

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. Tt[T]heir 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 it[^][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 Cyropaecia; 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 ofnotext 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 o 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 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. T t [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. ~~T~~hey never fought
with any one, but invariably submitted
to whoever conquered the lands adjacent
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 ~~crania~~ [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 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,femininefeminine 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 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 megatheriaie 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[W]e 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 preceeding 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