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The Niger Delta

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PROCEEDINGS
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ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY
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The Niger Delta.

By H. H. JOHNSTON, H.M. Vice-Consul for the Oil Rivers.

(Read at the Evening Meeting, November 12th, 1888.)

Map, p. 812.

THE "Oil Rivers"—so called from the fact of their producing the bulk of the palm oil exported from West Africa—are the main rivers, creeks, and estuaries lying between the eastern boundary of the British colony of Lagos and the northern frontier of the German Protectorate of the Cameroons. They are chiefly branches of the Niger, and form the Niger Delta, but some few of them have sources independent of that great stream; although close to the sea-coast, within tidal influence, the estuaries of these rivers are interconnected by a wonderful network of more or less navigable creeks. This system of natural canalisation is here and there blocked with vegetable growth, sandbanks, fallen trees, or artificial obstacles constructed by quarrelsome or timid natives; but with a relatively small amount of labour and at a moderate cost, the creeks in places might be deepened and cleared, and inland navigation rendered practicable between Dahome and the Cameroons Protectorate.

Before giving you more detailed information about certain portions of the Niger Delta, I will endeavour to describe in a general manner what these rivers are like. Just as by a process of modern photography we can obtain a general type of a race by merging a number of portraits of individuals into one average illustration, so, sinking the minor differences of each one of these many West African streams, I shall attempt to convey a general impression of the features they possess in common.

Arriving from Europe by sea, it is generally by the soundings and discoloured appearance of the water that we become aware of the near approach to land, rather than by sighting any part of the shore. When within a few miles of the mouth of one of these rivers, the low coast-line is at first indicated by isolated trees, which appear as islets of forest unconnected with each other, and distorted by the mirage of each horizon. Gradually these islets, which are really the loftier trees of

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the fringe of coast forest, become united in one line of purple green, divided only by the imposing gap of the estuary for which our ship is bound.

The bar of the river may be—as in the case of Old Calabar and Bonny—so deep as to be without danger, or it may be relatively shallow, as at Opobo or Akasa, but in all cases it is to be presumed that the vessel destined to cross it does not exceed the limited draught, and is properly steered according to the chart, and consequently incurs no danger. Once over the bar and within the estuary, we find ourselves surrounded by a lake-like expanse of smooth water, the shores of which are fringed with lofty mangroves with their ghastly white, blood-streaked trunks—streaked where the bark has been torn or frayed—and their graceful poplar-like foliage of a sad, dull, yellow-green. Behind the mangroves, however, generally show the dark and dense masses of inland forest, growing where the land has acquired firmness and lies just above the limits of high tide; or as far as you can see from the ship's deck, all and everything that is not yellow water may be unvarying mangrove.

The mangrove in West Africa is a tree that, taken by itself, is rather picturesque and stately: it is the wearisome monotony and want of variety of its extensive forests that form such a depressing aspect. As you ascend the river further and further from the sea the mangrove loses its exclusive possession of the shores, even if this possession be not here and there broken by little islets of firm land covered with varied vegetation, and generally the sites of villages. Almost before the water has ceased to be brackish, the pandanus or screw-pine begins to oust the mangrove, and below its fantastic whorls of spiny leaves the lovely *Lissochilus* orchids conceal the black mud with their leaves, and rear their stout flower-stems to a height of 6 or 7 feet. The effect of their masses of mauve-crimson golden-centred blossoms, each one nearly the size of a child's hand, standing out against the vivid spinach-green of the pandanus, is very striking.

At some spot where there is a stretch of clean white sand and firm soil emerging from the mud, you may distinguish a landing-place of some native village, which is usually characterised by a strip of varied forest, mingling with the lingering pandanus and mangrove. Possibly this is some little inlet or bay, protected from the strong wavelets created by the sea-breezes, which are liable to disturb the equilibrium of the native's canoe. The shore of the sandy beach is bright with the crimson flowers of the tall cannas. The natives' canoes are drawn up to the limit of the high tide, and fastened to stakes. The village will probably lie some quarter of a mile inland, and be embowered in exuberant forest. The houses will be poor, ramshackle structures of palm-fronds, and their inhabitants timid, naked fisher-folk, possessing a few fowls, goats, and mangy dogs.

Resuming the ascent of the river, though the banks still continue

marshy, the now perfectly fresh water enables a varied forest to replace the mangrove and pandanus, and here perhaps the most extravagant development of vegetation may be seen, recalling past geological epochs rather than the poor and mediocre aspects of nature at the present time. This magnificent development of equatorial forest scenery is almost confined to the valley of the Amazons, the West Coast of Africa, and a few portions of the Malay Archipelago, and has been most aptly described in the language, now classical, of our esteemed Secretary, Mr. Bates, in that most delightful work 'The Naturalist on the Amazons.' Here, walls of forest rise 100 to 200 feet into the air from the marshy shore. There is not one prominent kind of tree, but an infinite variety of kinds. There is every type of foliage and every shade of green. At the base of the forest on the water-line grow great Arums of the genus *Cyrtosperma*, with flower spathes of pale green streaked with purple-red. Above the Arums gleam out the white bracts of a species of *Mussaenda*, while higher up another *Mussaenda* exhibits huge creamy-white flowers without any bracts at all, and yet another species of this beautiful genus has blossoms of a vivid scarlet. Over the lower branches of the trees hangs a thick green veil of convolvulus-creepers, dotted at intervals with large mauve flowers. The *Raphia* palms are also a characteristic component of this river-side forest.

Ascending this typical river still further, the marshy banks gradually become firm dry land, and the ground even rises from the water into wooded heights. The native towns, with their pretty landing places at the river side, begin to increase in number and importance. Groups of chocolate-coloured natives peer at you suspiciously from among the boles and branches of the trees, but soon recognise you as a friend and come off in their dug-out canoes, to barter their fowls, yams, and palm-wine. Perhaps, arriving thus far, the channel of the stream has somewhat narrowed and shallowed, and you have exchanged the steamer for a steam launch, or a well-manned boat, or even—as I have done so often—for a good-sized native canoe, in which you will be able to thread more easily the channels of the river, and reach the limit of navigation. Alternating between the thickly-studded villages—between tribe and tribe—will come most pleasant spaces of solitude, where, owing to the constant warfare, which effectually divides each section of these savage peoples, there is an uninhabited neutral ground. Here you are alone with nature, unharassed by the presence of her noisiest offspring, man. Here from the dense green forest depths rings out the bark of the chimpanzee, and monkey families jump from tree to tree with a swish of leaves and a cracking of twigs. Black and white hornbills, with raucous cries, flap heavily across the river, and the lovely blue-green-purple-crested plantain-eater dodges your aim coquettishly among the palm-fronds. Perhaps where the river expands into a broad pool, with an archipelago of golden sandbanks, you encounter a school of hippopotami,

snorting, yawning, splashing, and grunting. If you are in a boat or canoe, you prudently avoid these ferocious beasts, and steer as closely as possible to the bank, because out of playfulness or spite, they would probably try to swamp your frail craft; but of course, in a steam launch you can steer through the midst of the herd without much fear of reprisals. On the sandbanks the yellow-grey crocodiles lie peacefully asleep, and close to them, about them, and around them, are groups of dainty, graceful water-birds who appear to have concluded a pact with the crocodiles that if they act as sentinels and warn the sleeping saurians of the approach of destroying man, on their part the crocodiles will abstain from eating their graceful allies. That the crocodile never eats a water-bird is more than I can assert, but this I do know is a most common feature on African rivers and lakes, that crocodiles and water-birds are constantly seen in close proximity, and that the spur-winged plover and other birds perch on the crocodile's scaly back.

Gradually the river narrows, and the banks increase in height, and red clay now gives place to outcropping rock. Looking interiorwards beyond the vista of the winding river is the exhilarating prospect of a faint blue range of hills. All influence of the tide has ceased, and the current becomes more rapid. It may be hours, or it may be days or weeks before we reach the outlying spurs of the first range of hills, the first ascent to the central plateau. Before we arrive at the actual falls which form an effectual bar to further navigation, there are many rapids, more or less difficult to pass, and in some places one can see where an ancient barrier of rocks has been worn away, leaving on either shore broken masses of stone, like the relics of some old bridge that has disappeared. At length, above the chirping of cicadas, the rustling of the forest, and the monotonous cadence of the boatmen's song, rises a far-off but persistent sound like the noise of a distant train. The native guide holds up his hand to the chanting paddlers, and commands silence; then after listening attentively he turns to you and says, "You hear them noise? We done catch close them place where water live for fall down." All expectation as you are, the windings of the river are tantalising, but at length a turn in the stream shows you the falls, which may be either a disappointing ledge of grey rock marked by a white line of water where the river descends abruptly one or two feet, or a beautiful series of cascades, coursing in many foaming torrents over a broad stairway of rocks. Here your water journey comes to an end, and this is the limit at which so many African explorations stop, but if you are an inveterate explorer, you will leave your boat and take to the shore, and cutting a road through the forest follow the river along its tortuous course, past fall after fall, past tranquil sluggish reaches, then a country of rocks, and then through grassy plains with wild cannibal villages, whose inhabitants you must pacify with your peaceful white umbrella, and your cheerful smile of placid amiability.

Here you are out of the forest-region of West Africa, in the great park-lands of the interior. Your stream, which has just been reduced to a narrow torrent between high walls of forest and precipices of shining water-smoothed rock, expands into a broad, sluggish flow, to whose banks come the numerous herds of the natives' cattle to drink and wallow in the mud; where the long-gowned, turbaned Moslem trader arrives from the north with his horses and asses and guns, to buy slaves of the naked, industrious, cannibal agriculturists, or to steal them or to seize them if the negroes are too weak to resist. This is the fascinating part of Africa—full of history and human movement—the land of wanton bloodshed, of gaudy barbaric pomp, of populous negro towns, of dry grassy plains, flat-topped mountains, clumps of huge sycamores and acacias, and graceful groups of fan-palms—the land where the Moslem robbers ride through the thorny stubble and the maize-fields on long-tailed ragged ponies, where the cannibal negro chief, alternately the ally and the victim of the Mohammedan slaver, shows you the clean interior of his clay-walled dwelling-house, studded with a frieze of a hundred human skulls, where the vultures are as tame as domestic fowls, and have no lack of offal on which to gorge—the land of the lion, the antelope, the ostrich, and the baboon.

Having given you this general description of what it is like to ascend the larger oil rivers and the branches of the Niger, I will now proceed to describe in a more detailed manner some of the important places and districts comprised within the British Protectorate of the Niger Territories.

As no doubt you know, the main streams of the Niger and Binue, with a considerable extent of land on either side, are under the administration of the Royal Niger Company, which, by royal charter, has become a territorial power. The remaining portions of the Protectorate comprising the greater part of the delta—in fact, the country between the boundary of Lagos and the German boundary of Cameroons—is at present administered by Her Majesty's consular officers, under various Orders in Council. The chief port of the Niger Company is at Akasa, at the mouth of the main Niger, and their administrative capital is at present at Asaba, above the delta. The headquarters of the consular establishment is at the important and relatively healthy town of Old Calabar, on an affluent of the Cross river. Old Calabar not only contributes a larger share of the trade than any of the settlements on the Oil Rivers, but it promises from its position and relative healthiness to be an important administrative centre in the future. It has a population of probably 15,000 natives, and about 150 British subjects who are foreigners, of whom over fifty are whites. Some of the Europeans (missionaries) have resided there for over thirty-seven years; two of them are aged respectively eighty-two and eighty-one, and the health of the whites, both in Old Calabar and Creek Town, is generally superior

to that of any other town in the Oil Rivers, or, indeed, in West Africa.

The natives of the Old Calabar district are thoroughly loyal to Great Britain, and very gladly accept its rule. They are ruled over by a number of native kings and chiefs, some of them of long descent and proud lineage, who live in handsome well-built European residences, and on Sundays and feast days dress elaborately in European clothes, at other times and seasons preferring to walk about in scarlet chimney-pot hats or the peaked caps of the mercantile marine, and little else, for nakedness knows no shame in these happy lands. At times, however, the chiefs can array themselves gorgeously in royal robes, crowns, and sceptres, while their chieftainesses put on second-hand dinner dresses of Parisian make, which hang about their supple bodies in deplorable shapelessness, from a lack of the underclothing which would accompany them in Europe. The Calabar women of lesser degree are very slight in their costume, unless they belong to the mission, in which case they wear long blue shapeless gowns that are well suited to the simplicity of clothing which the climate necessitates. But the women of the poorer classes and the slaves confine their adornment to their heads of hair and their skins, which are decorated with elaborate blue tattooing. The Calabar chiefs are also remarkable for their embonpoint, which they are proud to display.

The interiors of the Calabar houses are not devoid of taste, and their architecture gives a faint suggestion of Saracenic, as though originally they had been under the influence of the Niger peoples. Indeed, the arrangement of their houses differs markedly from that which prevails in the Bantu country across the Cameroons border. The Calabar houses are generally built in the form of a square, the narrow apartments enclosing a central patio or yard, open to the sky, in the middle of which a small tree, occasionally hung with charms and "fetishes," is planted. The Calabarese exhibit a decidedly æsthetic taste in their paintings and their brass work. They obtain the brass from European traders, and on it stamp by hand fantastic designs by means of a large-headed nail and a stone used as a hammer. They also do pretty bead-work, and weave elegant dyed-grass mats, and make fantastic masks and head-dresses, which are assumed in their plays and sports, and also in time of war.

The natives of Old Calabar and the lower Cross river belong to the Efik race. In language, and no doubt in origin, they are allied to the Ibos of the Niger Delta. They have scarcely been settled at Old Calabar more than a century and a half. Originally they came from the Ibibio district on the Cross river, and drove out and partly supplanted the Akpa tribe, who originally inhabited Old Calabar. The Efik people are now much mixed in blood, having imported many slaves from Cameroons. They have for more than half a century been to a considerable extent under British influence; and of course of late years they

have placed their country entirely under our political control. Indeed, if you told a Calabar man he was not a British subject, he would be greatly offended. Nearly every man speaks a little English, and not a few of the women can understand our language to a certain extent, and a fair proportion of the Calabarese can read and write it. This is the result mainly of the schools which have been established here for many years by the United Presbyterian Mission and other evangelising societies. Numbers of the young Calabar men go to England either to complete this education or just to see the white man's wonderful country; and the result of their abrupt contact with our civilisation is often amusing. One young fellow, who spent two years at an English school, returned to Old Calabar quite an Anglomaniac, and among other innovations attempted to form a cricket club among his friends and relations. To this end he wrote out in a beautiful neat text-hand an elaborate prospectus, which he circulated round the town to arouse interest and obtain subscriptions. The peroration of this document ran thus:—"The establishment of this cricket club will, I am convinced, redound to the greater glory of God and the benefit of our fellow-man." "English as she is spoke"—or rather written—at Old Calabar is a dialect full of the quaintest errors. One native gentleman wrote to our esteemed medical officer, Dr. Allman, complaining that he "suffered from involuntary emotions and reflex actions"; and a native matron of great respectability, educated at the mission, and somewhat over sensitive as to the frailty of her reputation, addressed to me the following complaint:—"Sir,—I approach your Consulship to bring a complaint against Mr. Blank for *Definition of my Character*." After detailing the improper allegations which Mr. Blank had made, she went on to say, "Now Sir, I am and always have been, *all my life*, a very respectable married woman," which fact, I hastened to assure her, was so well known to all the community, that it would be better to pass over Mr. Blank's ill-natured tattle in silent contempt. And I am glad to say she took my advice.

After all, though one may often good-naturedly laugh at their amusing blunders, there is something very remarkable in the way in which these negroes spring to the contact of civilisation, and hasten to avail themselves of every facility for acquiring knowledge which our missionaries and merchants place in their way.

In the early part of this year I decided to ascend the Cross river for the purpose of making treaties with the natives, and also for surveying its course, of which we knew nothing beyond the hasty sketch made some forty-six years ago by the surgeon of the little *Ethiope* trading steamer. Having no steam-launch at my disposal, I was obliged to make the journey in native canoes, of which I hired three, and fitted up the largest with a small house in the centre for my own lodging. I took with me about thirty Kruboyes. These invaluable native workers

come from the Liberian coast, between Sierra Leone and Grand Bassam. Without their aid, European enterprise on the West Coast of Africa would be at a standstill; for, invariably, the negroes who are indigenous to the land will not,—even the so-called slaves,—undertake any persistent work. The Kruboy is a strong, good-tempered, faithful creature; able to row, paddle, carry, dig, wash clothes, or wait at table, or turn his hand to anything; in fact he is a great deal sharper, defter, and more industrious than the average English navyy.

My first object in going up the Cross river was to settle an outstanding quarrel between the people of a district called Umon and the natives of Old Calabar. Umon lies at a distance of about 100 miles from the sea. The people speak a language quite distinct from the Calabar language. They were, until lately, terribly priest-ridden. Their life was a burden to them with its load of cruel superstitious practices. The last few years, however, since they have come into contact with the missionaries, this state of affairs has greatly improved. As I appeared in the light of a mediator, I was most warmly welcomed. An imposing fleet of eighty large Calabar canoes reached Umon soon after I arrived, and formed a really pretty sight, as they were all painted in brilliant but tasteful combinations of colour, like æsthetic "Noah's arks;" their little houses hung with bright carpets or leopard skins, each canoe being decorated with gaudy banners, and hoisting a Union Jack—for the people of the Oil Rivers are aggressively British in their display of bunting. The crews were most fantastically dressed in gorgeous clothes, with Lifeguardsmen's or policemen's helmets, or native head-dresses of Colobus monkey skin, or of black-dyed filaments of palm-fronds. The beating of drums, the blowing of horns, and the firing of guns made a clamour most disturbing to my comfort, which I promptly stopped. I need hardly say that I had the Calabar people all under control, for there was not only a personal attachment between us, but they knew that I was working in their interest, and the Umon people were much impressed by the way in which my shabby little despatch canoe, with two of my Kruboyes in it, could marshal the imposing Calabar fleet.

As both sides were longing to have their quarrel at an end, and were fully prepared to accept my decision, the conference was a brief one. I decided that it was six of one and half-a-dozen of the other; I made the Calabar people surrender the Umon captives, and the Umon surrender their Calabar prisoners. Peace was re-established, trade was resumed, and I was free to continue my journey. We next visited the important Akuna-Kuna country, very populous, and inhabited by friendly, industrious people, whose chiefs very promptly and willingly concluded a treaty with the British Government, and loaded me with such an abundance of provisions—bullocks, goats, sheep, fowls, ducks, yams, and Indian corn—that our progress was seriously impeded, our canoes nearly capsized, and my Krumen suffered severely from indigestion. Some

distance further up the river we had rather a ticklish task to perform. Another quarrel, and that a bitter one, had to be settled between the people of Akuna-Kuna and the inhabitants of Iko-Morut. Here I was awkwardly situated. Had I been enabled to travel in a steam-launch, I could have gone safely up the river, or in any direction where there was sufficient water; but travelling simply in native canoes, the inhabitants of these wild countries in the interior, who look upon every stranger as an enemy, had no idea that a white man was visiting them, and often proceeded to attack us before I could make myself seen.

As soon as we came in sight of the stockaded villages of Iko-Morut, many excited chocolate-coloured natives could be seen hurrying along the banks of the stream and posting themselves in ambush behind the trees. Then first one gun, then two, three, four guns, went off; then there was a regular hail of slugs and stones, whipping up the surface of the water, and in one or two cases whizzing over our canoes. In the face of this warm reception it would have been impossible to proceed, for, at any moment, a shot might strike our canoes and send them to the bottom. As to returning the fire of these poor stupid savages, nothing was further from my thoughts. It was always open to me to retreat, while unless I could proceed peacefully, and with a friendly reputation preceding me, it was futile to continue my ascent of the Cross river. So I had the canoes steered to an unoccupied sandbank in the centre of the stream, and as soon as the natives saw that we stopped they ceased firing. Then I got into my small despatch canoe with two interpreters, hoisted my white umbrella and assumed my smile, and quietly landed on the crowded beach, to the silent amazement of the natives, who were armed to the teeth. I was conducted to the chief, who, for a long time could not be prevailed upon to see me, on account of my presumed powers to bewitch him; but a little friendly conversation through the reed screen of his apartment, and the hint that I had brought a pretty present, reassured him, and we soon made excellent friends.

To make a long story short, the result of my stay at Iko-Morut was equally satisfactory to that at Umon; I made peace between Akuna-Kuna and Iko-Morut, and the chiefs of the latter place concluded a treaty with me. Then on, beyond Iko-Morut, day after day, we paddled up the beautiful stream, sometimes received by the natives in a gush of friendliness, sometimes sullenly avoided, sometimes boisterously attacked. At length, in the heart of the cannibal country, on the outskirts of Atam, where the Cross river attains its furthest reach to the north, our journey came forcedly to an end. I had several times been captured and released, several times fired at and then hugged by those who had attacked me, but the strain was becoming too great for the nerves of my Kruboyes.

As we approached one village, a shot, better directed than usual, went through the roof of my little "Noah's ark," and although no doubt

our ultimate reception at the village would have been the same as at the preceding ones—first sullen hostility, then timid inquiry, and lastly cordial hand-shaking and hugging, and the giving of presents—still before this happy consummation came about, some of us might have been accidentally killed, or our canoes—our only means of regaining civilisation—sunk or disabled, consequently I decided to turn back. Then ensued an awful afternoon, when for miles and miles we had to run the gauntlet past populous villages of cannibals, whom we had had much difficulty in avoiding on our ascent of the river; and who, taking our retreat for a flight, seemed bent on capturing us or plundering our canoes and eating the wretched Krubos, who turned blue with fright at the prospect of being eaten, as they desperately paddled down river past shrieking natives, who waded out into the shallows, or pursued us in canoes. Every now and again we would stick on a sandbank, and the shouts of the natives would come nearer and nearer, then we would get off again, and paddle for our lives, then stick again, and so on, till at last we were out of this savage district. I hesitate to say hostile, for, wherever I landed, or was captured, I was always well treated as soon as they found out what I was like and what my objects were in visiting their country. At length we arrived in the delightful district of Apiapum, where we put up for a week at the clean and comfortable town of Ofurekpe, whose chief and people were some of the nicest, kindest, most friendly folk I have ever encountered in Africa, although they were in their own practical way cannibals, like their neighbours—that is to say, they were given to eating the flesh of all whom they might catch in war. I did not here observe that other kind of cannibalism which I have occasionally met with on the Upper Cross river, which is of a sentimental character, namely, where the old people of the tribe, when they become toothless and useless, are knocked on the head, smoke-dried, pounded into a paste, and re-absorbed into the bosom of the family.

On the Upper Cross river there is a direct contact with the Mahomedan Soudan, and in the country of Atam, horses have been introduced from the north. Interesting to me as the Cross river district is, I cannot here dilate any further on its features, but must continue my review of the remaining part of the British Protectorate of the Oil Rivers.

Westward of Old Calabar, the first important trading centre we come to is Opobo, on the Opobo river, the right and left banks of which stream, near its mouth, are occupied by a flourishing European settlement, and about five miles from the sea is the not very large, but closely packed and squalid native town. The Opobo river leads one into the heart of the Opobo country, inhabited by the industrious Ibo race, which occupies the lower Niger, just above the delta, and extends thence to the right bank of the Cross river. The Ibos are cannibals, but their cannibalism is not of a ferocious type, and rather seems to mean the occasional eating of superfluous slaves, or the celebration of sacrifices

on the death of a great man. The Ibo country is densely populated. Their towns are of a very distinct character, with rectangular houses well built of clay and thatch, interspersed among groups of magnificent trees, which are purposely preserved and cultivated by the citizens. Among these are noticeable *Dracænas* of great height, with red trunks and dark green spiky fir-like foliage. The Ibo towns are never crowded, each house or little group of houses standing by itself in an independent compound. The open spaces in the town are kept scrupulously clean, being frequently swept with brooms made out of twigs and palm-fronds, which are industriously plied by the boys and youths who keep the town in order. In the vicinity of this settlement, there are dense groves of the oil-palm, and thriving plantations of maize, yams, beans, and colocasia arums.

The Ibos are exceedingly industrious people. They weave grass-cloth, and display a very marked æsthetic taste in the designing of their implements and textile fabrics, and in the interior decoration of their houses, in all of which, and in their social arrangements, they are greatly superior to the degraded coast tribes, who seem to have lost their ancient culture, and have not yet become thoroughly imbued with European civilisation. They are clever smiths, and make a good many implements from the iron which they smelt themselves from the soil, in their primitive forges. The Ibos I look upon as the promising tribe of the delta. It is they, at present, who create the trade; Ijos and Kwos—their neighbours on the south and west—are but middlemen, non-producers. The Ibos are industrious agriculturists, and have fine herds of cattle, goats, and sheep, and quantities of fowls and ducks.

Westward of Opobo, on the left branch of a large delta, is the old and important town of Bonny, which has been known to Europeans some two hundred years, and whose present reigning chief is the descendant of a family which has ruled Bonny continuously for nearly the same period. Although in some respects Bonny, from the great facilities it offers as a harbour, promises to be one of the chief places of the delta, yet it is at present far behind Old Calabar in size and good condition. The native town is a foul, unhealthy collection of native huts and ludicrously ugly imitations of European houses roughly put together with bits of corrugated iron, deal planks and crumbling bricks. The various towns of the district known as New Calabar, and of Brass, are somewhat better built, larger and cleaner than Bonny, but their general character is the same. Okrika, where the recent massacres and outbreak of cannibalism have taken place, is a particularly dirty warren of a place, about 20 or 30 miles north of Bonny. Behind the town of Okrika, however, is good firm land of red clay, covered in parts with rich forest, in others affording good pasturages for the large herds of cattle kept by the Okrika people. Okrika is but a short distance from the large Ibo town of Bende, the centre of the local slave and ivory trade.

The district which lies between the Middleton river on the west, and the Andoni river on the east of Bonny, and including the extreme lower Niger, is inhabited by the large Ijo tribe, who are further connected linguistically with the Sobos, who inhabit the country between the Benue river and the Wari branch of the Niger. The language of the Ijos—which has about six dialects—and the related speech of the Sobos are rather remarkable; they are utterly dissimilar to the surrounding languages, and, as far as we yet know, only offer a vague resemblance to certain languages on the Upper Niger. It would seem as though the Ijos represented an ancient migration into the delta, which has been cut off and circumscribed by relatively alien races, such as the Ibos, Kwos, and Jekris, on the north, east, and west. The Ijos represent to-day the ruling people of the extreme lower Niger, of Brass, of New Calabar, Bonny, and Opobo. In times past they were fanatic adherents of a savage type of animistic religion. Like the majority of the Africans, they did not know or conceive of the existence of one supreme God, but embodied a number of natural principles in the forms of certain animals, or in a concrete representation of “fetishes” or idols.

Each little community had its “totem,” or sacred animal, in whose species, the ancestral spirit—the soul of the tribe, so to speak—was supposed to dwell. Thus, in Brass, they worshipped the python snake; in Bonny, the monitor lizard. Only nine or ten years ago this animal worship was so real that the British authorities in the Oil Rivers were compelled to afford it a certain amount of recognition. Europeans were forbidden to kill the sacred lizard of Bonny, or the still more sacred serpent of Brass, and were heavily fined by their consul if they infringed this prohibition. On one occasion, in Brass, some ten or eleven years ago, an agent of Messrs. Hatton and Cookson's firm found a large python in his house, and killed it. When the misdeed became known, the Brass people made a descent on the factory, dragged the agent out of the house on to the beach, tied him up by his thumbs, spat in his mouth, and inflicted other indignities on him. Then they broke open the store and took out about 20*l.* worth of goods, which they confiscated. The British Consul hearing of the disturbance, arrived in Brass, considered the case, and was unable to afford the agent any redress, because he was supposed to have brought the punishment upon himself.

At Bonny the monitor lizards became a sickening nuisance. They devoured the Europeans' fowls, turkeys, ducks, and geese with impunity; they might lie across the road or the doorways of houses with their six feet of length, and savagely lash the shins of people who attempted to pass them with their whip-like serrated tails, and if you wounded or killed one of them, then there was no end of a to-do. You were assaulted or robbed by the natives, harangued by the Consul on board a man-of-war, and possibly fined into the bargain. In other parts of the delta it might be the shark, or the crocodile, or some water-bird that

was worshipped, but nowhere was this zoolatry carried to greater lengths than at Bonny and Brass. For its effectual abolishment, which has been of the greatest benefit to the well-being of Europeans and natives alike, we owe our thanks not to the intervention of naval or consular officials, nor to the bluff remonstrances of traders, but to the quiet unceasing labours of the agents of the Church Missionary Society, who, by winning the natives from these absurd practices, have brought about such a change of affairs that now the python is promptly killed at Brass whenever it makes its appearance, and the monitor lizard is relegated to the woods and swamps. Indeed, as regards the latter animal, there was rather a curious revolution of feeling. About four years ago, when Bonny Town was infested with numbers of these great sluggish lizards, the missionaries screwed the courage of the Bonny converts (who then meant almost the entire population of the place) to the sticking point. A grand slaughter of lizards was arranged to take place on Easter Sunday. As soon as the morning bells of the mission church rang out, a large number of Bonny men and boys armed themselves with matchets and sticks and commenced the slaughter of the lizards. By the end of the day there was not one left alive in the town, and so great were the numbers slaughtered, that the stench almost brought about a sickness, and for four or five days the town was unapproachable. But in slaughtering the lizards, much else of the old superstition seemed to go, and that event marked the real revolution, and a turning towards better things on the part of the Bonny people. A change almost similarly abrupt put an end to the python worship at Brass. Before that time, if a python seized a child in the streets in its coils, and slavered it with its viscous saliva, the mother—so far from interfering to save it—must stand by and call out her thanks, and summon her friends and relations to rejoice with her that the god-python had so honoured her family as to devour her child.

The Ijos and Ibos, and indeed most of the tribes of the Niger, were, not long since, inveterate cannibals, and cannibalism is far from being extinct even in the midst of such civilised centres—with their churches and schools and factories—as Bonny and Brass, and New Calabar. Again and again the news reaches us that in towns where we had really thought that civilisation had obtained firm hold, there has been an outbreak of cannibalism—witness the eating of human flesh by native Christians at Brass some three years ago, and the recent horrors reported from Okrika. Cannibalism is deeply associated with, and indeed forms part of, the ceremonial of the old fetish rites. The “Ju-Ju men”—the native priests—are bound to eat human flesh at certain times and under certain conditions. To procure this needed flesh, the Ju-Ju men are said to disguise themselves at night as leopards and prowl about the byways of the town, where they seek out victims, not among the townspeople, their own countrymen, but among strangers of another

tribe who may be sojourning in the town, and who are imprudent enough to be out of doors at night. Indeed, in Africa, a great licence is permitted at night. In the dark there is little distinction drawn between the lawful acts of a devil and the unlawful deeds of the mere human, the border-line with the poor superstitious African being so vague; and what with the fear of these were-wolves and the dread of malicious goblins, the African dreads to leave the shelter of his house or compound or the cheerful circle of his "club" fire after nightfall; and I have frequently taken advantage of this feeling to cross disturbed districts at night, knowing that, however much the natives might struggle to oppose me in the daylight, they would be very wary of attacking me at night. I have seen some of these human monsters—these Ju-Ju-men—at Okrika and at other places in the delta; they have shown me their long, claw-like, uncut nails, which they and all professional cannibals are supposed to retain for the purpose of tearing to pieces the meat of their cannibal repasts.

West of the main stream of the Niger we pass a number of shallow outlets, all of them with bad and difficult bars, and all interconnected with each other, with the Niger, with the Wari, and with the Forcados. This part of the delta is almost unknown at present. The natives, who seem to be a mixture of Ijos and Jekris, are savage cannibals.

The Forcados river, which is the main outlet of the Wari branch of the Niger, is a noble stream, with a safe and relatively deep bar. The shores of its lower course are almost free from marsh and mangrove, and offer firm, dry, and rich soil, which is at present overgrown by magnificent forest. The mild and timid inhabitants of its lower course belong to the great Jekri tribe, which is the ruling race on the Benin river, and right along the coast to Lagos. Nana, governor of the Jekri country, is an hereditary satrap of the King of Benin. He is one of the most enlightened chiefs in the Oil Rivers. His town, which contains some very good houses, has been designed and built, in a great measure, according to European ideas. The trade of the Benin river is very large, as it forms the débouché of the wealthy Benin country—a land known to English adventurers as far back as 1553, when we find that British traders first visited the Benin river for the purpose of buying the so-called "pepper," the seeds of a species of amomum, which were largely used in the middle ages for the purpose of making spices.

I have explored the main stream of the Benin river for a certain distance inland, and I have found a point on that river from which Benin city is distant only fifteen miles, an improvement on the old round-about way by Gwoto, which involved a long and difficult land journey.

The people of the Jekri country are in some respects superior in local indigenous civilisation to the inhabitants of the rest of the delta, and have a considerable show of wealth, which is manifested especially upon their persons, for the freemen and wealthy slaves wear the most mag-

nificent silks, which are specially ordered for them from Europe, and they are also especially fond of coral. It is not an unusual circumstance to see Nana and some of his big chiefs with over 100*l.* worth of coral on their persons.

The climate of the Niger Delta resembles that of other parts of the West Coast of Africa within the same distance from the Equator, except, perhaps, that it is more rainy than the districts to the west and south; nevertheless, although the local conditions of each part of the delta influence its salubrity, still it may be stated generally, that the climate of the Niger Delta is less unhealthy—that is to say, there is less loss of life among the Europeans—than in our other West African possessions. The temperature is very equable; it is rare that it reaches a greater height than 90° in the shade, and the thermometer seldom goes below 65°. More generally, the temperature night and day ranges between 75° and 87°.

The greatest danger to health in tropical climates, or at any rate in Tropical Africa, occurs from catching cold. Two other imprudences next to be guarded against are excesses of any kind in eating or drinking, or exposing oneself too much to the direct rays of the sun. Errors in diet are promptly and pitilessly punished with sickness; and whereas Europeans are all the better in health for taking a good deal of exercise; they are easily liable to get sick if they expose themselves to the sun's rays without the protection of an umbrella, which is frequently done by new-comers out of foolish bravado. Remembering these three injunctions I have given, it is by no means a difficult matter to keep one's health in the Niger Delta. I am acquainted with numbers of Europeans there—the majority in fact—who by living reasonable lives have no ailments to complain of; but as it is only the clamours of the unhealthy and the imprudent that reach our ears, we are too apt to conclude that the complaints of the few indicate the sufferings of the many.

As this rich country becomes opened up by commerce, as the marshes are drained and filled up, and the too dense forests thinned and cut down; as we penetrate more and more to the healthy interior and are able to supply Europeans with comfortable houses and with all the necessities and luxuries of civilisation, such as can be procured in the East and West Indies, so the exaggerated fear of the Niger climate will become dispelled, and we shall find it no more difficult of exploitation nor unadapted for European enterprise than the other tropical possessions of the British crown.

The paper was illustrated by a series of twenty-seven views of scenery and natives, shown by the dioptric lantern.

After the paper,

The PRESIDENT expressed, in the name of the Society, his thanks to Mr. Johnston for his extremely interesting and valuable addition to the knowledge of the Niger Delta, which was now being opened out to British enterprise and civilisation.



MAP OF THE NIGER DELTA

BY

H.H. JOHNSTON, F.R.G.S., &c, H.M. VICE-CONSUL FOR THE OIL RIVERS,
& H. SHARBAU, ESQ., CARTOGRAPHER, ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY.

Founded on

Surveys of the Rio del Rey, Cross River, Opobo, Andoni, Bonny & Benin Rivers by M^r H.H. Johnston; of the Niger, Benue, Onitla, Oraqi, Wari and Katsena Allah Rivers by the officials of the Royal Niger Company; of the Ekw-ibo River by the employes of the Liverpool African Company; of the lower course of the Oraqi and the upper course of the Bakana Rivers, and the creeks between New Calabar and Brass Rivers by Capt. Richard Boler; of the Estuary of the Bonny and New Calabar Rivers by Lieut. Rolleston, R.N.; of the Agara Creek, between Forcados and Benin Rivers, by Captains Parkinson and Harvey of the British & African Steamship Company; and of the creeks between Lagos and the Benin River by Captⁿ Speeding in the service of the Government of Lagos Colony. The remainder from the best information procurable.

Soundings Depth of water, 2 fms, 3 fms, 4 fms, 5 fms. The depth of the Rivers is that taken as an average during the rainy season from 1st June till 31st Oct.. In the Sea and within tidal influence the depths given are those of the lowest springs. With regard to the Rivers it must be borne in mind that the Niger, Benue and Cross Rivers fall about 20 feet between their average depth during the rainy season and their depth during the height of the dry season - March.

The Stations of the Royal Niger Company are underlined in red.

Mission Stations are indicated thus, ⚡

Heights of hills in feet, thus, 800. Depths of water in fathoms, thus, 3.

SCALE OF STATUTE MILES

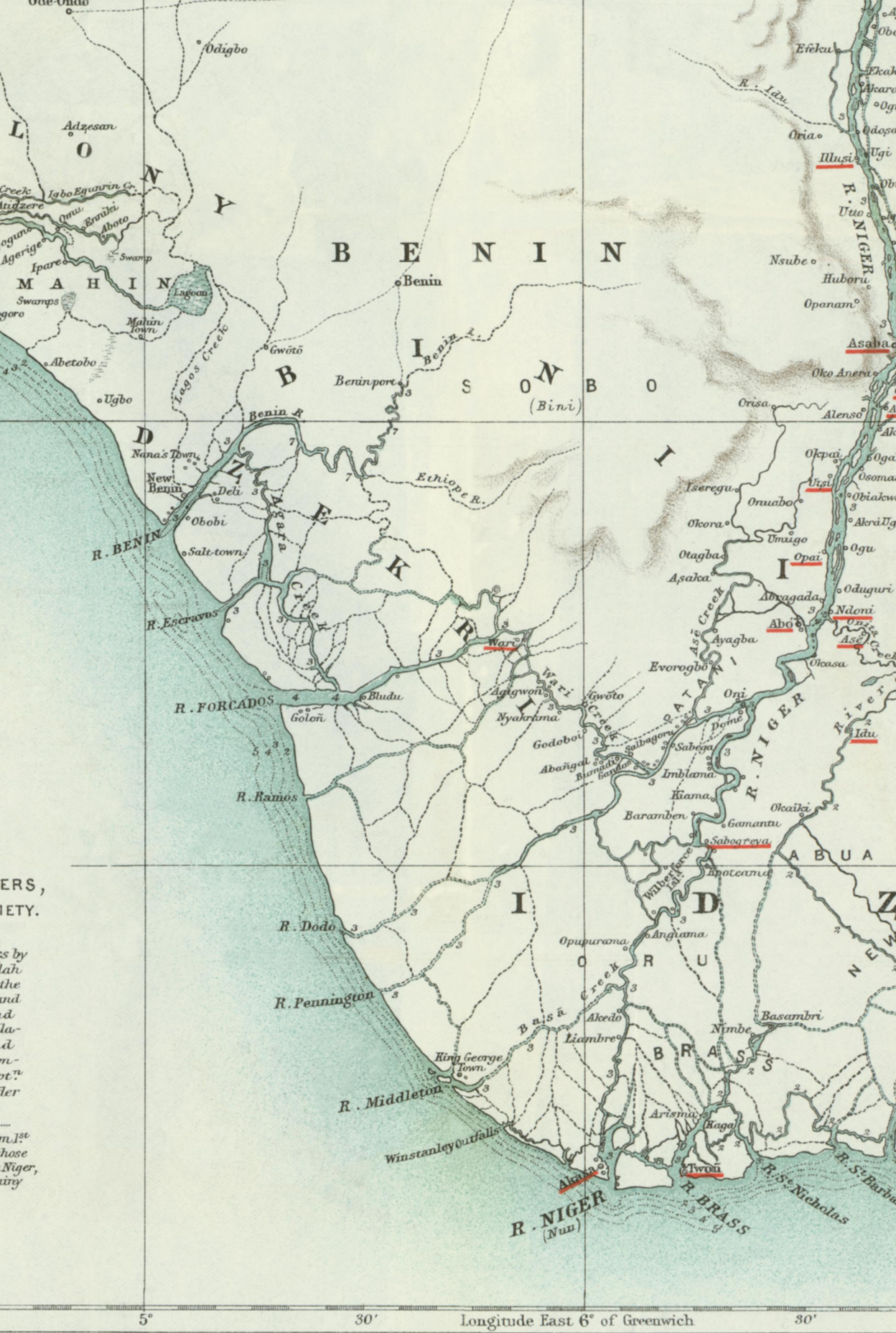
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30'

4°

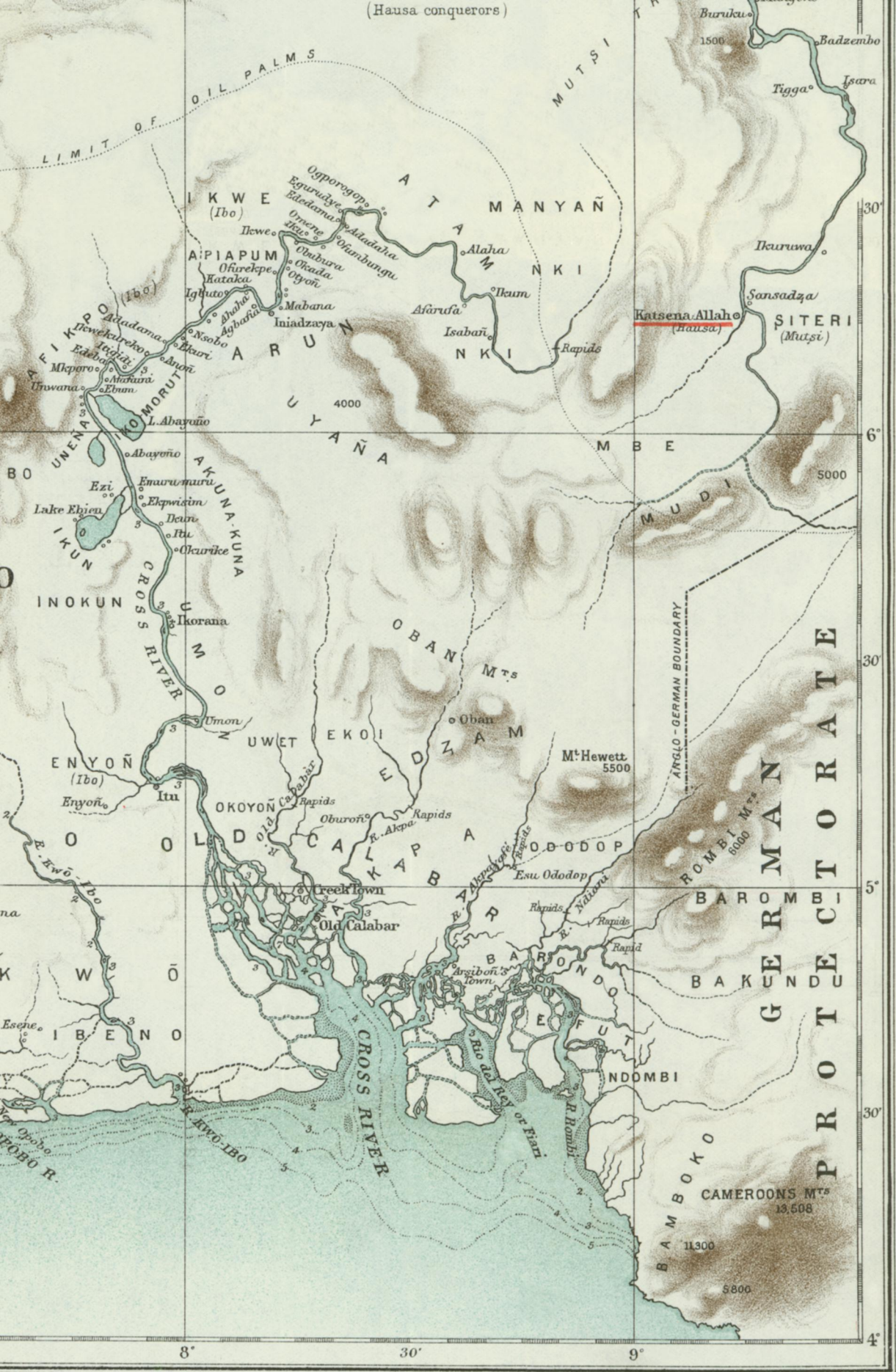
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