

Early Nineteenth Century Oromo Childhood Reminiscences

By Richard Pankhurst and Adi Huka

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This dearth of historical source material enhances the value of an interesting correspondence conducted in 1840 between two young Oromo ex-slaves who found their way to Germany. This correspondence, which forms the basis of the present article, must be considered among the earliest youth-literature in Ethiopian history.

The authors of this correspondence were Akafede Dalle, an eighteen or nineteen year old youth from Botchi in the Hambo area of Liban, south-east of Gudru, and Otshu Aga, a youngster of about the same age from Urgeza in the Sibru area south of Limmu.

The two young men had not dissimilar life histories. Akafede while still little more than a child had been enticed away from his parents' fields, after which he was taken by slave-traders to Gondar whence he was conveyed to Alexandria in Egypt. There he was purchased in 1838 by the liberal and scholarly German potentate Prince Maximilian of Bavaria who took him to Germany with three slaves from the southern Sudan. Prince Maximilian entrusted the four youths, whose native languages were mutually unintelligible, to a tutor, Karl Tutschek, a twenty-three year old German student of jurisprudence who besides embarking on this interesting educational experiment was to devote the next five years of his life to the study of their language and culture, and is known as the author of the first Oromo dictionary and grammar ever published.¹

Aga, who had fallen into the hands of slave-dealers at an early age, was likewise taken to Egypt, and was sold in Cairo. Later he came into the possession of Thomas Pell Platt, the famous British orientalist and some time librarian of the British and Foreign Bible Society, also renowned as the editor of the first Amharic translation of the Bible. Aga was taken by Platt, in 1839 or 1840, on a visit to Germany where Tutschek met him by chance while walking in the streets of Munich

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This memorable meeting was later described by Akafede, who, speaking of Aga, somewhat quaintly relates: "My teacher met him one day walking in the street. My teacher thought him to be a Galla and so he spoke to him in Afan Galla (i.e. Gallinga or Oromo). 'Do you speak Afan Galla?' he said to him. At this the boy at once looked at him, and said, 'Are you a Galla?' He answered, 'No, I am not a Galla but I have a Galla at home.' They went on talking, but the boy was in a hurry so he left them. My teacher came back and told me about it. He said to me, 'I saw a Galla My teacher met the boy as he was coming back from his lesson, and talked to him. My teacher took me there, and I met the boy.'"²

Akafede and Aga spent two months together in the autumn and winter of 1840 when, prompted and assisted by the former's tutor Tutschek, they carried on a revealing correspondence in which they reminisced on life in their native land and spoke of their aspiration to return there. This correspondence was effected by the two youngsters dictating to their teacher in Oromo the messages they wished to communicate to each other. These were then written down by Tutschek in his own hand. Fourteen letters were thus composed between October 19 and November 8, 1840. These epistles, which were to prove of great value to Tutschek in his linguistic researches, were carefully preserved by the German scholar until his death in 1843 when they passed into the possession of his brother Lorenz who was responsible for seeking Karl Tutschek's dictionary and grammar through the press. The letters were subsequently acquired by the Bavarian state archives, the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, in Munich where they were recently tracked down by one of the present writers (R.P.). Written in difficult and at times almost illegible early nineteenth century German script they were deciphered and translated into English by the other author, Adi Huka, with the aid of Tutschek's own *Dictionary of the Galla Language*. A.H.'s painstaking translation, which was dictated to the co-author of this article R.P., thus provides the substance of the study which follows.³

The Akafede-Aga correspondence, which has thus far never been published, affords us a unique glimpse into the life and thoughts of two Oromo-speaking youngsters of early nineteenth century rural Ethiopia, and is thus not without interest as source material for students of traditional Ethiopian culture and education.

Several of the letters, as we might expect, deal with the two young men⁴ yearning for their native land, and tell of the fright so many Ethiopian youngsters⁵ of those days experienced when carried off by the slave-dealers.⁴

In the opening letter, dated October 19, 1840, Aga thus writes to Akafede, "I long for my brother and my sister," and, addressing his friend and compatriot in fraternal terms proceeds:

"My brother, did you say, 'I will be eaten by *Bulgu*? (i.e. cannibals) when you left your country? I myself have had water rumbling in my stomach. Have you never been seized with fear since you left your country? Were you very much afraid or not? I was very afraid because I thought I would be eaten by *Bulgu*. I left the country with many Gallas. Many of us left the country, and we were very much afraid.'"⁵

Akafede, replying to Aga October 21, also spoke of his experience as a slave, and exclaimed, "My brother, thanks be to God for taking us out of the hands of the bad merchants." Explaining his capture in theological terms he declared, "I believe *Wagajo* (i.e. God) took me away from my father and my mother because of my unkindness. If not he would have kept me in a good place." Reverting to the miseries of the slave trade he added:

"There are many Gallas who can do nothing but grieve at the separation from their fathers and mothers. Bear courageously the fact that you will not see your father and mother again. Pray to *Wagajo* now for their well being."

Seeking to encourage his friend he nevertheless went on to observe:

"Who knows, *Wagajo* willing, when you grow up and can manage on your own your master will send you to your country. My brother, what would your mother say when you tell her, 'A man sold me into a country which I do not know, another man took me and brought me up, and when I grew up he told me to 'Go and look for your mother and your father.' Your brothers and your friends will at that moment fall over each other to embrace you."

Contrasting his own position, in the company of the three Sudanese ex-slaves, with that of poor Aga, who was all alone, Akafede concludes:

"The children who are with me keep me company. What are the circumstances like in which our fathers and our mothers find themselves? We know nothing; we only worry. The four of us talk about this among ourselves, but as you are alone, you say to yourself alone, 'How is my father and my mother?' Pray to *Wagajo* to send a Galla to you."

In a later epistle, of October 26, Aga once more voiced his sadness at having been removed from his native land, and referring to his mother, exclaims, "I long for my mother. If I were still living with my mother what I eat would agree with me and what I drink would agree with me."

How far this latter remark is an expression of what the modern American sociologist Donald Levine has referred to as "orality", and a confirmation of his argument about the "activity of eating" being coloured in Ethiopia by conventions of "great emotional significance"⁸ we leave to the psychologist.

Aga for his part returned to the theme of his separation, and that of Akafede, from their motherland, in his penultimate letter, of November 6, in which he observed:

"If the *ayana* (i.e. guardian angel) of your father is kind to you he will return you to your father's country. Then you will see your *durbi*, (ie. cousins); you will see your *fira* (i.e. friends); you will see your *hiria* (i.e. age group). When you see them what will you tell them? You will tell them that you went to a good country and returned. I will tell it to every-

one, beginning with my mother; after two days I will gather many people, and I will tell them all about it. I will tell my mother alone. I will tell everyone, even enemies."

In their letters the two nostalgic youths also shared with each other memories of their homeland. Several of these messages reveal their authors' constant thoughts for their family, as well as their pre-occupation with the hunting of wild animals, and other acts of bravery which were highly regarded in the country in former days.

Thus on October 23 Aga wrote to Akafede;

"What are the names of the leaders of your country... What is your father's name? I would like to learn the names of your father, your mother, your sister and your brother. Is your father a brave man? Has he killed *gafarza*, (i.e. buffaloes)? My father killed a young buffalo. Has your brother a wife? My brother has a wife. I have four sisters. One is married. The other three are at home. Did you ever go hunting? One day I went hunting secretly, and my father beat me severely because I went away without telling him. Is your father rich? Are your friends rich?"

Reverting to the question of hunting, and to the various animals he had killed. Aga in the same letter also discussed the taste of the different types of flesh, before alluding to the fact that in Europe he was now eating pork which had been abhorred in his native land. He declares:

"I am very afraid of hippopotami. You were not afraid were you? These hippopotami eat people. Have you ever eaten buffalo meat? I Have you eaten *arba* (i.e. elephant) meat? That meat is not good. Have you eaten *boje* (i.e. boar's) meat? In our country, Borana, boar is not eaten because it is *hirmida* (unclean). It is normal to eat boar's meat in this country (i.e. Germany). I am defiled because I eat boar's meat.¹² When I was in my country I killed a young wild *bosonu* (i.e. bush buck), and its meat was tasty. In my country I had a good *bode* (i.e. spear). I and my brothers used to take a big dog with us and go out hunting together. When we killed boars we did not eat meat ... In our country there is a big mountain called Jobi covered with forest which contains many boars. The boars in that forest were much hunted."¹³

In a subsequent letter, of November 3, Aga returned to the pleasures of hunting, and, describing some of his childhood experiences, declared:

"I and the children of the *tumtu* (i.e. blacksmiths) used to go hunting to kill *guge* (i.e. turtle doves) and *weni* (i.e. colubus monkeys). Whenever we killed a colubus monkey we used to quarrel among ourselves as to who had killed it. One would say, 'I struck it first.' Others would say the same. When we could not decide who had hit it first we would

call a *manguado* (i.e. elderly man), to arbitrate in our dispute. Whenever we quarrelled in this manner, and came near to breaking our heads, our mothers would punish us, saying, 'Why are you quarrelling in this way?'

Later in the same letter Aga describes another of his hunting exploits, and remarks:

"One day I saw a *djaldeza*, (i.e. monkey) walking along carrying its baby on its back. I forced her to leave her baby, and killed it. My father said to me, 'My son I'll buy you a *bode* (i.e. spear) if you wish.'"

Addressing Akafede, and telling him of other wild animals with which he was familiar, Aga reveals his interest in sport by adding:

"Have you ever killed anything? Have you ever gone hunting? Are there many *bosonu* (i.e. bush bucks) in your country? Are there many *kurrabe* (i.e. antelopes) in your country? Are there many *wenin* (i.e. monkeys) and *djaldeza* (i.e. colubus monkeys) in your country? Are there many *dschanon* (?), *qeransa* (i.e. leopards), *nendschaga* (i.e. hyenas) in your country?"¹⁴

Akafade fully shared his friend's passion for hunting, and describing an exciting incident he had once seen, he wrote to Aga at some length on October 28, saying:

"When you were in your country did you hunt *gorgori*, (i.e. partridges)? When I was in my country I used, together with other children, often to hunt partridges. One day while we were hunting partridges we came upon a *iya* (i.e. cerval cat). The big boys ran shouting towards it, but the cerval cat did not run away. It turned on the children and growled. The children stopped because they were afraid. There was nothing to do but to bring a dog. At this point a boy came running across a field. He said, 'Why are you standing there, instead of killing it? Give me a *hofa*, (i.e. pointed spear) The children replied, 'If you go and strike this cerval cat you will become our *baeza* (i.e. hero)!' The boy did not take the spear that was offered him, but instead picked up a *mutute* (i.e. pointed stick), and a *djiirma* (i.e. club), and advanced toward the cerval cat. As he moved towards it the cerval cat growled at him as it had done at the other children, but the boy was not afraid of it. He stood some distance away from it and threw the stick at it, and pierced it in the ear. It immediately closed its eyes and rushed to attack him. When it came near, the boy struck at its feet with the club. The animal fell down screaming. The children who had earlier not dared to approach now came forward and helped to finish it off. The boy left three weeks later for a place called Godero. His name was like yours Aga."¹⁵

A glimpse of the life of a traditional shepherd boy, and insight into his interests, and his relations with his father and mother and other members of the older generation, is afforded by a letter written by Akafede on October 23. In it the

author, recalling conditions in his native countryside, asks Aga if he had ever gone with his brothers to collect *hagada*, or sorghum stalks, and adds in another lengthy passage:

"I used to make my father and my mother very angry because as a shepherd boy whenever I saw my *hiria* (i.e. age group) go collecting stalks I used to go with them and abandon the cattle. Whenever I went collecting I never carried home a small quantity of stalks because my mother was fond of stalks, and I was more afraid of my mother than of my father. When I gathered these stalks and took them home I would put them on the ground, sort them and give the big ones to my mother. When she ate them she was pleased with me. One day I and a man from our village took the cattle to the *hora* (i.e. spring) when the animals drank and came up from the spring I saw other boys asking permission from their brothers to go back to collect stalks. I too asked a man from my village. I said, 'Let me go and collect stalks for my mother'. The man said I could go. He was not a bad man. So I went with the other children. When the children of the persons to whom the stalks belonged saw us they assembled and waited for us. When we came near them they asked us, 'Where are you going?' We replied that we were going to gather stalks. They replied, 'You can't take away our stalks unless you want to be beaten up. Try your luck some other time.' After thinking for some time we encouraged each other to go ahead with the plan. One of the farmers in the valley below us was cutting *missinga* (i.e. sorghum). He called us. 'Come here. Take the stalks', he said, 'I have sown both *handjiro* (i.e. white sorghum) and *missinga* (i.e. ordinary sorghum). If you cut them for me you can take the stalks.' Because we wanted to take the stalks we cut them for him, and returned home in the evening. Some children collected too many stalks, and when they could not carry them home they threw some of them away, but those who were strong enough picked up what the other children had thrown away. I walked behind and picked up what the other children had discarded. After walking for a while I came to a ridge called Hula. I could not climb up this ridge. As I was tired I threw away some stalks and said goodbye to the children. Those children who had thrown away some stalks before turned round and picked up what I had thrown away because their load had become light. We travelled along the ridge and came to a mountain called Tulu Tulam. At the foot of this mountain the children threw away the stalks they had collected when I threw them away. I immediately picked up the stalks they had thrown away as they had done when I threw them away. Thus regaining my stalks there was nothing more to do that evening but to go home. The stalks I brought home I divided between relatives and our neighbours."¹⁶

Another childhood reminiscence of rural society, this time connected with poaching, was recorded by Aga in a letter of October 29 in which he recalls the day when he received a second good beating from his father, and observes:

"One day we went to the *hora* (i.e. spring). When we became hungry we went poaching. While I was stealing *bokolo*, (i.e. corn) the owners saw me, and caught me and beat me. I threw away everything I had taken and fled. I began weeping because I was very angry. I arrived home in no time. The owner of the corn could not run fast because he was very irritated. He came in the evening, and he accused me to my father. He said, 'Your son stole my grain today', and then my father beat me. He beat me severely."¹⁷

The games of the traditional countryside were also briefly referred to by Aga in a letter of October 26 in which he exclaimed:

"When we used to play with our *hiria* (i.e. age group) we were very happy. How pleased we were when we played *kolle* (i.e. a game with a stick) with the children of our own age!"

Musical instruments played by children of the countryside were also referred to by Aga in a letter of November 3 in which he writes to Akafede, "I play the *ulule* (i.e. flute) well. Do you know how to blow on the *malakat* (i.e. trumpet)? I know how to blow on the trumpet."¹⁸

Though nostalgic for his homeland Aga was not unconscious of the fact that as a child he had on occasion been obliged to work hard in the fields, had been subjected to restrictions imposed upon him by his family, and was no stranger to hunger. In his letter of November 3 he chided Akafede for not visiting him, and, explaining that his friend had a far easier life in Germany than in his own country, he affirmed

"You are not so busy. You don't reap, you don't dig, and you don't look after the cattle. You don't have much to do ... You don't go hunting. You don't worry about what your *hiria*, (i.e. age group) thinks. You don't worry about what your *amadi*, (i.e. mother-in-law) says about you. You don't worry about what you are going to eat next."¹⁹

The final component of this early nineteenth century Ethiopian children's correspondence was an element of religious fatalism based on faith in *wak* or *wagajo*, (i.e. God). This is expressed in one of Akafede's letters, of November 6, in which he tells his friend that "*wagajo* will not forget you unless you forget him", and adds:

"Pray to him and think of him today and tomorrow. If you pray to him he will sooner or later send you what you ask. *Wagajo* is testing whether you will go on praying. He says to himself, 'If I don't give him what he asks he will not continue with his prayers.' *Wagajo* took you out of your father's country; he did not take you to a bad country, but to a good country. You cannot know when your prayer is answered because you are here on earth worrying about earthly matters, *Wagajo* alone knows. Don't worry: what *Wagajo* will give you no one will take away from you; whether he sends you back to your country or whether he keeps you here *Wagajo* will walk with you. What *Wagajo* intends for you nothing will take away."²¹

Aga, who was then preparing to leave Germany with his master Platt, sadly replied on the same day,

“What else can we do when we are separated? *Wagajo* willing, we will see each other soon... Meanwhile we must be patient. We have endured separation from our country, our mothers, our fathers, our brothers, and our sisters. We must not fail to go on enduring. When we first left our country we were worried lest we should be eaten by dogs or *bulgu* (i.e. cannibals). We did not know, but *Wagajo* took care of us. *Wagajo* knows everything. Man may talk as much as he pleases, but he cannot know everything ... My brother, one does not know what the will of *Wagajo* for one is. One does not know in what direction he may lead us.”

Turning from such theological ideas to the practical problems of the two friends' daily existence in a foreign land the good Aga proceeded to give Akafede his counsel and advice. He urged him to study both the language and the *sagada*, or religious beliefs, of the country in which he was living, and added in realistic yet sagacious vein:

“My brother, you can't possibly act now as you wish; therefore do as the *Jurbu*²² tells you. If you were still in the care of your father and your mother you could afford to be spoilt and refuse to go on errands, but now my friend, you bear every burden. I know how every Galla feels. It is not easy. We must not weaken; we have no alternative. Bear it. Don't provoke people, don't quarrel with people, don't insult people, don't laugh at people, don't be afraid of people, but talk to people.”²³

To this wise and brotherly letter Akafede responded, on November 8, in a sad letter, the last he was ever to write to Aga. In it he declared:

“I have no friends here except you. I did not think it would come to this. When I met you I was thrilled. My happiness has not lasted long. I was thankful to *Wagajo* for sending you to me even if you did not stay here long. May *Wagajo* direct your feet so that harm may not befall you.”

Urging his friend to have courage Akafede went on to express the hope that Aga would find companionship or as he put it, that “*Wagajo* will send you a Galla” and he added, “Who knows he may send you that Galla girl” - an apparent reference to the slavegirl Bilile, also known as Machuba, whose story will be examined elsewhere by one of the present writers (R.P). He then again enjoined on Aga the need for fortitude, and observed:

“If you don't forget *Wagajo*, if you pray to him, and if you do not offend him, what he sends you will come to you quickly. Even if you do forget him, he will not forget you.”²⁴

Aga that day left Germany as a result of which the correspondence between him and Akafede came to a sudden end. Nothing further is heard of Aga, and little more of Akafede who died only six months later on May 17, 1841, without ever returning to his beloved motherland.²⁵

1. C. Tutschek, *Dictionary of the Galla Language* (Munich, 1844-5); *A Grammar of the Galla Language* (Munich, 1845). See also K. Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, *Gelehrte Anzeigen*, March 18, 19, 20 and 23, Nos. 55, 56, 57 and 58, cols 441-8, 449-56, 57-64, 65-6.
2. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Hafuri Kan Agaf Akafede f Amanati, December 22, 1840. A.H.'s translation from the Oromo.
3. Thanks are, however, due to Dr. Volker Stitz for help in deciphering certain passages of Tutschek's script.
4. R. Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Slave Trade in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1964), IX, No. 1, pp. 220-8.
5. Aga to Akafede, October 19, 1840.
6. Tutschek, *A Grammar of the Galla Language*, p. 74.
7. Akafede to Aga, October 21, 1840. See also Tutschek, *A Grammar of the Galla Language*, p. 91.
8. Aga to Akafede, October 26, 1840.
9. D. Levine, *Wax and Gold* (Chicago, 1965), p. 224.
10. Tutschek, *Dictionary of the Galla Language*, I, 8.
11. Aga to Akafede, November 6, 1840.
12. Tutschek, *Dictionary of the Galla Language*, I, 53.
13. Aga to Akafede, October 23, 1840.
14. Aga to Akafede, November 3, 1840.
15. Akafede to Aga, October 28, 1840.
16. Akafede to Aga, October 28, 1840.
17. Aga to Akafede, October 29, 1840.
18. Aga to Akafede, October 26, 1840.
19. Aga to Akafede, November 3, 1840.
20. Aga to Akafede, November 3, 1840.
21. Akafede to Aga, November 6, 1840.
22. The term *Jurbu* appears to be a reference to Tutschek or to the Germans among whom Akafede was living.
23. Aga to Akafede, November 6, 1840.
24. Akafede to Aga, November 8, 1840.
25. Tutschek, *Dictionary of the Galla Language*, I, xii.