

Letter to Roderick I. Murchison, 4 March 1856

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[0001]

Nº III

Tette or Nyungwe

River Zambesi, Africa

4th 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 2d inst but~~ having 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. Their laws are
 very stringent. The 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. The underlying tusk and
 half of the carcase, are likewise the
 property of him on whose soil the elephant fell.
 They may well love their land, for it
 yields abundance of grain, and here, superior
 wheat and rice may be seen flourishing
 side by side. Their 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 equal to that which flows from the birch of our~~ ~~notext~~ ~~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, and to the
 Bashukulompo. Moshesh shewed the
 same spirit lately in an [his] encounter
 with English troops. These stand highest
 in the scale, and certain poor Bechuanas
 named Bakalahari, are the lowest.
 The latter live on the Desert, and some
 of their little villages extend down the
 Limpopo. They 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.
 They 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 hunting to traveling and sometimes
 talking 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 2d Sheets speak of
 the more abject of the Bechuanas as "Caffres". Seeing t The real Caffres or Zulah race are those
 who have bangled about the English soldier so unceremoniously, and one as remarkable as New
 Zealanders for suffering no nonsense from either white or brown. T 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 Oddly 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 They 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. They [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 [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 they are the Quakers of the body politic in Africa. They never fought with any one, but invariably submitted to whoever conquered the lands adjacent to their rivers. They say, their progenitors made bows of the castor oil plant, and they broke; "They herefore"(!) they resolved never to fight any more." They 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 ~~crania~~ [skulls]. [N.P] They 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]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. They 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 develops 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^d Sheet very great similarity in all their dialects,
 that they are essentially one race of men. ‡‡[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]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]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. ‡‡They have for instance the singular, plural and dual numbers; the
 masculine,femineinefeminine 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
 Sicheuana - 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 number fewer words 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^{rs} 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 4th Europeans. Tthe 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 foreexplained, 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 through they committed
great ravages, they did not remain endemic nor return. Tthey 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. TtThat there is an indisposition
independantindependent of climatorialie influences, isbecomes I imagine, evident, when the
venereal diseaseis is seenobserved 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 tribes which will soonare passing away, ^is the fact
that the Africans are wonderfully prolific. TtThe 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]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^r 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 such[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^r 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