

Chapter 1 : to bala and back | Download eBook pdf, epub, tuebl, mobi

The Somono are an ethnic group specializing in fishing and river transport on waterways of the Upper Niger. In Laminigbã's story, Bala the Somono hero survives French military service, defies colonial administration, becomes chief of canoemen and guardian of treasure, defies monsters of the river, and suffers for the love of a beautiful woman.

See Article History Alternative Titles: With a length of 2, miles 4, km , it is the third longest river in Africa, after the Nile and the Congo. The Niger is believed to have been named by the Greeks. Along its course it is known by several names. These include the Joliba Malinke: The Niger RiverThe Niger River in the western region of Africa is used for irrigation, power production, and transportation. Issuing as the Tembi from a deep ravine 2, feet metres above sea level , it flows due north over the first miles km. It then follows a northeasterly direction, during the course of which it receives its upper tributariesâ€”the Mafou , the Niandan, the Milo , and the Sankarani on the right and the Tinkisso on the leftâ€”and enters Mali. From there the Niger once dropped more than 1, feet metres in about 40 miles 60 km into a valley formed by tectonic subsidence ; but the rapids in this stretch have been submerged by the waters backed up by the Markala Dam, located some miles km downstream of the Sotuba Dam near Sansanding. In this stretch, at Koulikoro , the river takes a more east-northeasterly direction, and its bed becomes fairly free from impediments for about 1, miles 1, km. These lakes are chiefly on the left bank and are connected to the river by channels that undergo seasonal changes in the direction of flow. At high water most of the lakes become part of a general inundation. Largest of the lakes in this region is Lake Faguibine , which is nearly 75 miles km long, 15 miles 25 km wide, and more than feet 50 metres deep in places. Fisherman setting his nets in the Bani River in Mali. Some miles km downstream from Timbuktu, a rocky ridge that obstructs the course of the river is pierced by a defile narrow gorge more than a mile long, with an average width of about feet metres and a depth of more than feet 30 metres in places. At low water the strong current there endangers navigation. A short way downstream the river turns to the southeast and widens considerably, flowing to Gao across a floodplain 3 to 6 miles 5 to 10 km wide. This most northerly bend of the Niger flows through the southern fringe of the Sahara. The middle course of the Niger River is navigable to small craft during high water as far downstream as Ansongo â€”some 1, miles 1, km in all. Below Ansongo, miles km downstream from Timbuktu, navigability is interrupted by a series of defiles and rapids. The river becomes navigable to small vessels again at Labbezangaâ€”from which it flows into Nigerâ€”and continues to be navigable to the Atlantic Ocean. Navigation is seasonal, however, because of the fluctuations in the water level in the rainy and dry seasons. Downstream from Jebba , in Nigeria , the Niger enters its lower course, flowing east-southeast through a broad and shallow valley 5 to 10 miles 8 to 16 km wide. About 70 miles km from Jebba it is joined by the Kaduna River â€”an important tributary that contributes about one-fourth of the annual discharge of the river below the Niger-Kaduna confluenceâ€”and about 25 miles 40 km above Lokoja the river turns to the south. At Lokoja the river receives the water of its greatest tributary, the Benue , thereby approximately doubling the volume of its annual discharge. At their confluence the Niger is about three-fourths of a mile 1 km wide, and the Benue more than a mile. Together they form a lakelike stretch of water about two miles wide that is dotted with islands and sandbanks. From Lokoja downstream to the town of Idah , the Niger flows in a restricted valley, enclosed by hills and in some places flanked by sandstone cliffs up to feet 45 metres high. Between Idah and Onitsha the banks are lower and the country flatter. The Niger delta , which stretches for nearly miles km from north to south and spreads along the coast for about miles km , extends over an area of 14, square miles 36, square km. Within the delta the river breaks up into an intricate network of channels called rivers. The Nun River is regarded as the direct continuation of the river, but some of the other important channels include from west to east the Forcados , the Brass, the Sambreiro, and the Bonny. The mouths of these channels are almost all obstructed by sandbars. The Forcados, for instance, which supplanted the Nun as the most traveled channel in the early 20th century, was in turn displaced by the Escravos River in The delta is being gradually extended seaward by the increments of silt brought down by the river, and mangrove swamps extend beyond its outer edge. The river then turns westward into Nigeria and, for the greater part of its course, flows over a broad and fertile floodplain. At Yola

, a town feet metres above sea level and some miles 1, km inland, the width of the river in flood is from 3, to 4, feet to 1, metres. Near Numan , some 30 miles 50 km downstream from Yola, the Benue is joined on its north bank by its most important tributary, the Gongola. Together with its tributaries, the Niger drains a total area of some , square miles 1,, square km. This southern rampart forms a watershed separating the rivers of the Niger system from others that flow directly southward to the Atlantic Ocean. Climate Within the Niger basin, climate shows great variability. Mean annual precipitation levels decrease northward from more than inches 4, mm in the delta area to less than 10 inches mm in Timbuktu. Both the upper and the lower stretches of the river, however, drain areas with more than 50 inches 1, mm of precipitation per year. The middle Niger is an area where precipitation decreases and is also the sector where the greatest amount of evaporation takes place. It is estimated that in the lake region the Niger loses some two-thirds of the annual volume of discharge that flows past Mopti. Hydrology Because of climatic variations the annual river flood does not occur at the same time in different parts of the basin. In the upper Niger the high-water discharge occurs in June, and the low-water season is in December. In the middle Niger, a first high-water dischargeâ€”the white flood so called because of the light sediment content of the water â€”occurs soon after the rainy season between July and October; a second riseâ€”the black flood so called because of the greater sediment content â€”begins in December with the arrival of floodwaters from upstream. May and June are the low-water months in the middle stretch. On the Benue there is only one high-water season. The lower Niger below its confluence with the Benue consequently has a high-water period that begins in May or Juneâ€”about a month earlier than on the middle Nigerâ€”and a low-water period that is at least a month shorter, as the rains in the south start earlier. In January a slight rise occurs due to the arrival of floodwaters from the upper Niger. The difference between high and low water often measures as much as 35 feet 10 metres. Plant and animal life Along its course the Niger traverses virtually all the vegetational zones of western Africa. The Fouta Djallon plateau, where the Niger rises, is covered by a type of sedge vegetation consisting of fine, wirelike tufts interspersed with bare rock surfaces. In the north the grass is short and discontinuous, and thorny shrub and acacia wood occur. In the south of the grassland region, tall, tussocky grass is interspersed with fairly dense wooded vegetation. About the latitude of Onitsha, the river enters the high rainforest belt, which merges below Aboh with the mangrove swamp vegetation of the delta. Many varieties of fish are found in the Niger and its tributaries; the chief food species are catfish, carp, and Nile perch. Other Niger fauna include hippopotamuses, at least three different types of crocodiles including the much-feared Nile crocodile , and a variety of lizards. There is a rich collection of birds. Geese are found in the lake region, and herons, egrets, and storks are found both on the river and around the lakes. The striking crown bird is found wherever there is open ground in the grassland zone, and pelicans and flamingos are particularly associated with the upper Benue area. Smaller riverine species include white-headed plovers, crocodile birds, sandpipers, curlews , and green-red shanks. People and economy The Niger valley is sparsely settled, although there are population concentrations in the lake region and near the confluence of the Niger and Benue. From the 13th to 16th century the valley was the heartland of the Mali and Songhai empires, and some of the river towns date from this period. The ethnic pattern along the course of the river includes larger groupsâ€”such as the Bambara , the Malinke , the Songhai , and the Zarma Zerma, Djerma â€”occupying both sides of the river above the Nigerian boundary, below which there are many small ethnic groups. The Niger River at Mopti, Mali. River fishing is a specialized occupation for certain peoples, such as the Bozo and Somono in the lake region, the Sorko on the middle Niger, the Kede and the Kakanda between Jebba and Lokoja, and the Wurbo and the Jukun on the Benue. The discovery and exploitation of petroleum in the delta region, however, has seriously disrupted fishing there; oil pollution has killed most of the fish, undermining the economy of the Ijo Ijaw people of the region. Irrigation The irrigation of the Niger valleyâ€”for the purpose of transforming it into a densely populated, agricultural corridor running through the interior of western Africaâ€”has long been a goal of planners. In the s the French colonial administration, for example, began to plan the irrigation of large areas in the lake region; a barrage at Sansanding that raised the level of the Niger was completed in Feeder canals were constructed, and huge tracts of irrigated land now produce rice, cotton, sugarcane, and vegetables. The British colonial administration also encouraged irrigated rice cultivation in the Bida region. In Nigeria large-scale irrigation

schemes have been developed since the 1950s on the Niger and some of its tributaries, notably the Sokoto, Kaduna, and Benue. The Niger is also a source of hydroelectricity. The largest project is the Kainji Dam in Nigeria, completed in the late 1960s. A square-mile 1, square-km lake has been created upstream, offering opportunities for fishing and irrigation. Transportation Most of the Niger River is used by commercial shipping. From the Atlantic Ocean to Onitsha the river is navigable by large vessels throughout the year. From Onitsha to the confluence of the Benue and the Niger large vessels can move for 10 months of the year June-March. Navigation in this stretch is made possible by the influx of water from the Benue River, which is at its high level in June. Thus, Jebba is in effect the head of navigation of the Niger waterway, although extreme fluctuation in water level at times constitutes a major handicap to vessels plying beyond Lokoja. Above Jebba the Niger is navigable only to smaller craft and is dependent locally on periods when water levels are adequate. Jon Ward Rail and road routes cross the river at many points. Railway bridges span the river at Kouroussa and Jebba, and another crosses the Benue at Makurdi. The coordination of multinational efforts to develop the Niger and its tributaries is the responsibility of the Niger River Commission, formed in 1964. The Commission has sponsored a study of the navigational possibilities of the middle Niger from Gao Mali to Yelwa Nigeria. Moreover, in Nigeria several river basin development authorities have been established to develop more irrigation and fishing projects. Study and exploration It was not until the late 18th century that Europeans made systematic attempts to find the source, direction, and outlet of the Niger. In 1793 Park sailed more than 1,000 miles 2, km down the river, seeking to reach its mouth, but he and his party were drowned in the rapids at Bussa now covered by Lake Kainji. In another Scottish explorer, Alexander G. Laing, determined but did not visit the source of the river. In two English explorers, John and Richard Lander, established the lower course of the Niger by canoeing down the river from Yauri now also covered by Lake Kainji, to the Atlantic Ocean, via the Nun River passage. Flegel, in separate travels established the course of the Benue from its source to its confluence with the Niger. Learn More in these related Britannica articles:

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