

The Feminist Dimension of Niger River Exploration: Accounts of memorable confrontations between the African woman and the Nineteenth Century European Explorer Mungo Park

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ABSTRACT: The exploration of West Africa through the tortuous search of the once elusive River Niger by Europeans is no doubt a popular theme in the history of West Africa. But very little has been written about the significant roles of the African woman in the overall process of the various expeditions by European explorers in search of the Niger. That there is therefore a lacuna in the presentation of the African woman in this aspect of West African history is a fact which needs to be addressed. In addressing this lacuna, the present study takes a look at the fundamental roles women played during the first expedition to the Niger by Mungo Park that profoundly assured his survival and subsequent success of the expedition. In doing this, the work re-enforces the concept of “Mother Africa” against the modern and often fanciful concept of feminism imposed from without. It shows that the African woman defined conceptually as “Mother” under traditional African historical setting has never seen herself in conflict with the men folk but rather sees her role as complimentary and often times decisive when the roles of the men folk fails to present the desired result. As a historical work, every aspect of its approach is predicated on historical methodology.

Keywords: African women, exploration, feminism, Mungo Park, Nineteenth Century, River Niger, West Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The Niger is the most popular river in West Africa and third in Africa by size only to the Nile and Congo. Although its exploration remains the most sensational compared to the two others, not much has been written in detail from African point of view. Similarly, the roles of women in the successive episodes of the exploration seem to be downplayed within the context of their contributions.

Indeed, except particularly for the Akan of modern State of Ghana, most parts of West Africa are patrilineal societies in which masculinity dictates the pace of events. Thus, even roles traditionally assigned to women were often defined in masculine context in order to preserve the masculine character of the society. This readily explains the limited space provided the African woman in the history of pre-colonial Africa which the present study forms a part. And this further explains the necessity of the present study.

Unlike both the Niger and the Congo, the Nile has been known in history and used as the major artery of human communication far back to antiquity even though its sources remained unknown. In respect of the Niger,

MacBride (1988) gave a graphic description of the river thus:

Rising from the lush tropical highlands of Guinea, the Niger, at 2,600 miles, is Africa's third-longest river. For 260 miles it rides 1,600 feet down a series of cascades. Then it plows slowly, deliberately, northeast into the Sahel and Sahara, a frayed belt of semi-arid land between desert and savanna. It skirts Mali's ancient desert emporium of Timbuktu, retreats south to weave through the mangrove swamps and deltas of lower Nigeria, and ultimately spills into the Gulf of Guinea.

The Niger even though known far back to antiquity to the Roman World of the time, it was never reached nor was its source, course, and manner of utilization by those who inhabited its course known. Thus, for millennia, its

knowledge remained elusive to successive scholars and explorers till the emergence of modern European imperialism. As Basden (1921, 17) succinctly pointed out:

...the Niger has dominated the minds of men with a fascination well-nigh incomprehensible, except to those who have felt its influence. From the days of Pliny downwards no river has given rise to so many and varied speculations as to its course and ultimate discharge. Not until 1830 was the problem solved, when the brothers Lander passed down the river and, after many adventures, found themselves gazing after the sea at Brass.

Basden (1921, 17) further noted that the task of exploring the Niger had baffled the many men that underwent the risky adventure for thirty-five years with many of them, beginning with Mungo Park meeting their unfortunate end in the process. The ultimate discovery of its mouth by Richard and John Lander finally settled the over thirty decades of geographical riddle on the river. The enigmatic character of the river is that it rises from a point just about 150 miles from the Atlantic Ocean close to the border between Sierra Leone and Guinea, flows northeastwards and bends southwards to discharge at the same Atlantic Ocean 2610 miles from its point of departure (Geography, n.d).

It is a river that goes with different names within the difference territories it flows. At its source at Fouta Djallon Highlands of Guinea it is known as Tembi (Geography, n.d). To the Fula (Fulani), Madinka, Bambara of Guinea and Mali, it is known as Joliba. It is however in Nigeria that the river assumes commanding multiple identities in which every ethnic group through whose territory river traverses has their own name for it. Among these are —“Kwara” (Kwora) and “Kogi” for most of the people in Northern Nigeria, although Kogi among the Hausa stands for a big river. To the Ijaw it is generally known as “Toru Beni” and, “Oshimili” among the Igbo; or “Oshimini” as noted by Baikie (1966, 51). Baikie (1966, p. 73) equally noted that the Niger was known to the Igala as “Ujumini FuFu”, which stands for “White Water”, while the Hausa settlers around its confluence with River Benue refer to it as “FariN’rua” meaning “White Water.” Among the Tuareg it is called Egerew, while for the Songhai it is called Isa. To the Yoruba it is called Oya while the Fulani or Fula as they are referred to in most West African country call it variously as Maoyo and Joliba. In fact, as Loyd (1973, p. 16) clearly noted: “Part of the trouble in identifying a river of such length which flowed north, east and south, lay in the multiplicity of its name”. Loyd (1973, p. 16) further pointed out that William Baikie on his own account alone noted twenty-nine different names with which the River Niger was known and called by the different peoples that occupied its course.

On the reason why the river was as elusive as it appeared to be mythical Loyd (1973, p. 16) went further to state:

During its long course it flows through every type of landscape from the deserts of the north to the rainforests and mangrove swamps of southern Nigeria. Only parts of the river served as a means of communication, so that the inhabitants of the countries bordering its banks were as various in race, religion and language as the landscapes through which it passed. Peoples living only a few hundred miles apart were as ignorant of each other, therefore the river itself, as if they were separated by thousands of miles of ocean. Hence misconceptions about the river were as various as its peoples and as baffling as the river is long.

It was indeed the urge to resolve these riddles for the purpose of advancing European interests in the interior of Africa that subsequently led to the commissioning various European explorers to undertake the tedious task of Niger exploration.

Apart from the Niger Republic, the present Nigeria was coined from the name of the river in its wider territorial definition—“Niger Area.” Jeffreys offers us striking insights into the origin of the word “Nigeria” as it concerns its relationship with the Niger. Quoting Dr. Meek’s position which linked the origin of the word “Nigeria” to Flora Shaw, who later became Lady Lugard in consequence of her latter marriage to Lord Lugard, Jeffreys (1964, p. 443) stated:

The name ‘Nigeria’ first appeared in print, according to Dr. Meek (1960, 1,1), on 8 January, 1897: ‘it was the title of an article in our leading newspaper, written by Miss Flora Shaw, who at that time ‘did the colonies for the *Times*’ as Cecil Rhodes expressed it.’

But Jeffreys (1964, p. 443) was quick to counter this assertion by pointing out that as far back as 1862, W. Cole had in his work, *Life in the Niger* made clear reference to the word “Nigeria” when he wrote: “This is the general mode in which the Nigerians make known their loses”. In other words, it is reasonable to trace the first use of the word “Nigeria” to W. Cole in his book published in 1862 and not to Lady Lugard as it is popularly assumed in Nigerian academic and political circles.

The word “Niger” as a term describing the river came into use for millennia among European explorers, geographers and adventurers without those living along the course of the river being aware of it. It is believed as Kamm (1970, p. 11) noted that the first knowledge of the existence of the river came from the renowned Greek historian Herodotus who in about 460 BC while exploring the Nile was informed

of “a mighty river swarming with crocodiles, far away to the southwest of Egypt.” Herodotus however was not given the name of the mighty river. It was Ptolemy in his AD 150 map of Africa that indicated the identity of the river as “*Nigir*”, which was erroneously shown to be flowing westward.

Meek (1971, p. 61) however referred to it as Ptolemy’s “*Niyelp*”. Quoting de Cenival and Monod, Meek (1960, p. 448) stated that the first European reference to the river was 1506 by Valentim Fernandes who described it as River Ennyll by the fact that it was on its bank that Timbuktu was situated, but went further to again confuse it with what he referred to as River Çanaga which went also by the name “Ennyll”. But as Meek (1971, p. 61) further noted, both “Njer” and “Nijer” stand for river in Buduma language—an ethnic group found around the vicinity of Lake Chad. So, it is apparent that the name “Niger” might have been adapted from the Buduma term for river by the earliest explorers to the Lake Chad region such as Julius Maternus in A.D. 150 as a reference to the elusive great river (1971, p. 60).

THE SEARCH FOR THE NIGER AS THE PRECURSOR OF EUROPEAN SCRAMBLE AND PARTITION OF AFRICA

It is remarkable to note that the urge for the discovery and by extension the exploration of the elusive River Niger did not emerge from modern Europe until the urge for imperial expansion began. In other words, River Niger became a focus of international attention only when Western Europe decided to explore the interior of Black Africa for economic objectives. Indeed to Portugal goes the credit of being the precursor of the modern exploration of Africa with her intrepid and adventurous Prince Henry the Navigator as the major motivating force. Henry’s motivation appeared to have emerged during the Iberian siege of the last vestige of the Muslim Moors on the Peninsular at the Province of Grenada in the first half of the fifteenth century. In the further effort to cut off support for the besieged moors, Portugal had to occupy Ceuta in 1415 A. D. (Blake 1977, p. 1). It was indeed from Ceuta that the idea of exploration of Africa gained momentum following salivating Arab tales of abundance of gold in the interior Black Africa, of which the presence of such mighty African rivers as the Nile and Niger formed a part. As Blake (1977, p. 4) noted:

It was said that beyond the Sahara was a mighty river, the Western Nile, and on the south side of this dwelt a black race of people. The Arabs bought gold from these people, transported it by Caravan across the desert and sold it for distribution in Europe to Jewish merchants of the Island of Majorca.

Other European nations such as the English, French, Spain and the Dutch soon followed Portugal’s trails of exploration of the West Coast of Africa and beyond. As noted by Thomson (2016, pp. 20-21) in the following words:

Among the Christian nations thus awakening Portugal was taking the lead. Facing the Atlantic, it was ever looking over the wild waste of waters, picturing the possible beyond on the blank expanse, and rearing a hardy race of navigators all unconscious of the great mission that was yet to be theirs. Southward, too, their thoughts were ever turning, following their soldiers as they fought against the Moors and planted their most Christian flag along the entire coast-line of Morocco. Echoes there were which came to them of the vast wealth of Inner Africa, of the power of Prester John and the riches of far Cathay, till the imaginations of kings, soldiers, merchants, and priests were alike inflamed with a desire to share them. With it all the vaguest ideas were current as to the extent of the African continent.

Portuguese power on the sea had to later give way to the prided Elizabethan era of Great British dominance after her conquest by Spain when British explorers took over the realms of the high seas and became the masters of exploration, with such names as Drake, Raleigh, Baffin, Hudson, and Davis written on the golden plaque of honour as men of valour who laid the foundation of modern British imperial expansion. Their eventful escapades were however climaxed by Hawkins’ uneventful first voyage to the West Coast of Africa that subsequently inaugurated the British master-role in the infamous Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. But as Thomson noted, it was not Hawkins’ voyage in human cargo alone that attracted British attention to Black Africa; the quest for the discovery of the elusive River Niger was high on the agenda of their commercial interest. Thomson (2016, p. 24) further noted:

But it was not only the slave trade which drew the attention of English merchants to Africa. To them as to the Portuguese the Niger and Timbuktu were words to conjure with. Both were believed to be veritable mines of wealth. To the imagination of the time the one was pictured as flowing over golden sands, the other as almost paved with the precious metal. It was believed that the Senegal and the Gambia constituted the Niger mouths, and accordingly that to ascend either river would bring the traveler direct to the source of so much wealth. To accomplish this now became the dream of nations, so that it may well be said that the Niger and its fancied treasures were the magnet which drew men on to the exploration of the interior of the Dark Continent.

In advancing this commercial objective, a company was formed in 1618 with the task of exploring the Gambia River

with further extension to the region of the Niger. The first exploration in this regard was undertaken by Richard Thompson was nevertheless faced with the formidable impeding forces of an already entrenched hostile Portuguese. He eventually managed to outwit his European rivals only to fall victim to the perilous mutiny of his men (Thomson, 2016, pp. 25-26).

Richard Thompson was later succeeded by Richard Jobson who arrived at the Gambia in 1620 primarily at the head of reinforcement for Richard Thompson, only to be greeted with the sad news of his death. He thereafter under the engaging circumstance assumed command of a new expedition in which he made initial appreciable gains. As Thomson (2016, p. 29) noted:

On the 26th January 1621, Jobson had reached a place called Tenda, where he heard of a city four months' journey into the interior, the roofs of which were covered with gold. Unhappily, however much his appetite might be whetted by such wonderful stories, it had to remain unsatisfied. The dry season soon began to tell upon the volume of water in the river, making advance daily more difficult, till within a few days of a town called Tombaconda, some 300 miles from the sea, he was compelled to desist from further attempts, although he believed that Tombaconda was Timbuktu itself, in reality distant about 1000 miles. On the 10th February he commenced his return, hoping to go back and complete his work with the rising of the waters, a project he however never executed.

Unfortunately, the noble achievements Richard Jobson was cut short by the quarrel that broke out between the officials of the sponsoring company and the explorers which consequently suspended the project for the next one century (Thomson, 2016, p. 29). The interest was however rekindled in 1720 by the Duke of Chandos on assumption of office as the Chairman of the company who subsequently commissioned Captain Bartholomew Stibbs for a new Gambia exploration, which the latter undertook in 1723 but merely trailed the Thompson's exploratory route without getting to the highest point of his exploration. For the next half a century the urge to explore the interior Africa or search for the Niger seemed to have died a natural death. However, a new impetus towards this exploration venture was to arise in the last quarter of the 18th century.

As Loyd (1973, p. 13) noted, this impetus towards European exploration of interior African seems to have been fired by an article published in the second edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1778 in which the author questioned the wisdom of European neglect of nearby Black Africa in favour of far away West Indies and America in their quest for gold and silver while they could be

obtained in greater quantity at the former.

But the major factor on which the exploration of the Niger was founded was the rise of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain in the eighteenth century which made dependence on human labour in the new industries obsolete to a larger degree. In addition, not only were the industries dependent on raw materials, some of which were produced in Africa continent, there was equally the need for a thriving market for the finished products. In other words, Great Britain was searching for sales outlets for their finished products as much as she needed the raw materials for the industry.

This equally explains why both the idea of the exploration and its initial organization were the products of businessmen rather than the British Government. Even when the British Government eventually took over the business of the exploration, its organization was still undertaken at the behest of the merchants. Loyd (1973, pp. 9-10) noted:

The search for the Niger from the 1790's to the 1860's was a concerted international effort, inspired by the African Association, which was the predecessor of the Geographical Society and carried out by British, French and German travelers. Begun through the enthusiasm of Sir Joseph Banks, the search was then organised by Sir John Barrow and its results were followed up by philanthropists like Fowell Buxton and merchants like Macgregor Laird. Hopes that a trade in palm oil would replace the traffic in slaves were intensified by the demands of an expanding economy in search of new markets to which the Niger promised to serve as a highway.

Thus, with Joseph Banks' idea came the transformation of his Dinning Club to a more economically focused organization with specific aims and objectives. Thomson (2016, p. 32) noted:

To the African Association belongs the honour of inaugurating this new and more glorious era. Lord Rawdon, afterwards Marquis of Hastings, Sir Joseph Banks, the Bishop of Landaff, Mr. Beaufoy, and Mr. Stuart, were the first managers of this Association, whose objects were the promotion of discovery in Africa, and the spread of information, commercial, political, and scientific, regarding the still sadly unknown continent.

The crux of these objectives was made manifest by text embodying the inauguration of African Association on June 9, 1788 at Saint Albans Tavern in Pall Mall with the

following preamble-driven objective:

That, as no species of information is more ardently desired, or more generally useful, than that which improves the science of Geography; and as the vast continent of Africa, notwithstanding the efforts of the Ancients, and the wishes of the moderns, is still in a great measure unexplored, the Members of this club do form themselves into an Association for promoting the discovery of the Inland Parts of that Quarter of the World (Loyd, 1973, p. 26).

However, following Mungo Park's successful first journey that eventually revealed to the inquisitive Europe the nature and direction of the course of Niger, the British Government decided to engage Mr. Park on a second journey of exploration to conquer. Unlike the first travel which Park undertook as an innocent explorer, the second journey saw him as a British imperial adventurer.

In his submission to the British Colonial Secretary Lord Camden on the 4th of October 1804 on the major objectives of his exploration and how it would benefit the British Government and people, Park outlined two missions as his major objectives. First, as he put it in his words: "The objects which Mr. Park would constantly keep in view are, the extension of British Commerce, and the enlargement of our Geographical Knowledge" (Whishaw, 1805, p. 20). And second, still in his words: "Mr. Park would likewise turn his attention to the general fertility of the country, whether any part of it might be useful to Britain for colonization, and whether any objects of Natural History, with which the natives are at present unacquainted, might be useful to Britain as a commercial nation" (Whishaw, 1805, p. 21). This second mission accounted largely for the presence of British soldiers in his entourage during the second journey that consequently became ill-fated (Whishaw, 1805, p. 21).

Pioneer Niger explorers before Mungo Park

It should be noted that Mungo Park was not the first person to be engaged by the Association in their bid to open up the interior of Africa through the exploration of the Niger. Initially focusing their search-light through the Arab North African window, in which the Trans-Saharan Trade routes with their sprawling caravans and the Sudanic kingdoms were their major subjects of investigations, the Association soon re-directed their focus on the Niger (Thomson, 2015, p. 33).

The first traveler to be employed by the Association towards solving this age-long puzzle was Ledyard who attempted to cross the Africa Continent through the Nile to the Atlantic but died of fever in 1788. He was followed by the former British Vice-Consul to Morocco, Lucas who

made his attempt from Tripoli to cross the Sahara and then reach the Sudan. Unfortunately for Lucas, he was said to have abandoned the project because of a revolt of the Arab tribes. How far this was true no one could rightly ascertain. However, to satisfy the credulity of his sponsors, he was said to have deposited with them some relevant information regarding the interior of Africa. Horneman was to follow on the trails of Lucas the following year and was said to have presumably crossed the Sahara Desert but only to perish without trace in the process (Thomson, 2015, p. 34).

The Horneman debacle although created temporary stupor on the feasibility of the project on the part of the Association, particularly through the window of North Africa, it did not however deter their Spartan spirit in their bid to get to the end of their adventure. Thus, a resolve was taken to re-direct their root of adventure to the Coast of West Africa through the Gambia. The first man to take up the new task was Major Houghton who had served as a British Consul in Morocco and thus like Lucas was well acquainted with Moorish language and ways of life. He had also served at the Slave-transiting Island of Goree and became acquainted with aspects of Black African life. In 1791 he set out for the mission which was loaded with some laudable breakthroughs albeit destined to end in disaster. Perhaps it will be noteworthy to recast Thomson's account of Major Houghton's expedition and subsequent disaster in quite a little detail:

Generally, following the course of the river he safely reached Medina, the capital of Wuli, and was hospitably received by the king of the place. Less kind were the elements. A fire which [Pg 34] reduced the town to ashes deprived him of much of his goods. From Medina Houghton's route diverged from the Gambia, passing west to the Falemé, a southern tributary of the Senegal, and frontier line of the gold-bearing region of Bambuk. Here also he was received with hospitality, and was sent on his way through Bambuk rejoicing. Not to rejoice long, however. The last communication received from him contained these graphic lines: "Major Houghton's compliments to Dr. Laidley; is in good health, on his way to Timbuktu; robbed of all his goods by Fenda Bukar's son". No despair in these words, whatever calamities might have befallen the writer; no halting in the resolution to achieve his object—only the one unhesitating determination to go forward. But it was to go forward to die. In spite of Fenda Bukar's son, he seems still to have possessed sufficient means to rouse the unscrupulous cupidity of some Moors. Lured on by these wretches he was led into the desert, where he was stripped of everything

and left to a horrible death (Thomson, 2015, p. 35).

The news of the disastrous ending of Major Houghton was greeted with deep despair and resignation on the part of prospective adventurers who had the prior intention of seeking to be engaged by the Association. The question became mainly who would be the next explorer to die and not just to achieve the desired end. Many toxic tales began to emerge about the Continent of Africa. Thomson (2015, pp. 35-35) again theatrically noted:

Cannibalism, general blood thirstiness and ferocity, a love of plunder, and all manner of horrible practices, were associated with the name of negro. Death by thirst or starvation was thought likely to be the lot of those who escaped the miasma of the land or the murderous spear of the native. Brave indeed would be the man who should face such an accumulation of vaguely discerned and mightily exaggerated horrors.

As the concluding statement of the above quotation rightly put it, fate has a way of creating a man of valor out of the ashes of defeat. Thomson (2015, p. 36) again rightly put it thus:

At this crisis in their affairs, the man for the work was forthcoming one destined to crown their hopes with a triumphant success to inaugurate a more brilliant future for African travel, and give it such an impetus as would carry it on to a glorious issue. This was Mungo Park.

The emergence of Mungo Park and the Niger exploration

The emergence of Mungo Park on the terrain of exploration of the Niger although could not be said to be dramatic but eventually turned out to be the most memorable event in the history of exploration of the once elusive African river. Mungo Park although trained as a medical doctor had developed a passion for exploration before the Niger duty was committed to him. After his formal training as a surgeon at Edinburgh, he had relocated to London in search of greener pastures in 1791. Getting to London, he stayed with his brother-in-law named James Dickson who was a renowned botanist through whose intimate link with Sir Joseph Banks—Chairman of the African Association Park gained employment as an Assistant Surgeon on the voyage ship—*Worcester* East Indiaman and consequently made a voyage to Sumatra in 1792-93 where he collected rare botanical and zoological specimen.

It should be noted that before his employment with *Worcester* East Indiaman, Mungo Park had developed some appreciable interest in botanical collections through his brother-in-Law. Withers (2015, p. 1) as reported by Kate Kennedy pointed out:

In association with his brother-in-law James Dickson, the distinguished botanist, Park spent the summer of 1792 undertaking botanical excursions in the Highlands of Scotland. Dickson's connections with Joseph Banks, one of the most important patrons of late-Enlightenment science and exploration, led to Park securing the position of Assistant Surgeon on board the East Indian Company's ship the *Worcester*.

Park was to present the result of his expedition to Sumatra in the form of a public lecture to the Linnean Society which eventually made him an associate member of the Society in 1794. Becoming popular through his first voyage and with the advantage of his link with Sir Joseph Banks through his brother-in-law's intimacy, it was not therefore improbable that his commission as the new vanguard of the Niger exploration by the African Association would not be difficult. Thomson (2015, p. 46) noted:

The return of Park from his first voyage was the turning point in his career. At the moment there was a crisis in the affairs of the African Association. Everything they had attempted had ended disastrously, and news had just reached them of the sad death of Major Houghton. Should the task now be given up, or was it to be resumed with renewed zeal and ardour? There could be but one answer. The work begun must be continued. Surely in the end it must be crowned with success. Meantime, who was to take it up?

It was under these trying circumstances for the African Association that Park made himself available for the venture and was eventually commissioned. Park's instruction from the African Association was partly but fundamentally, as he put it in his words: "That I should ascertain the course, and, if possible, the rise and termination of the Niger" (Tait, 1957, p. 141). Thus Withers (2015, p. 2) pointed out, Park eventual began the journey for the final solution of the 2000 year-old riddle surrounding the source, course, and termination of the Niger.

In May 1795 Mungo Park set out on a journey to the most dreaded adventure of the era and eventually accomplished the most important unresolved dilemma of the Niger—the direction of the course of the Niger, which turned out to be eastwards against the trending opinions of the time. As he succinctly noted: "I saw with infinite pleasure the great object of my mission; the long sought for, majestic Niger,

glittering to the morning sun, as broad as the Thames at Westminster, and flowing slowly to the eastward". Withers (2015, p. 2) further noted:

His accounts of his travels are a mixture of personal adventure, commentaries on the trading networks of the region and ethnographic descriptions of the locals. He also describes how he is seen as an object of ethnographic wonder and regarded with suspicion by some, due to his Christian beliefs. Others simply refused to believe that a white man in Africa could be there simply to observe the course of a river. Indeed, Park was imprisoned and threatened with death on more than one occasion.

THE CHARACTER AND ROLES OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN IN THE EXPLORATION OF THE NIGER

Generally, the average African in his raw uncivilized carriage when free from the suspicion of danger has the overwhelming carriage of humane character with the women often exhaling deeper passion towards strangers. Francis Moore in his 1738 account as noted by Loyd (1973, p. 15) described the general character of the Africans towards the visiting Europeans in much friendly manner thus:

The behaviour of the Natives to strangers is not as disagreeable as people are apt to imagine; for when I went through any of their towns they almost all came to shake hands with me, except some of the women, who having never seen a White Man, ran away from me as fast as they could.

Indeed as Loyd (1973, p. 15) further noted, "Mungo Park was to owe his life on many occasions to the friendliness of such Negroes, whom the tawny moors of the north regarded as belonging to an inferior race...."

Apart from the factor of providence, a number of other factors accounted for Park's survival during his first exploration, most striking being the benevolence of the African women under inauspicious circumstances. The memorable roles of the African woman were well noted in his statue at Selkirkshire, Scotland which was unveiled in 1859. Tait (1957, p. 140) had noted, around the imposing edifice of the intrepid explorer stands bronze statues of Africans represented by a mother and her child, a musician, a slave girl, and the sensational Mumbo Jumbo.

For Park however, the most significant aspect of these acts of benevolence is that the women often appeared as the lifeline when the men failed and it appeared there was no further hope of survival. Kamm (1970, p. 47) evidently noted, "Death was never very far away. But for the

kindness of the women, he would probably have died of starvation if he had not been murdered". But it is not enough to state the significant roles women played in the survival of Park without looking at the underlining cultural milieu under which the African woman operated that distinguished her from her European counterpart.

Ogundipe-Leslieher (1987, p. 6) in her sublime definition of the concept of the African woman states with a profound sense of meaning: "There is the figure of the 'sweet mother', the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice. This figure is often conflated with Mother Africa, with eternal and abstract beauty and with inspiration, artistic or otherwise....". Ogundipe-Leslieher (1987, p. 6) went further to associate the African woman with a love founded on loyalty, care, kindness, and nurturing. All these four illustrations seem to be reflected on the supporting figures of an African slave girl and a mother with her child to Mungo Park's memorial statue at his home-base. They further underscore the kind of experience Park had in the course of his first expedition with the African women.

Although the third statue—the figure of Mumbo Jumbo might be at variance with the thesis of Mother-Africa when judged in the context of the strange reactions of the women to the plight of their kind, the point however stands that exceptions abound in every circumstance especially where it has to do with instruments of social control. In the words of Thomson (2016, 58):

In every village a masquerading dress is kept for the use of Mumbo Jumbo, a mysterious person whose business it is to seek out and punish wayward wives. When a husband finds matters becoming too hot for him in his household, he secretly possesses himself of this dress and disappears into the woods.

The first close personal encounter Park had with women was at Fatticonda, the capital of the Kingdom of Bondou. After formal visit to King Almami, he was re-invited the following day at the behest of the king's wives to satisfy their curiosity. Thomson (2016, p. 64) noted that it was an occasion of fun for both Park and the women who most profoundly admired Park's Caucasian features with great inquisitiveness, while Park on the other hand returned their admirations with strong doses of romantic complements that partly seemed have subdued his travails for the moment and invariably created immunity for him against possible plunder.

The next encounter came this time at a most inauspicious situation after he was plundered by some marauding horsemen at the village of Joag who came in the name of the King and there was nothing to eat. At this point it was an old slave woman that came to his rescue when he and his companions were dying of hunger. As Thomson (2016, p. 69) narrated:

Towards evening an old female slave passed

by with a basket on her head, and struck by his woe-begone, famished look, she asked him if he had had his dinner. Thinking she spoke in jest; he did not reply. Not so his boy Demba, who volubly, and with the eloquence of suffering, told the story of their misfortunes and their needs. In a moment the old woman had her basket on the ground, and a plentiful supply of ground-nuts was placed in their hands, the donor thereafter marching away without waiting for a word of thanks.

Park's next encounter which was riddled with danger was on the forceful invitation of the king of Ludamar, Ali at the request of Fatima his favourable wife. On arriving at his camp at Benaun Park was subjected to a dose of humiliating treatment by the king's son before being presented to him. At the King's presence Park once again became an object of curiosity by the people, and was physically examined by the king's wives to ascertain his humanity (Thomson, 2016, p. 84). When Fatima, the king's favoured wife on whose request Park was brought back, his sufferings appeared to have diminished a little, Fatima was said to have offered him a bowl of milk. As Thomson (2016, 91) noted, "At first Fatima affected to be shocked at Park's appearance, but showed that she had a woman's heart by presenting him with a bowl of milk. Later on, she proved to be his best friend". Fatima once again came to his rescue at the height of drought when it was impossible for them get water from the well by occasionally supplying him with water (Thomson, 2016, p. 91). The climax of Fatima's favour came when she persuaded her husband to allow Park join an expedition to Jarra in support of some rebellious Kaartans as a way of facilitating his escape. She followed this magnanimity with the return of his clothes and horse (Thomson, 2016, pp. 92-93). Thus, through the benevolence of Fatima, Park recovered much of his valuables confiscated by Ali and his son.

Park's next encounter after Fatima's experience was at Fula village under the control of the dreaded Ali—Fatima's husband. Before getting to this stage he had endured insurmountable sufferings ranging from plunder by armed bandits, lack of water to hunger without either the means to purchase or the opportunity to come across with only his equally tired and starving horse and perhaps his determined stunt to succeed in his objective as his companions. On getting to the village with the hope of getting humanitarian attention, he was again snubbed by the headman of the village. As Thomson (2016, p. 104) pointed out in these solemn lines, "On his applying at the head man's house, the door was slammed in his face, and his appeals for food were unheeded. Dejectedly he turned his horse's head, seeing nothing before him but death in the woods". But as Providence would have it and had always done it for him in previous circumstances, a Mother-Africa life-line appeared immediately and provided him with the most desired succour. As Thomson (2016, p.

104) once again noted in his melancholy style:

Dejectedly, he turned his horse's head, seeing nothing before him but death in the woods. As he was leaving the village, he remarked some mean dwellings. Might he not make another trial. Hospitality he remembered did not always prefer the dwellings of the rich. Prompted by the thought he advanced towards an old woman spinning cotton in front of her hut. By signs he indicated that he wanted food, leaving his haggard face and sunken eyes to tell the rest. Nor did he appeal in vain. The hut was opened to him, and such food as its owner could give was placed in his hands.

Indeed, this was the last port of suffering and deprivation before Park entered the territory of the Bambarra kingdom and its Capital city—Segu which stood on the two banks of the elusive Niger. There he saw the Niger flowing towards the east thereby crowning his Spartan efforts and undaunted sufferings and deprivations. Although curious about seeing a strange figure among them as ever, the idea of physical molestation by the people was no longer the issue with Park as the people were more of scared of his presence among them than the intention to harm him.

Park however met a temporary set-back when the Bambarra King—Mansong refused him permission to see him possibly acting at the behest of the ever hostile and suspicious Moors until he found the reason behind Park's long-suffering exploratory presence in his territory. Park was thereafter directed to lodge in a nearby village while awaiting the permission of the king. However, against his grounded opinion of Bambarra, on getting to the village he was shut out of accommodation, not possibly out of hostility as borne by the Moors and Fula he encountered in his tortuous journey to Bambarra kingdom but out of fear founded on superstition. Consequently, he was abandoned with no one willing to come to his aid for both food and shelter, particularly in a territory so infested with myriad of hyenas and lions prowling for victims of their dinner.

As the deadly night approached and Park, hungry and tired in his habitual form began to conceive the plan of climbing a tree to seek a haven on the branches against the prowling beasts and unprecedented in what appeared as a re-enactment of succeeding divine kindness driven by the sublime succour of Mother-Africa, more memorable than the previous ones occurred. Indeed Thomson's poetic although pathetic description of Park's dilemma at this point and the Mother-Africa episode that followed is worth quoting at length:

Thus, shunned and boycotted as a human pariah, and not knowing where to go to seek shelter, Park sat down under a tree, which at

least protected him from the overpowering glare of the sun. Hour after hour passed, and still no one offered him food or lodging. The day drew to a close. The wind rose and clouds gathered threateningly in the sky. Everything portended a night of storm. The sun fell, and still he sat unheeded. Darkness began to gather round him with tropical swiftness, and he lost all hope of moving the compassion of the natives by his forlorn and helpless condition. To escape death from lions and hyenas, he prepared to ensconce himself among the branches of the tree. Before doing so he proceeded to take off the bridle and saddle from his horse, that it might have greater freedom and ease in grazing. While thus engaged a woman returning from her work in the fields passed him. It required no words to tell her the stranger's plight. His dress and face spoke eloquently of weariness, destitution, hunger, and dejection. The negress stopped to ask his story. A few words told all that was necessary to move her woman's heart, and without further questioning she picked up his saddle and bridle and bade him follow her to her hut. There she lighted a lamp and spread out a mat for her guest (Thomson, 2016, p. 110).

Not only was he served a sumptuous dinner of fresh fish, Park like a distressed "Baby-Africa" which he turned out to be at that moment, was greeted with a lullaby that evidently revealed the height of African hospitality woven in the sublime spirit of motherhood to sooth his agony and tired frame for a relaxing sleep. Thus, as the song goes:

*The winds roared and the rains fell,
The poor white man sat under our tree;
He has no mother to bring him milk,
No wife to grind his corn.*

*Chorus—
Let us pity the white man,
No mother has he.
Let us pity the white man,
No mother has he* (Thomson, 2016, pp. 111-112).

The wordings of the song were not only woven in the deepest sympathy of the moment ever to be encountered by Park throughout the course of his journey of destiny but revealed in its philosophical meaning the depth of the essence and meaning of what feminism in original African sense stands for—motherhood without the engaging adulteration of gender competition and conflict as modern thesis tends to enunciate.

Motherhood in traditional African sense is gender blind since out of motherhood sprouted both daughter and son.

In the wordings of the song there was no mention of fatherhood but mother and wife both of which represent the same contextual term, for one has to be a wife before being a mother in traditional African sense, since childhood outside wedlock was an anathema before the people. As the Igbo of Southern Nigeria often say, *NneKa*—Mother is supreme.

The power of African motherhood was again re-enacted in the course of his return journey after the King of Bambarra had pronounced him a spy and ordered that no one among his citizens should provide him assistance of any kind. It took the kindly intervention of women to provide him a temporary relief at that moment of his destitution. As noted by Thomson in the following words:

This unpleasantly altered state of matters was further illustrated when arriving next day at Kabba, he was met outside the town by a party of negroes, who seized his horse's bridle, and in spite of his remonstrances, conducted him round the walls, and ordered him to continue his way lest worse should befall him. A few miles further on he reached a small village, but found no better reception. On his attempting to enter, the head man seized a stick and threatened to knock him down if he moved another step. There was nothing he could do except to proceed to another village, where happily some women were moved to compassion by his destitute appearance, and contrived to get him a night's lodging (Thomson, 2016, p. 125).

The above encounter became Park's experience with the benevolent spirit of Mother-Africa before his eventual return to Gambia River and thence back home to England for a tumultuous welcome for a well accomplished adventure that subsequently set the pace for European scramble and partition of the Africa Continent.

CONCLUSION

Mungo Park's experience of the marked hospitality of the African woman in the sea of masculine hostility clearly explains the root meaning of feminism in Black Africa and its inherent power, even though latent and to some extent unsung, yet sublime in its essence and meaning. Going through the myriad of his encounters with women on his way, it is obvious that without their eventful interventions at Park's inauspicious moments, his objectives might not have been accomplished, for at every point of their intervention next stood the danger of imminent death. So it is not out of place to state that without the accomplished intervention of the women, the objectives that Park set out to achieve could not have been achieved, and the subsequent progress on the exploration of the Niger made

with as much ease as it came be with the success of Park's mission.

It is important to point out that Park's experience in this aspect of encounter in the history of European exploration and subsequent colonization of Africa is not an isolated instance. A lot of outstanding roles of the African women towards the realization of European objectives in Africa have been put under the carpet of history for the reason of what could possibly be defined as the patriarchal mentality of European historians not the least subsequently adopted by succeeding historians of African extraction. But to be fair to Mungo Park, he was not the least oblivious of the fundamental roles the African woman played in his survival in the course of his first expedition to the Niger hence his copious records of every such encounter and episode. This could equally explain why all the supporting statues to his memorial concerned the story of the African woman both from the point of the benevolent motherhood and that of the gains of obedience as represented by Karfa's slave-girl Neali, although Neali eventually died, and pains of disobedience as portrayed by the Mumbo Jumbo.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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