

## The Loango Coast and the Rise of the Atlantic Slave Trade

The French were not the first European traders to reach the coasts of Africa and more specifically the Loango coast. This region stretched from Cape Lopez (twenty-first century Gabon, in the north) to the Congo River (where twenty-first century Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola intersect, in the south). Before them, in the early fifteenth century, Portuguese navigators had started to explore the coasts of North Africa and West Africa. First, they reached Ceuta, the North African port across the Strait of Gibraltar. Then they surveyed Madeira Islands, the Azores, and the Canaries. In the subsequent years, they reached the island of Arguim in twenty-first century's Mauritania, rounded Cape Bojador, arrived at the region of Senegal, and eventually passed Cape Verde. Moving east, after sailing along the Bight of Benin, Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão and his fleet reached the Loango Bay in West Central Africa in 1483.<sup>1</sup>

Sailing south, Cão's expedition met the mouth of the Congo River. On its southern bank near the harbor of Soyo, they found Mpinda, the coastal province of the Kingdom of Kongo, which is in twenty-first century Angola. To mark their arrival in this area, Cão chose a sandy beach surrounded by palm trees, where he placed a *padrão*, a monument of sorts consisting of a white stone cross carved with the Kingdom of Portugal's coat of arms. But the Portuguese navigator's expedition had only just started. One of the most important kingdoms in the region was located in the region:

Seeing the greatness and abundance of water that the river showed in its mouth, it seemed to him that such a great river had to be inhabited by many peoples;

and when he entered up the river ... he saw appearing on its banks many people, of those he was used to seeing back on the coast, all very black with their unruly hair.<sup>2</sup>

This first encounter propelled long-lasting exchanges between the Kingdom of Kongo's rulers, nobles, commoners, and slaves and Portuguese agents, who over the next decades expanded their presence along the coast of West Central Africa.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, there were three kingdoms along the Loango Bay. Each kingdom had its own port: Loango, in the Kingdom of Loango; Malembo, in the Kingdom of Kakongo; and Cabinda, in the Kingdom of Ngoyo (see Map 1). The Kingdom of Loango was the main state on Loango Bay. In 1575, the Portuguese founded Luanda, south of the Congo River. The capital of the Portuguese colony of Angola, Luanda gradually became the largest slave-trading port in West Central Africa.<sup>3</sup> In 1617, the Portuguese established Benguela. During the era of the Atlantic slave trade, Luanda and Benguela respectively became the first and the third largest exporters of enslaved Africans to the Americas.<sup>4</sup> But in 1641, the Dutch took control of Luanda for nearly seven years. As the Portuguese and the Dutch competed on the coasts of West Central Africa, the governor of Angola, Pedro César de Meneses, complained to King João IV that the ruler of "Cabinda" refused to pay allegiance to the king of Portugal, and instead had decided to be a vassal of the Kingdom of Kongo.<sup>5</sup>

The kingdoms of Loango, Kakongo, and Ngoyo were highly centralized states, a feature that may have favored their persisting autonomy from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Owing to a variety of internal and external factors, not only the Portuguese, but also no other European power managed ever to control the three main ports on the Loango coast during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, unlike the two Portuguese colonies of Luanda and Benguela. As Loango, Kakongo, and Ngoyo developed, the initial European demand for commodities such as ivory and copper was gradually replaced with the trade in human beings during the second half of the seventeenth century. This chapter revisits this early history, by examining how these states were structured, and identifying the main local agents involved in the commerce with Europeans. I especially examine the role of the *Mfuka* (spelled in various ways, including *Mafuku*, *Mafuka*, *M-Fouka*, *Mafouque* in French, and *Mafoeke* in Dutch) in the Kingdom of Ngoyo, to understand the complex interactions among African rulers, their local agents, and Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French slave merchants, who were often in competition.<sup>6</sup>

## I. I AFRICAN AGENTS OF THE LOANGO COAST

West Central African agents were pivotal in these commercial and cultural exchanges. Although responding to the external demand for enslaved Africans, unlike other regions of West Central Africa that supplied African captives to the Atlantic slave trade, the three centralized states of the Loango coast controlled their trade in human beings and maintained their independence vis-à-vis European merchants. Another crucial factor to consider is that the inhabitants of the Loango coast never fully and officially embraced Christianity as did their neighbor, the Kingdom of Kongo. As European powers such as the Dutch Republic, Britain, France, and Portugal started to trade in enslaved Africans in the region during the eighteenth century, middlemen such as the *Mfuka* increasingly acquired wealth and political power vis-à-vis noblemen, therefore transforming the balance of power in these societies. In this process, European luxury gifts contributed to shaping the dynamics of the Atlantic slave trade, whereas the commerce in human beings also transformed African and European material culture.

In the early sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Loango was the dominant state on the Loango coast. The region's environment included fertile soil, forests, and savannas with rich wildlife, as well as a long shoreline and several rivers, all of which favored the rise of a robust and unified polity. By the time of the arrival of the Portuguese, the region was occupied by the Vili, a term that originally designated caravaneers.<sup>7</sup> The Vili people belong to "a branch of the large Kongo family of the West Central African Bantu," whose language Vili belongs to the Kongo clade, and is part of the Bantu group.<sup>8</sup> When discussing the origins of the Loango coast's peoples, Phyllis Martin relied on the premise advanced by the late historian Jan Vansina (1929–2017), who in turn drew directly on the work of Dutch physician and armchair geographer Olfert Dapper (1636–1689).<sup>9</sup> According to this hypothesis, the peoples of the kingdoms of Loango, Kakongo, and Ngoyo had a common origin in the region of Mpumbu (also referred to by Europeans as Pombo). This area is located north of the Pool Malebo (Lake Nkunda) at the border of the twenty-first century Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Hence, the Vili, along with the Kongo peoples, may have migrated to the region in the early fourteenth century or even earlier. Martin states that the *Maloango* (ruler of Loango) claimed connections to the royal family of the Kingdom of Kongo, from which his polity became independent between the late fourteenth century and the early fifteenth century.<sup>10</sup> But Vansina questioned the claim that Loango had

been a former province of the Kingdom of Kongo, rather insisting that “there is no doubt that this state may well be as old as Kongo itself.”<sup>11</sup>

Regardless of its origins, starting in the seventeenth century, the Kingdom of Loango (and its homonymous port) became the dominant state of the Loango Bay. Several European travelers who visited the region described the kingdom’s inland capital Mbanza Loango (or Buali), where the *Maloango* resided, as an impressive town. The Dutch referred to its great size, comparing it to Amsterdam.<sup>12</sup> In the seventeenth century, the Kingdom of Ngoyo and the Kingdom of Kakongo formed two smaller polities independent from Loango. Yet the exact moment of their independence is unclear, and the two kingdoms may have continued paying tribute to Loango up to the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

Kakongo was inhabited by the Kotchi and its coast extended over nearly 25 miles, from the Chiloango River in the north to the Lulondo River in the south. Its western frontier formed a curve that met the Congo River at Ponta da Lenha in twenty-first century’s Democratic Republic of the Congo, whereas its eastern border curved south, passing Mayombe and the western part of Bungu, and ended at the Congo River near Mboma, today’s Boma in the twenty-first century Democratic Republic of the Congo. A few miles distant from the mouth of the Chiloango River was Malembo, Kakongo’s main harbor; approximately 28 miles inland was Kinguelé (Europeans called it Banze-Malimbe), the kingdom’s capital. At the south, the Kingdom of Ngoyo occupied a territory approximately half the size of Kakongo and one-quarter of the territory of the Kingdom of Loango. Ngoyo’s coastline stretched from the mouth of the Lulondo River at the north to the Congo River’s estuary at the south; its borders then followed the river’s north bank up to the Kakongo border. To the east, the kingdom’s territory boarded the rivers Lukala and Kalamu.<sup>14</sup> Ngoyo’s capital, Mbanza Ngoyo, was 5 Dutch miles (nearly 18 US miles) from its port, Cabinda.<sup>15</sup> Ngoyo was inhabited by the Woyo people. The Kotchi and the Woyo spoke Kiwoyo, whereas the Vili spoke Kivili.<sup>16</sup>

Historians have written the history of the states of the Loango coast by mainly relying on contemporary written sources produced by European travelers, officers, and merchants, who upon returning to Europe published journals and travelogues, usually illustrated with maps and engravings. As with any other sources, these accounts must be approached with caution. Although several travelers wrote their own travelogues, others were the result of a different process in which an experienced writer composed and published an account based on the traveler’s oral observations and written notes. As a specific writing genre,

travel accounts use description, narration, and commentary as modes of enunciation. Description aims to offer an allegedly objective point of view of the inhabitants and a picture of the natural world visited by the traveler. Through narration, authors can tell stories of events that took place during their journeys in distant lands. In contrast, passages employing commentary become opportunities to provide judgment and explanations often based on other written sources.<sup>17</sup>

When all these forms of enunciation are employed, travelers end up borrowing elements from other travelogues. As a result, in approaching these sources, historians need to compare these travelogues with other sources, paying attention not only to the possible differences among various editions of the same travel account, but also to different accounts published by various authors who visited the same places in the same periods. Despite the still scarce number of scholarly works focusing on the Loango coast, in the early seventeenth century, several European accounts published in English, Dutch, Portuguese, and French started to describe the West Central African coastal societies north of the Congo River. According to these written reports, the social structure of the three main polities of the Loango coast had similar characteristics.

Loango, Ngoyo, and Kakongo comprised a class structure of nobles, commoners, and slaves. Loango was ruled by the *Maniloango*, Kakongo by the *Manikakongo*, and Ngoyo by the *Maningoyo*. The kings of the three polities exerted their authority over the social, political, and economic spheres of their kingdoms, but their spiritual dimension was crucial. These rulers had strong religious roles and lived very restricted lives. Both the *Maloango* and the *Manikakongo* could not be seen eating or drinking. English traveler and slave trader Andrew Battell, who lived in Loango from 1607 to 1610, recounted this interdiction to Samuel Purchas:

When the King drinketh he hath a cup of wine brought, and he that bringeth it hath a Bell in his hand, and assoone as he hath delivered the cup to the King, hee turneth his face from the King, and ringeth the Bell: and then all that be there fall downe upon their faces, and rise not till the King have drunke ... For it is their Beliefe, that if hee bee seene eating or drinking, hee shall presently dye.<sup>18</sup>

It is hard to determine whether travelers witnessed these events or just heard about these prohibitions. However, Dutch merchant Pieter van den Broecke (1585–1640), who composed his journal upon his return to the Dutch Republic in 1630, nearly seventeen years after the publication of the first version of Battell's account, also corroborated this interdiction: "When this king drinks, no one can watch him, or else forfeit his neck.

When he wants to drink a little bell is rung. Then everyone around him falls on their faces. After he has drunk, it is rung again. Then everyone rises once again.”<sup>19</sup>

According to contemporary observers, biased by their Christian views, which led them to portray Africans in a derogatory manner, the subjects of the Loango coast kingdoms perceived their rulers as semidivine figures who held supernatural powers. Van den Broecke, for instance, reported that the “king himself is a great magician and speaks often with the Devil.”<sup>20</sup> They were also prohibited from seeing the ocean, consuming foreign goods, and interacting with Europeans.<sup>21</sup> French Abbé Liévin-Bonaventure Proyart corroborated this information in his published account based on observations made by Catholic missionaries who sailed to the Loango coast in 1766. Likewise, French naval officer and slave trader Louis-Marie-Joseph Ohier de Grandpré, who visited the region twice during the same period and published a travel account in the early nineteenth century, underscored that both the *Maloango* and the *Manikakongo* had to follow numerous restrictions.<sup>22</sup> Proyart discussed the origins of these limitations, emphasizing that the “first legislators of the nation may have imposed this law on the sovereigns in order to delay the progress of luxury and to teach the people, by the example of their masters, to do without the foreigner, by seeking remedies in its own industry.”<sup>23</sup> Still, he emphasizes that these restrictions were only imposed on the king, while his subjects, including his ministers, trafficked in all kinds of European goods.<sup>24</sup>

The succession to the throne of the three kingdoms on the Loango coast initially followed a matrilineal model. However, choosing a new ruler was a complicated process, and various authors and contemporary observers reported processes that involved elective and hereditary elements. In his early seventeenth-century account, Battell referred to four princes (*Mani Cabango*, *Mani Salag*, *Mani Bock*, and *Mani Cay*) of Loango who were the sons of the king’s sister; because “the Kings sonnes never come to be Kings.”<sup>25</sup> Yet these observations must be nuanced as systems of succession changed over the long period in which the Atlantic slave trade operated in the region. In his eighteenth-century account, Proyart explained that in the Kingdom of Loango, the heir to the throne was selected from among the *Maloango*’s nephews. According to Martin, they usually came from a specific clan, the Kondi (the members of the ruling dynasty).<sup>26</sup>

Other contemporary observers noted that in Kakongo and Ngoyo the throne was not hereditary but elective. In Kakongo, when the ruler died, his brothers became the heirs to the throne, and in the absence of any brothers, the successor was selected from among the sons of his sisters,

by order of age. Still, because the successor could only be enthroned after the sovereign's funeral, a regent (*Maboma*) ruled the kingdom during the period of transition.<sup>27</sup> Proyart reported that in the kingdoms where the ruler did not designate his successor before his death or in those where there was an elective process, such as in Ngoyo, the rulers' funerals were followed by battles that could lead to veritable civil wars.<sup>28</sup> Proyart reminded his readers that the ruler of Loango and Ngoyo often delayed for a long time his decision on who was the next in line to occupy the throne "either to not alienate the person he loves enough to want to make him his successor, or to keep all Princes attached to his interests, by letting each of them enjoy the hope of becoming the object of his choice."<sup>29</sup>

In the early seventeenth century, Battell already mentioned four princes of Loango, each of whom was awarded a fief. The fourth of these princes, the *Manikay* (presumably the *Makaya* or *Manicaye*), was "the next to be king."<sup>30</sup> Proyart described the *Mambuku* as a prince whose office was lesser than that of the *Makaya*.<sup>31</sup> According to him, in Loango and Ngoyo, the sovereign designated his successor by awarding a fief (*kaïa*) to the selected candidate.<sup>32</sup> Henceforth, the *Makaya* was prohibited from entering the kingdom's capital until the ruler was dead and interred. As in the Kikongo language, the term *kaya* means, among other things, a remote place, this stance seems to be plausible. Similarly, other French contemporary sources refer to the *Makaya* as the "presumed heir to the crown."<sup>33</sup> In the late eighteenth century, Grandpré explained the commercial activities in Malembo, designating the *Mambuku* and the *Makaya* as two different officials, the former being a wealthy broker and heir to the throne and the latter the prime minister.<sup>34</sup> Some historians refer to the *Mambuku* as being the equivalent of the *Makaya*.<sup>35</sup> But other scholars who examine the social structure of the Kingdom of Ngoyo tend to agree with Proyart and Grandpré by clearly establishing a distinction between the *Mambuku*, described as a governor, heir to the throne, and residing near Cabinda, and the *Makaya*, identified as the *Maningoyo*'s main advisor and prime minister.<sup>36</sup>

## 1.2 LOANGO'S EXTERNAL TRADE

The Dutch started visiting the Loango Bay in 1593, disrupting the Portuguese commercial monopoly along the coast of West Central Africa.<sup>37</sup> As historian Filipa Ribeiro da Silva explains, these initial commercial exchanges with African societies involved the combination of long-distance travel and several shorter coastal circuits, which often

encompassed several ports in West Africa and West Central Africa. Usually, larger vessels departed from the Dutch Republic followed by a smaller yacht carrying one or two prefabricated sloops. While the main vessel anchored in the port, the yachts and sloops would trade along the coast, collecting goods that were later stored in the main ship.<sup>38</sup>

European observers who traded on the Loango coast recorded information about commercial exchanges in the region. Their early observations indicate that rivalries among European merchants emerged early in the first years of their presence in the coastal area, a few decades before the rise of the slave trade. For example, on board the ship *Neptunmis*, Van den Broecke anchored for the first time in the Loango Bay in April 1608. Upon his arrival, he learned about the antagonistic reactions of Portuguese officials to Dutch competitors; after all, a few years earlier, Portugal had been the only European trading power in the region.<sup>39</sup> Informed about the recent assassination of a Dutch ship master, Van den Broecke soon realized he needed to be vigilant. The tragic event had unfolded before his arrival, when Dutch merchant Pieter Brandt anchored off the Loango coast on board the yacht *Meerminne*. The Portuguese invited Brandt, Pieter Tillmans, and the ship master Augustijn Cornelissen to come on board their ship in the Loango Bay. As Brandt fell ill, only his two men went to the appointment. When they approached the ship, the Portuguese, mistaking Cornelissen for Brandt, “shot [him] dead with a flintlock,” captured the other men who were on their boat, and sent them to Luanda.<sup>40</sup> This episode was just one in a series of violent conflicts between European powers that occurred on the Loango coast during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Although the primary sources rarely refer to violence between European and local populations in the region, these clashes certainly took place.

In 1610, Van den Broecke opened the first Dutch trading post on the Loango coast. The initial commercial and cultural exchanges did not involve the acquisition of enslaved people. Dutch traders purchased from local agents great amounts of ivory from elephant tusks obtained in the interior of the territory. They also acquired *takula* (*tacola* or *tekola*), a red wood comparable to brazilwood found along Brazil’s Atlantic coast during the sixteenth century and also used as dye in the textile production.<sup>41</sup> In exchange, they provided local kingdoms with a variety of cloths that had been manufactured in the Dutch Republic.

On his third voyage to the Loango coast in 1611, Van den Broecke reached Cabinda, situated nearly 30 miles north of the Congo River. In an entry from May 1612, the Dutch trader reported that he was “very well received by the natives.”<sup>42</sup> However, his journal shows that already



in those early days of external trade, it was not just European traders who were in competition; the Kingdom of Loango and the Kingdom of Ngoyo also had conflictual relations. Van den Broecke is not clear on whether he actually met the *Maningoyo* when he visited Ngoyo's capital, Mbanza Ngoyo, as in theory the ruler could not directly interact with European agents. Yet his account described the ruler as an "old and cruel man" who had fought against the Tio Kingdom and the Kingdom of Loango.<sup>43</sup> In his account published in the late seventeenth century, Dapper, who never traveled to Africa, also portrayed the hostilities of the Woyo people of Ngoyo against the Kotchi of Kakongo.<sup>44</sup> By 1631, the Kongo's province of Soyo, located in the coastal area just south of the Congo River, attacked Ngoyo. But one decade later, the Dutch continued to perceive Ngoyo as "the most aggressive of the lands north of the river, with Kakongo as its persistent enemy, but also placed it outside Kongo's control."<sup>45</sup>

Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch were in a much better position to supply Vili traders with a great variety of their manufactured cloths. In their first contacts with Loango's trade agents, Van den Broecke and the members of his crew purchased elephant's tusks with red *vierlooden*, a heavy cloth "with four lead seals indicating its high quality."<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the *Maloango*'s agents provided the merchant with twenty units of locally made palm cloth, whose unit (*kutu* or *makutu* or *makuta*) was used as currency on the Loango coast, therefore allowing the Dutch trader to purchase palm wine for his Vili commercial partners.<sup>47</sup> During the seventeenth century, like *takula* red dye, Dutch and Portuguese merchants, as well as the local population, procured palm cloth produced in the polities of the Loango coast.<sup>48</sup> During the 1640s, palm cloth was also the main adopted currency in then Dutch-controlled Luanda.<sup>49</sup> During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, visitors to the Loango coast continued to report various uses for *makutu* in the region, including as currency.<sup>50</sup>

The three main kingdoms of the Loango coast entertained exchanges not only among themselves, but also with neighboring states in the hinterland and to the south of the Congo River. In the 1590s, the Portuguese governor of Luanda sent the English trader Andrew Battell to trade in Loango. Battell's cargo included "European manufactured goods" such as blue and red cloths, Irish rugs, a variety of beads, and "looking glasses" (mirrors) with which he purchased elephants' teeth, palm cloth, and elephant tails, commodities that along with copper were the main products exported from the Loango coast states.<sup>51</sup>

The trade connections of the Kingdom of Loango encompassed a wide network spanning from the Gabon estuary in the north to the Pool

Malebo in the south, where the Teke (the inhabitants of the Teke or Tio Kingdom) were established. The Vili also sent caravans to the districts of Sette and Mayumba in the north and to Cango and Kesocuh, two eastern districts of Mayombe, to procure large amounts of ivory that they transported to the coastal area. The Vili also sent convoys to the Niari Basin to procure copper that, since the sixteenth century, they had traded with the Portuguese and then with the Dutch. This area was located between Boko-Songo and Mindouli, east of the kingdoms of Loango and Kakongo and northeast of the Kingdom of Ngoyo, near twenty-first century's southern border of the Republic of the Congo, a region spread over nearly 60 miles.<sup>52</sup> After the smiths mined, smelted, and molded the copper into the form of bars or rings, Vili traders transported it to the coast to feed their commercial transactions in Loango and Kakongo.<sup>53</sup>

As in other societies where slavery existed, in Loango, Kakongo, and Ngoyo, the ownership of enslaved individuals was regarded as a form of wealth.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, a person's position as free or slave depended on the status of his or her mother.<sup>55</sup> In these polities, enslaved people performed a variety of activities. For example, in the Kingdom of Loango, enslaved men cleared the land. They were porters who carried all kinds of commodities and transported people between different places in litters, which they carried upon their shoulders and heads.<sup>56</sup> In addition to extracting ivory, they also obtained *takula* as well as copper, which they transported from the interior to the coast.<sup>57</sup>

### 1.3 THE TRADE IN PEOPLE ON THE LOANGO COAST

During the seventeenth century, Loango, Kakongo, and Ngoyo gradually started selling enslaved individuals to the Dutch and the Portuguese. The long-existing commercial routes served as the basis for the emerging paths of the Atlantic slave trade, in which enslaved persons increasingly replaced the previously traded commodities. By 1636, Dutch merchants traded in slaves along the coasts of West Central Africa. But until the 1640s, human commerce remained marginal on the Loango coast because its states were unable to provide captives, who were mainly sought by Portuguese merchants and slave traders established south of the Congo River.<sup>58</sup> However, in the 1670s, the demand for captives increased as Dutch, English, and Portuguese merchants procured enslaved Africans for their colonies in the Americas. This new need led to a gradual and steady intensification of slave-trading activities in the region.<sup>59</sup> At the end of the seventeenth century, Dapper was already referring to the

commerce in human beings as the most important external trade activity in the Kingdom of Loango, even though ivory, copper, tin, lead, *takula*, and iron continued to be exported in the following years.<sup>60</sup>

According to Proyart, suppliers of captives and traders were not allowed to sell into slavery individuals who had been born in the kingdoms of the Loango coast, except for those who had committed a crime “specified in the law.”<sup>61</sup> These customs were similar to those in other regions in West Africa and West Central Africa, where, at least initially, enslaved peoples were outsiders; however, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this rule was often disregarded.<sup>62</sup> Proyart also emphasized that most enslaved persons sold to the French were individuals who had been captured during raids and wars being waged in the interior of the territory.<sup>63</sup> Martin identifies three main sources for enslaved individuals who were sold in the ports of the Loango coast as part of the Atlantic slave trade. The first included inhabitants of the coastal kingdoms who were being punished for crimes. The second consisted of captives taken during raids led by coastal peoples beyond the borders of their kingdoms. The third comprised individuals enslaved in the interior, who were transported to the coast in caravans along the usual commercial routes. In contrast with Proyart, Martin underscores that only a small number of enslaved individuals purchased at the ports of the Loango coast were obtained through warfare. Although recognizing that obtaining captives “involved ambush, kidnapping, skirmishes, and surprise attacks on villages, rather than full-scale war,” she insists that in the eighteenth century most enslaved Africans were acquired through traders who “brought slaves in caravans from the interior.”<sup>64</sup>

Relying on European contemporary observers and sociolinguistics sources, Christina Mobley explores the origins of captives who were deported from the Loango coast to the Americas. She emphasizes that Proyart provided a variety of exceptions, ultimately showing that in the kingdoms of the Loango coast only princes and lords who accumulated a large number of dependents were protected from being sold into slavery.<sup>65</sup> Contesting previous conclusions that placed the geographical source of the enslaved Africans traded on the Loango coast either in the Kingdom of Kongo, the inland Pool Malebo, or the upper Congo River, she argues that the peoples of the kingdoms of the Loango coast and the Mayombe forest were not middlemen, as previously assumed, but were rather the very individuals who were sold into slavery. According to Mobley, this shift provoked by the slave trade disrupted traditional political institutions.<sup>66</sup> John K. Thornton disagrees with this interpretation,

which explains the transformations in the kingdoms of the Loango coast as provoked by external trade, namely the trade in enslaved Africans. Instead, he explains these changes as the result of rivalries among local lineages seeking to take control of the state, in addition to periodic intervention of Soyo in Ngoyo's and Kakongo's political affairs.<sup>67</sup> More recently, Kathryn de Luna has added new layers to Mobley's interpretation, showing that linguistic evidence suggests that enslaved people could have originated from even further away.<sup>68</sup> However, as we will see in the subsequent chapters, these various interpretations are very probably not exclusive. Internal divisions among powerful clans who sought to control the state were not dissociated from the impact produced by the flow of material resources that was generated by the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century.

Regardless of these contrasting interpretations, moments of succession to the throne provoked disputes that led noblemen and noblewomen to be sold into slavery, as in other African societies during the era of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>69</sup> In the three kingdoms of the Loango coast, succession and inheritance followed matrilineal descent. In his account based on his travel to the region in the late eighteenth century, Grandpré reported the story of Tati, a man from Malembo who was sold into slavery in Cap-Français (also known as Le Cap) in Saint-Domingue, and then brought back home by a French slave trader. Tati was the son of Vaba, the Malembo's *Mfuka*, who married his mother, a Cabinda's princess who was also the sister of the *Maningoyo*. Despite being the son of a woman carrying the title of princess, as explained by Grandpré, his mother was not born a princess, which is why he was not eligible to become king.<sup>70</sup>

As the Atlantic slave trade emerged on the Loango coast during the seventeenth century, the king and the trade's agents established along the coast each had different roles associated with their interaction with European traders and African suppliers. Take the example of the Dutch trader Pieter van den Broecke. It remains uncertain if he met the *Maloango* in person during his three visits to the region. Yet it was clear that he needed the ruler's permission to conduct trade in the Kingdom of Loango. Moreover, obtaining permission to trade involved providing local authorities with valuable presents.<sup>71</sup> Similar to what happened in West African ports such as Ouidah in the Bight of Benin, Anomabu on the Gold Coast, and Benguela and Luanda, rulers of the states of the Loango coast relied on several representatives. Therefore, Dutch traders had many disagreements with Loango's middlemen over these "presents" that had to be paid in addition to the cost of European goods.<sup>72</sup>

## 1.4 GIFT EXCHANGES AND THE MFUKA'S ROLE

Despite disputes between European and African agents, gift exchanges were not new or specific to Atlantic Africa; they had been central to the development of diplomatic interactions since antiquity. Moreover, the practice of giving gifts to initiate trade was not original to the Loango coast. As an instrument to create ties of dependence, gift exchanges had been in place in West Central Africa before the arrival of Europeans in the region and were immediately embraced by the Portuguese in their early contacts with West Central African populations. According to the late Joseph C. Miller (1939–2019), the “[g]ivers initiated transactions to confirm the inferiority of receivers,” or in other words, “gifts constituted loans confirming the subordinated borrower’s general obligation to repay at some unstated future time and in some other, as yet unspecified, material form.”<sup>73</sup> In a much more nuanced way, historian Mariana P. Candido underscores the nature of gifts as tributes when examining the foundation of Benguela in 1617. According to her, the “payment of tributes, or gifts, as the Portuguese officially termed such exchanges, sealed diplomatic relationships and represented the right to settle temporarily in the territory.”<sup>74</sup>

A closer examination of gift exchanges on the Loango coast during the era of the Atlantic slave trade shows that gift receivers were not simple borrowers. Moreover, not all gifts were tributes. The practice of giving gifts to obtain advantage in commercial exchanges continued among the agents of the Loango coast kingdoms over the next centuries. When describing Kakongo, Dapper explained that the Portuguese and Dutch traded at its port (Malembu) the same goods they exchanged in Loango, but “are not obliged to give as much presents in order to obtain freedom of commerce.”<sup>75</sup> Although not traders, French Catholic missionaries who arrived on the Loango coast in 1768 with the hope of converting its rulers to Catholicism, reported that even a native who wanted to meet the *Maloango* had to offer him a present.<sup>76</sup> Giving gifts to local rulers and agents was also a well-established practice at West African ports on the Guinea Coast, the Bight of Benin, and the Gold Coast.<sup>77</sup> In other words, in the context of these exchanges, these gifts were paid by Europeans to local rulers and agents in order to obtain permission to engage in trade and missions of evangelization.

As in other coastal areas of West Central Africa, the trade with Europeans on the Loango coast operated through an extended network that involved European merchants, ship captains, and their crews, who interacted with a variety of African brokers and traders. These local traders made incursions into the interior, where they obtained goods that were transported by

caravans to the coast. Upon their arrival at the coast, European captains paid duties to the *Maloango* in Loango, the *Manikakongo* in Kakongo, and the *Maningoyo* in Ngoyo, which were collected by the *Mfuka*, a sort of minister of commerce.<sup>78</sup> According to a seventeenth-century vocabulary compiled by Catholic missionary Georgius Gelensis, the term *mfuka* means debt, whereas the *mfuku* refers to utility, advantage, profit, and interest.<sup>79</sup> In an early twentieth-century French dictionary of Kikongo-French, several words convey the idea of eating and paying. For example, the verb *dīa* or *dyā* means to eat, have a meal, consume, absorb, gnaw, burn, swallow, finish a dish, devour, serve, and use money. But *dīamfuka* means to go into debt, owe, assume a debt.<sup>80</sup> Likewise the word *dīuka* is the adjective from the verb *dīa* that means feed or give food or something that can be eaten (a goat, for example) as a gift. Therefore *dīukamfuka* is to give someone the opportunity to get into debt, lend to, prepay, whereas the word *kidīukamfuka* means creditor.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, the word *kūula* means redeem, pay a debt, deliver, to set free, to free (at the price of money), exonerate, pay the ransom (of a prisoner, of a slave), pay dearly (any price, however high it may be), reward, whereas *kūulamfuka* means to pay, redeem.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps future studies of the word *mfuka* may better illuminate the individual holding the *Mfuka*'s office was in charge of collecting tributes.

Appointed by the king, the *Mfuka* managed the trade with Europeans on the Loango coast. Unlike the rulers of Loango, Kakongo, and Ngoyo whose residences were situated inland, the *Mfuka* resided on the coast where trade occurred. In addition to collecting duties, he set the price of European products, and mediated occasional disputes between European merchants, local brokers, and traders.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the *Mfuka* was a slave trader, who imposed his captives on local brokers and waived taxes on selected merchants. In return, European merchants gave him gifts and advantages that contributed to his wealth. The *Mfuka* was also a broker, who selected and separated captives brought by slave traders from the interior, therefore acquiring more wealth through the development of his own private trade with Europeans. The *Mfuka* also appointed lesser *Mfukas* in other marginal trading centers situated along rivers and lakes, and in other distant centers where Europeans procured enslaved people.

Despite the *Mfuka*'s significant role, the rulers of Kakongo and Ngoyo also appointed another official, the *Mambuku*, whose role was similar to that of a prime minister (*Makaya*).<sup>84</sup> Yet, starting in the eighteenth century, it may only have been the *Mfuka* who was in charge of collecting

duties and organizing the trade with Europeans.<sup>85</sup> The Kingdom of Loango also had a *Mambuku*, but his position was that of a governor who controlled the frontier with Mayombe, an inland region comprising forests and mountains. In contrast, in Kakongo and Ngoyo, the *Mambuku* was a rich man. An important broker, he was usually second in line to occupy the throne. In Kakongo and Ngoyo, the appointment of a second official to negotiate with the Europeans may have indicated a desire to keep control of the trade because these kingdoms' capitals (where the sovereigns resided) were more distant from the coast.<sup>86</sup>

There were also other officers in the three kingdoms of the Loango coast. The *Mangovo za Ngoyo* (or *Mangove*) was a "powerful broker and wealthy man" who oversaw external affairs and introduced foreigners to the court. His aide was the *Mamputu* in charge of the relations with the Europeans.<sup>87</sup> The *Mamble* (or *Manibele* or *Mwelele*) was the king's messenger. In Ngoyo, along with the *Mamboma* and the *Mangovo*, he was a member of the regency committee who ruled the kingdom after the death of the king until the enthronement of the new monarch. The *Makimba* (or *Maquimbe*) was described by Grandpré as an officer responsible for all activity along the coast, including fishing, and whose role was comparable to that of a port captain.<sup>88</sup> Proyart, however, portrayed him as responsible for the forests and waters, and charged with inspecting "all boatmen, fishermen and hunters and it is to him that we send the fish and game that intended to the king."<sup>89</sup> The *Makimba* provided "Europeans with canoes and men to transport goods from ships to factories."<sup>90</sup> There was also the *Mambanza* (or *Manibanze*), a royal treasurer of sorts, who collected taxes and debts owed to the king.<sup>91</sup> The *Matiente* participated in the trade's organization.<sup>92</sup> As Martin emphasizes, all these officials received small amounts of goods and currencies from Europeans. Yet she also underscores that virtually anybody, including nobles, commoners, and servants, could become a broker, in other words, a middleman in the slave trade. Still, the most powerful ones were those holding an official position such as the *Mfuka* and the *Mambuku*.<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, the divine status of the rulers of the three main polities of the Loango coast, and the constraints this entailed, allowed the emergence of several officers who played the role of middlemen in the contacts with European agents trading along the Loango coast. With the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century, these individuals acquired an increasing amount of wealth. Through their growing economic power they sought to acquire political authority and to undermine the king's influence, whose mobility and ability to engage in social exchanges was already limited by numerous restrictions.<sup>94</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the rapidly increasing demand for enslaved Africans in European colonies propelled the export of the largest number of enslaved Africans from West Central Africa and West Africa to the Americas. In Brazil, the discovery of gold and diamond reserves contributed to increasing imports of enslaved Africans. During this period, the production of wheat, rice, tobacco, and cotton cultivated by enslaved people consolidated the development of slave societies in the thirteen colonies of North America that at the end of the eighteenth century became the United States of America. More importantly, the ports of the Loango coast, the region that interests us here, were directly impacted by this new context, marked by the consolidation of robust plantation economies in the West Indies that mainly relied on sugar, coffee, and indigo. During the eighteenth century, French slave merchants also started to acquire enslaved Africans in the three ports of the Loango coast in order to provide an enslaved workforce for slave-based sugar production in the French West Indies, especially in Saint-Domingue.<sup>95</sup>

Whereas the slave trade grew on the Loango coast, the *Mfuka's* wealth also dramatically increased with the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade from the eighteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>96</sup> During this period, the *Mfuka's* position acquired more importance. In the Kingdom of Loango, the sale of offices became one of the *Maloango's* main sources of income by the end of the eighteenth century. Thus, only affluent individuals could occupy the *Mfuka's* position. Moreover, in addition to purchasing the office, the *Mfuka* also paid the ruler an annual fee extracted from the tax he received on the monarch's behalf. Although originally a commoner, the *Mfuka* could marry a princess and obtain the privileges awarded to royalty.<sup>97</sup>

In the early eighteenth century, a series of wars among various western European states disturbed the Atlantic slave trade. These conflicts also impacted the slave trade on the Loango coast, where European powers competed to maintain their access to the ports supplying them with enslaved Africans. From 1703 to 1714, the War of the Spanish Succession fought by France and Spain against Britain and the Dutch Republic, as well as Prussia and Portugal, acquired continental dimensions and ultimately established Britain as an imperial power. Between 1754 and 1764, a war between the British and the French over the control of the center of the North American continent emerged. Despite initial support given to the French by most Amerindian populations, Britain won the conflict and gained control of a growing territory in the west of North America.



Meanwhile, between 1756 and 1763, in what became known as the Seven Years' War (or French Indian War), Britain and France (supported by Spain) were also fighting for the hegemony of the Atlantic region.<sup>98</sup> The war basically paused the slave trade on the Loango coast. After the end of the conflict, as established in the Treaty of Paris of 1763, Britain seized New France and Spanish Florida, and consolidated its presence in the West Indies. With the end of the Seven Years' War, and a few years later with the rise of the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), France became the dominant power of the Atlantic slave trade on the Loango coast. By this time, the economy of the kingdoms of Loango, Kakongo, and Ngoyo was solidly organized around the Atlantic slave trade.

Despite the growing European presence on the Loango coast during the eighteenth century, and unlike in West African ports such as Ouidah in the Bight of Benin or Cape Coast on the Gold Coast, or West Central African ports such as Benguela and Luanda, local rulers continued to control all dimensions of the Atlantic slave trade in the region. Prevented from constructing forts or other robust permanent settlements along the Loango coast, Europeans still needed to get permission from the *Mfuka* to establish small temporary trading posts to conduct their activities in the coastal area.<sup>99</sup> In the seventeenth century, for instance, the Dutch used *leggers* to trade along the littoral. These vessels have been described as “small yachts or barges ... that would stay anchored on the coast for a certain period of time, which could last from a few weeks to a year or longer.”<sup>100</sup> Contemporary eighteenth-century accounts reported widespread rumors of ill health, which Europeans feared during their time trading on the coast. Their improvised and temporary outposts, shared by European crew members and their captives, may have contributed to the outbreak of epidemics. Very often, the crews of the slave ships spent the night on board their own vessels, which were transformed into “holding pens,” and used the built structures just as warehouses.<sup>101</sup> However, avoiding sleeping in these provisional structures may have been a strategy to prevent possible attacks led by local agents and other European traders, a common occurrence in other ports of West Central Africa.<sup>102</sup>

### 1.5 RISING TRADE, EMERGING DIVISIONS

Unlike the ports and Portuguese colonies of Luanda and Benguela located south of the Congo River, the ports of Loango, Malembo, and Cabinda were never controlled by Portugal or any other European power.

Likewise, despite several attempts led by Portuguese (and later by French) Catholic missionaries, the rulers of the three polities of the Loango coast never embraced Christianity as did their southern neighbor, the Kingdom of Kongo. Before the arrival of the Europeans in the region, caravans departed from the Loango coast to the interior to procure a variety of commodities, including copper and ivory, which along with palm cloth and other goods used as currencies were traded with their neighbors. In the sixteenth century, the emerging kingdoms of Ngoyo, Kakongo, and Loango continued to rely on these long-existing trade networks for commercial exchanges with Portuguese and Dutch traders. As we have seen in this chapter, the first external trade of these kingdoms included providing goods such as ivory, copper, *takula*, and palm cloth in exchange for European manufactured goods such as textiles, beads, and all kinds of hardware.

As the demand for enslaved men, women, and children increased with the European colonization of the Americas during the seventeenth century, following the track of their neighbors south to the Congo River, the states of the Loango coast started to sell enslaved individuals to the Dutch, the English, the French, and the Portuguese, who after 1807 became along with the Brazilians the dominant presence in the region. As in other African slaving ports, local rulers relied on a variety of official representatives in their dealings with European merchants. However, as the slave trade intensified in Loango, Kakongo, and Ngoyo during the eighteenth century, increasing conflicts emerged among these kingdoms. As we will see in the next chapters, whereas European traders competed among themselves to obtain the best conditions to trade in enslaved Africans, African coastal commercial agents demanded special favors in the form of gifts as the Atlantic slave trade intensified. And as these agents acquired more wealth, they sought to obtain more political power and made attempts to alienate the authority of the kings. As the following chapters show, gifts of prestige increased competition among local brokers and fueled disagreements among European powers trading along the Loango coast. Such internal divisions and dependence on foreign luxury items opened a breach that favored European colonial rule in the region after the end of the Atlantic slave trade.