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Robert Moffat

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MISSIONARY LABOURS.

CHAPTER I.

General view of the state of Africa—Attempts to explore—Supposed origin of the Hottentots—How population extended—Origin of the Bushmen Tribes—Their extent—Bechuana Bushmen—Their suffering and degradation—Variety of dialect accounted for—The Tamahas—Melancholy view of Bushman country—The Kafir origin and character—Countries of the Basutos and Bechuanas—Namaquas and Damaras—Description of the Karroo—A dry and barren country.

THE continent of Africa, though probably the most ancient field of geographical enterprise, still is, and there is reason to believe that it will long continue to be, the least explored portion of our earth. Though once the nursery of science and literature, the emporium of commerce, and the seat of an empire which contended with Rome for the sovereignty of the world, —the cradle of the ancient church, and the asylum of the infant Saviour, yet Africa still presents a comparative blank on the map, as well as in the history of the world. Though, according to Herodotus, it was circumnavigated by the Phœnicians long before the Christian era, and its coast was the first object of

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maritime discovery after the compass had inspired seamen with confidence to leave shores and landmarks, and stand forth on the boundless deep ; yet to this day its interior regions continue a mystery to the white man, a land of darkness and of terror to the most fearless and enterprising traveller. Although in no country has there been such a sacrifice of men to the enterprise of discovery—of men the most intelligent and undaunted, of men impelled not by gross cupidity, but by refined philanthropy ;—yet, notwithstanding such suffering and waste of human life, we are only acquainted with the fringes of that immense continent, and a few lineaments at no great distance from its shores.

Africa had once her churches, her colleges, her repositories of science and learning, her Cyprians and bishops of apostolic renown, and her noble army of martyrs ; but now the funeral pall hangs over her wide-spread domains, while her millions, exposed to tenfold horrors, descend like a vast funereal mass to the regions of woe. Christendom has been enriched by her gold, her drugs, her ivory, and bodies and souls of men—and what has been her recompense ? A few crucifixes planted around her shores, guarded by the military fort and the roar of cannon. Had it not been for British power and British sympathy under the favour of Heaven, Africa to this day, with scarcely one exception, might have had the tri-coloured flag waving on her bosom, bearing the ensigns of the mystery of Babylon, the crescent of the false prophet, and the emblems of pagan darkness, from the shores of the Mediterranean to the colony of the Cape of Good Hope.

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ORIGIN OF THE HOTTENTOTS.

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“The countries extending throughout by far the greater portion of the vast surface just mentioned, are, as regards soil and capabilities, among the finest in the world ; but the population of the whole, with the exception of Egypt in ancient times, and the population of the shores of the Mediterranean when under the Carthaginian, the Roman, and the brighter days of Arab sway, have been, through every age, and are still, sunk into the lowest depths of ignorance, superstition, disorganization, and debasement ; the glimmer of civilization, which for a time appeared in Nubia and Abyssinia, compared with the whole, scarcely forming an exception.”*

Before entering into a detail of Missionary operations, it may be proper to glance briefly at the position, extent, and character of some of the fields which have been occupied.

The bold and mountainous promontory of the Cape, was first discovered by Bartholomew Diaz, the Portuguese navigator, and was taken possession of by the Dutch, in 1652. At that period the whole of what is now designated the Colony, was inhabited by Hottentots proper, whose history and origin, from their physical appearance, language, and customs, continue involved in profound mystery. They resemble none of the Kafir, Bechuana and Damara nations, which bound the different tribes of that remarkable people, extending from Angra, Pequena Bay on the west, to the great Fish-river on the east. The whole race are distinct from all others with which we are acquainted. Taking the Hottentots,

* M^{rs} Queen's Geographical Survey of Africa.

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Corannas, Namaquas, and Bushmen, as a whole, they are not swarthy or black, but rather of a sallow colour, and in some cases so light, that a tinge of red in the cheek is perceptible, especially among the Bushmen. They are generally smaller in stature than their neighbours of the interior; their visage and form very distinct, and in general the top of the head broad and flat; their faces tapering to the chin, with high cheek bones, flat noses and large lips. Since the writer has had opportunities of seeing men, women, and children, from China, he feels strongly inclined to think, with Barrow, that they approach nearest in the colour and in the construction of their features, to that people than to any other nation. Since his arrival in England, this supposition has been strengthened by seeing two blind Chinese children whom, had he not been previously informed, he would have taken for Hottentots; and if they had had their eyesight, the resemblance would have been much more striking. It is well known that the Hottentots inhabit the southern point of Africa, and spread northward, while the Bushmen, the most northerly, exist among the inhabited regions, where they continue perfectly distinct, and, which is very remarkable, do not become darker in their complexion, as is the case with all the other tribes that inhabit, or have inhabited the Torrid Zone. If they had been gipsies from Egypt, as some have thought, it is another singular circumstance, that they should not, during the successive ages which they must have required slowly to advance through nearly 5000 miles of territory, have adopted one word of the language of the myriads with whom they came in con-

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tact, or one of their customs of any description, not even that of sowing seed in the earth. It may not be considered chimerical to suppose that when the sons of Ham entered Africa, by Egypt, and the Arabians, by the Red Sea, that the Hottentot progenitors took the lead, and gradually advanced in proportion as they were urged forward by an increasing population in their rear, until they reached the ends of the earth. It may also be easily conceived of by those acquainted with the emigration of tribes, that during their progress to the south, parties remained behind, in the more sequestered and isolated spots, where they had located while the nation moved onward, and research may yet prove that that remarkable people originally came from Egypt.* At all events, it is evident that they have arisen from a race distinct from that of their neighbours, and extended inland, inhabiting the most fertile spots, till their course was arrested on the east by the bold and warlike Kafirs, and on the north by the Bechuana and Damara. It is probable that they stretched out into Great Namaqualand, along the western division of the colony, till prevented by a desert country, beyond which lay the Damaras; and then again they proceeded from Little Namaqualand, eastward, along the cooling banks of the Gariep

* A few evenings ago I was in the company of a Syrian who lately came from Egypt. On giving him a specimen and a description of the Hottentot language, he remarked that he had seen slaves in the market at Cairo, brought a great distance from the interior, who spoke a similar language, and were not near so dark coloured as slaves in general. This corroborates the statements of ancient authors, whose description of a people inhabiting the interior regions of Northern Africa, answer to that of the Hottentot and Bushmen.

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ORIGIN OF THE

or Orange River, richly fringed with overhanging willows, towering acacias, and kharree trees and shrubs, umbrageous at all seasons of the year. Thus, by the localities of the country they became separated into three great divisions, Hottentots, Corannas, and lesser and greater Namaquas. From time immemorial these have been the boundaries of their habitations, while the desert wastes and barren mountain-ravines, which intervened, became the refuge and domains of the Bushmen, who are emphatically the children of the desert.

All these possess nearly the same physical characteristics, the same manners and customs. I have had in my presence genuine Hottentots, Corannas, and Namaquas, who had met from their respective and distant tribes, for the first time, and they conversed with scarcely any difficulty. All use the same weapons, the quiver, bow, and poisoned arrows, of which the tribes beyond are ignorant, except such as border on them, like the Batlapis, who say they adopted that new mode of warfare in order to compete with them and the Bushmen, from both of whom they obtained these weapons, which they have not yet learned to manufacture.

The Bushmen are the most remarkable portion of the Hottentot nation. Various opinions have been offered on the origin and state of the Hottentots, among which is that of Gibbon, that "they were the connecting link between the rational and irrational creation." If he had been acquainted with the Bushmen, who are unquestionably inferior to the Hottentots, he would have felt more confidence in this strange and long exploded theory. Some say they

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BUSHMEN TRIBES.

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are the progenitors of the nation ; others, that they are an entirely distinct race ; and others, again, that they are Hottentots, who have been directly or indirectly plundered of their cattle by the Dutch farmers. That the Bushmen are the people from whom the Hottentot tribes have descended, is irreconcilable with existing facts ; that they are a distinct race, is still farther from probability ; and that they are plundered Hottentots, is, in my humble opinion, a preposterous notion, resulting from limited information on the subject. If this were to be admitted, then we must also admit that the Hottentots, in being deprived of their cattle, and becoming Bushmen, were deprived of their language also ; for it is well known, from the earliest records that can be obtained on the subject of their language,—which has, in addition to the klick of the Hottentot, a croaking in the throat,—that they never understood each other without interpreters.

Another fact is, that the Bushmen are to be found scattered, though thinly, among all the Bechuana tribes of the interior with which we are acquainted, even as far as the Mampoor lake, about eight hundred miles north of Lattakoo. The Marosa, or Baroa Bushmen, are found of the same description as those just beyond the boundaries of the colony ; and from the oldest traditions we can find among the Corannas and Namaquas, who are the unmixed Hottentots, as also from the Bechuanas, it may be demonstrated, that they existed a wandering people without homes, or cattle, or even nationality of character. That they descended from Hottentots, requires little argument to prove. Probably there are connected with all the tribes of Africa numbers of a nomadic character,

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whose origin will throw light on the history of the Bushmen. A parallel is furnished by the following facts of the case, which have hundreds of times come under my own observation, during a residence of more than twenty years among the Bechuana tribes. Connected with each of the towns among that people, there are great numbers of what are called "Balala," poor ones, who stand in the same relation to the Bechuanas in which the Bushmen formerly stood to the Hottentots, and whose origin doubtless was of the same nature. These Balala were once inhabitants of the towns, and have been permitted or appointed to live in country places for the purpose of procuring skins of wild animals, wild honey, and roots, for their respective chiefs. The number of these country residents was increased, by the innate love of liberty, and the scarcity of food in towns, or within the boundaries to which they were confined by water and pasture. These again formed themselves into small communities, though of the most temporary character, their calling requiring migration, having no cattle of any description. Accustomed from infancy to the sweets of comparative liberty, which they vastly preferred to a kind of vassalage in the towns, or kraals, they would make any sacrifice to please their often distant superiors, rather than be confined to the irksomeness of a town life. Such is their aversion, that I have known chiefs take armed men, and travel a hundred miles into desert places, in order to bring back Balala, whom they wished to assist them in watching and harvesting the gardens of their wives; and in such seasons they will frequently wander about, and fix their domiciles in the most desert and

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THEIR DEGRADATION.

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unfrequented spots, to escape this easy, but to them galling duty, which is only required in a year of plenty.

Though in general they are able to state to what chief or tribe they belong, yet, from want of intercourse, and from desolating wars, which are only waged where there is a prospect of plunder, great numbers of them become, in their isolated position, independent. They are never permitted to keep cattle, and are exposed to the caprice, cupidity, and tyranny of the town lords, whenever they happen to come in their way. They live a hungry life, being dependent on the chase, wild roots, berries, locusts, and indeed any thing eatable that comes within their reach; and when they have a more than usual supply, they will bury it in the earth, from their superiors, who are in the habit of taking what they please. Resistance on their part would be instantly avenged with the deadly javelin. When hunting parties go out to kill game, the Balala, men and women, are employed to carry grievous burdens of flesh to the rendezvous of the hunters; in return for which, they receive the offals of the meat, and are made drudges so long as the party remains. They are never permitted to wear the furs of foxes and other animals they obtain. The flesh they may eat; but the skins are conveyed to the towns, for which they obtain a small piece of tobacco, or an old spear or knife. Indeed, all the valuable skins of the larger animals, which they sometimes procure by hunting and pitfalls, as well as the better portions of the meat, they have to yield to their nominal masters, except when they succeed in secreting the whole for their own use. From the

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famishing life to which they are exposed, their external appearance and stature are precisely to the Bechuanas, what the Bushmen are to the Hottentots. Those, however, who live in places which afford a better supply of food, are generally of equal stature with those who live in towns. The natives I have observed throughout southern Africa are like plants on a sterile soil and bleak aspect, stunted in growth, while in a more genial situation the same species are trees instead of shrubs.

The next problem is the variety of languages spoken by the Bushmen, even when nothing but a range of hills or a river intervenes between the tribes, and none of these dialects is understood by the Hottentots. This may be solved with still greater ease, by again referring to the Balala. The dialects of the Sechuana as spoken by these people, especially in districts remote from the towns, is so different from that spoken by the nation generally, that interpreters are frequently required. In order to account for this, it is necessary to become acquainted with their habits. In the towns the purity and harmony of the language is kept up by their pitches or public meetings, at which the finest language is spoken, by their festivals and ceremonies, as well as by their songs and their constant intercourse; for, like the Athenians of old, they are ever telling or hearing some "new thing," and the first question a person who has come from a neighbouring village is asked will be, "Lo yélang gona?" What do you eat there? or, "'Mpuléla mahuku." Tell me the news. There is no end to conversation, excepting when sleep overcomes or pinching hunger prevails. With the isolated villages of the desert,