

BOOK REVIEW

*The Children of Hope the Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia*¹

By Sandra Rowoldt Shell, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018), 334 pages, \$ 49.00.

Occasionally an inspiring book even on the morally abhorrent topic of slave trade emerges that touches our hearts and souls through the uniqueness of its story, the depth of its message, the freshness of its ideas, and so eloquently expressing the power of generous human spirit for doing good in the service of others and the power of education for creating condition for the freedom of enslaved Oromo children . Such is Dr. Sandra Shell's *The Children of Hope the Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia*. The author is a fine historian by training and librarian by profession. Her excellent book gives examples of kind individuals, who showed profound desire for helping Oromo slave children by learning their language, meticulously recording their stories, providing them with education that altered their lives. The book depicts the Oromo children's experience from " their earliest memories to the moment they reached the Red Sea coast" (p. 2), the loss of one or both of their parents, their capture by slave traders, the pain and suffering they endured from the point of capture until their arrival at the ports of the Red Sea coast to be taken to slave markets of Arabia. This remarkable book is based not only on an impeccable scholarship supported by wide array of sources, but also by unmatched objectivity on the part of a very fine scholar, who after decades of labor of love, brought to life the untold story of Oromo slave children. The passion with which the author pursued her project for decades is genuinely beyond a call of scholarly duty. It shows her determination and deeply

seated commitment for shining light on the story of Oromo children.

Sandra Shell began “working for Rhodes University Cory Library for historical research in the eastern Cape” province of South Africa in 1972. It was while Ms. Shell was familiarizing herself with that library’s manuscripts that she discovered cards referring a cluster of sixty-four “ Galla slaves” (1-2). Galla was the name that imposed on the Oromo by their Abyssinian Christian neighbors. Abyssinians are the Amhara and Tigrayan people, whose elites dominated the political landscape of the old Christian kingdom in northern Ethiopia as well as the modern Ethiopian Empire since its creation during and after the 1880s. Gadaa Melbaa maintains that “the Abyssinians attach a derogatory connotation to Galla, namely “pagan, savage, uncivilized, uncultured, enemy, slave or inherently inferior”.² The name with such negative concepts was imposed on the Oromo for the purpose of distorting their identity, denigrating their culture and belittling their human quality. The Oromo did not call themselves Galla. The reference to Oromo slaves intrigued and planted in the mind of Sandra Shell “a lifetime interest in and fascination with these Oromo children—their origins and their outcomes” (2) whose history she tirelessly worked for bringing to life with captivating scholarship.

The Oromo children were victims of the slave trade and the worst famine that engulfed the Ethiopian region between 1888-1892. The slave trade had existed in the region of what is today Ethiopia, long before the nineteenth century. However, during the reign of King Menelik of Shawa, (1865-1889) and the Emperor of Ethiopia (1889-1913) slavery and the slave trade increased dramatically for several reasons. First, Menelik was the great sponsor of the slave trade, as he “was collecting a tax of 1 Maria Theresa (MT) dollar (or thaler) passing through his kingdom and as well as a tax of 1 Maria Thresa thaler for every slave sold” (p. 25) in the slave market of Rogge in his kingdom. Second, King Menelik

was involved in the war of conquest and continued raids into Oromo and other areas in southern Ethiopia which produced thousands of captives especially for him thus becoming the “greatest beneficiary “of the slave trade in Ethiopia.”³ Third, “prisoners captured in the course of his predatory battles, or *zamacha* , were sold in slave markets” (p. 25). Fourth, Harold Marcus maintains that Menelik was “...Ethiopia's greatest slave entrepreneur and received the bulk of the proceeds.”⁴ Fifth, some of his own generals’ and their warriors were slavers who depopulated several areas. ⁵ Sixth, Emperor Menelik received prisoners of war “ as tribute, and collected revenue in slaves from his [governors] of the conquered territories until his death.”⁶ Finally, while passing several proclamations abolishing the slave trade, Menelik, the Christian Emperor of Ethiopia, together with his wife, owned some 70,000 domestic slave population at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷

In over three decades, while reading slave trade literature for teaching African and world history, I have never come across a single reference which shows an individual or a husband and wife team, who owned as many slaves as Emperor Menelik and his wife did. In short, the book under review, makes a wonderful contribution to our understanding of the connection between Emperor Menelik’s expansion and massive increase in slave trade and slavery in Ethiopia.

Oromo children were enslaved either 1888 or 1889, during the time when Menelik’s conquest weakened the Oromo population, which was accompanied by the worst natural calamities- the Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892.⁸ The famine was caused by a combination of disasters. First, there was an epidemic of rinderpest, which spread like wild fire and decimated almost ninety percent of all livestock in Ethiopia (p. 26). “Emperor Menelik was said to have lost 250,000 head”⁹ of cattle. Those cattle were captured from the Oromo and other people of southern Ethiopia during

Menelik's wars of conquest. Second, the cattle plague destroyed plough oxen and was followed by drought which led to a serious dislocation of agriculture in the country. Third, there were swarms of locusts and worms of caterpillars which devoured the little that was planted by hand. This led to the worst famine in the history of the Horn of Africa.¹⁰ That famine unleashed "the war of the strong against the weak"¹¹, to the extent that the three most powerful governors, namely, *Ras Darge*, Menelik's uncle (who "massacred 12,000 [Oromo] on September 6, 1886",¹² and became the governor of Arsi region), *Ras Makonnen* (the father of the future Emperor Haile Sellassie, and the governor of Hararge and Dajazmach Walda Gabriel the conqueror and governor of Charchar area, they all plundered¹³ one after the other, the resources of the Oromo regions of what are today Hararge, Bale and Arsi, thus exposed the Oromo to combinations of biblical disasters. The terrible famine was accompanied by murderous epidemics of typhus, cholera, dysentery, and small pox, which claimed the lives of "between one-third and one-half of the human population of Ethiopia" (p. 27). Mike Davis, an economic historian, cites contemporary observers who estimated "that somewhere between two-thirds and fourth-fifth of pastoral Oromo had disappeared".¹⁴ Martial De Salaviac, a French missionary, who saw with "his own eyes" 400 brave Oromo warriors, whose right wrists were "cut in one day" in 1886 by the order of Walde Gabriel because of their heroic resistance.¹⁵ The same missionary adds that pastoral Oromo "deprived of milk and meat ...their ranks" [were reduced] to eyesight"¹⁶ This was because "cattle were central to the lives and livelihood of the Oromo [pastoralists] and farmers" (p. 30).

After Emperor Menelik's conquest, traditional Oromo "freehold [land] tenure" (43) system was abolished and replaced by the *Gabbar* system (serfdom) under which two-thirds of the lands of the Oromo and other conquered people of southern Ethiopia were taken away and distributed among

the *naftayna* (armed settlers), the Orthodox Church, and the state. Only one-third was left for the Oromo, on condition that they supplied forced labor to the armed settlers, as well as taxes, dues, and tithes to the imperial court and the Orthodox Church. Since the armed settlers were not paid salaries and did not engage in productive activities, they were given Oromo *gabbars* (serfs) in lieu of salary and “as material property to be owned and used as personal property.”¹⁷ The armed settlers were soldiers, policemen, judges, governors, tribute collectors and they who owned the conquered people of southern Ethiopia as they owned cattle and slaves. When governors and their followers were transferred from one region to another, they took with them their private *gabbars*.¹⁸ When Oromo *gabbars* (serfs) were unable to pay tribute, the armed settlers captured their cattle and enslaved their children. For instance, “Liban Bultum” whose father failed to pay the onerous tribute, the armed settlers “seized his son in lieu of the tribute debt, carrying him off to a nearby slave market and selling him...to slave traders and merchants” (p. 36). According to Sandra Shell: “It was in the climate of political vulnerability and ecological disaster that the families of the Oromo children central to this study found themselves in the late 1880s” (27).

Most of enslaved Oromo children were victims of professional slave raiders/ traders coupled with raids by armed settlers. Those children were drawn from “every social stratum”, i.e. from the lowest “to the local royalty...driven in part by the exigencies of Menelik’s invading forces to feed Oromo slaves in large numbers into the train of the external slave trade” (p. 51). The professional slave raiders preyed on orphans who lacked full family protection. What is more, “slave raiders either kidnaped, purchased, or seized their Oromo captives as spoils of war” (p. 63). Timothy Fernyhough’s research confirms¹⁹ that the children were victims of “state sponsored expeditions, the thefts of those already enslaved, the seizure of children as they tended livestock, house breaking at

night, ambushes, natural disasters such [as] famine and drought” (63).

It is impossible to know the number of Oromo children who were enslaved during the 1880s. However, few things can be said about it. First, all Oromo children experienced “a truly conjugation of natural and manmade plagues”²⁰ at some stage of their enslavement and to one degree or another (29). Second, Oromo girls, who were famous for their beauty “were the highest valued of all slaves in the Horn of Africa external trade. This might account for the higher percentage of girls than boys being captured specifically for the export network” (68). Third, “the range of the girl’s journeys [to the sea ports] was considerably shorter than those of the boys.... This may indicate a need to get girls to the coast by the shortest routes possible” (81). Fourth, Oromo children, especially boys” changed hands [owners] up ten times” (88). Finally, a total of 204 Oromo slave children, who were packed into slave traders’ dhows were intercepted by the British Royal Navy on the Red Sea on two separate occasions. The first larger group of 183 children were liberated “on 16 September 1888”, while the second smaller group were liberated on August 5, 1889 (98). The children were brought to Aden and placed under the care of Colonel Edward V. Stace, who “was charged with finding an appropriate sanctuary for them”(111). The children, who endured unimaginable pain and suffering from the time they were enslaved until they were liberated, “had little resistance to the new opportunistic infections they now encountered”, to the extent that “Fully one- fifth” of both boys and girls had died by the end of 1888 (p.114). The liberated Muslim Oromo children, who were the majority of the 204 children were adopted by established Arab families.

A total of sixty-four Oromo children were placed under the care of “Scottish Missionaries at Sheikh Othman, an oasis just north of Aden” (p. 111). The missionaries appear to have taken advantage of “having three fluent Oromo

speakers at the mission to assist them in interviewing the children for documenting their life stories, “which were transcribed and translated by Mathew Lochhead (111), a missionary who was fluent Oromo speaker. Another missionary, William Gardner, “devoted his time to learning” Oromo language. It was the documentation of those children’s life stories, which makes this book unique in the field of slave trade literature.

I say unique, because for over three decades, I had a good of fortune of reading many books on the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans as well as the Red Sea slave trade, but none provides so much information about an individual slave, including “the names of their villages, towns, regions, and countries of domicile” (211). Additionally, every child gave her/his “name, age, parents names, orphan hood, number of siblings, total family composition, and kinship structures” (29).

No other book gives so much detail about a single slave as does *The Children of Hope the Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia*. This remarkable book gives to the Oromo slave children their “authentic African voices relating their first passage experiences within weeks of their liberation” (3). What is more, the narratives of the Oromo children of Hope adds “a new dimension to our understanding of the first passage ordeal with their accounts of sickness, ill-treatment, torture and torment” (91). The Oromo children vividly recalled their journeys from capture to arrival at the Red Sea ports.

The children detailed each segment of their journeys. Giving the names of every place they visited, how long each segment took, how long they paused or stayed in servitude in each place, how they were treated en route, whether or not they tried to escape, how they were punished for their attempts, how many times they

changed hands, the identities of the slave traders and their owners, and how much the traders demanded in cash or kind for their human merchandise. The children's personal narratives also revealed whether or not they were sold into the local slave trade system, what their duties were, and the length of time they spent enslaved domestically (73).

The book under review gives several examples of incredible kindness shown toward Oromo children by so many individuals. Let me just mention four examples that will touch the readers soul and lift the human spirit. The first were three missionaries at the Free Church of Scotland at Sheikh Othman Mission, who warmly welcomed Oromo children and started school for their education. They were Mathew Lochhead, William Gardner (both devoted their time to learning the Oromo language) and Alexander Paterson (131). The three teachers who were fluent Oromo provided the Oromo children with basic education. The second was that of Gebru Desta, an Amhara Christian from northern Ethiopia, who was "a highly educated missionary". When he heard the news about the rescue of Oromo slave children, he left his "Basel Mission in East Africa" and joined the missionaries at Sheikh Othman for educating the Oromo children (114-116). As a fluent Oromo language speaker, who was well acquainted with Oromo culture and way of life, Gebru provided very practical and helpful guidance for those Oromo children. The third example of kindness was that of William Grant, a young Scotsman. In a slave market in Arabia, Grant spotted Berille Boko, a young Oromo slave girl, who was displayed for sale. Grant paid 175 Maria Theresa (MT) dollar (or thaler) for securing "her manumission and Freedom. Grant took her with him to Aden, where he put her into the care of the missionaries... 'to be educated at his expense' What is more generous and truly uplifting than what William Grant did for Berille Boko, who ultimately realized her personal potential by becoming a

school teacher and raising a family in South Africa. She was the last of the Oromo children to be captured and liberated” (109-110). The final example of kindness toward the Oromo children was that the missionaries at the Free Church of Scotland at Sheikh Othman Mission, who together with some British officials, searched “for a new, healthier environment” for those children. In 1890, Oromo children were brought “to Lovedale Institution in the Eastern Cape [of] South Africa (“(121). The above-mentioned missionaries, Mathew Lochhead and Alexander Paterson followed Oromo children to South Africa, which demonstrated their genuine commitment for the welfare of those children. At Lovedale, Mathew Lochhead taught Oromo children in “their mother tongue” (114).

From Aden to South Africa, these Oromo children had journeyed into hope and a new life at Lovedale. Their arrival at Lovedale was dramatic. It “signaled a rare unexpected link between South Africa and Ethiopia during the nineteenth Century” (130). Ironically, today there are thousands of Oromo refugees in South Africa, who fled from Ethiopia in order to save their lives in the face of a tyrannical regime. In that regard, Oromo refugees of the twenty-first century followed in the footsteps of those Oromo children who arrived at Lovedale in 1890.

“Lovedale was in that era the leading missionary educational institution in [South Africa], with the reputation of nurturing, and training many of the country’s future leaders across a wide array of fields” (144). At Lovedale, these Oromo children “had to adjust to a new environment, a new language, new customs, and a new curriculum” (131). Additionally, they had to fit with local Xhosa, and other children from what are today Malawi, Botswana, Basutoland and other African countries. Despite their traumatic background, the Oromo children “performed extraordinarily

well” (153) by dominating “the top ten class positions” (140). After six years of education, “the young adult Oromo began leaving Lovedale to fend for themselves” (150). Their departure from Lovedale was as dramatic as their arrival at that educational institution.

The education the Oromo children received at Lovedale enabled the young adult Oromo to realize their personal potential and determine their own destiny. Several of them were employed in different industries in South Africa and beyond. Three Oromo girls, namely, Bishp Jarsa, Berille Boko, and Watkitu Galatu” (150) who were trained as teachers, taught in different cities in South Africa. Two Oromo were employed for few years “in the Rhodesian railways” (in today’s Zimbabwe). “Mulata Billi became a sailor and settled in the United States” (164). Gamaches Garba and Tolassa Wayessa were enlisted in the British army in Natal during the South African War in 1900. In his own words, Tolassa stated “I was very nearly blown to pieces by shells...After the relief of Ladysmith, I was transferred to the special Ammunition Column of the Royal Artillery” (163). A total of twenty-three Oromo freely decided to remain permanently in South Africa as productive members of their adopted country. Of those twenty-three, it was Bisho Jarsa, who gave the “greatest gift to her adopted country in the form of her eldest grandson”, Neville Alexander (166). After his graduation from the University of Cape Town, Neville Alexander “won an Alexander Von Humboldt foundation Fellowship, Germany’s premier scholarship and [admitted] to the University of Tübingen [from] where he gained his PhD in German literature in 1961” (152). Shortly after his return to South Africa, he was involved deeply in the South African peoples struggle against the Apartheid system. The Apartheid regime imprisoned Dr. Neville Alexander “from 1964-1974 ...on Robben Island (concurrently with Nelson Mandela) “. After his release, Dr. Alexander taught at the University of Cape Town, where “he emerged as one of South Africa’s

leading intellectuals, recognized as a scholar of linguistic theory and a noted educationalist. He believed passionately in education, linguistic diversity, justice and equality” (152).

The final inspiring part of *The Children of Hope the Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia* is the wonderful measure several young adult Oromo’s took for responding to the call of their homeland. Eight of them financed from their meager savings, their expensive return travel to Ethiopia by 1902. In 1903 when the Lovedale missionaries “asked the surviving Oromo in South Africa, if they would return home if offered an assisted passage”, several responded positively. However, when the missionaries failed to fulfill their tantalizing promise:

The Oromo, under the leadership of Liban Bultum in Port Elizabeth, approached the German consul in 1908 to ask for assistance in returning to Ethiopia. This resulted in a flurry of correspondence between the governments of Cape [province], Britain, and Germany, and the court of Emperor Menelik II. With their return passage subsidized by the Emperor in Addis Ababa, a group of seventeen Oromo finally sailed for Aden on 9 June 1909 aboard Germany’s Kronprinz. Their dramatic return to Ethiopia came, ironically on the back of the scramble for Africa (198).

Emperor Menelik subsidizing the return of seventeen literate and skilled Oromo to Ethiopia, probably symbolizes his “redemptive, restorative” action for his wars of conquest which led to enslavement of most Oromo children. Be that as it may, of those Oromo who returned to their home land, two individuals stand out above all others. The first is Liban Bultum, who was captured by Emperor Menelik’s armed settlers and sold to slave traders [in 1888], because his father was unable to pay the heavy tribute demanded from him. As

indicated above on this page, it was Liban Bultum who successfully corresponded with British, Cape governments and the German consul, which resulted in the return of Seventeen Oromo to their homeland. After his return to Ethiopia in 1909, Liban Bultum “assisted missionary and Lexicologist Edwin C. Foot in compilation of the second Afaan Oromo-English/English Afaan Oromo dictionary ever published” (36) up to that time. Almost a century after its publication, this dictionary is still very useful for researchers who are interested in the Oromo language. The other interesting person is Tolassa Wayessa, who was involved in “considerable personal correspondence” with Lovedale missionaries and his Oromo friends. In 1899, Tolassa was employed in “East London as a photographer’s assistant”. The following year he enlisted in the British army during the South African War. Later he financed his own return to his homeland and arrived in Ethiopia in 1903. In Addis Ababa, he was employed “as an interpreter for ...London based International Railway Trust and Construction Company...agency in Abyssinia”. Later, he was employed in the German Legation in Addis Ababa. He married and” raised a family of two boys and one girl”. Today Tolassa’s descendants are living in Addis Ababa, Canada and England (162-63). As the two best documented Oromo returnees to Ethiopia, I will be surprised if Dr. Sandra Shell, will not write at least an article about Liban Bultum and Tolassa Wayessa in the future.

The Children of Hope the Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia has eleven chapters, interspersed with numerous figures, graphs, maps, precious photos of Oromo children, their teachers, their schools and domiciles. It has also insightful Reflections and appendices with wealth of information. This is an excellent book that systematically maps the journey the Oromo children traveled from the moment they were captured by slave raiders and armed settlers, the extremely difficult journey they endured to the Red Sea coast, the many challenges they faced along the way

and how they overcame all their obstacles with commitment to their education and iron determination for realizing their potential. What some of them achieved is beyond imagination, which feels one with pride, considering what they went through while they were young.

Finally, *The Children of Hope the Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia*, is a magnificent tribute to the author's dedication for bringing to life the story of those Oromo children. It is a very insightful, extensively researched book. It was the wonderful "record-keeping of the Scottish missionaries [that] allowed for a comprehensive longitudinal analysis of the children's lives from cradle to grave, assuredly unique in the slave literature" (199). The author's life-long interest in the Oromo slave children shines on every page of this delightful book. With her razor-sharp mind, a zest for telling their story, Sandra Shell's has brought to "vivid life" the story of Oromo slave children that was unknown before the publication of this beautifully written book, with profoundly gripping story that is captivating to read from beginning to end. Sandra Shell has produced splendid scholarly book that will remain relevant for decades to come. Those in the field of Oromo, Ethiopian and African studies are indebted to Sandra Shell for bringing to life, the story of Oromo slave children, that "had lain virtually unexamined for more than a century" (p.2). *The Children of Hope the Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia* is an excellent addition to growing literature on the Red Sea slave trade.

ENDNOTES

¹. In the interest of transparency, a page and half brief summary of the main points of this book was submitted to the African Studies Review.

². Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia: An Introduction to the History of the Oromo people*

(Minneapolis, MN: Kirk House, 1999), 14.

³. Bulcha, Mekuria, *The Making of the Oromo Diaspora A Historical Sociology of Forced Migration* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2002), 55.

⁴. . Marcus, Harold, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia, 1844-1913*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 73.

⁵. Darley, H. *Slaves and Ivory: A Record of Adventure and Exploration in the Unknown Sudan, and among the Abyssinian slave Raiders* (London, 1926), 197-99, 201.

⁶. Bulcha, 55.

⁷. Pankhurst, Richard: *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800-1935* (Addis

Ababa: Haile Selassie I University Press, 1968), 75.

⁸. _____” The Great Ethiopian famine of 1888-1892: A new assessment, Part one *Journal of History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 21, no.2 (April 1966): 95-124.

_____” The Great Ethiopian famine of 1888-1892: A new assessment, Part Two *Journal of History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* , 21, no.3 (July 1966):271-94.

⁹. Davis, Mike, *Late Victorian Holocausts El Nino Famines and The Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2017 Edition), 136.

¹⁰. Davis, 140.

¹¹. *Ibid.*, 136.

¹². .Abbas H. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880-1974 the Case of the Arsi Oromo* (Leiden, The Netherlands, Brill, 2014), 153.

¹³. . Davis, 136, 141.

¹⁴. *Ibid.*

¹⁵. *An Ancient People Great African Nation the Oromo*, As Recounted by Martial De Salviac , Translation from the Original French Edition by Ayalew Kanno (East Lansing, Michigan, Self-published, 2005), 350.

¹⁶. *Ibid.*

- ¹⁷. Lâpeso Delébo, *Ya'ityopyâ Yagabâr Šer'êâtnâ gemer kâpitâlizm, 1900–1966* (Addis Ababa: Artistic Press, 1991): 213–14, 219.
- ¹⁸. Timothy D. Fernyhough, “Serfs, Slaves and Shefta: Modes of Production in Southern Ethiopia from the Late Nineteenth Century to 1941” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1986), 181–82; Darley, *Slavery and Ivory in Abyssinia*, 130–31.
- ¹⁹. Fernyhough, 119–20.
- ²⁰. Davis, 136.

Mohammed Hassen
Georgia State University