EARLY KONGO-PORTUGUESE RELATIONS: A NEW INTERPRETATION

John Thornton
University of Zambia

I

One of the most durable myths of the history of central Africa is that of the early subversion and domination of the kingdom of Kongo by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Its original statement was made by James Duffy in 1959 and was amplified by Basil Davidson two years later.\(^1\) According to this argument the Portuguese had found a well-developed kingdom of Kongo when they reached the mouth of the Zaire River in 1483, and had entered into an alliance with the ruler. The alliance, first made with king Nzìnga a Nkuwu (baptized as João I in 1491) and strengthened and continued with his son Mvemba a Nzìnga (better known under his baptized name of Afonso I, 1506-1543) involved a partnership in which Portuguese settled in Kongo and provided technological and military assistance to Kongo in exchange for trade, mostly in slaves. As a result of this exchange Kongo adopted Christianity, and for a time the two kings addressed each other as "Brother." But the alliance, despite its good beginning, was rapidly upset by the greed of the Portuguese settlers, who saw the situation merely as an opening for quick riches through the slave trade. As a result the higher aims of the Portuguese court were subverted—first because the Portuguese, with a higher level of development, were able to benefit from their position more than Kongo; secondly because Lisbon was unable to control its settlers in Kongo or São Tomé. In the end there was a massive involvement of Portuguese in Kongoese affairs and a breakdown of authority in Kongo. Ultimately the Portuguese abandoned Kongo to establish their colony in Angola, leaving the ruined semi-colony in Kongo to vegetate and gradually decline into chaos.\(^2\)

It was not long before the presentation of Duffy and Davidson met with attacks, especially from Africanists. Writing in 1965 and dealing with the history of Kongo, Jan Vansina pointed out that, far from collapsing under Portuguese contact, Kongo continued more or less intact until well into the seventeenth century.\(^3\) David Birmingham likewise presented a somewhat more balanced picture of Portuguese activities in

\[\textit{HISTORY IN AFRICA, 8(1981)}\]
Kongo and Angola, which again emphasized Kongo's resilience. In any case, the image of a Kongo destroyed in the sixteenth century by Portuguese interference was contradicted by abundant seventeenth-century documentation showing a strong, centralized, and independent monarchy. Whatever the Portuguese motives might have been, and no matter how much they had tried to interfere in Kongo or create a puppet king, in the long run they had not succeeded in doing so.

Despite these early objections to the contrary, however, the myth of Kongo's destruction at the hands of the Portuguese managed to live on and it still turns up in textbooks. In large part this survival is due to the fact that the African side of the relationship has been more fully examined than the Portuguese side. Thus Africanists such as Vansina or Birmingham had discovered by careful use of the documents that Kongo had not been destroyed, but they had not gone on to investigate the real nature of the Portuguese operations in Kongo. Instead, they had more or less relied on the received interpretation of Duffy and Davidson as it applied to the Portuguese, while correcting it with regard to the results of this activity in Kongo. As a result there developed a consensus among Africanists, as well as other historians, that the relationship between Portugal and Kongo was essentially a tense and hostile one, despite the good beginnings. The Portuguese, out of Lisbon's control and anxious to make fortunes in Kongo, worked against Kongolese interests, lived dissolute lives, and engaged in political trickery in the new interpretation just as in the old, the only difference being that the Africanist historians saw the result as being less disastrous for Kongo.

Later Africanist historians who have followed Birmingham or Vansina have kept up much in the same tradition. For both Georges Balandier and W.G.L. Randles, the fundamental question of sixteenth-century Kongo history was the involvement of the Portuguese in Kongo and its effects. Balandier saw much of Kongo history in terms of a colonial situation, or at least a semi-colonial one, while for Randles the central point in the historical development and periodization of Kongo history was the arrival of the Portuguese and the "Christian Revolution," despite last-minute doubts expressed in his conclusion. This concentration on Luso-African relations diverted attention from internal historical processes going on within Kongo which ultimately proved to be more important for the periodization of Kongo's history. The ultimate result has been a picture of Kongo that is static and relies heavily on exterior impact to keep its historical momentum going. This orientation has reinforced a tendency found in many historians of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Kongo to present an idealized structure of Kongo based on documents and ethnography from a variety of historical periods and seemingly locked into one position for all time.

While later historians have relied heavily on Duffy or Davidson for their understanding of Portuguese motivations and
behavior, they have failed to see that neither of these writers gave the sixteenth-century Portuguese documentation the kind of systematic reading necessary to document the period properly. Duffy's remarks on Kongo were really only an opening section by way of introducing a much more detailed study of Portugal in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For his part Davidson was trying to show the evil effects of the slave trade in Africa or engaging in analysis of later Portuguese colonialism. Both writers were in fact making polemical points concerning Portugal's colonial policy and using the earlier material to support their conclusions. Both had thus begun from the perspective of modern Africa and had projected those relations back into earlier centuries and, while both had taken considerable trouble to understand modern Portugal, neither had made the same sort of study of Portugal in the sixteenth century.

One result of relying on the works of authors such as Duffy and Davidson has been to introduce a serious anachronism into the study of Luso-Kongolese relations. Sixteenth-century events have been interpreted as if they had occurred in the immediate pre-colonial days of the late nineteenth century, or even during the post-colonial era of the twentieth century; the familiar image of a growing industrial power from Europe confronting pre-industrial Africa or of the neo-colonialism of post-independence Africa is evoked. The image is accurate enough for the periods to which Davidson or Duffy primarily addressed themselves in their studies but it is not adequate, we would argue, for the sixteenth century. A number of false analogies have been raised and, while modified by the Africanist historians, they have not been fully overthrown in subsequent work.

Another problem which remains unresolved is that of understanding the context of the documents themselves, which requires a fairly detailed knowledge of sixteenth-century Portuguese society. Since the letters and reports which form the bulk of the primary sources were generated by or for contemporaneous Portuguese society understanding that society is essential to being able to read these documents sensitively. Africanists have developed fairly good techniques for detecting bias and evaluating comments as they apply to European descriptions of African society, and it is from such a critical approach that the revision of Kongo's history during the period has been made. But they have generally not concerned themselves with making a similar critical reading of the documents as they apply to the Portuguese. Neither Duffy nor Davidson attempted such an exercise in using sixteenth-century documents, but simply quoted from them in support of their contentions, while the Africanists have been unduly trusting in accepting such a reading for the basic understanding of Portuguese activities.

It is therefore necessary to undertake the work of examining Portuguese society in the sixteenth century, first to solve the question of how the interactions of Europe with Africa in this period did or did not resemble those of later
periods, and then to set the proper context for reading the
documents themselves. Doing this will give us a much different
version of Luso-Kongolese relations in the sixteenth century
and, it is hoped, will also allow us to begin to build a
critical methodology for examining other documents of the era
as they pertain to such relations elsewhere in Africa.

II

Many writers have taken for granted that sixteenth-century
Portugal was more or less like a modern European colonial
power and that Kongo was like the various African states that
had encountered colonial expansion toward the end of the nine-
teenth century. This is more or less explicit in the formula-
tions of Duffy and Davidson, and still quite visible in the
more specialist Africanist writing such as that of Randles and
Balandier. To what degree was this actually the case?

A complete answer to this question would involve a com-
plicated comparative exercise concerning relative levels of
development and their significance. There can scarcely be
said to be any sort of consensus among historians on the issue
of relative development, in any case, or by what indices one
might judge such a concept. Nevertheless, it is clear that
"commercial capitalism"--the term used to describe the economic
base of expanding Europe--was by no means the industrial
capitalism of the nineteenth century. In fact I believe that
Portuguese and Kongoese society were much more similar to
each other than many students of Kongoese history believe,
at least similar enough to allow us to abandon the idea of
economic domination (translated into political domination) of
Kongo by Portugal in the sixteenth century.

The fact that Portugal possessed more developed marine
technology, firearms, and building technology--and these were
the very things that Kongo most wanted from Europe--does not
necessarily imply that Portugal had a decisive structural
advantage over Kongo. In more fundamental ways Kongo and
Portugal were more or less on the same economic level. Both
were monarchies ruled by kings and a class of nobles in which
relations of kinship, clientage, and influence dominated the
political system. Although both had attained a high degree
of political centralization, life in rural areas went on in a
way not very different than in centuries past. Productivity
in neither society was high by modern standards but, to judge
from the comments of European visitors to Kongo, Kongo's
productivity was equal to or higher than that of most of Europe.
This was, of course, only relatively high productivity, since
agricultural production in Europe was itself very low in the
sixteenth century. Famine and pestilence were as prevalent
in Portugal as they were in Kongo, and such indicators of
health as life expectancy or infant mortality, while dismal
by modern standards for both countries, were scarcely much
different from each other.

Even in commercial matters, where the crux of most analyses
of the relations between the two countries is found, there was
little to distinguish the two. For example, both possessed general-purpose monies—gold and silver in Portugal and monetary cloth and nzimbu shells in Kongo—but neither possessed "modern money" in the sense that this term is generally used in economic or anthropological literature. Both also possessed international currencies, in that gold and silver were widely accepted throughout the world, while cowrie shells, which circulated in Kongo, had a wide circulation in Africa and Asia as well. The two countries solved the problem of the non-convertability of their currencies by evolving a rather complex system of currency exchanges and credits. The nature of this working arrangement can be gleaned from a "letter of credit" which Afonso I drew up for his brother Manuel, travelling to Rome as his ambassador in 1540. Afonso asked for a grant of 5,000 cruzados, and in exchange created a credit of 150 kofu of nzimbu for the King of Portugal in Kongo. Other such money matters in the mid-sixteenth century were handled by the Kongolese factor in the city of Lisbon, who for some fifteen years was António Vereira, a noble Kongolese resident there.

Portugal's commerce benefited mostly from her superior transport technology, which enabled the Portuguese to move products from one market to another quickly and cheaply by ship. Much of the western Africa trade was handled by just such inter-regional exchanges, and in Kongo direct service as soldiers or priests also earned the Portuguese some of their income. The flow of gold from the Gold Coast to Portugal was managed in part by exchanging copper bought in Kongo for slaves in Benin which were in turn sold to Akan traders for gold. Some of the copper from Kongo may have been purchased with cowries obtained in the Maldives, and imported to west and central Africa since the beginning of the sixteenth century. In this way the Portuguese manipulated the money market of the southern hemisphere in much the same way as the Spanish manipulated the silver market of the northern hemisphere. The outcries of later Kongo kings against the reduction of their revenue by the flooding of the country with foreign monetary shells resembles in many ways a similar body of literature generated in sixteenth-century Europe over the influx of "Spanish Silver."

Finally, with regard to the terms of trade, it has often been remarked (and this point has been fully developed by Davidson) that the slave trade led to a whole variety of ills in Kongo, including depopulation and the undermining of royal prestige. This point must be placed in the context of the history of the kingdom, however. Kongo had long been developing through the forced movement of human labor from neighboring and peripheral areas of the kingdom to the center and capital of Mbanza Kongo, and this population movement was a key factor in its centralization. That a portion of this population movement was diverted to the Portuguese in exchange for goods or services was a logical aspect of the whole development, especially since it was often Portuguese soldiers who assisted in acquiring the manpower in the first place. However, it
must be noted that once Kongo had developed fully toward the end of the sixteenth century, it was no longer a center of the slave trade, and seventeenth-century sources stress that slaves were rarely obtained in Kongo. In this respect Kongo resembled Benin, which had also acquired slaves and sold them to the Portuguese in exchange for military assistance during their wars of expansion, but had also dropped out of the slave trade by the early seventeenth century. Like Benin, too, Kongo made most of her exchange with the Portuguese in cloth, which the Portuguese re-exported to other parts of Africa in order to acquire slaves. Kongo thus had complete political control over its own development, and trade considerations were always secondary to the main logic of this development, which was dictated by internal needs and not by external pressures from trading partners.

In short, we can see that, while Portugal had some advantages in navigational techniques, these must not be interpreted as being a fundamental, structural advantage such as the Industrial Revolution was to afford European countries in the nineteenth century. In most respects Kongo and Portugal were of the same world, and these similarities in basic economic and social structures can go a long way to explain why Kongo found it easy to adopt so many Portuguese practices (especially religion and literacy). It can also explain why each society was fairly open to penetration by the other, and why members of one society could operate in the other with a sense of familiarity.

III

Once we have established that Kongo and Portugal were not actually relating to one another in the familiar terms of the immediate pre-colonial era of the nineteenth century, we can turn to a more detailed analysis of the primary sources generated by the different periods. We are then less likely to see twentieth-century relations reflected "between the lines" of the letters and documents of the sixteenth century. This is important to establish, because it is possible to read these letters in just such a way if they are taken out of their sixteenth-century context. This is why so many modern historians have seen evidence of Portuguese subversion and domination in Kongo in the letters of complaint from Kongo kings (especially those of Afonso I), denunciations of the lives and practices of the resident Portuguese community, and other accounts of Portuguese involvement in Kongo politics.

Reading a body of documentary evidence requires understanding why it exists, especially if the evidence in question is not consciously intended to be history—that is, when it consists of letters, reports, and other official documentation rather than chronicles or narratives. Chronicle sources do illuminate periods prior to about 1520, but for later periods and especially for the crucial aspects of Luso-Kongo relations, it is letters and reports that form the bulk of the evidence. These were generated by the requirements and social dynamics of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century
Portuguese society, especially in the overseas area, and it is essential to have at least a rudimentary knowledge of the social nature of this period to read the documents correctly.

Marian Malowist has demonstrated that, while all classes in Portugal participated in the expansion, it was the nobility that led it and from early times dominated it. Expansion was not undertaken by a free-booting group of "merchants" or "bourgeoisie," but was a tightly-controlled movement under the leadership of the highest social groups in Portugal. New discoveries or lands were normally granted by the crown first to the discoverer or some other notable of middling rank. Later it might revert to a high noble as a feudal tenure, but ultimately it would end up under direct control by the crown.

Taking São Tomé as an example, we can see how this pattern developed. The land was first given to Alvaro da Caminha with orders to settle it and make it a paying colony. On his death in 1499, however, it was then granted to Fernão de Melo, a member of the royal household rather than to da Caminha's heirs. Although the grant to Melo was supposed to be perpetual as well, the crown decided in 1522 to remove it from his control and place it directly under royal authority—and from that time it was governed by a captain sent on short term from Portugal as the king's representative. Thus lower-status people had undertaken the risky and difficult tasks of early settlement, only to lose out to those of higher status once they had succeeded in their task, and finally when a particular place was fully developed, the crown stepped in and assumed full control.

Just as the social status of the leader of the Portuguese community in overseas settlements changed, so did the positions of the rank-and-file community of settlers and residents. In a country still imbued with feudal ideas, people were normally tied by blood or service to a higher status patron. The patron supplied positions and income to his clients—his "creatures" ("criados" in Portuguese)—and they in turn did his work and watched out for his interests. The two were thus closely bound up with each other and the fall or transfer of a patron often meant hard times for his clients as well. In this way a change in the status of the leader of a Portuguese overseas community often meant radical changes in the lives of the clients. Suddenly they were ruled by a new person, who normally had his own clients, who in turn would shoulder the clients of the previous patron out. Often the two groups would struggle, occasionally violently, over the positions, lands, or titles in question, with the normal result being victory for the new patron, who after all had royal backing. Obviously pained protestations to the crown in writing was one of the features of this struggle, and such types of literature form one part of the documentation of the era left to us. Another part of the literature, growing out of the other side of the struggle, is the slightly sanctimonious report of the new patron, announcing his actions to put the grant in order, and denouncing the local residents whose lives he is in the process of disrupting.
Accounts of struggles between new patrons and old clients do not exhaust the documentation of the era, however, for there were also similar struggles between more or less equal patrons in competition for a particular area. For example, the clerical establishment, led by the bishop if the area had an episcopal see, might contest with the governor or captain and the secular establishment. At the same time, lower levels of the clergy or separate religious orders might contest with each other and with the bishop. Likewise, other royal officials—judges for example—might have powers and jurisdictions overlapping with those of the captain or governor.

Finally, regions that had many common grounds of interest might be placed under separate leaders, each with monopolistic powers that would allow them to control and exclude the other leaders. This situation naturally led to frequent violations of monopoly, such as those reported by Antônio Carneiro, captain of Príncipe against the clients of Fernão de Melo, who had violated his monopoly on the trade of the "Five Rivers of Guinea" (Benin and the Niger Delta). Each of the participants in all these complex struggles might write to the crown, making reports or denunciations of their enemies, and creating a distinctive body of documentation which is left for the historian of today to decode.

Reading the corpus of such letters and reports from any region in the Portuguese empire rather quickly gives the impression of gross corruption on the part of the royal officials, an impression gained from reading the denunciations of displaced patrons, competing grantees, or royal judges. Similarly one gets the impression of flagrant insubordination on the part of the subjects (a product of reading captains' and governors' official reports) and of a venal and worldly clergy (from the reports of bishops and other religious orders) oppressed by high-handed bishops (created by the complaints of lower clergy). To some extent the picture is probably true—the sixteenth-century was indeed full of corruption—but one must be wary of exaggerating both its extent and significance. On the one hand, most of the documentation was written by interested and prejudiced parties and was subject to exaggeration and distortion. On the other hand, it is clear from the lists of complaints in question and the judgments made—when judgments were made at all—that a great deal of what would be considered corrupt today was considered perfectly licit in the sixteenth century. A good example is the inquiry into charges made against the Bishop of São Tomé, Manuel Cão, in 1571, in which a wide variety of trading operations (using the traveling vicars as agents) were obviously considered normal. The fact that so much of the complaint literature was resolutely ignored by the crown indicates how seriously it was regarded by the royal authorities.

Afonso I of Kongo, whose letters form the backbone of much of our understanding of Portuguese behavior in central Africa at this time, wrote very much as would any high-ranking official who had received a hereditary fief with monopolies.
Indeed, the agreement between Kongo and Portugal which gave Afonso a monopoly of all trade out of his section of the African coast made him like such a feudatory although obviously, as an independent sovereign, his rights could not be removed. Much of his complaint writing concerns violation of this monopoly by Fernão de Melo's clients from São Tomé, by António Carneiro's from Principe, and by interlopers based in Ndongo with São Tomé connections. Indeed, placing his letters of complaint into the context of many other similar letters would show them to be virtually indistinguishable from the others, say for example, the complaints of António Carneiro against the violation of his trade of the "Five Rivers" by Fernão de Melo.

Afonso's (and his successors') epistolary skills came from a thorough understanding of how things functioned in the Portuguese system. There were two causes of such a deep understanding: first, the Kongolese had themselves become involved deeply in Portuguese affairs and thus needed to master the skills of dealing with that system; secondly, the basic similarities in the social and political systems of the two countries made acquiring such skills relatively easy. Understanding these aspects of Afonso's position makes him appear much less the tragic hero that some have portrayed him, and will also render the sources of this period more easily understandable.

Kongolese penetration of Portuguese society and mastery of the skills required by a high-born participant started with the arrival of Kongolese students in Lisbon for education in 1493, even before Afonso's ascent to the throne. Here they saw first-hand much of Portugal and Portuguese upper class society which they, as Christian nobles (in the eyes of their hosts), were entitled to join. This is evidenced in the gifts of clothing and other benefits given them, since such donations were a fundamental element of Christian noble hospitality in the late fifteenth century. Many more students followed, and many of them returned to Kongo, so that the Kongolese government was doubtless thoroughly up-to-date, not only on Portuguese social structure, but also on events of the day. They and other Kongolese were numerous enough in the Portuguese capital by the time of King Diogo I (1543-61) to have one of their number acting as royal factor, collecting debts, and assisting them in presenting cases to Portuguese courts. Antonio Vereira, the factor in the 1550s and a Kongolese of noble blood, eventually married into the royal household of Portugal, an accepted right for a man of his status and position.

In addition to their presence in Portugal, Kongolese were also present in São Tomé. Describing the island in about 1550, a Portuguese pilot noted that there were numerous black planters there who were rich and whose daughters often wed Portuguese residents. Some may have been descendants of freed slaves, but some must also have been Kongolese nobles who had settled there. A man who might have made such connections as a Kongolese student in Lisbon signed a petition on behalf of the clients of Alvaro da Caminha's heirs in 1499. That same
JOHN THORNTON

year da Caminha's will provided for a slave to be left on São Tomé for "Dom Pedro de Manicongo."\textsuperscript{52} Afonso I had sufficient interests in São Tomé to have his own shipping to the island, managed in 1526 by two Kongo noble, Luís Eanes and Pero Fernandes, who were also members of the royal household.\textsuperscript{53} When Afonso asked João III of Portugal to make him a grant of a ship, he was refused on the grounds that he had already been using Portuguese shipping as if it were his own.\textsuperscript{54} Afonso had asked that the ship be delivered by a certain Rodrigo de Santa Maria, one of his relatives, who probably owned land on São Tomé and retired there when politics forced him to flee Kongo. His international connections were sufficiently developed by then that he was entrusted by some plotters in Kongo with the task of obtaining a Papal bull in their favor.\textsuperscript{55}

Thus the kings of Kongo were not only well informed about Portuguese society, but they were deeply involved in it. The natural outgrowth of this deep interest was an equally well-developed skill in dealing with it on its own terms, and indeed creating terms favorable to Kongo. It was probably this early development of Kongo interest in São Tomé that prompted Afonso I to request that he receive the island as a grant from the king of Portugal.\textsuperscript{56} He was aware that non-Portuguese had in fact been granted islands and positions in Portuguese possessions in the Azores and Madeira, so that the grant need not violate Portuguese precedent too much—although it must be noted than none of these early non-Portuguese grantees were sovereigns of foreign countries, and the grants were made in the full understanding that they be loyal only to the Portuguese crown.\textsuperscript{57} In any case, the request was a serious one, and not totally naive, as Davidson seems to assume.\textsuperscript{58}

Understanding Portuguese society on the part of Kongo monarchs was helped by the similarities in social structure, which made it easy for Kongo to assimilate many of the superficial aspects of Portuguese culture. We have already noted the similarities in basic economy and society, and to this we can add similar notions of sovereignty, born of similar political patterns. For example, Afonso styled himself as "King of Kongo and Lord of the Ambundos" and this contrast of King and Lord continued in the royal titles of Kongo rulers in their official correspondence.\textsuperscript{59} The doublet of King–Lord corresponded in turn to an equivalent doublet in the King of Portugal's titles, in which he used the same form to contrast areas over which he claimed direct sovereignty with those over which he exercised some power or perhaps a trade monopoly, but not sovereignty, such as the "Commerce and Conquest of Guinea."\textsuperscript{60}

An analysis of the regions included in Afonso's area of Lordship indicates that the concept applied to the Portuguese titles was useful in his titles as well. Some regions such as Kisama, the Suku, or Ndongo were fairly remote and contemporary documents show only a very light Kongo presence which was often hotly contested. These regions might or might not have been included in descriptions of Kongo's borders, such as that of Duarte Lopes, but the doublet title shows that the Kongo ruler
exercised a very different and weaker sort of claim to those regions. Although he might term the inhabitants "vassals," they were never considered a real part of the administrative center of Kongo.

This point is relevant for it sheds light on one of the most important documents dealing with the Portuguese presence in Kongo. This is the letter series of 1526 in which Afonso claims, among other things, that the Portuguese king's vassals had made his vassals richer than he and caused them to be less obedient, to the point that they had taken to seizing Kongoles as slaves—even including nobles and members of the royal household. This one strand of evidence has been taken as proof that the Portuguese merchants in Kongo connived with the nobility of the provinces to upset the authority and centralization of Kongo, which led to decentralizing tendencies which eventually broke out in disastrous civil wars after 1665. However, the key issue is the use of the word "vassals," which, while it might correspond with direct subjects such as the Kongolesie nobility in Portuguese usage of the sixteenth century, could also mean those nobles living in and ruling the states of the area of simple Kongolesie "lordship." The latter is rendered more likely by the fact that descriptions of Kongo from a somewhat later period made no mention of a disloyal provincial nobility; in fact a detailed analysis of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Kongo shows a very loyal provincial nobility, with the Portuguese presence in Kongo bearing very little relation to the breakup of the kingdom well over a century after Afonso wrote.

More probably the vassals in question lived in the growing kingdom of Ndongo, where Portuguese had come to settle, and where Afonso had complained of their violation of his monopoly rights over the trade of the area—rights which he claimed under his title of lordship. Ndongo had been a rising power since its formation in the middle of the fifteenth century, some fifty years after Kongo's rise began but before the Portuguese arrived. Its ruling house claimed to have originated in Kongo. This probably reflected matters of prestige rather than any actual relationship, but at least one document does suggest that it had been sufficiently humbled to pay a nominal tribute to Kongo. Certainly since the reign of ngola (king) Kiluanji kia Ndambi who had conquered much of the land between Ndongo's original center in the Luanda plateau near the Lukala and the coast, early in the sixteenth century Ndongo had become an independent force. But this power had been born without Portuguese aid, for it was this same Ngola who first met the Portuguese and in 1520 asked for priests to come to his land. Portuguese from São Tomé had assisted the Ndongo rulers in their wars, including perhaps, wars against Kongo in which the nobles and members of the royal household to which Afonso referred in 1526 were captured. But Portuguese merchants did not create Ndongo's ability to resist Kongo, nor did they plant the idea of revolt, and Afonso's complaint was not really that they did, but only that
they had violated his claim to lordship over the area. In this respect, Afonso's letters to Portugal must be taken in the same light as Portugal's complaints about English and French "interlopers" on the Gold Coast in the late sixteenth century. To interpret it as a sign of incipient "desatellization" of Kongo provinces is to fail to see it in its proper context.

A more fundamental similarity in political structure between Kongo and Portugal than just notions of sovereignty were those of nobility and service in the patron-client relationship. For example, in Kongo blood and marriage ties were important in determining status, and kinship units formed important political factions. Alongside this concept of nobility was one of service, and Kongo had patron-client relations similar to those of Portugal. This is made clear in a judicial inquiry made at the order of King Diogo I in 1550 into a plot hatched against him some years earlier. Here we find one of the plotters, Pedro Nkanga a Muika sending messages through a trusted client, while he promises other clients and relatives positions in the government when he succeeds. It is quite clear that he greatly feared Diogo's group of relatives and clients, who were getting all the positions in Kongo at the expense of Pedro's kin, who collectively bore the name of Kibala. Although Kongo possessed a hereditary landed nobility (as did Portugal) they were loyal, and the bulk of the landed positions and court titles were in the hands of the king's family and clients. In short Kongo had a social and political environment that would be very familiar to a Portuguese arriving there in the sixteenth century, and obviously this in turn helped the Kongolese who participated in Portugal's society.

The fundamental similarities go a long way to explain the basis of Portuguese society in Kongo, and they can illuminate the correspondence and reports concerning the Portuguese there. This literature of complaint and report is somewhat different from that generated in a Portuguese colony like São Tomé, where the crown was always basically in control, for in Kongo a ruler completely independent of Portugal operated his own patronage chain separate from that coming from Portugal and under its king. Kongo's patronage net included Portuguese who entered Kongo's service as clients of the king, which paralleled one led by royal officers sent from Portugal to oversee the behavior of the Portuguese community in Kongo. This new conflicting jurisdiction, like those in other parts of the Portuguese empire involving secular and clerical authorities or different grant holders, created a new and different cycle of correspondence, one made more interesting by the fact that the Kongo king himself participated in it.

In theory the Portuguese community in Kongo was under the supervision of a high-ranking official appointed by the crown. In early years this was the leader of the various political-military-religious expeditions sent in 1491, 1509, and 1512. Later a capitão mor was placed in charge on the usual short-term appointment from Portugal. The clerical community was
nominally under the charge of a priest sent with them, but others came as vicars of priests stationed on São Tomé. After the appointment of a bishop of São Tomé in 1534, the clerical community in Kongo nominally fell under his control. As in São Tomé, other officials and messengers occasionally came from Portugal and they might have overlapping functions with people already in place or, as was the case of the Jesuits, they would conflict with the secular clergy and the bishop. Kongo's kings generally respected in principle all these various Portuguese officials' claims and positions, but often they became involved in the struggles of their own Portuguese clients with royal appointees. In a place like São Tomé the hierarchy of status was fairly clear, even if jurisdictions were not, but in Kongo this hierarchy was upset because Portuguese of fairly low birth might rise to become important nobles in Kongo, even to the extent of becoming members of the king's household, thereby holding more status in Kongo than many of the high officers in Portugal's service might hold in Portugal. Several Portuguese attained such a status in Kongo under King Diogo I, and Afonso probably honored his clients in the same way.

Alvaro Lopes for example became nominal head of the Portuguese community in 1512 and found to his cost what the locally-installed Portuguese could do. Diogo Fernandes, a local resident, obtained judicial powers from Afonso to parallel those of Lopes and used them to harass the commander to the point where in a rage Lopes killed Fernandes. Although he respected Lopes, Afonso extradited him to Portugal to stand trial. Local clerics could also make good against their supposed superiors from Portugal in this way. Manuel Afonso, a priest who rose to become personal confessor to King Diogo I, successfully frustrated both the travelling vicars from the bishops of São Tomé and the Jesuits in their attempts to gain control of the clerical community of Kongo. Thus the normal powers of the Portuguese overseas were disrupted. High-status Portuguese found themselves frustrated in Kongo as could never have happened on São Tomé.

This circumstance resulted in a rather long and vituperative series of denunciations by royal captains and higher clergy. The Jesuits, who worked in Kongo from 1548 to 1555, wrote a long string of letters complaining of the "immorality" of the local Portuguese community, both clerical and lay. So great was the evil of this community, they wrote, that the king of Portugal should order them all withdrawn. A similar denunciation was repeated by the capitão-mor of the same period, Diogo Rodrigues, who proposed the same solution. If one takes these reports seriously, as many historians have done, it appears that the Portuguese in Kongo were unruly and undisciplined and the clergy dissolute and immoral. In fact, all it really shows was that upper status Portuguese were unable to have their way in Kongo as they had on São Tomé.

The local community of Portuguese did occasionally write petitions on their own behalf to the king, as a group did in
denouncing the behavior of the royal factor Fernão Rodrigues Bulhão in 1541. Just as often, though, the king of Kongo himself, as their principal patron and protector of their interests did the denouncing. Afonso I's request in 1528 that the community of Portuguese be extensively reorganized was probably just such a request on behalf of his clients. The appointment of a council (which included one of his Portuguese clients) to oversee the export of slaves would allow loyal client Portuguese leverage to prevent their enemies from damaging them, as well as giving Afonso's Portuguese clients a weapon to hurt the same enemies. Of course it also allowed Afonso better control to tax and oversee the slave trade from Kongo. Likewise the request that he be granted a bishop would allow him to protect the Kongolese clerical community (of both Portuguese and Kongolese nationality) from interference by outside higher clergy, as well as giving him the power to reward his clients. In that same year Afonso also threatened to expel all the Portuguese from his kingdom. While this might be interpreted as a general anti-Portuguese measure, it was more probably intended to include just the immediate subjects of the king of Portugal, and meant only royal agents or clients of captains on São Tomé or Príncipe. Loyal Portuguese clients would no doubt be unaffected and would remain in their posts. In the end Diogo I, after a long struggle with both the capitão-mor and the Jesuits--not to mention the conflicting jurisdiction of São Tomé and the Bishop--obtained for his clients the right to elect their own leader, subject only to Diogo's approval. His expulsion of the Jesuits two years later did much the same for his clerical clients. Again, an unduly literal reading of the participation of the Kongo king in the intrigues of status groups of Portuguese in Kongo can give the false impression of a ruler being exploited by a group of unscrupulous foreigners.

The fact that the great bulk of available documentation for this period consists of letters, reports, and complaints also distorts historical reconstruction. Since Kongolese only chose to write to Lisbon on matters that concerned the Portuguese king, the surviving documentation naturally deals almost entirely with the Portuguese community. The internal affairs of Kongo are less well known because the Kongolese archives, known to exist by the mid-sixteenth century, have not survived. Nor do we have for the sixteenth century long reports and letters of resident missionaries, such as those of the Jesuits in the early seventeenth century or the Capuchins of the middle and late seventeenth century. The fact that most of the documentation we can see for the sixteenth century deals with the affairs of the Portuguese in Kongo or the requests of Kongolese kings made in Portugal can easily exaggerate the significance of the Portuguese community in Kongo. It is doubtful that by mid-century they numbered over fifty in all. An inquiry which was conducted among all the whites in Kongo in 1548 listed only a dozen residents—presumably only the biggest patrons.
the end of the century Domingos de Abreu e Brito estimated that there were 100 whites in Kongo, although his context suggests that he might have wanted to exaggerate.91

The small number of Europeans combined with their visibility in Kongo made extralegal or illegal activities difficult. Despite this, however, they are often said to have played a major role in Kongo politics. But this assertion is undermined by a more careful look at the documentation. Of course, political activity would certainly be reported, so that the surviving documentation is bound to exaggerate their political role somewhat. However, we must also realize that they generally functioned in Kongo as clients of Kongolese. Normally this Kongolese patron would be the king himself but at times, especially during the struggles for succession to the Kongolese throne that broke out at the death of a ruler, more than one Kongolese might have Portuguese clients. Their role in performing dirty work for their patron was bound to involve them in Kongo politics, since their patrons were inextricably caught up in the intense political activity of the succession struggle. One of the most celebrated incidents involved a shooting incident at Kongo's church in 1540 in which a group of Portuguese attempted to kill Afonso I.92 Afonso was by then an old man, probably over 80, and it was clear he had only a little longer to live. Consequently the succession struggle was already beginning, and later testimony showed these Portuguese were in fact working with a group of Afonso's relatives.93

Equally revealing is the role of Portuguese in the struggle following Afonso's death in 1543. For example, the widespread plot to overthrow Diogo I, who won the initial struggle with Afonso's son Pedro I, is well known thanks to a detailed inquiry made by Diogo when it was discovered sometime before 1550. In this document Portuguese do only low-level work such as carrying messages, and the really significant work of raising armies was done by Kongolese.94 Even in the task most likely to have fallen to a European, that of obtaining a Papal bull recognizing Pedro as legitimate king of Kongo was given to a Kongolese, Rodrigo de Santo Maria, whose international connections were equal to the task.95

Another struggle in which Portuguese were involved took place on the death of Diogo I in 1561 when Portuguese supported one candidate and helped to murder another but again the evidence suggests Portuguese working on behalf of Kongolese patrons, and suffering the fate of failure—a massacre of the plotters occurred shortly afterwards.96

IV

We can see then that placing the surviving corpus of documentation on Kongo's relations with Portugal in the sixteenth century into its social context reveals a much different set of relationships. Because the only useful surviving documents are found in Portuguese archives and quite naturally deal with Kongo's relations with Portugal,
the role of the Portuguese in Kongo's history is inevitably exaggerated. Taking this point and then reading the documents in the context of the society with generated them (or for whom they were generated) gives us a rather different interpretation, in which status and jurisdictional conflicts predominate over diplomatic interaction or outraged protest. Many historians have failed to consider this Portuguese dimension of the documents, and this has led to a two-fold distortion of the history of this period. On the one hand they have failed to see how the form and language of the documents fit into contemporaneous Portuguese society, while on the other hand they have placed this misreading next to an anachronistic analytical framework more appropriate to nineteenth-century Euro-African relations than to sixteenth-century ones. This double misunderstanding has then led historians to accept an apparently well-documented and solid interpretation of Kongo's history, when the interpretation is in fact based on a much weaker foundation. I have tried to redress this imbalance by developing a source criticism for Portuguese documentation, using Kongo as an example. This methodology need not be restricted to Kongo alone, however; it might well be applied to Portuguese documents for other parts of Africa as well.

NOTES

* An earlier version of this paper has benefited from comments by Linda Heywood, Joseph Miller, and colleagues and students at the University of Zambia. MMB = António Brásio, Monumenta Missionaria Africana, (11 vols.: Lisbon, 1952-71).


2. Neither Duffy nor Davidson present exactly this chain of events, but this represents a summary of what might be called the "Kongo myth" as it has developed over the years in a number of writers' work. Its major elements, however, definitely derive from Duffy and Davidson's original formulation.


6. The most recent textbook reproduction of this version is J.D. Fage, African History, (New York, 1978), 238-40. Davidson's continued writing in textbooks has contributed a great deal to the myth's life; e.g., Davidson, A History of East and Central Africa to the Late Nineteenth Century, (London, 1967).


10. Both, we might add, had relied heavily on the earlier Portuguese historiography to construct the sixteenth-century situation. For its part this Portuguese historiography was a highly polemical attempt to prove long and deep Portuguese influence in central Africa, in support of claims to rule the area. See the literature cited and critiqued by Vansina, *Kingdoms*, 41.


18. For a working definition of primitive money, widely accepted by students of monetary history, see Paul Einzig, *Primitive Money*, (London, 1949). Since European money in the sixteenth century circulated by weight only (no face values were attached, nor was there a concept of fiduciary value) they must be counted as primitive, along with shells, beads, hoes, salt blocks, and the like.


Diogo I to Diogo Gomes, 15 August 1546, *MMA*, 2:149.

For example Portuguese received some of the captured slaves when helping in wars: Afonso to Manuel I, 14 October 1514, *MMA*, 1:312-13; for salaries to technicians, same to same, *MMA*, 1:306.


Thorton, "Social Formation."

See especially Afonso to Manuel I, 14 October 1514, *MMA*, 1:302-03.

Olfert Dapper, *Umbestündliche und Eigentliche Beschreibung von Africa*, (Amsterdam, 1670), 556-57. This was Dapper's own translation of his 1668 Dutch edition.


The Chronicles of Rui da Pina, Garcia de Resende (who copied da Pina) and Damiao de Gois cover the period up to about 1520. João de Barros' chronicle mentions events as late as Afonso I's death in 1543, but he provided few details on the later periods. The bulk of the evidence comes from the Corpo Chronologic section of the Arquivo Nacional do Torre do Tombo in Lisbon, which is itself a somewhat random collection of documents from the early to middle sixteenth centuries. See A.F.C. Ryder, *Materials for West African History in Portuguese Archives*, (London, 1965), 9-10.


Charles Verlinden, "Formes féodales et dominales de la colonisation portugaise dans la zone atlantique, XIVe et
37. See petition of residents of São Tomé on behalf of da Caminha's heirs, 1499, MMA, 1:165.
38. Jácome Leite to King, 31 January 1554, MMA, 2:343-47.
40. Sentence in favor of Manuel Cã, 14 March 1571, MMA, 3:7-34.
42. See inquiries conducted for António Carneiro on Príncipe, 24 August 1517 and 19 November 1526, MMA, 1:412-13 and 465-67.
43. Sentence in favor of Manuel Cã, 14 March 1571, MMA, 3:7-34.
44. Afonso I to Manuel I, 15 October 1514, MMA, 1:294-323; Afonso to António Carneiro, 5 March 1516, MMA, 1:359-60; correspondence cited in Birmingham, Trade and Conflict, 32-35.
45. See note 42 above.
46. Order for clothing for Kongolese students, 10 December 1493, MMA, 1:157.
47. See the hospitality accorded the Bohemian traveller, Leo of Rozmital in Portugal, Malcolm Letts, The Travels of Leo of Rozmital Through Germany, Flanders, England, France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy 1465-67, (Cambridge, 1957), 104-123.
48. The careers of Pedro de Sousa, Henrique (Afonso's son), and Rodrigo de Santa Maria illustrate the travels of highly-placed Kongolese in both Europe and Kongo. MMA, 1-3, passim.
49. Diogo I to Diogo de Campos, 15 August 1546, MMA, 2:149; Petition of Afonso, nephew of King of Kongo to legitimize his daughter Angela, MMA, 2:240-41; António Vereira to Dona Catarina, 18 April 1566, MMA, 2:543-44; Anonymous report (of Jesuit origin), 1553, MMA, 2:330.
51. Clothing order, 10 December 1493, MMA, 1:157-58 and petition in favor Alváro da Caminha, 27 June 1499, MMA, 1:164. The connection must be considered speculative since it is based on the identity of a João Gonçalves in both places—but
João Gonçalves is a common name.

52. Will of Alvaro da Caminha, 24 April 1499, MMA, 1:159.
53. Documentary fragments, ca. 1526, MMA, 1:481. Luís Eanes is identified as a member of Afonso's household in João III to Afonso, ca. 1529 (actually written about 1531), MMA, 1:521.
54. João III to Afonso, ca. 1529 (1531), MMA, 1:527.
56. Afonso to Manuel I, 15 October 1514, MMA, 1:294-323.
58. Davidson, Black Mother, 137-38.
60. Afonso to João III, 4 December 1540, MMA, 2:100.
61. Filippo Pigafetta, Relazione del Regno di Congo et della Circonvince Contrade..., (Rome, 1591), 10-24. Pigafetta's source was Duarte Lopes, a Portuguese who had lived in Kongo from 1578 to 1583.
62. Afonso to João III, 6 July 1526, MMA, 1:470.
63. This notion is found in greater or lesser degree in most histories of Kongo, even those of the Africanists. Normally research has focused on the mechanism whereby this disintegration took place from an early period, one of the most recent and influential being Kjasa Ekholm, Power and Prestige: The Rise and Fall of the Kongo Kingdom, (Uppsala, 1972).
64. Thornton, "Kingdom of Kongo;" idem, "Social Formation." Note that the 'standard' descriptions of a tightly-controlled monarchy come not from sixteenth-, but from seventeenth-century sources.
65. Birmingham, Trade and Conflict, 32-5 cites the relevant documents.
68. Cavazzi, Istorica Descrizione, II, no. 131.
69. Pierre du Jarric, De l'histoire des Choses Les plus memorables advenues tant en Indes Orientales que autres pays de la decouverte des Portugais..., (3 vols.: Bordeaux, 1608-13), 3, 81. It was probably this ruler who sent for priests--his request arrived in Lisbon in 1520. Regimento to Baltazar de Castro and Manuel Pacheco, 16 February 1620, MMA, 1:434. Heintze dates his reign from 1515(?) to 1557, "Angola," 756.
70. Du Jarric, 3, 81, mentions early wars--to Cavazzi full Portuguese involvement did not seem to come until the 1550s, Istorica Descrizione, 2:131.
71. John W. Blake, European Beginnings in West Africa, 1454-
72. Thornton, "Social Formation."
73. Inquest of Diogo I, 10 April 1550, MMA, 2:248-62.
74. Thornton, "Social Formation." See the inquest cited
in note 73.
75. The expedition of 1491: Rui da Pina, Chronica d'El Rei
D Joao in MMA, 1:135-36: of 1509; Armada de Gonçalo
Rodrigues, MMA, 4:60-62: of 1512; Regimento to Simão
da Silva, MMA, 1:241.
76. Afonso to João III, 9 February 1530, MMA, 1:542-43,
receiving Jerónimo de Lião.
77. Cf. the mission under João de Santa Maria, George Cardoso,
Agiologio Lusitanio, 1666, III, MMA, 1:86, 99. Damião de
Góis in MMA, 1:373-74.
78. See for example the services performed for the bishop,
Manuel Cão by Sebastião do Souto, a vicar to Kongo, which
included purchasing goods on his behalf. Sentence in favor
of Manuel Cão, MMA, 3:24. See also Afonso I to João III,
28 December 1535, MMA, 1:53; Manuel Pacheco to João III,
28 March 1536, MMA, 1:57.
79. The Jesuits and their problems with the clerical establish-
ment is documented at length in MMA, 2, passim for the
period 1546-56. Also see the summary in Vansina, Kingdoms,
60-64.
80. The list of names produced by the anonymous author (probably
a Jesuit) of immoral Portuguese in Kongo is probably an
excellent survey of those Portuguese who had risen to
high status in Diogo's Kongo: three--Cristóvão Ribeiro,
Jorge Afonso and Belchior Dias--were magistrates, MMA,
2:330.
82. Cristóvão Ribeiro to Francisco de Barros de Paiva, 25
January 1549, MMA, 2:221-23.
83. Information on Kongo, 1553, MMA, 2:332-33.
84. Diogo Rodrigues to Dona Catarina, 16 October 1558, MMA,
86. Afonso's letters to João III, 1526, MMA, 1:459-81 passim.
88. The existence of archives can be surmised from the fact
that, although Diogo's inquest into the plot against him
was made in 1550, it was pulled out of files and copied in
order to be transmitted to Portugal two years later, MMA,
2:248.
89. Furthermore, the documentation is incomplete and its rapid
diminution after about 1560 is due to problems in survival,
and not a lack of interest in Kongo on the part of the
Portuguese throne. The widely-held view that the
Portuguese had diverted attention from Kongo to India by
the end of the sixteenth century can not therefore be
supported by a simple shortage of documents.
90. Inquiry into the trade of Angola, 12 November 1548, MMA,
2:198.
You have printed the following article:

Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation
John Thornton
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0361-5413%281981%298%3C183%3AEKRANI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-V

This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.

Notes

8 Review: Anthropologists and the Third Dimension
Reviewed Work(s):
*La Vie quotidienne au royaume de Kongo du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle (Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo from the 16th to the 18th Century)* by G. Balandier; H. Weaver
J. Vansina
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%28196901%2939%3C62%3AAATTD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R

Demography and History in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1550-1750
John Thornton
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8537%281977%2918%3C507%3ADAHITK%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Q

19 The Cowrie Currencies of West Africa. Part I
Marion Johnson
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8537%281970%2911%3A1%3C17%3ATCCOWA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8

NOTE: The reference numbering from the original has been maintained in this citation list.