

Royal commemorative heads stood on ancestral altars in Benin. Art historian Suzanne Blier has described how the physical head itself was imbued with symbolism and perceived as the site of attributes connected to royal authority, such as royal destiny, wisdom, intelligence, noble character, sound judgment, and strong leadership. These artistic renderings reveal Benin's veneration of both male and female authority. The office of queen mother, believed to have been established in the early sixteenth century by King Esigie in honor of his mother, Idia, was a highly esteemed position in the kingdom of Benin. In the sixteenth century, brass heads personifying queen mothers were placed on special altars and displayed at both the primary palace and the queen mother's own home.

Although in Benin the accession of a king had to be validated by two nobles whom he could summarily dismiss afterward, in other African states kings were elected by officials. Indeed, when Europeans first encountered African rulers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they noted existing practices of election in such states as Biguba (on the coast of modern Guinea-Bissau), in Sierra Leone, and in regions around Accra on the Gold Coast (modern Ghana). The right of "election," whether actual or merely ceremonial, along with the power to check rulers was granted to representatives of specific lineages, often those considered related to the original settlers of the land.

The Christian Kongo The kingdom of Kongo in West Central Africa was founded in the fourteenth century. It was unique for its voluntary conversion to Catholicism, which occurred after the Kongolesse king Nzinga, a Nkuwu, asked Portuguese priests to baptize him in 1491. He adopted his baptismal name João I and established trade and religious relations with Portugal, allowing Portuguese merchants and priests into his kingdom. However, in Kongo, Africans and not the Portuguese controlled the church, and thus Catholic worship melded indigenous religious beliefs and practices with Christianity.

Christian beliefs, introduced by the Portuguese, complemented and reinforced local Kongo traditions, such as the cruciform (cross), which already existed as an indigenous symbol of transitional space for communication between the earthly and the divine. Kongo leaders used Christian symbols like the crucifix as vehicles for communicating with deities and ancestors. Merging the secular and the spiritual, crucifixes were used to invoke divine favor in matters such as weather, hunting, and fertility, and they were incorporated in legal proceedings and rainmaking rituals.

After King João's death in 1506, his son Afonso ruled from 1509 to 1543. He consolidated the power of the church in the kingdom of Kongo, beginning with the defeat of his non-Christian brother, who fought him for succession to the throne. Afonso's rule marked a rapid increase in the amount of trade with Portugal, a significant part of this trade being the export of slaves. Kongo reached its zenith in the mid-seventeenth century, and although it endured civil war and lost some of its centralization, it did not lose territory to the Portuguese.