18 European explorers and missionaries in West Africa, 1792 to 1890

In 1788 the African Association was formed in Britain with the aim of sending explorers to find information about the geography, politics and economy of the interior of West Africa. In particular these explorers were to search for the source, course and mouth of the River Niger, even more so after 1808 when Britain abolished the slave trade and was seeking new sources of trade.

On his first journey (1795–7) Mungo Park, a Scottish doctor, reached the Niger at Segu and saw the river flowing eastwards. On his second expedition (1805–6) Park and his companions failed to reach the river's mouth because they were drowned in the rapids near Bussa.

Denham, Clapperton and Oudney, three British officers, explored the Central Sudan (1822–5). Oudney died in Borno but Denham explored Lake Chad and Clapperton reached Sokoto. On a later journey (1825–7) Clapperton and Richard Lander crossed the Niger at Bussa and went on to Sokoto, where Clapperton failed to persuade Sultan Bello to sign commercial treaties and died of fever. In 1830 the brothers Richard and John Lander solved the Niger mystery by sailing from Bussa to its mouth at the delta. Another Englishman, Major Laing, had found the sources of the Niger in 1822.

René Caullière, a Frenchman, travelled from the west coast to Timbuktu and across the Sahara to Morocco in 1827–9. Heinrich Barth, a German, between 1850 and 1855 crossed the Sahara, explored Borno and the Hausa states, reached the Benue and later spent eight months in Timbuktu.

Dr. William Baikie, a Scottish surgeon, led a British expedition up the lower Niger and the Benue in 1854. He kept his men alive by giving them quinine to combat malaria, and thus showed it was possible for a much greater number of Europeans to come to West Africa.

By 1855, therefore, much of the interior of West Africa was known to Europe. Directly and indirectly the discoveries of the explorers were to lead to an increase in Christian missionary activities; active trading contacts between Europeans and peoples in the interior; and European imperial expansion and colonisation.

Christianity spread more rapidly in West Africa than in any other region of the continent before 1890 (though it made far fewer converts in West Africa than Islam did). Nearly all Christian missionary activity was concentrated along narrow strips of coast under close British or French political or commercial domination. The most heavily Christianised area was the freed slave colony of Sierra Leone around the port of Freetown, where the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) became dominant. The Christianised Creoles of Sierra Leone played the major role in spreading the gospel to southern Ghana, Yorubaland and the lower Niger. Five out of every six missionaries were Africans. Two Sierra Leonians, ex-slaves Samuel Ajayi Crowther and James Johnson, became CMS missionary bishops in Nigeria.

The Church of England, through the CMS (see also map key for explanation of abbreviations), ran many parishes in Sierra Leone and mission stations in Nigeria. The Methodists (WMS) focused their attention on Ghana, while the Presbyterians concentrated on Ghana (BEMS) and Calabar (UPM). American Protestant missions were active in Liberia; the SBC founded missions in several parts of Yorubaland. The Roman Catholic missions, the HGF and the SMA, also set up several missions before 1890.

Key to map

European explorers:
- Park 1795-7
- Park 1805-6
- Denham, Clapperton & Oudney 1822-5
- Clapperton & Lander 1825-7
- Caullière 1827-9
- R. & J. Lander 1830
- Barth 1850-55
- Baikie 1854

Catholic Missionary Societies:
- HGF Holy Ghost Fathers
- SMA Society for African Missions (Fr.)

Protestant Missionary Societies:
- BEMS Basel Evangelical Missionary Society
- BMS Baptist Missionary Society
- CMS Church Missionary Society
- CONG Congregationalists
- METH (US) Methodist Church, USA
- NGMS North German Missionary Society
- PEM Paris Evangelical Mission
- PRES (US) Presbyterian Church, USA
- SBC Southern Baptist Convention, USA
- UBC United Brethren in Christ, USA
- ULCA United Lutheran Church of America
- UPM United Presbyterian Mission
- WMS Wesleyan Missionary Society

Tropical rain forest boundary
Desert boundary