

Letter to William Thompson, 14 May, 14 August 1854

Livingstone, David, 1813-1873

Published by Livingstone Online (livingstoneonline.org)
[0001]

Rev^dW. Thompson Calimba 14th May 1854

My Dear Sir -

I am not far from Loanda and as I shall have very little time to spend in writing there because my purse is light and followers numerous and hungry, I give you a few particulars now

We have had a most tedious journey from the land of the Leeambye. We went up the Leeba 40 or 50 miles then left the canoes and went forward on ox back to the first chief of the Balonda called Kabompo or Shinté. He highly approved our object in opening up a way for commerce into his country and shewed his sincerity by giving us guides and sending orders to all his people in the route to supply us with food. This kindness hindered our progress for every village must have time to prepare meal &c. for us, but the rains hindered us much more. Never did I endure such drenchings, and all the streams being swollen we had to ford many the water flowing on the rustic bridges waist deep. Others we crossed by sticking to the oxen the best ~~we~~[way] we could and a few we made a regular swim off. My Barotse, for with them alone I travelled did not know I could swim and the first broad stream we came to excited their fears on my account. "Now hold on fast by the tail". Dont let go" I intended to follow the injunction but tail and all went so deep I thought it better to strike out alone for the bank. and just as I reached it I was greatly gratified to see a universal rush had been made for my rescue. Their clothes were all floating down the stream and two of them reached me breathless with the exertion they had made. If we could march I got on very well. I dont care much for fatigue, but when compelled to stand still by pouring rains. then fever laid hold with his strong fangs on my inner man and lying in a little gipsey tent with everything damp or wet, was sore against the grain
[0002]

Frequent and most severe attacks of intermittent made me miserab[...] weak. but I never lay by for that. and we managed to make occasional progress. through a population & country to which I can offer you no comparison in the South. We came to a village every

few miles. sometimes passed 10 in a day. These were civil, how could they be otherwise, the fellows were living in a Mahometan Paradis[...] We often entered a village and when sitting on ox back could only see the tops of the huts in a wilderness of weeds, By & Bye the villagers emerged from their lairs, men & women each smoking a long pipe and followed by crowds of children. Very little exertion is required to procure the staff of life which in these parts is the Manioc. A part of the Forest is cleared of brushwood and fires made round the larger trees leave them standing dead. Cuttings of the manioc are inserted in the ground and the earth drawn up around them. Maize bean Darts nuts &c. are planted between and here we have a supply of food for years The climate is so good they are either planting[...] or reaping the whole year round. All the different grains, roots &c. may be seen at one time in every stage of growth. Indeed the country generally is fertile in the extreme. and very beautiful It is flat but lies in ridges or waves, the ridge of each wave is covered with dense dank forest and the trough a pleasant valley containing either a bog or stream in its centre The Boerish Eden Magaliesberg will bear no comparison[...] to this land for fertility and beauty. The forest trees shoot up to an enormous height as straight as arrows and all being covered with white moss shew the humidity of the climate would require no irrigation for English Wheat. Through some of these forest we could scarcely move on ox back. Swinging climbing plants of from an inch to three or four in diameter abound. and when drizzling rain makes the darkness of the forest darker we were often caught (more Absalom) The ox when you attempt to stop ~~him~~ rushes on the faster and down comes the rider on the crown of his head. Mine a most perverse beast [0003]

often went out of the way or narrow winding path on purpose and always tried to administer an effective kick to shew how he would act if he had the upper hand. The country to the West of that which we travelled through is called Lobale and was impassable the water standing on its plains waist deep. We had sometimes to make a divergence from our path in order to avoid such and two or three times passed over plains 12 or 15 miles broad about 6 inches deep. other plains presented the appearance of large rivers flowing fast towards the rivers and must be the sources of the annual inundations of the Barotse &c. The water is always clear because rains fall on a dense mat of grass only. The Southern part of the Lobale is well peopled but the plains being at other than the rainy season destitute of streams have but a small population. The East is all densely populated and pass by the name Balonda. They are idolaters near every village an idol is seen, a block of wood with a rough human head carved on it or a lion made of clay and two shells for eyes standing in a little shed. The people when unsuccessful in any enterprise or sick beat a drum before them all night. And they are otherwise very superstitious They would not eat with us, not in our sight though

they took meat from us and eat it at home. When I saw their numbers and thought of the vast multitudes there are in this land all living without God and without hope I often sat down with feelings of despair. When will they be supplied with the gospel of Christ?

As we approached the Portuguese settlements the people became worse & worse and at last instead of gifts of food we were offered knocks on the head! The Chiboque for instance are most outrageous blackguards. We came to them as quiet as Quakers and were spending Sunday on Peace Society principles when a whole tribe surrounded us [0004]

fully armed with guns, arrows, spears and short swords. They were all vociferating and brandishing their weapons simultaneously I sat down and asked the chief to do the same and then demanding silence requested to know what was the matter. Our crime consisted in one of our men when spitting allowing a small drop of the saliva to fall on one of them. I replied if the chief could seriously say such was a crime I was willing to pay a fine. (On such frivolous pretexts we had often to pay enormous fines) He accepted one but his warriors rejected it and demanded one thing after another untill by demanding one of our number to be sold as a slave we saw their intention was regular plunder, and armed our selves for the worst. They feared my arms alone, indeed we were as a company unprepared for fighting but armed as we were not a man of chief or counsellors would have escaped the first onset. We determined to let them shed the first drop of blood and sat looking at them in all their heathenish shouting. This resolute bearing made them more reasonable so they accepted an ox and gave us two or three pounds of the flesh to shew they were of a generous disposition after all. We were often so treated and at last no passage allowed past a town or village without paying for it. I paid away nearly all I had. oxen for provisions & riding clothes razors spoons, &c . Then we all got angry, chafed in mind and hungry and replied angrily to their demands Sometimes I was furious and would have fought but my companions were more pacific stripping themselves of their ornaments & paying for passage At other times they were on the bloody key and I was quakerish and we rose up by night and passed our enemies expecting an assault in every thicket and glen we came to. And After all I thank God sincerely in that he prevented us from shedding human blood. [0005]

When we reached the Quango I had made up my mind to part with my bedding for a passage but we were prevented by a small tribe from approaching the ferry. I could not pay both tribe and ferry with what I had remaining

and there they laughed at us with their teeth filed to
a point and hair elaborately plaited & ornamented
"you must just go back the way you came ", "if you
you cannot pay us you will see what we can do "O &c
Ah! you Caffres have been spoiled by missionaries I suppose
The Read's have been among you exciting you to rebellion, that
they have. Here a young Portuguese Sergeant appeared &
enabled us to get over the Quango without more trouble
Our difficulties were ended All we have met in the Portuguese
territory have been civil and Serg^t Cypriano de Abreu
began the hospitality which we have everywhere received
from the Portuguese. We arrived at Cassange, naked
and famished. There they clothed and fed us May God
reward them. At Ambaca I found the command
ant an enlightened friend of Africa. one who has
written spoken and suffered on her behalf, and
his sentiments are in unison with those of many
in the upper ranks in Portugal. I have on
the whole been agreeably disappointed in the Portuguese
They are extremely polite and hospitable and all lament
the state of supineness into which their nation
has sunk

Loanda 14 Augst

I reached this city on the 31st of May and
was glad to tumble into bed as soon as
I arrived. knocked up and no mistake
by fever and Diarrhoea. The first house
I called at was that of Edmund Gabriel Esqu

x I have since found out he is so only in profession & one
cannot rely on the most plausible speeches of even governors
They are excessively corrupt. DL
[0006]

Her Majestys commissioner for the suppression
of the slave trade and a most disinterested
generous friend he has proved himself to be
He is the only Englishman in this city
and it contains a population of 11,000 souls
I recovered partially then had a relapse &
nearly marched off from the land of the
living. I have now however by Gods
mercy got round again and will start
on my return on the 20th currt. The officers
of our [...] have been very kind and
the Portuguese authorities too. The Bishop
of Angola is the acting Governor. He received
us very kindly and assured my men of his
protection. Sends a present to Sekeletu consisting

of 2 coats ornamented with lace & a horse
There are no bibles here - the prosperity of the city
depended on the slave trade and as that
is virtually suppressed they have no hope of
gaining filthy lucre except by the revolution
of the English or such other blessing as the
devil might bestow. The province is fruitful
in the extreme and of rare beauty. Two crops
of all sorts of fruits per year. coffee the
best I ever tasted grows & yields in 3
y[...] s if they would only stick the plants
in the soil sugar pine apples. everything
in fact but the Portuguese actually buy all
their flour & bread from the Yankees instead
of growing wheat themselves. The coffee trees
were chiefly planted by the old missionaries
and their churches are all in ruins But
[0007]

most of the Portuguese of mixed blood can both
read & write. They teach each other. How I long
for a few Bibles but it is questionable whether
I shall return this way. I intend going down the
Zambesi to Quilimane rather than this way
so many rivers & thickets prevent me attempting
this way with the waggon - they have no roads
here and tomorrow is a grand festival in
commemoration of having driven the Dutch
out of the country - the Dutch began to make
a canal to lead water to the city It has
never been completed and all drinkable
water has to be carried from the Bengo 8 or 9
miles distant. The Harbour once a splendid
one is now filling up. Indeed ships cannot
now anchor within a mile of the city an[...]
all look on & take the world easy. The trad[...]
is in the hands of the Yankees. No English
house has established itself. this arose from
Loanda getting a bad name some years ago

George I left at the town of Sekeletu I
wished him to leave as soon as possible
after I left. He leans on me. This wont
do at all. The Portuguese give ten times as
much for ivory as English traders Kind
salutations to your sister & all the family
I have not got a single line from anyone
though I wrote you all by a trader called
Chapman who was accompanied by
one Thompson from Natal

Ever Affectionately Yours

David Livingstone
[0008]

Rev^d. W. Thompson

Cape Town

Cape of Good Hope