

## Letter to James R. Bennett, 22 December 1841

*Livingstone, David, 1813-1873*

Published by Livingstone Online ([livingstoneonline.org](http://livingstoneonline.org))

[0001]

I have been writing ever since coming home to several friends for the support of native agents. With the overwhelming importance of ~~have~~ an our extended agency I have been fully impressed in the interior. My hurry accounts for many errors in this which you will excuse I would write to your father on that subject, but I know he has so much to do. It would only take him off his other duties with which I believe his 2 hands are quite full

Kuruman 22<sup>d</sup> Dec<sup>r</sup> 1841

My Dear Sir

I wrote you last Oct<sup>r</sup> but having [had] no opportunity of transmitting it for a long time afterwards the letter became so old I was ashamed to send it; I have now been longer in the country & having lately returned from a long journey in the Interior perhaps the information I can now give will be more acceptable than that I should have given by sending the other

The Bechuanas you know are divided into a great many tribes each of which is independant of all others But they have all the same language & they dont differ much with respect to their customs & mode of life; they are all under the feudal system of Government, the chieftainship is hereditary and although the chief is usually the greatest ass, & the most insignificant in appearance in the tribe the people pay a deference to him which is truly astonishing; I dont mean to say that they are all downright fools. I saw one exception & ~~I hear~~ it is said there is another sensible man about 300 miles from this. but with this exception all I saw were certainly so. Indeed they were distinguished by nothing but superior impudence in begging. And these men have the power of life & death, administration of the laws! &c. Hereditary succession appears to be the same in its effects all over the world - the only differences I could discover amongst them [were] a very slight change in the language as we went Northwards and an evident increase of superstition. the language towards the North seems more original, some letters are left out altogether and there is an interchange of others but it is easier for a native of this tribe to understand them than for a Cockney to understand a Yorkshireman. But with respect to superstition they differ much more. Far in the interior we scarcely saw one grown up person without the instruments of divination or some

charms attached to the neck: they frequently divine, & when they do, they take off their sandals & utter a sort of prayer to the deity. this is quite different from what the missionaries found here. they seemed to be quite ignorant of anything pertaining to the Deity & only recognised evil spirits - About 200 miles to the N. by East we found a tribe busily engaged in the manufacture of iron & connected with it they have very many superstitions: the manner of extracting the ore is kept as profound a secret as any of our chemical works at home. the men who are employed at it have to abstain from all connubial intercourse during a period of five or six months & never enter their own houses but sleep in the kraal amongst the cattle during all that time & besides other observances they put medicine beside the furnace & into it all for the purpose of preventing disease in the iron - the most fatal disease it is liable to is When they raise too great a heat it is burned to a cinder. I tried to explain to

[0002]

I have got for Proff. Owen specimens of the incubated ostrich in abundance & am only waiting an opportunity to transport the box of to college I tried to keep for you some of the fine birds of the interior but the weather was so horribly hot that they were wilted in two hours

the use of Limestone as a better sort of medicine than theirs But it would require the experiment performed before their eyes before they will admit that white men knew the business as they do. They admitted us because we were foreigners & had not been at home for some time, and certainly it was worth seeing for they seemed to have the art in embryo, just in that state Old Tubal Cain left it, two leathern bags with clay tubes at one end as nozzles & orifices ~~opened~~ at the other opened & shut by the hand as valves as they are elevated & depressed alternately constitute the bellow A huge stone grasped in both hands, Another stone on the ground & a peice of the bark of a tree bent upon itself, constitute the hammer, anvil & tongs of these genuine Antedeluvians. But they make very good axes spears picks &c. Perhaps this is more owing to the excellent quality of the iron than to the dexterity of the workman for they take a very long time to finish anything - the ore they obtain in great abundance in the neighbouring mountains - they also make wooden bowls spoons &c. And in the manufacture of these their patience is wonderful. Some of the bowls are 3 feet in diameter and almost all is done by means of a little knife, from the solid trunk of a large tree. they do not cut them down but making a fire at the roots bring them down by that means - Still farther toward the North they have manufactures in Copper And with them as well as with others who manufacture "white iron" superstition abounds still more. What they call white iron I have not seen & dont know what it is but copper is used over the whole country as arm & leg rings - We went about 250 miles directly noth but the whole distance we travelled was at least 700 miles. We went far to the

North East & found the country improve in that direction. the trees becoming larger, the wild olive covered with fruit, fig trees &c and more water but the Boers of Port Natal are advancing in that direction. Towards the North by West the country is a dreary desert with scarcely a drop of water to be found, But even here there exists a tribe of Bechuanas. they have no cattle cultivate no ground & have no fountains yet they love their liberty & very generally they fled from us lest we should seize them & take them away. Providence seems to supply their destitution of water in a wonderful manner. Even in their most desert places on the burning sand a species of bitter water melon grows in great abundance. these they collect, making incisions into them the juice flows out into their vessels & with this bitter stuff they quench their thirst, Probably like the Laplanders with their sow thistle & some folks with medicine. It now tastes sweetly to them. the seeds of this plant roasted and many other edible roots which they dig up serve as food while a few skins of animals they happen to snare serve as clothing to these hardy sons of the desert. they have a great number of esculent roots & some of them very good One [the manner of growth] of them struck my mind very forcibly. Above ground you see nothing but a single tendril or two of a slender creeping plant: dig down for perhaps two feet and you have still a slender thing of a root but beyond that perhaps three feet from the surface & quite away from the immediate effect of the burning Sun on the sand it suddenly swells out in many instances thicker than ones thigh, and quite succulent and perhaps a foot & a half long

[0003]

I am going again in a month, it will then be cooler, I take two native travellers with me. & will I hope write you a better letter when I return. Please remember me to your father & mother [too] if she remembers me & believe me yours affectionately D Livingston-

Please address care of D<sup>r</sup> Phillip, Cape Town

Young ones about 2 inches in diameter & 3 in length very much resemble a young turnip but the old ones have an astringent taste. I have got another root very much resembling them in size. It is saturated with gallic acid & something else, the natives tan thin skins with it. It is powerfully astringent, & when tasted immediately constringes the mouth & [...] decomposes the mucous of the tongue, I have tried it in some cases where an astringent seemed to be indicated with success. It will prove I hope a means of saving my English medicines of that class — As I am talking of plants I may mention a plant which grows in abundance in this quarter & when in flower scents the whole atmosphere with its delightful odours. One of the French bretheren being delighted with its fragrance thought it might be a good subs-

titute for tea, & made an infusion of it. Of this both he and another partook a little & presently their whole nervous systems were strangely affected. I cannot give you an accurate account of the [...] [symptoms] for they are not able to give them in English But the effect of the remedy was curious. A large dose of vinegar seemed as soon as it entered the stomach to run along the nerves to the extremities of the limbs as if cold water had been gradually poured over them beginning at the centre & pouring gradually out to the tips of the fingers & toes. After this they very soon became well. I should not have mentioned this but this is one of the plants the Bushmen make use of in poisoning their arrows & when I made a decotion & tasted it, it caused a burning sensation on the tongue & roof of the mouth with a sense of stoppage in the nostrils. When however I added a little acetic acid to the decotion it made [...] quite bland. Would I be justified in trying this bland [...] in a case of Rheumatism? I cant get dogs on which to try its physiological effects. I have thought, the salt [compound] which seems to be formed by the acetic acid might be useful in the same manner. some of the preparations of other virulent poisons are, but I am scrupulous about trying. I have felt no effects from it myself even when taken in drachm doses - I shall feel obliged by your spending an hour on me at your leisure. I feel the benefit often of your instructions & of those I got through your kindness And here I have an immense practice I have patients now under treatment who have walked on foot 130 miles for for my advice: And when these go home others will come for the same purpose. this is the country for a medical man if he wants a large practice but he must leave fees out of the question. the Bechuanas have a great deal more disease than I expected to find amongst a savage nation. but little else can be expected for they are nearly naked & endure the scorching heat of the day & the chills of the night in that state Add to this they are absolutely omniverous, Indigestion Rheumatism & Ophthalmia are the prevailing diseases, the latter is caused by the hot winds which coming over the extensive sanding plains to the north west load themselves with myriads of fine particles and produce a disease which for its virulence deserves to be called the Bechuana purulent ophthalmia. When in the interior many very bad cases were brought to me

[0004]

at every village & sometimes my waggon was quite beseiged by these blind & halt & lame What a mighty effect would be produced if one of the seventy disciples were amongst them to heal them all by a word. the Bechuanas resort to the Bushmen & these poor people that live in the desert for Doctors. the fact of my dealing in that line a little is so strange & new my fame has spread far & wide But if one of Christs Apstoles were here I should think he would very soon be known all over to Abyssinia. The great deal of work I have had to do in attending to the sick has proved beneficial to me, for they

make me speak the language perpetually & If I were inclined to be lazy in learning it they would prevent me indulging this propensity. And they are excellent patients too besides, there is no wincing. Every thing prescribed is done instanter, their only failing is they become tired of a long course. But in any operation even the women sit unmoved. I have been quite astonished again & again at their calmness. In cutting out a tumour an inch in diameter they sit & talk as if they felt nothing. "A man like me never cries" they say "they are children who cry" it is a fact the men never cry But when the spirit of God works on their minds they cry most pitiously. Sometimes in Church they endeavour to hide themselves from the eye of the preacher by creeping under the forms or hiding their heads with their Karosses as a remedy against their convictions And when they find that wont do they rush out of the church & run with all their might crying as if the hand of death were behind them. One would think when they had got away there they would remain but no then they are in their places at the very next meeting

It is not to be wondered at that they should exhibit agitations of body when the mind is affected as they are quite unaccustomed to restrain their feelings and [...] the hardened beings should be moved mentally as all is wonderful indeed. If you saw them in their savage state you would feel the force of this arm

Care of Rev<sup>d</sup> D<sup>r</sup> Phillip, Cape Town  
Mountfora Crescent  
Barnsbury Park  
D<sup>r</sup>. J. R. Bennett  
~~Dalby Terrace, Islington~~  
London  
single sheet