

Letter to Benjamin T. Pyne, 11 March, 17 May 1842

Livingstone, David, 1813-1873

Published by Livingstone Online (livingstoneonline.org), 2017

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Tropic of Capricorn, Long. 28° 10' E,
11th March
1842

My very dear friends

You will see by the date if this that I am coming nearer you, I am not quite certain whether I am actually on the Tropic but by a dead reckoning carried on from the last observation I had an opportunity of taking I am very near it, if not perhaps a few miles on the northing of it. I am at present with Bubi one of the chiefs of the Bakwain or Bakone as it is sometimes spelled. I have come for the purpose of helping a native teacher to commence operations amongst them & as far as we have proceeded with them we have found all to our wishes. A great cause of thankfulness to him who thus opens up our way amongst a fickle people. I read one of your letters on Sunday evening last & it brought back to my recollection many pleasing thoughts - It was so full of kindness I resolved to devote the only remaining large sheet of paper at present with me to you - But I fear I cannot give you anything like the ideas of this country which the actual presence in it gives - It is prodigiously large, & I think there are far more wild animals than human beings in it - During our long journey hither we came to no village except one & that did not contain 500 of a population But every day we were sure of seeing large herds of different kinds of game - In travelling - there is not much to excite interest one has to keep near the waggon not so much for conveyance as defence Lions abound, they seldom however shew themselves in the day but make a disagreeable noise at night - the Rhinoceros is exceedingly like a gigantic pig both in his motions & general appearance But I need not begin to describe animals, I may however mention that one loses much of the feelings with which we think of them while in England, even on serpents & the enormous centipedes disgusting at first from their size & length I now look with indifference & like the natives I walk among the long grass as tall in some parts as myself without the least apprehension - I am very much astonished at the change which has taken place on my mind in so short a time, had anyone told me of it beforehand I could not have credited it for the first one I nearly trod upon 6 or 7 feet in length almost petrified me - By thinking of this change you will understand how inhabitants of tropical climates can live just as well as you do in England notwithstanding all the reptiles which would destroy our comfort if more sensitive on the

I intend remaining here for 6 weeks & then proceeding still further to the North in order to visit other tribes still more distant, they are so few & far scattered it will be impossible or rather impolitic for the people at home to supply them with European Miss^s If one were stationed here all

the best portions of his time would be occupied in travelling towards the Colony for supplies & oxen will be pretty well worn out before reaching Kuruman. Native teachers are the only hope & unless we can open up a route to Delagoa Bay or some other on the West Coast

I have with me an excellent man as teacher, today he began school for the children - the chief himself collecting them for him I could not go near to see how he was getting on for if I had only looked at the little naked brats an instant dispersion of the whole school would have taken place, their terror at the sight of a white face though mine scarcely merits that appellation now is extreme - Even girls of 10 years scream with terror if brought forcibly by their parents for medicine - this chief is the most sensible I have seen among chiefs of Bechuanas - He is not considered legally chief but by his own abilities has drawn around him a number of people equal to that of the legal chief - This latter a greedy nasty fellow is very anxious to fight but being afraid to try alone has been soliciting and in different quarters against Bubi - In order to defend himself better Bubi has recently taken up his residence on a hill about 600 feet high - & surrounded on all sides by rocky precipitous approaches - It is about ½ a mile broad at the top - I outspanned at the bottom but he came down & pressed me to ascend on another side where the ascent was less steep - Here then He lives so far in the desert almost without walls they are unable to attack him - He sent ambassadors to them & his own brother murdered them - Again he sent others who passed his brother by another route those to whom they went assured him that they were friendly to him told him to leave the desert, come out & sow corn - (his own ardent wish as he may get nothing but roots & the flesh of his cattle where he is) And at the same time they were purchasing horses in order to attack him - His object in sending to me is to ascertain

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on a cool spot I shall remain a little - My presence will probably deter the other fellow from attempting anything - Bubi feels this & is perhaps more kind than he in other circumstances might be - He brings milk to me morning & evening himself - Just now sent a huge pot of beer & when I proposed to him yesterday to pay for the milk &c - I received, he said, "No, drink my milk & eat my corn & let your heart feel pleasant so long as you remain & dont say anything about payment" I cant hear of it" Some of his people went with M^r Edwards & S to K - There received me with great joy, the wild bursts of laughter by which they testified it was very gratifying - and what to me was amusing was the enquiry some of them put respecting an old ox of mine left behind to rest himself, "Where is Canute?" &c" I suppose their affection is about as strong for the oxen as for myself, the Bechuanas are devotedly attached to cattle - My establishment consists of a Driver & Leader - the latter is necessary because no reins are used - He goes before & leads the two front oxen the Driver manages to propel the ponderous machine by guiding & thrashing the animals with a whip as long as a fishing rod - He is the commander in chief & presides at meals &c. and his orders are implicitly obeyed - He cooks, washes shirts & is the sort of valet of the owner of the waggon - Mine is a heathen but the most energetic obliging fellow I have seen amongst them, more so indeed than most

of the Christians - I took him on account of his energy & hope to be useful to him - He is besides a famous Nimrod & we never want a supply of meat if I only allow him powder & shot. My leader is a Christian & an amiable man - when a boy he was driven out of his own country by Moselekatze He requested to come with me because he was poor & wanted to make a little money to buy a cow - A few beads to assist him in trading for foxes skins has made him very grateful - My native teacher Pomore is the son of an old heathen chief & has considerable influence wherever he goes - He is a good man & far before most of his countrymen in knowledge

He has resolved to bring his wife & children here as soon as the corn is cut It being still green was the cause he left her behind when we set out All his fathers family are Christians & when they became so one after another It was a great affliction to the old man - He looked upon them as dying & now they are all dead as he expresses it - He says sometimes his heart sweats & he should like to be a Christian but how can he give up his wives - (he has 3 or 4) Last year he came to this part of the country seeking another & being much annoyed by his sons who accompanied him for the purpose of trading, preaching wherever they came He at last proposed to precede them to the next town - He came to this & the next village & told the people that some men would soon follow who would begin & talk nonsense But they must not believe them it was all lies - When his last son Moffat went to Kuruman for the purpose of being admitted to the church, the old man manifested violent anger

and in addition to sending off a messenger to bring him back by force went about steaming at a great rate against Believers for three days - But at length fearing his other dead sons would be offended with him, he went to them privately & said "you know my sons that I am a man of the world - It is necessary for me to make this shew in order to please my fellow chiefs still in heathenism - Never mind me but go on praying as before Dont stop for me or anything I may say or do - Such is old Seretse father of my friend Pomore Another man P.s. Sawaat constitutes the whole of my establishment - You will think I have enough to support But it is not so difficult to support them here as it is at home - Although it is much more so here than in India the abundance of game is a great help - Everything is eaten except the wolf between whom & the natives a most determined enmity exists because he is the enemy of their cattle - The Bechuanas never eat fish & hold them in the greatest detestation - Perhaps this owing to those of Kuruman River being deleterious in to quality most stomachs, they are disgusting - looking things, having a broad flat head & a kind of beard & without scales - On our way here we halted on the banks of a stream containing three parts, as T asserted that fish always even in small quantity acted as emetics to him & other Bechuanas I took out a few with a pin in order to try the experiment on him again He ate them with relish & no vomiting took place - I think if the Bechuanas knew the difference of the different kinds they would soon add another article to their already large bill of fare - Certainly they are preferable to the flesh of Rhinoceros They are perfectly tame having never been troubled by the arts of the angler - I at one time intended to make a collection of insects &c. for M^{rs} P. but after some further endeavours I am obliged to give up the idea - the butterflies are very beautiful but my fingers are too clumsy for them & the heat is so great that when dead they are quite brittle & the jolting of the waggon makes them crumble to powder - She must therefore excuse me on that hand - I shall endeavour to send some other things not so frail as insects, the box for the college I have sent - There was an opportunity for one only but I have told Professor Owen I shall entrust yours to his care by the next opportunity - It will be the truth - If I should say come out He will come with his people directly. But I cant bid him

now - He would be safe with me so long as I continued on the spot but if I went any where else the others would attack him immediately - Such is the terror inspired by

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June or July before I reach Kuruman & it may be some time after that before an opportunity occurs of sending - Of course this letter remains by me till then - I hear nothing but Sita huana & hope to make more progress toward the attainment of the language in this - than when mixing with Europeans I read addresses long ago in it but of course full of imperfections - It is a poor language except in what relates to cattle &c. Energy is expressed chiefly by reputation, the loudness of the tone & gestures more

or less violent according to its intensity - You may understand the meaning of a far by the way the speaker elevates his voice until it is lost in a rough sort of breathing straining the eyes in the direction spoken of & repeating the word for it incessantly

Theological terms have all to be constructed for them & until they have learned their meaning, It is all Greek to them - If I should speak to the people here in this language used in the New Testament scarcely one in this whole tribe would understand what I said - & believe not one They are all children & are as easily amused as they - A few buttons or beads puts[...] the wisest among them into extremes As a whole they are exceedingly ungrateful, mean to the last degree Liars for the sake of lying & the most disobeying selfish nation on the face of the earth - The Christians dont lose this character when they make a profession - There are exceptions however you must remember but they are few & far between

If you are habitually kind to anyone you are sure to spoil him - the missionaries never knew an exception to this - He becomes impudent & [...] & a slanderer We have therefore to labour for this good with a certainty of getting no thanks for them - Those who are nearest missionaries are the worst - Believers at a distance on receiving a visit from us receive us with great joy & it is really a pleasure to meet them & it is so with friends in heathen towns but still the chief expense of the friendship devolves on the stranger - By working on their character as expressed above (the universal testimony by all the missionaries I have met in this country confirms it) I have found no difficulty in getting on well with them I scarcely ever propose anything to those with whom I have to do without pointing out the personal advantage - make stops in dispensing favours, never ask one to do anything because he can do it better if there is a poor person who can do it in any way & who would esteem employment a favour- All those I have now with me are obliging in the greatest degree, I have not been obliged to reprove one of them & the chief reason is I allow them to carry their little stocks of merchandise in the waggon & give them an opportunity of trading when we come to a village by remaining a day or two at it & if a very good bargain offered, they know they can make a draught before[-] hand on their wages to secure it - Besides the tea you so kindly gave is occasionally produced on a wet day or after a fatiguing days work a cup of tea has wonderful effect on their tempers or when we get a large animal & then they eat & laugh all day long, suppose it is Sunday & we have got a good fat wild horse the day before, the pot is never cool one large potful disappears one after another all the day - In these cases bread is never thought of, the lean is dipt in the fat & down it goes

Different modes of cooking are continually in process & during the intervals of eating someone begins a hymn in which all form but a concert of screech owls might be denominated the "music of the spheres" compared to it - Spelling books are also in request but it seems only to ease their consciences these are occasionally taking up - These are our company - Pomore is not quite so bad as the others But it would be a great offence indeed if temperance were insisted on I should be scandalized over the ~~old~~ whole country as one who starved my people & instead of being anxious to go with me I should find it difficult to get a complement for the waggon -

I have lately become acquainted with some excellent friends. M^r & M^{rs} Lempe of the French mission - They are as polite as we think the French & amiable & kind even to a fault - The same may be said of M^r & M^{rs} Helmore of Likation. M^r L. is at Mohito about 35 miles from - they were lately most anxious I should take up my abode with them for 3 or 4 months the time during which M^r Edwards is on a visit to the Colony - But I preferred coming here - Both of them speak Eng. well but I can converse with the children only by means of Si thuana

17th May 1842 Perhaps you may dislike this patchwork like letter but I have just to write as I have opportunity - I hope therefore you will excuse me - After finishing what is above, I was busied for a month directing the people how to lead out the water of their river, & after that was finished on one side I left this & proceeded to the North untill I arrived within 2 days of the Bamangwato - my route skirted the Great Sandy desert which lies to the West of this the sand completely exhausted the strength of the oxen 3 of them were sick & one died - If any of the others failed I saw my waggon must stand still - There was no water nearer than $\frac{1}{2}$ a day before us & behind us nearly a whole day - I directed our people to endeavour to take them back & remain at that water untill I should return from the Bamangwato - We were received with great kindness by the chief Sekomi & in addition to a present of an elephant^['s] tusk in value sufficient to pay Pomore's salary the first half year - I have him for myself & this is a guns of the Boers none of them dare think of attacking a tribe where a white man lives - this chief sent me an ox as a present which fills up the vacancy caused by the loss of the other, his name is Sebechwe the ch sounded gutturally as in Scotch loch

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is the hand of our Father providing - I had no authority from the Directors but thinking good could be done I could not want their sanction but rather suffer the loss myself but loss it cant be called for it is spent in the service of him from whom are all that I have & to him all should be dedicated - I ought to have said in addition to the Ele-tusk I lived on his bounty for a fortnight - This town is larger than any I have seen in this country but the huts are miserably small We lived in one as large as the chiefs & three of us could not sleep in it without kicking each other unless the fire was out

I then visited the Bakaa another portion of the Bechuana nation & they are in bad repute among the other tribes so much so some of the Bakwains who accompanied me refused to go to them - The reason is a few years ago they poisoned a trader & his people in order to get his waggons &c - They heard by one of Sekomi^['s] people that I was on the way to visit them & the whole tribe fled my presence - they said to him that foreigner must be coming to kill us on account of the waggons we destroyed - There were only three who had courage to look me in the face at my first entrance into the town - the chief & two others but after I had sat & talked a while with

them the others ventured to come from their hiding places - If anyone ought to have feared it ought to have been myself but I was quite amused with this terror instead of being terrified myself - When the others came near I could not help feeling sad for I saw pieces of gun locks hung round their necks & other things which I am Sekomi sent 5 men with me to K. in order to see the white men & bring him back a faithful report of all the wonderful things I had told him of - When I came back here I found an embassy of 16 men from a chief of the Wanketze who lives in the desert 200 miles West of this, the tribes to the Southward wish to plunder him of his cattle &c

~~Care of the Rev^d D^r Phillip, Church Square,
Cape Town~~

Benjamin T. Pyne, Esq^{re}
Wildingtree, Ongar,
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March 11 / 42
single sheet

sure belonged to these unfortunate visitors - one had a piece of the waggon sail round his head & another a piece of a tin jug attached to his ear - They shewed considerable uneasiness untill they got a bowl of porridge cooked for me & saw me eating of it heartily - this seemed to give them more satisfaction anything I had before said - Next day I assembled them & told them of the Blood which cleanses them from all sin - I earnestly hope some of these murderers may yet turn to that penus fountain of mercy - Pomore was then taken with fever & so ill I feared we should not remain long together, & to add to the difficulty I had given away all the medicine I had brought with me - A copious bleeding relieved him considerably when it was at its height - The Bakaa felt great anxiety on his account as in the event of his death they would be blamed by the neighbouring tribes. All their native remedies were put into requisition but the fever ran its course & left him very weak - I then left him & having requested Sekhomi to send men for one of my oxen - When they arrived I sent them on for Pomore - We then bid Sekomi farewell & instead of riding myself I had the pleasure of walking about 70 miles [...] the side of my servant & the sand is very much like snow under [...]