

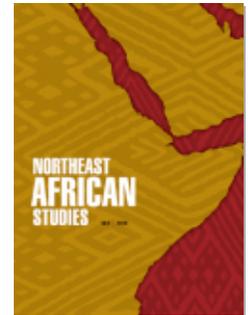


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Children of Hope: The Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa by Sandra Rowoldt Shell (review)

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Book Review

***Children of Hope: The Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa*, by Sandra Rowoldt Shell**

Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018; pp. xvii + 334. \$29.95 hardcover.

The history of slaves is mostly told “top-down” from the perspective of the masters’ society, or built in colonial, administrative, and abolitionist narratives. In the Ethiopian context, the historiography of slavery heavily relies on the accounts of international diplomats and administrators associated with the League of Nations and the Anti-Slavery Society, as well as travelers who were interested in slavery, the slave trade, and its suppression. Hence, Ethiopian slave systems are often narrated through the eyes of external observers, often with euro-centric biases. Ethiopic documents, treaties, letters, and other archival materials that could complement the image, are often overlooked. But more important, we hardly get to hear the voices of enslaved people themselves. Sandra Rowoldt Shell offers a fascinating correction of this imbalance by building her analyses of the experience of enslavement on a unique set of documents—the transcripts of oral interviews of sixty-four liberated slave children, recorded between 1888 and 1889 in Sheikh Othman near Aden. All these children originated from southern

Ethiopia from what today corresponds to western Oromia and adjoining territories. This data offers an incredibly rich picture of the “first passage,” the memories of home, capture, abduction, transaction, and other ways into slavery. The children were often sold several times and then trafficked across the country before reaching slave markets on the shores of the Red Sea. Here they were put on *dhow*s together with other commodities bound for Aden. On this short “middle passage,” they were liberated by the Royal Navy, which had been patrolling the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since the late nineteenth century to suppress the slave trade. The children were given into the care of the Keith-Falconer Mission near Aden, and there interviewed with the help of Oromo translators. The missionaries Matthew Lochhead and William Gardner studied the language and were assisted by the former slave and Basel-trained educator and theologian Gebru Desta (207–8). Due to a deteriorating health situation at Sheikh Othman, many children were taken to a mission station in Lovedale in South Africa.

Sandra Rowoldt Shell meticulously weaves together the narratives of the children with the detailed journals and documentation from the Royal Navy, the Mission archives at Sheikh Othman and the archives and journals from Lovedale. Some of the slaves returned home in the early twentieth century and some remained in South Africa, setting down roots there. The story is simultaneously one of deprivation as well as resilience and dignity.

The author’s approach is prosopographic, which allows her to present a systematic exposition of statistical details (e.g., sex ratio, age distribution, places of origin, ethnicity) as well as patterns of slave trading, the social system, the feudalism–slavery nexus, debt bondage, and serfdom in southern Ethiopia shortly before the area’s incorporation into the Kingdom of Ethiopia under Emperor Mənilək II. Her data and the short biographies and narratives of the slave children originally recorded by the missionaries are reprinted in the appendix and give us vivid insight, much of which is conveyed to the reader by supporting graphs and maps (213–56). GIS-based maps accompany the interviews and help the reader visualize the individual odysseys of the children who often stayed in different households before they were trafficked across the Red Sea. On the downside, the maps are too small to be of real use and provide only rough sketches of the zig-zagging journeys.

Given the fact that the data stems from the children themselves, historical ethnic terms and designations are often applied. For example, on the trader/raider side, the majority appear to be “Sidama.” This term was applied by Oromos speakers mostly to the Amhara and Təgrəñña communities, and is not a designation of the Sidama ethnic group (36). Less clear and unexplained is the term “Obbojote,” which designates the realm of Joote Tuulloo of Leeqa Qellem (*obbo* being an honorary title in Afaan Oromo). The only “Yambo,” Tola Lual, was captured by a raider from *obbojote* (236). Yambo indicates descent from present-day Anywaa, because it is a term historically applied by the Oromo for the peoples of lowland Gambella. Also, the infamous “Shangalla,” a designation of a variety of western Ethiopian ethnic groups, complicates the question of ethnicity and origin as discussed by the author (56). The list continues.

This not only shows that the book is an incredibly rich source for the ethnohistory of southern Ethiopia, but it raises complex questions with regard to the slave trade. What do the sources provided tell us about the overall situation—and the ethnohistorical situation in particular—of the everyday slave trade at this time? What explains the territorial focus of slave trading? The author’s statistics identify the majority of children as Oromos. Seemingly all the trafficked children spoke Afaan Oromo, but we do not know whether it was their first or second language. Thus, although the language was obviously widespread, is it sufficient as a marker of identity?

Also, to what extent are the sixty-four interviews representative of general trends? It is possible that many boats were not captured by the Royal Navy. Also, given the book’s focus known outlets such as Mätämma and the Nile route are not mentioned in Shell’s account. In addition, domestic slavery in Ethiopia is not discussed. We have practically no numbers for the slaves who remained in the courts and homes of Ethiopian masters. Another aspect is that of power. Mənilək’s grip over the regions was not yet fully developed: the *näftäñña-gäbbar* system had not been introduced everywhere, and the severe exploitation of prisoners of war, which occurred during the Abyssinian expansion, was only about to begin. In 1884, while in another territory, Yoḥannəs IV had made a treaty with the British to suppress the trade in slaves, so it is possible that this contributed to a significant decrease in exports through northern Ethiopia, which might explain why

no children were trafficked from or through Təgray (i.e. northern Ethiopia) during that time.

The historiography of slavery in Ethiopia is still in an early stage, and many more questions—concerning the economic, political, and social implications of the trade in slaves and slavery itself—remain to be answered. Shell's book is an excellent and much-needed contribution for understanding various relating dynamics. It is a timely contribution to a growing corpus of slavery studies in Ethiopia.

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