



Sandra Rowoldt Shell. *Children of Hope: The Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018. Illustrations. 352 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-2318-9.

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Sandra Rowoldt Shell's *Children of Hope: The Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa* uses prosopography—the systematic analysis of a collection of biographies—to construct a nuanced and detailed picture of the experience of enslaved people, with particular emphasis on the “first passage” of slavery from capture to the coast. She works with a remarkable (and unique) set of sources, consisting mainly of sixty-four original accounts by enslaved Oromo children, given to missionaries within weeks of their liberation by the British navy off the coast of Aden. These accounts, complemented by later reports from the Keith-Falconer Mission in Aden and the Lovedale Mission in South Africa, allow Shell to reconstruct life histories that contribute to the histories of the East African slave trade and children's experiences of enslavement.

This highly technical work is divided into five parts that trace the children's journey from their homes in Ethiopia to South Africa and, in many cases, back to Ethiopia. She begins with part 1, “Roots: Memories of Home,” in which she establishes the Ethiopian context. Each chapter of the book builds around the children's narratives, which include descriptions of their families and communities. The children's enslavement came during the rise of Menelik II as well as catastrophic ecological collapse, leading to displacement and

famine and the choice by some families to sell their children or kin.

The second part, “Routes: From Capture to Coast,” traces the “first passage” of the children's journeys and describes not only the moment in which they became enslaved but also the journey they took before arriving at the coast. This section is particularly notable for the many hardships that inflicted psychological and physical trauma to these girls and boys, who at the time of their interviews ranged in age from ten to nineteen. Because her sources provide such consistent information (each child answered the same set of questions by the missionaries), she can use her analysis to identify many patterns through the data, from the relative ages of boys and girls to the likelihood of running away, time spent enslaved before reaching the coast, and the manner in which they became enslaved in the first place.

The data here is truly remarkable. For scholars of childhood, the availability of first-hand accounts by children offers unparalleled insights into their experiences. Shell is correct to note that most accounts of childhood are filtered through adult perceptions; in the case of these narratives, that is not because they are the later reflections of an adult but because adult missionaries asked the questions and the responses were “transcribed and translated by Matthew Lochhead, assisted by

interpreters” (p. 111). She dismisses any possible anti-Muslim bias but does not address other ways the missionaries may have, intended or not, shaped the accounts of the children. She also goes too far in her assumption that because the children gave the accounts within weeks of their liberation they are not touched by “the filter of hindsight, learned experience, or suggestion,” since hindsight is of course always a factor when recounting events, even from an individual’s recent past (p. 6). And indeed, as her sources show, these children had traveled great distances, been traded by many individuals, and worked in various capacities before being caught onboard trading vessels (dhows) and liberated by the British.

However, the stories still offer incredible insight into these children’s lives. She explicitly challenges much of the Africanist scholarship on the interior slave trade, though for the most part she critiques arguments (such as Paul Bohannan’s, that Africans did not trade slaves for money, and the slavery-kinship continuum model that Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff used to argue that acquiring slaves was largely about incorporating kin, and that kinship protected, broadly speaking, from enslavement) that are quite dated and have robust challenges in more recent scholarship.

The real benefit of the stories, then, is their unique specificity. These are not anonymous, generalized experiences over an entire region and large span of time; they are the individual reflections reflecting slave trade patterns in central Ethiopia during the late 1880s. As a result, many significant patterns emerge. One of the most interesting to me was the length and duration of their first-passage experience. These children passed through two to ten different traders’ hands, and their journeys, mapped in the book, zigzagged back and forth before reaching the coast. Boys covered close to 2,000 kilometers on average, and girls around 1,600 kilometers; these distances took anywhere between a couple of weeks and, in one

shocking outlier, seven months. In the seven-month example, the boy in question walked almost the equivalent distance from Cape Town to Cairo.

The gender difference throughout the entirety of the ordeal is striking. Girls’ journeys, for example, were markedly shorter than those of the boys, suggesting higher value in the export market. These girls were also by and large described as beautiful, suggesting the importance of their sexual value. Indeed, the sexual aspect of the trade is under-theorized in this text. The girls themselves, or at least, in the accounts we have from the missionaries, never discussed any possible sexual abuse, though Shell does briefly address its almost certain inevitability. She only raises it, however, in relation to the markedly different behaviors of the boys and girls upon their arrival at Lovedale, when the boys seemed “ebullient, noisy, talkative, merry, and ‘naughty,’” in contrast to the girls’ “quiet, obedient, shy, and unhappy” demeanors. She remarks that “the silence surrounding any reports of the inevitable sexual abuse they would almost certainly have experienced could have concealed some massive instances of personal trauma” (p. 130). This point is not raised again until the appendix, “The Variables and Authentication of the Data,” when she references extensive evidence that girl children, in particular, were treated as “concubines” throughout their journeys and by successive owners (p. 208). In a work that otherwise is so careful to trace the devastating traumas of first-passage experience, it is disappointing that there is not more attention drawn to this all-too-common abuse and the physical and psychological consequences it could entail. It is also worth noting that the missionaries themselves asked the same questions of boys and girls, which may have contributed to this silence in the data.

Parts 3 through 5 mostly rely on records from the missions themselves, though there is also some later correspondence from the Oromo themselves. Part 3, “Revival: From *Osprey* to Lovedale,” follows

the children from their liberation in the Gulf of Aden to South Africa, allowing her to explore the history of these anti-slaving patrols and the larger mission politics of the region, which among other things determined the ultimate demography of the children who ended up in South Africa, since the missionaries selected those children deemed most fit for agricultural labor. At Lovedale, explored in chapter 10, knowing the fates of the non-Oromo in attendance casts stark light on the toll that the first passage took, as the death rate from disease was unusually high, even as the Oromo children consistently outperformed the others in their class marks. Within the comparisons and conclusions that are possible across the sixty-four children, Shell treats each child as a distinct individual. She uses their names and exact details throughout, bringing them to life on the page and providing a powerful reminder of their individual identities.

Part 4, “Return: Forging a Future,” consists of a single chapter tracing the lives of the surviving Oromo and investigating their own attempts and desires to return to Ethiopia. Of the original group, approximately a third died in South Africa before repatriation was widely available, a third made their way back to Ethiopia, and a third settled permanently in South Africa or farther afield. Return was made possible in part by a rather tense scuffle among the British, German, and Ethiopian state over funding, after which thirteen returned on a German vessel.

In the final part, “Reflections,” Shell offers a useful summary overview of the data and arguments from the text. As throughout, this is methodical and clear. The organization moves clearly, and each chapter uses section headers to group themes and data. There are thirty-five pictures, thirty-six graphs, eleven maps, and individual maps for each child’s journey to the coast. The appendices include the children’s narratives, as well as “My Essay Is upon Gallaland,” an account of Ethiopia by one of the boys. In all, this book has an incredible collection of sources and uses the data clearly and

methodically to trace almost every aspect of the children’s lives from their homes through enslavement, liberation, and adulthood. Some of the generalized conclusions she makes seem to stretch her data too far—she is, ultimately, talking about Ethiopia during the 1880s, and so comparisons to West Africa during the era of the transatlantic slave trade might be overstated. But the detail she can give about these children challenges the use of assumptions anywhere in the history of African slavery. Most notably, her deeply analyzed assessment of the first passage, and its impact on mortality and trauma, offers rich potential for historians of slavery across the continent.

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