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Author(s): H. L. Gallwey

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JOURNEYS IN THE BENIN COUNTRY, WEST AFRICA.*

By Captain H. L. GALLWEY, H.M. Vice-Consul to the Oil Rivers Protectorate.

THE part of the world that I am going to speak about is the Benin country, West Africa. Owing to the want of proper surveying instruments I was very much hampered in my mapping work. On my return to Africa, early next year (1893), I hope to be able to furnish the Society with more reliable maps of this particular region.

It is extraordinary how little appears to be known about the Benin country. Dapper and Barbot, geographical writers of the 17th and 18th centuries, give a certain amount of information on the subject; but their works were for the most part compiled from the observations of others, and not from personal experience, and consequently their statements can only be accepted with a certain amount of caution.

The Benin River is the western boundary of the lately-formed Oil Rivers Protectorate, the mouth being situated about long. $5^{\circ} 3' \text{ E.}$ and lat. $5^{\circ} 46' \text{ N.}$; the general course of the stream is west-north-west. Like all African rivers on the west coast, the Benin River is approached by a bar, the width of the navigable part being about half a mile, with a depth of water at high tide of from 13 to 14 feet; consequently only small steamers drawing up to 12 feet of water can enter the river by the mouth. Large steamers have to enter the Forcados River, proceeding from thence to Benin by the creeks. These creeks are very difficult to navigate owing to their tortuous nature, there being sharp turns every few hundred yards. The river is about 2 miles wide at the mouth, narrowing by degrees to $1\frac{1}{2}$ mile at Batere, 1 mile at Young Town, $\frac{3}{4}$ mile at America, and dwindling down until it is only about 30 yards wide, and sometimes less, above Aruca; but widening a little at Sapele. Here a bifurcation takes place, one arm having been named the Jamieson by a gentleman of that name in 1839, and the other the Ethiopie by Consul Beecroft in the following year.

To return to the mouth of the river. The whole of this part of the coast is one extensive mangrove swamp, intersected by a network of creeks. Very little solid ground is to be found, there being only occasional patches here and there. These mangrove swamps are veritable hot-beds of fever, and in consequence this part of the West African coast ranks among the most unhealthy places in the world. After crossing the bar, and ascending the river for about 5 miles, we come to the European factories, which are situated at intervals for several miles along the river, all being on the right

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bank. A factory consists of a dwelling-house, substantially built and very comfortable, warehouses, and stores. In the olden days the traders lived in hulks; but these are now entirely replaced by very commodious houses. In fact, a great change has come over the life of a West African trader of late years. Pleasant social gatherings, in the shape of cricket, lawn tennis, and such pastimes, now take the place of the debauches of the past.

In the days of the Portuguese supremacy trade was almost entirely confined to slaves and ivory; now palm-oil is the chief production. Very little ivory comes down the river. A large trade is also done in palm kernels, although not in the King of Benin's dominion, a fetish veto having always been placed upon it. However, since the conclusion of a treaty between Her Majesty and the King in March last, the latter personage has expressed his willingness to open up the kernel trade. In the same way many valuable trade products are lying untouched in this dusky potentate's territories, owing to the fetish rule of that unfortunate land. It is to be hoped, however, that all this will be changed before very long, although a very great deal of tact and patience will have to be brought into play. A small amount of rubber is exported, but is hardly worth mentioning, although the country abounds in this particular product, as well as in gum copal, gum arabic, incense gums, mahogany, hardwoods, and fibres of every kind. Tobacco, coffee, and cocoa would thrive well, although I doubt whether it would pay Europeans to grow these articles, especially coffee. Until very recently all the factories were at the mouth of the river, but now there are two at Gwato and two at Sapele. Sapele is the point at which the bifurcation of the two arms of the river takes place, and it is here that the Jakri and Sobo tribes join.

The Jakris have hitherto acted as middlemen between the white traders and the oil producers; they naturally resent any white trader establishing a factory up-country, and thereby dealing direct with the oil producers; consequently they do their best to obstruct any move in this direction. Taking these facts into consideration, it will probably be some time before the Sapele factories do very much trade. On the other hand, the oil producers are very anxious to trade direct with the white man; but they are afraid of the Jakris, and will continue to be so until a military post is established at Sapele. The Vice-Consulate has been, and is at present, established near the mouth of the river; but in a very short time it will be moved up to Sapele. This will have the effect of giving confidence to the Sobos, and at the same time an eye can be more easily kept on the Jakris.

To return to the river. During the neap tides the water rises and falls about $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet; during the springs $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet, and even more. The tide runs from 4 to 5 miles an hour. The rise and fall of tide is felt as far as Kanaka on the Ethiope, and Gbiye on the Jamieson. Above these

points the water is always running down. Between Eku and the Sobo plains the current is very rapid, and above that it becomes almost a torrent. A launch drawing 5 feet of water can go right up to Sapoba on the one branch, and Eku on the other, though one has to be very careful to avoid the snags, i.e., sunken trees, which are everywhere.

After ascending the river about 6 miles we come to the Deli Creek. This waterway leads into the Escardos River, and is navigable for launches, but is too narrow and tortuous for even small steamers. In about a couple of miles we reach the Lagos Creek, the entrance to the inland waters connecting the Benin River with Lagos. Last year (1891) Mr. Haly Hutton and I managed to navigate this channel, thereby having the small satisfaction of being the first Europeans to get through by this route. It appears that several attempts had previously been made to reach the Benin River from Lagos, but Arogbo was the furthest point touched. This place is about 50 miles from the Benin River. On the occasion I mention our craft was a large gig-canoe, lent to me by Nanna, the leading Jakri chief, manned by thirty men. Nanna objected to supply me with a crew, as he said that if once his slaves knew the way to Lagos they would all eventually run away, Lagos being a free country. However, a chief named Dore, not having the same scruples, gave me all the men I required.

Leaving the river on a Tuesday (Dec. 7th, 1891) we reached Lagos the following Sunday, thus taking five days to do the 170 miles. We paddled only during the day, i.e., from 5 A.M. to 9 P.M. The region through which we passed was very uninteresting, there being no open country of any kind. The mangrove disappeared about 25 miles after leaving the Benin River, and reappeared about 15 miles from Lagos. As far as Aboto the waterway is very narrow, in some places being less than 10 yards wide; above that place the stream widens, the banks get higher, and the forest scenery is very beautiful. On the evening of the third day we reached the Lekki Lagoon, a lovely sheet of water dotted with islands covered with grand forest trees, creepers, and ferns of every kind. This lagoon is about 30 miles long, and 15 miles broad in the widest part, and was very refreshing after three days of narrow creeks. The natives of the country through which we passed gave us no trouble of any kind, although we had been led to suppose that they might prove disagreeable. In fact Aboto was the only place where they took any notice of us. Here the chief sent a message to know why the white man passed by without calling on him—a message which required no answer.

As regards the future use of this inland waterway, I fear it will not prove of very much value. Some of the grass obstructions that had to be got through were formidable. In many cases the canoe had to be lifted along, and in one place we had to go through about

2 miles of high grass, quite impassable by a launch of any description. In addition to this, the snags, especially near Arogbo, were a decided bar to any craft other than a canoe getting past.

To return to the river once more. Shortly after passing the Lagos Creek we come to two more factories, and a little further on to a narrow creek leading to Broheme, where Nanna, the chief already referred to, resides. This town is very well built, and is quite a model native settlement. It is kept scrupulously clean, Nanna's own house being built according to European ideas. This chief is a superior sort of native, and is very wealthy. He is greatly feared by the neighbouring chiefs. About 10 miles further up the river we reach Young Town, where steamers enter the river after coming through the creeks from Forcados. Opposite Young Town is the Gwato Creek, the waterway to the town of that name, the landing-place for Benin city. I made a survey of the creek, but unfortunately mislaid it. Another 5 miles sees the last of the mangroves, the ground becomes firmer, and the banks higher, the foliage being chiefly palm trees. The scenery varies very little. The river gets narrower and narrower, though there is plenty of water right up to the edge of the bush. Passing a few small towns and villages, we reach Sapele, about 50 miles from the mouth of the river, where the bifurcation before alluded to takes place. Steamers drawing up to 14 feet of water can run up to this place, where there is an excellent anchorage. We now enter the forest region, the country being one impenetrable forest, with small clearings here and there where the towns and villages are built. The trees are magnificent, the most noticeable being the cotton and mahogany.

As we follow the stream up the northern arm the water gets clearer and clearer, being covered with masses of lovely white lilies; the banks become higher, and are covered with exquisite foliage. You see here and there long high walls of beautiful ferns stretching from tree to tree. The banks on each side are covered with orchids, flowering trees, and shrubs of every kind. The air is simply alive with the most gorgeous butterflies. The river is now very narrow and "twisty," there being sharp turns every few hundred yards. There are several towns, or rather villages, on each bank, all being oil markets. About 30 miles from Sapele is Sapoba, where the river practically ends, i.e., as far as navigation goes. In November, 1891, I traced the stream still further by wending my way through the forest trees in a small canoe; and from what the natives told me reached a spot about 3 miles further on which was about an hour's walk from the actual source of this arm of the river. This they described as a large pool, in which the water bubbled up out of the ground; they declared no water ran into this pool. However, on my return to Benin next year I intend to test the accuracy of their statements. My Jakri guide was somewhat loth to conduct me to this pool, as the people about there apparently regard it with a certain

amount of superstitious awe. I am convinced that the river, both this arm and the *Ethiope*, does not come from the *Niger*. The water is so deliciously clear, more especially so above *Utamara*, on the *Ethiope*, where it is as clear as crystal. You can see the bottom quite distinctly, although the water is $2\frac{1}{2}$ fathoms deep at that place; the current is, moreover, very rapid. Presuming that the *Jamieson* branch rises in the pool, as described by the natives, I fancy it will eventually be found that the *Ethiope* rises in the high ground north-west of the *Niger*.

Returning to *Sapele*, let us now ascend the *Ethiope*. This branch is also very narrow, but hardly as tortuous as the *Jamieson*, at all events not until you reach *Ekú*; after that it becomes narrower, and could not well be more winding than it is, the current being much swifter than on the other branch. The forest scenery up this way is even more lovely than that already described. After reaching *Ekú*, where we anchor our launch in about 10 feet of crystal water, we get into a canoe and paddle up stream, reaching the *Sobo* plains about 9 miles further on. These plains were mentioned by Consul *Beecroft* in 1840, and were the furthest point reached by any white man in this direction prior to last year (1891). They extend as far as the eye can reach, there being no signs of either animal or human life. These plains are covered with long grass, the soil being sandy, clumps of trees dotted here and there—an ideal spot for big game, though we saw none. Another 9 miles or so brings us to *Demovia*, in the *Abrakar-Sobo* country, the stream in some of the narrowest places nearly approaching to a torrent. From here we went 5 or 6 miles inland to a place called *Abrakar*, passing through many well-kept farms, chiefly pepper plantations, on the way. This was the furthest point reached by me in May 1892. When once clear of the mangrove swamps of the coast the soil is almost entirely red clay. There are no roads, the only substitutes being tracks through the forest, on which you have to walk in single file. Nearly all communication is carried on by means of the waterways. Beasts of burden of any kind are unknown, all carrying being done by the people.

As I remarked before, the climate of this region is very unhealthy, though its effect on Europeans depends a great deal on how they live. The temperature is equable, ranging from 92° to 70° in the house. The characteristics are those of West Africa generally, and it is unnecessary to repeat the details. As regards sport, you could not go to a worse place. There are plenty of bush-deer, a species of antelope; but they are very hard to get at, the bush being so very thick. Crocodiles abound, but you soon get tired of shooting them. The only really good shooting to be got is curlew. I never came across any hippo in the river, though I did nearer the *Niger*. There must be plenty of elephants in the *Benin* country, judging by the tremendous stores of ivory in possession of the king of that land. Monkeys swarm in the forests, but they hardly come under the head of game!

Let me now refer briefly to the tribes that people this part of the world. First we come to the Jakris, who are connected in race and language with the Yoruba people, extending from the Mahin country on the west to the Forcados on the east, and inland about as far as Sapele. The last king of the Jakris died in 1848, after which, and until recently, the people appointed a governor, whose powers were very limited, and the state of the river became one of anarchy. The Jakris act as middlemen in the trade between the white traders and the oil producers. They are a very timid race, and have very little idea of fighting. Domestic slavery is in existence, most of the slaves being bought from the neighbouring Sobo tribe. The value of a full-grown man is about £10. The Jakris are free men, and do no work. All their towns are built in the bush, the trees acting as a sort of natural screen in case of attack. The people are pagans. Their customs are barbarous; but now that the country is under British rule these things will disappear in time. There are several Ijo settlements in the Jakri country. The Ijos are a much-abused race, and were once inveterate cannibals; even now they do not object to a tender morsel of human flesh when the opportunity offers. Domestic slavery as it exists in the Jakri country has many points in its favour. There is really very little difference between the lot of a good slave and a freeman, except that the former works while the latter does not. They are housed and fed by their masters, and are given positions of trust, and in many cases they rise to be masters themselves, as in the case of the late King Ja-Ja of Opobo, who was originally a slave. Some of the Jakri chiefs display a very fair show of wealth, which usually takes the form of silks, coral, gold and silver ornaments, all specially ordered for them by the white traders. I have seen Nanna with seven or eight hundred pounds worth of coral on him.

The next tribe we come to is the Sobo, inhabiting the country on the left bank of the Ethiopie River. They are a very timid race, given to agriculture, their chief occupation being the manufacture of palm oil. They recognise no common head, the country being divided among a number of chiefs, who are always quarrelling among themselves. Like the Jakris, these people are pagans; they do not keep slaves, but are bought as such by the Benin and Jakri people.

Next come the Benin people, the regular inhabitants of the vast Benin kingdom. It is difficult to say exactly how far this kingdom extends, and I should doubt if the king himself knows. About forty years ago it was supposed that he claimed territory up to within 50 miles of Lokoja, at the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers. The River Ethiopie is probably the south-eastern boundary of this kingdom. Many states pay tribute to the king. The tribute is collected yearly, the king sending his so-called war-men to collect it. The inhabitants are somewhat superior to the neighbouring coast tribes, but

can hardly be called a brave people. They are given to agriculture, and are great hunters. Judging from the king's stock of ivory, the country must abound in elephants. When an elephant is killed the king claims one tusk, the other going to the hunter; but the king has the option of buying it if he wishes to. Christianity has never yet reached this country, although tradition says that the king of Great Benin city some time in the fifteenth century offered, for the small consideration of a white wife, to drive all his subjects into the pale of the church.

Before bringing this paper to a close, I will give you a short account of a visit to Benin city, the capital of the country, and the seat of government. I had the good fortune to be sent on a mission there last March (1892), the object being to conclude a treaty with the king, which object was fortunately successful, and the extensive dominions of the King of Benin are now under Her Majesty's protection. Very few Englishmen have ever visited the city of Benin. Prior to 1890 it would appear that only about three of our countrymen had been there. From all accounts the manners and customs of the people have changed very little since the days of Nyendale, in 1702. I was accompanied by Mr. Haly Hutton, Dr. Hanley, and Mr. Swainson.

We left the Vice-Consulate, near the mouth of the river, in a launch. Five hours' steaming brought us to Gwato. It was here that the great Belzoni, of Egyptian fame, died in 1823. There is, however, no trace of his last resting-place. Gwato was a large town once, but has suffered considerably during the frequent wars of past years. It is now only a small village, and it is here that the Benin people bring their oil and other produce to the white trader, there being two factories at this place. At present Gwato is the only place that the king will allow white men to land at with a view to visiting Benin city, all other routes being placed under fetish veto. However, it is to be hoped that before long all such foolish ideas will be dispelled. On our arrival at Gwato messengers were quickly despatched to the king to acquaint him of our coming.

Benin city lies about 25 miles from Gwato, the whole route being through a dense forest, with the exception of the last mile or two. We slept at Gwato that night, and started early next morning on our march, halting at a place called Egoru for the night, having done 16 miles of the journey. Just before reaching the city we had to pass through rather an unpleasant half mile of fairly open country. We presumed it was the place where all criminals' bodies were deposited. The path was strewn on both sides with dead bodies in every stage of decomposition; skulls grinned at you from every direction—a gruesome experience in its way. On reaching the city we found the king had told off a couple of very decent houses for our use. One we took possession of, and put our carriers in the other. These houses were built of red clay, having a high wall all round forming a sort of court yard. There were two

fair rooms, and many uncanny alcoves; skulls, human and otherwise, hung around promiscuously. The walls were adorned with the impressions of a very large hand in lime and blood. The roof was a thatched one, full of creeping things.

I will not weary you with an account of our five days' stay in this extraordinary place. The king had promised to see me on my arrival, but it was three days before he gave me an audience. However, the result was very satisfactory, so one cannot complain. Benin city is the seat of a very powerful theocracy of fetish priests. The king is all-powerful, though he would appear to be somewhat in the hands of his big men, and very much tied down by fetish customs. He only goes amongst his people once a year, the occasion being one of general rejoicing and feasting. Human sacrifices are of frequent occurrence, and the rule is one of terror. The usual form of sacrifice is crucifixion. We saw several crucified victims during our stay in Benin city, on the plain outside the king's residence. It is, however, to be hoped that now this country is under Her Majesty's protection these terrible practices will be put an end to, though it must take time. Punitive measures are all very well in their way, but in a country like Benin the effect would probably be to drive the natives into the bush, and make them greater savages than ever; one cannot reasonably hope to abolish in a short time customs that have been in practice for centuries. The Benin people are free, but are treated as slaves by the king, the title of king's slave being considered an honour.

A man may take unto himself as many wives as he likes. To describe the manners and customs of this strange people would fill a book, but I must say, after all we had heard, we were disappointed in the place. If Dapper and Barbot are to be believed, verily and indeed the glory has departed from Benin city. However, one cannot very well expect to see prosperity going hand in hand with human sacrifices and other barbarous customs. It is almost impossible to conceive that such a deplorable state of affairs should exist in these civilised days, but I assure you I have not told half the horrors I saw and learnt about in the few days spent in that city of skulls.

It might prove interesting to compare the Benin city of to-day with what it was two or three hundred years ago. The Portuguese called it Great Benin. Among the Benin people it is known as Ado, meaning the place where the king lives, whilst the Jakris call it Ubini. According to Dapper the city was surrounded by a high wall, and contained many towers and spires. Nyendale, a Dutchman, would appear to be the best authority on the subject in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he having visited the city on two occasions. He describes the streets as being "prodigious long and broad," and says that the town is "four miles large."

The state of the place to-day is very different, the so-called city
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being but a straggling collection of houses, built in clusters here and there, in little or no order. The number of ruins testify to the fact that it was once very much larger; but in our wanderings through the place we saw nothing that suggested "prodigious long and broad streets." The only market-place we saw was on the plain outside the king's residence. The whole aspect seemed to bespeak anything but a prosperous state of affairs. The principal part of the city is the king's residence. This consists of a number of compounds, each surrounded by a high mud wall. In each compound is a fetish shrine, composed of numbers of elephants' tusks, some very beautifully carved, together with a collection of native brass-work, the whole freely besprinkled with blood. After passing through several of these compounds you come to the king's houses, built of red clay, and with nothing particular to recommend them.

In each of the compounds are a number of king's stewards, a brass anklet, and sometimes not even that, being the sum total of their wardrobe. Very few of these functionaries have access to the king's presence, the penalty for passing beyond their own particular compound being death. The king keeps up a good deal of state, only a chosen few being permitted to speak to him direct. He is a very busy personage, attending to all state matters himself. The city is not fortified in any way, the only defence against attack being the natural screen afforded by the impenetrable forest.

The Benin people at one time had the reputation of being great weavers of cloth and workers in metals. They undoubtedly practise these industries now, though we saw nothing of the kind going on during our few days in the place. We saw, however, many specimens of brass ware of very clever workmanship.

In a woodcut in Dapper's work the city is depicted as having hills in the background. These hills certainly do not exist now. The same writer gives the king an army of 100,000 men, including many horsemen. To-day the king has no regular army, only a rabble called his war-men; and a horse is not to be seen in the country. In fact, horses are not be found, according to native testimony, until one is three or four days' march on the other side of Benin city.

As I said before, the manners and customs of the people have apparently changed very little in the last few hundred years, human sacrifices, criminal law, no marriage customs, fetish belief, and general mode of living being to-day as they were in the days of Dapper and Barbot.

I feel I have already somewhat tried your patience, so I will conclude by asking you to overlook the many shortcomings in this my maiden effort.

After the reading of the paper the thanks of the meeting were conveyed to Captain Gallwey by the President.