

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE BRITISH ATTEMPT TO EXPLORE THE WEST
AFRICAN INTERIOR: WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE BENUE
RIVER REGION, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the British attempt to explore the West African interior, with a focus on the Benue River region in Nigeria. It examines the historical context of British colonialism in Africa and the motivations behind their exploration efforts. It also delves into the methods used by the British, such as the establishment of trading posts and partnerships with local rulers, to gain access to the interior. One of the most notable and unsuccessful attempts was led by renowned explorer Mungo Park in 1795. He embarked on a journey along the Gambia River and reached the River Niger, but unfortunately died during the trip. Another attempt was made by Hugh Clapperton in 1825, who explored the Sokoto Caliphate and reached the coast of Lake Chad. However, he was also met with several challenges and had to turn back. In 1830, Richard Lander was able to successfully navigate the entire length of the River Niger, providing valuable insights into the region's geography and potential for trade. Despite facing numerous obstacles, these British explorers played a significant role in expanding knowledge and influence in the West African interior. The article draws on a variety of content analyses of documents which are narrative in nature and obtained substantially from secondary sources. Primary and secondary sources, including official reports, travel accounts, and historical documents. The study concludes with a critical evaluation of the impact of British exploration on the West African Interior and its lasting effects on the region. Overall, this study sheds light on a lesser-known aspect of British colonial history and contributes to our understanding of the complex interactions between European powers and African societies in the 19th century.

Keywords: British, Exploration, West Africa, Benue River, Nigeria

Introduction

The British expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century was not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, their efforts to explore the interior of West Africa were with a particular attention to the Benue River region. It also followed an earlier British expansion elsewhere in the world, which had much to do with a contemporary British desire to expand overseas trade, and with traditional British commercial activities on the West African coast, a tradition dating

back to the sixteenth century. For this reason, it is important to review, strictly from the point of view of West Africa, the background to the British advance into the Niger-Benue region in the Nigerian area in the second half of the nineteenth century.

This particular movement of British expansion was the culmination of a long process which may be considered to have begun in the 1530s.¹ It was in that decade that English seamen and traders appeared on the West African coast on individual speculative trading ventures. By the seventeenth century, these early ventures were transformed into a more serious commercial undertaking with the institution of chartered national trading companies. The companies aimed to increase the British share of Europe's overseas trade and provide slave labour for her vast colonies in America and the West Indies; for that matter, remained largely confined to the coast where several forts and trading posts had been established.² What little attempt was made to penetrate the interior of West Africa before 1780 was limited to the efforts of a few commercial agents who sailed up the river Gambia for several hundred miles as far as the Falame, a tributary of Senegal, and travelled overland in this area between 1619 and the second decade of the eighteenth century.³

The explanation for this apparent lack of enthusiasm on the part of British interests to advance into the West African interior seems to be the absence of any compelling reason to establish bases away from the coast.⁴ Indeed, gold dust and slaves, the commodities in which European traders were mainly interested, were obtained easily on the coast.⁵ The traditional explanation based on physical climatic and political obstacles is no longer regarded as wholly convincing.⁶ Nevertheless, these obstacles, particularly the resistance by African polities over which Europe enjoyed very little if any military superiority at the time, must have reinforced the inclination to stay away from the interior, could be that the richer opportunities opened up with the discovery of America and the Cape route to the east had taken up all the energies of Europe available for overseas expansion.⁷

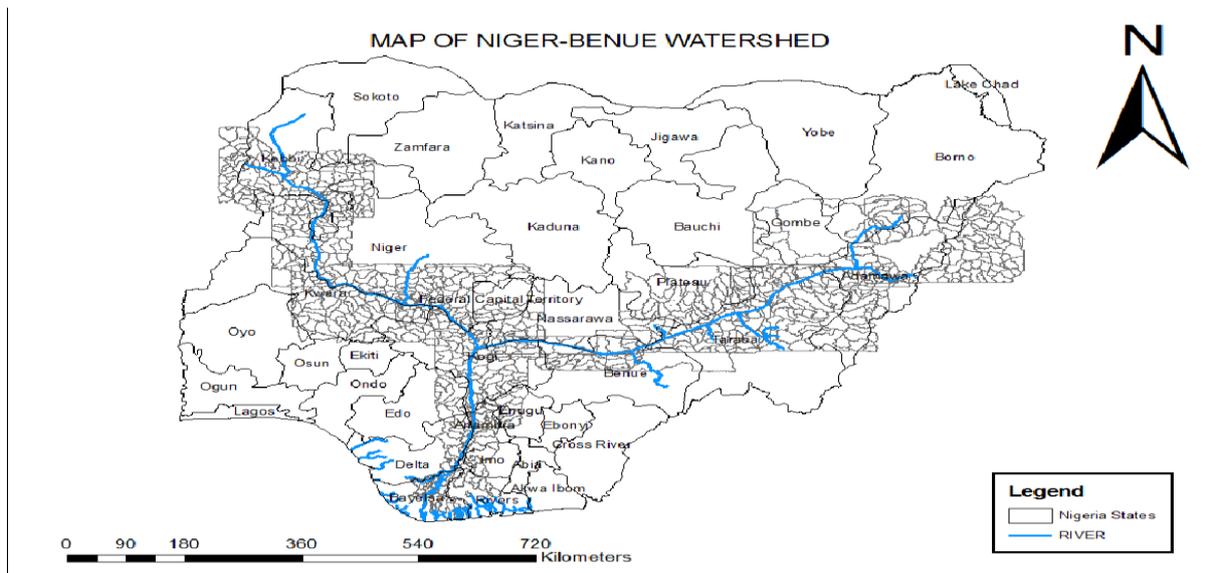
Consequently, it was not until the last decade of the eighteenth century that British interests made any attempt to venture into the interior of West Africa. This newfound interest, not only in West Africa but in the continent as a whole, has been attributed to developments within British society. These developments include the quest for geographical knowledge, demonstrated particularly in Scientific and general Curiosity about unknown parts of the world, as exemplified by the journeys of James Cook to Australia and New Zealand and the Journey of James Bruce to North Africa and Ethiopia, Bakie to Nigeria and also by a consequent flood of travel literature. Other significant development was the expansion of trade between the British and West Africa, which had increased sixfold from an export of goods worth only E133,000 in 1720 to one valued at E866,000 in 1772, and the onset of the early stages of the "Industrial Revolution" about 1750.⁸ Finally, the cause included such divergent factors as the emergence of the movement for the abolition of the slave trade and the strategic importance of the West African coast in the naval war of 1778-83 between Britain and France. In other words, it was a varying mixture of considerations that gave rise to an increasing interest in West Africa during the later eighteenth century.⁹

However, a detailed examination of these considerations has shown that not all of them were equally responsible for the new exploration of West Africa that was begun by the African Association in 1788. For instance, the humanitarian factor in the sense of movement to penetrate the interior of West Africa to abolish the slave trade, as opposed to a general philanthropic disposition, had little to do with the foundation of the African Association, the body which organised much of the exploration.¹⁰

Furthermore, the formal anti-slavery movement had emerged after the way had been paved by political and economic logic and would, to that extent, seem to be a reflection of the new national situation. In 1776, the American colonies broke away from the empire, and this seems to have reduced the influence of the British West Indies, which sustained the Slave trade to produce for the American Market. In addition, it has been argued that the relative importance of the West Indies in the Imperial economy had declined, following the expansion of the total volume of British trade, and as a result, the restrictions imposed by its sugar planters were becoming increasingly indefensible.¹¹ But it seems that this development alone is not sufficient to explain the formal anti-slavery movement, which in part may have also owed its origins to genuine popular revulsion to the concept of human enslavement.¹²

The strategic factor also never emerged as a serious issue, nor was it recognised as such by the supporters of exploration, both within and outside the African Association, even though the West African coast was becoming increasingly drawn into the naval conflicts between Britain and France.

The Map Shows Nigeria and the River Benue



Source:https://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=AwrEoPUakj5pA3oapjKjzbfK;_ylu=c2VjA2ZwLWF0dHJpYgRzbGsDcnVyba

What would appear to constitute the major reason for the exploration of West Africa in the eighteenth century was economic and intellectual considerations, the latter involving, above all, passionate consideration of patents. By the 1750s, Britain had started to witness the beginning of an industrial revolution.¹³ This development meant that British industries were beginning to acquire an immense productive capacity, which demanded foreign markets and raw materials for their rising outputs.¹⁴ The needs of the new industrial order were further heightened by the loss of the thirteen American colonies to the empire, which, according to C. Howard and J. H Plumb caused anxiety among the mercantile and ruling classes and government circles.¹⁵ The economic needs of the time were not lost on members of the African Association, who gave adequate consideration to them in their activities.¹⁶

The current geographical consideration and the contemporary interest in botany, natural history, and ethnography were best reflected in the stated motivation of the Association. It was founded as a result of the prevailing ignorance about Africa, which "it was determined to remove by collecting information on every aspect of the continent, physical, material, and human."¹⁷ It was these reasons that led members of the Saturday Club to form themselves into the African Association to promote the discovery of the inland parts of the African continent. Below is a map showing the Nigeria-Benue watershed.

Explanatory Endeavours of the African Association 1790-1805

Individual founders of the African Association were interested in the exploration of more than Africa. Sir Joseph Banks, the main founder of the Association, was also involved in the exploration of the Americas, China, Siam, the West Indies and Australia. Nor was the association the only British promoter of exploration, either in Africa or elsewhere. The Sierra Leone company and later the Sierra Leon government, the Bulama Association and certain private individuals were also involved in exploration in West Africa. At the same time, the Hudson Bay Company was scouring the far north of Canada while John Barrow, second secretary at the Admiralty, was preoccupied with the exploration of Arctic regions and the North West Passage. But as the concern in this study is with the Niger-Benue region of Modern Nigeria, attention is focused only on those expeditions which were either aimed at or visited that region or its waterways.

Between 1790 and 1805, the African Association organised several expeditions to explore the interior of West Africa, particularly the areas it termed "Hausa" and especially "Katsina".¹⁸ The emphasis on the exploration of Katsina was designed to lead to the discovery of the middle course of the river Niger, on which the town was believed to be situated. The discovery of the course and termination of the Niger, about which very little was known, not even its direction of flow, remained an important objective of the Association. For this reason, all the expeditions, but particularly that of Friedrich Conrad Dorneman in 1798. Were instructed to endeavour to discover the course and termination of the Niger. Another important objective of the association was to collect information about the animal, vegetable or animal productions of the West African interior, as well as its natural history and ethnography.

As a result of the efforts of the African Association, information was collected about the West African interior, especially the river Niger, whose middle course was explored by Mungo Park in 1799. However, the problems of the lower course and the termination of the river remained unresolved by 1805, when the efforts of the association came to an end. By that date, the Association had lost its drive. Its finances and membership were in decline while many of its core members had either died, moved out of the country or had other concerns to claim their attention.¹⁹ It was at this juncture that the British government of the day, under pressure from Banks and John Sullivan, under-secretary of State at the Colonial Office, took over the task of promoting, organising and financing African exploration.²⁰

The Involvement of the British Government in Exploration 1805-1841

By the first decade of the Nineteenth century, it had become important to Britain that the course termination of the river Niger was about to be discovered, since this was regarded as the key to the establishment of that commercial intercourse between Britain and the West African interior that had been anticipated since the beginning of the exploration. Furthermore, there

was the feeling that unless action was taken fairly quickly, Britain might be forestalled on the Niger by another European power, most probably France. Indeed, the attention of the government of the day was drawn, via the colonial Office, by no less an influential figure than Banks, to a book published in 1802 by Sylvester Goldsberry, an ardent advocate of a policy of French expansion, calling on that government to colonise the whole Senegambia.²¹ It took a decade after the end of the mission of the park before the government of the day, under pressure from the Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst, who, since his appointment in 1812, had shown interest in African exploration and the problem of the West African interior. We may infer that the delay might have been due to preoccupation with the war with France. But, the expedition under Major Peddie, which was organised in 1815 for the purpose solely of discovering the course and termination of the Niger from the point at which Park had left off, cannot be advanced beyond Segu before it was forced to return on account of deaths, opposition and Political unrest in the area.²²

The main outcome of Pedie's mission was that it led to the abandonment of the attempt at exploring the West African interior via Senegambia. The abandonment of the approach through the region was in part due to the tragedies that attended the expeditions, since it was also in part due to the availability of an alternative approach, which was tested and recommended by a naval commander, W, Smith. This was the approach through North Africa. The approach has several advantages in terms not only of relative celebrity but also the political influence of the Pash of Tripoli, Yusuf Karamanlis, which extended as far as Bornu (Borno), with whom the Pash had friendly relations. Moreover, the Pasha was willing to cooperate with British interests.²³ It was the prospect of success held out by an approach from the north that determined the British Government of the day, under pressure from Bathurst, to send in late 1821 yet another expedition, comprising Dr Walter Oudney, or Dixon Denham and Captain Hug Clapperton, who task of the Oudney-Denham-Clapperton expedition, otherwise known as the Bornu Mission, was to explore the West African interior in particular to discover the course and termination of the river, the mission was also instructed to promote the extension of British commerce and advertise the British name and character.²⁴ But despite the discoveries the mission made and the considerable amount of information it collected, it failed to reach Nigeria.²⁵ As a result of the success of the Bornu Mission, which lost only one member, namely Oudney, the British government was still under pressure to further the exploration of the West African interior despite the financial stringency being observed at the time.²⁶ Consequently, two expenditures were launched in late 1824 and in August 1825. The first expedition, led by Major Alexander Gordon Laing and directed from the north, was instructed to visit Timbuktu and, in particular, ascertain whether there was any highway for the extension of British commerce into the interior.²⁷ On the other hand, the second expedition under Clapperton, this time from the south, was concerned mainly with the question of the abolition of the slave trade. During Clapperton's earlier mission, he had reported that the Caliph of the Sokoto Caliphate, Muhammad Bello, had shown interest in establishing commercial intercourse with Britain and in abolishing the slave trade. The government of the day felt that it should take advantage of Bello's interest to check the slave trade.²⁸ Thus, Clapperton was directed, among other things, to conclude an anti-slavery treaty with Bello to pave the way for the course and termination of the river Niger.²⁹

Both the Liang and Clapperton missions ended in tragic failure. Laing reached Timbuktu in August 1826 but was ordered out of the town. He was killed near Arawan as he attempted to reach the upper reaches of the Niger by way of Walata and Segu Sikoro.³⁰ Clapperton's mission, reduced by fever to only himself and his servant, Richard Lander, arrived in Kano in July 1826, from where the former hastened to Sokoto. Clapperton was not allowed

to proceed to Bornu (Borno) on account of the war then raging between the two states, while the arms intended as a present to Sheikh Muhammad Kanemi were seized. Clapperton died in Sokoto in April 1827, and Lander returned to Britain the following year.³¹

Despite the tragic failure of the expeditions of both Laing and Clapperton, the determination to resolve the problem of the course and termination of the river Niger had not dissipated. On the contrary, immediately after Lander had returned in 1828, he offered to go back, together with his brother, John, in order to continue the search for the termination of Niger, the offer which was supported by Barrow was accepted by the Colonial Office and the Lander brothers left in January 1830 for West Africa the main mission of the Landers brothers was to discover the course and termination of Niger by navigating it from the point where Park had left off, down to its outlet.³² The Landers Mission was the most successful of all the attempts to resolve the problem of the Niger. The brothers reached the Niger at Bussa, from where they sailed down the river and thus resolved the problem of the Niger, which had baffled geographers for many centuries.

The resolution of the problem of the course and termination of the river Niger excited much interest among geographical and commercial circles in Britain and, more importantly, it led to the flotation of a commercial company to open direct commercial relations in the interior of West Africa via the river. Indeed, it seems that since 1821, when James McQueen, a West Indian planter and geographer, published a book in which he argued that considerable trade was carried on in the interior of West Africa, a new group of merchants inclined to inland, as distinct from coastal trade, had emerged.³³ It was members of this new group of traders who came together to form the company, which became known as the African Inland Commercial Company. The leading spirit of the company was MacGregor Laird, the son of William Laird, the owner of William Laird and Sons, a successful Birkenhead firm of shipbuilders. MacGregor and his family owned about a quarter of the total share of the new company.³⁴ The company built one sailing ship and two steam vessels, which it dispatched to West Africa in July 1832 under the command of Richard Lander and with a crew of forty-eight, with instructions to commence trade with the interior of the region. The two steamships, the *Quorra* and *Alburkah*, ascended the river Niger to Raba in Nupe, from which point they were forced to return to the coast by technical trouble in the latter vessel.

Not surprisingly, as the first pioneering trading venture into the interior of West Africa by Europeans, the African Inland Commercial Company suffered a trading loss; and what is more, thirty-eight members of the expedition died of the fever of the Niger region, while Landers and an Association lost their lives as a result of an attack by the peoples in the Delta.³⁵ As a result, the company was dissolved after the return of the expedition to Liverpool in 1834.³⁶ But despite this daunting drawback, some merchants, notably Robert Jamieson, were determined to continue the efforts to establish commercial relations with the regions of the Niger and Benue rivers, albeit on a smaller scale than that undertaken by the African Inland Commercial Company in 1832. It was to this end that Jamieson and his associates bought the *Quorra* from the company and placed it on the coast under the command of John Beecroft, a British resident merchant on the Island of Fernando Po.³⁷

Beecroft made a strenuous attempt at the commercial expedition of the Niger region between 1835 and 1840. But his effort largely confused the oil rivers; the only exception was in 1840 when he ascended the Niger to Nupeland. In that year, he navigated the river as far as Bajibo but was forced to return by the narrowing of the river to about fifty yards across and by the very strong current.³⁸ However, as a result of this endeavour, Beecroft was able to

demonstrate that both trade and navigation of the upper Niger were practicable for steamers at least as far as Raba in Nupe.

In the meantime, an ambitious scheme for West African exploration was being prepared in Britain. This was the expedition that the British government of the day, under pressure from a humanitarian organisation, the African Civilisation Society, sent out to the Niger in 1841.³⁹ This expedition, consisting of three ships and three hundred individuals, had as its object the conclusion of anti-slavery treaties and the encouragement of legitimate trade through the promotion of agricultural production. To this end, a Superintendent was appointed to set up a model farm at the junction of the Niger and Benue Rivers, and the expedition was supplied with agricultural implements and stores weighing thirty tons. The emphasis on the development of legitimate commerce was a product of the conviction that it was the most effective means of checking the slave trade. Nonetheless, it was no less *ex parte*. Sir Fowell Buxton, the Leader of the British Anti-slavery movement, who was largely instrumental in setting up the expedition, noted that interests at stake were markets and sources of raw materials, particularly cotton, and the agricultural settlement was designed to achieve those ends.⁴⁰

It was a widely held view that “Christianity”, commerce and “Civilisation”⁴¹ advanced together and could not be separated. The Niger expedition represented the highest watermark of the influence of the humanitarians.⁴² The disastrous end of the expedition, due to an epidemic of fever which claimed many lives, spelt the death knell of the African Civilisation Society, which was dissolved in January 1843.⁴³

Conclusion

The British played a major role in exploring the West African interior, particularly the Benue River region in Nigeria. They employed a range of methods and technologies, including steamers, canoes, and trading posts. The expeditions faced significant challenges, including disease, hostile tribes, and difficult terrain. Despite these obstacles, the British gathered valuable information and established a strong presence in the region, expanding trade and political influence. The British attempt to explore the West African interior, particularly the Benue River region, was a significant undertaking with a lasting impact on the region's development and history. It may be argued with some justification that by 1841 British enterprise had come a long way in its endeavours to explore the West African interior. The area drained by the middle course of the River Niger had been explored. More importantly, the river's mouth had been discovered, thereby revealing a highway into the interior. Between 1849 and 1857, British attention turned to the exploration of the area drained by the most important tributary of the Niger, the River Benue.

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Biodata

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