

Letter to Thomas M. Steele

Livingstone, David, 1813-1873

Published by Livingstone Online (livingstoneonline.org)

[0001]

[Exploration into the Interior of Africa by
the Re Dr Livingston. Communicated by Lt Col Steele FRGS
Read June 12.]

Town of Sekeletu, Linyanti 20th September

1853

My dear Colonel

As soon as I could procure people willing to risk a journey through the country lately the scene of the gallant deeds of the Boers, I left Kuruman, and my companions being aware of certain wrathful fulminations uttered by General Peit Scholtz to deter me from again visiting the little strip of country which the Republicans fancy lies between Magaliesberg and Jerusalem, our progress was pretty quick till we entered latitude 19°[at a place that I have marked on my map as the Fever Ponds] . Here the whole party, except a Bakwain lad and myself, was laid prostrate by fever. He managed the oxen and I the hospital through the goodness of God, the state of the invalids permitted us again to move Northwards, I did not follow our old path but from Kama kama travelled on the magnetic meridian [(N.N.W.)] in order to avoid the tsetse. This new path brought us into a densely wooded country. The grass was from 8 to ten feet high, the greater leafiness of the trees shewed we were in a moist climate, and we were most surprised by the presence of vines growing luxuriantly and yielding clusters of dark purple grapes. The seeds, as large as split peas, and very astringent leave but little room for pulp though the grape itself is of good size. The Bakwain lad now became ill, but by the aid of two Bushmen, we continued to make some progress. I was both driver and road maker, having either the axe or whip in hand all day long till we came to Lat 18° 4 . Here we discovered that the country adjacent to the Chobe was flooded - looked like rivers, and after crossing several we came to one - the Sanshurch - which presented a complete barrier to farther travelling with waggons. It was deep. 1/2 a mile broad and contained hippopotami. After searching in vain for a ford our two bushmen decamped. Being very anxious to reach the Makololo I took [one of] the strongest of our invalids crossed the Sanshurch in a small pontoon, kindly presented by Messers. Webb and Codrington, and went N.N.W. [across the flooded country] in search of the Chobe. After splashing through about 20 miles of an inundated plain, we came to a mass of reed which towards the N.E. seemed interminable. We then turned [for a short distance] in the direction of our former waggon stand and from a high tree were gratified by a sight of the Chobe. But such a mass of vegetation grew between the bank and the flowing river, [that] our utmost efforts failed in

procuring a passage in [to it] - the water among the reeds either became too deep, or we were unable to bend down the barrier of Papyrus & reed bound together by a kind of convolvulus. You will understand the nature of our struggles when I mention that a horrid sort of grass about six feet high and having serrated edges which cut the hands most cruelly, wore my [strong moleskin] "unmentionables" quite through at the knees, and my shoes (nearly new) at the toes. My handkerchief protected the former, but in subsequent travelling through the dense grass of the plains the feet fared badly. Though constantly wet up to the middle during the day, we slept soundly by night, during the three days we spent among the reeds, and ~~having~~[only] effected a passage in[to][the open water of the Chobe] on the fourth day. fter paddling along the river in the pontoon about 20 miles we discovered a village of Makololo. We were unexpected visitors and the more so since they believed that no one could cross the Chobe[from the south bank] without their knowledge .

[0002]

In their figurative language they said "I had fallen on them as if from a cloud, yet came riding on a hippopotamus" (pontoon) . A vague report of our approach had [previously] reached the chief, and two parties were out in search of us but they had gone along the old paths. In returning to the waggons which we did in canoes and in a straight line we found the distance not more than ten miles. Our difficulties were now ended, for a great number of canoes and about 140 people were soon dispatched from the town. They transported our goods and waggons across the country and river, and when we had [been landed on the other side of the Chobe, we travelled]gone Northward till within about one day from Sesheké in order to avoid the flooded lands [adjacent to the River, we then struck upon]on the other side of the Chobe, we reached the town by the path which M^r and I travelled on horseback in 1850 [and turning into it proceeded South West until we came to Sekeletu's town Linyanti] Our reception here was as warm as could have been expected. The chief [Sekeletu] not yet nineteen years of age, said, he had got another father instead of Sebituane, was not quite sure, however, about learning to read. "He feared it might change his heart and make him content with one wife only as in the case of Sechele" . It is pleasant to hear objections frankly stated, ~~and heartsickening to deal with gelatinous characters who agree with everything you say. In one of my first interviews with Sechele, he asked "if what you say be true, how was it that your forefathers allowed all my forefathers to pass away without once sending to let them know"!~~ When I proposed to Sekeletu to examine his country to ascertain if there is a suitable locality for a mission, he consented frankly, but he had not yet seen me enough. Then he could not allow me to go alone, some evil might me and he would be accountable . [A] This and Fever caused some delay - ~~but when we did set out, though our company~~ consisted of 160 men, our fleet of 33 canoes proceeded rapidly up the river towards the Barotse. I had the choice of all the canoes and the best was 34 feet long and 20 inches wide. With six paddles we passed through 44 miles of latitude by one day's pull of 10 1/2 hours. If we add the Longitude to this, it must have been upwards of 50 miles actual distance . The river (~~called everywhere~~Lecambe viz the River) is indeed a magnificent one. It is often more than a mile broad, and adorned with numerous islands of

from three to five miles in length. These and the banks too are covered with forest and most of those [trees] on the brink of the water send down roots from their branches like the Banian. The islands ~~and at~~ [at] a little distance seem rounded masses of sylvan vegetation of various hues, reclining on the bosom of the glorious stream. The beautiful [y] [of the] scene is greatly increased by the date palm and lofty palmyra towering above the rest and casting their feathery foliage against a cloudless sky. [D] The banks are rocky and undulating and the water being now low navigation was rendered dangerous by rapids and cataracts. The former are not visible when the river is full but the Cataracts of Kalé , Bombwe & Nambwe are always dangerous , the fall is from four to six feet in perpendicular height. But the Falls of Gonyé (hard g.) excel them all. ~~omit Their chief peculiarity consists in the rock which forms one bank below the fall jutting out and presenting its shoulder to a portion of the torrent. The water thus dashed into a chasm and against the rock sends up a cloud of spray on which are reflected the colours of the rainbow. We waded through 100 yards river in order to reach the rock . This and portions of the river on the other side form fine cascades. The Heathen who went with me viewed the scene with awe. Some exclaimed "How grand the works of God are"! others washed their faces in the spray as a charm, while those of the Utilitarian school searched the holes in the rock for round stones to grind snuff. I ought to have mentioned that [I] t [T] he~~ main fall [of this] is over a straight

ledge of rock about 60 or 70 yards long and 40 feet deep. Tradition reports the destruction [in this place] of two hippopotamus hunters, who, too eager in the pursuit of a wounded

animal, were with their prey drawn down into the frightful gulph. And we digged some yams in what was said to [have] been the garden of a man who of old came down the river and led out a portion of it here for irrigation - superior minds must have arisen from time to time in these regions but ignorant of the use of letters they have left no memorial. One never sees a grave, nor a stone of remembrance set up. The very rocks are illiterate they contain no fossils. [F] In the bed of the river they are of sandstone hardened and porphoritic basalt. All the beautiful parts of the river are infested by Tsetse but when we come to the Northern confines of Lat. 16° the tsetse suddenly ceased. The high banks covered with trees seem to leave the river in the shape of ridges of about 300 feet high. hey stretch away to the N N E & N.N.W. they are from 20 to 30 miles apart - the intervening space or valley is the Barotse country proper, and it is annually inundated not by rains but by waters, one portion of which comes from the N.W. and the other from the North. There are no trees in this valley except such as were transplanted for the sake of shade by the chief Santuru. It is covered with coarse succulent grasses, one of these is 12 feet high and as thick as a man's thumb. he villages and towns are situated on mounds some of which have been formed artificially. he site of Nahiele the present capital was so constructed. This was not the antient capital. [G] The river now flows over its site and all that remains of that which cost the people of Santuru the labour of many years, is a few square yards . As the same thing has happened to another antient site the river seems weaving Eastwards. Ten feet of rise above low water mark submerges the whole valley except the foundations of the huts and two feet more would sweep away the towns. This never happens though among the hills below the valley the river rises 60 feet and then floods the lands adjacent to Sesheke on both sides. The valley contains a great

number of villages and cattle stations - these and large herds of cattle grazing on the succulent herbage, meet they eye in every direction . On visiting the ridges above mentioned we found them to be only the commencement of lands which are never inundated. they are covered with trees and abound in fruitful gardens in which are cultivated sugar cane sweet potato, two kinds of manioc, two kinds of yam, bananas, millet &c . Advantage is taken of the inundation too - to raise large quantities of maize and Caffre corn of large grain and beautiful whiteness. These with abundance of milk and plenty of fish in the river make the people always refer to the Barotse country as the land of plenty. No part of the country can be spoken of as salubrious. The Fever must be braved if a mission is to be established. [it is very fatal even among natives] I have had eight attacks of it the last very severe, but I never laid by. I tried native remedies in order to discover if they possessed any valuable means of cure

[0004]

but after being stewed in vapour baths, smoked like a red herring over a fire of green twigs in a hot potsherds, and physicked secundem black artem I believe that our own medicines are more efficacious and safer, I have not relinquished [the search] and as I make it a rule to keep on good terms with my professional bretheren I am not without hope that some of their means of [re]establishing the excretions, and to this indeed all their efforts are directed, may be well adapted for this complaint.

I did not think it my duty to go towards Mosioathuny-a, for though a hilly country the proximity to Mosilikatze renders it impossible for the Makololo to live there, but I resolved to know the whole Barotse country before coming to the conclusion now reached, that the Ridge East of Nariete is the only part of the country that can be fixed on for a mission. I therefore left Sekeletu's party at [Nariete] the Barotse capital and went Northwards . The river presents the same appearance of low banks without trees till we come to 14° 38. Lat. Here again it is forest to the water's edge and Tsetse . I might have turned now, but the river Londa or Leeba comes from the capital of a large state of the former name, and the chief being reported friendly to foreigners. If I succeed in reaching the west coast and am permitted to return by this river, it will be water conveyance for perhaps 2/3^{ds} of the way. We went therefore to the confluence of the Leeba or Londa (not Lonta as we have written it) with the Leeambye . It is in 14° 11 South. the Leeba comes from the N & by W. or N. N. W. while the Leeambye there abruptly quits its Northing and comes from the East Nor East. (the people pointed at its course due East. Are the Maninche or Bashukulompo river & Leeambye not one river dividing and meeting again down at the Zambesi?). The Loeti with its light coloured water flows into the Leeambye in 14° 18 . It come from Lobale which is probably a country through [which] a Portuguese merchant informed me he [had] passed, and had to cross as many as ten considerable rivers in one day. the Loeti comes from the West N. West . The current of the Leeambye is rapid - 100 yards in 60 seconds of time or between 4 & 5 miles an hour. Our elevation must have been considerable but I had to regret having no means of ascertaining how

much it was. The country flooded by the river ends on the west bank before we reach the Loeti and there is an elevated table land called Mangoon which grows grass but no trees. The Barotse country when inundated presents the appearance of a lake from 20 to 30 miles broad and 100 long. [K page 6] ~~H go on at K The above is I suspect quite enough on the physical features of the country I am afraid to launch out into its moral and political aspects. It would be like writing a book but I shall condense that which I have still to say and hope you will get comfortably through with it at a sitting.~~

The daughter of Sebituane[had] resigned the chieftainship into [- Sekeletu,] her brother's hands .

From all I can learn she did it gracefully and sincerely. Influential men advised her to put Sekeletu to death lest he should become troublesome when he became older. She turned from their proposals in disgust, called a meeting and with a womanly gush of tears said she had been induced to rule by her father but her own inclination had always been to lead a domestic life she therefore requested Sekeletu to take the chieftainship and allow her to marry .

[0005]

He was equally sincere in a continued refusal during several days, for he was afraid of being cut off by a pretender who had the audacity to utter some threatening words in the assembly. I do not [now] wonder at the resolution of Sebituane's daughter, having just come off a nine weeks ' tour in company with a crowd who would have been her courtiers . There was no want of food, oxen were slaughtered almost every day in numbers more than sufficient for the wants of all. They were all as kind and attentive to me as they could have been to her, yet to endure their dancing, roaring, and singing, their jesting anecdotes, grumbling, quarrelling, murdering and , equalled a pretty stiff penance. These children of nature gave me a more intense disgust to Heathenism and a much higher opinion of the effects of missions, among tribes in the South which are reported to have been as savage as they, than I ever had before.

The pretender above referred to [at Sekeletu's accession and at the time of my arrival] believing that he could effect his object by means of a [Portuguese] slave merchant and a number of armed Mambari, encouraged them to the utmost, the selling of children was [had been] positively forbidden by the lawful chief [Sekeletu]ut

his rival transported the slave trading party across the Leeambye[River] and gave them full permission to deal in all the Batoka and Bashukulompo villages [to the] East of [it.] ~~the river.~~ A stockade was erected [at Katongo] and a flagstaff for the Portuguese banner planted

and in return for numerous presents of ~~Sekeletu's~~, ivory and cattle, [that really belonged to Sekeletu] the pretender

a small cannon. Elated with what he considered success he came down here with the intention of murdering [Sekeletu himself]~~the chief~~, having no doubt but that [after]having

effected[ing] this, he should by the aid of his allies easily reduce the whole tribe. We met him in our way to Sesheké [as we travelled there from Linyanti] and a very slight circumstance served to

derange the whole conspiracy. [The pretender]He carried a battle axe with which he had arranged

with his confederates to hamstring Sekeletu as a signal, when he rose up from

their first interview. I happened to sit down between [him and the pretender]~~the chief and him~~ and

soon feeling disposed to retire for the evening, said to Sekeletu Where do we sleep tonight ?

He replied "come I will shew you." We rose together and my body

covering that of Sekeletu the attempt was not made - the accomplices

came and revealed the whole in the evening. "If what you say you know to be true"

answered Sekeletu "Take him off" . He was instantly led forth and executed. In a

hut close by. I knew nothing of it till the following day, others deeply implicated

were afterwards put to death in the same offhand way, and when I remonstrated

against shedding human blood, the counsellors calmly replied - "You see we are

still Boers, we are not yet taught." Another [Portuguese slave] merchant came from the West.

He

remained here only three days and finding no market departed. A large party of

Mambari was encamped by ~~the town~~ [Katongo] about the time of our arrival [at Linyanti] - no

slaves were sold to them and when they heard that I had actually crossed the

Chobe, they fled precipitately. The Makololo remonstrated, saying, I would do

them no harm, but the Mambari asserted that I would take all their

goods from them because they bought children. The ~~other~~ merchant [I first spoke of] had

probably no idea of the risk he ran in listening to the tale of a disaffected

underchief, [he was now in his stockade at Katongo and]~~but~~ influential men proposed to expel

both him and the

Mambari from the country. reading the results which might follow a

commencement of hostilities, I mentioned the difficulty of attacking a stockade

which could be defended by perhaps forty muskets. "Hunger is strong

enough" said an underchief "a very great fellow is he" . As the chief sufferers

[in the event of an attack] would be the poor slaves [...] in gangs I interceded for them and

[0006]

as the result of that intercession, of which of course they are ignorant

the whole party will be permitted to depart in peace. But no stockading will

be ~~permitted~~[allowed] again.[C]The Makololo quote the precedent of Santuru who when

he ruled this country was visited by Mambari, but refused them permission

to buy his people as slaves. This enlightened chief deserves a paragraph

and as he was a mighty hunter you will glance at it with no unfriendly eye .

He was very fond of rearing the young of wild animals in his town and

besides a number of antelopes, had two tame hippopotami. When I visited his

first capital the people led me to one end of the mound and shewed me some

curious instruments of iron which are just in the state he left them. hey

are surrounded by trees all of which he transplanted from the ridge. "On these "

said the people " Santuru was accustomed to present his offerings to the gods

(Barimo - it means departed souls too) . The instruments consisted of an upright

stem having numerous branches attached on the end of each of which was

a miniature axe or hoe or spear. Detached from these was another which

seemed to me to be the of a basket hilted sword. When I asked if I might

take it as a curiosity - "Oh no he refuses" Who refuses? " Santuru" this seems to

shew a belief in a future state of existence. After explaining to them the nature

of true worship and praying with them in [our] simple form which needs no

offering on the part of the worshipper except that of the heart. We [planted some fruit tree seeds &] departed

in connection with the faith of these savages. [...and 100 long][Continued from H page 4

K] I may relate another

incident which happened at the confluence of the Leeba and Leeambye . Having taken Lunar Observations, we were waiting for a meridian altitude for the Latitude before commencing our return. My chief boatman was sitting by in order to bind up the instruments as soon as I had finished. here was a large halo round the sun about 20° in diameter . hinking that the humidity of the atmosphere which this indicates might betoken rain I asked him if his experience did not lead him to the same view. "O no " said he "It is the Barimo who have called a "pecho" (assembly) Don 't you see they have placed the Lord (sun) in their centre"[continues this at K][K]

Some of the Mambari visited us subsequently to their flight [of which I spoke before] - they speak a dialect very much resembling the Barotse - they have not much difficulty in acquiring the dialects ~~of each other~~ even though but recently introduced to each other. hey plait their hair in threefold cords & arrange it down by the sides of the head. They offered guns and powder for sale at a cheaper rate than traders can do who come from the Cape Colony, but the Makalolo despise Portuguese guns because different from those in the possession of other Bechuanas - the bullets are made of iron. The slave merchant seemed anxious to shew kindness influenced probably by a valuable passport and letter of introduction from the ~~Portuguese Consul at the Cape~~ [the Chevalier Duprat who holds the office of Arbitrator in the British and Portuguese mixed Commission in Cape] ~~He comes from the farthest inland trading station East of Benguela~~ - this is the first instance in which the Portuguese have seen the Leeambye in the Interior - the course of Pereira if ever travelled must be shifted Northwards. He never visited the Barotse which is one Malona or Laoi so the son

[0007]

and companions of Santuru assert and the event of the visit of a white [...] is such a remarkable affair among Africans it could scarcely be forgotten [...] a century. Our visit is commemorated in eight or ten [children called] MaRobert (M^{rs} L.) Many Monare's (M^r) Waggon, Horse - Gun, Jesus &c &c. But no one ever heard of Pereira. His route may have been more Northerly than it is laid down in Portuguese maps. These indeed seem constructed almost entirely from native informants - neither of the merchants I saw possessed as much as a common compass.[L] At one time [as I mentioned before] I thought of going west in company with the slave traders [from Katongo], but a variety of considerations induced me to decide on going alone. I think of Loanda though the distance is greater as preferable to Benguela and as soon as the rains commence will try the route on horseback. Trees and rivers are reported which would render travelling by means of a waggon impossible. [The Portuguese are carried in hammocks hung on poles - two slaves carry a man - It does not look well.]

I am sorry to say that the Boers destroyed my celestial Map and thereby rendered it impossible for me to observe as many occultations as I had intended, I have observed very few, these I now send to M^r Maclear in order that he may verify my Lunars. If I am not mistaken we have placed our rivers &c about 2° of Longitude too far East. Our

waggon stand instead of being 26° East is not more than $23^{\circ} 50'$ or 24° .
 It is probable that an error of my sextant of which I was not aware deranged the calculations of the gentleman, who kindly undertook to examine them .
 I send many Lunar observations too, and hope it may be convenient for M^r Maclear to examine them and let you know whether I am right or wrong in my calculations. The map prepared by M^r and myself need not be altered yet. It is admirably well adapted for all we pretended to viz. a guide to future investigators. In the enclosed sketch you will see I give no more than I saw I took the bearings of every reach of the river both in ascending and descending & allowing for the variation of the compass (21° West) reduced the sketch according to the Latitudes and Longitudes obtained by observations; I am not well satisfied with the reduction. I have not been able to insert the islands and other remarks which would convey information as well as the form of the river - but you will see how nearly my sketch from actual observation agrees with our map from Native information. But I shall send an unreduced sketch in order that if you wish it a finer pen than mine may reduce it. The watch performs remarkably well - though deranged for some time by an unfortunate knock I think it will yet do good service. If you know any one at Loanda on the West Coast send me a thermometer graduated to shew the point of ebullition of water at different heights but please remember not to lay out much on that which may be lost. I should like to ascertain the water shed of the east & west .

[0008]

The continent seems to be an elevated table land sloping chiefly towards the East .

Sportsmen have still some work before them in the way of discovering all the Fauna of Africa. This country abounds in game and beyond Barotse the herds of large animals surpass anything I ever saw. Elands and buffaloes their tameness was shocking to me. 81 buffaloes defiled slowly before our fire one evening and lions were impudent enough to roar at us. On the South of the Chobe where Bushmen abound they are very seldom heard. These brave fellows teach them better manners. My boatman informed me that he had never seen an animal with [long] wide spreading horns like an ox, called liombikalela perhaps the Indian Bison or another animal which ~~lives~~[does not live] in the water but snorts like a hippopotamus and is like that animal [in size. It has a horn & may be the Asiatic Rhinoceros .] And we passed some burrows of a third animal which burrows from the river inland, has short horns and feeds only by night. I did not notice the burrows at the time of passing but I give you the report as I got it. Sable antelopes abound and so does the Nahong and there is a pretty little antelope on the Sesheke called "Teeanyane" which seemed new to me. These animals did not lie in my line so you must be content with this brief notice.

The birds [are] in great numbers on the river

Sand martin[s] never leaves
~~the River~~[it]. We saw them
 in hundreds in midwinter .

, and many beautiful

new trees were interesting objects of observation but I had perpetually to regret the absence of our friend M^r, I had no one to share the pleasure which new objects , and instead of pleasant conversation in the evenings I had to endure the everlasting ranting of Makalolo .

Believe me yours

Most Affectionately

David Livingston

Lieut^t Colonel Steele

Prepaid

Lieutenant Colonel Steele
21 Upper Brook St.
Grosvenor Square
London