

CHILDREN OF HOPE: The Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa

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The book titled *Children of Hope: The Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa*, explores and sheds some light on the experiences of the sixty-four Oromo slaves who were taken from Ethiopia to South Africa. The book highlights the liberation of Oromo slaves by the British Navy and taken to Lovedale institution championed by the Scottish Missionaries. This great compilation comprises five different parts and eleven descriptive chapters. Each chapter covers significant aspects such as geography; topography; Ethiopian population; demographics; family structures; routes from capture to the coast; education at Lovedale as well as the dilemma regarding returning home of slaves amid political unrests. Shell's experience as a librarian gave her direct access to the manuscripts that capture the experiences of slavery by Oromo slaves which included their narratives. Furthermore, the author was able to get in touch with the grandson of one of the rescued Oromo slaves, who provided incisive accounts about the experiences of slavery by his ancestors. The geographical influence of Ethiopia and the *Horn of Africa*, as well as the political and socio-economic impact on the Oromo captives and their families, will be further explored in the review.

In the four chapters which make up the first part of the book subtitled roots: Memories of Home, Shell provides a strong description and understanding of the horn of Africa. This part of the book indicates that there are eighty groups that make up the population in Ethiopia, and that the Oromo people (who were called the *Galla* which meant "uncultured" people until the 1970s) amount to a larger percentage of the Ethiopian population. Shell argues that the history of Ethiopia has not been adequately explored, it tends to focus on those who were in power at the expense of those who were marginalized, such as the Oromo people. Parallels are drawn between Ethiopian slavery and Apartheid South Africa. The Tigrayans for example, make up only 6 percent of the Ethiopian population, but managed

to occupy positions of power. This comparison enables South Africans to understand the commonalities between the political dynamics of the two countries. The writer further explains that although there are eighty-four languages in Ethiopia, Ethiopians are united by one language which is the Oromo language (Afaan Oromoo) that is spoken in other parts of Africa like Kenya, Sudan and Somalia. In terms of religion, Shell explains that the Oromo's traditional religion is centered around *Waaqa* who is defined as the "Sky God" and that they also worship the big tree on the mountain. The writer also takes us through the myths surrounding the origin of the Oromo people, which include among other things the claim that they were not the first inhabitants of Ethiopia. In the second chapter, the writer deals with the Oromo family structures and the recruitment strategies on the basis of the accounts by sixty-four Oromo slave children. It turns out that some of these children were already orphans when they were taken in as slaves, while others were separated from their parents, ranging between the ages of seven and fourteen. The first part of the book profoundly provides the reader with the context within which slavery and slave trade particularly in the *Horn of Africa* thrived.

The second part of the book comprises two chapters and explores the slave trading routes from the point of capture to the coast, as well as from the moment of capture right up to the experiences of the road by the Oromo slave children. The writer narrates the process of enslavement of these children amongst other issues and highlights the involvement of the state, capture of children while they were heading livestock, night house break-ins, ambushes, and debt redemption. There is also reference to literature from the travellers who have studied this enslavement which indicates that some parents sold their children using tricks and deception. Significantly this part of the book answers the most fundamental question: Who captured the children? The varied ways through which the children were captured shows that some of the enslavement was forceful and violent, while some did not experience violence from their captors at all. The literature goes a little further to identify the instigators of *Horn of Africa* slave-trade to be the "Arabs," although at the point of capture, there were different agents including the local people whom the Oromo children were able to recognize as their captors. Gender dynamics are also discussed with some interesting revelation that 93 percent of the captors were male and only 7 percent were female, who often used trickery such as luring children away from their homes.

The third part of the book comprises four chapters which cover the journey of Oromo slave-children to Lovedale in South Africa and their settlement there. In this part of the book, the writer included records of Reverend William J. B Moir who welcomed and took care of the rescued Oromo children. These records reveal that the Oromo children

experienced culture shock at Lovedale, although they were familiar with some of the things from their country such as herding cattle, nature of houses and the geographical make-up of South Africa including its environmental layout, which enabled them to relate to some degree. Processes that were undertaken to help these children settle in, including building accommodation for them upon arrival, were also covered extensively in this part of the book. On the education front, the Oromo children had to adapt to the South African curriculum, which obligated the school to find people who were conversant with Oromo language to translate teaching and learning material. Significantly, the writer delved a little deeper into what the Oromo children were taught, who taught them, and their academic progress. It is also revealed in this part of the book that some of the challenges that these children were confronted with were dire, culminating in the death of at least 13 in the first ten years of their settlement in Lovedale.

The fourth part of the book captures significant aspects of the Oromo children's experiences in South Africa. They grew to become literate adults who were at liberty to determine their future and make independent choices including returning home. The parties involved in making such determination, were also identified in this section of the book.

In the very last part of the book, Sandra Shell reflects and interprets data from the entire book. All the aspects covered in this book which include among others; exploring Ethiopia, the capture of Oromo children, their rescue and lived experiences at Lovedale with the missionaries and their eventual return home, are quite significant and represent the crucial part of African history. Furthermore, they enhance the book's usefulness to both historians and readers who are keen on tapping into themes from African history, particularly slavery. The use of primary evidence in the form of graphs, pictures, maps, tables, interviews and letters of the Oromo slaves, strengthen the credibility of the book, in its contribution to the development of historical knowledge and understanding. Although the book is presented as a well-thought out piece of academic writing, it is however less accommodating to readers who are not familiar with historical concepts and who do not have a good background in geography. Some of the illustrations used require knowledge of social sciences particularly the geographical component.