



# Africa's Discovery of Europe

by David Northrup

*David Northrup is professor emeritus of the history department at Boston College. Northrup authored several histories that established him as one of the leading voices on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The excerpt below, from his book titled 'Africa's Discovery of Europe,' places the experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of Africans at the center of study, an approach that differs from many of the more Eurocentric histories of the past.*

## Secondary Source:

Africans had considerable interest in acquiring all sorts of goods in their early contacts with Europeans, by trade or other means, even though their appreciation of the value of such goods in the world market was still limited. Once trade with Europe became regular, naïve and impulsive bartering declined and sophisticated professionals on both sides calculated market exchanges closely. On the European side, large trading companies with shareholders and annual **dividends** replaced passing expeditions or bands of castaways. Coastal Africans developed their own sophisticated techniques for maintaining their bargaining strength. Europeans dominated the long sea routes that tied the continents into a new global economy, but Africans remained dominant over the land and resources of their continent.

From an early date, African rulers played a central role in regulating trade and determining fair prices. The great kingdoms of Benin and Kongo... illustrate the first phase of these relations in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Rulers in both kingdoms actively encouraged trade and tried to monopolize the profits from it. The **oba** of Benin established special markets for overseas visitors, which they had to open and close with costly presents. At first most of Benin's exports consisted of pepper, ivory, cloth and beads, but Portuguese demand for slaves for sugar plantations on the island of São Tomé led the oba in 1516 to create separate markets for male and for female slaves (each requiring separate presents to open and close). The Benin rulers adopted similar controls when they established trade with other Europeans later in the century.

## Glossary:

**dividends:** payments to stockholders from a company's profits

**oba:** term used for the ruler of Benin and several other African Kingdoms of this time period

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Whereas the oba of Benin remained in control of the monopoly and effectively used his power to regulate the trade's volume and content, this was not true of the king of Kongo, whose kingdom produced little that Europeans wanted besides slaves and whose control was less absolute. ...King Alfonso was soon lamenting the destructiveness of the slave trade as it slipped from his control. His letters to his royal brother, the king of Portugal, in 1526 seeking aid in ending the slave trade are **poignant**, but that was not his final position. Although Alfonso's pleas failed to change Portuguese policy, the destructive effects of the slave trade within his kingdom soon **abated** for other reasons. First, Alfonso's wars with the neighboring kingdom of Tio generated a ready supply of foreign captives to be sold abroad. Then Tio itself began to sell slaves it obtained from still further inland at such low prices that the kidnapping of slaves within Kongo that Alfonso had complained about largely ceased. No longer suffering the loss of his own citizens, Alfonso came to regard the trade that passed through his capital as beneficial, as it employed Kongo middlemen and required purchases of the nzimbu shells that were Kongo's currency. In these changed circumstances Alfonso wrote again to the king of Portugal in 1540 expressing a very positive view of their mutual trade: '[N]o king in all [of coastal western Africa] esteems the Portuguese goods so much or treats the Portuguese so well as we do. We favor their trade, sustain it, open markets, roads and Mpumbu [an area where many slaves were traded].' As this letter's quite different sentiments suggest, the ruling and commercial elites of Africa saw advantages of the trade with Europe that, when properly managed, far outweighed the disadvantages.

### Glossary:

**poignant:** sad; touching

**abated:** decreased