

Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

2006 Fellow's Report

By

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Introduction

About four years ago, I came across a book that changed my life. It was a recent edition of the diaries of Mungo Park, one of the great, unsung heroes of African exploration. Initially trained as a surgeon, Park was hired twice by the African Association to explore the unknown interior of West Africa, first in 1795 then again in 1805. His mission was to trace the course of the River Niger, the great waterway that arcs from the highlands of Guinea through the Sahara to the steamy swamps the Niger Delta and, ultimately, the Atlantic Ocean.

To cut a long story short, Park failed in both his attempts. On his first solo journey, he managed to solve the riddle of what direction the river flows in – west to east, not east to west as was commonly thought. But such was his ill-treatment by local tribes people that he was forced to turn back and bring home what information he had managed to glean in his two-year journey. The second time around, this time with a whole squadron of soldiers for backup, he got substantially further. Although most of his men died from disease and murder, Park and a few survivors managed to reach the river in what is today Mali, and set sail downstream. By all accounts, they made it as far as northern Nigeria, but were attacked and killed in an ambush. They were only a few hundred miles short of the river's end.

Yet failure aside, Park's legacy lives on. This is mainly due to the startling diaries that in spite of his terrible personal circumstances he managed to maintain and safeguard. Never out of print since their first publication in 1799, Park's diaries still make for a compelling read, swept along by his powerful narrative yet always alive to the details of the many strange sights he was witnessing, probably for the first time by a white man.

As I read more around the subject, I began to realise that Park wasn't alone in exploring the Niger; for the best part of a hundred years, it was the goal of dozens of explorers, some sent by the British, others by the French. The river was finally conquered about 25 years after Park's second attempt, and it was primarily because of this that West Africa was eventually thrown open to colonialism.

I became increasingly drawn into this fascinating history and started to formulate my own ideas for a trip to West Africa based partly on Park's own experiences, partly on the numerous other stories of adventure and personal sacrifice that make up the history of the Niger's exploration. My dream finally became a reality when I successfully applied for a 2006 WCMT Fellowship. The following is an account of own journey along the River Niger, what I feel I have learned from the expedition and how I think some of that knowledge can be put to use.

Part 1 *The Plan*

Although my initial interest was in Park and his travels, I decided that I didn't want to attempt a slavish re-enactment of his route. He began both his expeditions in what is now Gambia, picking up the Niger in modern day Mali, about 1000 miles from its source. To emulate this would have meant entirely missing out Guinea, the first country through which the river flows, and potentially the most interesting due to its relative obscurity today.

The idea I eventually formulated therefore was to begin at the beginning – at the river's source in Guinea – and follow it to as close to the end as I could get. The advantage of this was that it would allow me the opportunity of exploring some of the less known reaches of what is known as the Upper Niger – roughly the stretch from the source to Bamako about 800 miles away. This, I had heard, was interesting country, and on that basis alone was not to be missed.

After Guinea, the expedition would then be a straightforward tracing of the river's course (with a few deviations) through Mali, Niger and Nigeria to as close to the end as circumstances would allow. I was realistic that given the volatile situation in the Niger Delta, plans to get all the way to the end could well be thwarted, but I decided to keep an open mind, aim for the end anyway and keep an eye on things as the trip progressed.



Fig 1: my proposed route, beginning in Guinea

Aside from the challenge of travelling the best part of 3,000 miles through some remote and potentially dangerous parts of West Africa, the trip I hoped would serve a more fulfilling purpose. As a journalist with a long-standing fascination with Africa, particularly West Africa, I was extremely keen to use my writing skills to document the trip in some way.

West Africa, particularly the four countries through which the Niger flows, is a relative unknown here; my hope therefore was to observe and experience the place as it is now and in some small way communicate that to anyone willing to listen or read what I had to say. I couldn't claim any overarching scientific or geographical purpose to the mission other than a desire to shed light on a part of the world for many is off the radar.

My plans received a great fillip about five months before I was due to set off when I managed to enlist Daniel Norwood, then an acquaintance, now a firm friend, to join the expedition. Dan is a professional photographer who works for the Metropolitan Police in forensics. Due a sabbatical, he happily decided that a trip along the Niger River was something worth taking three months off for and signed up. I would like to say at this stage that I am glad he did; he was a great companion and his tireless efforts mean we have ended up with a first class photographic record of the expedition. The trip wouldn't have been the same without him.

Part 2 Guinea: the source

Guinea is an obscure little country sandwiched between three of West Africa's most notorious hotspots – Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire. It is a troubled place, suffering from all the usual African afflictions – poverty, corruption, despotism – yet with all the paradoxical charms of friendliness, warmth and optimism. It is also home to the source of the River Niger and to one of the wildest and least explored stretches of the river's upper reaches and therefore as good a place as any to launch the expedition.

We arrived in Conakry on November 7 on a hot, sultry evening. Conakry had no real draw other than being the place where we had to gather supplies and locate a vehicle to take us inland to Faranah, the first proper town on the Niger and our base for exploring the source. The vehicle secured, we pushed inland on the nine-hour drive to Faranah. As a place it wasn't much to look at, but it offered us our first glimpse of the Niger, here about 100 miles from its source and relatively insignificant in size compared to what it later becomes.

We spent sufficient time in Faranah only to gather supplies for the canoe trip and to finalise our arrangements for reaching the source: we would drive to a village roughly two days' walk from the source, leave the vehicle and set out on foot. For this stage we enlisted the help of Sori Keita, an elderly local whose grandfather used to be a king in the region of the source. Sori's considerable local knowledge we felt would be a great advantage, so we decided to hire him as our guide for finding the source.

After a full day's walking across rugged mountainous terrain, we reached Forokonia, the nearest large village to the source. Here Sori used his slick diplomatic skills with the chief and his elders to secure us food, a bed for the night and, most importantly, the necessary permission to venture further into the chief's lands.



Fig 2: Tough going on the path to Tembicoundo

The next morning we pushed on up a path that became tougher going with every step. After a few hours along this we came to the village of Bacando, whose inhabitants are the self-appointed guardians of Tembicoundo, the sacred source of the River Niger – or ‘Djoliba’ as it is known here. Sori’s abilities were really put to the test when the chief essentially refused to let us proceed to the source without paying a large and unrealistic sum of money. This we refused to do, and it was only through delicate negotiation that we were able to convince the chief to let us go any further, and this only on condition that he and some of his advisers accompanied us.

The procession to Tembicoundo was a large and colourful one. Apart from Dan, Sori and me, we now had the company of the chief, his son, two or three elders and two armed soldiers, sent with us, we were told, for our protection, though from what I’m not quite sure. We hacked our way through the bush through tall grasses that sometimes reached well above our heads. Eventually we came to an area where the bush seemed unusually dense and was dominated by several stands of huge bamboo plants.

Pushing on further, the vegetation grew still thicker, blocking out much of the mid-afternoon sun. Scrambling over two huge boulders, the chief pointed to the ground in which stood a small puddle of water. The water trickled slowly out of the ground into the beginnings of a tiny stream. “This is what you have come to find,” he said solemnly. “You may drink if you wish.”

It was hard to believe this was the source of the mighty Niger. The heavy tree canopy and emerald light certainly lent the scene an air of mystery in keeping with the source’s magical reputation. But was this really the sacred Tembicoundo we had come to find?

Of course, there was no way of being absolutely certain. But being only a few metres from the watershed, the other side of which was pretty much downhill to the coast of Sierra Leone, this certainly was *one* of the sources of the Niger. Whether it was *the* source of the river I’ll never know, but I like to believe it was.



Fig 3: Dan (left) and Ben at the source of the Niger

Part 3 Guinea - the headwaters

With the source behind us, we returned to Faranah to prepare for the next stage of the voyage. This was to be potentially the most risky – a two-week canoe trip between Faranah and Kouroussa, the next town on the river, a couple of hundred miles downstream. Although barring a couple of sections of rapids the river itself is not massively hazardous here, there were real dangers from wild animals, particularly hippos.

The morning of our departure dawned and we lugged our gear across the meadow where we were planning to launch the boat. Almost immediately a group of children gathered around and watched transfixed as we put together our collapsible boat.

Pushing off from the bank, it was hard not to feel a sense of trepidation. With only a satellite phone as backup we were about to head off into territory that was entirely forest and only sparsely populated. If we got into trouble, we would be able to raise the alarm through the sat phone, but our emergency contact would take several days to reach us.

Pushing these thoughts to the back of our mind, we set off. The river's strong, gurgling current immediately took the boat and pulled us downstream. Dan took up his position in the bow so he would have an unobstructed view for taking photos; I stayed at the back, a position in which I would be in full control of the boat.

There is not space here to detail the full fortnight in the boat. The most enduring impression of the trip was the sensation of being utterly alone in the middle of the wilderness. Each day we would rise early, eat breakfast, break camp and set off before the sun had grown too hot. By late morning it was too fierce to paddle in, so we would stop in the shade, cook lunch and doze until the early afternoon then hit the river for another few hours of canoeing.

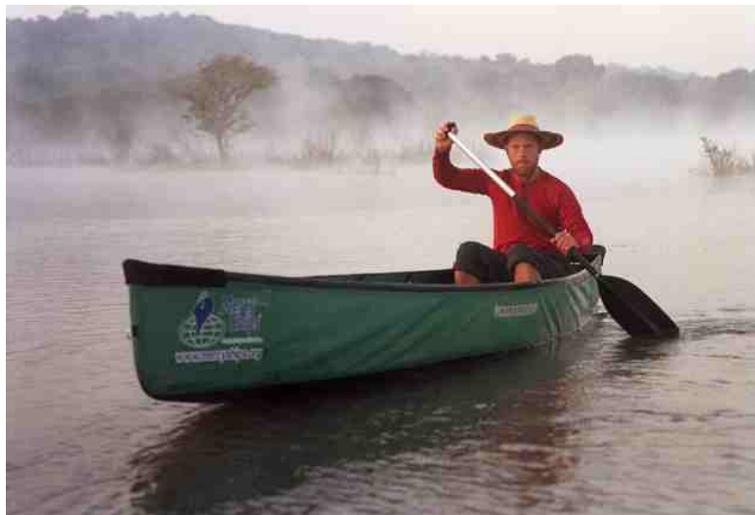


Fig 4: Canoeing in the early morning mist

Things went smoothly, barring a couple of near brushes with hippos, and a scare when Dan gave himself a nasty gash in the finger with a machete. The other main source of entertainment was the few stretches of rapids we hit. These were never extreme, but they were fierce enough to give me some testing moments at the helm. Once we semi-capsized, enough to throw me out; another time we both had to get out altogether and wade down the rapids, which were too shallow for the boat.

A highlight was the two-day break we had roughly in the middle of the trip when we stopped at a chimpanzee sanctuary, Project Primate, located almost at the very centre of the Parc du Haut Niger – the area of wilderness through which we were canoeing. Project Primate has been in existence for some years now, run by a French lady Esthel Raballand. It is in the most remote of locations, accessible only by boat as we were doing, or along a very rough track through the bush, passable only in the dry season.

In all the sanctuary has some 50 chimps held in large enclosures in the forest. Many had been rescued from a life as a novelty pet; others were orphans of parents killed for the bushmeat trade. The sanctuary is in the process of rehabilitating the chimps with a view to releasing them all back to the wild. Before this can happen though, they must first learn to co-exist in roughly the social groupings they would form in the wild, to give them more of a chance when finally they are let free.

Having seen the power and ferocity but also the calculating intelligence of these amazing animals in captivity, Dan and I were alarmed the night after we left the sanctuary to realise we had made camp right next to a group of wild chimps. It was a sleepless night indeed knowing that we were (as it sounded by the shrieks and whoops) but a stone's throw from a group in the forest.

A few days and the final section of rapids after leaving the sanctuary, we finally made Kouroussa. It was a Sunday, and it seemed the entire town was down at the river's edge washing, fishing or just relaxing. Imagine their complete surprise, then, when they saw two red-faced and tired white men canoeing round the bend in the river in an outlandish looking craft. Suddenly, the untamed world of natural Africa was behind us, and the chaos of its manmade one beckoned.



Fig 5: our normal daily view down the Niger

Part 4 Into Mali

Ten cramped hours with nine others people in a taxi built comfortably for six brought us to Bamako, Mali. Rather than trace the whole of the Niger's course through Mali, a vast country, our plan here was to travel along its route overland, visiting places of interest along the way.

Our first stop was the iconic mud-town of Djenne with its famous mud mosque (below) located on the floodplains between the Niger and one of its largest tributaries, the Bani. For this stage of the journey, we teamed up with Sekou Toure, a young Malian and the local 'fixer' of a contact of mine from the States who has written widely on the adobe architecture of Mali.

In Djenne, we had heard that there were growing problems resulting from the construction of a controversial dam on the Bani; our aim was to spend some time there investigating what was going and gathering material for an article on the town.



Figure 6: Djenne's mosque and Monday market

We were fortunate in that through Sekou we were introduced to some of Djenne's most notable people – the chief, his sons, various elders and the former deputy of the town. We were also invited to live in the house belonging to Jean-Louis, my American contact. This gave us a privileged insight into daily life in Djenne that I think as just one of Djenne's many regular *toubabs* (tourists), confined to the town's main tourist area, we would not have gained.

Our time in Djenne was spent wandering the town's many narrow mud streets talking with locals, gauging their views on the impact the dam is having; from numerous conversations, it seemed this was considerable. Chief among the ill effects of the dam was the devastation of the local rice crop; other problems included the destruction of

natural vegetation used by nomadic cattle herders that come to Djenne for seasonal grazing.

After Djenne we pressed on north to Mopti, a major town on the confluence of Niger and Bani rivers. Mopti was a good base for exploring the Niger's Inland Delta, a wetland ecosystem where the Niger splits into numerous creeks and channels that converge again in the vast Lac Debo further north.

Our intention here was to meet up with a representative of Wetlands International, a charity working to conserve areas such as the Delta and its rich animal and birdlife. We hired a pinasse, a kind of large, covered canoe with a motor, to take us up to the lake. Here I wanted to talk to some of the locals to hear about their experiences coping with similar problems of progressive drought as those in Djenne.

We had one successful meeting with elders of one the lakeside villages. But sadly during the night I was struck down with malaria, so we had to cut the trip short and find a hospital. The nearest was three hours across the lake, and a crumbling, depressing place at that. The doctor, though, was cheerful, and knew straight away what I had.

To get it treated, however, was another matter; being only provincial and therefore extremely poorly equipped, the hospital perhaps unsurprisingly had none of the drugs the doctor had prescribed to clobber the malaria. In fact, the nearest place we'd find them – here, in the middle of nowhere – was back in Mopti, 12 hours up the Niger in the direction we'd come only the day before. There was nothing for it but to sit in the bilges and let the world slip by.

We made Mopti at midnight and picked up the drugs the following morning. After this I had no choice but to find a hotel and sweat the malaria out. The drugs were effective, so this only took three days. But they're days I'd rather forget.



Figure 7: The sickbed

Part 5 To Timbuktu

After recuperating from malaria, Dan and I had a few days off to recharge the batteries. This happened to coincide with Christmas and roughly the middle of the trip, so it was as good a time as any to take stock.

With our energy restored, we pressed on, picking the river up at Mopti once again, but this time with the fabled city of Timbuktu in our sights. We hired ourselves another pinasse and took to the river once more for the three-day trip downriver. The route took us through Lac Debo and close to the village where I had been struck down; fortunately, second time round, we had no mishaps.

Travelling by pinasse was a wonderfully relaxing way of seeing the Niger. There was little to do but plenty to see as the world slipped past: villages of the Bozo fishermen who scratch out a meagre living from the river; children running alongside the boat, waving and shouting; the strange spiky mud mosques for which this part of Mali is famous; homebuilt boats gliding past with sails made from a patchwork of food-aid rice bags.

I found myself, as on many other occasions during the trip, reflecting on Park's experiences. He would have passed this way – or one of the many other channels that make up the Niger at this point. Little would have changed since his day; people are still living the same kind of simple lives they would have 200 years ago.

But what different circumstances: by this stage, Park and his few remaining men would have been fighting for their lives against almost entirely hostile locals. Park was a desperate man by now, and had abandoned his initial patience and humility in a mad dash to get as far along the river as possible. By all accounts, he never left his boat, *Djoliba*, and instead almost blasted a path along the river, repelling attacks from the shore with the few guns he and his crew had left. How very different from my own experience, reclined on the roof of a motorised boat, returning friendly waves from the shore.



Fig 8: Pulling in to camp at night on shores of Lac Debo

Part 6 Fallen Empire

Whatever Timbuktu was, it isn't now. Explorers of the past were drawn by tales of its great wealth. This it no doubt once had in great quantities when it was a trading city, but today it has fallen a long way from its golden past. It sits on the very edge of the desert, seemingly losing the battle against the relentless tides of sand lapping in from the Sahara so that parts of the town are buried in great drifts the stuff. There's an air of decay about the place, with evidence of poverty at every turn.

And yet, there's still something irresistible about the town. It was probably the knowledge of being in such a fabled place – "*Timbuktu*," I kept saying to myself. Or maybe it was the thought of treading in the footsteps of other great explorers such as Gordon Laing and Renne Caillie, respectively the first European to make Timbuktu (though he was killed before he made it home again) and the first European to make Timbuktu and live to tell the tale. Whatever it was, our stay in Timbuktu had a profound effect on me.

Sadly it was only a short stay. We had arrived in the city the night before the beginning of the great *Festival au Desert*, a major annual fixture on the calendar of the Tuareg, the Blue Camel Men of the Sahara, and were destined for Essakane, the location of the festival for the past seven years.

The festival was a kind of mid-point break for the expedition, a chance to sit back and soak up the sights and sounds of the Tuareg's unique culture. In fact, once it was over we only had a month left to push on to the end of the river – or as close to it as we could get – and there was still plenty of ground to cover.



Fig 9: Tuareg nomad with camel in the Sahara

Part 7 The Great Bend

Timbuktu sits almost on the apex of the Great Bend of the Niger, the point at which the river's relentless and seemingly law-defying plunge north into the desert ceases and it begins its long southward journey to the Atlantic. After the festival, I pressed on alone; Dan was forced to return to Bamako to take care of some red tape.

I had hoped to pick up a ride across the desert, on the north bank of the river, but because of the festival all available transport was headed south. I too was forced to take this route and to make an irritating detour back south to the nearest proper road when all I really wanted to do was head east.

The next port of call was Gao, like Timbuktu a former great city of empire, but now a shadow of its former self. There was little time in Gao, as the day after I arrived one of the few buses of the week was leaving for Niamey, my next destination, across the border into Niger. However, I had just enough time to take a pirogue on to the river to find the famed 'dune rose' (pink dune).

As the pirogue slid out of Gao's little port, the dune became immediately obvious – a towering edifice on the opposite side of the now very wide Niger and the highest point for miles around. The locals believe the dune to be sacred and inhabited by spirits; I was fortunate to be on it at sunset, when it turns a fire red, and sitting at the top of it watching the great Niger slip past it was easy to see why they thought this.

The next morning I hit the road again on one of the dilapidated and supremely uncomfortable buses that plies the route between Gao and Niamey. To relate the story of this journey in full would require a report all of its own. Suffice to say it was horrendous – cramped, hot and noisy. The 'bus' barely qualified as such and was in fact a metal box with crude seats and windows welded to the back of a truck. It was slow, the road virtually non-existent, and with all the usual hold-ups for border formalities and endless checkpoints, the journey of probably less than 400km took over 24 hours to complete.

Niamey was an opportunity to recharge the batteries and await the arrival of Dan, who flew on to meet me from Bamako.

Part 8 Niger

Reunited, Dan and I pressed on together. We made a brief excursion from Niamey to a location in the bush about 60km outside the city where West Africa's last herd of giraffes live. They roam over a large area, but we were fortunate to catch two groups of them, grazing on acacia trees and contentedly oblivious to us.

From Niamey, we had a number of options. One was to roughly follow the river south-east, but I had heard the border crossing into Nigeria here was difficult. Instead we opted to take a bit of a detour east to Zinder, an ancient Sahelian town and erstwhile capital of the Hausa people. As with all bus journeys in this part of the world, the trip to Zinder was long and draining. However, it was refreshing on arrival that our presence didn't draw the same throng of opportunist tourist touts so rife in Mali and, to a lesser extent, Niamey.

We spent an enjoyable two days in Zinder exploring the old town, a labyrinth of ancient, winding streets that we got happily lost in for a few hours. There were some other fascinating sights in Zinder. One was the museum, which although lacking in content, contained a few gems such as the door of the old Sultan of Zinder's palace. This was a heavy wood construction, studded with metal plates each of which apparently represented a village he controlled. Another relic from the past was the profusion of Hausa architecture characterised by its spiky crenulations and the colourful relief motifs set into the mud walls.

However, there was little evidence of the rich part Zinder played in the exploration of West Africa. It was on the route taken by Major Clapperton, another of travellers who died trying to find Timbuktu and the course of the Niger, but there was no monument to him. In fact such was Zinder's distance from our real purpose for being in this part of the world – the river – that I felt the Park's trail going cold. It was time to get back to the Niger.



Fig 10: Colourful Hausa architecture in Zinder

Part 9 Into Nigeria

Before picking up the river again, however, we had one final detour to make. Kano is the great city of northern Nigeria, a devoutly Muslim place where Sharia law is enforced and the crime of selling or consuming alcohol supposedly punishable by flogging – for Muslims at least.

Despite its fearsome reputation, the Niger-Nigeria border presented us with no problems and we passed through without even having to pay the infamous bribe – or ‘dash’ – that pretty much keeps Nigerian society running. It was actually on the short stretch of road between the border and Kano that we saw this famed institution in operation: over no more than about 70km, we had to stop for at least 25 road blocks manned by various levels of officialdom, each hungry for some dash money. As long as this was paid, no questions were asked.

The cliché ‘seething metropolis’ was made for Kano: from the relative calm of Niger, we were plunged headfirst into a maelstrom of human activity – traffic, motorbikes, pollution – thick, palpable – crowds, beggars... I had read Kano’s official population was three million, but it felt like a lot more.

I contacted a friend I had made in Niger, a young Kano resident, Yussuf, who offered to show us around. The highlight of his tour was Kano’s ancient indigo dye pits. Records show the same family has run these for several centuries, and there is clearly a great deal of time honoured tradition involved in the process of dying the cloth the rich blue for which it is famed. First a dye mix is made up in one of the deep clay vats set into the ground. The cloth is then immersed in the dye for several days, before being removed, rinsed and dried. A group of young men then vigorously pound the cloth with heavy wooden clubs to give it the fashionable ‘sheen’ beloved of Nigerians.



Fig 11: Scenes from Kano’s dye pits, and on the road in Kano

Part 10 *Back to the Niger*

From Kano we pushed West again back towards the river. I had wanted to visit Bussa, the place where Park is reputed to have met his end, but time was against us and it was too far north; besides, the precise point is now under the waters of Lake Kainji, a reservoir created from the damming of the Niger several decades ago.

Instead, we headed for Jebba. A small, industrial town on the banks of the Niger, there was little reason to go to Jebba other than the fact it's home to perhaps the most significant monument to Park and his exploits in the whole of West Africa. To my surprise, I discovered by chance that it also contained a relic of the SS Dayspring, a pre-colonial steamer that was one of the first European boats to venture up the Niger in the days when the British were making their first commercial inroads into what is now Nigeria.

We stumbled across this while wandering along the old rail track that once served Jebba's now quiet factories. Hidden in a clump of bushes, we almost missed it, but the few lumps of metal that remain of the ship were accompanied by an almost illegible hand painted sign bearing a reference to the vessel. The SS Dayspring, manned by the redoubtable James Blaikie, one of Nigeria's first colonists, sunk close to Jebba while foraging north up the river. Blaikie and his men survived but had to wait one day short of a year to be rescued. All that remains of their misadventures is the Dayspring's propeller and a few assorted engine parts.



Fig 12: Relics of the SS Dayspring

But the main draw in Jebba was the Park monument. I had expected this, in true West African style, to have been tucked away in some forgotten corner and allowed to go to ruin, but it was actually in a highly prominent location on a hill just outside the town. A short, steep scramble brought us to the base of the monument, which rose about 60 feet. As well as Park, it was commemorated to Richard Lander, the Cornishman, who with his brother John completed the Scot's work about 25 years after his death; it was the Landers who eventually solved the riddle of the Niger's course.

The monument was profoundly moving for me. Its inscription read: “To Mungo Park, 1795, and Richard Lander, 1830, who traced the course of the Niger from near its source to the sea. Both died in Africa for Africa.”

As a eulogy to these two brave men, it was understated to say the least. Yet with great economy it summed up the burning passion that drove Park and Lander through terrible hardships towards their ultimate goal. They both did indeed die for Africa.



Fig 13: The monument to Mungo Park and Richard Lander, Jebba

Part 11 Southwards

After Jebba, our route, almost for the first time during the trip, was directly due south. We were headed for Lokoja, a town on the confluence of the Niger and its largest tributary, the Benue. Lokoja was significant for being the British colonialists' first major settlement in the interior of Nigeria. James Baikie, of SS Dayspring fame, lived in Lokoja for several years and during his time there learnt the local Hausa tongue, enabling him, for the first time, to translate the Bible from English and so begin the slow process of Christianising the 'heathen' tribes.

More recently, Lokoja has received attention for hosting a visit by the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II who came to survey some of the surviving relics of Britain's days of empire. There are still many of these left: the first bank of northern Nigeria; a graveyard for serving British officers and civil servants; and a plinth marking the spot where, in 1897, the union flag was raised for the first time to symbolise Nigeria's transition from commercial outpost of the empire to full-blown colony.

Today these are hard to find, but with the help of a friendly guide we were able to nose out some of the crumbling vestiges of Britain's colonial heyday. Insignificant as they may seem today, these dusty remnants are nonetheless a potent reminder of the once total control that Britain exerted here and the huge part that Lokoja played in the history of Africa and the world. One can visit, for example, the spot where Samuel Crowther, the first black bishop, brought freed slaves to undergo a ceremony marking their transition from bondage to liberty. There was a sense in Lokoja that, although times have moved on and modernity has taken over, the great tides of history that once swept through this place have never entirely abated.

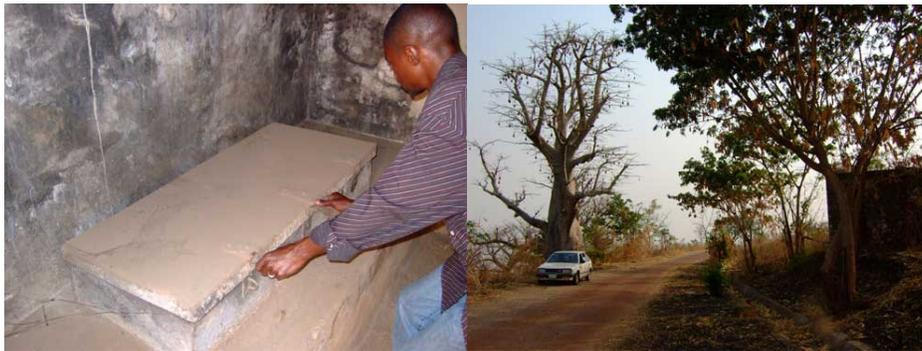


Fig 14: (From left) The first bank in Northern Nigeria, Lord Lugard's hilltop viewpoint, Lokoja

Part 12 Endings

Having begun our journey at the very start of the Niger, our intention had been to end where it ends – in the great Delta where river meets sea. However, the Niger Delta is currently one of the world's most volatile areas. As a large oil-producing region, the Delta is an economic powerhouse, yet the extreme poverty that exists side by side with incredible wealth has proved an unhappy mix and today it is unsafe for Westerners to visit for fear of kidnapping.

In spite of our best efforts, we were unable to enter the Delta and so complete our journey. Instead we paid a brief visit to Assaba, a city situated just above the point where the Niger – now about a kilometre wide - splits into numerous channels and winds its way through the oily swamps of the Delta. This was to be the closest we got to the Niger's mouth. Disappointed but in some way relieved not to have been caught up in the Delta's strife, we headed west for the great sprawling city of Lagos.

Unable to finish our journey properly, we decided as a substitute to visit Badagry. Around 50km west of Lagos, Badagry was once one of the main centres for the West African slave trade. Even today, and in spite of Badagry's picturesque setting next to the sea, there is still an air of melancholy that hints at the town's tragic past.

Maybe this was due to the many relics of its slaving past still on show today. Most harrowing of these was the slave museum, in which were displayed such barbaric items as the tongue clamp used to pierce the tongue of slaves deemed to be misbehaving.

But most striking for me, in the context of the journey I was about to complete, was the spot where Richard Lander narrowly avoided death by poisoning

Before his triumphant navigation of the lower Niger, Lander had been servant to Major Hugh Clapperton, another of the great West African explorers. Lander was with Clapperton when he died of dysentery but managed to survive and make it back to the coast. However, upon arriving at Badagry Lander was taken prisoner by the local king on suspicion of being a spy. This was mainly due to exhortations by the Portuguese, who in spite of Britain's abolition of slavery, were still very active in the illicit trading of human beings and saw Lander as a threat.

In spite of Lander's innocence, he was put on trial, found guilty and sentenced to death by poisoning. As the king and his people watched on, Lander was forced to drink a toxic potion made from the red water tree. Ever resourceful, however, Lander was able to hide himself briefly from sight and to vomit up the concoction. This saved his life and, amazed at Lander's 'magical' abilities, the king gave him a full pardon and released him.

Several years later he was able to return with his brother to Nigeria and achieve the goal that not only defeated Park and the countless other early explorers of the Niger, but now, for very different reasons, had evaded two modern day journeymen.

Evaluation

The Niger River Project, as the expedition has become known, was an eye-opener in every way; it is therefore very difficult to give an objective appraisal of what Dan and I achieved. However, there are a number of elements that clearly warrant comment.

Professionally, the fellowship taught me a huge amount about the organisation of an expedition and that you can never do too much of it. A great number of the most successful aspects of the trip were down the hard work put into detailed planning and into locating and nurturing the right contacts.

Our time in Djenne, for example, wouldn't have been what it was without our guide Sekou Toure, whom I had been put in touch with by an America contact, Jean-Louis Bourgeois, made before the trip. The same was true of Nigeria, where we were helped by a number of people that I had tracked down during the planning stages. Of the four countries we visited, Niger was the one where I had failed to make any meaningful contacts, and it really showed in so far as our time there didn't seem as well spent as in places where we'd had someone to show us around.

That said, I also learned that no matter how well prepared you are for what you think is every eventuality, you will always be the victim of circumstance. Unfortunately, where our trip was concerned, the main 'circumstance' happened to be the political turmoil in the Niger Delta that wrecked our chances of getting all the way to the end. Not completing the journey is something that will always disappoint me; nevertheless I am realistic that to have attempted to complete the trip regardless of personal safety would have almost certainly been to push fate's goodwill too far.

From my personal point of view as a journalist the trip was a mixed success. Amazingly, given West Africa's technological backwardness, I was able to keep a detailed record of the trip in the form of an internet blog featuring my words and Dan's wonderful photographs. This proved to be incredibly popular while we were away, not just among immediate family and friends but also among people we'd never heard of on the other side of the world who'd happened to stumble across our site. Such is the power of the web. To me this was perhaps the most satisfying aspect of the trip: the fact that my own endeavours were bringing Mungo Park and the African world he first revealed to the European world, albeit 200 years on, to public attention once again.

That said, I've had less success in capitalising on this interest since I've been back – namely in publishing the various articles I had planned to write on aspects of the trip. This for me was one of the prime motivations for undertaking the journey: to chronicle this strange and compelling part of the world in much the way Park and his contemporaries did in the early 1800s. In terms of the dissemination aspect of the Churchill Fellowship, too, this was to have been my primary outlet.

Obviously the blog partly achieved this aim, but in spite of persistent efforts in writing and pitching articles for a variety of newspapers and magazines, I have so far been unsuccessful in getting anyone to take one. This, unfortunately, is the nature of being a

freelance journalist, so I am not getting too downhearted about it. It's a case of plugging away until the right proposal lands on the right editor's desk on the right day; I'm sure it will.