

CHARLES BARTER: BOTANIST ON THE 1857 NIGER EXPEDITION

F. Nigel Hepper

25A Montague Road, Richmond TW10 6QW

When the sailing steamer *Dayspring* (Fig.1) left Liverpool under Captain Alexander Grant on 7 May 1857, she carried the '1857 Niger Expedition' to West Africa. One of the expedition members was Charles Barter who was the botanist/naturalist. He had trained as a gardener at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew 1849-1851, hence in 1857 he would have been known to the Director, Professor Sir William Hooker who evidently recommended Barter for the Expedition. Barter, who was born about 1830, was then working in the Royal Botanic Society's Botanic Gardens in Regents Park, London, and he wrote on 25 March 1857 to thank Hooker for his assistance and to say that he was leaving the next day to join the expedition at Plymouth.¹

This 1857 Niger Expedition was one of several sponsored by the British government to survey the River Niger in order to open it up for peaceful trade by negotiation, not by conquest. The 1833 expedition was led by Macgregor Laird when only nine of the original 48 members returned alive; and the next one in 1841 under Captain Trotter, had to turn back at Egga as they were weakened by disease—including the botanist Theodore Vogel who suffered from malaria and succumbed when they returned to Fernando Po (Allen 1848). But by 1854 when Dr. William B. Baikie R.N. headed the *Pleiad* up the Niger, they stayed 118 days without loss of life due to the availability of quinine (Baikie 1856).

So the prospects for the *Dayspring* were good. As well as Charles Barter, there was the same Dr. Baikie who was the scientific head; the surveyor, Lieut. John Harvey Glover, who was also to collect African bird skins for the British Museum (Natural History) as he was a good shot; Drs Berwick and Davis were surgeons; MacIntosh was second in command and Mr Rees the first mate. Others seem to have come and gone during the expedition; and there was also a crew of ten. The ship was only 23.2m(76ft 3ins) long with a beam of 6.7m (22 ft) and was built in Birkenhead by Macgregor Laird. They set out from Liverpool on 7 May and although the *Dayspring* had a 30 horse power steam engine its sails had to be used all the way out, reserving the engine and coal for the upstream leg of the expedition. Six kroomen (krumen) joined in West Africa, and two African missionaries² at Fernando Po,

¹It is difficult to reconcile the date and place, 26 March and Plymouth, when the *Dayspring* left Liverpool on 7 May 1857

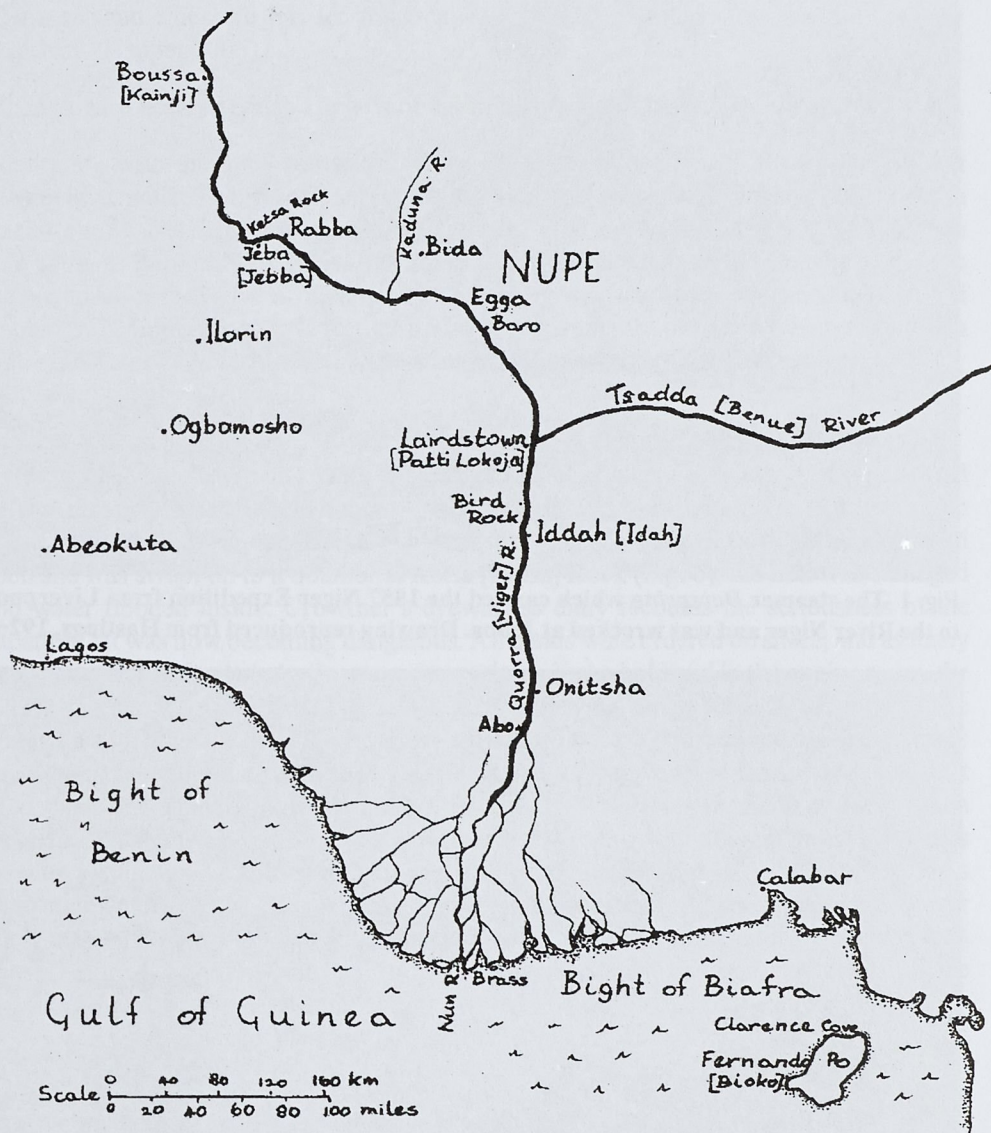
²The African missionaries were Rev. Samuel Crowther and Rev. J.C. Taylor. Crowther was a released child slave of Yoruba origin who was brought to England in 1841 aged 33. As

which must have made the 78 gross tonne (77 ton) vessel very crowded.

From Clarence Cove in Fernando Po [now Bioko] Barter wrote to Hooker sending a Wardian case containing living plants he had collected. He complained (as we all do) about the difficulty of drying plants for herbarium specimens in the humid atmosphere and "books are covered with mildew". The ship set out on 27 June for Brass in the Delta where they spent twelve laborious days in the Nun branch of the Niger. Barter wrote an interesting description of the forest vegetation he encountered there (letter 45). The schooner *George* was lashed to the side of *Dayspring* and later it was towed to reduce the drag. Once past the Delta with its multitude of creeks they were heading up the great Niger itself and continued upstream. Locally this river was known as the Quorra or Kowara and it is the boundary between the Yoruba and Ibo peoples - numerous smaller tribes inhabit the Delta. By 21 July they had reached Abo[h] and Barter went ashore to visit Aje and Tshukuma. At Onitsha he heeled in living plants he had brought from Sierra Leone and Fernando Po until they could be planted properly. Further north Barter climbed Bird Rock.

They reached the confluence of the Niger and Benue some 400 km (250 miles) from the coast. They anchored for three weeks opposite Lokoja, then called Lairdstown after MacGregor Laird who had reached the confluence and sailed up the Benue during the 1833 expedition. This time Captain Grant took the *George* up the Benue (or Tsadda/Chadda) to trade, leaving MacIntosh in charge of the *Dayspring*. On 2 September Barter accompanied Crowther, Glover and Davis and climbed up Elphinstone Fleming Mountain (probably Patti Lokoja), where they rejoiced in the cooling breeze and looked down to the river hundreds of feet below (Fig. 2). Glover is recorded as having shot pelicans, cranes and egrets there. On a later visit Barter collected many plants on Patti and dried them as herbarium specimens. Other botanists followed him, making Patti a famous locality not only for its view but for its natural history. I was looking forward to climbing it during my visit on 14 November 1969 when I was travelling on an SRN6 hovercraft downstream from Bacita and

a keen Christian who "displayed many excellent qualities" he studied at the Church Missionary Society's institute in Islington. He was ordained by the Bishop of London. He went to the Niger as a member of the 1854 expedition and his journal was published, as was that of the 1857 expedition, to which I am indebted for much information. Crowther became the Bishop of Niger Territories in 1864 and is still honoured as the first Nigerian to be ordained; he died on 31 December 1891 and much later the CMS College in Edgbaston was named after him (see A.F. Mockler-Ferryman, *British Nigeria*, pp.273-5, 1902; Jesse Page, *The first black bishop*, 1908; and the archives of the University of Birmingham Library). Rev. J.C. Taylor was also a returned slave, from Sierra Leone of Ibo origin, who left the *Dayspring* at Onitsha to found a CMS Mission there. Crowther founded a CMS school in Lokoja in 1885.



MAP of Nigeria showing some of the places mentioned in the text, with modern equivalents in brackets.

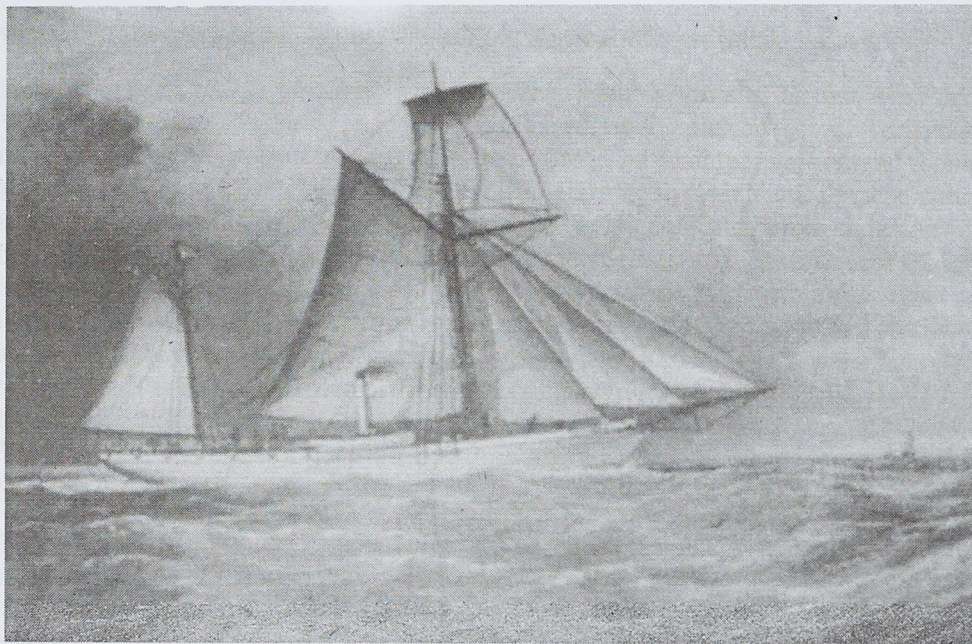


Fig. 1 The steamer *Dayspring* which carried the 1857 Niger Expedition from Liverpool to the River Niger and was wrecked at Jebba. Drawing reproduced from Hastings, 1926.



Fig. 2 View of the confluence of the Niger and the Benue from the top of Patti Lokoja. Photo. from Hastings, 1926

Baro.³ However, unfortunately our Trans-African Hovercraft Expedition arrived late in the afternoon, and since we left for the Benue early next morning there was no time for fieldwork (Hepper 2005).

When Lugard became British High Commissioner he made Lokoja his capital, 1900-1902.

Continuing with the 1857 narrative, on 14 September there was a friendly meeting at Wuyaji town where Dasaba offered protection and trade, as well as permission for Christian teaching as far as Rabba. The expedition members were invited to Bida where Usman Zaiki held court as Emir of Nupe. Beyond Muregi where the Kaduna River meets the Niger was the boundary of the Nupe Kingdom. The *Dayspring* continued upstream and anchored off Rabba on 22 September, only to find that it was in ruins following war between Usman Zaiki and his rival Masaba, who later succeeded him and ruled for fourteen years.

The wrecking of the *Dayspring*

By 7 October the *Dayspring* had reached Jeba [Jebba] where they met rocky islets and several passages in the river. They were welcomed by villagers in numerous canoes which came alongside the steamer. The current was so strong she made little or no headway and soon she was swept on to a boulder at Ketsa [Katsa] Rock (Fig. 6), the hull was damaged and water flooded inside. Crowther's eyewitness diary recounts the seriousness of the situation: "It was now becoming dangerous. All hands were ordered on shore, and as many things as could be landed. As the water was gaining in the hold and in the engine room, the steam was blown off, and the boiler discharged. Having but two boats, the gig and the dinghy, we would have been in very great difficulties had we not received ready assistance from the native canoes alongside and about us. All the people were landed on the nearest sandbanks, just showing out of the fall of the river, with as many things as could be taken out. A better footing being desired, Dr Baikie and Mr May went to look for one. Towards evening we removed on shore and cleared a piece of land of grass, where temporary tents were made for the night. The canoes helped in landing the things till evening. Lieut. Glover and Captain MacIntosh remained last aboard, but as the ship continued to keel and take in water through her portholes, it was not safe for anyone to remain on board over-night as she was expected to go down before daylight. We were thankful that in the midst of the hurry and bustle which unavoidably must take place on such an occasion as this, no life was lost."

After an uncomfortable, rainy night in the open, daylight revealed that the stern of the ship was still visible and a few more things were recovered. Even the sails were rescued and cut up to make tents which were erected on higher ground to avoid flooding. On 12 October

³Baro, according to Professor Ronald Harrison-Church who was on the hovercraft with me, was the terminus for the railway built by Lugard. The sleepers were known as bars and the last sleeper on the river bank was bar nought, or bar-0!

all hope of retrieving anything else from the wreck was lost and the *Dayspring* was abandoned.

Here I would like to interpose another personal recollection - this time during my first visit to Nigeria in 1957. In October Ronald Keay of Forest Research, who had been my botanical mentor at Kew, took me by car (Fig. 3) from Ibadan to Bida and beyond. We reached Jebba and in my diary I note: "We got a view for miles over the Niger valley into the distance and soon the great wide river came into view...(Fig. 4) Up on to the railway line and with wheels astride track on metal plates laid over sleepers we crossed Niger on to Jebba Island and into Niger Province." I had heard about this marvellous road/rail bridge (Fig. 5), but until I arrived I had no idea that one had to drive up a steep earth bank, look both ways to make sure no train was coming, before setting off for the other side. In my diary I then commented: "Great event as it is the centenary of 1857 Niger Expedition this year when Barter collected extensively around Jebba after their ship foundered there" by Ketsa Rock (Fig.6). Remarkably, I now find that my diary entry is dated "7 October 1957"— the actual centenary of 7 October 1857 when the *Dayspring* was holed! Relics of *Dayspring* are - or were - displayed at Jebba railway station. Some of the plants I collected in 1957 were the same as those Barter found in 1857. We still had to drive many miles to Bida, which is where Barter and the others had travelled on foot to see the Emir. Our journey was not without incident since the Kaduna River had flooded the adjacent land, but thankfully we caught the last ferry for some days. Having reached the Bida side we were struck by a sudden wind that felled trees across the road behind us, and the torrential rain nearly flooded the road in front of us before we gained the catering rest-house. Someone returned to the fallen tree to rescue the occupants of the marooned car. The next time I reached the Jebba bridge I was on the SRN6 hovercraft and we were escorted by a military vessel because the Biafran war was on in 1969 and the bridge was heavily defended. We passed under the lesser section to be near our re-fuelling dump.

Returning to Barter and colleagues in their emergency camp at Jebba, what were they going to do? They had lost their stores of salt pork, dried beef, ships biscuits, tea, sugar and other supplies, so the local people, realising that the crew were short of food, set up a vegetable market beside the camp. These and other services had to be paid for with cowrie shells rescued from the ship. Fortunately, Crowther had also rescued the journal he had kept daily since departure from Fernando Po. Several papers had been lost in the wreck, but he had transcribed his journals from his notebook into his diary which had been safely preserved in his little black bag. The hope was that the steamer *Sunbeam*, which was due to follow the *Dayspring* upstream, could be contacted with the disastrous news and continue its journey to rescue them at Jebba. Little did they know that for over a year they were going to have to stay in that impromptu camp!



Fig. 3 Nigel Hepper collecting plants beside the Ilorin to Jebba road. Photo by Ronald Keay, 7 Oct, 1957.



Fig. 4 A village near Jebba on the south bank of the Niger. Photo. by F.N.Hepper, 7-10-57 camp life in Nupe Country

As usual in such unplanned situations, those caught up in it get on with life, making the best of the opportunities presented. But this was a blank page for the Europeans who found none of their customary substructure of government, nor lines of communication such as roads. Yet remarkably within a few weeks they were sending off letters to England and in due course receiving replies. Post had to be taken by a European on foot to Lagos as the emir of Ilorin was on poor terms with his neighbours and only trusted the British. There was a consul at Lagos with ready access to ships for Sierra Leone, which is how Barter's letters to Sir William Hooker at Kew got through to England. News of the wreck had reached a Baptist missionary, Rev. Clark at Ogbomosho who turned up at camp on 10 December with donations of sugar, tea and coffee, as well as newspapers which told of the Indian Mutiny! He decided to bring the supplies himself to ensure their arrival, and he left with more letters for England. Soon afterwards a Mr Campbell at Abeokuta sent further supplies.

Meanwhile, the kroomen were almost mutinous at their conditions and bleak prospects, but the expedition members set about studying the environs of their new home. In the wreck Barter had lost many of the rain forest specimens which he could not replace as he was now in savanna country where he made a large new collection.⁴

On 1 November Barter, with Glover and Crowther, crossed the river by boat to Dorofu on the island opposite Katsa (Ketsa) Peak. On another occasion (16 November) Glover and Barter decided to go upstream as far as the current would allow. Although he mounted a major expedition, progress was slow as they met rapids after rapids before reaching Wuru or Awuru. Glover remarked on the 'crown birds' (crowned cranes); 'convolvulus' (*Ipomoea*) and 'flowering tobacco' (*Nicotiana*) which were surely collected by Barter who is said by Glover to be "filling his box with herbs and flowers". They continued on horseback to Faku and Potishee Island. At each stopping place they were closely watched by jealous locals. Glover wrote that "Barter was prevented from collecting extensive specimens, but I battled it out with the king and on condition that he did not strip the bark from the trees which were sacred, he was allowed to continue his pursuits, altho' most strictly watched". They accused Barter of taking plants home to make charms against them. Glover continued with his surveys and map-making in spite of his frequent illnesses.

Having visited Wasa on 10 December Glover was keen to get to Boussa where Mungo Park had perished. They were very short of funds so Barter even sold a knife for cowrie shells before he returned to Wuru because of illness. Glover, however, with 15 kroomen and others pressed on to Boussa where they remained for four days. Unfortunately, Glover

⁴Each sheet of his whole collection was numbered from 1 to 3444, with the 2000 series written as 20000. These are housed in Kew Herbarium with many duplicates in other herbaria in Europe and America. Most have small labels in Barter's hand. The most frequent localities are "Nupe country" and "Jeba".

discovered nothing more about Park's fate and he returned to Jebba camp on 5 January 1859, after 52 days absence. Even so, Glover and Howard made a second visit to Boussa. Later Howard died of dysentery.

Camp life was monotonous but it had its exciting moments. Each night the members kept a two-hour watch in turn and one night during Barter's vigil, pandemonium aroused the sleeping members when a leopard boldly took away a goat kid. The next night it returned and tried to kill a pregnant female goat which was so gashed it had to have its throat cut to put it out of pain. On the third night all members were armed to the teeth hoping to despatch the beast – which did not appear, much to their chagrin.

By the end of 1858 no news of the *Sunbeam* had reached the camp where Christmas Day and the New Year were celebrated in as traditional a British fashion as possible. By 26 January camp life was again becoming monotonous so Crowther, Barter and MacIntosh revisited Rabba where they were surprised to see a large market in spite of the ruins. Rabba was also a crossing point for caravans travelling north or south with some 3000 people and 1000 head of cattle, horses, donkeys, mules and bullocks using 41 large canoes to transport them. At the nearby village of Bere, Crowther writes that "Barter collected some natural curiosities"; then at Mbele he is said to have cut down a tall fan-palm to get sections as specimens - at Kew there are various specimens of *Borassus aethiopicum* which may be from this collection.

Months passed and the various messengers sent to the confluence to find out about the *Sunbeam* returned with disappointing news that it would not be able to come until the level of the river rose as the vessel's draught was nearly 3m (9 ft.) Worse still were the occasional false messengers who raised the members' hopes for nothing but a reward. On 3 April Barter left the camp with MacIntosh to visit the confluence some 380km (200 miles) downstream. They found the depot ('factory') in the town centre in a deplorable state as it had been burnt down and all the provisions left by the *Dayspring* destroyed. Then astonishingly they continued another 160km (100 miles) downstream to Onitsha where Rev. Taylor was at the Mission and "all looks very promising", he wrote to Hooker. Then they were faced with the problem of returning to their Jebba encampment. The voyage was difficult as the river had fallen very low and often they had to drag the canoes over extensive shoals. This meant they were drenched to the skin and had to sleep in wet clothes. Nevertheless, in spite of travelling some "1000 miles (by Barter's reckoning) in an open boat" on that trip of seven weeks duration he remained healthy and strong and collected 120 specimens. Unfortunately, the other members in camp suffered various illnesses, and Hewitt died, leaving only five Europeans. The first rain for six months fell on 20 April, although the river did not rise significantly until early July when again their hopes were raised that they would soon see the steamer. However, it was another month before there



Fig. 5 The old rail/road bridge across the Niger at Jebba. Photo. by F.N.Hepper, 7-10-57

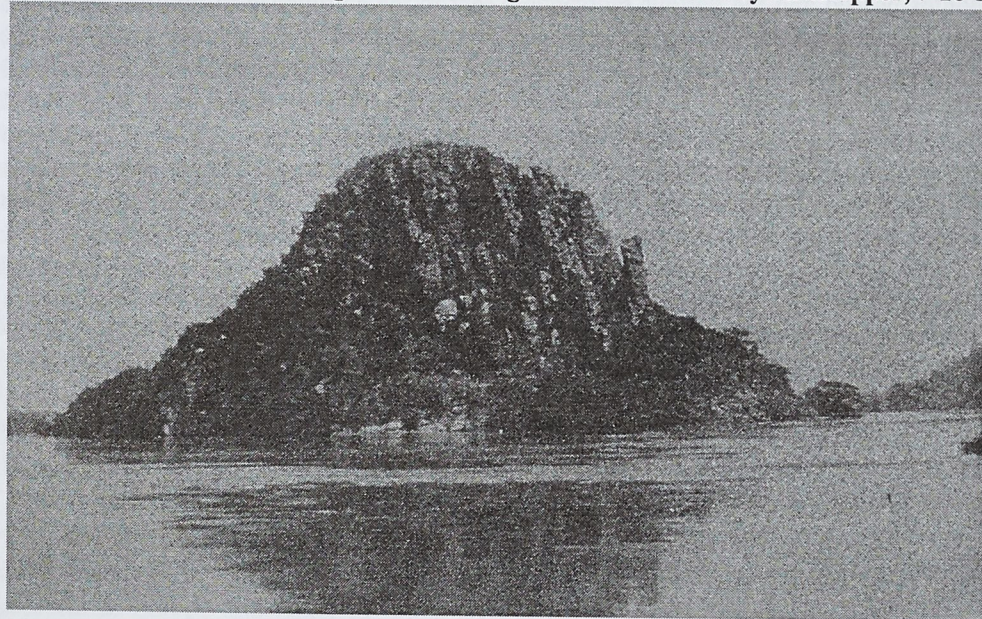


Fig. 6 Katsa (Ketsa) Rock where the *Dayspring* was wrecked. Photo. from Hastings, 1926.

was a steady rise in water level. Personal letters from England received on 28 June had also encouraged the campers. On 3 July Barter thanked Hooker for his letters of December 9, January 7 and 14 and April 20 via Fernando Po: "To be noticed by you in such favourable terms is extremely gratifying, and the high opinion you have of my industry, while so little of my collecting has yet reached home, will be a stimulant to future exertions under all depressing circumstances that may arise incident to this climate". Barter notes that Hooker had sent to Fernando Po "glazed cases and paper." He goes on to say that "I have made some tolerable [Wardian] cases here of [*Dayspring's*] planks using the sky lights for glass. These will convey living plants down the river. I have been somewhat straitened for paper but what was recovered from the wreck tho' near two months under water is still strong as ever." In one letter Barter comments on the inadequacy of his salary being £120 per year, which is little more than he received at home, and he evidently had a family to maintain. Nothing else personal comes through his letters, however. Barter filled other letters with details of the plants he had collected and I find his knowledge of the scientific names remarkably accurate. Joseph Hooker's *Flora Nigritiana*, based on Theodore Vogel's and others earlier collections, bound with his father's *Niger Flora* (1849), would have been available to him, but these were early days in the study of West African plants - the first comprehensive *Flora* was by Hutchinson and Dalziel's (1927-36), with an extensive revision by Keay and Hepper (1954-72).

Crowther, always regular in his Christian ministry and services for his colleagues, arranged for the building of several huts as a CMS mission station for the residents of Rabba. He also noted the ecology and agriculture of the region "where oil-palm trees almost entirely cease, except now and then in groups on the banks of the river and along water-courses or brooks, shea-butter trees take their place in great abundance. Also cotton, beni-seed, guinea corn, various beans, sweet potatoes, large onions and tobacco". Crowther also remarked on the "sheep, goats, fowl, not many ducks, cows owned by Felanis [Fulani] only, not by Nupe. Manufacture of cloths and mats, small and enormous pots, made by farmer women. Watermen fish in swamps and river banks, some cultivate rice as well as ferrying passengers and petty traders." He noted that the trading canoes were very large, made of rough boards nailed together and caulked with bombax cotton, but they were still very leaky. They were propelled upstream very laboriously by two or four or more men with bamboo poles; the canoes were partly covered so that the trading women and their children could sit in shade for days at a time.

Rescue at last

By September 18 there is word in Barter's letter to Hooker that a steamer called *Rainbow* has been reported to be coming, but the *Sunbeam* arrived first to rescue the campers. Both vessels met at Iddah where Glover was found to be aboard the *Rainbow*. The next letter

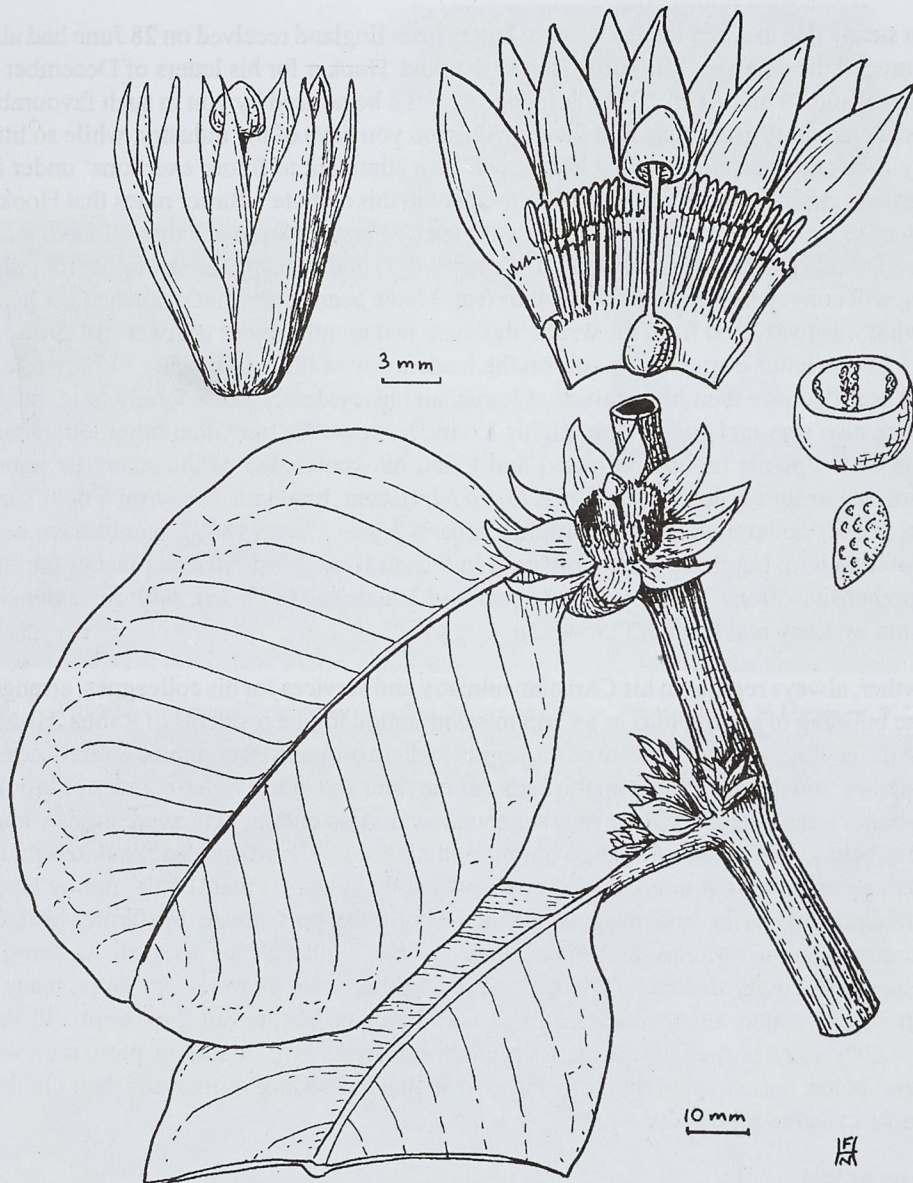


Fig. 7 *Barteria nigritiana* Hooker fil. subsp. *nigritiana* (family *Passifloraceae*). A medium-sized tree named in honour of Charles Barter and occurring in the coastal forest zone of West Africa. It is well known for the fierce, protective small black ants which inhabit its hollow twigs; subsp. *fistulosa* (Masters) Sleumer is inhabited by larger ants. Drawn by F.N. Hepper from the type specimen (Barter 2119) collected by the Nun River and now in Kew Herbarium, with dissections after Fitch's drawing.

from Barter, written on 2 October, comes from Fernando Po. It is not clear what Barter did between then and 6 February 1859 when next he wrote to Hooker from Lagos. In spite of being away from home for nearly two years – and much of the time in an emergency camp – he tells of his impending overland trip all the way to Rabba, still with his expedition companions Dr Baikie, Lieut. Glover and Dalton. After Rabba the intention was to reach “Soccatoo [Sokoto] and the region beyond” with the prospect of being away a further “8 or 9 months.” They did indeed reach Rabba where sadly Barter died on 15 July 1859. The others continued but failed to reach Sokoto and they returned to England by the end of the year. This was the last of the Niger Expeditions.

Charles Barter’s memorial is the new genus *Barteria* (Fig.7) named after him by Joseph Hooker, who later became Director of Kew. In 1860 Hooker wrote this complimentary and well-deserved appreciation “Among the many interesting plants collected by the lamented Mr Barter during Dr Baikie’s Niger Expedition, is a very singular and new form of those anomalous Passifloreae [now Passifloraceae] of which several genera have already been found in that quarter of the globe, and which I propose should bear the name of its intrepid and indefatigable discoveror, whose collections far exceed in magnitude, condition and value those of any other explorer in those regions.” It is a pity that no portrait of Charles Barter exists.

REFERENCES

- Allen, W. (1848). *Narrative of the Voyage to the R. Niger in 1841*. London
- Baikie, W.F. (1856). *Narrative of an Exploring Voyage, 1854*. London
- Barter, Charles (1857-59). *Letters in Director’s Letters* 59:40-48, 67-74. Archives, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew
- Crowther, Samuel & J.C. Taylor (1859). *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger, 1857-59*. London
- Desmond, Ray (1994). Barter, C. *Dictionary of British and Irish Botanists and Horticulturists*. London
- Hastings, A.C.G. (1926). *The Voyage of the Dayspring*. Journal of Sir John Hawley Glover... account of the Expedition up the Niger River in 1857. London.
- Hepper, F. Nigel & R.W.J. Keay (2000). History of the Flora of West Tropical Africa. *Nigerian Field* 65:141-148.
- Hepper, F. Nigel (2005). The search for Mungo Park on the River Niger. *Nigerian Field* 70: ...
- Hepper, F.N. & F. Neate (1971). *Plant Collectors in West Africa*. Barter p.8. Utrecht
- Hooker, Joseph D. (1860). *Barteria*: a new genus in Passifloreae. *Journal of the Linnean Society* 5:14 tab.2.
- Hutchinson, J. & J.M. Dalziel (1926:7-36). *Flora of West Tropical Africa*. London. Revised Edition: R.W.J. Keay & F.N. Hepper (1954-72).