

PROLOGUE



“THE TRADERS ARE KIDNAPPING OUR PEOPLE”

WHEN EUROPEANS began imagining Africa beyond the Sahara, the continent they pictured was a dreamscape, a site for fantasies of the fearsome and the supernatural. Ranulf Higden, a Benedictine monk who mapped the world about 1350, claimed that Africa contained one-eyed people who used their feet to cover their heads. A geographer in the next century announced that the continent held people with one leg, three faces, and the heads of lions. In 1459, an Italian monk, Fra Mauro, declared Africa the home of the roc, a bird so large that it could carry an elephant through the air.

In the Middle Ages, almost no one in Europe was in a position to know whether Africa contained giant birds, one-eyed people, or anything else. Hostile Moors lived on Africa's Mediterranean coast, and few Europeans dared set foot there, much less head south across the Sahara. And as for trying to sail down the west African coast, everyone knew that as soon as you passed the Canary Islands you would be in the Mare Tenebroso, the Sea of Darkness.

In the medieval imagination [writes Peter Forbath], this was a region of uttermost dread . . . where the heavens fling down liquid sheets of flame and the waters boil . . . where serpent rocks and ogre islands lie in wait for the mariner, where the giant hand of Satan reaches up from the fathomless depths to seize him, where he will turn black in face and body as a mark of God's

vengeance for the insolence of his prying into this forbidden mystery. And even if he should be able to survive all these ghastly perils and sail on through, he would then arrive in the Sea of Obscurity and be lost forever in the vapors and slime at the edge of the world.

It was not until the fifteenth century, the dawn of the age of ocean navigation, that Europeans systematically began to venture south, the Portuguese in the lead. In the 1440s, Lisbon's shipbuilders developed the caravel, a compact vessel particularly good at sailing into the wind. Although rarely more than a hundred feet long, this sturdy ship carried explorers far down the west coast of Africa, where no one knew what gold, spices, and precious stones might lie. But it was not only lust for riches that drove the explorers. Somewhere in Africa, they knew, was the source of the Nile, a mystery that had fascinated Europeans since antiquity. They were also driven by one of the most enduring of medieval myths, the legend of Prester John, a Christian king who was said to rule a vast empire in the interior of Africa, where, from a palace of translucent crystal and precious stones, he reigned over forty-two lesser kings, in addition to assorted centaurs and giants. No traveler was ever turned away from his dinner table of solid emerald, which seated thousands. Surely Prester John would be eager to share his riches with his fellow Christians and to help them find their way onward, to the fabled wealth of India.

Successive Portuguese expeditions probed ever farther southward. In 1482, an experienced naval captain named Diogo Cão set off on the most ambitious voyage yet. As he sailed close to the west African coast, he saw the North Star disappear from the sky once his caravel crossed the equator, and he found himself much farther south than anyone from Europe had ever been.

One day Cão came upon something that astounded him. Around his ship, the sea turned a dark, slate-tinged yellow, and brownish-yellow waves were breaking on the nearby beaches. Sailing toward the mouth of an inlet many miles wide, his caravel had to fight a current of eight to nine knots. Furthermore, a taste of the water surrounding the ship revealed that it was fresh, not salt. Cão had stumbled on the mouth of an enormous silt-filled river, larger than any a European had ever seen. The impression its vastness made on him and his men is reflected in a contemporary account:

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For the space of 20 leagues [the river] preserves its fresh water unbroken by the briny billows which encompass it on every side; as if this noble river had determined to try its strength in pitched battle with the ocean itself, and alone deny it the tribute which all other rivers in the world pay without resistance.

Modern oceanographers have discovered more evidence of the great river's strength in its "pitched battle with the ocean": a hundred-mile-long canyon, in places four thousand feet deep, that the river has carved out of the sea floor.

Cão went ashore at the river's mouth and erected a limestone pillar topped with an iron cross and inscribed with the royal coat of arms and the words: "In the year 6681 of the World and in that of 1482 since the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the most serene, the most excellent and potent prince, King João II of Portugal did order this land to be discovered and this pillar of stone to be erected by Diogo Cão, an esquire in his household."

The river where he had landed would be known by Europeans for most of the next five hundred years as the Congo. It flowed into the sea at the northern end of a thriving African kingdom, an imperial federation of two to three million people. Ever since then, geographers have usually spelled the name of the river and the eventual European colony on its banks one way, and that of the people living around its mouth and their indigenous kingdom another.

The Kingdom of the Kongo was roughly three hundred miles square, comprising territory that today lies in several countries. Its capital was the town of Mbanza Kongo — *mbanza* means "court" — on a commanding hilltop some ten days' walk inland from the coast and today just on the Angolan side of the Angola-Congo border. In 1491, nine years and several voyages after Diogo Cão's landfall, an expedition of awed Portuguese priests and emissaries made this ten-day trek and set up housekeeping as permanent representatives of their country in the court of the Kongo king. Their arrival marked the beginning of the first sustained encounter between Europeans and a black African nation.

The Kingdom of the Kongo had been in place for at least a hundred years before the Portuguese arrived. Its monarch, the ManiKongo, was chosen by an assembly of clan leaders. Like his European counterparts, he sat on a throne, in his case made of wood inlaid with ivory. As sym-

bols of royal authority, the ManiKongo carried a zebra-tail whip, had the skins and heads of baby animals suspended from his belt, and wore a small cap.

In the capital, the king dispensed justice, received homage, and reviewed his troops under a fig tree in a large public square. Whoever approached him had to do so on all fours. On pain of death, no one was allowed to watch him eat or drink. Before he did either, an attendant struck two iron poles together, and anyone in sight had to lie face down on the ground.

The ManiKongo who was then on the throne greeted the Portuguese warmly. His enthusiasm was probably due less to the Savior his unexpected guests told him about than to the help their magical fire-spouting weapons promised in suppressing a troublesome provincial rebellion. The Portuguese were glad to oblige.

The newcomers built churches and mission schools. Like many white evangelists who followed them, they were horrified by polygamy; they thought it was the spices in the African food that provoked the dreadful practice. But despite their contempt for Kongo culture, the Portuguese grudgingly recognized in the kingdom a sophisticated and well-developed state — the leading one on the west coast of central Africa. The ManiKongo appointed governors for each of some half-dozen provinces, and his rule was carried out by an elaborate civil service that included such specialized positions as *mani vangu vangu*, or first judge in cases of adultery. Although they were without writing or the wheel, the inhabitants forged copper into jewelry and iron into weapons, and wove clothing out of fibers stripped from the leaves of the raffia palm tree. According to myth, the founder of the Kongo state was a blacksmith king, so ironwork was an occupation of the nobility. People cultivated yams, bananas, and other fruits and vegetables, and raised pigs, cattle, and goats. They measured distance by marching days, and marked time by the lunar month and by a four-day week, the first day of which was a holiday. The king collected taxes from his subjects and, like many a ruler, controlled the currency supply: cowrie shells found on a coastal island under royal authority.

As in much of Africa, the kingdom had slavery. The nature of African slavery varied from one area to another and changed over time, but most slaves were people captured in warfare. Others had been criminals or debtors, or were given away by their families as part of a dowry settle-

ment. Like any system that gives some human beings total power over others, slavery in Africa could be vicious. Some Congo basin peoples sacrificed slaves on special occasions, such as the ratification of a treaty between chiefdoms; the slow death of an abandoned slave, his bones broken, symbolized the fate of anyone who violated the treaty. Some slaves might also be sacrificed to give a dead chief's soul some company on its journey into the next world.

In other ways, African slavery was more flexible and benign than the system Europeans would soon establish in the New World. Over a generation or two, slaves could often earn or be granted their freedom, and free people and slaves sometimes intermarried. Nonetheless, the fact that trading in human beings existed in any form turned out to be catastrophic for Africa, for when Europeans showed up, ready to buy endless shiploads of slaves, they found African chiefs willing to sell.

Soon enough, the slave-buyers came. They arrived in small numbers at first, but then in a flood unleashed by events across the Atlantic. In 1500, only nine years after the first Europeans arrived at Mbanza Kongo, a Portuguese expedition was blown off course and came upon Brazil. Within a few decades, the Western Hemisphere became a huge, lucrative, nearly insatiable market for African slaves. They were put to work by the millions in Brazil's mines and on its coffee plantations, as well as on the Caribbean islands where other European powers quickly began using the lush, fertile land to grow sugar.

In the Kingdom of the Kongo, the Portuguese forgot the search for Prester John. Slaving fever seized them. Men sent out from Lisbon to be masons or teachers at Mbanza Kongo soon made far more money by herding convoys of chained Africans to the coast and selling them to the captains of slave-carrying caravels.

The lust for slave profits engulfed even some of the priests, who abandoned their preaching, took black women as concubines, kept slaves themselves, and sold their students and converts into slavery. The priests who strayed from the fold stuck to their faith in one way, however; after the Reformation they tried to ensure that none of their human goods ended up in Protestant hands. It was surely not right, said one, "for persons baptized in the Catholic church to be sold to peoples who are enemies of their faith."

A village near Diogo Cão's stone pillar on the south shore of the Congo River estuary became a slave port, from which more than five

thousand slaves a year were being shipped across the Atlantic by the 1530s. By the next century, fifteen thousand slaves a year were exported from the Kingdom of the Kongo as a whole. Traders kept careful records of their booty. One surviving inventory from this region lists "68 head" of slaves by name, physical defects, and cash value, starting with the men, who were worth the most money, and ending with: "Child, name unknown as she is dying and cannot speak, male without value, and a small girl Callenbo, no value because she is dying; one small girl Cantunbe, no value because she is dying."

Many of the slaves shipped to the Americas from the great river's mouth came from the Kingdom of the Kongo itself; many others were captured by African slave-dealers who ranged more than seven hundred miles into the interior, buying slaves from local chiefs and headmen. Forced-marched to the coast, their necks locked into wooden yokes, the slaves were rarely given enough food, and because caravans usually traveled in the dry season, they often drank stagnant water. The trails to the slave ports were soon strewn with bleaching bones.

Once they were properly baptized, clothed in leftover burlap cargo wrappings, and chained together in ships' holds, most slaves from this region were sent to Brazil, the nearest part of the New World. Starting in the 1600s, however, a growing demand tempted many ship captains to make the longer voyage to the British colonies in North America. Roughly one of every four slaves imported to work the cotton and tobacco plantations of the American South began his or her journey across the Atlantic from equatorial Africa, including the Kongo kingdom. The KiKongo language, spoken around the Congo River's mouth, is one of the African tongues whose traces linguists have found in the Gullah dialect spoken by black Americans today on the coastal islands of South Carolina and Georgia.



When the Atlantic slave trade began decimating the Kongo, that nation was under the reign of a ManiKongo named Nzinga Mbemba Affonso, who had gained the throne in 1506 and ruled as Affonso I for nearly forty years. Affonso's life spanned a crucial period. When he was born, no one in the kingdom knew that Europeans existed. When he died, his entire realm was threatened by the slave-selling fever they had caused. He was a man of tragic self-awareness, and he left his mark. Some three hundred

years later, a missionary said, "A native of the Kongo knows the name of three kings: that of the present one, that of his predecessor, and that of Affonso."

He was a provincial chief in his early thirties when the Portuguese first arrived at Mbanza Kongo, in 1491. A convert to Christianity, he took on the name Affonso and some Portuguese advisers, and studied for ten years with the priests at Mbanza Kongo. One wrote to the king of Portugal that Affonso "knows better than us the prophets, the Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ, all the lives of the saints and all that has to do with our holy mother Church. If Your Highness saw him, You would be astonished. He speaks so well and with such assurance that it always seems to me that the Holy Spirit speaks through his mouth. My Lord, he does nothing but study; many times he falls asleep over his books and many times he forgets to eat or drink because he is speaking of our Savior." It is hard to tell how much of this glowing portrait was inspired by the priest's attempt to impress the Portuguese king and how much by Affonso's attempt to impress the priest.

In the language of a later age, King Affonso I was a modernizer. He urgently tried to acquire European learning, weapons, and goods in order to strengthen his rule and fortify it against the destabilizing force of the white arrival. Having noticed the Portuguese appetite for copper, for example, he traded it for European products that would help him buy the submission of outlying provinces. Clearly a man of unusual intelligence, Affonso tried to do something as difficult in his time as in ours: to be a *selective* modernizer. He was an enthusiast for the church, for the written word, for European medicine, and for woodworking, masonry, and other skills to be learned from Portuguese craftsmen. But when his fellow king in Lisbon sent an envoy to urge the adoption of Portugal's legal code and court protocol, Affonso wasn't interested. And he tried hard to keep out prospectors, fearing total takeover of his land if Europeans found the gold and silver they coveted.

Because virtually everything we know about this part of Africa for the next several hundred years comes to us from its white conquerors, King Affonso I provides something rare and valuable: an African voice. Indeed, his is one of the very few central African voices that we can hear at all before the twentieth century. He used his fluency in Portuguese to dictate a remarkable series of letters to two successive Portuguese kings, the first known documents composed by a black African in any European language. Several dozen of the letters survive, above his signature, with its

regal flourish of double underlinings. Their tone is the formal one of monarch to monarch, usually beginning "Most high and powerful prince and king my brother . . ." But we can hear not just a king speaking; we hear a human being, one who is aghast to see his people taken away in ever greater numbers on slave ships.

Affonso was no abolitionist. Like most African rulers of his time and later, he owned slaves, and at least once he sent some as a present to his "brother" king in Lisbon, along with leopard skins, parrots, and copper anklets. But this traditional exchange of gifts among kings seemed greatly different to Affonso from having tens of thousands of his previously free subjects taken across the sea in chains. Listen to him as he writes King João III of Portugal in 1526:

Each day the traders are kidnapping our people — children of this country, sons of our nobles and vassals, even people of our own family. . . . This corruption and depravity are so widespread that our land is entirely depopulated. . . . We need in this kingdom only priests and schoolteachers, and no merchandise, unless it is wine and flour for Mass. . . . It is our wish that this kingdom not be a place for the trade or transport of slaves.

Later the same year:

Many of our subjects eagerly lust after Portuguese merchandise that your subjects have brought into our domains. To satisfy this inordinate appetite, they seize many of our black free subjects. . . . They sell them . . . after having taken these prisoners [to the coast] secretly or at night. . . . As soon as the captives are in the hands of white men they are branded with a red-hot iron.

Again and again Affonso speaks about the twin themes of the slave trade and the alluring array of cloth, tools, jewelry, and other knickknacks that the Portuguese traders used to buy their human cargoes:

These goods exert such a great attraction over simple and ignorant people that they believe in them and forget their belief in God. . . . My Lord, a monstrous greed pushes our subjects, even Christians, to seize members of their own families, and of ours, to do business by selling them as captives.

While begging the Portuguese king to send him teachers, pharmacists, and doctors instead of traders, Affonso admits that the flood of material goods threatened his authority. His people "can now procure, in much greater quantity than we can, the things we formerly used to keep them obedient to us and content." Affonso's lament was prescient; this was not the last time that lust for Europe's great cornucopia of goods undermined traditional ways of life elsewhere.

The Portuguese kings showed no sympathy. King João III replied: "You . . . tell me that you want no slave-trading in your domains, because this trade is depopulating your country. . . . The Portuguese there, on the contrary, tell me how vast the Congo is, and how it is so thickly populated that it seems as if no slave has ever left."

Affonso pleaded with his fellow sovereigns as one Christian with another, complete with the prejudices of the day. Of the priests turned slave-traders, he wrote:

In this kingdom, faith is as fragile as glass because of the bad examples of the men who come to teach here, because the lusts of the world and lure of wealth have turned them away from the truth. Just as the Jews crucified the Son of God because of covetousness, my brother, so today He is again crucified.

Several times Affonso sent his appeals for an end to the slave trade directly to the Pope in Rome, but the Portuguese detained his emissaries to the Vatican as they stepped off the boat in Lisbon.

Affonso's despair reached its depth in 1539, near the end of his life, when he heard that ten of his young nephews, grandsons, and other relatives who had been sent to Portugal for a religious education had disappeared en route. "We don't know whether they are dead or alive," he wrote in desperation, "nor how they might have died, nor what news we can give of them to their fathers and mothers." We can imagine the king's horror at being unable to guarantee the safety even of his own family. Portuguese traders and sea captains along the long route back to Europe sidetracked many a cargo between the Kongo kingdom and Lisbon; these youngsters, it turned out, ended up in Brazil as slaves.

His hatred for the overseas slave trade and his vigilance against its erosion of his authority won Affonso the enmity of some of the Portuguese merchants living in his capital. A group of eight made an attempt on his life as he was attending Mass on Easter Sunday in 1540. He escaped

with only a bullet hole in the fringe of his royal robe, but one of his nobles was killed and two others wounded.

After Affonso's death, the power of the Kongo state gradually diminished as provincial and village chiefs, themselves growing rich on slave sales, no longer gave much allegiance to the court at Mbanza Kongo. By the end of the 1500s, other European countries had joined in the slave trade; British, French, and Dutch vessels roamed the African coast, looking for human cargo. In 1665, the army of the weakened Kingdom of the Kongo fought a battle with the Portuguese. It was defeated, and the ManiKongo was beheaded. Internal strife further depleted the kingdom, whose territory was all taken over by European colonies by the late 1800s.



Except for Affonso's letters, the written record of these times still shows them entirely through white men's eyes. How did the Europeans, beginning with Diogo Cão and his three ships with faded red crosses on their sails, appear to the people living at the great river's mouth? To see with their eyes, we must turn to the myths and legends that have filtered down over the centuries. At first, Africans apparently saw the white sailors not as men but as *vumbi* — ancestral ghosts — since the Kongo people believed that a person's skin changed to the color of chalk when he passed into the land of the dead. And it was obvious that this was where these menacing white *vumbi* had come from, for people on the shore saw first the tips of an approaching ship's masts, then its superstructure, then its hull. Clearly the ship had carried its passengers up from their homes beneath the surface of the earth. Here is how the Portuguese arrival was recounted by Mukunzo Kioko, a twentieth-century oral historian of the Pende people:

Our fathers were living comfortably. . . . They had cattle and crops; they had salt marshes and banana trees.

Suddenly they saw a big boat rising out of the great ocean. This boat had wings all of white, sparkling like knives.

White men came out of the water and spoke words which no one understood.

Our ancestors took fright; they said that these were *vumbi*, spirits returned from the dead.

They pushed them back into the ocean with volleys of arrows.

But the *vumbi* spat fire with a noise of thunder. Many men were killed. Our ancestors fled.

The chiefs and wise men said that these *vumbi* were the former possessors of the land. . . .

From that time to our days now, the whites have brought us nothing but wars and miseries.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade seemed further confirmation that Europeans had come from the land of the dead, for after they took their shiploads of slaves out to sea, the captives never returned. Just as Europeans would be long obsessed with African cannibalism, so Africans imagined Europeans practicing the same thing. The whites were thought to turn their captives' flesh into salt meat, their brains into cheese, and their blood into the red wine Europeans drank. African bones were burned, and the gray ash became gunpowder. The huge, smoking copper cooking kettles that could be seen on sailing vessels were, it was believed, where all these deadly transformations began. The death tolls on the packed slave ships that sailed west from the Congo coast rose higher still when some slaves refused to eat the food they were given, believing that they would be eating those who had sailed before them.

As the years passed, new myths arose to explain the mysterious objects the strangers brought from the land of the dead. A nineteenth-century missionary recorded, for example, an African explanation of what happened when captains descended into the holds of their ships to fetch trading goods like cloth. The Africans believed that these goods came not from the ship itself but from a hole that led into the ocean. Sea sprites weave this cloth in an "oceanic factory, and, whenever we need cloth, the captain . . . goes to this hole and rings a bell." The sea sprites hand him up their cloth, and the captain "then throws in, as payment, a few dead bodies of black people he has bought from those bad native traders who have bewitched their people and sold them to the white men." The myth was not so far from reality. For what was slavery in the American South, after all, but a system for transforming the labor of black bodies, via cotton plantations, into cloth?



Because African middlemen brought captives directly to their ships, Portuguese traders seldom ventured far from the coast. For nearly four centuries, in fact, after Diogo Cão came upon the Congo River, Europeans

did not know where the river came from. It pours some 1.4 million cubic feet of water per second into the ocean; only the Amazon carries more water. Besides its enormous size and unknown course, the Congo posed another puzzle. Seamen noticed that its flow, compared with that of other tropical rivers, fluctuated relatively little during the year. Rivers such as the Amazon and the Ganges had phases of extremely high water and low water, depending on whether the land they drained was experiencing the rainy or the dry season. What made the Congo different?

The reason several centuries' worth of visitors failed to explore the Congo's source was that they couldn't sail upstream. Anyone who tried found that the river turned into a gorge, at the head of which were impassable rapids.

Much of the Congo River basin, we now know, lies on a plateau in the African interior. From the western rim of this plateau, nearly a thousand feet high, the river descends to sea level in a mere 220 miles. During this tumultuous descent, the river squeezes through narrow canyons, boils up in waves 40 feet high, and tumbles over 32 separate cataracts. So great is the drop and the volume of water that these 220 miles have as much hydroelectric potential as all the lakes and rivers of the United States combined.

For any sailor bold enough to get out of his ship and walk, the land route around the rapids wound uphill through rough, rocky country feared for its treacherous cliffs and ravines and for malaria and the other diseases to which Europeans had no immunity. Only with enormous difficulty did some Capuchin missionaries twice manage to get briefly inland as far as the top of the great rapids. A Portuguese expedition that tried to repeat this trek never returned. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europeans still knew nothing about the interior of central Africa or about where the river began.

In 1816, a British expedition, led by Captain James K. Tuckey of the Royal Navy, set off to find the Congo's origins. His two ships carried a wonderfully odd assortment of people: Royal Marines, carpenters, blacksmiths, a surgeon, a gardener from the royal gardens at Kew, a botanist, and an anatomist. The anatomist was directed, among other things, to make a careful study of the hippopotamus and to “preserve in spirits and if possible in triplicate, the organ of hearing of this animal.” A Mr. Cranch was entered on the ship's log as Collector of Objects of Natural History; another expedition member was simply listed as Volunteer and Observant Gentleman.

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When he arrived at the Congo's mouth, Tuckey counted eight slave ships from various nations at anchor, awaiting their cargoes. He sailed his own ships as far up the river as he could and then set off to skirt the thunderous rapids overland. But he and his exhausted men grew discouraged by endless "scrambling up the sides of almost perpendicular hills, and over great masses of quartz." These came to be called the Crystal Mountains. The river was a mass of foaming rapids and enormous whirlpools. At a rare calm stretch Tuckey observed, rather provincially, that "the scenery was beautiful and not inferior to any on the banks of the Thames." One by one, the Englishmen began to suffer from an unknown illness, most likely yellow fever, and after about 150 miles, Tuckey lost heart. His party turned around, and he died shortly after getting back to his ship. By the time the shaken survivors of the expedition made their way back to England, twenty-one of the fifty-four men who had set out were dead. The source of the Congo River and the secret of its steady flow was still a mystery. For Europeans, Africa remained the supplier of valuable raw materials — human bodies and elephant tusks. But otherwise they saw the continent as faceless, blank, empty, a place on the map waiting to be explored, one ever more frequently described by the phrase that says more about the seer than the seen: the Dark Continent.