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Sierra Leone, Volume 1

Thomas Winterbottom

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ACCOUNT OF THE  
*NATIVE AFRICANS*  
IN THE  
NEIGHBOURHOOD  
OF  
SIERRA LEONE.

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CHAP. I.

DIVISION OF THE AFRICAN COAST. GENERAL ACCOUNT OF THE COUNTRY IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF SIERRA LEONE. ITS INHABITANTS, AND THEIR LANGUAGES. DISCOVERY OF THE RIVER SIERRA LEONE, AND ORIGIN OF ITS NAME. DESCRIPTION OF THE RIVER; ITS ISLANDS; AND THE ADJACENT COUNTRY.

THE Coast of Guinea, as it is commonly termed, is divided into the Windward and Leeward Coast. The former extends from Senegal, in about  $16^{\circ}$  N. lat. or according to some from Cape Roxo, in  $12^{\circ} 23'$  N. lat. to Cape Palmas, in lat.  $4^{\circ} 26'$ : the latter includes the remaining space, reaching from Cape Palmas as far south as European vessels commonly trade for slaves. The Windward Coast receives its name from lying to the northward and westward of the other parts

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of the Slave Coast, from which quarters the wind blows during a great part of the year. The line between Cape Mount, in lat.  $6^{\circ} 46'$ , or perhaps more accurately between Cape Mesurado, in  $6^{\circ} 13'$ , and Cape Palmas, is called the Grain or Malaguetta Coast; from the quantity of grains of paradise or Malaguetta pepper procured there: it is also frequently called the Kroo Coast. The space from Cape Palmas to Cape Three Points, in lat.  $4^{\circ} 40'$  N. is called the Ivory Coast; and where it terminates the Gold Coast begins, which extends about 180 miles eastward.

Almost the whole of the sea coast, for some hundred leagues to the north and south of Sierra Leone, is very low; and in some parts, the tops of the trees which appear like an immense forest growing in the water, are the first indication of the approach of land. If the river Sherbro be excepted, which is remarkable for its majestic size, and for the distance which it runs inland, there is no river of much consequence to the southward of Sierra Leone until the Gold Coast be passed. To the northward we meet with a number of fine rivers, some of which are large, and navigable by vessels of considerable burthen. Among them are the Scarcies, called by the Bulloms and Timmanees Ma-bayma, Sama River, Kisse, Rio Pongas, Rio Nunez, Rio Grande, Gambia, &c. These rivers penetrate into the interior by a great variety of windings, and divide into innumerable branches and creeks, which communicate with each other and with the branches of neighbouring rivers, so

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as to render the inland navigation very extensive. In sailing up these rivers, the eye is charmed with a landscape perpetually varying, which would afford full scope to the genius and pencil of a Claude. The vast diversity of trees, unknown in Europe, which overhang the banks; the immensity of their growth; the vivid hues of their luxuriant foliage; the sombre shade which they afford in despite of a dazzling and vertical sun; and the awful stillness which prevails in places so distant from the busy haunt of men; and which is interrupted only by the melancholy cooing of the dove, the shrill cry of the parrot, or the noisy mirth of the hordes of monkeys occasionally to be seen on these shores; fill the mind with astonishment, and cause it to exclaim in the language of the poet,

What solemn twilight! what stupendous shades  
Inwrap these infant floods! thro' ev'ry nerve  
A sacred horror thrills, a pleasing fear  
Glides o'er my frame. The forest deepens round,  
And more gigantic still th' impending trees  
Stretch their extrav'gant arms athwart the gloom.

The Windward Coast, as above described, is inhabited by several different nations. The Timmanees possess the south side of the river Sierra Leone, together with its branches of Port Logo\* (so called

\* The river gives its name to an old town called Port Logo or Baga Logo, situated near 60 miles above Free Town. There are four other towns close to it. 1. Ar-re-bát. 2. Sédigo. 3. Sierra Leone or Mi-yín-ga. 4. Bómba. The Logo country is distant three days journey from Ar-re-bát; the Limbo Country is four days journey distant. After passing through the Limbo,

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from running into the Logo country) and Rokelle, called by the Timmanees Robung-dakell or River of Scales. Thence they penetrate to a considerable distance inland, where they are subdivided into Timmanees, Logos, and Krangos; all of whom it is said, speak dialects of the same language. This nation formerly lived at a distance from the sea coast; but being of a warlike and active disposition, they forced themselves down the river Sierra Leone, among the Bulloms, who formerly possessed the whole region from the river Kissee to the Sherbro. They have no tradition by which we can learn at what period this event took place. Not contented with dispossessing the Bulloms of a part of Sierra Leone, they have in like manner forced themselves down the river Scarcies.

The Bulloms inhabit the country on the north side of the Sierra Leone river, called Bullom, which extends as far as the river Scarcies, from the banks of which, as has been said, the Timmanees have driven them. To the northward of the Scarcies the Bulloms chiefly occupy the sea coast, as far as the mouth of the river Kissee. They also inhabit to the southward of Sierra Leone the river Sherbro, the Bananas\*, the Plantains, and

the Foola country succeeds; Tecmbo the capital is said to be thirteen days walk from Port Logo. The names of the towns between these two last mentioned places are, Ma-kóoma, Mén-dee, Bám-ba-lee, Bántee, Sa-fro-go, Wo-see-yáyma, Mongo, Kamoo-ga, Tecmbo.

\* The Bananas are three small islands situated in about 8° 8' N. lat. and scarcely distant a league from the continent. At the

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some other smaller islands. This once powerful nation formerly possessed the whole of the river Kisee, from which they were driven by a nation called Soosoos or Suzees. The Soosoos extend from the river Kisee beyond the Rio Pongas, nearly as far as the Rio Nunez, of which tract they dispossessed a nation called Bagoes, who were once masters of the whole of the Rio Pongas, and of the country between that river and the Rio Nunez, together with a considerable line of sea coast extending from the Rio Nunez south-

distance of seven or eight leagues thence to the south east, are situated three other small islands, which are low and sandy, called the Plantains. Dapper calls the Plantain Islands Las Sombreras, and the Bananas Las Bravas, but if we may judge from the etymology of the words, it is probable that these names are misapplied. Sombreyro signifies in Portuguese a broad brimmed hat, and was probably applied to the Bananas from the fancied resemblance; the mountain in the middle island being not unaptly compared to the crown of the hat. On the contrary, Las Bravas signifies wild or desolate, an epithet more applicable to the Plantains. The same writer continues, "on fait dans les îles las Sombreras de l'excellent vin & de l'huile de dates, & du marc de vin, mêlé avec cette huile, on fait du savon, qui est beaucoup meilleur que celui de l'Europe."

Between the Bananas and Plantains the coast forms a great bay, called the Bay of Sherbro, which has been compared to the Pampus of the Zuider-Zee in Holland. Into this bay four rivers discharge themselves, the Kates, the Camarancas, the Sherbro, and the Shebar, which were discovered by Le Maire in 1615, whilst searching for the river Sierra Leone. The river Sherbro divides into three branches, called the Boom, the Deong, and the Bagroo, which run to a great distance inland. The countries within this tract are generally named from the rivers. The coast between Shebar and the river Galinhas, so called by the Portuguese from the number of fowls found there, is named Kittim; and the country about the Galinhas, a river between Shebar and Cape Mount is called the Foy Country.

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ward as far as the river Dembia, nearly opposite to the Isles de Los.\* They still retain a few straggling villages scattered here and there among the Soosoos; but are chiefly confined to the sea coast and to the Isles de Los, upon the largest of which, called Támara, they have plantations and villages. The Bagoes, like the Bulloms, seem to have been of a mild and peaceable disposition, and to have fallen a prey to ambitious and restless neighbours. It is said of them, that they will not allow Europeans to settle among them; and the reason assigned for their conduct is, that they dislike the slave trade. They make earthen vessels of a blue kind of clay, fashioned into a variety of forms, and burnt in the fire, which they use for holding water and other domestic purposes, and sell to their neighbours. Their canoes shew little ingenuity; they are long, very low and inconvenient, and taper very much from stern to stem. They are rowed by paddles, which the rowers use standing, and they can only go with the tide.

The Soosoos however have not remained in undisturbed possession of their usurpation. A few emigrants from a powerful nation, called Mandingos†, settled themselves upon the banks of the Kisee, and have since become possessed of a considerable tract of country in its neighbourhood. The Mandingos are strict Mahommedans, very zealous in making converts, and have spread their religion with much success among the Soosoos,

\* Called by the Soosoos For-tó-ma, or White Man's Land

† For an account of this nation see Parke's Travels.

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where it appears to be daily gaining ground\* Europeans call every one on the coast who professes Mahommedanism, indiscriminately, *Mandingo Man*, or as the Pagan natives term it, *Book Man*. This is the same with the *Maraboo* or *Marbut* of travellers. These *Bookmen* are much respected by the illiterate natives, and are very frequently met with in the Bullom and Timmanee villages, where they have great influence.

\* The following extract from a report made to a Committee of the House of Commons by the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company, with which the author has been favoured, will throw further light on this subject: "A remarkable proof exists in the neighbourhood of Sierra Leone, of the very great advantages of a permanent though very imperfect system of government, and of the abolition of those African laws, which make slavery the punishment of almost every offence. Not more than seventy years ago, a small number of Mahommedans established themselves in a country about forty miles to the northward of Sierra Leone, called from them the Mandingo country. As is the practice of the professors of that religion, they formed schools, in which the Arabic language and the doctrines of Mahommed were taught, and the customs of Mahommedans, particularly that of not selling any of their own religion as slaves, were adopted. Laws founded on the Koran were introduced. Those practices which chiefly contribute to depopulate the coast were eradicated; and, in spite of many intestine convulsions, a great comparative degree of civilization, union, and security was introduced. Population in consequence rapidly increased, and the whole power of that part of the country in which they are settled has gradually fallen into their hands. Those who have been taught in their schools are succeeding to wealth and power in the neighbouring countries, and carry with them a considerable portion of their religion and laws. Other chiefs are adopting the name assumed by these Mahommedans, on account of the respect which attends it, and the religion of Islam seems likely to diffuse itself peaceably over the whole district in which the colony is situated, carrying with it those advantages which seem ever to have attended its victory over negro superstition."

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It is not easy to draw the precise boundaries of each of the nations mentioned above, as villages of neighbouring nations are often met with considerably advanced within each other's territories.

The Foola nation lives at a considerable distance from the sea, Teembo, the capital, being nearly in the latitude of 10° N.; they are strict Mahommedans, and are much employed in agriculture and the breeding of cattle\*.

Several different nations inhabit the coast to the southward of Sierra Leone, between Cape Mount and Cape Palmas; among the most remarkable of whom are the people of that part called the Kroo Coast, the inhabitants of which spend much of

\* The country inhabited by the Foolas is called Foota. It is supposed to extend about 300 miles from east to west, and 160 miles from north to south; and is said to be surrounded by twenty-four different nations. Those which lie between Foota and Tombuctoo are the following; as related by the chief of Laby, a large town in the Foola kingdom, to my brother in 1794:

1. Belia. The king's name, Mamadoo. Their chief trade consists in gold, ivory, wax, cattle, and slaves; in return for which they receive salt, an article of indispensable utility to them; tobacco, silver, shells or cowries, which pass for money as far as Tombuctoo; cola, and beads.
2. Booree which is only seven days journey from Teemboo. King's name Boorama. They export gold, ivory, slaves, wax, &c. and receive in return salt, tobacco, silver, cola, cloth, and beads.
3. Manda. Trade as above.
4. Sego. King Mansung. Trade the same. Thus far Mr. Parke proceeded.
5. Genah. King Alkaida. A very rich people. Trade as above.
6. Tombuctoo. King Albass. People richer than any of the others, but having nearly the same trade and returns.



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their time on the water, and live chiefly on fish and rice\*; they are remarkable for the robustness and fleshiness of their bodies, and also for their great agility.

The Kroos, or Kroomen, are a very industrious people, and frequently engage themselves to European vessels upon the coast, continuing on board several months, and acting in the capacity of sailors and traders, in both which situations they shew much intelligence and activity. But notwithstanding their utmost exertions none of them become rich. When any person returns home from the service of Europeans, he is obliged to make large presents to the old men of the town: when this has been neglected, or when it is suspected that a part of his wealth has been concealed, he is summoned by the old people to the Palaver-house, where a fire being made of green pepper bushes, the culprit is suspended over it with his hands tied behind his back, until nearly suffocated with the smoke; a ceremony which never fails to extort a discovery of his treasure, and a compliance with all their demands.

All these nations have languages peculiar to themselves, most of which are not merely dialects of the same language, but essentially different, though confined in some cases to a small district. Even the Bulloms of Sierra Leone, and those of Sherbro, though constituting one nation, differ in their mode of speaking; and this diver-

\* Ichthyophagi, natantes ceu maris animalia.

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sity, which is still greater in other instances, proves a great obstacle to the acquirement of a competent knowledge of the customs of the natives\*.

All these languages are highly figurative, and abound in metaphorical expressions, images, and comparisons, drawn from natural objects, which, when translated into European languages, give them a poetic turn. The languages to the northward of Sierra Leone are softer and more harmonious than those to the southward. Those of the Timmanees and Bulloms† are both agreeable to the ear, but the Soosoo excels them all, and in softness approaches the Italian. The Mandingo is the fashionable language in this region, but it is more difficult to acquire than the others, and abounds in guttural sounds. As we proceed southward, the languages become more harsh and unmusical: the Kroos have a guttural, singing pronunciation, which is very disagreeable, and one nation below Cape Palmas receives the name of Qua-qua, from their speech resembling the cry of a duck. The frequency of Europeans on the coast has introduced among the natives a kind of lin-

\* Bosman observes, “ though the Gold Coast is not extended above sixty ‡ miles in length, yet we find there seven or eight several languages, so different that three or four of them are interchangeably unintelligible to any but the respective natives: the Negroes of Junmore, ten miles above Axim, cannot understand those of Egira, Abocroe, Ancober, and Axim.”

† The Bullom language is spoken from a little to the south of Cape Sierra Leone to Shebar; from which to Shuggree, near Cape Mount, the Foy language is spoken.

‡ A Dutch Mile is  $3\frac{1}{2}$  English.