TRAUMA AND SLAVERY, GILO AND THE SOFT, SUBTLE SHACKLES OF LOVEDALE

By Sandra Rowoldt Shell

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Introduction

Trauma is a word on many lips worldwide during this COVID-19 era as in previous times of personal, group, national or global stress and distress. Pandemics, natural disasters by flood or flame, man-made disasters, the deaths of loved ones---all leave their specific legacies of trauma. Each of us could add many other forms of trauma from our own experiences and we may know that the term "trauma" derives from the Greek word meaning a wound and can refer either to the impact of sudden changes in a person's physical condition (serious injury), or to the emotional shock experienced in the wake of a stressful or distressing experience.[1] The University of Maryland Medical Center defines a traumatic event as "an experience that causes physical, emotional, psychological distress, or harm. It is an event that is perceived and experienced as a threat to one's safety or to the stability of one's world."[2]

In terms of those definitions, enslavement, at any time and under any circumstances, presupposes a plethora of implicit and ensuing traumas. In addition, the intergenerational legacy of the trauma of slavery has a profound impact on issues of identity, perceptions of self and self-worth. This legacy has cast a long shadow across the history of slavery at the Cape of Good Hope and persists to this day. Wounds such as these thrust deep into the hearts and minds of the national psyche. Included in the litany of slavery trauma manifestations is the "slave loyalty syndrome" or "Stockholm syndrome. The phenomenon has received considerable attention in the context of slavery by scholars from a range of disciplines, all examining the behaviour and

[1] *Fowler's Modern English Usage* [online resource] http://www.answers.com/topic/psychological-trauma.

[2] "Traumatic events." *University of Maryland Medical Center* [online resource] http://umm.edu/health/medical/ency/articles/traumatic-events#ixzz318Xi9Kls.

motivation of slaves who found they had to reconcile their slave status with genuinely deep feelings for their captors.

The Oromo Slave Children

A recent study of sixty-four Oromo slave children from the Horn of Africa has provided valuable information of the children's experiences from capture to the coast.[3] In 1888 a British warship liberated a consignment of Oromo child slaves in the Red Sea and took them to Aden. A year later, a further group of liberated Oromo slave children joined them at a Free Church of Scotland mission at Sheikh Othman, just north of Aden. Two of the missionaries learnt Afaan Oromo (the children's language), and, with the assistance of three fluent Afaan Oromo speakers, they conducted structured interviews with each child asking for details of their experiences of their first passage i.e. the journey from cradle to the Red Sea coast. When a number of the children died within a short space of time, the missionaries had to find another institution with a healthier climate to prevent further deaths. They decided to ship the Oromo children to the Lovedale Institution in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.

The Oromo child slaves of this study experienced their own, albeit Hobbesian, middle passage—nasty, brutish and short."[4] One traumatised child, Isho Karabe, was found alone, crammed on top of rice-bags below deck on an abandoned, drifting slave dhow in August 1889.[5] The dhow crew, spotting the Royal Navy in hot pursuit, had thrown the other forty-one slaves overboard before jumping into the water themselves. The rescue and liberation of an earlier, larger group of Oromo children in September 1888 was achieved amidst salvos of lethal machine-gun fire from the mast of a Royal Navy gunship, killing four slave children and the captain of the dhow. We can only speculate on the intensity of the terror the children experienced during this violent encounter and all the multiple traumas of that brief middle passage.

Few if any studies address, let alone illuminate, the trauma of the still only darkly-lit first passage. Without the voices of the slaves themselves, there can be no illumination nor any empirical commentary or analysis. Fortunately, some first passage narratives do survive, as the study of this group of Oromo child slaves demonstrates, and it is in these narratives that the real revelations of the children's slavery experience and traumas reside.[6] The story of one of these Oromo children, Gilo Kashe, may serve as an exemplar of these traumas.

Gilo Kashe

Gilo Kashe, a young boy who was about fourteen years old when liberated, was the only Oromo child known to have been profoundly intellectually damaged in consequence of the trauma of his slave-time experiences.[7] He was also physically compromised, with

[3]Sandra Rowoldt Shell, *Children of Hope: The Odyssey of the Oromo Slaves from Ethiopia to South Africa* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2018).
[4]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXI.9. The middle passage voyages experienced by these children lasted only a matter of hours before patrolling gunships of the Royal Navy intercepted their dhows.
[5]Isho Karabe (ca.1879-31 October 1895), see Matthew Lochhead, *Short Biographies of the Galla Rescued Slaves now at Lovedale: With an Account of Their Country and Their Capture* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1891), 26; Shell, *Children of Hope* (2018).
[6] Shell, *Children of Hope* (2018).
[7] "Gilo Kashe" in Lochhead, *Short Biographies*, 23; see also his narrative in Shell, *Children of Hope*, 225.

impaired mobility and clipped ears. The cause of these incapacities is uncertain. He may have suffered severe ill-treatment during his capture, or while on the road to the slave trading entrepôt of Tadjoura on the Red Sea coast. Or he may have been the victim of major illness during his first passage. Coincidentally, in the first group of Oromo children liberated on 16 September 1888, there was also a boy named “Gilo” or “Geelo.” On reaching Aden, he was taken to hospital where he was diagnosed with “general dropsy.” Dropsy, or oedema, is a major indication of severe malnutrition (possibly kwashiorkor). This level of malnutrition can also lead to permanent cognitive impairment as well as general developmental delay, loss of knee and ankle reflexes and impaired memory. Gilo Kashe was liberated nearly a year later, at the height of the worst drought and famine in Ethiopian history. This could equally have been his story.[8]

The missionaries at Lovedale Institution, where the Oromo children were shipped in 1890, believed Gilo’s condition resulted from injuries incurred en route. They referred consistently to his diminished mental capacity in reporting the progress of the Oromo children at the Institution.[9] When Lovedale reported to their financial benefactors about the progress of the Oromo children in 1900, all had left—with one exception:

> The only boy now left is Gilo Kashe. He was from the first mentally unfit, all real intelligence or mental capacity for even ordinary work having been probably driven out of him by shock or ill-treatment after his capture. It is not likely his captors would have troubled themselves with him if his mental condition had been then what it is now. He is perfectly harmless and remains on the place, amusing and occupying himself as best he can.[10]

The renowned anthropologist, Monica Wilson, knew Gilo personally whilst at Lovedale and later wrote:

> In 1890 sixty-four Galla boys and girls, rescued from a slave ship by a British cruiser, were sent to Lovedale to be educated. Some later found employment in South Africa; others returned to Ethiopia; one [Gilo Kashe] injured before his rescue remained in Lovedale until his death, his cropped ears the proof of his history.[11]

Her son, the economic historian Francis Wilson, remembers the first time he, as a little boy aged about six years, saw Gilo standing naked on a rock in the Tyhume River, soaping his glistening body. Francis was frightened and took to his heels, running all the way home through the long grass. His mother reassured him that Gilo was a little different, even eccentric, but a gentle and lovable man.

[8] British Library, India Office Records and Private Papers, Records of the British Administrations in Aden, 1837-1967, Volume 1037, Slave Trade, IOR/R/20/A/667, 1888; Zubin Grover and Looi C. Ee, “Protein energy malnutrition” *Pediatric Clinics* 56 (October 2009): 1055-1068.

[9]“Gilo Kashe [is still] at Lovedale. Has always suffered under a mental affliction.” “The Gallas: Statement Shewing Address Occupation etc., on 10th of March 1900” CL MS 17,125: 5.

[10] James Stewart, *Final Statement to Supporters of the Rescued Gallas at Lovedale, South Africa*. Lovedale: 15 January 1899-March 1900, CL MS 17,125; [Lovedale Institution]. “Distribution of Gallas outside Lovedale,” CL MS 17,125.

[11]Francis Wilson and Dominique Perrot, editors. *Outlook on a Century: South Africa 1870-1970* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press and Spro-Cas, 1973). There is thus far no evidence of ear-clipping as a mark of slavery in the slave trade of Ethiopia. Gilo’s Lovedale fellow Oromo peers were convinced a camel was responsible for biting off his ear(s). “K,” “Lovedale 1887-1889: A Student Looks Back Through Childish Eyes” *South African Outlook* (01 March 1948), 44-45.

Medical doctor Margaret Elsworth recollects meeting Gilo at Lovedale in the early 1940s. She remembers that he had scarring on his ankles which she interprets as evidence of the use of shackles.[12]

Gilo, of course, had no memory of the treatment he experienced. but it is highly unlikely that he presented as cognitively or physically compromised prior to his initial enslavement. Slave traders were anxious that the slaves they were buying were in good health and worth the price, and that those they were offering for sale were sound of mind and body to earn them the best price. Milko Guyo, one of the other boys, remembered seeing Gilo working for a man in Tigre named Butta, "going round from house to house gathering up cow dung which when dried was used as fuel."

There is a sense that, even at that stage, Gilo was limited in what he was capable of doing, presumably in consequence of his brain damage. Logically then, the trauma that robbed him of his wits and full mobility occurred between his home and Tigre. Whatever that trauma was, it left Gilo with no memory of his mother, not even her name. Matthew Lochhead, one of the missionaries who interviewed Gilo and the other children at Sheikh Othman, wrote that it was impossible to get any accurate information from Gilo at all (with the exception of his father's name—Kashe).[13]

Gilo nonetheless endeared himself to all who knew him. He not only attracted affection but inspired some to write about him. The Eastern Cape poet, David Darlow, penned two poems which together give a vivid evocation of Gilo. The first of these poems, written circa 1930, Darlow linked Gilo's obsession with cleanliness directly with bubonic plague:

A small slim man black as a polished coal,
With high and sloping brow and crafty eyes
Part glazed with rheum, his shaven chin thrust forth;
A strange nobility yet lurks in him,
Some dying echo of the forest cries
Of freedom in the Galla land, a poise
Of head that slavery and wanton scorn
Could never change. His wiry body draped
With oft-washed clothes is clean as Tyumie's stream
And razing-glass can make it. E'en his boots
That shuffle on his feet are scrubbed lest there
The fierce bubonic lurk and threaten death.
And faithful is he; never did he fail
His daily journey to the dairy farm;
With crouching gait, half-run, he hurries on,
His serious thought bent to his duty. Oft
He visits us with sly; on-coming smile
And long, thin fingers tapping on his cheek
And muttering between his broken teeth:
"I never come. My boots are broke.
"Tickie, tickie! My stomach sore; a biscuit.
"Missis, I never come. I want to buy
"Some sugar. Stomach sore. I never come.
"A watch and chain. Tick, tick! A piece of soap.
"I crap myself. I'm clean. I wash in Tyumie.

[12] I am grateful to Francis Wilson and Margaret Elsworth for sharing their memories during our personal discussions.
[13] "Gilo Kashe" in Lochhead, *Short Biographies*, 26; Shell, *Children of Hope*, 225.

"A piece of soap. Enkos! Enkos! Enkos!
"I go wash in Tyumie. Tyumie cold.
"I light a fire. I wash. The people die.
"Bubonic. I go wash. Enkos! Enkos!"
And some despise him, but to me it seems
Without old Gilo life were not so rich.[14]

There is a strong suggestion in this poem that Gilo's condition was the legacy of a bout of the bubonic plague which swept through Ethiopia around the time of his capture, along with drought, famine, locusts and the rinderpest, hence his obsessive fear of the disease. Medical opinion is that the disease could have accounted for both his physical and his mental disabilities.[15] Whatever else, Gilo sustained a mortal terror of the disease and an obsession with cleanliness throughout his long life in the care of the Lovedale missionaries. He washed himself and his surroundings—even Lovedale's horses—compulsively.

In the second poem, written on the occasion of Gilo's death in 1948, Darlow pointed again to Gilo's compulsion to wash himself and be clean. The poem includes an allusion to late rains, an evocation of the traumas ushered in by the welter of Ethiopia's climatic and epidemic disasters at the time of the children's enslavement, including the worst drought and famine in the country's history.

On the Passing of Gilo: 15 February 1948

Last of the Gallas,[16] *Gilo, are you dead?*
No trotting off in laceless, broken shoes,
No washing in the Tyumie, then with pride
Showing your ebon breast glass-razed and clean.
No biscuits, scraps of soap, no longing gaze
On hats and watches, no soft wheedling voice
To plead for tickeys to repair your clothes:
Good jacket! Broken! Very dear to patch!
Sixpence! Yes, it's dear; sixpence for a patch!
To whom will you confide your heart's belief?
"I clean. They dirty. Many die. I wash. I never die."
You little knew, my friend, How true a word you spake in saying that.
In that far country do you cock your head,
Birdlike, and say: "Rain coming! Perhaps to-day!
And when an angel asks: "Are you quite sure?"
"Ye-e-s," will you reply, "rain coming soon!
Perhaps to-morrow "?
When last I saw you, Gilo,
—Eyes now dull, back high-hunched, gait lame—
You murmured: "Been away! Going again?
Next week? Coming back soon? At Christmas? Huh!
"Coming back soon, old Gilo? Coming back?"[17]

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[14] David J. Darlow, *Shadows of the Amatole: A Book of Poems* (London: Longmans, Green, 1932), 49.
[15] I am grateful to Dr Louis Botha, a Cape Town general practitioner, for this diagnostic insight.
[16] "Galla," an obsolete term used to refer to the Oromo people. The term has long been considered pejorative by the Oromo people and the use of the old ethnonym, now considered offensive, was declared illegal in Ethiopia in 1974.
[17] David J Darlow, "On the passing of Gilo, Feb 15th 1948: Gilo was the last of a group of Galla slaves captured from an Arab dhow by a British gun-boat and sent to Lovedale." *Anthology: Paths of Peace (in Africa): Poems*. (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1960: 92.

Darlow was not the only person to document Gilo in verse or prose. One of Gilo's Lovedale peers, administrator and author Frank Brownlee, returned to Lovedale for a visit many years later and recorded his memories.[18] He wrote:

> The children were bright and intelligent; that is with the exception of one, Gilo, who seemed to be a half wit. When- ever addressed he would go off into cackles of high pitched laughter. He was regarded as a joke by his companions and it seems that Gilo accepted the role of "funny man" and may have played up to the idea that he was a half-wit. I knew such a case in a European school.[19]

Although Gilo was ineducable and incapable of caring for himself, he was capable of delivering some remarkable observations and insights, had a prodigious memory regarding his time at Lovedale and even tried to write— perhaps styling his cursive script after that of one of the Lovedale missionaries—though his attempts are tantalisingly indecipherable.

Gilo lived in a world defined by his own set of rules. As a young boy, Brownlee was present when the Oromo children arrived at Lovedale. In his reminiscence, he noted Gilo's rejection of institutional authority:

> The one who had a special attraction for me was Gilo, an alleged half-wit. We had no common language, but signs sufficed. It is true that he behaved in strange ways ... He was regarded as the jester by his mates. He showed no regard for discipline. It was not that he defied it; for him it simply did not exist. Perhaps that is a reason why we became friends. … Gilo would stroll into a class-room to wander round. The bright colours of the wall-maps attracted him while they conveyed nothing to him. The master was very patient and tried to explain. "And that's where you came from Gilo" he said, indicating a locality in North-East Africa. Gilo threw back his head and cackled: "Good fun Sir, I know where I came from."[20]

Brownlee recalled an incident in the Tyhume River during which he saved Gilo from drowning. One of the teachers had taken the children to the river to swim. Despite the river being in flood, most of the children entered the water when instructed—but not Gilo. The teacher was enraged. Gilo panicked. He dashed across the sand bank into the water, where the swirling current immediately picked him up and swept him down-stream.

Brownlee was already in the water and a strong swimmer. He caught up with Gilo, grabbing him first by one leg and then by an arm as the current bore them both away. Gilo tightened his hold on Brownlee "[a]fter the manner of drowning people with their would-be rescuers." Brownlee broke loose but still kept a firm hold on one of Gilo's wrists. Finally, he took advantage of an overhanging branch and hauled himself and Gilo out of the water. Recovering on the river-bank, Gilo eventually caught his breath and chortled: "Ullo Brownlee ... good fun, yes?" In his memoir, Brownlee remarked wryly in response: "I hadn't seen it like that."[21]

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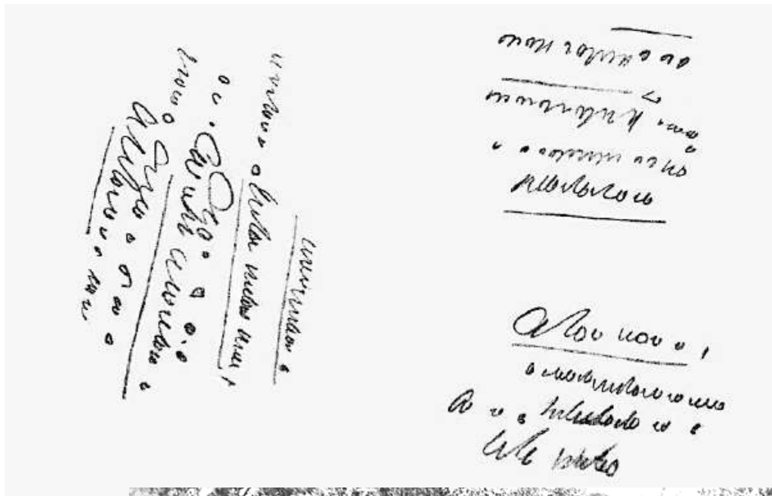
[18]Frank Harold Brownlee, novelist and Cape administrator, was born in 1875, the son of the Reverend Charles Pacalt Brownlee.

[19]Frank Harold Brownlee, "Gilo, the Last of the Galla Slaves." Amazwi South African Museum of Literature (formerly NELM), Frank Harold Brownlee Collection: 86. 36. 3. 23. 1, page 3. Thank you to Cecilia Blight for drawing my attention to this document.

[20]Brownlee, Amazwi, 86.36.3.23.1, page 4.

[21]Brownlee, Amazwi, 86.36.3.23.1, page 5.



Left: Gilo's handwriting
Source: MS 9310,
Cory Library for
Humanities Research

Right: The Oromo at Lovedale, circa 1895. Source: PIC/M1093, Cory Library for Humanities Research

Years later, when Brownlee was travelling in the vicinity of Lovedale, he called upon Dr Robert Henry Wishart Shepherd, the Principal.
“Come to my study” said Shepherd, “I have a surprise for you.”
He opened the door and there in a club chair sat Gilo. “Do you remember Gilo?”
“Of course I do” responded Brownlee as he and Gilo shook hands. “Ullo Brownlee” said Gilo. “It is good fun to see you again.”[22]
Shepherd explained that people from all over the world visited the Institution and that

> “Gilo has become quite an institution of the Institution … they all want to meet Gilo, the Galla Slave” …
> “Yes,” said Gilo, “those people talk to me and talk to me and then they give me money. What have I to do with money? —I have everything”
> Gilo decided the money should benefit the blind:
> “Yes … those blind people see nothing so they have nothings. I have everything. I hope that my small money may help them to see, if even just a little.”

[22]Brownlee, Amazwi, 86.36.3.23.1, page 6.

Then, in an interestingly philosophical reflection, Gilo told Brownlee:

> I believe in providence … You smoke a cigarette from that little box: providence. I have a good bed, I eat and sleep, I have clothes: providence. If I were once to question where these things came from they might stop ... I hope that providence will look after you as it has looked after me. Come and see me again.[23]

But conditions were such that Brownlee did not come and see him again. Gilo never left Lovedale. He died there on 15 February 1948 at the age of seventy-three.[24]

Conclusion

The Oromo narratives provide a new lens through which we can appreciate the primary trauma of slavery, namely the first passage. In the case of Gilo, we have evidence of multiple traumas. Every part of Gilo's early life was wiped out by the traumas of the first passage that robbed him of much of his memory and his wits. His condition was certainly not congenital nor did it manifest before his enslavement. No slave raider would conceivably select— nor would he purchase or try to trade a child believed by other traders to be a "half-wit."

Gilo's malformed ears and scarred wrists and ankles are clear evidence of further trauma, the same trauma that took his straight young spine and hunched it high, and transformed his youthful step into a lame and crouching gait.

Gilo, in fact, represents a classic case of Stockholm syndrome. His lifetime accommodation within the Lovedale environment reveals to us the epitome of what the Stockholm syndrome means. His disfigured mind and body became a poignant living testament to the multiplicity of traumas which deprived him of the power of self-determination. Even the gentle care of the Lovedale missionaries exerted its own invisible subtle shackles. Gilo could not leave. He could not survive on his own. In a sense he was enslaved not by any external agency but by the legacy of his trauma.

But Gilo readily adopted the world-view of those who cared for and had power over him. He absorbed the host culture in which he conversed in isiXhosa, the indigenous language of the Eastern Cape, the language of his peers, and he appropriated a casual mastery of the idiom of Lovedale's then governing class—"Ullo Brownlee ... good fun, yes?"
Gilo no longer scurries along the corridors of Lovedale, but his memory is permanently enshrined and celebrated close by in the Alice cemetery. His grave and memorial stone stand within a special enclosure alongside the grave and commemorative plaques of the acclaimed Xhosa musician, journalist and clergyman, the Reverend John Knox Bokwe. "Coming back soon, old Gilo? Coming back?"

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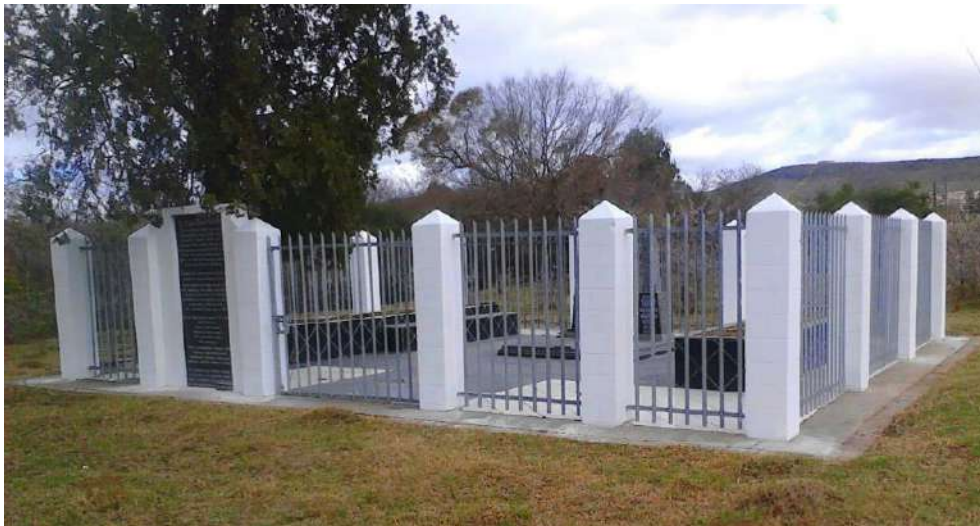
[23] Brownlee, Amazwi, 86.36.3.23.1, page 6.
[24] Brownlee, Amazwi, 86.36.3.23.1, page 6. Gilo's death was reported in the press nationwide and sparked an unexpected tribute to him and all the Oromo children from a man named A. T. V. Wright (then living in Benoni, Gauteng). He was the youngest member of the crew aboard the HMS *Osprey*, the Royal Navy ship which intercepted the slave dhows in 1888. Wright's tribute, published in the *Sunday Times*, did not apply only to Gilo but to them all. It is clear from his letter to the *Sunday Times* that the plight of the Oromo children had left an indelible, life-long print in his memory.

Gravesite of Gilo Kashe and memorial to the Oromo children, Lovedale
Source: Phumulele Heritage Zonela



Commemorative grave enclosure of John Knox Bokwe and next to it, Gilo's grave
Source: courtesy of Themba Ngada, Amava Heritage Publishing

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160 *Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, vol. 71, no 2, December 2017