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The Argobba of Ethiopia are not the Languages they Speak¹

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Introduction

The Argobba of northeastern Šäwa and southeastern Wällo live amongst and speak the languages of the Amhara and the Oromo with great ease as if they are members of these ethnic groups. For them Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* are the languages of administration and market transaction and therefore important for Argobba survival. Because administrative offices and market places provide the material conditions for using these languages, and since these languages are the paramount modes of communication in government circles and market spaces, every achievement oriented Argobba must not only speak the language of his/her neighbours but must also learn, know, and handle them well in public interactions. Yet the Argobba I met in these lands identified themselves as Argobba, and they were known as such, despite the fact that several of them had Amharic or *Afaan Oromoo* as their first language. The central claim of this article is therefore that a) the Argobba define themselves as Argobba on the basis of the total culture of the communities in question, and not on the basis of who can or cannot speak the Argobba language, and b) that in the relationship between language and ethnicity, Argobba language loyalty as a strong ideological marker of ethnicity is losing ground while cultural identity is more or less intact among the Šäwa and Wällo Argobba of Ethiopia.² As the main focus of this article is on language loss without cultural acquiescence, attention

¹ The title of the article is a rejoinder to W. SOBANIA's (1978) rhetorical question: *Are we the language we speak?* I would like to thank AMSALU AKLILU for his comments on an earlier version of this article. I have been involved in ethnographic and ethno-linguistic fieldwork among the Argobba of Ethiopia between 1986 and 1996, thanks to the generous grants from the Rockefeller and McArthur Foundations.

² For the purposes of this study I mainly dealt with Argobba consultants from the Aliyyu–Amba/Wärk–Amba/Särbädin/Čänno areas of Tägulät *awraja*, Ankobär *wäräda* region of northeastern Šäwa and from the Essoyyä Hijirota area of Qallu *awraja*, Kämissé *wäräda* region of southeastern Wällo, the two locations where some form of the language is still spoken today. In these areas, I talked to a total of fifteen individuals consisting of both men and women, took a word list of one hundred and fifty Argobba terms, and recorded and transcribed them all.

and the burden of proof shall rest on the link between ethnic affiliation and linguistic obsolescence³.

In this respect, there is a widespread belief among anthropologists (Blackhurst 1980: 59, 1996: 241) that in many African societies language and ethnicity are very much apart. Koenig (1980: 9) and Spear *et al.* (1993: 11), for example, write that ethnicity is concerned with cultural conservation while language is an aspect of a significant degree of acculturation and that this requires continuous contact. According to them, membership to an ethnic group is nothing more than an association of individuals who define themselves as a cultural rather than a linguistic group. This view is empirically supported by my data of Argobba ethnic identity construction and linguistic assimilation. My opinion is that language is not linked to ethnicity in this region of Ethiopia as possibly elsewhere. Language loyalty and ethnic identity are therefore shifted and maintained incongruently (Ferguson 1982: 373).

In the case of Argobba, Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo*, borrowing is certainly abundant from the two latter by the former, covering nearly all fields of language including syntax and semantics but not cultural characteristics. In other words, the Argobba have lost their language without giving up cultural identity under various conditions of migration, conquest, intrusion, conscious integration and assimilation, and, over time, gradual gain of importance of the Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* languages over Argobba. On the other hand, the Argobba, at least those who still spoke their language in the hills of Essoyyä Hijirota in southeastern Wällo, often did not provide the Oromo and some Amhara of the surrounding area with an opportunity to know the Argobba language⁴. What is striking about these phenomena of language

³ Language obsolescence that is not followed or accompanied by cultural assimilation seems to be rare in Ethiopia. For example, the Gafat people, whose language was alive in a limited number of villages in Gojjam in the 1930s (L. MANZINI 1935: 30), have now totally been linguistically and culturally assimilated by the Gojjam Amhara (W. SHACK 1974: 53–54). Some Agäw and Omotic peoples are probably the only cases that do not fit this explication. For more details on this discussion, see R. HAYWARD (1998: 27) and D. APPLEYARD (1998: 146). For a contrasting view using a Central Cushitic Agäw language example, see ZELALEM LEYEW (1998: 167).

⁴ Essoyyä Hijirota is some 15 kilometres southeast of Kämissé. When I carried out fieldwork in this area in the mid 1980s and early 1990s, Šonké, the *sūfi* saint shrine site and village (ABBEBE KIFLEYESUS 1995: 33), was crowned with some 135 family households while Färäja, Mägaräja, and Tolaha had about 30 households each. I stayed here for a period of one month and met men, women and children who spoke the language. However, when I listened to the so-called Aliyyu–Amba/Wärk–Amba/Särbädin/Ĉanno and Farré Argobba of northeastern Šäwa, I never felt their language was any different from Amharic.

replacement is the length of time within which this process has taken place. It is some seven hundred years or so after the first contacts started that the Argobba language is now on the brink of extinction or literally extinct.

Current Status of Argobba Language Usage

The Argobba, who number around 30,000 and call themselves and their language by the same name, are Muslim cultivators and traders practicing some herding and craft working in the escarpment slopes of northeastern Šäwa and southeastern Wällo⁵. A minority of them, which do not form part of the subject of the present essay, live in the adjoining settlements of the town of Harar in eastern Ethiopia. According to Leslau's (1970) standard classification, Argobba is the closest kin of Amharic and together with Harari or *ge'usu*, Guragé and the extinct Gafat language belongs to the South Ethio-Semitic branch of languages. Bender (1976:24), Hetzron (1973:31, 1997:538) and Hudson (1997:461) have, however, considered it a dialect of Amharic. In this respect, Argobba's position in relation to Amharic still remains undetermined⁶.

It appears that until the end of the eighteenth century the Argobba formed a largely closed society where no language other than Argobba was understood and communication with people from other ethnic groups was confined to trade (Bruce 1790, III:126; Lobo 1735:283). But since trade among the Amhara was not that all important, commercial relations did not by this time bring about bilingualism. The great impact of Amharic began after the Amhara settler penetration into the escarpment slopes in northeastern Šäwa in the last two decades of the eighteenth century (Stitz 1970:76). Even if there was limited impact of the Amhara culture on Argobba life ways principally due to a difference in religious orientation, language shift was insipient, and after the nineteenth century Amharic became the primary language of the Argobba people born in northeastern Šäwa

⁵ ZELELEM LEYEW *et al.*'s (1994:11) estimation for Argobba population as reaching 40,000 is a groundless census without source citation. The Argobba couldn't have grown by another 10,000 in the very few years that followed my departure from the field after the mid-1980s given that these years were also dotted by drought and famine.

⁶ The decision of whether Argobba is dead or a language similar to or a dialect of Amharic or still an independent language in its own right is something that must await the visit of a linguist to Essoyyä Hijirota. ZELELEM LEYEW *et al.*'s (1994:17) conclusion that Argobba and Amharic are dialects of one another is based on comparison of Argobba/Amharic phonemes, consonants, vocabularies and morphological and syntactic similarities that involves *Argobba* language data that comes from outside the Essoyyä Hijirota circles and is therefore tentative and too limited in scope of representation to be conclusive.

from that period onwards⁷. As time went by, however, the subsequent generations must have spoken good Amharic whose acquisition over the years was probably facilitated by interethnic socialisation, education and market transaction.

At present the Argobba are largely fragmented and divided from each other, islands, as it were, in a sea of Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo*. What was once an Argobba continuum, extending from the extreme south of the Käsäm River region in northeastern Šäwa to the far north of the Čälläqa River basin in southeastern Wällo, has now developed into a language expressed in a whole series of variations caused by waves of Oromo migrations in the sixteenth century and Amhara settler penetration during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At present, the Argobba speech communities must struggle for a place alongside Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* because it is in these two languages that administrative matters and most official businesses or commercial transactions are negotiated and conducted, the percentage of Argobba speakers being now so small as to be irrelevant.

Indeed, the spread of *Afaan Oromoo* and Amharic has been a principal factor for the decline in use of the Argobba language and a cause for the replacement of Argobba for several mother-tongue functions. While *Afaan Oromoo* is the principal medium of communication even in the predominantly Argobba-speaking areas of southeastern Wällo, Amharic is without exception the first language of the Argobba in northeastern Šäwa. Since there are more Oromo and Amhara who speak their languages natively, there is greater Argobba opportunity and necessity to learn them as first language competency. The fact that Amharic appears to exert a more consistent pressure on Argobba than *Afaan Oromoo* is in part attributed to Amharic's greater prestige as the language of the politically dominant Amhara, as the official language of the nation state, as the language of education, and as a language with a written tradition in Ethiopia.

Argobba is not thus only giving ground to Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* but the Argobba are also becoming more and more proficient in Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* with more usage of these languages. The more proficient they are in these languages the more they are liable to use them to the detriment and demise of the Argobba language. Such changes in language competency solely reflect the need to be functional in Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* to survive economically. Even if Argobba is very ubiquitous in

⁷ Several travelers entering the region from the coast ranging from R. D'HÉRICOURT (1841:203) to W.C. HARRIS (1844, II:148) noted the presence of Amharic-speaking Muslim Argobba and many remarked on the strangeness of the people who possessed a different religion but spoke the Amharic language.

Bitaha, Däwwé, Essoyyä Hijirota, and Wärk Amba-Çänno homelands, it is still the language of a minority, and therefore its use does not branch outside specific villages in these homelands. And if it does appear in market places, it is only used by the Argobba themselves for hiding and/or clouding price negotiation and market information from *Afaan Oromoo* and Amharic speaking traders or customers.

In markets such as Arärti, Čoba, Abbulé, Dulläčča, Aliyyu Amba, Har Amba, Mafud, Sänbäté, Zuṭṭi, Bora, Kämissé and Harbu, it did not appear that *Afaan Oromoo*, Amharic, 'Affar or Argobba were serving the function of a trade language. Argobba, Oromo, Amhara and 'Affar traders and customers did not typically interact in their common first or second language, rather traders transacted with customers by speaking the latter's first language. Commerce is thus facilitated by traders' multilingual abilities rather than by the emergence of a trade *lingua franca*. There is no general format or vocabulary which everyone knows, rather the market language is specific and peculiar to individual persons who create and develop their own words or phrases through trials and errors. This diffuses the grounds for conflict and disputes even before haggling or bargaining begins, and is therefore a mechanism of tension management which facilitates commercial transaction and interethnic interaction.

Although *Afaan Oromoo* and Amharic are decisively and definitively emerging as dominant languages, the latter will continue to be the language of education, supra regional communication and governmental administration in both the northern and southern homelands. This linguistic condition calls attention to the present Argobba language position in this region where Argobba has been in retreat for a long time and its distribution has been shrinking at the same time that its functions have been dwindling. The explanation that many languages that come into the path of Amharic or *Afaan Oromoo* have the tendency to be hegemonised by them is an analysis closely related with the numerical strength of the speakers of these languages (Gragg 1980:108; Mulugeta Seyum 1986:74–81).

At present, Argobba in the Essoyyä Hijirota/Essoyyä Wata and Särbädin-Çänno homelands promotes social cohesion because sharing a common communicative semiotic system lends the Argobba of these lands a linguistic identity and a speech community, and strongly contributes to a common point of view and indeed to a shared world view. It not only encodes Argobba cultural concepts and transmits facts and ideas, inculcating affection and mutual attraction and passing culturally more meaningful modes that are expressed through Argobba rituals and ceremonies, but it is also the means by which Argobba world view is advanced in the enculturation of younger beginners and the acculturation of new comers.

In a series of visits between 1986 and 1996, I have found that in villages like Šonké, Färäja, Mägaräjjä and ʾTolaha, the language is still regularly used even in the presence of *Afaan Oromoo*. Moreover, when people give up one language for another they may consciously or unconsciously also transmit part of their former mother-tongue language into their newly acquired language (Gumperz *et al.* 1990: 16). For example, in the shift from Argobba to *Afaan Oromoo* in these homelands, the original Argobba lexicon pertaining to kinship terms such as *qurmähalé* (grand father) and *qurmähadé* (grand mother) largely survived unscathed. Similarly there are various loanwords appearing in *Afaan Oromoo* whose traces go back to Argobba. The gradual disappearance of Argobba seems more often than not to be due to horizontal spreading of *Afaan Oromoo* where the language is rapidly engulfing and encapsulating Argobba due to greater Oromo population numbers inhabiting vast lands.

Giles *et al.* (1977: 65–67) claim that ethnic group members identify more closely with someone who shares their language than with someone who shares their cultural background. Such a generalised position doesn't explain the linguistic relation between the Argobba and their neighbours. For the Argobba language may not be as important a potential symbol of ethnic identity as some are led to believe. The Argobba I met in Essoyyä Hijirota and Essoyyä Wata identified themselves as Argobba, and they were known as such, despite the fact that several of them had *Afaan Oromoo* or Amharic as their first language. Hence a common language is not always an immutable part of group identity. Instead ethnicity and ethno-linguistic identity may be seen as something flexible and negotiable (Keefe 1989: 5–6). A characteristic feature of the Argobba of Šonké, Färäja, Mägaräjjä, ʾTolaha and Määdina is that they often practice traditional marriage systems, wear Argobba costumes, and display exclusive Argobba body decorations including coiffures, and thus recognise the speech community as the total culture of the communities in question, and not the outcome of who can or cannot speak the traditional Argobba language.

Another domain in which Argobba has traditionally been strong in southeastern Wällo is religion. The pressure to retain the language is greater here, where their Oromo neighbours are Muslims not easily distinguishable on religious grounds, than in northeastern Šäwa where their neighbours are Amhara Christians whose language the Argobba don't mind using in daily interactions. Argobba religion and language in these rural homelands shared a symbiotic relationship in several instances. For example, together with Arabic, the use of the Argobba vernacular (*ʿajam*) in *Qurʾānic* and *ʿIlm*

schools upholds and preserves Argobba language uses.⁸ While sermon in the mosque is done in Arabic, teaching in the *khalwa* and *zawiyya* is performed by use of a vernacular language. Such Islamic educational institutions use the Argobba vernacular because the Argobba are highly motivated to achieve excellence in these religious institutions. In this respect, Argobba has to a great extent been transformed in Islamic terms.

The Argobba facility in Arabic is essential for religious understanding, and symbolically for demonstrating that one has a Muslim status. Being a Muslim or attaining a near or equivalent standing, then, means speaking Arabic in public places at the deliberate expense of a vernacular language because it is the only vehicle allowed to transmit Islamic religious values and codes. Similarly, Argobba *sūfi* traditions in southeastern Wällo played an important part in the use of the vernacular language by the Argobba among whom the coming together through *ziyarah* or *wärra* is expressed through local rituals and ceremonies, through the exchange of greetings and gifts, and the singing of *sūfi* songs by the followers of the *awliya* (Abbebe Kifleyesus 1995: 33–34). In short, Argobba is still employed during worship in those regions which remain strongly *sūfi* in orientation, and this maintained Argobba cultural and religious identity.

Connected with matters of religion in the lives of Argobba Muslims are the pre-Islamic practices such as *zar* cults, spirit possession and exorcism sessions, and evil eye (*buda*) beliefs each of which had their own lore, vocabulary, and observances which now persist only vestigially among the older Argobba generation. Similarly, magical spells and charms, as well as traditional herbal medicine inherited from members of the previous generation and used, for example, in treating or in healing and curing illnesses and diseases still do appear in Argobba language forms, so that the effect of their survival as a whole is notably great. Each of these settings and traditional means of earning a living therefore have their own specialised vocabulary, as well as songs and lore associated with it. Thus, indigenous knowledge of native flora and fauna in Argobba have increased the rate of survival of the language.

In northeastern Šäwa, Argobba, as a language which has a close typological and genetic relationship with Amharic, has through population movements easily coalesced with and eventually blended into standard Amharic where the latter is the dominant language in the areas of migrations. Here, the media

⁸ All Argobba are fond of learning how to read and write the Arabic language in order to use it in *Qurʾānic* and *ʿIlm* schools. A more typical way of praying and mediating throughout the Argobba rural homelands is the common use of an Amharic or Argobba form of Arabic known as *ʿajam*. For a detailed discussion on this subject, see R. PANKHURST (1994: 259–263).

of instruction being Amharic still facilitates the loss of Argobba to school attendants, and hence they are taught in Amharic and so they learn to think and dream in Amharic. Moreover, Argobba is in an extremely weak position due to the fact that many individuals within these communities frequently dissociate themselves from the Argobba language, many others use the language but rarely, and also because of the increase in the number of resident Argobba Amharic speakers who have been in contact with returning *émigrés* from towns, and people who have grown up in homes in which the Argobba language is no longer spoken. In more than one Argobba household I have spoken to young Argobba boys and girls whose parents would communicate with them as children in Amharic, whereas communication between the parents themselves would be largely in Argobba.

The ability to speak Amharic is often a status marker for the Argobba, as is clear not only from their eagerness to competently speak this language whenever the opportunity arises but also from the number and nature of Amharic loanwords in what remains of Argobba in northeastern Šäwa. The borrowing by Argobba of Amharic vocabulary and usages in the form of inflections, and the fact that virtually all Argobba are now also Amharic speakers, as well as the particularly strong impact from Amharic through what Manuel (1993) calls *cassette culture*, purveyed mostly through the omnipresent media of the radio and the tape recorder transmitting Amharic popular songs, have led to the loss of Argobba. Today nearly all Argobba speak Amharic as their primary and first language and there are evidences that suggest that the younger Argobba generations are Amharic-proficient and use Argobba as a second language. It is because the Argobba interact with the Amhara using Amharic that their linguistic loyalty is now tilted towards this society.

The gradual linguistic expansion of Amharic as a language of prestige is a result of its being spoken by a much larger homogeneous population whose members share common cultural features in terms of kinship and marriage, and in terms of subsistence production that range from farming to some kind of herding in this region. In this environment, Amharic is a *lingua franca*, and its expansion is probably due to the fact that it has for sometime been a dominant culture language in terms of being the language of trade, justice, administration and education. It is perhaps for this reason that the Argobba have no illusions about their linguistic position and are unwilling to make inordinate sacrifices in depriving their children of knowledge of Amharic.

In places where Argobba and Amharic have been in close contact with each other over a long period of time, changes have occurred in the direction of convergence with Amharic through long term interference from this language. Contraction is further facilitated by: a) geographical proximity to Amharic, b) presence of schools operating in this language, c) Argobba and

Amhara economic interdependence and market interactions and exchanges favourable for the contraction of Argobba, and d) failure of the younger speakers to benefit, as previous generations did, from interaction with the oldest generation of speakers who normally have the widest range of Argobba linguistic skills. Even traditional Argobba greetings and blessings are often unfamiliar nowadays to younger Argobba speakers in many of the Wärk Amba-Çänno Argobba communities. The reason is that modern young Argobba individuals whose preoccupations lie mainly outside the scope of these old Argobba people's experiences lead much of their daily lives in Amharic.

All of the above factors have the commulative effect, then, of restricting the young speakers' level of functioning in Argobba, thinning-out of the speech communities of the oldest generation of Argobba speakers with the widest linguistic range, increasing the number of speakers opting for use of Amharic in everyday speech, and eroding Argobba vitality even in domains where traditionally it was strong. Similarly, because great economic and social changes are taking place in these areas, some occupations and by the same token the native tongue used in expressing them are gradually being lost to a large number of the Argobba population due to new terms coming from Amharic sources.

Yet linguistic assimilation, as Dorian (1980:33–35) has shown using another case study, does not necessarily imply social or cultural assimilation. Similarly language loss does not necessarily mean loss or modification of cultural norms. The Argobba are tolerant to foreign cultures and languages for survival purposes. They welcome their assimilation into other groups in order to strengthen their position as a community of Argobba individuals. In short, Argobba, already in the process of extinction, is not an essential link between ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness and by the same explanation a loss of the Argobba language is not a deterrent to Argobbanness, and thus it is the very cultural characteristics of the people that create and cultivate a feeling of identity and lubricate the wheel of ethnicity.

Argobba Linguistic Assimilation and Cultural Conservation: A Discussion

In northeastern Šäwa, Argobba has, as indicated earlier, totally given up to Amharic, the established *lingua franca* in the area, whereas in southeastern Wällo, both Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* do not function as *lingua francas* but are instead major languages in a demographic sense only.⁹ Indeed, cer-

⁹ ZELALEM LEYEW and his colleagues' (1994: 14) assertion that the large majority of the Argobba who live in and around the town of Šäwa Robit do not speak the language, is correct. On the other hand, R. SIEBERT *et al's* (1994: 18) word list taken from a presumably Šonké person who had permanently lived in Šäwa Robit for fifteen years

tain aspects of the extinction of Argobba may be explained as being the result of a longer and more intimate familiarity with Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* through market interaction, religious affiliation and government administration.

The Argobba of northeastern Šäwa as a whole speak Amharic fluently and with competency in all occasions including communication among family members. There is very little difference between Argobba, as spoken today in northeastern Šäwa, and ordinary Amharic of the surrounding area. The substratum vocabulary is widely spread around agricultural terminology, although the younger generation speakers stretch it even to the domain of commercial activity. From these Argobba materials in the lexicon Leslau (1959), some four decades ago, noted that for them the corresponding Amharic words were much more common and that in time were likely to replace the original Argobba words.

In contrast, a glance at the lexicon of the original Argobba language collected by the same scholar reveals that less loan words from *Afaan Oromoo* were present in Argobba than from its linguistically closely related language of the Amhara. At present, however, I think that the Argobba that is still spoken in the few various villages of Essoyyä Hijirota in southeastern Wällo, and is the product of Argobba speakers who still perfectly use it, is in the process of decay.¹⁰ This means that there are clear indications of language decay even in Essoyyä Hijirota Argobba although the Argobba are ethno-historically much more connected to the Amhara than to the Oromo. On the other hand, the Argobba and the ‘Affar speak very divergent languages and, with the exception of a common religious tradition, nor do they share similar economic and social values. The Argobba thus have less loan words from the language of their pastoral neighbours.¹¹

can't be taken as a valid sample. This is because it has been collected from someone who has been detached from his roots for more than a decade and lives in Šäwa Robit where Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* are the languages of education, government administration, and market transaction respectively.

¹⁰ Linguistic research about the Argobba *language* has been very limited, compared to research on other *small* South Ethio-Semitic languages of Ethiopia. Language decay, here defined as heavy loss in grammatical expression, is identified through comparison with dying Argobba language in northeastern Šäwa or, if any, in the surroundings of Harar in eastern Ethiopia.

¹¹ During the various years that I visited the different Argobba rural settlements in the escarpment slopes of northeastern Šäwa and southeastern Wällo, I noted that the Argobba spoke fluent Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo*, but very few of them knew ‘Affar. This is because the large majority of the Argobba rural homelands are too far west to permit ‘Affar and Argobba social interaction.

Contrary to the Argobba of northeastern Šäwa, the Argobba in southeastern Wällo did definitely shift their economy from trading to cultivating and some herding.¹² The linguistic consequence of this development is that Argobba here has very few traces of the old South Ethio-Semitic language associated with commerce. Argobba in southeastern Wällo therefore contains a large amount of *Afaan Oromoo* terms brought about by the density and concentration of Oromo population covering a large area while for those in northeastern Šäwa it is the length of time that Argobba has been in contact with Amharic that made the former extinct through extended lexicalisation. The Argobba are therefore a distinct ethnic group not linguistically but culturally.¹³ If this explication of identity relies largely on culture as a decisive element of ethnicity, what are then some of the cultural categories that define Argobba society?

The Argobba in both northeastern Šäwa and southeastern Wällo did not for long give up endogamy and paternal parallel cousin marriage and bridewealth exchange. These marriage practices, patrilocal residences, and traditional payment exchanges have kept the Argobba in tact as an ethnic group. In northeastern Šäwa, this is reinforced by the fact that the Argobba, living as they do amongst the Christian Amhara, are ethnically Muslim. In southeastern Wällo, in cases where Argobba girls married out, and young Argobba men brought in Oromo brides due to similar religious orientation, there definitely was language loss or people became bilinguals but this did not necessarily lead to drastic decline in use of traditional values and customs, change in type of *amba* based dwellings and habitats, or precipitate a shift in dietary patterns and ethnic linkages.¹⁴ Argobba octogenarians also mention that they have a unitary or common myths of origin and say that the first Argobba were immigrants, and that in their new habitat they found it difficult

¹² There are several ethnographic reports suggesting that the Argobba are former traders who resorted to agriculture and craftworks out of necessity in not too remote past (V. STITZ 1974: 186; U. BRAUKÄMPER 1977 (1) 31, (2) 19; S. WALDRON 1984: 50; ABBEBE KIFLEYESUS 2003: 332). On account of the social and economic changes which have affected Argobba speech communities in recent decades, it was often extremely difficult, if not down-right impossible, to explore whole ranges of vocabulary relating to now defunct Argobba cultural practices, observances and beliefs.

¹³ G. SCHLEE (1987: 273–274) speaks of a similar case and argues cogently and convincingly that a Somali group of people in northern Kenya became Oromo speaking but preserved their clan-based cattle culture enthusiastically.

¹⁴ In southeastern Wällo where Islam by and large binds the Argobba with the Oromo, Argobba intermarriage, often wives marrying out, with the former happens infrequently. In northeastern Šäwa where the Argobba live amongst the Christian Amhara, intermarriage between the two is forbidden for religious reasons.

to abandon one's own ethnic affiliation due to deeply rooted customs, cultural values, religious rituals and traditions, and engagement in commercial enterprises.

Common terraced agricultural lands conceived as Argobba rural homelands and social values such as denigration of iron, gold, and silver smithing and other despised activities, and the social groups associated with them seem also to consistently construct Argobba cultural identity. With all Argobba groups having the 'Affar as traditional enemies living on the eastern flank of their frontiers, their cultural codes and obligations are linked to ethnic affiliation in the sense of, for example, a raid against the 'Affar ethnic group entails Argobba ethnic association because it reduces 'Affar political strength. This is then briefly what happened to the Argobba who experienced strong linguistic assimilation brought about by various population movements but survived in terms of ethnic affiliation due to cultural practices and religious orientations in the rural homelands of northeastern Šäwa and southeastern Wällo.

Conclusion

The Argobba lost their language without succumbing their cultural values, religious beliefs, and traditional customs. They lived among the Amhara and the Oromo but they did not become members of these ethnic groups by simply speaking their languages. They remained Argobba even well after being Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* speakers. Indeed, Argobba cultural continuity has remained remarkably strong in the sense that there are several Argobba groups who live among different ethnic groups of the region and speak their languages but retain their common cultural traditions and ethnic links.

Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* are thus *lingua francas* not just in the sense that they are first languages to the Argobba, but also in so far as they have no attached ethnic symbolic status. In a word, they have been deculturalised. To become Argobba then simply means to see oneself culturally considered as Argobba. The existence of such cultural practices and cosmological traditions is characterised by participation in Argobba Muslim ritual ceremonies and *sūfi* saint shrine visitations, preparation and consumption of Argobba alimental goods (Abbebe Kifleyesus 2002:256–263), involvement in trading, weaving and several other material culture dispositions, and above all by a common history and political economy that cuts across the Argobba rural homelands in northeastern Šäwa and southeastern Wällo.

In this last respect, craftworks such as weaving and masonry of square stone-built dwellings, endogamous practices, and collective dispersal and displacement experiences due to Oromo invasion and Amhara settler pene-

tration has in time encouraged ethnic or cultural cohesion. At present, such awareness of ethnicity and intensified sense of cultural identity has been accentuated by loss of rural homeland villages due to neighbouring ‘Affar incursions in search of pasture lands. Moreover, the sheer fact of being Argobba from a certain *amba* and the use of Islam as a moral charter against intense Christian Amhara ethno-religious character has further given the Argobba some dynamic qualities in exercising a heightened sense of group identity.

Argobba Islamic identity is thus but one of the several symbols of their ethnicity and cultural continuity. Argobba ethnicity is not therefore distinct from their religious identity. Both capture the essence of Argobba moral character by placing great emphasis on religious paths, *sūfi* traditions, local wedding customs, dressing codes and dietary habits as ways and means of remaining distinct and feeling different from their non-Muslim neighbours. Such differences not only enrich their religio-cultural appearance but give more relevance to the kinds of Argobba identities and interpersonal relationships that draw conceptualisations from Argobba strategies of adaptation and cultural orientation.

Indeed, the Argobba have over the years learned their neighbours’ languages, and in so doing they have become multilingual and functional in non-Argobba cultures without losing their own cultural traits. In sum, the argument that due to diminishment of speakers Argobba is in a fast process of linguistic extinction is very true but that their ethnic identity is being shed or their culture is being supplanted by other cultures is to a large extent untrue. Clearly Argobba cultural history is not only inextricably linked to the changing conditions of a regional political economy, but it is also a story of the survival and revival of ethnic identity through the articulation of adaptive strategies in the form of distinct settlement systems, social organizational features and religious practices. The transformation of the Argobba language and the expression of Argobba cultural traditions in religious and commercial terms is thus not independent of historical and political developments.

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Summary

The Argobba of southeastern Wällo and northeastern Šäwa live amongst and speak the languages of the Amhara and the Oromo with great ease as if they are members of these ethnic groups. For them Amharic and *Afaan Oromoo* are the languages of administration and market transaction and therefore important for Argobba survival in a region dominated by these two ethno-linguistic groups. Yet the Argobba I met in these lands identified themselves as Argobba, and they were known as such, despite the fact that several of them had Amharic or *Afaan Oromoo* as their first language. The central claim of this article is therefore that the Argobba of this region define themselves as Argobba based on their traditions, customs, beliefs, values, and total cultural practices and not on the basis of who can or cannot speak the Argobba language.