney's thesis, advanced his 'transformation hypothesis' to argue that more and more production processes were transferred to slaves who became more central to the

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¹ Walter Rodney, 'African slavery and other forms of social oppression on the upper Guinea coast in the context of the Atlantic slave trade', *Journal of African History*, 7 (1966), 431–43; J. D. Fage, 'Slavery and the slave trade in the context of West African history', *Journal of African History*, 10 (1970), 394–404.

political economy of African states.² Over the years, historians have examined topics ranging from slavery and gender in Africa, to the role of slavery as a political system, slavery as a system of labor, and slavery and its connection to kinship.³ For Central Africa, and especially the kingdom of Kongo, the slave trade has been seen as particularly pernicious, with long-lasting disastrous demographic, economic and political effects.⁴ Anne Hilton and John Thornton have both contributed to the debate concerning the trade's destructive role in Kongo.⁵ Hilton, for example, contended that the relationship between the Portuguese and the Kongo rulers in the first several years of contact led to the development of slavery in a region where none existed before, and that, moreover, by the seventeenth century the proportion of 'slaves to free' in the population had increased substantially.⁶ Thornton contended that, rather than being destroyed by the trade, Kongo's rulers controlled and contained its negative effects. He dismissed 'the myth of Kongo destruction at the hands of the Portuguese',⁷ and argued instead that decisions made by Kongo's rulers played an important role in the growth of slavery and the slave trade in the kingdom, at least before the late seventeenth century.⁸ In reference to the transformation hypothesis, while Hilton argued that the trade transformed Kongo's political structure and led to greater centralization, Thornton maintained that domestic political processes were always primary in Kongo's transformation, including those connected to the slave trade.⁹

² Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (2nd ed., New York, 2000), 281–3. Lovejoy exempted West Central Africa from the productive schemes while retaining the idea that slavery was central to the area's political economy.

³ See, for example, Igor Kopytoff and Susan Miers (eds.), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, 1977); Claire Robertson and Martin Klein (eds.), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983); Joseph E. Inikori, *The Chaining of a Continent: Export Demand for Captives and the History of Africa South of the Sahara, 1450–1870* (Mona, Jamaica, 1992); John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (New York, 1998).

⁴ James Duffy, *Portuguese Africa* (Cambridge MA, 1959); Basil Davidson, *Black Mother: The Years of the African Slave Trade* (Boston, 1961); Joseph Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, 1996); Ann Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford, 1985); John Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition* (Madison WI, 1983); Thornton, *The Kongoese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita* (New York, 1998); Thornton, 'As guerras civis no Congo e o tráfico de escravos: a história e a demografia de 1718 a 1844 revisitada', *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*, 32 (1997), 55–74; Jose Curto, *Enslaving Spirits: The Portuguese–Brazilian Alcohol Trade in Luanda and its Hinterland c. 1550–1830* (Leiden, 2004).

⁵ John Thornton has discussed this thoroughly in his article entitled 'African political ethics and the slave trade: Central African dimensions', on the internet at <http://muweb.millersville.edu/~winthrop/Thornton.html>.

⁶ Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 123.

⁷ John Thornton, 'Early Kongo–Portuguese relations, 1483–1575: a new interpretation', *History in Africa*, 8 (1981), 183–204.

⁸ John Thornton, 'The kingdom of Kongo, ca. 1390–1678: the development of an African social formation', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 22 (1982), 325–42. Joseph Inikori, relying mostly on Hilton's work, critiqued Thornton and instead took the position advanced earlier by Walter Rodney, more than four decades ago. See Joseph Inikori, 'Slavery in Africa and the Atlantic slave trade', in Alusine Jalloh and Stephen Maizlish (eds.), *The African Diaspora* (Arlington, 1996), 39–72; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*.

⁹ Cited in Lovejoy, *Transformations*, 127–9.

This study will devote more attention than previous ones to the questions of how slaves were procured and who could be enslaved. From the beginning of its relationship with Europeans, Kongo relied on the export of slaves to sustain the diplomatic, material and cultural ties the country developed with Europe. Rulers also used slaves within the kingdom as well. However, previous studies that focused on the role of the external slave trade reveal little about the way in which the kingdom's politics impacted on the procurement of slaves and the transformation of the institution.¹⁰ Moreover, they ignore the major sociopolitical processes such as civil wars and their impact on enslavement. This paper explores the dynamics that undergirded Kongo's participation in the slave trade, and addresses the issues of how slaving and wars affected notions of freedom and slavery.

For most of the sixteenth century, as Kongo expanded militarily, foreign captives supplied Kongo's needs for slaves,¹¹ and many of the people born in Kongo enjoyed the protection of the king and were not exported. By the turn of the eighteenth century this situation had changed as rival contenders for the throne, along with their appointees and partisans, came to play an increasingly important role in the politics of the kingdom. The fragmentation of Kongo's politics which made kings unable to protect their people from enslavement provides important clues as to why more people born in Kongo became subject to enslavement, as well as to the relationship between the Atlantic trade and the growth of slave holding in the kingdom.¹²

SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE IN KONGO: ORIGINS TO THE LATE 1500S

Slavery as an institution existed from the time that Kongo emerged as the dominant power in West Central Africa in the fourteenth century. Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, a Capuchin missionary who collected the earliest oral traditions on slavery from Kongo informants in the mid seventeenth century, noted that the traditions claimed that the first slaves in the kingdom appeared at its founding by Kongo's first conqueror king, Lukeni lua Nimi. The traditions that Cavazzi collected recalled that the lands that Lukeni conquered were 'ruled by a certain Mabambòlo Manipangalla, whose descendants have been driven out by this insolent conqueror, [and] became slaves'.¹³ Unfortunately, we know nothing about the institution between Lukeni's conquest and the first written description of the trade in slaves in the kingdom. This first reference to slaves comes from a legend found on the Cantino Atlas of 1502 which noted that Kongo sold slaves to São Tomé for 'things of

¹⁰ Davidson, *Black Mother*, pp. 116–50; James Duffy, *Portuguese Africa*, 49–56.

¹¹ For a discussion of slaves in early Kongo, see Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 58–60.

¹² For studies of the trade in other regions of Atlantic Africa, see, for example, Boubucar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1998); Paul Lovejoy, *Slavery, Commerce and Production in West Africa* (Trenton, 2005); Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750: The Impact of the Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford, 1991); Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port, 1727–1892* (Ohio, 2004).

¹³ João António Cavazzi de Montecúccolo, *Descrição histórica dos três reinos do Congo, Matamba, e Angola*, trans. Graciano Maria de Leguzzano (2 vols.) (Lisbon, 1965), 1, 230.

insignificant value'.¹⁴ Another early reference to the trade comes from a 1506 description by the Portuguese geographer Duarte Pacheco Pereira who, in listing the items Kongo traded between 1502 and 1506, mentioned copper, ivory, palm cloth which resembled velvet and 'a small quantity of slaves'.¹⁵

The several letters from King Afonso I (1509–43) to the Portuguese kings form the bedrock of any understanding of the social categories that existed in the kingdom and the place of slavery in it. For example, the terms that Afonso used to refer to different groups in Kongo in a long letter that he sent to King Manuel of Portugal in October 1514 leave no doubt that slavery was present in Kongo. The letter revealed a society consisting of a ruling group and people who were under the king's protection, as well as slaves and a slave market. In the first part of the letter Afonso noted that, because of his acceptance of Christianity, his father the king had 'taken away his income' and ridiculed him by telling him that he 'wished to see if our Lord God would give us other people (*gente*) since we believe so much in him'. Afonso, writing in Portuguese, used the Portuguese term *gente* (freeborn Kongos),¹⁶ referring to those who provided him his livelihood through the rights he had to collect taxes from them.¹⁷ In another letter of 1526 Afonso provided additional information that allows us to reconstruct social categories more clearly. In one part of the letter, Afonso referred to 'nossos filhos, parentes e naturaes' ('our children, relatives and natives [citizens]'), while elsewhere in the same letter he complained that slave traders were taking away his 'naturaes forros' ('free citizens'). Afonso's language leaves no doubt that Kongo had a group of freeborn commoners. In fact, in a 1529 letter that King João III of Portugal wrote to Afonso in response to complaints that Afonso had made about the illegal enslavement of freeborn Kongos, the king referred to 'naturaes ou de fora' ('citizens or outsiders [foreigners]') in summarizing the complaint that Afonso had made about who could be enslaved and who could not be.¹⁸

The terms *gente*, *naturaes* and *naturaes forros*¹⁹ referred to a different social group from the term *fidalgo* (nobleman) which Afonso also mentioned in his many letters.²⁰ Slaves made up another distinct social group in Kongo. Afonso's 1514 letter referred to this group of individuals as *espruiuos/espravos* (slaves) who had been brought back to his capital, Mbanza Kongo, from wars

¹⁴ Armando Cortesão and Avelino Teixeira da Mota (eds.), *Portugalliae monumenta cartographica* (6 vols.) (Lisbon, 1960) 1, 12 (plates 4–5).

¹⁵ Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de situ orbis* (1st critical ed., Lisbon, 1905), 134.

¹⁶ In sixteenth-century Portuguese, 'gente' could mean people or followers, but not slaves.

¹⁷ Afonso to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, in António Brásio (ed.), *Monumenta missionaria africana* (1st series, 15 vols.) (Lisbon, 1952–88) (henceforth, *MMA*), 1, 295. The seventeenth-century Latin–Kikongo dictionary kept by Joris van Gheel lists the Kikongo word *mússa* for the Spanish word *gente* (Latin *populum/plebeius*) for common people. See 'Vocabulario congolese' (1648), Biblioteca Nacional Centrale da Roma, MS Varia 274, fols. 41, 78.

¹⁸ Afonso to João III, 18 Oct. 1526, *MMA*, 1, 489; João III to Afonso, end of 1529, *MMA*, 1, 526.

¹⁹ These terms are being used in the sense in which Afonso and his contemporaries used them, which might not be the same meaning as they had in Europe.

²⁰ Afonso to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA*, 1, 320.

that he fought. To stress that these people could be sold outside the country, he frequently used the term *peça* (piece), a Portuguese financial term referring to exported slaves, to describe them, even those not immediately awaiting export.²¹

In the many references to slaves, Afonso noted that he had brought slaves back from his wars and had sent some to Portugal to cover various expenses. Afonso was using these slaves as commodity exports because they had monetary value in Portugal. In one case he referred to 50 slaves he sent to Lisbon 'to buy us the succor that we need'. He also made note of another group of 500 slaves (with an additional 30 in case some of the originals died) that he sent to Lisbon in two large ships whose sale was meant to cover the upkeep of 'two of our nephews'.²² Moreover, the letter also contains several other references to the Portuguese purchasing slaves, and these references leave no doubt that Kongo already supported markets where slaves were bought and sold.²³

Indeed, the majority of the slaves Kongo exported during Afonso's reign and for the rest of the sixteenth century were foreign captives obtained from wars Kongo kings and their Portuguese allies waged against the neighboring Mbundu kingdom of Ndongo or in the region of Pamzelungu across the mouth of the Zaire River, as well as the Anzico region around the Malebo Pool (formerly Stanley Pool) on the river.²⁴ For example, after a war he waged against the Dembos region of Ndongo in 1512, Afonso specifically mentioned to King Manuel that he had sent him '410 slaves (*peças*) from the wars'. At this time Afonso operated an open slave market in the capital, for he notified King Manuel that the slaves who had been captured were 'in our compound (*terreyro*)', and that Alvaro Lopes (Manuel's agent) 'chose 320 very good ones and took them away – leaving our compound (*ter[r]eyro*) 90 thin and old ones'.²⁵ Moreover, in a 1529 letter written by the Portuguese king, João III, to Afonso, João noted that he had heard that 'no slave ever leaves the country [Kongo]' and went on to add that he had been told that slaves 'are ordered to be bought outside'. Furthermore, he observed that if Afonso 'send to the Pumbos [T'io region]' he would get slaves.²⁶

Afonso facilitated the trade in slaves by establishing secure markets where Portuguese factors could conduct their business and where his representatives could sell war captives to them. Thus Afonso could continue selling foreign captives and still respect local customs about who could be enslaved.

Kongo did support a slave population, however, for Afonso noted in his 1514 letter that he had retained some of the slaves he had captured. Besides the foreign captives whom Afonso held as slaves, he and later sixteenth-century kings and other members of the monarchy also held as slaves people born in Kongo who had been condemned for various kinds of crimes. Here,

²¹ Afonso to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA*, 1, 295, 297, 300. ²² *Ibid.* 297, 300.

²³ *Ibid.*; also see Thornton, 'Political ethics'.

²⁴ Pereira, *Esmeraldo*, 134.

²⁵ Afonso to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA*, 1, 314–15.

²⁶ João III to King Afonso, end 1529, *MMA*, 1, 525–6. Although João was probably exaggerating in response to Afonso's complaint that his country was being depopulated because his people were being stolen, this does not invalidate the statement that most of the slaves at the time came from outside of Kongo.

however, rules existed that limited opportunities for the enslavement of freeborn Kongos as well as restricted their sale. Some of these rules concerned selling of women, issues of just enslavement, limiting the kinds of people to be sold, and the like. For example, during Afonso's reign there were restrictions on the enslavement of Kongo women. Afonso raised the issue of the enslavement of women in his 1514 letter to King Manuel when he complained that, even though the Portuguese were only permitted to buy male slaves (*peças*), they were also buying female Kongo. Afonso pleaded with King Manuel to remind the priests that 'if they buy some slaves (*peças*) that they be male slaves (*espriuos*) and not to buy any woman'.²⁷ Afonso was outraged that the priests were purchasing women for sexual favors because he regarded himself as a pious Christian monarch who was working to transform Kongo into a European-style kingdom. Indeed, he identified one priest, Father Fernandes, who, he wrote, had even 'impregnated a woman in his house, and she gave birth to a mulatto'. He also noted that the Portuguese who had been sent as part of a cultural embassy to assist him had neglected their duties and became involved in slave trading and 'began to fill their houses with whores (*putas*)'.²⁸

Kongo also had rules that restricted the selling of Kongo subjects. For example in 1526 Afonso wrote to the Portuguese king, João III, noting that the numbers of Portuguese traders bringing goods into Kongo had increased and that they were selling their goods directly to unscrupulous Kongo noblemen who no longer relied on him to supply the imports. He complained that some of his vassals were conniving with the Portuguese and were enslaving Kongo subjects, even noblemen. In the letter Afonso referred to the Kongo merchants as 'thieves and men of bad conscience' who 'grab them [Kongo subjects] and carry them to sell'. He specifically accused the Portuguese of 'taking [every day] our natives, sons of the land and sons of our noblemen and our vassals and our relatives'.²⁹ The kidnapping of Kongo subjects so threatened Afonso's legitimacy that he pleaded with the Portuguese king to order his factors not to send 'either merchant or merchandise because our will is that in these kingdoms they should not have the trade in slaves nor the departure of them'.³⁰

The dilemma that the Kongo leadership faced was that, in order to enforce the laws concerning who could be enslaved, Kongo needed to remain a strong state. From the 1590s, however, the Kongo penchant for civil wars weakened the monarchy. Furthermore, the idea that Kongo subjects could be enslaved for crimes, including rebellion, undermined the protection that the kings guaranteed the population. These developments – a weakening monarchy, civil wars and the idea that Kongo subjects could be enslaved for certain crimes – ultimately undermined the guarantees to which the kings subscribed. Maintaining a strong monarchy was problematic since potential candidates for the throne had to gain the support of members of the royal family who held tenures in provinces. In many cases these officials put themselves up as prospective candidates or became partisans of candidates. In this situation, royal politics led to rebellions and civil wars which weakened

²⁷ Afonso to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA*, 1, 300.

²⁹ Afonso to João III, 6 July 1526, *MMA*, 1, 468.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 300–1.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 471.

royal authority. As a result, freeborn Kongos increasingly became victims of enslavement and the slave trade.

THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF
KONGO SLAVERY

Sixteenth-century Kongo rulers sometimes faced political crises which led to the enslavement of freeborn Kongos, and the way they handled them speaks volumes about their ideas of slavery and freedom. The Jaga Inyasion (or uprising) in 1568–70 – which occurred during the reign of King Álvaro I and which led to the first large-scale enslavement of freeborn Kongos – demonstrates how far the Kongo state, when strong, was willing to go to guarantee the freedom of Kongos who had been enslaved.³¹ The examples that follow clearly illustrate this commitment. Duarte Lopes, who arrived in Kongo in 1578 and remained there until 1583, noted that the invasion/uprising resulted in a major economic crisis and ‘as a result of the necessity, father sold son, and brother, brother so that each person obtained food in any manner they could’. These Kongo slaves immediately entered the circuit of the Atlantic and were transported by Portuguese merchants to São Tomé. This group of enslaved Kongos were different from the general run of slaves and Duarte Lopes observed that ‘you can find in São Tomé and Portugal no small number of slaves born in Kongo sold for this necessity among whom were some of royal blood and principal lords’.³²

The sale of so many freeborn Kongos to the foreign trade was certainly not something that King Álvaro condoned, for, as soon as the situation in the kingdom had stabilized, he sent one of his relatives, Sebastião Álvares, in the company of a Portuguese agent, to São Tomé and Portugal to ransom his enslaved subjects. Many of the Kongo returned and Álvaro integrated them, ‘especially the nobles and lords’, into his administration.³³

Indeed, this incident reveals how serious sixteenth-century kings were about protecting freeborn Kongos from illegal enslavement. This idea was critical to Afonso’s policy regarding the trade, and his 1526 letter accusing the Portuguese of illegally enslaving freeborn Kongos and threatening to end the trade (see above) was meant to reinforce this policy. Early seventeenth-century kings also went to great lengths to ensure that freeborn Kongos were not illegally enslaved. When António Manuel, Kongo’s ambassador, stopped in Bahia in 1604 on his way to Rome, he ransomed a slave named Pedro Mambala, and the certificate of freedom that he retained in his papers indicated that Pedro was a native of the Kongo and was ransomed because he had been ‘badly sold’ (illegally enslaved).³⁴

³¹ The invasion or uprising was the subject of a lengthy debate in the 1960s and 1970s. For a summary and new contribution, see the annotation in M. Chandeigne’s re-edition of the Wily Bal translation of Pigafetta’s description, *Le Royaume de Congo et les contrées environnantes* (1591) (Paris, 2002), 291–5.

³² Filippo Pigafetta, *Relazione del Reame di Congo del circunvinconi contrade* (Rome, 1591), 60.

³³ *Ibid.* 62.

³⁴ Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Miscellanea, Armadio I (henceforward ASV, Misc., Arm I), vol. 91, Collettione di Scritture di Spagna II, Papers of António Manuel, Certificate of Freedom, 25 Oct. 1604, fol. 126.

Moreover, in 1623, King Pedro II wrote to the pope and to King Philip of Spain complaining that, in November 1622, the governor of Angola, João Correia da Silva, had invaded his country and illegally enslaved and sent to Brazil many of his nobles and thousands of free people who had been captured following a battle in the region of Mbumbi. Pedro's insistence that the Kongos were free people who had been illegally enslaved eventually led King Philip to send an order to the governor in Brazil to find out the whereabouts of the Kongos and to return them to their homeland. Although most of the Kongos had already been sent to different regions, some were tracked down in Brazil and returned to Kongo.³⁵

The aim of protecting the freeborn Kongo population might explain why officials closely monitored the trade, even as slaves became the major form of foreign exchange. The role slaves played in Kongo's economy is clearly indicated in the desire of the early kings to prevent the Portuguese from trading slaves at the port of Luanda. In fact in 1548 Kongo officials conducted an inquest into Portuguese trading and sent it to Lisbon to reinforce their claims that Portuguese merchants were trading illegally in the port.³⁶

The idea that Kongo kings had obligations to the population was well established in the country. Indeed, the king's role as protector of the population was not limited to nobles and freeborn but covered slaves as well. At the 1641 coronation of King Garcia II (1641–61), for example, he had to listen as a herald read out the conditions under which he should rule. The new king was told: 'You shall be king, be no thief, neither covetous nor revengeful, but be a friend of the poor: You shall also give alms for the release of prisoners or slaves and help the needy'.³⁷

In fact, aside from the Jaga incident when the state proved incapable of protecting freeborn Kongos from enslavement (but even here Álvaro did succeed in redeeming some of the enslaved Kongos), for most of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries few freeborn Kongos were sold in the external market. Indeed, the custom of kings sending 'malefactors to a desert island so that they could be recuperated' may also have reduced the number of Kongos sold to the overseas trade.³⁸ Thus when Kongo was at peace, or during the time when strong kings ruled, few freeborn Kongos were enslaved. This was largely because the slave trade was tightly monitored, even following civil unrest. A proclamation that Count Miguel of Soyo issued in 1593 at the end of a civil war between Kongo and Soyo provides an example of the steps officials took to monitor the trade, a situation that at the same time might have prevented freeborn Kongos from being enslaved. In the proclamation the count reiterated that the people should 'keep the roads open for the exit of slaves for the export trade of his majesty from all parts under penalty of death'. The proclamation also called

³⁵ Pedro II to Giovanni Battista Vives, 28 Nov. 1623, *MMA*, VII, 160–3; Jesuits to Lord Collectors, 20 Oct. 1623, *MMA*, VII, 513–14; Royal Letter to Governor of Brazil, 18 Mar. 1624, *MMA*, VII, 220; Mateus Cardoso, 'Relação do que se passou em Angola no anno de 623 ...' *MMA*, VII, 177.

³⁶ 'Inquirição sobre o comercio de S. Tomé com Angola ordenada por D. João III', 12 Oct. 1548, *MMA*, II, 197–206; Pigafetta, *Relatione*, 19, 26.

³⁷ Olifert Dapper, *Naukeurige beschrijvinge van Africa gewesten* (Amsterdam, 1668), citations from the English translation, John Ogilby, *Africa* (London, 1670), 582.

³⁸ Pigafetta, *Relatione*, 68.

on the population to keep the peace so that the king could begin again trading in slaves – most of whom originated in markets outside of the kingdom.³⁹

Moreover, in January 1600, King Álvaro II sent out an official order to the Mani Mpemba, the ruler in one of Kongo's provinces, reminding him that the slave trade should be conducted only through the port of Mpinda and not at Luanda. He warned the Mani Mpemba that anyone contravening his order would suffer grave penalties and loss of property. The king also regularly communicated to officials reminding them that they should monitor the trade to ensure that no male or female slave should leave the kingdom without official documentation.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Kongo maintained a series of toll booths along the road between Mpumbu (Malebo Pool) – the major hub for the purchase of slaves from markets outside of Kongo – and Luanda. Portuguese merchants regularly complained about the dues they had to pay and tried to get rid of them.⁴¹ The attempts of Kongo kings to monitor the trade in slaves might explain why the Portuguese did not immediately seek out slaves from among the freeborn Kongo population. In fact, a 1620 report noted that Portuguese merchants only passed through Kongo 'to the king of Mococo to trade ... and from these kingdoms come slaves and cloth'. The report added that, in Kongo, 'they do not trade people, but only cloth, save in the case of a few malefactors'.⁴² These policies at least ensured that only legitimately enslaved persons (mainly foreign captives) entered the external trade.⁴³

The problem that confronted Afonso and later rulers was that participation in the Atlantic network also meant that they had to obtain slaves to pay for commodities and alliances, even as they sought to keep their own freeborn population from being enslaved. For example, during his reign Afonso sent frequent gifts of slaves to the Portuguese king as well as using slaves to cover other transactions his agents conducted for him in Portugal. In a 1539 letter, Afonso referred to relatives he sent to study in Portugal, whose upkeep had to be covered by slaves,⁴⁴ while in others he mentioned the steps he had taken to keep open the roads to the interior markets so that the slave trade could take place.⁴⁵ Indeed, as long as the slaves were foreign-born or condemned by law, sixteenth-century rulers had no reservations about selling captives and condemned persons. This dependence on providing slaves for the foreign trade was such that, by the 1560s, Kongo kings,

³⁹ ASV, Misc., Arm I, vol. 91, fol. 125, Provision of Miguel, Count of Sonho, 4 Feb. 1593.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* fol. 244, Order of Álvaro II to Simão Manipemba, 22 Feb. 1600.

⁴¹ In the same letter, Álvaro II detailed the steps the Mani Mpemba should take to monitor the trade with the Portuguese at Mpemba, Mbamba and Mbwila. *Ibid.* 242. These toll houses are clearly shown on the map. Joan Blaeu, *Regna Congo et Angola*, 1652, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Chartes, Collection D'Anville 08255, or on the internet at gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b77595489. For a discussion of Kongo's taxation system, see Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 117–19.

⁴² 'Relação que faz o Capitão Garçia Mendes Castelobranco do Reyno do Congo', 16 Jan. 1620, *MMA*, VI, 438.

⁴³ Anne Hilton argued that the actions ensured control over revenue. Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 121–41.

⁴⁴ Afonso to João III, 25 Mar. 1539, *MMA*, II, 73–5.

⁴⁵ Afonso to João III, 25 Mar. 1540, *MMA*, II, 100–2.

members of the elite, Portuguese traders and priests who were involved in foreign transactions all had to convert local payments into slaves.

A series of legal cases involving the church reveals the system of making exchanges between the local currency, *nzimbu* shells, and slaves, an international tender. A legal process involving the bishop of São Tomé, Gaspar Cão, in 1571 is illustrative. After being accused of not paying royal taxes on slaves he received from the Kongo king, the bishop claimed that he received the slaves on behalf of the church and that they should be exempt from royal duties (as was the practice for those slaves sent to the Portuguese king). He argued that since these slaves were actually taxes paid to the church by the Kongo king, and that the king could only pay in slaves, they (the slaves) were the actual money as '*busios* [a Portuguese term for shell currencies] ... was not current money'. To bolster his defense, Cão reasoned that, since part of his pastoral duties required him to travel to Kongo, the slaves who came from Kongo for him were payment for the duties he performed, and that he was doing nothing different from what 'the bishops his predecessors did, always carrying the said slaves'.⁴⁶

Although Kongo had a vibrant cloth trade and also used ivory, copper and shells as money, from the very beginning of the trade Portuguese merchants reduced all money in Kongo to slaves, and thus Kongos conducted all their international transactions in slaves. Indeed, slaves as an international currency existed side by side with Kongo's local currency, *nzimbu* shells, which had been in use before the arrival of the Portuguese.⁴⁷ The first mention of this shell money appeared in the account of the six Portuguese witnesses who were in Kongo with the first mission in 1491. Rui de Pina, who summarized the account, wrote that when the Portuguese mission arrived near Mbanza Kongo they were greeted by a royal official who had 'much of their money which are white sea shells' and that they valued it as if it were 'purest gold'.⁴⁸

During Afonso's period and until the eighteenth century, *nzimbu* shells covered domestic expenses, but slaves covered international financial and diplomatic obligations. Afonso and other sixteenth-century kings not only acquired war captives as slaves but also purchased others, primarily at Mpumbu beyond their eastern border. In a letter of 1540, Afonso requested a loan of 5,000 cruzados (Portuguese currency) – perhaps as a line of credit – from the Portuguese king, which he noted that he needed to support his brother whom he had sent on an official visit to Rome. In spelling out how he planned to use the money, he wrote that he would be able to exchange it for the local currency (*cofos* [a unit, *kofu*] of *nzimbu* shells) which would allow him to purchase a number of slaves in the neighboring market. This plan revealed the method of exchange between slaves as international means of payment and *nzimbus* as a local currency, for Afonso concluded that, once he purchased the slaves, he would then be able to sell them in Portugal and

⁴⁶ 'Sentença do Cardeal D. Henrique a favor do Bispo de S. Tomé', 14 Mar. 1571, *MMA*, III, 10–13.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of local and international currencies in Central Africa during the period of the Atlantic slave trade, see Miller, *Way of Death*, 175–89. For West Africa see Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁴⁸ Carmen Radulet (ed. and trans.), *Relazione del Regno di Congo*, in *O cronista Rui de Pina e a 'Relação do Reino do Congo'* (Lisbon, 1992), 116.

repay the loan.⁴⁹ Later Kongo rulers and others in authority maintained the monetary system that Afonso had established, using slaves to cover imports and to pay for the political and cultural relations they maintained with Europeans.

A 1619 letter written by the Spanish clergyman Bras Correa provides some insight into the important place of slaves as foreign exchange in Kongo's economy. Bras Correa noted that, although shells (*nzimbu* or *busio*) and cloth served as money in the Kongo, Portuguese traders attempted to reduce 'all the types of money ... to slaves who are embarked for Brazil'.⁵⁰ Indeed, by the opening decades of the seventeenth century, as demand for slaves in Portuguese Brazil and the Spanish Indies exploded, foreign captives were not sufficient to meet the demand, and Kongo elites increasingly looked to freeborn Kongos to cover their foreign imports and meet their international obligations.

In 1643 King Garcia II acknowledged how Kongo's reliance on slaves as international tender had compromised the state. In a letter to Father Filipe Franco, the Jesuit rector in Dutch-occupied Luanda, Garcia blamed the Portuguese in Luanda for the state of affairs, pointing out that 'in place of gold or silver or other things that serve as money in other places, the trade and money are pieces [slaves] which are not gold nor cloth but creatures'. In the letter, Garcia regretfully acknowledged that he and his ancestors, 'in our simplicity we gave place to that from which grows all the evils of our country'.⁵¹ Garcia was the first Kongo ruler to articulate the moral dilemma of the practice of reducing slaves to money (although laying all the blame on his predecessors and the Portuguese).

Despite complaining about the system of reducing slaves to money, Garcia nevertheless made regular payments of slaves to the Portuguese and sent gifts and payments in slaves to the Dutch as well. As early as 1619, Kongo officials were pawning freeborn Kongos to Dutch traders, as a complaint made by the bishop of Kongo noted that the region of Soyo had become a major center for trade in people and other commerce, and that the count of Soyo participated in the trade with the 'discreet consent' of the king of Kongo.⁵² As Dutch/Kongo commerce expanded by the 1630s, Dutch merchants at the port of Mpinda could report of Soyo that 'here is no lack of ivory or slaves'.⁵³

In addition to selling slaves, seventeenth-century Kongo officials continued the practice established by their sixteenth-century predecessors of cementing their diplomacy with gifts of slaves. For example, in 1641, when tensions increased between Count Daniel da Silva, who had declared Soyo's independence, and King Garcia, both mounted different diplomatic missions to Brazil and Holland to win Dutch military support for their cause and used slaves to cover the cost. In 1642 Count Daniel sent three diplomats to Recife, Brazil, who, when they reached Luanda, informed the Dutch authorities

⁴⁹ Afonso to João III, 25 Mar. 1540, *MMA*, II, 100–2.

⁵⁰ Bras Correa to Juan Baptista Vives, 20 Oct. 1619, *MMA*, VI, 405.

⁵¹ Garcia to Rector of the College of Luanda, 23 Feb. 1643, *MMA*, IX, 18.

⁵² Manuel Baptista Soares, 'Lembranças que fes, e deu a V. Magestade, o bispo de Congo', 7 Sept. 1619, *MMA*, VI, 360.

⁵³ Fr. Capelle, 'Corte beschrijvyng van gepasserde in Rio Congo', *Nationaal Archief Nederland, Oud West Indische Compagnie*, 56, no. 33, 25 Aug. 1638.

there that they had 'six or seven slaves to sell there to procure by this means articles'.⁵⁴

Furthermore, King Garcia also sent an embassy consisting of 'three young nobles of my royal house' to Brazil and Holland. The emissaries also had a letter from Garcia, dated 20 February 1643, which informed Dutch officials that accompanying the embassy was 'a small advance of slaves, since circumstances do not permit otherwise'.⁵⁵ In a series of letters between the West India Company's representatives in Brazil and officials in the Netherlands over the distribution of the slaves, we learn that Garcia also paid for the Dutch attack on Luanda as he had earlier promised. In one letter he indicated that 500 of the 700 slaves were 'in compensation for expenses already undertaken in his service' and that he was making good on his promise. When the emissaries arrived in Recife, they gave a 'verbal declaration' as to how Garcia wanted the slaves to be distributed.⁵⁶ What this set of correspondence also reveals is the level to which the ruling elites had been compromised by the slave trade. In 1645, when the war with Soyo still raged, Garcia sent 'many slaves to the Council [of Recife] ... and two hundred more', besides a 'gold chain[,] to [count] Maurice [of Nassau] himself'.⁵⁷

The custom of making all kinds of payments in slaves meant that demand for slaves to use as money was high. Moreover, slaves had other uses as well, and this also put a premium on owning slaves, especially among the nobility. In the early seventeenth century, when Kongo stopped expanding and waging wars against its neighbors, elites had the opportunity to manipulate the laws concerning the kinds of crimes for which freeborn Kongos could be enslaved. Civil wars which began in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and which continued into the eighteenth further encouraged this process, and contenders for power enslaved the populations of their rivals. Thus, condemning rebels to slavery increasingly became the way for freeborn Kongos to lose their freedom. In time, kings and their political rivals openly enslaved free Kongos, selling some to Portuguese and other foreign merchants, sending others as gifts to missionaries and political allies, and keeping the remainder to serve as soldiers, producers or status symbols.

SLAVERY AND ENSLAVEMENT IN KONGO

Although during most of the sixteenth century foreign slaves comprised a significant section of the slaves exported from Kongo, and the kingdom also retained a slave population, early descriptions of Kongo do not mention large

⁵⁴ Louis Jadin, *L'ancien Congo et l'Angola (1639-55) d'après les archives romaines, portugaises, néerlandaises, et espagnoles* (3 vols.) (Louvain, 1975), 1, 372.

⁵⁵ Nationaal Archief Nederland, Oude West Indische Compagnie, 59, Garcia II to Dutch Governor of Brazil, 20 Feb. 1643, 'en met die gaet dese kleijne verderinge van slaven, also de gelegenheit niet anders en heeft toegelaten ...' My thanks to Andrea Mosterman for her transcription and translation of this passage.

⁵⁶ Le gouverneur et le Conseil du Brésil, 14 Aug. 1643, in Jadin, *L'ancien Congo*, 1, 475; Lettre general de O.W.I.C au gouverneur et au Conceil de Recife, 29 Oct. 1643, in Jadin, *L'ancien Congo*, 1, 500.

⁵⁷ Ogilby, *Africa*, 543.

slave settlements.⁵⁸ Moreover, the rules about who could be enslaved and the political stability that Kongo enjoyed may have kept large numbers of free-born Kongos from being exported as slaves. Indeed the few mid sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century sources that refer to domestic slaves give no indication that slaves comprised a significant and separate part of the population. In a letter that King Diogo wrote in 1550 to his supporters, concerning his uncle, the ex-king Pedro, he warned them ‘not to follow any one of [his] lineage, neither son nor daughter nor male or female relative, even if they are slaves’. Undoubtedly, at the time, domestic slaves in elite households were considered part of the extended family.⁵⁹

Apart from the foreign captives that kings retained from the foreign wars, members of Kongo’s political elite acquired slaves by purchasing them at slave markets. For example, in a 1575 letter that King Álvaro I wrote to Father Garcia Simões, in which he proclaimed his innocence with regard to an accusation that his ambassadors in the court of Ndongo had persuaded the Angolan ruler to have the Portuguese missionary Francisco Gouvea killed, Álvaro informed Simões that ‘I have sent to Pumbo to buy some slaves to send to you’.⁶⁰ Pigafetta also referred to the slaves being purchased, noting that during the 1580s Anzico slaves were available for purchase in Kongo. He wrote that the main source of Kongo slaves was Mbata, a province in the eastern part of the country, but added that slaves from this region, whom he called ‘Monsobos’ (‘Zombos’)⁶¹ were ‘resistant to enslavement’ and were very ‘obstinate’.⁶² In Mbata at this time, a slave had the same value as ‘one small civet cat’, which was also a major item of trade.⁶³ Most likely these slaves came from the territories east of Mbata which Kongo used as a staging point to expand eastwards. As late as 1604–8, Kongo kings were incorporating kingdoms such as Kundi⁶⁴ into their sphere, and these regions were most likely the sources of slaves held by Kongo elites. After this period, Kongo acquired its foreign-born slaves by trading in the northeastern region of Mpumbu (Malebo Pool).⁶⁵

Kongo elites also obtained slaves as income from taxes. A Vatican document of 1595 noted that the principal revenue of the Kongo king was ‘slaves, palm cloth ... ivory, various products and their own peculiar money (*nzimbu* shells)’.⁶⁶ An annual tax that was also levied on each household throughout the kingdom to support the queen was actually calculated in slaves, with each household paying one slave, and some large households paying as many as

⁵⁸ ‘Copia cuiusdam capituli litterarum ex Ulixbona sub Dei VI Novembre 1491’, in Adriano Capelli (ed.), ‘A proposito di conquiste Africane’, *Archivio Historico Lombardo*, Series 3, 10 (1896), 416–17.

⁵⁹ Devassa de D. Diego Rei do Congo, 10 Apr. 1550, *MMA*, II, 261.

⁶⁰ Álvaro I to Father Garcia Simões, 27 Aug. 1575, *MMA*, III, 127–8.

⁶¹ Inhabitants of the eastern province of Zombo were called Muzombos in the Portuguese plural.

⁶² Pigafetta, *Relatione*, 38. On the identifications of the Mosobos as Zombo in this section, see the annotation to the revised French edition/translation by Bal, *Royaume de Congo*, 295–6.

⁶³ Pigafetta, *Relatione*, 32.

⁶⁴ Another province in the eastern part of Kongo.

⁶⁵ Linda Heywood and John Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge, 2007), 110.

⁶⁶ ‘De statu regni Congi’, 1595, *MMA*, III, 508.

three slaves in taxes.⁶⁷ Although we do not know when this taxation began, Dapper's reference to the tax in the 1640s also noted that nobles acquired slaves as part of their income as well.⁶⁸ By the end of the sixteenth century there was quite a large number of slaves in the kingdom, and Hilton suggested that the 4,000–5,000 soldiers held by each of the four principal nobles as the personal guard of King Álvaro II (1587–1614) were Tio slaves from the Malebo Pool.⁶⁹ Thus most of the slaves in Kongo were foreigners who came from the Tio region – either as a result of conquests or by being bought from Anzico traders who came to Kongo to trade.⁷⁰

Kongo also had legal ways of allowing for the enslavement of freeborn Kongos for crimes, but such enslavement followed a strict set of rules. The existence of such rules meant that some elites also obtained freeborn Kongos as slaves because they were found guilty of certain crimes and sentenced to enslavement. A letter of 1576 noted that, whereas in Angola people guilty of stealing were condemned to death, in Kongo 'the penalty is perpetual captivity'.⁷¹ Besides the extraordinary events connected to the Jaga Invasion and the return of enslaved Kongos, however, sixteenth-century sources are silent as to whether the enslavement of freeborn Kongos for crimes was commonplace.

Seventeenth-century sources, however, suggest that, in fact, enslavement of freeborn people by a variety of means became increasingly common, perhaps as a response to the vicious, protracted competition among the elites. Moreover, market opportunities also appear to have made enslavement of freeborn Kongos more commonplace. Dapper, referring to the situation in the 1640s, listed many arbitrary ways that freeborn Kongos became slaves. He noted that the king ordinarily enslaved anyone who failed to show 'due respect and obedience', and that free people might also be enslaved if a kinsman was condemned to death for a crime, since the condemned person 'loses his goods and his slaves ... so that none of his relations enjoy ought that was his'.⁷² When the duke of Nsundi became convinced that a local village leader disrespected him, he 'destroyed all and made many people slaves' while those who could fled.⁷³ Impugning the honor of a freeborn person often led to enslavement as well. In this situation, the opposing groups would stage public duels, and individuals on the losing side who failed to make good their escape became slaves to the winners.⁷⁴ Moreover, a person faced enslavement for stealing from the garden or house of his

⁶⁷ Ogilby, *Africa*, 540.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 541.

⁶⁹ For the reference to the 4,000–5,000 soldiers, see 'De statu regni Congi' (1595), *MMA*, III, 508. For Hilton's discussion of how Álvaro acquired the slaves see Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 85. However, this document (the only one Hilton cites) does not specifically identify these soldiers as slaves.

⁷⁰ Pigafetta, *Relazione*, 38.

⁷¹ 'Carta do padre Garcia Simões ao padre Luis Perpilhão, 7 November 1576', *MMA*, III, 146.

⁷² Ogilby, *Africa*, 536, 538.

⁷³ Girolamo da Montesarchio, 'Viaggio al Gongho', pub. in Calogero Piazza (ed.), *La prefettura apostolica del Congo alla metà del XVII secolo. La relazione inedita di Girolamo da Montesarchio* (Milan, 1976), 226.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Girolamo Merolla da Sorrento, *Breve relazione del viaggio nel regno di Congo* (Naples, 1692), cited from the English translation 'A voyage to Congo', in Awasham Churchill and John Churchill, *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (4 vols.) (London, 1702), I, 607, 645.

neighbor. Indeed, unscrupulous freeborn Kongos found many ways to enslave members of their kin, and would swear to the buyers 'that they were already slaves and condemned many times to death'.⁷⁵ In one case that occurred in 1654 a young man sold as slaves 'his brothers and sisters and even his mother and father'. Many of those who sold family members into slavery justified their action by explaining that 'it was tolerated by ancient custom' and that they themselves were subject to being enslaved.⁷⁶ Arbitrary enslavement of free people had become so widespread that a 1650 report reflecting on Kongo's status as a Christian kingdom commented that the king raided the lands of officials he wanted to discipline and captured 'the unfortunate man and [took] by force all his people'. Presumably the people who were taken were freeborn Kongos who would become slaves.⁷⁷

Entire villages could also face enslavement if some of their members were found guilty of certain crimes. For example, in 1653, when King Garcia was informed that the people of the village of Ulolo had killed the missionary Father Joris van Geel who had burnt their *nkisi* (charm), he ordered the local official to appear in court, and, after conducting a trial, 'sent an order to have the village head arrested along with all the inhabitants', and made many in the village slaves and sent them to Luanda to be sold to the Portuguese.⁷⁸ Serafino da Cortona, who was in Luanda at the same time that the enslaved Kongos arrived, met 'some of the blacks that the king of Kongo sent to sell as slaves', and he was able to get those who had participated in the murder to confess.⁷⁹

Other crimes that led to enslavement included adultery with the daughters, wives, nieces and concubines of elite men. A Capuchin report commenting on some positive elements of Kongo customs noted that, in Soyo, 'whoever deflowers a girl, would himself become her slave ... as payment for his crime, or if he is poor these slaves ought to be from his relatives'.⁸⁰ Indeed, the custom that elite Kongos followed of having one legal wife and many 'concubines' meant that elite men could buy 'as many women as they could maintain'. When these women (called *mancebas* [concubines]) had children (in some elite households the several concubines might have more than 100 children), if the men were unable to take care of their progeny they often would sell some of them into slavery.⁸¹

Witchcraft accusations could also lead to enslavement, but even here rules were in place to protect the accused. The situation in the region of Soyo where the count could still enforce laws against enslavement reveals how far the law went to safeguard people's freedom. The missionary Merolla reported that in the 1680s the law required that 'if the wizard is taken be a freeman ... for the first offense he is enjoined penance; for the second he pays

⁷⁵ Cavazzi, *Descrição histórica*, I, 86, 160.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 86.

⁷⁷ 'Points à toucher dans lá reponse du pape au rei du Congo pour aide cette chrétienté', in Jadin, *L'ancien Congo*, III, 1290–1.

⁷⁸ Serafino da Cortona to Jose de Granada, 6 Mar. 1653, in Jadin, *L'ancien Congo*, III, 1451–2; see also Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, MS 3533, Antonio de Teruel, 'Descripcion narrativa de la mission serafica de los Padres Capuchinos ... en el reyno de Congo' (1664), 126.

⁷⁹ Serafino da Cortona to Jose de Granada, 6 Mar. 1653.

⁸⁰ *Le pratique missionnaire des PP. capucins italiens dans les rouyimes de Congo, Angola et contrées adjacents* (1747), ed. D. Northrumb (Paris, 1931), 82.

⁸¹ Cavazzi, *Descrição Histórica*, I, 80.

an Indian piece [a unit of account] about the value of a slave, but if he offends a third time, he is forthwith sold for a slave, and the price distributed to the poor'. These rules, however, did not cover slaves, for if a slave was accused of witchcraft he was immediately 'sold and sent among the whites'.⁸²

While other mechanisms of enslavement were commonplace throughout Kongo's history, enslavement as a punishment for treason as a result of factional struggles became more important by the 1600s. Enslavement of freeborn Kongos occurred because of rivalries among various factions of the elite, and the custom was to enslave the rival party and his family, as well as all those who followed him. Kongo experienced a series of dynastic conflicts between the death of Álvaro II in 1614 and the election of Pedro II in 1622. Mateus Cardoso, a Jesuit missionary in Kongo at the time, reporting on the joyous occasion of Pedro's coronation, contrasted it with the situation that prevailed in former times at the death of the king. He commented that God saved Kongo from the revolts that the kingdom usually experienced at the death of the king when both 'the nobles and ... the common people' rose up in revolt, which usually involved 'deaths, cruelties, and robberies, in which it is certain that the Portuguese who come and travel in this part will enter in [to obtain slaves]'.⁸³

The connection between political rivalries that led to civil wars and enslavement of freeborn Kongos is best revealed by events during the reign of Álvaro VI. The problem began after the death of King Pedro II in 1624 and lasted well into the 1640s.⁸⁴ In the first of the two wars that he fought, Álvaro suffered significant military losses to the count of Soyo who brought a large army against him, along with '80 Portuguese soldiers'. In the second of the two defeats, the king escaped with 'the loss of many slaves'.⁸⁵ Furthermore Pieter Moortamer, the Dutch factor in Kongo and Luanda in 1642, informed the council of the West India Company in Brazil that any Kongo who fled from the army during combat was 'reduced to slavery with his whole family'.⁸⁶

The civil war period (1665–1709) that followed the battle of Mbwila (1665) was a fundamental turning point for Kongo society in that it created long-lasting rivalries that were not resolved and that undermined many of the sixteenth-century institutions that protected freeborn Kongos from enslavement. In Kongo proper, the prolonged series of wars caused the state to collapse and allowed contenders for the throne, with their base of support in the several provinces, to condemn to enslavement anyone who supported their rivals. This situation continued into the eighteenth century as Kongo entered a state of anarchy.⁸⁷ In the first place, the civil wars led to the collapse of the state and therefore its capacity to protect free Kongos from

⁸² Merolla, 'Voyage', 616.

⁸³ [Mateus Cardoso], 'Morte de D. Alvaro III El Rei do Congo e eleição de D. Pedro Affonso', 1622, *MMA*, xv, 485.

⁸⁴ For details, see Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans*, 141–3.

⁸⁵ Ogilby, *Africa*, 541.

⁸⁶ 'Rapport de Pieter Moortmer au Conseil du Bresil', 14 Oct. 1642, in Jadin, *L'ancien Congo*, 1, 347.

⁸⁷ Thornton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 69–124. For a discussion linking the fall of Kongo to changes in the trade routes and the decline of the cloth trade, see Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, ch. 5.

enslavement. At the same time, the need that various factions had for munitions and other imported materials increased the demand for slaves. With the collapse of the state, rivals exploited the laws about treason, deference to superiors and the like to enslave whole communities of freeborn Kongos.

The several missionaries who lived in the kingdom during the period of civil war left reports of many incidents describing the enslavement of freeborn Kongos.⁸⁸ Some individuals were enslaved because they supported the losing party in a private dispute and were captured ‘and became slaves to the conquerors’.⁸⁹ Moreover, Girolamo Merolla da Sorrento noted that, during his first year in Kongo (1682), the conflicts between two rivals for the throne led one of the contenders, ‘Simantamba’ (Nzimba Ntamba), to capture several freemen and send them as slaves to the ruler of Soyo, a powerful elector whose vote he wanted to have.⁹⁰ In another incident that occurred in 1701, the Mani Lumbo (a royal official), following the order of King Pedro IV, captured 58 slaves after attacking and destroying the village of a local ruler whom the king considered a traitor. Among those enslaved were ‘many free people’, some of whom lived in the villages, along with others who were visiting.⁹¹

Non-combatant members of the elite were not exempt from arbitrary enslavement, as the case involving a young woman whom Pedro IV gave to the missionary Marcellino d’Atri as a slave in 1698 illustrated. When the girl’s mother attempted to ransom her, d’Atri found out that the young woman, whose name was Susanna, was actually the daughter of Pedro’s standard bearer and had been enslaved because her father had lost the royal standard.⁹² The case of two Christian Kongo boys who attempted to avoid enslavement and sale by their mother is particularly illustrative as it focuses on the role close relatives played in the enslavement of their kinsmen. In 1747 the boys were apprehended as they attempted to steal the pig that the missionaries owned, and explained their actions by noting that, in order to avoid being sold to Dutch and English traders whom the missionaries referred to as heretics, ‘we tried to kill your pig, in order to remain slaves at your post and live as Christians as we desire’. The custom at the time was that ‘whoever kills the animal of his neighbor remains a slave of the person he has harmed’. Moreover, elite members used other subterfuges to enslave freeborn Kongos, one of which involved hiding crosses in the bush and leaving a lookout to capture the unfortunate Kongo who happened to touch the cross.⁹³

Increasing anarchy also led Kongo kings and rivals to keep armed slaves for their protection. For example, in 1665 as António I prepared to raise a slave army to face an invading Portuguese army of 400 Europeans and 4,000 African slave soldiers at the Battle of Mbwila, the Kongo-born Capuchin

⁸⁸ *Pratique missionnaire*, 83–4.

⁸⁹ Merolla, ‘Voyage’, 645.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 619.

⁹¹ Luca da Caltanissetta, ‘Relatione delle missione fatta nel regno di Congo per il Padre Fra Luca da Caltanissetta ... sino alla fine del 1701’, in Romain Rainero (ed.), *Il Congo agli inizi del setecento nella relazione da Luca da Caltanissetta* (Florence, 1974), fol. 99v.

⁹² Carlo Toso, *L’anarchia Congolese nel sec. XVII: la relazioni inedita di Marcellino D’Atri* (Genoa, 1984), 291.

⁹³ Raimondo da Dicomano, ‘Informazione 1798. Documentario’, *Studia*, 46 (1987), 302–26, fol. 14 (original foliation marked in this edition).

Francisco de São Salvador warned the king that he should not risk the lives of so many slaves against 'so warlike a people as the Portuguese'. In fact, both António and Francisco were killed during the battle, as well as several nobles who had also brought their forces to the war. Following their victory, the Portuguese captured thousands of the Kongo slave soldiers.⁹⁴

Some rivals had large slave armies which they used to promote their own candidates for the kingship. For example, in 1685, the vicar-general of Kongo, who was quite old, had 'six thousand slaves at his command, beside subjects [in order to] force his son's promotion to the priesthood, to the end that he might crown him king of Kongo'.⁹⁵ Furthermore, although Daniel da Silva had declared Soyo independent from Kongo in 1645, rulers of this former Kongo province were still formidable players in the politics of Kongo and kept slave armies to protect their borders. Lorenzo da Lucca reported that, when he arrived in Soyo in December 1705, he was greeted by a volley of muskets set off by slave soldiers whom the prince had settled at a place called Matto Cortato.⁹⁶

In the aftermath of the civil war in 1709 and the efforts of Pedro IV and the leaders who followed him to rid the kingdom of the supporters of the popular mystic Beatriz Kimpa Vita, Kongo ended up exporting more than 30,000 of its subjects.⁹⁷ The end of the war did not really bring a close to the chaos, however, and elite families continued to keep large retinues of slaves. A 1747 description of the residence of the count of Soyo noted that, like other residences of the elite, the count's consisted of thirty to forty one-room cabins in an enclosure, 'one part of them around the prince's [house] and are inhabited by his slaves. Another set are around the princess and serve her slaves'.⁹⁸ In 1765, Capuchin missionary Cherubino da Savona noted that war refugees, in all likelihood people who fled the conflicts that broke out in other parts of the kingdom, made up a significant percentage of Soyo's population.⁹⁹ Soyo's military strength made it able to protect them.

As Kongo kings' power eroded in the course of the 1700s, factional fighting became endemic in the kingdom and each side made slaves of their opponents' followers. The leaders of the factions completely ignored the policy that former rulers had established of not enslaving freeborn Kongos, and regarded the members of the opposing sides as rebels liable to enslavement. Although the breakdown would only become more visible from the 1780s onwards after the death of Afonso V, from the mid 1700s the countryside was already heavily populated with slaves whom factions used for their defense. Cherubino da Savona, traveling in the kingdom in the mid-1760s, listed

⁹⁴ Merolla, 'Voyage', 662. For an account of the Battle of Mbwila, see 'Relação da mais gloriosa e admirável victoria que alcançou as armas de el Rey D. Afonso VI', *MMA*, xii, 582–91.

⁹⁵ Merolla, 'Voyage', 658–9.

⁹⁶ Archivio dei Cappuccini da Provincia di Toscana, Florence, Lorenzo da Lucca, 'Lettera annua del 1705', 30 Dec. 1705, in Filippo Bernardi da Firenze, 'Relazioni d'alcuni missionari cappuccini toscani singularmente del P. Lorenzo da Lucca che due volte fù missionario apostolico al Congo', 206. French translation: Jean Cuvelier, *Relations sur le Congo du P. Laurent de Lucques* (Brussels, 1953) (which notes the original pagination).

⁹⁷ See, for example, Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*.

⁹⁸ *Pratique missionaire*, 92.

⁹⁹ Cherubino da Savona, '1755 Congo', in António Brásio, 'O problema de eleição e coroação dos Reis do Congo', *Revista Portuguesa da História*, 12 (1969), 209.

22 provinces and settlements, several of them headed by women and many with large slave populations.¹⁰⁰ Less than two decades later Portuguese missionary Rafael de Castello de Vide noted that the ruler of Mpemba, Dom Afonso, the brother of the king, controlled 50 settlements of slaves and observed that such slaves were used mostly to 'defend them in time of war and no one neither great or small is without them'.¹⁰¹ As he traveled in other areas of the kingdom, de Vide commented on other settlements of slaves, noting, for example, that in the mountainous region of Kibangu there were many 'great princes, powerful nobles of many lands and many settlements of slaves'. Even the lesser nobles, who were the sons, nephews and grandsons of the powerful rulers, also controlled slave settlements.¹⁰²

Throughout the second part of the eighteenth century, provincial rulers with large numbers of slave soldiers under their control monopolized the selection process of Kongo kings, many of whom had very short reigns or were kept impoverished by the powerful provincial lords. Unlike the situation before the civil war, the nobles who oversaw the coronation ceremony from the mid-1700s onwards made no pretense that the king was required to protect the population. In 1764, at Álvaro XI's coronation, the king was reminded that it was to the lords that he owed his position and had to swear to:

love his vassals and consider the great dignity which he has been given and which he would give to many others, and not place himself above nor to depreciate them, should not take what they possess, not aggravate them, not rob them with his power, because he was elected to be their king only to defend them, to keep the peace for them, and the customs of his ancestors.¹⁰³

Raimondo da Dicomano commented on the role of slaves and slave armies in the political process by noting that kings were powerful only when 'they come from a family that has a lot of slave followers'. He added that kings who did not have soldiers and an army exercised no authority, and that the reigning king Dom Enrique I (1793–5) was very weak because he 'does not have soldiers or an army' and only had 'twenty to twenty five guns and his relatives are very poor'.¹⁰⁴

FREEBORN KONGOS, SLAVERY AND THE ATLANTIC TRADE

Thus, unlike in the sixteenth century and the early part of the seventeenth century when most Kongo slaves were foreign captives or were brought into the core provinces from the more distant provinces and sold in local markets, the chaotic period in the eighteenth century following the civil war witnessed a situation where fewer slaves came from outside the Kongo. In fact, by the middle of the seventeenth century, the size of the slave population had

¹⁰⁰ Da Savona, '1755 Congo', 208–14. For a discussion of the role of some of the women in Kongo politics, see John K. Thornton, 'Elite women in the kingdom of Kongo: historical perspectives on women's political power', *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006), 437–60.

¹⁰¹ Academia das Ciências de Lisboa (ACL), MS Vermelho 296, Rafael de Castello de Vide, 'Viagem do Congo do Missioario Fr. Raphael de Castello de Vide, hoje Bispo de S. Thomé', 85.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 207.

¹⁰³ Da Savona, '1755 Congo', 380.

¹⁰⁴ Da Dicomano, 'Informazione 1798', 7–8.

increased dramatically from what it was in the sixteenth century, and Antonio Cavazzi, who lived in Kongo and Angola between 1654 and 1668, asserted that 'the number of slaves is almost equal to the number of free persons'. He also observed that the only material wealth that people had was 'some slaves'.¹⁰⁵

Many of the slaves during the period came from the freeborn population and increasingly entered the circuit of the Atlantic slave trade. In the 1640s, when Kongo slaves began appearing at the ports in larger numbers, Portuguese and Dutch merchants were reluctant to purchase them, since they believed that they (particularly noblemen) 'being used to live idly, when they are brought to labor they die quickly'.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, a former Portuguese slave called Luis, who worked for the Dutch administrator Mortimer soon after the Dutch had taken control of Luanda in 1641, and who had traveled widely in Angola and Kongo and twice made the Atlantic crossing with his owner to Brazil to sell slaves, warned Mortimer that he should avoid exporting slaves from Kongo or Loango. He observed that these slaves 'die from sickness in great numbers more than others, because for the most part, they are former freemen reduced to slavery'.¹⁰⁷ Portuguese merchants for their part often kept Kongo slaves – especially nobles whom they had captured in the wars in Luanda, 'to get them accustomed to poverty and to slavery'.¹⁰⁸

Despite these concerns, the trade in Kongo slaves expanded and, as the civil war dragged on into the eighteenth century, warlords in the various provinces sold free Kongos as slaves to Vili (Loango-based) traders for resale to the Dutch, and increasingly to the English, or sold them directly to the Europeans. The missionary Merolla who arrived in Soyo in the 1670s noted the widespread sale of Kongos (almost certainly as a result of their capture during the early years of the civil war) to the Dutch and English. He went so far as to write a letter to the king and count arguing that 'at least the heretics should be excluded from this merchandize, especially the English who made it their business to buy slaves here, and to carry them to Barbados, where they are exposed to the Protestant religion, so very contrary to ours'. In 1683, Merolla continued his attack against the rulers for selling Christian Kongos, and posted a ban on the church door which called on nobles who sold free Kongos to 'think with compassion on the slaves their countrymen' who, when sold, became slaves to Protestant heretics who would 'pervert the good principles we have instilled in them'.¹⁰⁹ In response to Merolla's letter and the threat to excommunicate him, the count defended himself with the argument that he sold slaves to the English because they provided him with arms to keep his enemies at bay. He subsequently sold 15 free residents of Soyo to an English merchant.¹¹⁰ Moreover, in 1701, the Soyo ruler António III Barreto da Silva actually wrote to the pope requesting permission to sell Christian slaves to the heretics so he could defend his country.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Cavazzi, *Descrição histórica*, 1, 160.

¹⁰⁶ Ogilby, *Africa*, 535.

¹⁰⁷ 'Rapport de Pieter Moortmer au Conseil du Brésil', 14 Oct. 1642, in Jadin, *L'ancien Congo*, 1, 347.

¹⁰⁸ Ogilby, *Africa*, 359.

¹⁰⁹ Merolla, 'Voyage', 638.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 639.

¹¹¹ Archivio De Propaganda Fide, Scrittura riferite nei Congressi (APF, SRC), 3, 188–188v, Antonio Barreto da Silva to Propaganda Fide, 1 Oct. 1701.

The wars pushed more freeborn Kongos into the Atlantic trade, and in 1760 the Italian Capuchin Rosario del Parco, who lived in the kingdom, noted that wars that the nobles waged allowed them to come by captives whom they sold to 'the Portuguese, English and French who are in the port of Cabinda', and that 'almost all the wars are unjust ... and are made so that they can rob each other'. He also noted that the majority of those captured and sold as slaves 'are baptized'.¹¹² In 1767, Cherubino da Savona, who also lived in Kongo, detailed the trade in free Kongos. He noted, for example, that, in the province of Zombo, the four 'Dembos' who governed the region 'are great slave traders which they send to be sold to the Portuguese ships and French and English ships in exchange for merchandize, powder and arms of all qualities'.¹¹³ Moreover, he identified another nobleman who had the title of 'Lord' from the coastal province called Zembo, who 'carries on a lot of slave trading with French ships'.¹¹⁴ Although some of these slaves might have originated as far away as Lunda, there were many freeborn Kongos among the group. Castello de Vide, who traveled widely in the kingdom during the 1780s, reported that settlements of Vili traders were located near to the king's court and next to the compounds of noblemen who sold freeborn Kongos as slaves. In fact, he recorded his numerous attempts to convince King Afonso V to convene his councilors to publish a decree outlawing the selling of Kongos. Most of de Vide's efforts were futile, for, on the same day that he was in audience with the king, more than 'forty Mobires (Vilis) porters arrived with goods to buy Christian slaves'. Furthermore, every month 'more than seventy of the poor souls' left from the king's court.¹¹⁵ Many of the victims were 'kidnapped on the roads, being free, without being guilty of any crime and made slaves'. The kidnapped Kongos were immediately sold and sent out before their relatives could ransom them. One notorious nobleman called 'Mbwa Lau' ('Mad Dog') was described as the 'universal bank of the Mobires' because of the number of freeborn Kongo victims he kidnapped and sold away as slaves.¹¹⁶

By the end of the 1790s, every freeborn Kongo risked enslavement by kidnapping or entrapment, and every member of the elite, from the king down to the lowest-level noble, not only owned large numbers of slave soldiers and personal slaves but was in the business of selling freeborn Kongos to foreign traders. A report of 1798 noted that Kongo supported a 'great market' where traders from the provinces of Mbamba, Kibangu and Lundo (Nsundi) converged. The traders from Mbamba sold their victims at the Loze River to the English in exchange for 'muskets, vessels, powder and textile ... Those who live in Quibango [Kibangu] trade with Ambuila [Mbwila] and other parts of the Portuguese conquest for alcohol, hoes and some very good textiles ... but most of the best they sell to the English'. The slaves from Soyo were sold to the Vilis who exchanged them for ceramics, copper, powder, iron and the like.¹¹⁷

We know that some of these Kongos ended up on plantations in the Danish West Indies, for Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp, a Moravian

¹¹² APF, SRC 5, 298, Rosario del Parco, 'Informazioni del stato della missione in particolare' (c. 1760). ¹¹³ Da Savona, '1755 Congo', 43. ¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 43v.

¹¹⁵ ACL, MS Vermelho 296, de Vide, 'Viagem', 290–2.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 291–2.

¹¹⁷ Da Dicomano, 'Informazione 1798', 12.

missionary in the Danish West Indies in the 1760s, interviewed and recorded the recollections of several Kongos about their enslavement. One of the enslaved Kongo told Oldendorp that he had taken a long voyage and was apprehended by 'manstealers' who took him to a Danish ship. Another remembered that he was tricked into being sold, for his own relatives had arranged with 'manstealers' to take him when he went to a certain place. When he arrived at the location (a warehouse where slaves were kept) he was taken to a Danish ship.¹¹⁸

CONCLUSION

From the first contacts with the Portuguese in 1483 to the period of the civil war and anarchy (after 1665), Kongo was a supplier of slaves to the Atlantic market and also had a population of slaves. Kongo was also a country that had rules that regulated the trade and initially limited the export of freeborn Kongos to the Atlantic market. For much of the sixteenth century, when Kongo was a strong state, rulers were able to pursue strategies that allowed Kongo to export, for the Atlantic, war captives or slaves bought outside of Kongo, to pay for its foreign imports and the diplomatic and cultural ties with Europeans. Kongo officials not only sold foreign-born slaves to the Portuguese but also allowed the Portuguese to use Kongo as a base for trading in foreign-born slaves. Moreover, Kongo elites employed both foreign-born and Kongo-born slaves in a variety of economic activities and also used them as soldiers.

The protection from enslavement that freeborn Kongos enjoyed dissipated during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as foreign wars declined and internal strife led competing factions to enslave partisans of rivals. Under these conditions, Kongo could not simultaneously be a major supplier of foreign slaves, maintain a social order based on slavery, and still protect freeborn Kongos from enslavement. Thus the distinctions between foreign-born slaves and freeborn Kongos disappeared. Ultimately every Kongo was a potential slave.

¹¹⁸ Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp, *Historie der caribischen Inseln Sanct Thomas, Sanct Crux und Sanct Jan: Kommentierte Edition des Originalmanuskriptes*, ed. Gundrun Meier, Stephan Palmié, Peter Stein and Horst Ulbricht (4 vols.) (Berlin, 2000–2), 1, 516.