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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ARGOBBA

AKLILU ASFAW*

Résumé : *Aperçu historique sur les Argobba, essentiellement basé sur des enquêtes de terrain.*

Mots-clefs : *Éthiopie, Argobba, Nord Choa, Sud Wollo, Islam, Histoire.*

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Keywords : *Ethiopia, Argobba, Northern Shoa, Southern Wollo, Islam, History.*

Introduction

It was decided to conduct the study of the Argobba, people in the process of extinction. The chief aim of the study was to gather historical, cultural, and archeological data about this vanishing people, and to record and to analyze them.

The present field study was conducted for 15 days in 1995 in Harbu and Dewe *wäräda* in Southern Wollo. As the ancient Argobba villages of Tolha and Shenke were found in Dewe woreda, the study was assured of continuation. Although villages like Shenke in Southern Wollo were not visited, it was still possible to record and register them. The villages testified that the Argobba nationality had not become extinct. It was decided to continue the study.

Based on the results and experiences gathered from the on-going studies, two different teams were assigned to study respectively the history and the culture of the Argobba in Southern Wollo and Northern Shoa. Accordingly, Shenke and Tolha villages in Southern Wollo, Aliuyu Amba in Northern Shoa and Gachene in the Argobba sub-zone of the Afar Region were studied.

It was possible to ascertain that the Argobba people spread to the Harar and Afar regions for various reasons (war, trade) both from the field data gathered and from library research. This led to a plan to conduct further study in 1997-98. Accordingly, a one-month field study was conducted in the Harar Region; in the Oromia region (in Eastern and Western Hararge zones) and in the Afar Region (Awash). It was ascertained that the Argobba people lived in village settlements in various places.

Studies on the Argobba people were made from 1993 to 1997. It was possible to establish the settlement pattern of the Argobba, and to know their general character. The study has gathered data regarding the connection of the Argobba with Yifat, Walasma, Harar, Adiya, Doba and Shagura as well as with the coming of Arabs and Islam.

* Department of Archaeology & Anthropology of the Centre for Research and Conservation of the Cultural heritage. Translated from Amharic to English by Dr Hailu Habtu.

It is said the Argobba came from Arabia. Nonetheless, on account of historical migrations, the Argobba are now intermingled both through marriage and shared culture with the neighbouring Amhara, Oromo, and Afar peoples. An Argobba does not speak only Argobbigna, but two, three or even more languages. Although they are all called Argobba, they are also found to be Doba, Shagura and Adiya. In language and culture, the Argobba have close connections with the Tigreans, the Amhara, the Harari, and the Gurage. However, they are Muslims. This makes them nearer to the Harari, and both claim to be Arabs and descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. When the Harari trace their dynasty, they go back to the Walasma. In this regard, the history of the Argoba and the Harari has continuity and they have been and are connected in faith, domicile, and history.

The meaning of *Argobba*

What does *Argobba* mean? The elders say that Argobba means *Arab geba* (Arabs have entered) and relate its etymology to an event. Others give a slightly different etymology and say it is derived from *har geba* and explain that it means silk that is seen on a mountain. They further explain that the first Arabs who came into the area settled on a hill and pitched a silk tent and so they were given this appellation. Nevertheless, all Argobba believe that the name is derived from *Arab geba* and that they are descended from Arabs. Consequently, they consider themselves Arabs and tell others that they are so. They say that Islam entered Ethiopia via their ancestors. They claim their genealogy to go back to the first followers of the Prophet Muhammad who came as refugees to Ethiopia. For them, the history of the Argobba and of the coming of Islam to Ethiopia are one and the same.

Different people and different authors give different explanations on their origins. Some say that Argobba is an area that is found in Yifat, while others say that there is an area in Southern Wollo in the sub-*wäräda* of Qalu that is called Argobba. As the natives of the area are also called Argobba, it is both the land and the people that are called Argobba. As Argobba is associated most of the time with Yifat, the Christians in Yifat call themselves Yifate, while the Muslims there are called Argobba. The Muslims call the Christians there Amara, while the Christians call the Muslims Argobba. Thus Argobba and Muslim denote the same thing. The Argoba in turn, consider their history and the coming of Islam into Ethiopia as one and the same thing.

According to writings on Christian Ethiopian history, the Argobba are one among the many Semitic-speaking peoples like the Amhara, Gurage, Harari (Adare) and Gafat who moved south in the Aksumite era¹. The writings say that they came from the north and settled on an *amba* (hilltop) in Eastern Shoa. Some other researchers say that when the ancient Aksumite Empire expanded southwards past Angot, there was a nomadic people called Gebal² which used to live in South-Eastern Shoa in the

¹ SERGEW HABLE SELASSIE. *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, Addis Ababa, 1972 p. 279; TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopian 1270-1527*, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 4.

² MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, Ethiopia: *Cradle of History*, 1989, p. 2; DORESSE J., *Histoire sommaire de la Corne Orientale de l'Afrique*, Paris 1971, p. 91; TADDESSE TAMRAT, *op. cit* 34-36.

Awash valley and fell under Aksumite rule. They assert that this ethnic group was the first to accept Islam and further forward the opinion that Gebal are what came to be later called Argobba³.

In his description of the territory of Prester John (the Christian King), the 16th century Portuguese author, Alvarez wrote that when the king went on a campaign to Adiya, he left the queen and his children in the custody of the rulers of the Kingdom of Argobba⁴. He wrote that this kingdom, which was adjacent to the Kingdom of Adiya, had its eastern border in the direction of Mogadishu.

The present-day Argobba around Harar say they are Adiya⁵. Argobba informants say that the Argobba came from Persia and from Baghdad, Iraq.

After the 6th century A.D., there was military expansion southwards from Aksum and accompanying migration. Again, in the 10th century A.D., villages cropped up on the trade route from Zeila to the interior of Ethiopia, and began to be settled by traders. These traders intermingled with the people and increasingly moved up to the *amba* of Shoa. The Emperors recognized the prominent Walasma family, known for their good deeds, as the overlords of Yifat and gave them the authority to administer this territory where Muslims and Christians lived intermingled. It was thus that the Yifat Walasma civilization was formed⁶. The newly organized Yifat under Walasma rule gave security and political power to the Muslims and became a trade centre, in which Arab merchants dominated. Thus, the phrase *Arab geba* (the Arabs have entered) came to represent an ethnic group which created unity among the inhabitants who then acted as a political force. It became the vanguard for Muslims and consolidated its authority. In the course of history, it migrated in two main directions through commerce, through the expansion of Islam and through new settlement. From internal pressure and yet keeping the Argobba as its umbrella and Yifat as its core, this ethnic group spread to different places establishing villages and giving them its own names⁷. The two main directions in which it migrated were: in the north, starting from Yifat, it established the villages of Guze, Tolha, Shenke and many others in northern Shoa and Southern Wollo. Especially in the 19th century, it established the Argobba areas known as Argobba Serche and Argobba Wanta in Northern Wollo. The southward migration includes that which occurred eastwards as well. Along this route, it established the villages of Bereshet, Minjar, Kesseme, Mebab and many others. Among these, Wosel and Harar were Muslim centres⁸, while many other existing and vanished villages are also often cited. The Argobba around Harar call themselves "Adiya" and are mixed with the Oromo.

³ TRIMINGHAM J.S., *Islam in Ethiopia*, London, 1965, p. 62; *The Dictionary of Ethiopian Biography*, vol. 1, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa 1975, p.108.

⁴ ALVARES F., *The Prester John of the Indies*, Cambridge Hakluyt Society, 1961, p.435.

⁵ Ato ZAKARY MOHAMMED, age 70, Umar Kule, 1998; Haji BURKLE MOHAMMED, age 95, Umar Kule, 1998.

⁶ TADDESSE TAMRAT, *op.cit.*, p. 123.

⁷ Ato MOHAMMED HASENE, Shonke, 1996; Asre ALEKA ABDUL KADER, age 52, Chefa-Robite, 1995.

⁸ DORESSE J., *op.cit.*, p.195; TADDESSE TAMRAT, *op.cit.*, p. 148.

Among linguists, the Argobba are classified as Northern and Southern Argobba⁹. However, their spread is diffuse and discrete. The Argobba have their own historical and cultural features based on Islam. Wherever they go, they mix with the pagan and nomadic peoples they come in contact with, teaching them religion, agriculture and establishing village settlements. In Hararge, this system is known as Mogassa¹⁰. With time, the Argobba came to use their own language only at home, and learn and adopt the language of the larger host community. The Argobba in the North speak Amharic, Oromo and Afar. Those in the middle speak Amharic, while some speak Afar. Those in the South speak Oromo and Afar, while a few speak Somali.

After 1991, the people known as Argobba formed a nationality and organized the Argobba People's Political Party which is based in Gachene town in the Argobba Zone of the Afar National Regional Government.

The Argobba Political Party is faced with the great challenge of creating a social, political, and economic unity among the Argobba found dispersed in so many different places. Judging from the present situation, it has gained acceptance in its effort to have the Argobba recognized.

The Historical Origins of the Argobba

The history of the Argobba¹¹ is narrated in close connection with the coming of Islam to Abyssinia and with the establishment of the Yifat civilization. Thus, it is difficult to separate one from the other. In narrating about Islam in Abyssinia, the Argobba and Yifat are inevitably cited.

One version of the coming of the Argobba holds that they first came in via northern Abyssinia's commercial port of Dahlak¹² (Massawa), then they crossed Tigray and came to the highlands of Central Shoa, from which they later moved southwards. Another version equally holds they first came in via Abyssinia's eastern port of Zeila¹³ from which they followed the Afar plains until they reached the Shoan Highlands, and subsequently moved to the south-eastern regions of Bale and Dara.

It is not possible to assert definitively the date of the coming of the Argobba, the direction they came from, or the reason why. Nonetheless, it can be asserted that they came in at different times, and built the Islam-based Walasma civilization in Yifat by the 13th Century and became a formidable Muslim political force. In general, investigation of their coming and spread reveals that it both pre-dates Islam and continues after Islam. The reasons were commerce, religious expansion, wars, and emigration from economic pressures. When the Aksumite Kingdom was strong and glorious, it had relations with states that were both near and far. It had friendly commercial dealings with those states. As a result, there were foreigners coming into the country for

⁹ COHEN M., *Études d'éthiopien méridional*, Paris 1931, pp. 355-369; LESLAU W., A preliminary description of Argobba, *Annales d'Éthiopie*, III, 1959, p. 251-273; ULLENDORFF E., *The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia*, London, 1955, p.230.

¹⁰ Ato MOHAMMED MUSA ABEGAZE, age 27, Bordede, 1998.

¹¹ Haji SHERIFE MUHAMMED SEIDE, 60, Gachine, 1996.

¹² TADDESSE TAMRAT, *op.cit*, 51, J. Doresse, *Op.cit*, 191-192.

¹³ SERGEW HABLE SELLASIE, *op.cit*, 223.

trade as much as there were natives going out of the country for a similar purpose. Such commercial activity went on both in the pre-Islamic and post-Islamic periods. At this time when Abyssinia had commercial relations across the Red Sea with Arabia, Persia, and Byzantium¹⁴, it is certain that people of different nationalities came to Aksum. After Islam was established as a religion, Muslim merchants (from Arabia, Persia, etc.) settled in the ports and commercial depots and acted as a bridge between Abyssinia and the outside world. They established villages around the commercial depots and mingled with the indigenous population and formed friendships and contracted marriages¹⁵. They further spread their culture, way of life, and religion to the local populations. They also adopted some of the culture of the local population.

In the reign of Emperor Kaleb in the 6th Century A.D., Aksum had expanded its rule across the Red Sea to Arabia as well as southwards to Southern Abyssinia¹⁶. It is mentioned in history books that during the internal expansion, Kaleb's main camps were in Angot, between the Takazze and Awash, and that Semitic speakers mixed with the local population. At this time, there is evidence that there was an ethnic group called Galab under Aksumite rule. This ethnic group accepted Islam in the 10th Century. Some historians propose that this ethnic group was the Argobba¹⁷.

In 1998, pieces of pottery were found around tombs in Atatiya¹⁸ in Southern Wollo in Harbu *wäräda* to the south-east of Hayq and to the north-east of Ancharo (Chiqa Beret). The decorations and symbols on the pottery are reliable archaeological evidence that Aksumite civilization had extended to Southern Abyssinia beyond Angot. The stone statue of a lion with the sign of a cross on it found in Chiqa Beret¹⁹ was first attributed to the medieval period. However, this archaeological find (piece of pottery) has pushed the date back to Antiquity.

Many Argobba villages are found in this *wäräda* of Harbu in Southern Wollo. These villages are not far from Atatiya, the site of the new archaeological find, or from Chiqa Beret, the older site. The villages are connected in topography as well as religion. An informant from the Argobba villages of Tolha and Shenke states as follows: *Those who first settled here are Kulu Base. They are the ones who made all Ethiopia fit for settlement; they came from Tigray. After they came, they declared in Argobba "Listen! Behagim. I am Kulu Base; I am Aksumawi!"*²⁰ It is possible that "Kulu Base" is "Nigus Kaleb."

It is probable that, prior to Islam, the way of life in the area was non-Argobba. As the Argobba consider themselves Muslims, they do not accept archaeological evidence that is outside the Islamic tradition. A local inhabitant explained to us that there is the tomb of Bin Hawiya in this Tolha Shenke area. When we dug in this farm plot, we found human bones. He further said that their forefathers told them it was the tomb of Bin Hawiya and that the Bin Hawiya people were very

¹⁴ TADDESSE TAMRAT, *op.cit.*, 31, DORESSE J., *op.cit.*, 113.

¹⁵ TADDESSE TAMRAT, *op.cit.*, 52.

¹⁶ ULLENDORFF E., *The Ethiopians*, London; 1967, p. 60.

¹⁷ TRIMINGHAM S., *op.cit.*, p. 62.

¹⁸ AKLILU ASFAW, Report to the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, 1997.

¹⁹ ANFRAY F., Notes Archéologiques, *Annales d'Éthiopie*, VIII, 1970, p.34.

²⁰ Ato MOHAMMED HASEN, Shonke, 1996.

tall²¹. According to historical books, Bin Hawiya was a queen who attacked the Abyssinian king at the end of the 10th Century A.D. Some say that this queen was Yodit Gudit. And she was Agaw. In Agaw, there is an area called Damot whose language is Awa. In the Bati area close to the Bin Hawiya tomb, there is a *käbälé* called Damot²². Thus, the area might have been inhabited by the Agaw before the Argobba, considering the tradition that Bin Hawiya was queen of Damot.

Some Ethiopian history books suggest that the Christian troops who expanded southwards from the beginning of the 6th century A.D. onwards were Semitic speakers, namely Amhara, Gurage, Adare, Argobba and Gafat. They further mention that they reached as far as South-Western Shoa and South-Eastern Awash²³. When internal contradictions in Aksum later weakened the Christian forces, the Muslim merchants who had come to trade spread Islam and came to dominate over the residual troops in the region of Yifat and consolidated themselves. Indeed, the Argobba are close to the Tigreans, the Amhara and the Gurage in language, in customs, and in the manner of building their houses. The Muslim tombs, stelae and inscriptions found in Inderta in Tigray²⁴ show that the Argobba first came via Massawa to Northern Abyssinia and Aksum, and that the Arab Muslim merchants who came through Zeila did so at a later time.

Oral tradition holds that the capital city to which the first followers of Islam went was Kubar²⁵. With the decline of the city of Aksum, the capital became Kubar. Although it is not certain today exactly where Kubar was, it is said that it was an ancient place located to the south of Aksum. Argobba elders explain the first followers of the Prophet Mohammed who came to Ethiopia as refugees met the king in the city of Kubar. Although some of them say that this city might have been called Ankober, they locate the city in Tigray nonetheless. They call the place Ado Keber²⁶ and say that the people who inhabited it were Argobba. The Abyssinian king received the Muslim followers of the Prophet and converted to Islam. He thought of visiting the Prophet Mohammed, but died on the way. The place where he died and was buried, and to this day, is a place of worship called Negashis Tomb. Although Islam entered early in the north, it was later that it spread to the south and south-east and that it came to Yifat. Islam coming into Yifat is connected to the port of Zeila in the second half of the 10th Century A.D. and there are written sources indicating this to be so. Argobba informants say that Arabs came to Ethiopia after the turmoil that arose in the rebellion against Ali to avenge the Caliph Osman's death in 656 AD. At that time, those in power were the Mawyan²⁷, the opponents of Ali, and on entering Ethiopia they asserted their authority over the Arabs already in the country. These Mawyan were the ones who later became the Walasma. As the land they first settled in was called Doba, they came to be known as Walasma Doba²⁸.

²¹ Ato BASHIRE, age 48, Toleha 1996.

²² KABIR WELASMA, age 70 Bati, 1997.

²³ SERGEW HABLE SELLASIE, *op.cit.*, p. 279.

²⁴ SCHNEIDER M., Stèles funéraires arabes de Quihaï, *Annales d'Éthiopie*, VII, 1967, p. 107-118.

²⁵ SERGEW HABLE SELLASIE, *op.cit.*, p. 223.

²⁶ Shah MENULE KARIME, age 72, Meso, 1998.

²⁷ Haji MOHAMMED SANI HABIHA, *Islam and the History of the Prophet* (in Amharic), Addis Ababa 1982 (E.C.).

²⁸ Ato MOHAMMED MUSA ALEGZE; Saïd NURE ALI, age 74, Asabote.

According to the traditional narration of Argobba elders, the Argobba came from the east via Zeila²⁹. The first Argobba settled in Mejid (Ayelu) on a high mountain. Ayelu is a mountain in Harar to the east of Gewane. Once settled there, they developed the area through farming and cattle raising and became wealthy. Feeling the surfeit, they held weddings and feasted during the fast of Ramadan. God got angry and sent genii who then showered famine and plagues on them. Fleeing this situation, they left the area and went up to the highlands of Shoa and settled in Yifat. There, they established a sultanate under Walasma leadership and spread to Chen, Guze, Tolha, Shenke and other areas. Then they spread Islam to many places and founded new settlements. In short, traditional accounts connect the coming of the Argobba and the founding of the Yifat sultanate, while field data have established that the term Argobba means *Arab geba* or the Arabs have entered. Argobba as a nationality encompasses all. It is a general term. Although the Argobba are considered as one ethnic group under the Yifat sultanate, they are also found in Doba and Shagura³⁰ in northern Shoa, in Sertu and Watta in Southern Wollo³¹, and Adiya and Alla in Harar³². However, the origin of all of them are Doba and Shagura.

Doba is the clan name of the Walasma; it is the root of the genealogy of the local Walasma. Land belongs to it and it is the Muslim authority. It is privileged in the eyes of the state; it gives out land to the qadi. The *qadi* is elected among the Argobba; he is not a Walasma. It is said that when the Bin Mawiya first crossed Arabia to come here, they first landed in Doba that came to be called Wallasma Doba. Doba is located near the river Mofer Wiha in Menz. People say also that Doba is in Bulga and Doba is found too in Inderta. The first Islamization probably took place in Inderta. There are ancient Muslim tombs there. Doba is an ancient territory south of Angot, and the people are called Doba after the toponymy. Although it is not now possible to locate a people called Doba, it is known that, at the time of Alvarez, the Doba were Muslim warriors³³. He wrote that they guaranteed the security of traders by patrolling the areas between the Afar lowlands and the highlands and thus were allies of the Christian kingdom. The Doba were everywhere. They are considered members of the Walasma group. Walasma is the name of the nobility found in Yifat and in many other places. The founder of this noble line was Awel Asmal. With time, his name came to be Walasma.

Shagura are also members of the Argobba³⁴, but are different from the Walasma. Their language is Argobba, but their origin seems different. It is said that it means "mixed." Desta Tekle Wold says that *Shagura* means one who is sold as a slave. There is also a tradition, according to informants, to that effect. However, they do not put it in such plain language; they gloss it over saying it means "mixed". They say that there is a place called Shagure around Debre Sina. Professor Tadesse Tamrat writes that at the time of Emperor Amde Tsion's campaign to Yifat, his encampment was at a place

²⁹ Hadji SHERIFE MOHAMED.

³⁰ Ato MOHAMMED MUHAMED & SHEIKE MOHAMMED; ABO BASHIRE, Aliyu Amba (Gachine) 1997.

³¹ SHEIKE ABDO, age 55, Harbu, 1996.

³² SHEIKE ABUBAKER, (Genda Ademe), 1998.

³³ ALVARES F., *op.cit.*, p. 193.

³⁴ HARRIS W.C., *The Highlands of Aethiopia*. London, 1844, 3 vol., vol. II, p. 267.

called Shagure³⁵ which is to the north of Yifat. He indicates that Shagure was inhabited by Christians then.

For the reasons given above, it is not possible to accept the claim that the Argobba are Arabs in origin. The chief reason for this is that the Argobba are connected with many events in Ethiopian history. From the point of view of ancient Ethiopian history, the Argobba are one of the Semitic-speaking peoples who migrated from north to south. The Argobba, however, relate themselves to the coming of Islam and claim their origin to the Qoraish tribe. It is known that Muslim traders came to Ethiopia from Persia and Yemen at the time of the Ummayad and Abbasid dynasties. Elders suggest that they came from Baghdad and Damascus. Finally, the Argobba came into formation following an intermingling of the local population with Muslim merchants who came from various places. This mixed population then came to be known as the Argobba after the Walasma dynasty was established. The Argobba have an origin in the north which was Semitic-speaking and then mixed with many ethnic groups. Thus, they are a composite people. They claim, however, that they have not mixed with others and that they are pure Argobba.

“Argobbaness” (Being Argobba)

As one Semitic-speaking people, the Argobba have their own tradition and mores. Retaining their Argobba features, they carry with them their tradition and mores wherever migration takes them. These features express their being Argobba, and distinguish them from others. They also help to easily identify who is Argobba.

There are many Argobba villages in Northern Shoa, Southern Wollo, and Harar. The ruins of vanished villages with their cemeteries attest to their existence in ancient times. These ruined villages had at one time served as commercial centres, but were later abandoned on account of migrations that took place for various reasons. The villages share similarities. Their first similarity is that they are all located on hills³⁶, while the other is that the building style of their houses is of the *idmo* (rectangular house built of stone) type. The manner of building their house is similar to those of the Tigre and Adare.

In settlement, the Argobba prefer to build their villages on hills. The reason is that such settlements are easy to defend; the access to the *amba* on which the settlements are located is often only one, and difficult to enter. Further as the *däga* (highland) weather is in general healthier, such *amba* are preferred. The *qolla* lowlands are suitable for farming, but are unhealthy for settlement. The layout of an Argobba village has the features of a town. The outer walls of the houses built all around the hill are joined and contiguous. Thus, they enclose the settlement much like a fort and make it easy to defend from attacks. The outer walls of the houses serve as a fence. A village has two or more gates. The gates are narrow and easy to guard. Inside, the village has houses for each family with an inside court in front. The houses have roads facing and connecting them. In a village, there is, at least, one mosque, a weavers' workshop, a public square, and an area for the schooling of children. All the inhabitants of the vil-

³⁵ TEKLE TSADIQ MEKURIA, *Yegragn Worera* (Amharic), Addis Abeba, 1966 (E.C.), p. 360; TADDESSE TAMRAT, p. 33.

³⁶ It is the opinion of all informants.

lage are Muslims, and there are no outsiders other than those who come to teach or to work as blacksmiths.

The Argobba do most of the work themselves, while they employ communal labor for farming. They do not hire carpenters or masons to build their houses. Every Argobba knows farming, house building and *Shemnbo*. *Shemnbo* work is individual, while house building is communal. The house is rectangular and it is built of stone, wood, and gravel. The ceiling is made of stacked and latticed wood on top of which gravel and earth are laid. In front of the house, there is a cattle pen as well as children's playground. The house is divided into sections inside, and all the houses have the same pattern of internal division.

The Argobba are self-reliant in every way, and the basis of their livelihood is primarily agriculture. They also trade, but the one item they need from outside is mostly salt. Although the Argobba are farmers, their style of life and their villages are almost town-like. An Argobba is often a good farmer, raises livestock, works hard and does not spend time idly. It is said that it is the Argobba who taught the Oromo and the Afar how to farm³⁷. The Argobba produce mostly sorghum, cotton, red pepper, coffee, qat, peanuts, beans, and peas. Every year, at the time of first ploughing, of the ripening of grain, and of harvest, the Argobba offer sacrifices communally. They slaughter cows, oxen, goats, sheep, and chicken. The Argobba produce their own implements except those made from iron or clay. Weaving is not despised. On the contrary, it is said that, in combination with farming, it makes one self-supporting; it complements farming. Commerce is also highly regarded. The Argobba do not fear to move from place to place for the sake of trade. In former times, the Argobba were engaged in the slave trade as intermediaries. They have established villages along trade routes.

The Argobba despise the work of the blacksmith and the potter; they do not know either work. The goods of the blacksmith or the potter are bought in the market. Alternatively, the blacksmith may be granted by the community *yekesel meret* (charcoal land) which he may farm for his subsistence. Nonetheless, he is paid for his work as a blacksmith.

The Argobba are ruled by Sharia law (the law of the *Qu'ran*). On top of the Islamic law, they have their own tradition. The Argobba are God-fearing; they respect people. The law of the *Qu'ran* is adapted to local tradition and *qadi* and elders administer the community. Issues unresolved by them are passed on to government authority. Children learn the *Qu'ran* from early age. In the morning, before farm work begins, children, both boys and girls, go to the *Qu'ran* School. They study until the time that cattle are taken out to pasture. Girls stay with their mothers in the house, do household chores, fetch water, spin cotton, and weave basket. Depending on their age, boys herd cattle or join their fathers in farm work. Boys who wish to continue their Quranic studies go to *ulammaa* Sheikhs. If they are far from their parents, they sustain themselves by begging much like itinerant Christian students. They go in pairs to beg; they do not beg singly. Teachers do not charge fees.

Girls marry at age 15, while boys marry when they are over 18 years old. A married woman puts on a *gofta* on her hair and wears necklaces, braces, and anklets. The men trim their hair on which they attach a long hairpin. The women wear dresses

³⁷ Ato MUHAMMED HASEN and others, 1996.

while the men wear wrap-arounds. Both men and women wear kohl on their eyes.

The Argobba are extremely conservative. As they consider themselves a special people, they do not intermarry with others. There is marriage among first cousins. The Argobba look down on others and claim genealogical descent from the Prophet Mohammed. As the Argobba have always lived among pagans since Antiquity, they are afraid of attacks from outside and deal with people from outside their village with caution. They do not trust others and are very suspicious. In their relations with neighbours, there is not only suspicion but also scorn. As they are worried about attacks by others, they guard the gates of their villages with vigilance. They tie threads on the gates; if they find that they are broken, they conclude that some enemy has come in. On the whole, the Argobba established new settlements spreading Islam along the way. Nonetheless, their relations with Christians are based on mutual respect and co-existence.

Migration arising from trade, the search for new land religious expansion, war, economic pressure, and outside marriage have characterized Argobba history. Argobba migrate singly or communally. The Argobba adapts to his new environment, gives his new home a new name, and is found spread all over. Although contacts are maintained with his old domicile initially, they are cut and disappear over time. Nevertheless, he never abandons the Argobba name and identity; He takes it with him all over like his shadow.

The Argobba's ancient language appears to have been close to Tigrinya, Gurage-gna, and Adere (Harari). Nowadays, the Argobba are being assimilated, and speak the languages of the larger society in which they live like Amharic, Oromo and Afar. Nevertheless, at the level of the family and their own community, the Argobba maintain their old language, religion, and culture.

The Argobba are found spread in many places now. From the time of their first entry into Abyssinia, their origin in Mejid (Ayelu) here, and their governmental seat in Yifat, they have, at various times, migrated to many places. After the formation of the Yifat sultanate in 1285 A.D., we find an Islamic political power playing a significant role in Ethiopian history. It had its rise and fall in the course of history and its centre moved from one place to another. Argobba moved to Southern Wollo and to Harar while their centre was in Yifat. Modern linguists classify the Argobba now as Northern Argobba (Shoa and Wollo) and Southern Argobba (Harar).

Northern Argobba

This is the region formerly known as Yifat. It is the plateau to the south of the river Borkena, to the south of the river Kesseme, and bordered by Menz on the west. The Argobba here are found in Northern Shoa and Southern Wollo. The people are generally referred to as Argobba. However, there is a clan called Doba Shagura among them, and the Doba are those who established the Walasma dynasty. Even though the Shagura are also called Argobba and speak the Argobba language, it is said that they are a mixed people. Doba does not refer to a language, but to a clan within the Argobba. The Argobba in southern Wollo make a distinction within the Argobba on the basis of race and settlement. They distinguish between *Argobba Serte* and *Argobba Wata*. They explain that the *Argobba Serte* are pure Argobba, while the *Argobba Wata* are nomadic and mixed with the Oromo and the Afar.

Southern Argobba

These are the Argobba who live around Harar in Fedis and Bisidemo. Although they all consider themselves Argobba like their northern brothers, they also make an internal distinction between *Adiya* and *Ala*. *Ala* are mixed with the Oromo. Outside this, each village carries the name of the village founder, e.g. Yishaq Umardin, Umar Kule, etc.

Both Northern and Southern Argobba are Semitic speakers and claim that they have the same religious, cultural and historical origin. They are indeed similar. Nevertheless, it is possible to indicate differences in their present language use.

Although the language of the Northern Argobba is influenced by Amharic, Oromigna, and Afarigna, we can observe that it is similar and close to Tigrignya and Gura-gegna. On the other hand, Southern Argobba has been fully absorbed by Oromigna. Nevertheless, on close examination, there are indications that their ancient language was either very close to Amharic or that they were Amharic speakers. Although the language has disappeared now, women and mothers recall lyrics sung at weddings. They say they learnt those poems from their mothers. It can be said that the poems are Amharic.

Although it is established that the Argobba in Harar share the same religion and history as the Northern Argobba, they are now Amharic speakers.