

## Letter to Roderick I. Murchison, 4 March 1856

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[0001]

Nº III

Tette or Nyungwe

River Zambesi, Africa

4<sup>th</sup> March 1856

~~[To] Sir Roderick I. Murchison.~~

Sir,-

~~the enclosures Nº I.~~  
~~and Nº II. could not be entirely copied~~  
~~after my arrival on the 2<sup>d</sup> inst but~~~~[H[H]]~~aving  
arranged for the delay of the messenger  
for half a day more[,] I shall spend the  
time in copying Nº III the whole if  
legible being intended to form but one  
communication. the concluding  
[on this] portion [^] [of my communication] referring principally to the people  
[of this part of Africa].

Perhaps no-where else do hills seem  
to exert a more powerful and well marked  
influence on national character, than  
they do in Africa. Every one is aware  
of the brave resistance offered by the  
Caffre mountaineers to the British soldiers,  
than whom I believe there are none more  
brave beneath the sun. And the whole  
of the hill tribes with but few exceptions  
possess a similarity of character. they  
extend chiefly along the Eastern side of  
the [...] those among [^] [whom] I have lately  
[0002]  
~~been travelling~~~~[ed]~~[,] have been fighting with the  
Portuguese for the last two years[,] and [^] [have] actually  
kept the good men of Tette shut up in  
their fort during most of that time. They  
are a strong muscular race, and from  
constant work in their gardens[,] the men

have hands like those of English ploughmen.  
 Like hill people in general[,] they are  
 much attached to the soil. ‡[T]heir laws are  
 very stringent. ‡[T]he boundaries of the  
 lands of each are well defined and  
 should an elephant be killed, the huntsman  
 must wait till one comes from the  
 lord of the land, to give permission to  
 cut it up. ‡[T]he underlying tusk and  
 half of the carcase, are likewise the  
 property of him on whose soil it [^] [the elephant] fell.  
 ‡[T]hey may well love their land, for it  
 yields abundance of grain, and here, superior  
 wheat and rice may be seen flourishing  
 side by side. ‡[T]heir government is  
 a sort of mongrel republican-feudalism[,]  
 which has decided that no child of a  
 chief can succeed his father. ~~A system  
 of separating the young men from their  
 parents and relatives, would have pleased  
 the author of the Cyropaedea; yet the frequent  
 application of the ordeal to get rid of a  
 wife no longer loved, shews that Xenophon's  
 beau ideal does not produce gallantry [0003]  
 equal to that which flows from the birch of  
 of wrathful village pedagogue among  
 ourselves.~~ the country towards Mozambique  
 supports people of similar warlike propensities,  
 and if it is [these are] owing to an infusion of Arab  
 blood in their veins, that mixture does not  
 seem to have had much influence in their  
 customs; for those are more negro than  
 aught else. they all possess a very vivid  
 impression of the agency of unseen spirits  
 in human affairs-[,] ~~this~~ [which] I believe is especially  
 characteristic of the true negro family.

Situated more towards the centre of  
 the continent, we have the Bechuana  
 tribes who live generally on plains.  
 Compared with the Caffre family[,] they are  
 all effeminate and cowardly; yet even  
 here we see courage manifested by those  
 who inhabit a hill country. Witness [for example,]  
 Sebituane[,] who fought his way from the  
 Basuta country to the Barotsé[<sub>5</sub>[,] ] and to the  
 Bashukulompo. Moshesh shewed the  
 same spirit lately in ~~an~~ [his] encounter  
 with English troops. ‡[T]hese stand highest  
 in the scale, and certain poor Bechuanas  
 named Bakalahari, are the lowest.

‡[T]he latter live on the Desert, and some  
 of their little villages extend down the  
 Limpopo. ‡[T]hey generally attach themselves  
 to influential men in the Bechuana  
 [0004]  
 [towns[,] who furnish them with dogs, spears, and  
 tobacco, and in return receive the skins of  
 such animals as they may kill either  
 with the dogs or by means of pitfalls.  
 ‡[T]hey are all fond of agriculture, and  
 some possess a few goats even. But  
 the generally hard fare [which] they endure[,] makes  
 them [^] [the] most miserable objects to be met  
 with in Africa. From the descriptions  
 given in books I imagine their thin  
 legs and arms, large abdomens, and  
 the lustreless eyes of their children,  
 make them [^] [Bakalahari] the counterparts of South  
 Australians. [n.p.] Considerable confusion  
 has been introduced in consequence  
 of [the] all such being indiscriminately [use of the] termed  
 "Caffres". It is an instance in which  
 the use of a single word involves a  
 very free use of the travellers licence,  
 for does it not appear to you most  
 terrifically bold for us to [presumptuous to pretend] [to speak of] hunt[ing] to  
 travel[ing] and sometimes talk[ing] big among  
 thousands of "Caffres" [.] – those "magnificent  
 savages" \* [*United Services Gazette*] to wage war with whom  
 Sir Harry Smith declared was like  
 fighting with Circassians or Algerine  
 Arabs. I never can repress a smile  
 when I hear Boers or Englishmen [0005]  
2<sup>d</sup> Sheet

speak of the more abject of the Bechuanas  
 as "Caffres". Seeing ‡[T]he real Caffres or Zulah  
 race are those who have banged about  
 the English soldier so unceremoniously,  
 and one as remarkable as New Zealanders  
 for suffering no nonsense from either  
 white or brown. this difference in  
 national character explains at a glance  
 why the tide of emigration spreads  
 away from Caffreland towards the  
 more central parts[,] – in the sovereignty  
 and Cashan mountains. And[O]ddly  
 enough, among the very first articles  
 of the political existence [Governments] of a Republic  
 on the plains, is a law made for the  
 punishment of cowardice! ‡[T]hey

~~of course know their own wants best.~~

But though it is all very well,  
in speaking in a loose way, to ascribe  
the developement of national character  
to the physical features of the country,  
I suspect that those who are accustomed  
to curb the imagination in the severe  
way [^] [employed to] of testing for truth [^] [employed] in the physical  
sciences, would attribute more to  
race or breed than to mere scenery.  
Look at the Bushmen - living on the  
same plains, - Eating the same food, but  
[0006]  
often in scantier measure, - and subjected  
to all [^] [and the] [the Same] climatorial and physical influences  
as the Bakalahari, yet how enormously  
different the results. ‡[T]he Bushman  
has a wiry compact frame, is brave,  
and independant, scorns to till the ground  
or keep domestic animals. the Bakalahari  
is spiritless and abject in demeanour  
and thought, delights in cultivating a  
little corn, or pumpkins or [in] rearing  
a few goats. And b[oth] [^] [races] have been  
looking at the same scenes for centuries.  
Two or three Bechuanas from the towns,  
enter the villages of the Bakalahari,  
and pillage them of all their skins [^] [of animals] without  
resistance. If by chance they [^] [Blakhalari] stumble  
on a hamlet of Bushmen, they speak  
softly and readily deliver up any tobacco  
they may have, as a peace offering, and  
in dread of the poisoned arrow which  
may decide whether they spoke truly  
in saying they had none.

Again look at the River Zouga  
running through a part of the Bushman  
and Bakalahari desert. the Bayeiye  
or Bakoba live on its reedy islets,  
cultivate gardens, rear goats, fish and  
hunt alternately and are generally  
[0007]  
possessed of considerable muscular development.  
Wherever you meet them they are always the  
same. And ‡[T]hey are the Quakers of the body  
politic in Africa. ‡[T]hey never fought  
with any one, but invariably submitted  
to whoever conquered the lands ajacent  
to their rivers. ‡[T]hey say, their progenitors

made bows of the castor oil plant,  
 and they broke; "†[T]herefore"(!) they resolved  
 never to fight any more." †[T]hey never  
 acquire much property, for every one turns  
 aside into their villages to eat what he  
 can find. I have been in their canoes  
 and found the pots boiling briskly untill  
 we came near to the villages. Having  
 dined, we then entered with the pots empty,  
 and looking quite innocently on any  
 strangers who happened to drop in to  
 dinner. Contrast these Friends with  
 the Lords of the isles, [^] [ Sekote & & ] [and others,] living on [among] identical  
 circumstances, and ornamenting their  
 dwellings with human ~~erania~~ [skulls]. [N.P]†[T]he  
 cause of the differences observed in  
 tribes inhabiting the same localities, though  
 it spoils the poetry of the thing, consists  
 in certain spots being the choice of the  
 race or family;[.]s[S]o when we see certain  
 characters assembled on particular spots,  
 it may be more precise to say we see the  
 [0008]  
 antecedent disposition manifested in the  
 selection, rather than that the part chosen  
 produced a subsequent disposition. †[T]his  
 may be evident, when I say that in the  
 case of the Bakalahari and Bushmen,  
 we have instances of compulsion and  
 choice. the Bakalahari were the [^] [first] body  
 of Bechuana emigrants who came  
 into the country, and [They] possessed large  
 herds of very long horned cattle, the  
 remains of which are now at Ngami.  
 A second migration of Bechuanas  
 deprived them of their cattle and drove  
 them into the Desert. they still cleave  
 most tenaciously to the tastes of their  
 race. While for the Bushman, the  
 Desert is his choice, and ever has been  
 from near the Coanza to the Cape. When  
 we see a choice fallen on mountains,  
 it means only [^] [that] the race meant to defend  
 itself, †[T]heir progenitors recognized the  
 principle, [which is]acknowledged universally, except  
 when Caffre police or Hottentots rebel, viz.-  
 that no[ne]one deserves liberty except those  
 who are willing to fight for it. †[T]his  
 principle gathers strength from locality;  
 tradition developes it more and more;  
 yet still I think the principle was first,

foremost, and alone vital.

In reference to the origin of all these tribes, I feel fully convinced from the [0009]  
3<sup>d</sup> Sheet

very great similarity in all their dialects, that they are essentially one race of men. t[T]he structure or we may say the skeletons of the [^] [dialects of] Caffre;- Bechuana;- Bayeiye;- Barotse;- Batoka;- Batonga or people of the Zambesi;- Mashona;- Babisa;- the Negroes of Londa, Angola and people on the west coast;- are all wonderfully alike. A great proportion of the roots is identical in all. [N.P]t[T]he Bushman tongue seems an exception, but this from the little I can collect of it is more apparent than real. While all the others are developed in one and nearly the same direction this deviates into a series of remarkable clicks. t[T]he syllable on which in other dialects the chief emphasis is put, in this constitutes the whole word. But though the variations lie in clicks, the development is greater than in other dialects. t[T]hey have for instance the singular, plural and dual numbers; the masculine[,],femine[ine] and neuter genders; and the aorist [^] [tense] which the others have not. [N.P] It may be gratifying for you to hear that the Bible is nearly all translated into Sichuana—the dialect of the Bechuanas and the most regularly developed of all negro languages. Of its capabilities you may judge, when I mention that the Pentateuch is fully expressed in a considerable[y]numbe fewer words [0010] than in the Greek Septuagint, and in a very large number less than in our verbose English. Of its copiousness, I can not well speak, for I have been learning it for fifteen years, and others have been doing so for double that time, and we hear new words every day or two. It is fortunate so many are now secured, and others not in the language or in any language till [^] [the ideas are] taken from the sacred oracles are adopted into the language. For, people born in the country, though they speak it without foreign accent, and even natives in contact with Europeans[,], are remarkable

for the scantiness of their vocabularies.

In the animal kingdom, there are  
three antelopes which I believe have been  
hitherto unknown; ~~that~~ all [^] [of which] abound  
in the great valley, but no where else.  
One is specially adapted for treading on  
mud and marshy spots, by great  
length from point of toe to ~~(name forgotten~~  
~~of~~ [the] little hoofs above [^] [the] fetlock.) It has a heavy  
gait, looks paunchy and hides itself  
all but the nose [in water]. I wished to  
name it after ~~my friend~~ Captain Vardon  
a[my] warm friend and a participator in discovery  
in Africa; but I could not bring any  
skin ~~unless I had~~ [for want of] tin boxes. Tropical  
rains go through everything [^] [else]. Will the  
Zoological Society gratify me in this?  
[0011]

I will send it when I can. Its native name  
is Nakong or Setutunka. [N.P] Another little  
antelope abounds in great numbers near Sesheke.  
Its cry of alarm is like that of the domestic  
fowl. It is called Thianyané - t[T]he third  
is named Poku and it abounds in  
prodigious numbers above the Barotse  
It is exactly like the Lechusee which was  
discovered when we went first [^] [to] Lake  
Ngami, but considerably smaller in  
every way and of a redder colour. It  
seems to be an instance of the [^] [application of the] law  
which has determined larger development  
for animals in the more temperate &  
colder parts of the continent, than in  
the hot, equatorial regions, where food  
abounds in lavish profusion. this  
is different from M<sup>rs</sup> Bachmans theory,  
but I have no doubt as to the existence  
of the law. A full grown elephant here  
for instance, measures quite two feet  
less, than a similar animal does on  
the Limpopo or at Kolobeng; ~~this~~  
though the smaller animal carries the  
largest ivory. [N.P] I never before saw ~~such~~  
[so] numbers[ous] or [so]~~such~~ tame elephants, as at  
the confluence of [the] Kafue [^] [& Zambesi]. Buffaloes, zebras  
pigs and hippopotami, were equally so,  
and it seemed as if we had got back to  
the time, when megatheriae roamed about  
undisturbed by man. We had to shout to  
[0012]

them to get out of the way, and then their second thoughts were - "its a trick",- "we're surrounded" - and back they came tearing through our line. Lions and hyaenas are so numerous [that] all the huts in the gardens are built on trees, and the people never go half a mile into the woods alone. One of our best men ran off we believe in a fit of insanity during the night, and we never found a trace of him.

I believe we have no reason to complain of the treatment we have met on this river [the Zambesi]. the inhabitants have plenty of great [ain] and were never stingy with it. Had it been otherwise we should have starved. If spared to return, I will pay them again, and not the Lord Chancellor [of the Exchequer][,] as those do, I suppose, who publish in their books, that they gave "three buttons" or a "cotton handkerchief" in return for handsome presents or food. they believed our statements of everything being expended, untill close to Tette; and as they levy tribute [thus] on traders we found great difficulty in getting along. Are they worse thus, only where they know us christians best. We do not seem to convey a favourable idea of our blessed Christianity to the Heathen. Do we? [N.P] With respect to the perpetuity of the African race, we have a stronger hope than in the case of the South Sea Islanders and other savage nations in contact with [0013] 4<sup>th</sup>

Europeans. the well known preference that fever manifests for the natives of Northern Europe, and the indisposition it exhibits to make victims of Africans, would lead one were they [persons] resident in one region of this continent to say [^] [that] the white race was that doomed to extinction. However to be accounted for [explained], the Africans who have come under my observation, are not subject to many of the diseases which thin our own numbers. Small pox and measles paid a passing visit through the continent some twenty years ago, and though they committed great ravages, they did not remain endemic nor return. they did not find a congenial soil, and though the period preceding the



rains is eminently epidemic in its  
 constitution, excepting hooping cough,  
 no epidemic known in Europe appears.  
 t[T]hat there is an indisposition independant  
 of climatorial [ic] influences, is [becomes] I imagine,  
 evident, when the venereal disease is  
 is seen [observed] to die out spontaneously in  
 Africans of pure blood; and those of  
 mixed blood are subjected to all its forms,  
 in [^] [with a] virulence exactly proportioned to  
 the amount of European blood in their  
 veins. [NP] Tending in the same way as this  
 indisposition to diseases which decimate [0014]  
 tribes which will soon [are] pass[ing] away, [^] [is the fact that] the  
 Africans are wonderfully prolific. t[T]he  
 Bushmen are equally so, but the Bechuanas  
 are an exception which the introduction  
 of Christianity may remove. As this has  
 not, it is reported, happened in the Pacific,  
 the data on which our hopes are founded  
 may prove deceptive.

My present party amounts to one hundred  
 and ten or twelve and I have taken ivory  
 enough to purchase a long list of articles  
 for Sekeletu. Less I could scarcely do  
 [less] in return for all his kindness to me[,]  
 and it will be initiating his people into  
 trade at the same time. I expect to  
 find employment for the men when  
 nearer the sea, in order that they may  
 support themselves and save a little  
 for their return during my absence in  
 England. t[T]he prospect of coming down  
 to trade in canoes is to them so feasible  
 [that] all are delighted with it. I have not seen  
 a rapid which would delay the Makololo  
 a day. Had I not been obliged to part  
 with the price of the canoe, otherwise  
 I should have examined all minutely.  
 At present, I am indulging the belief that  
 we have water carriage all the way to the  
 foot of the Eastern ridge; and should  
 the Makololo come nearer, we shall not  
 be quite so much out of the world as we have been  
 [0015]  
 [N.P.] It may be proper to refer to what has been  
 done in former times, in the way of crossing  
 the continent, though my enquiries lead  
 to the belief that the honour belongs to our  
 country. The Portuguese invariably applaud

any little ebullition of patriotic feeling they observe in me; and I can not but participate in their feelings, when, in the history of Angola, proud mention is made of the brave attempt of Captain José da Roza, [in 1678] to penetrate from Benguella to the Rio da Senna (Zambesi). He was forced to retire after exploring a large tract of new country. In 1800, the project was again revived by the energetic D<sup>r</sup> Lacerda, [who] recommending[ed] the erection of a chain of forts along the banks of the Coanza whereby to effect a line of communication between the East and West coasts. ‡[T]his shewed a mistaken idea of the source of the Coanza, as it arises near Bihé[,] West of the Western ridge. But a communication having been made a few years afterwards by some native traders with the Mohias (Balonda), the Government of Angola was gratified in 1815 by the arrival of two ~~sueh~~ [persons] (feirantes prietos) named Pedro Jaoã Baptista and Antoneo José with [0016] letters from the Governor of Mosambique "proving thereby", as stated in the Government document of the day, "the possibility of such a communication." Certain Arabs too a few years before my visit to Loanda came from the opposite coast to Benguella; and with a view to improve the event the Government of Angola offered one million of Reis (about £142) and an honorary captaincy in the Portuguese army, to any one who would accompany them back, but no one went. The journey will now be performed by Ben Habib, Pereira and others visited Cazembe, and Senhor Graça [^] [visited] Matiamvo. If I knew that any one else had done more I would certainly mention it. [\* See M<sup>r</sup> Macqueens Paper RGS Journal vol XXVI] I cannot find a trace of a road from Laconda either.

I feel most thankful to God who has prolonged my life while so many who would have done more good have been cut off. But I am not so much elated as might have been expected, for the end

of the geographical feat is but the beginning  
of the missionary enterprise. Geographers  
labouring to make men better acquainted with  
each other[,] - soldiers fighting against oppression;  
- and sailors rescuing captives in deadly climes;-  
are all as well as missionaries ~~are all~~ aiding  
in hastening on a glorious consummation  
of all God's dealings to man, in the hope that

that I may yet be permitted to do some good to this poor long trodden down  
Africa, the gentlemen over whom you have the honour to preside will I doubt not  
all cordially join. David Livingston