

T R A V E L S
IN THE
INTERIOR DISTRICTS OF AFRICA:

PERFORMED UNDER THE
DIRECTION AND PATRONAGE
OF THE
AFRICAN ASSOCIATION,

IN THE
YEARS 1795, 1796, AND 1797.
BY MUNGO PARK, SURGEON.

WITH
AN APPENDIX,
CONTAINING
GEOGRAPHICAL ILLUSTRATIONS OF AFRICA.
By MAJOR RENNELL.

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CHAPTER XX.

Of the climate and seasons—Winds—Vegetable productions—Population—General observations on the character and disposition of the Mandingoes ; and a summary account of their manners and habits of life, their marriages, etc.

THE whole of my route, both in going and returning, having been confined to a tract of country bounded nearly by the 12th and 15th parallels of latitude, the reader must imagine that I found the climate in most places extremely hot ; but nowhere did I feel the heat so intense and oppressive as in the camp at Benowm, of which mention has been made in a former place. In some parts, where the country ascends into hills, the air is at all times comparatively cool ; yet none of the districts which I traversed could properly be called mountainous. About the middle of June, the hot and sultry atmosphere is agitated by violent gusts of wind (called *tornadoes*), accompanied with thunder and rain. These usher in what is denominated the *rainy season*, which continues until the month of November. During this time the diurnal rains are very heavy, and the prevailing winds are from the south-west. The termination of the rainy season is likewise attended with violent tornadoes ; after which, the wind shifts to the north-east, and continues to blow from that quarter during the rest of the year.

When the wind sets in from the north-east it produces a wonderful change in the face of the country. The grass soon becomes dry and withered ; the rivers subside very rapidly, and many of the trees shed their leaves. About this period is com-

monly felt the *harmattan*, a dry and parching wind, blowing from the north-east, and accompanied by a thick smoky haze, through which the sun appears of a dull red colour. This wind, in passing over the great desert of Sahara, acquires a very strong attraction for humidity, and parches up everything exposed to its current. It is, however, reckoned very salutary, particularly to Europeans, who generally recover their health during its continuance. I experienced immediate relief from sickness, both at Dr. Laidley's and at Kamalia, during the *harmattan*. Indeed, the air, during the rainy season, is so loaded with moisture, that clothes, shoes, trunks, and everything that is not close to the fire, become damp and mouldy, and the inhabitants may be said to live in a sort of vapour bath; but this dry wind braces up the solids, which were before relaxed, gives a cheerful flow of spirits, and is even pleasant to respiration. Its ill effects are, that it produces chaps in the lips, and afflicts many of the natives with sore eyes.

Whenever the grass is sufficiently dry, the Negroes set it on fire; but in Ludamar, and other Moorish countries, this practice is not allowed; for it is upon the withered stubble that the Moors feed their cattle until the return of the rains. The burning the grass in Manding exhibits a scene of terrific grandeur. In the middle of the night I could see the plains and mountains, as far as my eye could reach, variegated with lines of fire, and the light reflected on the sky made the heavens appear in a blaze. In the day time pillars of smoke were seen in every direction; while the birds of prey were observed hovering round the conflagration, and pouncing down upon the snakes, lizards, and other reptiles, which attempted to escape from the flames. This annual burning is soon followed by a fresh and sweet verdure, and the country is thereby rendered more healthful and pleasant.

Of the most remarkable and important of the vegetable productions mention has already been made, and they are nearly

the same in all the districts through which I passed. It is observable, however, that although many species of the edible roots which grow in the West India Islands, are found in Africa, yet I never saw, in any part of my journey, either the sugar-cane, the coffee, or the cocoa tree ; nor could I learn on inquiry that they were known to the natives. The pine-apple, and the thousand other delicious fruits which the industry of civilized man (improving the bounties of nature) has brought to such great perfection in the tropical climates of America, are here equally unknown. I observed, indeed, a few orange and banana trees near the mouth of the Gambia ; but whether they were indigenous, or were formerly planted there by some of the white traders, I could not positively learn. I suspect that they were originally introduced by the Portuguese.

Concerning property in the soil, it appeared to me that the lands in native woods were considered as belonging to the king, or (where the government was not monarchical) to the state. When any individual of free condition had the means of cultivating more land than he actually possessed, he applied to the chief man of the district, who allowed him an extension of territory, on condition of forfeiture if the lands were not brought into cultivation by a given period. The condition being fulfilled, the soil became vested in the possessor ; and for aught that appeared to me, descended to his heirs.

The population, however, considering the extent and fertility of the soil, and the ease with which lands are obtained, is not very great in the countries which I visited. I found many extensive and beautiful districts, entirely destitute of inhabitants ; and, in general, the borders of the different kingdoms were either very thinly peopled, or entirely deserted. Many places are likewise unfavourable to population, from being unhealthy. The swampy banks of the Gambia, the Senegal, and other rivers towards the coast, are of this description. Perhaps it is on this account chiefly that the interior countries abound more

with inhabitants than the maritime districts; for all the Negro nations that fell under my observation, though divided into a number of petty independent states, subsist chiefly by the same means, live nearly in the same temperature, and possess a wonderful similarity of disposition. The Mandingoes, in particular, are a very gentle race; cheerful in their dispositions, inquisitive, credulous, simple, and fond of flattery. Perhaps the most prominent defect in their character was that insurmountable propensity which the reader must have observed to prevail in all classes of them, to steal from me the few effects I was possessed of. For this part of their conduct no complete justification can be offered, because theft is a crime in their own estimation; and it must be observed that they are not habitually and generally guilty of it towards each other. This, however, is an important circumstance in mitigation; and before we pronounce them a more depraved people than any other, it were well to consider whether the lower order of people in any part of Europe would have acted, under similar circumstances, with greater honesty towards a stranger, than the Negroes acted towards me. It must not be forgotten that the laws of the country afforded me no protection; that every one was at liberty to rob me with impunity; and finally, that some part of my effects were of as great value, in the estimation of the Negroes, as pearls and diamonds would have been in the eyes of a European. Let us suppose a black merchant of Hindostan to have found his way into the centre of England, with a box of jewels at his back, and that the laws of the kingdom afforded him no security; in such a case, the wonder would be, not that the stranger was robbed of any part of his riches, but that any part was left for a second depredator. Such, on sober reflection, is the judgment I have formed concerning the pilfering disposition of the Mandingo Negroes towards myself. Notwithstanding I was so great a sufferer by it, I do not consider that their natural sense of justice was perverted or extinguished;

it was overpowered only for the moment by the strength of a temptation which it required no common virtue to resist.

On the other hand, as some counterbalance to this depravity in their nature—allowing it to be such—it is impossible for me to forget the disinterested charity and tender solicitude with which many of these poor heathens (from the sovereign of Sego to the poor women who received me at different times into their cottages when I was perishing of hunger) sympathised with me in my sufferings, relieved my distresses, and contributed to my safety. This acknowledgment, however, is perhaps more particularly due to the female part of the nation. Among the men, as the reader must have seen, my reception, though generally kind, was sometimes otherwise. It varied according to the various tempers of those to whom I made application. The hardness of avarice in some, and the blindness of bigotry in others, had closed up the avenues to compassion; but I do not recollect a single instance of hardheartedness towards me in the women. In all my wanderings and wretchedness, I found them uniformly kind and compassionate; and I can truly say, as my predecessor Mr. Ledyard has eloquently said before me:—"To a woman, I never addressed myself in the language of decency and friendship, without receiving a decent and friendly answer. If I was hungry or thirsty, wet or sick, they did not hesitate, like the men, to perform a generous action. In so free and so kind a manner did they contribute to my relief, that if I was dry I drank the sweetest draught, and if hungry I eat the coarsest morsel, with a double relish."

It is surely reasonable to suppose that the soft and amiable sympathy of nature, which was thus spontaneously manifested towards me in my distress, is displayed by these poor people, as occasion requires, much more strongly towards persons of their own nation and neighbourhood, and especially when the objects of their compassion are endeared to them by the ties of consanguinity. Accordingly, the maternal affection (neither

suppressed by the restraints, nor diverted by the solitudes of civilized life) is everywhere conspicuous among them, and creates a correspondent return of tenderness in the child. An illustration of this has been given in page 39. "Strike me," said my attendant, "but do not curse my mother." The same sentiment I found universally to prevail, and observed in all parts of Africa that the greatest affront which could be offered to a Negro was to reflect on her who gave him birth.

It is not strange that this sense of filial duty and affection among the Negroes should be less ardent towards the father than the mother. The system of polygamy, while it weakens the father's attachment, by dividing it among the children of different wives, concentrates all the mother's jealous tenderness to one point—the protection of her own offspring. I perceived with great satisfaction, too, that the maternal solicitude extended not only to the growth and security of the person, but also, in a certain degree, to the improvement of the mind of the infant; for one of the first lessons in which the Mandingo women instruct their children, is *the practice of truth*. The reader will probably recollect the case of the unhappy mother, whose son was murdered by the Moorish banditti at Funingkeddy, p. 84.—Her only consolation in her uttermost distress, was the reflection that the poor boy, in the course of his blameless life, *had never told a lie*. Such testimony from a fond mother, on such an occasion, must have operated powerfully on the youthful part of the surrounding spectators. It was at once a tribute of praise to the deceased, and a lesson to the living.

The Negro women suckle their children until they are able to walk of themselves. Three years' nursing is not uncommon; and during this period the husband devotes his whole attention to his other wives. To this practice it is owing, I presume, that the family of each wife is seldom very numerous. Few women have more than five or six children. As soon as an infant is able to walk, it is permitted to run about with great

freedom. The mother is not over solicitous to preserve it from slight falls and other trifling accidents. A little practice soon enables the child to take care of itself, and experience acts the part of a nurse. As they advance in life, the girls are taught to spin cotton, and to beat corn, and are instructed in other domestic duties; and the boys are employed in the labours of the field. Both sexes, whether Bushreens or Kafirs, on attaining the age of puberty, are circumcised. This painful operation is not considered by the Kafirs so much in the light of a religious ceremony, as a matter of convenience and utility. They have, indeed, a superstitious notion that it contributes to render the marriage state prolific. The operation is performed upon several young people at the same time; all of whom are exempted from every sort of labour for two months afterwards. During this period they form a society called *Solimana*. They visit the towns and villages in the neighbourhood, where they dance and sing, and are well treated by the inhabitants. I had frequently, in the course of my journey, observed parties of this description, but they were all males. I had, however, an opportunity of seeing a female *Solimana*, at Kamalia.

In the course of the celebration, it frequently happens that some of the young women get married. If a man takes a fancy to any one of them, it is not considered as absolutely necessary that he should make an overture to the girl herself. The first object is to agree with the parents concerning the recompense to be given them for the loss of the company and services of their daughter. The value of two slaves is a common price, unless the girl is thought very handsome, in which case the parents will raise their demand very considerably. If the lover is rich enough, and willing to give the sum demanded, he then communicates his wishes to the damsel; but her consent is by no means necessary to the match; for if the parents agree to it, and eat a few kolla-nuts, which are presented by the suitor as an earnest of the bargain, the young lady must either have

the man of their choice, or continue unmarried, for she cannot afterwards be given to another. If the parents should attempt it, the lover is then authorised, by the laws of the country, to seize upon the girl as his slave. When the day for celebrating the nuptials is fixed on, a select number of people are invited to be present at the wedding; a bullock or goat is killed, and great plenty of victuals dressed for the occasion. As soon as it is dark, the bride is conducted into a hut, where a company of matrons assist in arranging the wedding-dress, which is always white cotton, and is put on in such a manner as to conceal the bride from head to foot. Thus arrayed, she is seated upon a mat in the middle of the floor, and the old women place themselves in a circle round her. They then give her a series of instructions, and point out, with great propriety, what ought to be her future conduct in life. This scene of instruction, however, is frequently interrupted by girls, who amuse the company with songs and dances, which are rather more remarkable for their gaiety than delicacy. While the bride remains within the hut with the women, the bridegroom devotes his attention to the guests of both sexes, who assemble without doors, and by distributing among them small presents of kolla-nuts, and seeing that every one partakes of the good cheer which is provided, he contributes much to the general hilarity of the evening. When supper is ended, the company spend the remainder of the night in singing and dancing, and seldom separate until daybreak. About midnight, the bride is privately conducted by the women into the hut which is to be her future residence; and the bridegroom, upon a signal given, retires from his company. The new-married couple, however, are always disturbed towards morning by the women, who assemble to inspect the nuptial sheet (according to the manners of the ancient Hebrews, as recorded in Scripture), and dance round it. This ceremony is thought indispensably necessary, nor is the marriage considered as valid without it.

The Negroes, as hath been frequently observed, whether Mahomedan or Pagan, allow a plurality of wives. The Mahomedans alone are by their religion confined to four; and as the husband commonly pays a great price for each, he requires from all of them the utmost deference and submission, and treats them more like hired servants than companions. They have, however, the management of domestic affairs, and each in rotation is mistress of the household, and has the care of dressing the victuals, overlooking the female slaves, etc. But though the African husbands are possessed of great authority over their wives, I did not observe that in general they treat them with cruelty, neither did I perceive that mean jealousy in their dispositions, which is so prevalent among the Moors. They permit their wives to partake of all public diversions, and this indulgence is seldom abused; for though the Negro women are very cheerful and frank in their behaviour, they are by no means given to intrigue. I believe that instances of conjugal infidelity are not common. When the wives quarrel among themselves, a circumstance which, from the nature of their situation, must frequently happen, the husband decides between them, and sometimes finds it necessary to administer a little corporal chastisement before tranquillity can be restored. But if any one of the ladies complains to the chief of the town that her husband has unjustly punished her, and shewn an undue partiality to some other of his wives, the affair is brought to a public trial. In these *palavers*, however, which are conducted chiefly by married men, I was informed that the complaint of the wife is not always considered in a very serious light, and the complainant herself is sometimes convicted of strife and contention, and left without remedy. If she murmurs at the decision of the court, the magic rod of *Mumbo Jumbo* soon puts an end to the business.

The children of the Mandingoes are not always named after their relations, but frequently in consequence of some remarkable occurrence. Thus, my landlord at Kamalia was called *Karfa*, a

word signifying *to replace* ; because he was born shortly after the death of one of his brothers. Other names are descriptive of good or bad qualities, as *Modi*, “a good man ; *Fadibba*, “father of the town,” etc : indeed, the very names of their towns have something descriptive in them, as *Sibidooloo*, “the town of ciboa trees ;” *Kenneyeto*, “victuals here ;” *Dosita*, “lift your spoon.” Others seem to be given by way of reproach, as *Bammakoo*, “wash a crocodile ;” *Karankalla*, “no cup to drink from,” etc. A child is named when it is seven or eight days old. The ceremony commences by shaving the infant’s head ; and a dish called *Dega*, made of pounded corn and sour milk, is prepared for the guests. If the parents are rich, a sheep or goat is commonly added. The feast is called *Ding koon lee*, “the child’s head shaving.” During my stay at Kamalia I was present at four different feasts of this kind, and the ceremony was the same in each, whether the child belonged to a Bushreen or a Kafir. The schoolmaster, who officiated as priest on these occasions, and who is necessarily a Bushreen, first said a long prayer over the *dega*, during which every person present took hold of the brim of the calabash with his right hand. After this the schoolmaster took the child in his arms, and said a second prayer, in which he repeatedly solicited the blessing of God upon the child, and upon all the company. When this prayer was ended, he whispered a few sentences in the child’s ear, and spat three times in its face, after which he pronounced its name aloud, and returned the infant to the mother. This part of the ceremony being ended, the father of the child divided the *dega* into a number of balls, one of which he distributed to every person present. And inquiry was then made if any person in the town was dangerously sick—it being usual in such cases to send the party a large portion of the *dega*, which is thought to possess great medical virtues.*

* Soon after baptism, the children are marked in different parts of the skin, in a manner resembling what is called *tattooing* in the South Sea Islands.

Among the Negroes every individual, besides his own proper name, has likewise a *kontong*, or surname, to denote the family or clan to which he belongs. Some of these families are very numerous and powerful. It is impossible to enumerate the various *kontongs* which are found in different parts of the country, though the knowledge of many of them is of great service to the traveller; for as every Negro plumes himself upon the importance or the antiquity of his clan, he is much flattered when he is addressed by his *kontong*.

Salutations among the Negroes to each other, when they meet, are always observed; but those in most general use among the Kafirs are *Abbe paeretto*—*E ning seni*—*Anawari*, etc., all of which have nearly the same meaning, and signify, *are you well*, or to that effect. There are likewise salutations which are used at different times of the day, as *E ning somo*, good morning, etc. The general answer to all salutations is to repeat the *kontong* of the person who salutes, or else to repeat the salutation itself, first pronouncing the word *marhaba*, my friend.