

BANKS'S NETWORKS IN AFRICA: FROM INDIVIDUAL MISSIONS TO A COLLECTIVE PROGRAM OF EXPLORATION

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This paper fits into a broader research project funded by the Belgian *F.R.S.-Fonds national de la Recherche scientifique* that aims to investigate how from the Enlightenment to the apogee of the first Industrial Revolution Africa has become a scientific object in its own right for the colonial administrations of France and Great Britain. In this paper I focus on the British side of the spectrum. I will investigate the changing British attitude towards Africa at the end of the eighteenth century by focusing on the “Banksian” networks in Africa. Through a series of cases I will illustrate the transformation of British science policies that took place under the pressure of competition with the French. Thus, it is my aim to show how Great Britain in the face of state-oriented French science started to intervene more directly in exploration.

The rise of a giant

Joseph Banks (1743-1820), the president of the Royal Society, was one of the key figures in the organization of scientific exchanges between Britain and Africa. During many decades he left his mark on dozens of scientific expeditions. In the early years of his career he had an eye for Africa's botanical wealth; later he also turned to the geography of Africa's interior.

His social background gave him access to the highest circles of society. He became an intimate friend of King George III and was put unofficially in charge of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, which he decorated with exotic plants. To this end he sent dozens of plant hunters all over the world with royal funding. As a member of the Privy Council he linked science to politics. Banks's house in London became a meeting place where scholars discussed new developments in science and technology. To Banks and his intimates exotic knowledge provided by travellers had not just anecdotal value. When applied to the improvement of British agriculture, trade and industry it became of strategic importance.

The networks of Sir Joseph Banks and the botanic exploration of Africa

The interest Banks showed for Africa dated from the time he travelled outside Europe. In 1771, during his trip with HMS *Endeavour*, he went ashore at the Cape in the company of Daniel Solander. They visited the garden of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and collected numerous plants. Back in London, Banks's reputation grew quickly. He granted his patronage to a number of initiatives in the field of exploration and started to focus his attention on the natural history of the African continent. In 1773, Banks together with his friend Thomas Falconer (1738-1792) designed plans to explore the Niger. In the following years Banks became the recipient of seeds and specimens coming from all over the world, and, consequently, also from Africa. The majority of Banks's “African” correspondents were to be found in the European stations situated in West Africa and at the Cape. As the Dutch

developed the Cape as a refreshing station for ships on their way to Asia, it was a popular resting place for all European nationalities and a starting point for plant hunting missions.

Several packets of seeds from the Cape arrived in London through Christoffel Brand (1730-1815), a naturalist in the service of the Dutch *VOC*. Francis Masson (1741-1805), a gardener at Kew, left Britain in 1772 with Cook's second expedition, but he went ashore at the Cape, where he collected plants until 1775. He discovered hundreds of species, what provoked a breakthrough of the African flora at Kew. It is no surprise Banks became the principal promoter behind Masson's second journey to the Cape in the years 1785-1795. That way, many hitherto unknown African species enriched the Royal Botanic Gardens. Masson informed Banks on the collections formed by explorers such as the Dutchman Robert Jacob Gordon (1743-1795) or the Swedish officer Franz Pehr Oldenburg (1740-1774). Another supplier of botanic material was William Brass (?-1783), a plant hunter who in the 1780s was sent to Sierra Leone on behalf of a consortium of British dignitaries, including Banks. Brass, however, suffered a misfortune and was dropped at the Cape, where the local governor treated him badly. Nevertheless, he sent Banks numerous botanical descriptions and specimens before passing away prematurely. In 1785, Banks was invited by the British government to propose a botanist who should join an expedition to West Africa that must find a location for a future penal colony. Banks selected the Polish plant hunter Anton Pantaleon Hove (fl. 1785-1798). The expedition ended in disaster but Hove did succeed in sending botanical material to London. Banks sometimes acquired botanical collections without having asked for them. In fact, his reputation worked as a magnet for career seekers. In 1785 Banks received baskets containing the fruit of dozens of plants from Paul Erdmann Isert (1755-1789), a German working at the Danish Fort Christiansborg who hoped to receive a financial compensation. Banks also received seeds and plants from James Bruce (1730-1794) who travelled in East Africa between 1768 and 1773.

Banks increasingly focused on supporting government initiatives, and always involved the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in business at hand. In that regard, he was in contact with John Barrow (1764-1848) who travelled through South Africa around the turn of the century. He settled in Cape Town and had official functions there, but he also travelled around the country while investigating its natural history and geography. When the British occupied the Cape during the Napoleonic wars Banks also counted on high placed local officials to supply Kew with African plants. Banks gradually focused on "useful" specimens, preferably timber trees. Banks advised to procure rare plant material from the Boers living in distant districts. He also grasped the opportunity to insist on the importance of improving maintenance at the Cape's Botanic Garden. That institution might be developed into a station that served Kew's interests. In the early decades of the nineteenth century Banks continued to intervene at government level to ensure the Treasury would finance botanic expeditions in South Africa. The most famous examples are those undertaken by Kew gardener James Bowie (ca. 1789-1869) between 1817 and 1823, and by the naturalist William John Burchell between 1810 and 1815. The specimens they collected ended up at the British Museum.

The African Association or the culmination of “Banksian” exploration

With the foundation in 1788 of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, also called the African Association, a new era began. The Association’s members belonged to the leading classes in society. Both in scientific and management terms Banks was the Association’s “life and soul”.

The establishment of the African Association was the amplifier of Banks’s activities in Africa. His concern now went beyond the purely “scientific”. The resolution of geographic issues and the search for a wide range of “resources” in the African interior came to the fore more strongly. It was partly a matter of scale: the fact that wealthy British gentlemen joined their financial efforts, made possible the organization of larger expeditions. The question of coordinated action now became important as parallel initiatives strove to achieve a single objective: uncovering the secrets of a continent unknown to Europeans.

The activities of the African Association are too comprehensive to flesh them out completely, but a summary of the most eye-catching expeditions illustrates how this private organization left its mark on the exploration of Africa through a process of informal negotiation with the government. However, it should be noted that failure and human drama were more the rule than the exception. It is clear that all efforts focused on one specific but still very vaguely defined area: the Niger Basin. It was the object of an ancient geographical problem that had to be solved at last. Old stories about valuable resources – particularly gold – people hoped to find along the Niger, and of which caravans arriving in North Africa gave evidence, offered certainly an incentive to carry on with action.

The first initiatives – the voyages made by John Ledyard (1751-1789) and Simon Lucas (ca. 1766-1799) and the ill-fated plans for voyages to be undertaken by the African born merchant Ben Ali or the physician Franz-Xaver Swediaur (1748-1824) – turned out to be failures. The situation took a more positive turn when the African Association engaged Daniel Houghton (1740-1791) who was sent out to explore the Gambia River upstream. He carried with him a questionnaire regarding the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious features of the Houssa Empire. Via a network of intermediaries Houghton sent his patrons in London a series of reports from which they learned he had been able to penetrate deep into the country. An immediate consequence of Houghton’s work was that the African Association started a process of negotiation with the British government. Banks and his friends contacted Cabinet members and pleaded in favor of the creation of a British consulate in Senegambia. A consul was to defend British trade interests in the region.

In April 1794 the name of James Legge Willis (1761-1817), a former director of the Turkey Company, was suggested for the post. This proposal received a favorable response from Cabinet members. But in the end there was serious disagreement about how to finance the whole operation and the mission was canceled.

The much-needed success came eventually. Mungo Park (1771-1806), a Scottish physician with a sense for adventure, would prove to be the right man on the right place. On 17 April 1795 the Association decided to send him to Africa. His instructions were almost

identical with those received by Houghton who died during his sojourn. Mungo Park traveled without encountering serious problems along the Gambia River and managed to reach the Niger, becoming the first European to confirm the river's eastern flow. Unfortunately he was unable to reach Timbuktu. At the end of 1797 Mungo Park was back in London. He handed over to his patrons a mass of information. The African Association was completely convinced of the economic possibilities the region had to offer.

During the three years Park travelled in Africa, the members of the African Association had not been sitting around doing nothing. Again Banks made optimal use of his network of correspondents. He exchanged letters with Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), professor at Göttingen, who recommended his pupil Friedrich Conrad Hornemann (1772-1801) for a new expedition. It was decided that the operation should be prepared with care. Hornemann was requested to study the basics of astronomy and Arabic. Then he was asked to go to Cairo where he should acquire knowledge of both African languages and culture. Britain and France were at war. It was prudent to choose a neutral German to carry out the job. Banks used his good relations with leading French scholars to guarantee Hornemann a safe passage through France. The German adventurer began a discreet life in Cairo, only disturbed by Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. In 1799 he left the city and travelled to Tripoli where he joined a caravan to Murzuk in the Fezzan. Meanwhile he sent journals and maps to London. His last correspondence dates from April 1800 when he reported he would join a caravan to Bournou. It is currently assumed that Hornemann did manage to traverse the eastern Sahara Desert but died somewhere in the north of modern-day Nigeria.

Military tensions trigger a transformation of British policy in Africa

Competition between the French and the British in Africa increased gradually and reached a climax when Napoleon conquered Egypt. Elsewhere in Africa tensions were also becoming apparent. Banks now relied to a great extent on the services offered by British diplomats and consuls who forwarded him firsthand information on the political and economic situation in the Mediterranean. James Mario Matra (1746-1808), British consul in Tangier, and James Grey Jackson (1768-1840), consular agent for various maritime nations in Mogador, sent him reports containing valuable data of all sorts: the location of caravan routes, and lists of lucrative commodities, especially gold, spices and medicinal products.

But surprisingly also some French officials were eager to supply Banks with valuable knowledge. None other than the famous botanist Pierre Marie Auguste Broussonet (1761-1807) was appointed as French consul in Mogador. This scholar lived in London in the 1780s and Banks brought him into contact with Linnaean botany. Friendship continued after Broussonet's departure to Paris. When working in Mogador from 1797 to 1799 Broussonet sent his friend numerous boxes full of botanical specimens.

Banks and his colleagues increasingly pushed the African Association towards the realization of strategic objectives. But this could only be achieved if and when the British government would take up responsibility. With regard to the organization of expeditions in Africa Banks certainly was won over to the idea of direct government intervention.

Consequently, he tried to convince politicians. In a speech held on 25 May 1799 before the General Assembly of the African Association Banks formulated a clear message: “Sir Joseph proceeded to expatiate on the advantages to be derived from Mr. Park’s discoveries, and more immediately in a commercial point of view. He said, ‘a gate was now opened into the interiors of Africa, which it was easy for every nation to enter, and extend its trade and adventure from the west to the eastern side of that great continent’. He noted the short distance, from the navigable waters of the Gambia, to those of the Joliba or Niger, and the facility of establishing a commercial and military station at a proper point of intercourse; and briefly touched on the speculation of probable extent, to which the demand for British manufactures might arrive, from such a vast and populous countries, in the bosom of which was to be found ‘gold’, the great medium of commerce [...]”.

In response to this intervention, the members of the African Association unanimously agreed “That it be recommended to the Committee, to take again into consideration, the plan of appointing a consul for the district of Senegambia; and the sending there of a sufficient force to take possession of a station on the banks of the Joliba, and from thence exploring the interior of Africa; and that the Committee be empowered to lay before Government, for their information, such particulars respecting the importance of that object, as they may think expedient”. A more pronounced imperialist stance is hard to imagine. The African Association agreed to work on the Privy Council Committee for Trade in order to launch new operations with a more explicit agenda of conquest. Late May 1799 Banks along with Francis Rawdon-Hastings (1754-1826) addressed a memorandum to the Privy Council Committee for Trade in which they reiterated the main points of Banks’s speech. Banks also discussed the matter in a letter addressed to statesman Charles Jenkinson (1727-1808), 1st Earl of Liverpool, the Committee’s influential Chairman. He advocated the creation of a company, which would stand under direct government control and had to divert West African trading goods to British markets. It all came down on gaining control over the whole West African coastline up to Sierra Leone, either by treaty or by conquest. A letter with the same content was addressed to John Pitt (1756-1835), Lord President of the Privy Council. Banks’s plea did not produce immediate results. The government ignored the memorandum as all attention had to be given to the growing political tensions in Europe. But the first steps towards a transition were made.

Mungo Park’s popularity set in motion a new dynamic, which eventually pushed the government to a greater involvement in the African adventure. The circumstances of war certainly played a role. In 1800 the British took the island of Goree from the French. It had the potential of becoming a gateway to the African interior. The Peace of Amiens (27 March 1802) abolished all recent colonial conquests. However, the period of peace between France and Britain was short-lived. A year later hostilities were to resume. Meanwhile a number of books were published in which France’s intention to occupy Senegambia was made clear. They left no doubt whatsoever with regard to the new imperialistic agenda the Napoleonic regime hoped to get implemented. Banks was alarmed and warned the British government about what was coming. It is in this tense atmosphere that the Under-Secretary of State for

the Colonies John Sullivan, who was one of Banks's correspondents within the government, drafted a memorandum in which the establishment of British trading posts along the Gambia River was recommended. When war restarted, the government continued on this path. Robert Hobart (1760-1816), Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, took an initiative in which the African Association was not directly involved but on which Banks was certainly informed indirectly. Mungo Park was commissioned to return to the interior of Africa, now protected by a military escort. The goal was to chart the entire course of the Niger down to its estuary. But this geographic project also contained an important strategic element. Simultaneously with Park's mission the British would erect a fortress in Bambuk, while Park himself would act as an official envoy of the British government at the royal Courts in West Africa. A change of government provoked an alteration to the initial plan. The most explicit military components of the mission were eliminated, but in general the government was won for the organization of an expedition led by Mungo Park.

Epilogue

After Napoleon's fall from power, the Vienna Congress brought peace in Europe through a new balance of power. But the British feared the French would seek compensation in Africa. They built up military operations in Africa to safeguard British trade interests there. But as the military lacked knowledge on the continent's geography and resources, scholars remained an important auxiliary for imperialism. Government officials now took the lead in the organization of new operations. Nevertheless, the administration still used the aging Banks as an advisor. In 1816 he selected the scientific staff for an expedition organized by the Admiralty that had to explore the Lower Congo. Although this voyage generated important scientific results, its tragic end diverged British efforts principally to West Africa. Britain now got implicated in a raging competition with France, which after the occupation of Algeria in the 1830s became the supreme power in this part of Africa. With the expedition to the Congo the British made a final transition to full-grown government initiative, implicating various ministerial departments into the organization of scientific exploratory missions. But the struggle in the years to come would be hard. French activities were one thing, opposition of African people another. Part of the public opinion and the world of politics certainly had positive feelings about developing a policy of enhancing British presence in Africa in the form of military occupation or trade. But gradually this vision came under pressure. Britain expanded its control along the coast of Nigeria, but many considered both the costs and the human risk too high. Exploration on the contrary was never halted, as many examples prove. Most initiatives took place at the request of the British government.

The African Association remained active until 1831, but to a lesser extent than before. The link with the early "Banksian" networks was confirmed through the growing implication of the Royal Society and the British Museum in processing the results of new expeditions in Africa. From the 1830s onwards a new actor would, however, take a more prominent role in African exploration: the Royal Geographical Society – a society in which Banks's African Association was integrated.