A Note on Jean-Baptiste Douville.
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Résumé

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Jean-Baptiste Douville’s alleged mémoire of two extensive journeys through west-central Africa in the years 1828-1830 continues to intrigue historians, not only because of the romantic and mysterious quality of this French traveler’s life but also because his book—if authentic—may contain valuable information about the far interior of Angola at a period when few other sources allow more than occasional glimpses of the history and culture of the people who lived there. M. Douville’s credibility, long in disrepute, has recently received renewed support in an article by Anne Stamm published in this journal. Ms. Stamm has developed ingenious methods of verifying the accuracy of Douville’s data on the climate, geography, politics, and society of the area he claimed to have visited, and her analysis indeed shows that many names (toponyms, titles of political officials, etc.) appear in print for the first time in Douville and only later make their entry into the accounts of other travelers. She also demonstrates that Douville’s descriptions of the geography of the Angolan interior often included verifiable details. But she is repeatedly forced to admit that Douville’s book occasionally shows signs of wild fabrication, which she explains as evidence only of partial falsification. Her overall judgment is that Douville did travel to most of the areas he claimed to have visited and only occasionally relied on hearsay to fill out his personal experience.

Although Ms. Stamm might have uncovered several names she believes appeared first in Douville’s book in earlier publications if she had consulted some of the older materials on Angola, both those published before Douville visited Angola and several other manuscripts known to informed Portuguese but not published at that time, there is really no point in undertaking the lengthy textual comparisons which would be necessary to establish however speculatively what information he might have gleaned from the writings of others. The Portuguese who traveled

through the Angolan interior in the first third of the nineteenth century knew a great deal more about the area than many government officials in Lisbon or Luanda realized, and several accounts, discovered somewhat later, attest to the extensive knowledge then available from oral Portuguese sources on the entire area which Douville claimed to have traversed.1 Douville need not have completed the journey described in his Voyage au Congo to have learned most of what appeared in his book but might merely have spent three years in the territory administered by the Portuguese.

The fact that Douville could have acquired most or all of his information from Portuguese in Angola, does not prove, however, that he fabricated his account from such sources. Three documents in the Arquivo Histórico de Angola (AHA) cast almost conclusive doubt on his claims to have ventured beyond the Portuguese presidio of Pungo Andongo.2 Douville claimed in his mémoire to have stayed in Pungo Andongo only from May 22 to June 21, 1828; afterwards he allegedly traveled in a wide circle through the highland regions south of the Kwanza, touching the coast at Benguela, before returning to the Angolan capital at Luanda. He then supposedly made a second secret trip in 1829-30 through the regions north and east of the Portuguese colony; secrecy, he wrote, was necessary because the Portuguese seemed to distrust his intentions.

Comparison of dates on which Douville wrote that he had been in Matamba, Kasanje, and the area east of the Kwango with the documents in the AHA reveals that the French traveler in fact remained in Pungo Andongo during most of the time his book shows him elsewhere. Douville’s mémoire shows that he arrived in Matamba on May 4, 1829, and remained until sometime in early June. On the 28th of April 1829, Governor Nicolão de Abreu Castelo Branco confirmed that Douville was in Pungo Andongo at that time, awaiting bearers to accompany him on a proposed trip to Kasanje. He had asked for more bearers than local Portuguese authorities were willing or able to provide, and he had requested that they go all the way to Kasanje with him. The governor directed the regente at Pungo Andongo to provide as many bearers as he could (an implicit directive to comply with Douville’s demands in as minimal a fashion as possible), but to permit them to go only as far as the non-vassalized territories to the east. After that, Douville would have to shift for himself.

Douville claimed to have spent most of the month of June 1829 in Kasanje (June 6 until early July). A July 18, 1829, letter from the governor confirmed, however, that Douville still remained stranded in Pungo Andongo, unable to arrange bearers to transport his belongings on his projected journey to Kasanje.

1. João Monteiro de Moraes, Catalogo dos governadores de Angola (first published in the Coleção de Notícias para a História e Geografia das Nações Ultramarinas, III, 1, Lisboa, 1825); R. J. da Cunha Matos, Compendio histórico das possessões portuguesas na África (first published in Rio de Janeiro, 1963); Alfredo de Albuquerque Felner, Angola: apontamentos sobre a colonização dos planaltos e litoral do sul de Angola, Lisboa, 3 vols., 1949; and numerous documents subsequently published in the Arquivos de Angola and the Anais do Conselho Ultramarino (parte não oficial, Lisbon, 1856) testify to the growing knowledge of the interior but do not reveal the much greater amounts of information available from unlettered pumbeiros, moradores with long experience in the interior, and African traders from the interior. An inspection of the documents available in the Arquivo Histórico de Angola makes plain the extensive gap between popular oral accounts and the much less informative written descriptions which reached Luanda and Lisbon.

2. Letters from Governor of Angola, Nicolão de Abreu Castelo Branco to the Major Regente do Presídio de Pungo Angongo, Bento Pinheiro Falcão, Luanda, 28.4.1829, 18.7.1829, and 2.10.1829; Códice A-21-3, Arquivo Histórico de Angola (Luanda); cf. Arquivo Histórico de Angola, Roteiro topográfico dos códices (Angola, Instituto de Investigação Científica de Angola, 1966).
By that time, he had lost the confidence of both the regente in Pungo Andongo and the governor in Luanda. Governor Castelo Branco instructed his subordinate (on the basis of information provided by the regente in a letter not preserved in the archive) not to provide more than a bare minimum of bearers and to send an official escort with them to make certain that Douville did not abuse them. Apparently, Portuguese officials had reason to doubt his honesty, since the governor further instructed the regente to make certain that the bearers were paid. The governor acknowledged the regente’s complaint that Douville had been causing some unspecified sort of trouble for the local authorities in Pungo Andongo and added that rumors current in Luanda doubted that the Frenchman was a “scientist” as he claimed but rather had some vague sort of ulterior motive. These rumors probably sprang from Portuguese xenophobia, rampant at the time in Angola, about foreign traders on the coast. In any case, the Pungo Andongo regente was to send Douville on his way within three days, either back to Luanda or preferably, with thinly disguised hostility, to send him on toward the dangerous regions beyond the sphere of Portuguese control.

Douville’s journal showed that he crossed the Kwango in the first part of July and remained there until April 1830. The last letter bearing on his affairs in Pungo Andongo proves, however, that he remained at the presidio as of October 2, 1829, and had become associated with certain unspecified clandestine activities of a Candido de Almeida Sandoval. Sandoval had been in the Pungo Andongo jail several times and had managed to escape on every occasion, in some instances with the aid of Douville. The would-be French explorer had clearly worn out his welcome, and the governor ordered his immediate expulsion from the region.

The three letters touching on unhappy experiences in Angola raise more questions than they answer. If they prove that he was not venturing into the unknown interior when he claimed, they leave open the question of how he obtained the information which he later wrote up in the form of his *Voyage au Congo*. Pungo Andongo in the 1820’s and 1830’s was the major jumping-off place for Portuguese merchants who, with their African agents, traded both south of the Kwanza in the region of Douville’s alleged first journey and also east across the Kwango where he claimed to have traveled while he in fact remained in Pungo Andongo. Douville would have had little difficulty in obtaining news and information about the interior from Portuguese and pombeiros returning to that site. It is possible to speculate that sustained inquiries of this sort lay behind the suspicious rumors in Luanda about Douville’s real intentions; he could not have helped but raise the distrust of merchants jealous of their contacts in the far interior through his evident intent to go to some of their most profitable markets. Nor do the documents give any indication of the nature of Douville’s and Sandoval’s clandestine activities in Pungo Andongo. Ms. Stamm’s suggestion that Douville was engaged in illegal slave trading receives confirmation from his proposed destination, since Kasanje was the richest single slave source in the interior; this may explain why he encountered Government opposition, but the documents give no final answer. They also fail to explain how and under what circumstances he finally left Pungo Andongo. Douville now appears as a victim of circumstances he could not control, since he apparently intended to go to Kasanje and would presumably have tried to cross the Kwango if he could, as well as the perpetrator of a fraudulent travel account.

Aside from the issue of M. Douville’s personal reputation, the more important questions raised by Ms. Stamm’s article concern the way in which historians should use his *Voyage au Congo* as a source of information on early nineteenth century Angola. The documents would seem to dispose of the question of whether or not Douville actually made the journey he claimed, but they do not necessarily eliminate the value of his account for modern scholars. Some of his information, if gleaned from Portuguese or African merchants personally familiar with the
regions south and east of Pungo Andongo, may still be useful as accurate but second hand data. That dealing with the areas known best to me (Kasanje, Cokwe, Lunda, etc.) rings fairly true for Portuguese activities in these regions but almost totally false (despite Ms. Stamm's arguments to the contrary) for ethnographic data on Africans. Detailed refutation of this part of Douville's account, if it is still worth the trouble, must await another occasion.