



Adventurous makeshift bridge, 1931, Schomburgk's Expedition (SLUB Dresden, see p. 234)

HANS SCHOMBURGK'S PIONEER JOURNEY 1931/1932

THE FIRST MOTORISED CROSSING OF THE LUANGWA VALLEY

An equally exciting story is Hans Schomburgk's African expedition in 1931/1932, which saw him cross the Luangwa Valley for the first time by motor. Schomburgk was already over fifty years old at the time and an experienced connoisseur of the African wilderness; in 1907, he too had crossed the Luangwa Valley from west to east as a young big game hunter.

Born in Hamburg in 1880, he was drawn to South Africa at the age of 17, where he worked on a farm and took part in the Boer War as a messenger rider for the British Natal Police. His thirst for adventure led him to join the police in Northern Rhodesia, where he quickly became enthusiastic about the wilderness in the British outpost and crossed the vast country as a big game hunter. He discovered unknown waters in the south of Angola and recognized the connection between tsetse flies and sleeping sickness. He also managed to catch some rare wild animals and ship them to Europe

(including the first pygmy hippopotamus, which was previously thought to be extinct). Then a process of maturation began and Schomburgk realised how dramatic the changes were for the people of Africa and how much unbridled hunting threatened the animal world. In 1912 he finally swapped his firearm for a film camera. The wild adventurer became a thoughtful explorer, Africa researcher and just as quickly a pioneer of German nature films. In the decades that followed, he undertook numerous trips through Africa, made documentaries and feature films, wrote travel reports and non-fiction books, put together a comprehensive ethnographic Africa collection, was soon considered THE German Africa expert and had even been appointed military attaché to the Liberian embassy in London. He was a jack of all trades and remained inquisitive throughout his life. But because of his half-Jewish origins, the Nazi regime imposed a news ban on him in 1940, despite his fame. While his works later became widely distributed and popular in the GDR (East Germany), Schomburgk was almost forgotten in West Germany after the war. However, his texts show a deep respect for all life in Africa and a philosophical wisdom that was still rare among Africa travelers of his time. What we are particularly interested in here from all his Africa trips is the motorized crossing of the Luangwa Valley, which all of his local contemporaries had shaken their heads and declared impossible:

Schomburgk and his seven European companions – including his young wife, a photographer, scientists and technicians – as well as numerous helpers from Zululand led an unusual entourage: two open vehicles and two light trucks with the trademark "Opel-Blitz", which had been specially converted for use in difficult conditions. In it they stored the expensive film cameras, recording equipment and cameras, tripods, binoculars, spare parts, tools and gifts for exchange, as well as four bicycles for particularly difficult road conditions. The Schomburgks even brought their little dog, Putty.

SCHOMBURGK CALLED THE COLORFUL ENTOURAGE "CIRCUS" BECAUSE PEOPLE FLOCKED TO SEE IT WHEREVER IT APPEARED

Against the advice of the British administration, the "Circus" set off from the small settlement of Lundazi towards the Luangwa Valley. The valley had long been a restricted area due to the widespread tsetse flies, so that animal diseases and sleeping

sickness did not spread to the highland regions. Only gradually did the colonial administration take the first steps to survey the valley in order to build roads in the future. At that time, only dirt roads and paths led down to the Luangwa from both sides. No one had ever managed – and probably no one had ever even thought of doing so – to cross the valley with a motor vehicle. But Schomburgk was not deterred and relied entirely on his expedition equipment, experience and technical skills.

Soon after Lundazi, the road deteriorated and the "Circus" followed at a snail's pace a path of an old road project that had once been cut through the Miombo forest but was never further developed. Schomburgk reports how the locals feared this forest because it attracted lightning. Even his European fellow travelers found the dry forest unsettling. The engineer often inspected the vehicles because he thought the strange loud cracking noises of seed pods bursting open were mechanical defects and did not believe Schomburgk's botanical explanation. And the cicadas also buzzed so loudly that the poor, unsettled engineer became seriously afraid of leaky valves.

Difficult journey through the Luangwa Valley, 1931, Schomburgk's Expedition (SLUB Dresden, p. 234)



ON THE WAY DOWN, THE VEHICLES
ALMOST TIPPED OVER ON THE SLOPES

Then the descent began. Branches and pickaxes were now constantly in use to overcome the many small tributaries. The vehicles almost tipped over on the steep slopes. Often they could only move forward centimetre by centimetre using the cable winch. And all this in the scorching October heat and with annoying tsetse fly attacks. But even then the "road conditions" were not the biggest problem. For the two vehicles, which were in danger of overheating, cool water had to be constantly replenished, and since the tributaries of the Luangwa usually dry up in October, replenishing cool water was the biggest worry and logistical challenge. Washing and showering had to be stopped. After days of exertion, the expedition reached the village of Chama. Here the people made quite a fuss because they had never seen a car before. Schomburgk was delighted to find original African traditions and hospitality among the Senga in Chama. Here he managed to hire more porters and helpers, as he was now worried about the morale of the group. The difficult

fight for every kilometer was wearing on everyone's nerves, and with thirty men from the village he hoped to make faster progress.

So the 'Circus' struggled through the untouched wilderness. At each sandy riverbed it took hours until a wooden footbridge could be built over which the vehicles could be pulled. Between the riverbeds, in the dense forest, fallen trees or rocks had to be cleared out of the way. There was plenty of food, as the area was very rich in game. But there was a lack of water everywhere. One day when the expedition camped on a hill, they discovered a freshwater spring in a closed basin near 'Kapanta Mpassi'. The exhausted group spent the rest of the day luxuriating in the small bathing pond.

Finally they reached the Luwumbu River, one of the largest tributaries of the Luangwa, which flows all year round, and the border of the district between Lundazi and Isoka. There was even a new bridge. Schomburgk had instructed the thirty Senga from Chama to only come as far as here, where their settlement area ended, because he expected better travel conditions for the onward journey towards Isoka.

Opel vehicle of Schomburgk's Expedition, 1931 (SLUB Dresden, see p. 234)



Traditional dancer, 1931, Schomburgk's Expedition (SLUB Dresden, see p. 234)

But he was wrong. Two American land surveyors whom he met at the bridge and who almost took him for a Fata Morgana (mirage) confirmed his fears: there were indeed a few paths in the rocky hill country beyond the Luwumbu, but before a navigable road could be built, the two cartographers would first have to complete their work. And while up to now there had only been flat and sandy terrain to overcome, the expedition would now have to tackle mountainous stretches full of rubble and rocks. Schomburgk could not manage without the thirty helpers from Chama. But the men went on strike. A long palaver began, at the end of which the Senga agreed to march on to the next village. Eight Senga deserted on the way, the others kept their word. In the village of Mpetu, Schomburgk hoped to meet the two land surveyors again, but they had meanwhile gone on an elephant hunt after a futile wait.

The adventurers had still not reached the Luangwa. The difficult, deep-sand riverbeds were now behind them, and the administration in Isoka had had makeshift bridges built over

numerous deep valleys in the mountainous country ahead of them. But all of these bridges were far too light for the two-ton trucks in Schomburgk's wagon train.

SO IT REMAINED A FIGHT FOR EVERY
KILOMETER. BRIDGES HAD TO BE
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BEHIND EVERY LOWLAND STREAM

The villages they passed through were now home to members of the proud Bemba kingdom. Schomburgk was worried, meanwhile, whether he would manage to leave the valley in time before the rainy season began.

Then they suddenly found themselves in front of the bridge over the Luangwa. After all the bridge collapses of the last few weeks with the wooden slats breaking, Schomburgk no longer had the courage to watch his vehicles make it over the Luangwa bridge, which was four metres above the water level at the time. But everything went well and the bridge held. On the same day, his dog Putty disappeared, but the cavalcade immediately turned around and found the runaway again.

The expedition spent its last evening in the Luangwa valley in the village of Chinyasi, which lay under a notorious pass called the "Jordan Pass", which marks the watershed between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. This opening in the Muchinga escarpment had previously been considered impassable for trucks, but Schomburgk's team had already survived worse when they reached the pass the next day. They climbed the slope without any difficulty and continued directly on to Isoka.

The incumbent representative of British colonial administration could hardly believe his eyes when the exhausted troop appeared before him and immediately issued the expedition with a certificate for their incredible feat of crossing the intrinsically impassable Luangwa Valley by motor vehicles.