

INTRODUCTION

Argobba, the least studied of all the Ethiopian Semitic languages, was brought to our attention by Praetorius, 1879, p. 14, who listed a small selection of the Argobba vocabulary taken from C. T. Lefebvre¹ and Seetzen². Marcel Cohen, 1931, pp. 357-375, greatly increased its exposure by reproducing all the 77 lexemes of Seetzen's vocabulary, the documents of Abba Tasfa Sellassye on the suffix pronouns attached to *bed* 'house', and a few other nouns (pp. 367-368). In addition, Cohen gave us general information on Argobba and, as far as I know, he was the first to separate Argobba into North Argobba in the region of Ankober and South Argobba in the region of Harar. It should be pointed out that the Argobbas are Muslims.

Of particular importance is Cohen 1939, pp. 375-427. In 1929 and in 1930 Mme de Monfreid who had a farm in Arawe (or Arawage), about 6 kms to the south of Harar, collected a South Argobba vocabulary using the *Questionnaire de l'institut d'ethnologie* (1928). Although not a linguist, Mme de Monfreid spoke Arabic and was probably aware of the feature of gemination. Marcel Cohen reproduced this vocabulary and carried out a grammatical analysis of it. It will be seen below that South Argobba is no longer spoken. Instead, the Argobbas of that region use Oromo.

Inspired by the work of my teacher Marcel Cohen, I decided to undertake in 1946 an investigation of both South Argobba and North Argobba. Concerning South Argobba, I soon discovered that even though there was an Argobba village to the south of Harar, its inhabitants spoke only Oromo. Argobba was no longer spoken. Thanks to the help and cordial cooperation of the late Prince Makonnen, Duke of Harar, I found the only Argobba speaker in the region of Harar, but unfortunately the prospective informant had no teeth. This was the end of my work on South Argobba.

1 *Voyage en Abyssinie exécuté pendant les années 1839-1843*. Paris: Arthus Bertrand [1845?].

2 Published in *Proben deutscher Volksmundarten. Dr. Seetzen's linguistischer Nachlass, und andere Sprachforschungen und Sammlungen besonders über Ostindien*, herausgegeben von Dr. Johannes Severin Vater. Leipzig, 1816, pp. 101-103. Note that in Leslau 1946 I expressed the opinion that this vocabulary is Selti-Wolane and not Argobba.

I then decided to turn my attention to North Argobba in the region of Ankober. I had started working on Argobba in Addis Ababa where I found a few speakers of the language, but during my second trip to Ethiopia in 1950 I decided to travel to the Ankober region where Argobba was still spoken. Accompanied by a cook, I left Addis Ababa on March 2d by car to Däbrä Bərhan which lies about 80 miles north of Addis Ababa on the Addis Ababa-Asmara road. From there a 8-hour mule trip through a country of green pastures, but bare of trees, brought me to the village of Gorebela which was the administrative seat of the nearby city of Ankober. Ankober was the capital of Ethiopia in the 18th century, and the churches of Kidanä Məhrät, Giyorgis, Maryam, and Mädhana Aläm as well as the remains of Menelik's dwelling house bear witness to the historical past of the city.

The next day I went down to the village of Aliyu Amba, another 4 hours by mule to the south-west. Aliyu Amba, inhabited by Argobba, sits at 5500 feet high (3000 feet lower than Ankober) in the *wäynä däga* region intermediary between *däga* (highland) and *q'älla* (lowland). The hot climate and the numerous flies did not add much to my comfort. It is an important market place visited by caravans from Ankober and also by the Danakil. At that time only the older men and women spoke Argobba whereas the younger generation used Amharic. (I understand that at present Argobba is no longer spoken in Aliyu Amba).

I was told that the inhabitants of Ch'anno to the south of Aliyu Amba spoke only Argobba, but this village lies in the region of the *q'älla* 'lowland' which implies torrid heat and uncomfortable conditions for work. Since there were natives of Ch'anno living in Aliyu Amba, I did not need to go to Ch'anno. I stayed only a few days in Aliyu Amba and returned to Ankober with some linguistic informants to take advantage of better working conditions.

I soon arrived at the conclusion that the Argobba which I had gathered on my previous trip from informants living in Addis Ababa was in complete agreement with the Argobba of the Argobba-speaking region, and I decided, therefore, to continue my investigation in Addis Ababa. There were quite a number of Argobba speakers living in the Mercato, the main market place of Addis Ababa

On the basis of my investigation of the language I published, prior to compiling this grammar, 5 articles on Argobba, 4 of them reprinted in the grammar.

Not much has been added to our knowledge of Argobba in the intervening decades. Information on Argobba villages has been provided by Volker Stitz, *Studien zur Kulturgeographie Zentraläthiopiens*, 1974. On pages 66-68, 183-184 he mentions the Argobba villages of Ančarro, Essoye-Awaksosē, Shonkē-Täläča, Gozē-Mēdina, Wasil, and Mälkaḡelo, but he does not inform us whether Argobba is still

spoken in these villages. As I found near Harar, the existence of Argobbas in a given village does not necessarily prove that they still speak the language.

Our knowledge of Argobba was slightly increased thanks to the "Survey of Little-known Languages of Ethiopia. Linguistic Reports", a joint Institute of Ethiopian Studies and Survey of Little-known Languages project (abbreviated "Survey"). Report no. 22, November/December 1994, deals with Argobba. The investigating team consisted of two social scientists and a linguist Zelealem Leyew. They visited the town Shewa-Robi(t) situated about 35 miles north-east of Ankober.

The report consists of 19 pages.¹ Pages 1-3 deal with the people and the language. Pages 4-7 record an English-Amharic-Argobba list of 250 words of Shewa-Robi(t). Pages 7-12 offer a few grammatical observations. On pages 12-13 the author concludes that Argobba is an Amharic dialect. Pages 14-15 contain sociolinguistic information. Pages 16-19 give an additional list of 290 words, likewise of Shewa-Robi(t).

While, according to Zelealem Leyew, the two wordlists come from the same region, there are clear differences between them, these differences being undoubtedly due to different dialects. I, therefore, designated the wordlist of pp. 4-7, and the grammatical observations as of pp. 7-12 as dialect [A], and the wordlist of pp. 16-19 as dialect [B].² A few examples will illustrate the differentiation of the dialects. Thus, 'mother' [A] *tatte*, [B] *däpe*; 'door' [A] *mäsära*, [B] *tarra*; 'night' [A] *yet*, [B] *hadara*; 'water' [A] *əhwa*, [B] *əfa*; 'buttocks' [A] *fägära*, [B] *qit*; 'back of body' [A] *gəgo*, [B] *užo*, and others.

Other pairs showed minor differences: 'donkey' [A] *hansi-a*, [B] *hasiya*; 'father' [A] *ab*, [B] *aw*; 'bone' [A] *hačəm*, [B] *əčənt*.

There are differences in gemination: 'jump' [A] *zäläl*, [B] *zälläl*; 'fall' [A] *əddäq*, [B] *ədäk* (for *ədäk'* = *ədäq*).

It is strange that the transcription of gemination is expressed differently in the two wordlists. Thus, in [A] it is expressed by the reduplication of the consonant whereas in [B] it is expressed by : preceding or following the consonant to be geminated; e.g. [A] *goğgo* 'hut', *tatte* 'mother', *čamma* 'shoe', *wätat* 'young', *šäčč-a* 'he drank', but in [B] *säm:a* 'listen', *bär:är* 'fly', *gäd:äl* 'kill', *ha:čər* 'short', *läsla:sa* 'smooth', and others.

Note that while most of the lexemes in [A] and [B] are different, some of them overlap.

On the whole the *Survey* renders a service to our knowledge of Argobba, but

1 It is quite possible that p. 20 is missing.

2 The dialect described by me is designated as [L].

unfortunately there is quite a number of misprints. Besides, the investigator was careless in the matter of gemination, as I pointed out in 139.6.

The socio-linguistic information on the language is particularly important. Since the *Survey* is not generally available, I thought it advisable to bring out the essential points.

Speaking of Argobba of Shewa-Robit, we are informed that "some of them say that they speak Argobba very well; others say they only speak a little while still others say they do not speak any Argobba at all. In general, we found that the majority of the 'Argobba' citizens of this area do not actually speak Argobba. They speak Amharic instead, and this is their native language.

Some of the younger people acquire a 'broken' Argobba from the elderly people. The elderly people themselves are not very confident about their proficiency in Argobba. Some of them remarked that they very often 'mix' Argobba and Amharic.

The Argobba people of Shewa-Robit and the surrounding villages use their language - even though it may not be 'pure' - whenever they are together in groups, and when they intend to identify themselves as distinct from the rest. In all other situations they use Amharic, even among family members.

It is also worth mentioning that the people of the Shewa-Robit area are not usually aware of a language called 'Argobba' which is supposed to be different from Amharic. They are aware of the fact that they are Muslims called 'Argobba', but they hardly regard Argobba as a distinct language. On the other hand, every person of this area is aware of Amharic, Oromo, and Afar as languages spoken in and around Shewa-Robit.

All the Argobba people of Shewa-Robit and the surrounding rural villages recommend Shonke, a settlement nearly 150 kms NW from Shewa-Robit (60 or 70 kms by car, the rest on foot). Shonke, in southern Wollo, is said to be inhabited by 'original' Argobbas who speak a 'pure' Argobba. In fact, Shonke-Argobba is considered to be different from Shewa-Robit-Argobba. A person who wants to learn Shonke-Argobba should live in Shonke, and a person who wants to learn Shewa-Robit-Argobba should live in Goze. On the other hand, the investigators also heard that in Shonke there is close language contact between Argobba and Oromo. As a result, there is a situation where 'language shift' occurs from Argobba to Oromo.

The investigators of the *Survey* were told that the same variety of Argobba spoken in Shonke was also spoken in Hararghe.

For future investigation it should be useful to indicate the villages in the Shonke area where, according to the *Survey*, Shewa-Robit Argobba is spoken. They are:

Abdelager, Akiager, Goze, Hudad, Kilegirima, Qimbibit, Lenču-ager, Meriye, Teyo, Taqwar, Ts'akolu, and Zehonka.

On the basis of the information furnished by the *Survey* in combination with my own experience in the regions of Harar and Aliyu Amba, it is safe to state that Argobba is a dying language, if not already dead in some regions. Since, however, it is still spoken in some regions - even if only by older men and women - it is highly desirable to investigate the language as thoroughly as possible before it is completely extinct. In the present circumstances it would seem that it is up to the Ethiopians to undertake this assignment.

I am aware of the fact that my own description of Argobba is incomplete. I had hoped to investigate the language more thoroughly in my subsequent trips to Ethiopia, but unfortunately unforeseen circumstances prevented me from doing so. Since I know that I will have no other occasion to reexamine Argobba, I thought it useful at this time to present this preliminary description.

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Wolf Leslau
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