Book Review

Children of Hope: The Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa, by Sandra Rowoldt Shell. Ohio University Press, 2018, 352 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8214-2318-9. Hardcover price: $49.95.

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Sandra Rowoldt Shell's recounting of 64 first-person narratives of enslaved Oromo (Ethiopian) children is an innovative and well-written piece of research. As the Horn of Africa is an under-researched geographic area for the study of both domestic and external slave trades, the plurality of these first-person slave narratives has much to teach the reader about the sensitive topic of African domestic slavery. While we can question if these accounts of the enslaved children (aged 10–19, with an average age of 14 at the time of the interviews) are typical, they nonetheless reveal a complicated and detailed history of slavery from the Horn of Africa.

Shell systematically coded the narratives to highlight trends and generate keen insights into the ordeal of the children's first passage (moments of capture, identities of initial captors and subsequent slave traders, the commodity value of the enslaved, gender differences in terms of treatment and value, periods of domestic servitude, pre-capture social status, parental occupation, etc.). Shell employs prosopography, a methodology of quantitative history (cliometrics) to systematically analyse the collective characteristics of the biographies. Although she provides a brief synopsis of each of the 64 narratives in an appendix, Shell analyses them as a group, highlighting similarities and variations in the children's' experiences. In addition to the narratives, Shell uses archival data, such as the records of the Royal Navy which liberated the children, and missionaries who interacted with the children at different times post-emancipation. Additionally, Shell refers to other external sources such as school records, a survey on repatriation issued by the Lovedale Missionary Institute in 1903, death registers, personal correspondence, and other official documentations, thus providing for a more complete picture. Moreover, to complete her rigorous methodological arsenal, Shell employs Geographic Information System (GIS) to map out the internal

journeys the children took before reaching the coastal areas and being transported out of Africa across the Red Sea.

The practice of slavery, both domestic and international, was widespread in the Horn of Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was only outlawed and abolished in Ethiopia in 1936 under the regime of Haile Selassie. Domestic African slavery has been alternatively interpreted as 'rights-in-persons' and 'slavery-to-kinship' continuum within an intricate system of African social and kinship relationships. In the example of the Oromo, the practice known as *guddifachaa* meant that child war captives were adopted and therefore incorporated into the victors' kin group. In effect, this became a system of kinship absorption or ambiguous slavery, although disagreements on these interpretations abound. In the late 1880s, Ethiopia experienced a devastating drought and ensuing famine that wiped out one-third to one-half of the country's population. Bartering children for food became a means of survival, and Shell aptly notes that "enslavement was an individuated, not a collective process" (p. 191).

Shell indicates that there was no "concerted plan to enslave a particular group," but that circumstances brought together 64 children who "shared a common heritage and a broad, common area of origin" (p. 194). While 83% of the enslaved children are of Oromo origin, 7% were Kafficho, 2.4% were Shangalla, Gurage, and Yamo, and the ethnicities of 7.1% of the children could not be determined. Shell erroneously asserts that these other ethnic groups are cognate with the Oromo or share strong genealogical or political links to the Oromo. In fact, these other ethnic groups were raided and enslaved, not just by highlanders, but also by Oromo slavers. Unfortunately, this is not the only place where Shell makes an erroneous assertion about ethnic identity in Ethiopia. The enslaved children repeatedly describe their captors and slavers as 'Sidama', which Shell misinterprets as Abyssinian. For an Afaan Oromo speaker during the turn of the 20th century, 'Sidama' was a generic term that referred to non-Oromos, outsiders, aliens, or enemies. Therefore, equating 'Sidama' with Abyssinian is reductive and incorrect. This misrepresentation is a disservice to the author's otherwise brilliant scholarship as it stretches the narratives of the enslaved children to fit within a particular contemporary narrative. It also highlights the author's limited knowledge about crucial aspects of Oromo history, their internal migrations, and their encounters with other communities. A discussion of the place of the Oromo in the larger story of local and transnational networks of slave trade in the Indian Ocean World is missing.

Shell argues that "any a priori assumptions that slaves were garnered from only the poorest and humblest of Ethiopian society have to be abandoned" (p. 50), and advocates for an understanding that the children came from a broad spectrum of social strata, even royal lines. Although the enslaved children emanated from all socioeconomic backgrounds, their religious status is revealing. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church purposely neglected to penetrate the southern territories of its empire, enabling a continued source of subservient populations. As a result, the Oromo either retained their traditional belief system of *Waqqifecha*, which is closely linked with the *Gaada* system of governance, or converted to Protestantism and Islam. All of these religions were subjugated compared to the older Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. This also meant that the Oromo population could be used as slave labour by the more dominant ethnic groups based on religious grounds.

Shell makes some problematic and indefensible comparisons between the racial segregation of South Africa's apartheid regime and Ethiopia's present-day system of ethnic federalism. How can one conscionably compare a system of white (colonial) supremacy with indigenous ethnic federalism? She further rehashes a limited history of the 'colonization' of Oromo principalities by the Abyssinian Empire without providing the necessary nuanced context to understand this complicated history of state expansion. For instance, while Shell mentions the system of *guddifachaa,* whereby individual children are adopted into a new family, she neglects to address the system of mass assimilation campaigns knows as *mogassa,* where entire communities are voluntarily or forcibly integrated into the Oromo group, thus gradually increasing the size of the Oromo population. Shell ardently criticises Ethiopian studies for bypassing the history of the Oromo, whom she paints as singularly oppressed, blurring the boundary between scholarship and political practice. Yet, Ethiopian studies has made tremendous strides over the last 60 years that take into account most of the criticism that Shell levels. Nonetheless, since this problematic historical reexamination of the ethnic plurality of Ethiopia is not the key intervention of this book, it can be begrudgingly overlooked.

While the internal trade of domestic slavery was controlled locally, Arabs governed the Red Sea trade. From initial capture to the Red Sea crossing, the enslaved took slow and intricate internal routes and were used as domestic slaves. The author limits her analysis to the length of time between initial capture and arrival at the Red Sea crossing (from 1 to 9 years), and notes differences in the children's treatment based on gender. Since the girls were viewed as more valuable, their trek was generally shorter than that of the boys.

Moreover, while the first passage (from capture to the coast) was arduous, the middle passage across the Red Sea (unlike the Trans-Atlantic Slave trades) took a matter of hours. In 1888 and 1889, the enslaved children were loaded into dhows with the intended destination of the Arabian slave market. When the dhows carrying the enslaved children were intercepted by the British Royal Navy, the enslaved children regained their freedom. The year of the Oromo children's liberation coincides with the ascendency of King Menelik II to Ethiopia's imperial throne in 1889. The children became 'prize slaves' as the British were rewarding the liberation of slaves after the abolition of the slave trades in 1807. The irony that the Europeans who were the biggest instigators and beneficiaries of African slave trades later became the self-styled saviors of enslaved Africans is somehow lost in this narration.

After reaching Aden, the British decided that sending the children back to Ethiopia would potentially condemn them to a life of slavery. The Lovedale Missionary Institute in the Eastern Cape of South Africa (founded in 1824 by the Glasgow Missionary Society) would eventually become the home of the enslaved Oromo children. The gender differences upon arrival were marked. The author notes that the girls seem traumatized, probably due to sexual trauma that the narratives fail to capture. Since Lovedale was the leading missionary institution of its era in South Africa and educated many future leaders, the Oromo children received unrivaled education. While Shell implies that race did not matter in the integration of the Oromo children in South Africa, it is impossible to imagine this to be the unadulterated reality. After receiving their education in South Africa, between 1900 and 1908, 21 of the 64 Oromo children eventually returned to Ethiopia (8 independently and 13 with German assistance). Others either died or permanently remained in South Africa. The fates of the rest are unknown.

Overall, this book provides the reader a complete overview of the children's lives from pre-capture to enslavement to eventual return to their homeland. It is unequivocally a must-read for any person interested in the African slave trade, particularly as it concerns the first passage. For future research, it would be informative to learn about the long-term fairings of the survivors and their lives in South Africa and Ethiopia.