

# AN ENCOUNTER IN AFRICA

## European Perspective

*After Henry M. Stanley found Dr. Livingstone in Africa, he returned to take up the challenge of unexplored Africa. On the east coast of Africa, he employed a large party of bearers and determined to follow to the sea the Lualaba River. Only as he reached the sea did he realize it was in fact the Congo. Over the long course of the river, Stanley reported meeting several groups of aggressive Africans. One such encounter is recorded below.*

At 2 pm, ... we emerge out of the shelter of the deeply wooded banks in the presence of a vast tributary, nearly 2000 yards across at the mouth. As soon as we have fairly entered its waters, we see a great concourse of canoes hovering about some islets, which stud the middle of the stream. The canoe-men, standing up, give a loud shot as they discern us, and blow their horns ever louder. We pull briskly on to gain the right bank, and come in view of the right bank, when looking up stream, we see a sight that sends the blood tingling through every nerve and fibre of the body, a flotilla of gigantic canoes bearing down upon us, which both in size and numbers utterly eclipse anything encountered hitherto! Instead of aiming for the right bank, we form in line and keep straight down the river. Yet after a moment's reflection, as I note the number of the savages, and the daring manner of pursuit, and the apparent desire of our canoes to abandon the steady compact line, I give the order to drop anchor...

We have sufficient time to take a view of the mighty force bearing down on us, and to count the number of the war-vessels, which have been collected from the river. There are fifty-four of them! A monster canoe leads the way, with two rows of upstanding paddles, forty men on a side, their bodies bending and swaying in unison as with a swelling barbarous chorus they drive down towards us. In the bow, standing on what appears to be a platform, are ten prime young warriors, their heads gay with feathers of the parrot crimson and grey: at the stern, eight men, with long paddles, whose tops are decorated with ivory balls, guide the monster vessel; and dancing up and down from stem to stern are ten men, who appear to be chiefs. The crashing sound of large drums, a hundred blasts from ivory horns, and a thrilling chant from two thousand human throats, do not tend to soothe our nerves or increase our confidence. However, it is 'neck or nothing.' We have no time to pray, or to take sentimental looks at the savage world, or even to breathe a sad farewell to it. So many other things have to be done speedily and well.

As the foremost canoe comes rushing down, and it consorts on either side beating the water into foam, and raising their jets of water with their sharp prows, I turn to take a last look at our people, and say to them, "Boys, be firm as iron; wait until you see the first spear, and then take good aim. Don't fire all at once. Keeping aiming until you are sure of your man. Don't think of running away for only your guns can save you."

The monster canoe aims straight for my boat, as though it would run us down; but within fifty yards off, swerves aside, and, went nearly opposite, the warriors above the manned prow let fly their spears, and on either side there is a noise of rushing bodies. But every sound is soon lost in the ripping, crackling musketry. For five minutes we are so absorbed in firing that we take no note of anything else; but at the end of that time we are made aware that the enemy is reforming about 200 yards above us.

Our blood is up now. It is a murderous world, and we feel for the first time that we hate the filthy, vulturous ghouls who inhabit it. We therefore lift our anchors and pursue them upstream, until rounding a point we see their village. We make straight for the banks, and continue the fight in the village streets with those who have landed, hunt them into the woods, and there only sound the retreat, having returned the daring cannibals the compliment of a visit.

Henry M. Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1878), II  
Pages 269 – 272.

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## African Perspective

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About thirty years after Henry M. Stanley's trip down the Congo River, Father Joseph Frassle came as a missionary to the Basoko people of the lower Aruwimi River. Here he met the old chief, Mojimba, who had led his people in their first meeting with Europeans. The following is Chief Mojimba's story as he told it to Father Frassle:

"When we heard that the man with the white flesh was journeying down the Lualaba we were open-mouthed with astonishment. We stood still. All night long the drums announced the strange news – a man with white flesh! That man, we said to ourselves, has a white skin. He must have got that from the river kingdom. He will be one of our brothers who were drowned in the river. All life comes from the water, and in the water he has found life. Now he is coming back to us, he is coming home.

We will prepare a feast, I ordered, we will go to meet our brother and escort him into the village with rejoicing! We donned our ceremonial garb. We assembled the great canoes. We listened for the gong which would announce our brother's presence on the Lualaba. Presently the cry was heard: He is approaching the Lohali! Now he enters the river! Hallo! We swept forward, my canoe leading, the others following, with songs of joy and with dancing, to meet the first white man our eyes had beheld, and to do him honor.

But as we drew near his canoes there were loud reports, bang! Bang! And fire-staves spat bits of iron at us. We were paralyzed with fright; our mouths hung wide open and we could not shut them. Things such as we had never seen, never heard of, never dreamed of – they were the work of evil spirits! Several of my men plunged into the water – What for? Did they fly to safety? No – for others fell down also, in the canoes. Some screamed dreadfully, others were silent – they were dead, and blood flowed from little holes in their bodies. 'War! That is war!' I yelled. 'Go back!' The canoes sped back to our village with all the strength our spirits could impart in our arms.

That was no brother! That was the worst enemy that our country had ever seen.

And still those bangs went on; the long staves spat fire, flying pieces of iron whistled around us, fell into the water with a hissing sound, and our brothers continued to fall. We fled into our village – they came after us. We fled into the forest and flung ourselves on the ground. When we returned that evening our eyes beheld fearful things: our brothers lying dead, dying, bleeding, our village plundered and burned, and water full of dead bodies. The robbers and murderers had disappeared.

Now tell me: has the white man dealt fairly by us? O, do not speak to me of him! You call us wicked men, but you white men are much more wicked! You think, because you have guns you can take away our land and our possessions. You have sickness in your heads, for that is not justice."

Father Frassle added that this kind of ceremonial meeting of a person, such as Stanley experienced, was still in common usage in his time and that he had often been honored in that way.

Joseph Frassle, quoted in Heinrich Schiffrers, *The Quest for Africa* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), pages 196 – 197.