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THE GAFAT AND ARGOBBA OF ETHIOPIA: A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE TWO ETHIO SEMITIC LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to present a brief ethno-historical and linguistic survey of the Gafat and Argobba Semitic communities and the status of their languages in Ethiopia. Available evidences show that Gafat is an extinct language both in the country and in elsewhere in the world. The Argobba language, on its part, is in the process of decline. Today, no one speaks Gafat language on the planet. Nevertheless, Argobba and its dialects are still trickling though they completely lost their market and educational roles. We, however, still see families and villagers or in some urban pockets of Ethiopia, people do communicate with it. The intensive social interactions and integrations with their neighbors seem to have eventually worked against both Gafat and Argobba to extinct (Gafat language) and decline (Argobba language) in favor of the languages of their neighbors such as the Amhara, Oromo, and Afar. In addition, that we are living with not only the living language and cultures but also with the enshrined heritages, culture and fragments of the literary sources of both the extinct Gafat and the declining Argobba. Ethno historical research method employed a case study based on qualitative sources to handle this topic. The article properly evaluates the current state of literature on the two communities and their languages. However, Gafat language is extinct and we do not have speakers of it; the Argobba is in state of declining, their contribution both as social heritage and serving as sources of linguistic and ethno historical research remains quite vital.

Keywords: *Ethiopia, Gafat, Argobba, Extinct Language, Declining Language, Ethno-History*

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Fig.1: Historical Map of Ethiopia

Source: Developed by Isyas Sahlu, Cartographer at the Department of Geography, Addis Ababa University 1994.

I. Introduction

Language is a system of communication, which consists a set of sounds and written symbols in everyday use by the people of a particular country or region for talking or writing. To put it in further detail, it is a principal method of human communication, consisting of words used in a structured and conventional way and conveyed by speech, writing or gesture. Notwithstanding the great number of works published on Ethiopia and its diverse languages, we still do not know enough of the linguistic dynamics of this historical country, its diverse peoples, complex multi religious setting, the not yet well-documented history, its urban and rural geography as well as the tales of Ethiopian ethnography and several languages. It is evident that Ethiopia had been the only colonial free kingdom in Africa and its Horn during the colonial era and one of the populous African countries with the current population of about 120 million, being also a legitimate home to more than 85 languages.

Linguists usually characterize that many languages are still living and active ones, others are declining ones and still some are extinct and dead ones. The all about history, on its part, is better to define it as the study of the life of the past societies, in its entire facet, to play the role of a lesson for the present social developments and to chart the future hopes. It is the story of human being in time, an inquiry into the past based on evidences both chronologically and thematically. Indeed, evidences and available sources are the raw materials for historical research as in the cases of all research topics. They are those one can tap even from the debris of dead and extinct languages, from traces of written and oral evidences as well as from the rest of the languages we do characterize as living ones. To have a language, one should first have the linguistic communities of such given

languages. In this regard, that Ethiopia, being a home for diverse linguistic communities, has several languages. While some of them extinct, some declining many others, however, still living and still in daily use. The Semitic Linguistic community of Gafat now extinct and Argobba now declining are two of them.

The case of these two Ethio Semitic groups and the status of their languages, namely the Gafat and Argobba are making the object of this article. While the former is completely extinct, the latter is still trickling to survive but with no doubt on the verge of its eventual demise if the speakers will not use it in daily activities, such as market places and center of learning at both indigenous and local modern schools. Gafat language's chapter of existence is already closed. Leslau (1948: 221) left for us has the following words:

.....The reader will understand my disappointment when, instead of the expected Gafat, I came across an artificial language, called 'the left language,' which consisted in inverting the syllables and consonants, like saying teb instead of bet, rassa instead of sarra. In addition, I was told that some judges in a native court knew Gafat, but when I came to see them I found out instead that they were interested in Gafat and wanted to study it from my Gafat Documents. Finally, after two weeks of inquiry, I found four people, three men and a woman, all of them old, from the region of Womberma near the Blue Nile who still spoke Gafat.

The vital point is that after Leslau had communicated with those three men and one women speaking the language, no evidence came to the existing oral literature of Ethiopia and no settlement or site identified where one could find speakers of the Gafat language. This means there has not been Gafat language continuity after those four persons contacted by Leslau. This could serve as a tangible proof that Gafat language is extinct.

The current concern is that the Argobba subjects of this time usually marketing and schooling in Amharic, and not in Argobba, at modern schools and versing their siblings and children in Arabic in both prayers and Islamic learning centers. These evidently and jointly works in such a silent manner against the continuity and blossoming of the Argobba language. Volker Stitz (1975) identified speakers of the Argobba language in different Argoba settlements on the hilltops of the areas of Yifat and South Wallo. His work remains a reliable evidence that the language of Argobba is on the route of decline but not yet extinct. A brief historical survey in the existing literary and oral sources modestly presented in this article. To do so, a methodological tool remains essential.

II. The Methodological and Specialty Options

Victor De Munck (2009: vii) puts a significant remark that “a method is part of a research design and not a stand-alone application.” One should deal with cacophony or in contrary with harmony of cultures and with jargons and discourses regarding languages. The first

thing to do, according to Victor De Munk (2009: 3), is to find out what one is interested in and work on. In research world, it is not such an easy thing to handle research questions unless researchers with long years of training, in being oriented towards the unquestioned or the not properly studied topics and embark on the task of studying them. Socio-linguistic and historical topics inevitably need the curious intervention of ethno-historians armed with both knowledge and speciality in history, anthropology and linguistics. Any of such professionals could do justice in treating such subject.

There are four different research methodologies usually used by ethno-historians and anthropologists in conducting a research on linguistic communities and their languages. They are experimental research, quasi or pre-experimental research, ethnographic tools and then the case study. To study the socio-linguistic environment, the ethnographic tools and observations forging a case study approach by employing the qualitative data justifies the treatment of the subject under consideration. From social science perspectives, mention should be made of Stitz (1970, 1974, 1975); Abebe (1992) and Ahmed (1987, 1994, 1997). All the three employed such method in understanding the Argobba and the human geography of central Ethiopia in the case of Stitz. In the case of Abebe the transformation of the Argobba identity among the plural communities diligently studied. Ahmed has treated the Argobba intensive interactions with the Amhara, Oromo, and Afar on the same geographic space of central Ethiopia. Case study methodological approach therefore reached its high point in the case of Tadesse (1988a: 5-18; 1988b: 121-154) with respect to the interaction and integration of the linguistic communities of the Agaw and the Gafat.

III. The Perspectives of Existing Literature

The existing literature understands that Gafat language is an extinct one and the Argobba on the verge of decline. It is, however, clear that we do not have a Gafat community justifying this or that sense and existence of their language. The only asset we have is the linguistic and historical research output on the Gafat, for instance, Liselau (1948) senior expert of his time in the field of linguistics and Tadesse (1988), whose article is the mine of historical knowledge regarding Gafat's glorious past. It does not matter be Gafat and Argobba languages may in their proper position of respectively extinct and declining, they championed in offering both literary and oral information to reconstruct a history of Ethiopia and its diverse communities along with their languages.

It is not surprising while some languages flourish and assumed global prominence in both education and administration, others took the route of decline and extinction. It would be suffice to underscore that Ethiopian languages attract researchers and the pioneer in this regard was Wolf Leslau, who was a scholar of Semitic languages and one of the foremost authorities on Semitic languages of Ethiopia. In one of his early pieces

(1948: 212), he significantly addressed that Ethiopia and the Ethiopic languages aroused the attention of the Western world as early as the 16th century. Furthermore, Leslau (1952:72-79) successfully conducted research on Tigrigna language in northern Ethiopia in the North, and on Harari, Argobba, Gafat, and Gurage in the South, Southeastern and central Ethiopia. Following the footsteps of Leslau, if a look into the Argobba appears on the scene of research by scholars of Ethiopian studies, from a linguistic point of view, Zelealem Leyew and Ralph Siebert (2001:1-42) stand out quite clearly.

Even though we do not really see successive and detailed linguistic research on this language and the linguistic community of Argobba, efforts from the social sciences have never interrupted. The German geographer and historian Volker Stitz, whose pieces have already been stated; and, even more recently, Eloi Ficquet (2001:497-516), is an ethnologist and one of the hard workers in anthropological and historical research space in Ethiopia. Eloi conscientiously looked into the status of the Semitic Ethiopian Amharic. It is quite vital to see how according to him the Ethiopian Amharic assumed the high profile of service in Education and in the administration of the country in particular during the 20th century, being “the language of languages,” in a sense that quite a majority of diverse Ethiopians communicate with and also read and write with. Eloi’s remarkable words (2001:1) run as follows representing the indicated sense and hence: “*Que ce soit dans la version centralisatrice de cet État, ou dans la version fédérale contemporaine, l’amharique a été au XX^e siècle la ‘langue des langues’ en Éthiopie*”. The intention of Eloi is one of discovering Amharic language in his attempt to contrast Ethiopian languages and histories. The significance of his piece is that examining other languages too such as the Argobba, understanding their language and culture is important.

The major task of the present article is not to partially appreciate, on the one hand, the living languages of Ethiopia those more than 85 in number; and, to curse, on the other, the extinct and the declining languages such as, respectively the Gafat and the Argobba. The further intention and objective of this article is also that we are living with not only the living language and cultures but also with the enshrined heritages, culture and fragments of the literary sources of both the extinct Gafat and the declining Argobba. Suffice to state that studying historical settings of the linguistic community of Gafat and Argobba, with their languages, along with traces of the process of their interactions and integrations with their close neighbors will inevitably upgrade our knowledge about the past and present cultures of the Ethiopian diverse communities.

IV. The Gafat, the Argobba: State of their History and Languages through the March of Time

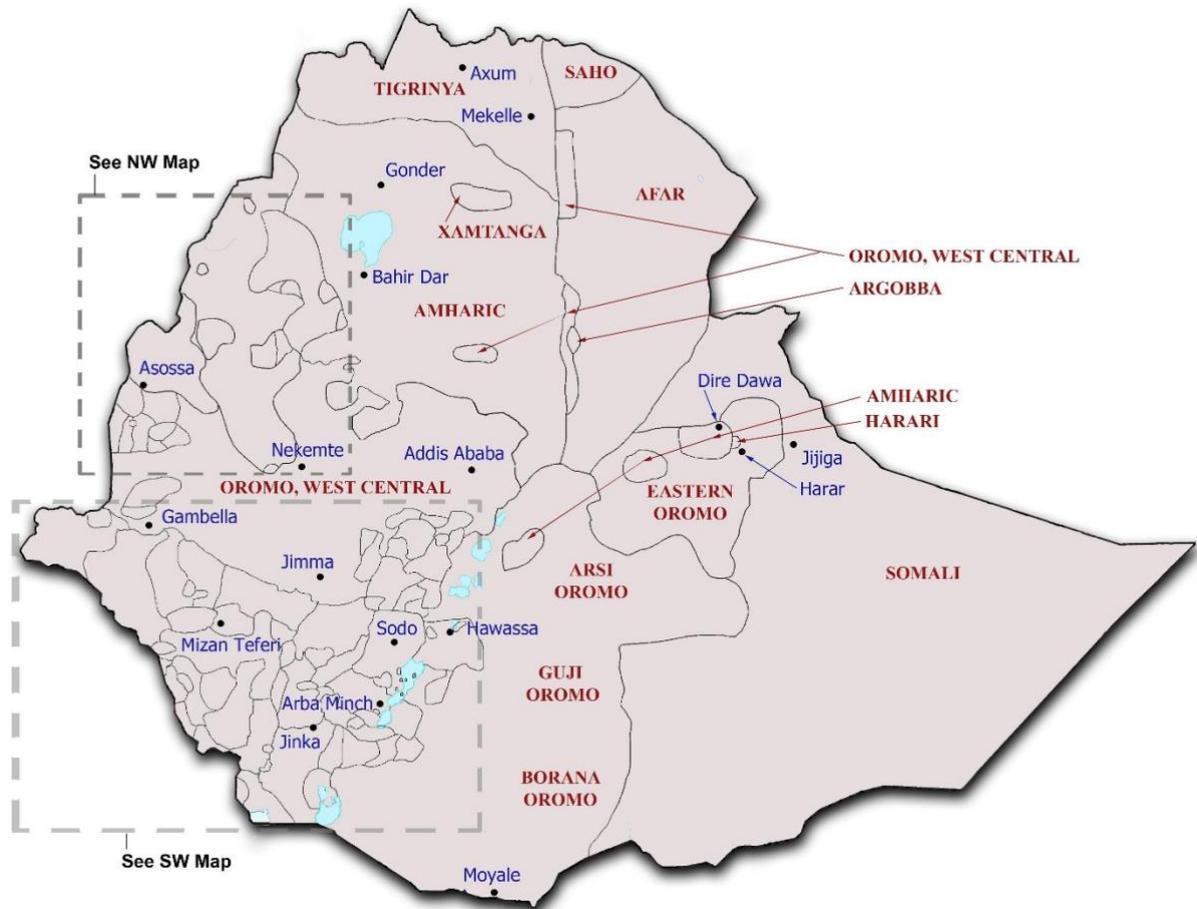


Fig.2. Language map of Ethiopia

Source: Adapted from; ETHIOPIAScripture.org

4.1. A Brief Look at the Gafat

In Ethiopia, the Gafat language is an extinct language. It no longer has any speakers, as Gafat as a community and has also no living descendants and integrated into its social neighbors. Gafat as extinct language is a language that no longer exists due to the absence of speakers or users, in linguistics or otherwise. Attention here is because the Gafat language is not a dead language. This is just in linguistics and historical linguistics any dead language usually defined as a language that some people still use in one way or another. The European Latin, for instance, is in many ways a dead language as it still serves in communications, both oral and literally, though we do not consider it a living one. It is just to insist on Gafat as an extinct language of Ethiopia for, among other things, Grover Hudson (2004:160-172), the prominent linguist and one of the leading specialists

on Ethiopian languages did not include Gafat due to its nonexistence with no single person speaking it on the Ethiopian social and linguistic platforms.

The earliest reference regarding Gafat clearly mentioned in the Chronicle of King Amdä Tsion of Ethiopia (1313-1344). According to this Chronicle well translated by Huntingford (1965: 129), one the King's vassal was a Gafat chief bearing the title of Awalamo. Indeed, the Gafat people are according to Samuel (1946: 111) an extinct ethnic group that once inhabited present-day Western Ethiopia. They spoke the Gafat language, now extinct being part of the South Ethiopic grouping within the Semitic subfamily of the Afro-Asiatic languages and closely related to Harari and Eastern Guragé languages. Indeed, for instance, in the year 1922, Gafat was present and only spoken privately in Gojjam due to the Amhara neighbors qualifying and designating them as the "outcasts".

It also appears in the sources such as Aläqa Tayyé (edited and translated by Grover Hudson and Tekeste Negash (1987:58-59) that the population of Gafat seems to have been the amalgam of different clan groups such as Abdray, Gambo, Birabado Yazembal, Yasubli Ashamen, Harbawash Harba Akal, Wange, Den, Waket and Waremadud. These clans in the distant past according to Taddesse Tamrat (1988b:125-127) resided in the Shewn region of central Ethiopia under the regional chief with a title Zhan Be Gedem. The place names and genealogical research which Ahmed (2007:58) conducted in the area of Yifat (North-Eastern Shewa) demonstrate that these clan groups of Gafat lived there as this area is not far away from the site of Gedem mentioned above.

We learn from Taddesse Tamrat (1988b:133) that certain groups of the Gafat converted to Christianity during the reign of the fifteenth century King Zer'a Yaiqob of Ethiopia (1434-1468). Francisco Alvarez, editors and translators, Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 458,495, 576), was the capuchin traveler who visited the court of the sixteenth Century King Lebne Dengel of Ethiopia (1506-1540). The Alvarez records narrate that the Gafat were indigenous clan groups forming the larger community in those days and one of the leading ingenious peoples of the country but with deep conflicts with the King Lebne Dengel.

The Gafat clan groups used to take positions in the mountain, forests and valleys in North East Shewa. Gfata occupancy however used to cover the area of the present Mugger valley up to Gendeberet in Western Shewa as noted by Alvarez. Some of them, converted to Islam. This is according to the sixteenth century Ahmed ben Ibrahim's chronicler, Shihab ed-Din, edited and translated by Rene Bassét (1897:224,366,399). We, however, learn both from Christian and Islamic references that the Gafat people and the language exposed and interacted with different cultures as well as intermarried with their close neighbors such as the Amhara and the Oromo. When Manuel de Almeida visited the region in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Ethiopian rulers of the time already pushed the Gafat further west to the region of Gojjam. Like their neighbors such as the Oromo, the Gafat used to largely depend themselves on meat and milk products in terms

of their notable diets. Currently, there is no speaker of the Gafat language. We found, however, a Gafat proverb of three lines found in the work of Iob Ludolf but later in that of Franz Praetorius (1879:13). Ludolf translated them into Latin and Praetorius in to German. It is impossible to know whether we geminate or not when reading them as no one currently knows the Gafat. However, these lines are the proof of the presence and function of Gafat language and literature in the past. It runs as follows:

ሰቦኝ ተልጸላም፣

ብሌኝ ተልበላም፣

ይጸለኝ አማም።

From what Praetorius translated into German language, based on Ludolf's Latin, one of our colleagues, Dr. Joachim Crass, translated into English so that an English rendering runs as follows:

I do not want to hate people and make them disappointed,

Cereal crops are not my principal diet,

Yet, they hate me for nothing.

We do not even know how to pronounce whether we read these lines geminated or not as we do not find a speaker proving our doubt. In any case, the basic import of the first line of these three lines demonstrates the Gafat willingness to live in peace with their neighbors and with the Ethiopian authorizes of those days. The second one goes in complete agreement with the observation made by Manuel De Almeida in relation to the Gafat food habits in their culture. The final and the last line denotes the menace against the Gafat people by their neighbors and the Ethiopian regime of the time without basic reason to justify.

4.2. The Argobba

Coming to the Argobba people, their language still exists but in precarious nature. It is still trickling according to Ahmed (2007:39-40), in some settlements around the city of Harar, Yifat in Northeast Shewa and on the hill ranges of Southern Wallo such as Shoké and Tollaha. It does not mean however, the Argobba language is absent in several Ethiopian urban centers as the Argobba dispersed here and there due to business activities. The principal reason contributing to the decline of the Argobba language is above all due to their continuous cultural and religious as well as economic interactions with their huge neighbors such as the Amhara, the Oromo and the Afar communities. It, however, remains on the linguistic platform being highly minority compared to other living languages.

As in the case of Gafat, Argobba has been a composition of complex clans to note some of them according to Ahmed (2007:48-52) the Qachino, the Shagura and the Melesay.

We could not find evidences of the Qachino and the Melesay as they are already extinct. Nevertheless, currently the Shagura dialect still persists and presents itself on the hill top of Argobba settlements in Yifat such as Khayr Amba, Warkamba, Channo Gozé and Robit Gozé. We do not however know the fate of the Melesay except a place name attributed to it in Yifat as “the country of Melsay” indicating its extinction since the distant past.

The reason why we do not see continuity of clans such as the Qachino appeared in the document, as they had been the subject of the royal expeditions. For instance, King Bā`edä Maryam of Ethiopia (r. 1468-1478) marched over the territories of the Qachino in the then province of Ifat. It does not matter in the same fashion King Susenyos of seventeenth century Ethiopia (r. 1607-1632), according to Ahmed (2007: 49) fought with the clan of Qachino in Wayet and Gisshé for the Qachino contingent encircled his governor of Ifat in the name of Yolyos. Gradually in the seventeenth century, according to Periera (1892, I: 263), the Qachino as an Argobba clan disappears except some of the place names attributed to them bearing this clan name in Yifat.

As in the case of the Qachino we have another Argobba clan called Shagura*. However, we do not have much detailed and rich references on this clan. Better than the fate of the Qachino clan, we still have traces of peoples speaking this dialect of Argobba in Yifat. According to Ahmed (2007:51-52) based on local Islamic sources, the Shagura were/are one of the Muslim Argobba clans along with the Qachino. Aläqa Tayyé editors Hudson and Tekeste Negash (1987:58-59) also prove the existence of the Argobba clan named Shagura in the area of Yifat. The particular area in Yifat mentioned, as their home, is Warkamba. Although we do not know when the term Shagura denoting a marginal group did and in the sense of derogatory term, standing to represent “greedy business oriented group or individual” well mentioned in the work of Desta Tekel Wold (1970:126).

Seen from different perspectives, the Argobba people and its language with all dialects, seems to have passed through a history of suffering lost their political authority of the medieval times and finally since the sixteenth century and all through until our own times assuming a low social profile in the country at large. The Argobba informants interviewed in 2003 namely Al-Haj Mohammed Nur Salah and the gifted Argobba businessperson, Abo Walsama narrated how the dignitary of King Menelik when he was the Kingdom of Shewa (1865- 1889) named Azaj Wolde Tsadiq put his heavy hand destroyed the Argobba chiefs and their political authority with the title of *Walsama* as vassals of the king. It seems since those days the Argobba and their language gradually declined. One indication of this direction of decline well elaborated by the already indicated Argobba elders in the course of the 2003 interview conducted in Addis Ababa and at the heartland small village town of Aleyyu Amba in North-eastern Shewa in the case of the latter.

The French Linguist Marcel Choen (1931) properly studies the Argobba language. The tendency of the decline of the Argobba language properly followed up and documented by him. His book of 416 pages cites the Argobba Grammar and languages here and there.

Even as late as the turn of this century, Zelalem Liyew (2001: 4-41), both linguists of high academic profile considered the Argobba language as follows:

Argobba is a very closely related to Amharic. The phonological similarity is about 95%. Their lexical similarity is about 75% (Leslau even gives the figure of 84%, 1970:13). In addition, above all: the two languages are about 85% similar in their morphology, which is believed to be more resistant to change than their phonology or lexicon. Syntactically, too, the two languages were seen to be identical. For this reason, I suggest that Argobba and Amharic are dialects of one another, not independent languages. If, however, Argobba is regarded as a language, then it is a language whose present status neither is “dead” nor healthily “alive”—but a “language” on the verge of extinction.... Is Argobba in fact a “dialect”, and is it on the way to “extinction”? Professor Zelalem and Siebert questioned.

Both Professor Zelalem and Siebert based themselves on the data they collected from the Argobba villages of Northern Shewa and Southern Wallo. It seems their conclusion is one of evaluating the status of the Argobba language. They did not consider its independent and one of the functional language of the country in the country’s social, political and cultural setup. Ethiopian history records the Argobba and their language’s political hegemony of medieval times as Abebe (1992) and Ahmed (2007) already documented the glorious past of the people, their language politics, economy and culture without leaving aside the process of decline both their socio-political and economic hegemony as well as their language and dialects. One thing that one should not deny is that the Argobba tradition regrets let alone now but long time in the past when the French journalist Mondon-Vidailhet (1913:98) recorded their language and literary culture in the 1880s and early 1900s. One of his rich sources demonstrates the Argobba tradition, which regrets their current fate along with their glorious past:

የድሮ ሀብታም የዛሬ ድኃ፣
ዕራቱን በላ በጎመን ውኃ።
የዛሬ ሀብታም የድሮ ፈቂር ፣
የድሮ ፈቂር የዛሬ ከቢር፣
ዕራቱን በላ በቅቤ ንሂር።

The English translation runs as follows:

*The [Argobba] rich in the past becomes the today’s poor,
He/ She remains only to enjoy the soup of cabbage
The today’s rich one [their neighbors] one but*

miserable of the past,
The miserable of the past but the current rich,
 Enjoying his bread with the sauce of butter.

V. Concluding Remarks

As already indicated in this article, the Argobaba and Gafat linguistic communities seem to have played a role of both existence, change and continuity in Ethiopian history. The process of interaction and integration of the Gafat linguistic community finally led the speakers and their language eventual extinction. When looking at the case of the Argobba, the existing literary and oral sources underline that the language is declining and pockets of the speakers are still trickling in the country's social environment. Nevertheless, we are currently living with not only the living language and cultures flourishing around us but also with the enshrined heritages, culture and fragments of the literary sources of both the extinct Gafat and the declining Argobba in many ways than one. One basic fact is that in the course of social interactions and integrations, the process of give and take remains true. Indeed, human interactions and integrations, in terms of both adversity and that of opportunity, remain quite mutual.

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