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JAMES BRUCE OF KINROSS

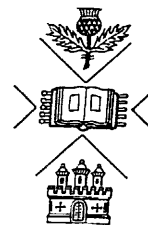
TRAVELS
To Discover
THE SOURCE
of The
NILE

by
JAMES BRUCE



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particular friend, as I had kept him in my house, and attended him in his sickness, after the campaign of 1769, confessed to me his apprehensions that he should die, because the serpent did not eat upon his leaving his house to come to Gondar. He was, indeed, very ill of the low country fever, and very much alarmed; but he recovered and returned home, by Ras Michael's order, to gather the Agows together against Waragna Fasil; which he did, and soon after, he and other seven chiefs of the Agows were slain at the battle of Banja; so here the serpent's warning was verified by a second trial, though it failed in the first.

Before an invasion of the Galla, or an inroad of the enemy, they say these serpents disappear, and are nowhere to be found. Fasil, the sagacious and cunning governor of the country, was, as it was said, greatly addicted to this species of divination, in so much as never to mount his horse, or go from home, if an animal of this kind, which he had in his keeping, refused to eat.

The Shum's name was Kefa Abay, or Servant of the River; he was a man about seventy, not very lean, but infirm, fully as much so as might have been expected from that age. He conceived that he might have had eighty-four or eighty-five children. That honourable charge which he possessed had been in his family from the beginning of the world, as he imagined. Indeed, if all his predecessors had as numerous families as he, there was no probability of the succession devolving to strangers. He had a long white beard, and very moderately thick; an ornament rare in Abyssinia, where they have seldom any hair upon their chin. He had round his body a skin wrapt and tied round with a broad belt: I should rather say it was an ox's hide; but it was so scraped, and rubbed, and manufactured, that it was of the consistence and appearance of shamoy, only browner in colour. Above this he wore a cloak with the hood up, and covering his head; he was bare-legged, but had sandals, much like those upon ancient statues; these, however, he put off as soon as ever he approached the bog where the Nile rises, which we were all likewise obliged to do. We were allowed to drink the water, but make no other use of it. None of the inhabitants of Geesh wash themselves, or their cloaths, in the Nile, but in a stream that falls from the mountain of Geesh down into the plain of Assoa, which runs south, and meets the Nile in its turn northward, passing the country of the Gafats and Gongas.

The Agows, in whose country the Nile rises, are, in point of number, one of the most considerable nations in Abyssinia; when their whole force is raised, which seldom happens, they can bring to the field 4000

horse, and a great number of foot; they were, however, once much more powerful; several unsuccessful battles, and the perpetual inroads of the Galla, have much diminished their strength. The country, indeed, is still full of inhabitants, but from their history we learn, that one clan, called Zeegam, maintained singly a war against the king himself, from the time of Socinios to that of Yasous the Great, who, after all, overcame them by surprise and stratagem; and that another clan, the Denguis, in like manner maintained the war against Facilidas, Hannes I and Yasous II, all of them active princes. Their riches, however, are still greater than their power, for though their province in length is no where 60 miles, nor half that in breadth, yet Gondar and all the neighbouring country depend for the necessaries of life, cattle, honey, butter, wheat, hides, wax, and a number of such articles, upon the Agows, who come constantly in succession, a thousand and fifteen hundred at a time, loaded with these commodities, to the capital.

As the dependence upon the Agows is for their produce rather than on the forces of their country, it has been a maxim with wise princes to compound with them for an additional tribute, instead of their military service; the necessities of the times have sometimes altered these wise regulations, and between their attachment to Fasil, and afterwards to Ras Michael, they have been very much reduced, whereby the state has suffered.

It will naturally occur, that, in a long carriage, such as that of a hundred miles in such a climate, butter must melt, and be in a state of fusion, consequently very near putrefaction; this is prevented by the root of an herb, called Moc-moco, yellow in colour, and in shape nearly resembling a carrot; this they bruise and mix with their butter, and a very small quantity preserves it fresh for a considerable time; and this is a great saving and convenience, for, supposing salt was employed, it is very doubtful if it would answer the intention; besides, salt is money in this country, being circulated in the form of wedges, or bricks; it serves the purpose of silver coin, and is the change of gold; so that this herb is of the utmost use in preventing the increase in price of this necessary article, which is the principal food of all ranks of people in this country. Brides paint their feet likewise from the ancle downwards, as also their nails and palms of their hands, with this drug. I brought with me into Europe a large quantity of the seed, resembling that of coriander, and dispersed it plentifully through all the royal gardens: whether it has succeeded or not I cannot say.

Besides the market of Gondar, the neighbouring black savages, the woolly-headed Shangalla, purchase the greatest part of these com-

modities from them, and many others, which they bring from the capital when they return thence; they receive in exchange elephants-teeth, rhinoceros-horns, gold in small pellets, and a quantity of very fine cotton; of which goods they might receive a much greater quantity were they content to cultivate trade in a fair way, without making inroads upon those savages for the sake of slaves, and thereby disturbing them in their occupations of seeking for gold and hunting the elephant.

The way this trade, though very much limited, is established, is by two nations sending their children mutually to each other; there is then peace between these two families which have such hostages; these children often intermarry; after which that family is understood to be protected, and at peace, perhaps for a generation: but such instances are rare, the natural propensity of both nations being to theft and plunder; into these they always relapse; mutual enmity follows in consequence.

The country of the Agows, called Agow Midre, from its elevation must be of course temperate and wholesome; the days, indeed, are hot, even at Sacala, and, when exposed to the sun, we are sensible of a scorching heat; but whenever you are seated in the shade, or in a house, the temperature is cool, as there is a constant breeze, which makes the sun tolerable even at mid-day, though we are here but 10^o from the Line, or a few minutes more.

Though these Agows are so fortunate in their climate, they are not said to be long-livers; but their precise age is very difficult to ascertain to any degree of exactness, as they have no fixed or known epoch to refer to; and, though their country abounds with all the necessaries of life, their taxes, tributes, and services, especially at present, are so multiplied upon them, whilst their distresses of late have been so great and frequent, that they are only the manufacturers of the commodities they sell, to satisfy these constant exorbitant demands, and cannot enjoy any part of their own produce themselves, but live in misery and penury scarce to be conceived. We saw a number of women, wrinkled and sun-burnt, so as scarce to appear human, wandering about under a burning sun, with one and sometimes two children upon their back, gathering the seeds of bent grass to make a kind of bread.

The cloathing of the Agows is all of hides, which they soften and manufacture in a method peculiar to themselves, and this they wear in the rainy season, when the weather is cold; for here the rainy seasons are of long duration, and violent, which still increases the nearer you approach the Line, for the reasons I have already assigned. The

younger sort are chiefly naked, the married women carrying their children about with them upon their backs. Their cloathing is like a shirt, down to their feet, and girded with a belt or girdle about their middle; the lower part of it resembles a large double petticoat, one ply of which they turn back over their shoulders, fastening it with a broach or scewer, across their breast before, and carry their children in it behind. The women are generally thin, and, like the men, below the middle size. There is no such thing as barrenness known among them. They begin to bear children before eleven; they marry generally about that age, and are marriageable two years before: they close child-bearing before they are thirty, though there are several instances to the contrary.

Dengui, Sacala, Dengla, and Geesh, are all called by the name of Ancasha, and their tribute is paid in honey. Quaquera and Azena pay honey likewise; Benja, honey and gold; Metakel, gold; Zeegam, gold. There comes from Dengla, a particular kind of sheep, called Macoot, which are said to be of a breed brought from the southward of the Line; but neither sheep, butter, nor slaves make part of their tribute, being reserved for presents to the king, and great men.

Besides what they sell, and what they pay to the governor of Damot, the Agows have a particular tribute which they present to the king, one thousand dabra of honey, each dabra containing about sixty pounds weight, being a large earthen vessel. They pay, moreover, sixteen hundred oxen, and 1000 ounces of gold: formerly the number of jars of honey was four thousand, but several of these villages being daily given to private people by the king, the quantity is diminished by the quota so alienated. The butter is all sold; and, since the fatal battle of Banja¹, the king's share comes only to about one thousand jars. The officer that keeps the accounts, and sees the rents paid, is called Agow Mizikir, accountant of the Agows; his post is worth one thousand ounces of gold; and by this it may be judged with what economy this revenue is collected. This post is generally the next to the governor of Damot, but not of course; they are separate provinces, and united only by the special grant of the king.

Although I had with me two large tents sufficient for my people, I was advised to take possession of the houses, to secure our mules and horses from thieves in the night, as also from the assaults of wild beasts, of which this country is full. Almost every small collection of houses has behind it a large cave, or subterraneous dwelling, dug in the rock,

¹ In which Fasil had routed the Agows, who had revolted against him and declared for Ras Michael.