

## Regional History and Ethnohistory

Gerhard Rohlfs and other Germanophone Researchers and a Forgotten Ethnic Group, the Dob<sup>ca</sup>

FESSEHA BERHE

### Introduction

The Dob<sup>ca</sup> present a rather unexplored area of research. So far no extensive study has been done on the group<sup>1</sup>. The limited knowledge we have of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> comes from literature that mentions or discusses the Dob<sup>ca</sup> only in passing.<sup>2</sup> The Dob<sup>ca</sup> are mentioned recurrently in travelogues, chronicles, and hagiographies between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Dob<sup>ca</sup> are also mentioned parenthetically in some scholarly works and there are also some local secondary sources that give some clues to Dob<sup>ca</sup> history particularly on their possible origin, language and early migration.

However, the main focus of this paper is on the works of some Germanophone researchers – Hiob Ludolf, Werner Munzinger, and Gerhard Rohlfs – and how the Dob<sup>ca</sup> are treated in them. The objective is simple: discuss how the Dob<sup>ca</sup> are described in the works of these three Germanophone researchers and show the importance of these works for our understanding of the history and culture of the group. As a background I have tried to present what is known and not known about the group, although I do not analyse all the available source materials and draw no conclusions on what these sources tell us or on the history of the Dob<sup>ca</sup>.<sup>3</sup> I present a brief overview of the written sources available on the Dob<sup>ca</sup>, ranging from travellers' accounts to chronicles to hagiographies and scholarly works and the information so far known about the Dob<sup>ca</sup>, while discussing why research on the group is important. I then discuss the works of the three Germanophone scholars pertinent to the study of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> and give a brief biography of each. The infor-

mation provided by Ludolf, Munzinger and Rohlfs is then compared with other written sources and with oral traditions.

### The significance of research on the Dob<sup>ca</sup>

The limited knowledge we have on the Dob<sup>ca</sup> comes from literature such as travelogues<sup>4</sup>, chronicles<sup>5</sup>, hagiographies<sup>6</sup> and scholarly works<sup>7</sup> that mention or discuss the Dob<sup>ca</sup> in passing. From these materials, we have a thin, mostly tentative knowledge of their territory, language, religion, livelihood and resources and their relations with various emperors and their neighbours. It seems that the term Dob<sup>ca</sup> is used to designate a group/people and/or a geographical territory. According to most sources, the Dob<sup>ca</sup> were known for their rich cattle resources and inhabited parts of what is today southern Təgray (south of Wägğärat and north of Angot). But we remain uncertain on the geographical size of their territory and how and when they settled in southern Təgray and in the other areas where groups exist claiming to have descended from the Dob<sup>ca</sup>.

The Dob<sup>ca</sup> are depicted, in most of the written sources, as 'black moors' (black Muslims), 'pagans' or 'Islamized pagans'. The written materials portray them as belligerent people who were in constant confrontation with the central government, emperors, regional lords and with their neighbours such as the ʿAfar, Wägğärat, Angot, Qädda, at least in the period between the reigns of King Lalibela (1186–1225) and King Iyasu II (1730–55). The Dob<sup>ca</sup>, according to these sources, were pastoralists or semi-pastoralists but they are also mentioned in relation to long distance trade, both their involvement in and disruption of it.

For some reason – perhaps because of the existing ambiguity on the origin and linguistic affinity of Dob<sup>ca</sup> – in the literature the Dob<sup>ca</sup> are mentioned in association with different geographical territories and people or groups. Some (such as Morin 2004) associate them with the <sup>c</sup>Afar particularly with those living in the Awsa area; others (such as Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006) connect them with the Argobba of south-eastern Wällo and north-eastern Šäwa, including the Wälasma dynasty, while others (such as Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba 2010) try to relate them with the Oromo. The Dob<sup>ca</sup> are also mentioned as being one of the inhabitants of Däwaro in the time of Aḥmäd Gərañ (Stenhouse 2003). Others (such as Del Boca 1969; Greenfield 1965) wrote the existence of a locality in northern Šäwa with similar name, Doba. We also know of the existence of some groups among the Təgrä in Eritrea in southern Təgray in the area between Koräm and Alagä who call themselves Dob<sup>ca</sup> or descendants of Dob<sup>ca</sup> (Fesseha Berhe forthcoming). We are also told that there is mention of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> in some parts of Qobbo and Bati areas.

128

How is it possible to explain that Dob<sup>ca</sup>, groups related to Dob<sup>ca</sup> or different groups using the name Dob<sup>ca</sup> are and/or were living in different parts of Ethiopia particularly in <sup>c</sup>Afar, eastern and southern Təgray, Däwaro, Ifat, among the Argobba in south-eastern Wällo and north and north-eastern Šäwa (including the existence of a locality named Doba) and in some parts of today's Eritrea? Are we talking about the same people, offshoots of the same group or different people/groups with similar names? And, surely, the claim made by some scholars that the Dob<sup>ca</sup> have 'vanished' needs revisiting.

The literature is silent about the origin of the Dob<sup>ca</sup>. But some materials (such as Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006; Ficquet 2014; Merid Wolde Aregay 1974b; Morin 2004; Esteves Pereira 1900; Trimmingham 1965) give us some clue on the linguistic background of the group. These scholars have put forward different suppositions regarding the linguistic affinity of the Dob<sup>ca</sup>. Trimmingham argues that they were probably part of the <sup>c</sup>Afar stock, a point shared by other scholars such as Morin (2004: 143) and Ficquet (2014: 13). On the contrary, Abbebe Kifleyesus, Esteves Pereira and Merid Wolde Aregay hint that they probably have Semitic origins, the latter declaring Təgrəñña to be the language of the Dob<sup>ca</sup>.

Others (such as Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba 2010: 341) try to associate the Dob<sup>ca</sup> with the Oromo group who settled in southern Təgray. A recent study (Fesseha Berhe forthcoming) proposes that the Dob<sup>ca</sup>, were part of the larger Saho group or groups related to the Saho, without ruling out the possibility that they might be the result of continuous interaction between various groups, most notably the Saho and the <sup>c</sup>Afar.

The great part of the available material does not seem to offer much help in fully showing the historical development of the Dob<sup>ca</sup>, particularly the way the society adapted to changing socio-economic, political and historical circumstances both at local and regional levels. Their social organization, socio-political institutions, the dynamics of their relations with 'others' particularly neighbours, and the role that genealogy, social organization, territory, religion, livelihood, population movement, warfare and 'foreign' incursions, marriage alliances and natural and manmade calamities played in shaping the identity and history of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> are either mentioned parenthetically or completely missed in most of the literature.

Research on the Dob<sup>ca</sup> is significant, at least for the following reasons. There is huge gap in our knowledge of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> that makes the group attractive as a research topic. However, certain features of the group also make them a particularly interesting group to study. Firstly, the Dob<sup>ca</sup> are mentioned in association with different geographical territories and people or groups living both in today's Ethiopia and Eritrea, which makes research on the group significant though challenging. Secondly, the Dob<sup>ca</sup> initially appear to be one of the 'peripheral' or 'marginal' groups in the region, but it seems that they were an important part of the ethnic-political framework of the northern Ethiopian highlands. The recurrent mention of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> in travelogues, chronicles and hagiographies at least between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries shows that they may have been one of the major people in Ethiopia or at least in northern Ethiopia even if today their traces are insignificant. The fact that they were in constant confrontation not only with various emperors and regional nobles but also with their neighbours for extended periods of time is a possible indicator that they were not on the fringes, their fate decided by a central authority, simply accepting the outcomes of events dictated by it. Finally, they occupied strategic areas (it looks that they

lived mostly on the escarpments facing the eastern lowlands, particularly the °Afar plains) and it seems that they had a great influence over long distance trade both through active involvement in trade and through disrupting it by attacking caravans passing through their territory.

Research on ‘ethnic groups’ like the Dob<sup>ca</sup> is also significant as it challenges some of the overly simplistic portrayals of the ethno-linguistic features of some parts of Ethiopia. There is a general feeling that there is ethnic and cultural homogeneity in Təgray/northern Ethiopia, but research on the Dob<sup>ca</sup> shows that this was not, and still is not, the case. The region has been home to a host of ethno-linguistic groups in the past – in the medieval period and possibly even before – and this continues even today. Research on the Dob<sup>ca</sup> is also significant in terms of filling some important gaps in the historiography of Ethiopia, including the need to reinterpret and reorientate the study of regional/local history and culture.

### Germanophone Researchers and the Dob<sup>ca</sup>

Hiob Ludolf (1624–1704) is credited as being the ‘founder of Ethiopian Studies as an academic discipline.’ He is often associated with Abba Gorgoryos who was his ‘teacher of Gə<sup>ca</sup>z and main informant’ (Uhlig 2007: 602). He undertook extensive research on Ethio-Semitic languages, Ethiopian history, culture, and literature as well as Christianity. He wrote various books focused mainly on Ethiopia including the famous *Historia Aethiopica* published in 1681 (*ibid.* 601–03).

Ludolf is one of the first European scholars, after the Portuguese missionaries such as Alvarez and d’Almeida, to mention the Dob<sup>ca</sup>. In the *Historia Aethiopica*, Ludolf provides a short description of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> in which he writes that the Dob<sup>ca</sup> was one of the twenty-seven ‘prefectures belonging to Tegre [Təgray]’, which was itself one of the thirty kingdoms of Abyssinia mentioned by Abba Gorgoryos. Ludolf further wrote that Dob<sup>ca</sup> was peopled by ‘pagans’ and was found close to ‘Angora’ [Angot] (Ludolf 1682: 17).

Looking at his description of the Dob<sup>ca</sup>, it seems that Ludolf did not use the sources available to him. Particularly the accounts of Alvarez and d’Almeida who gave a relatively detailed account of the group. Because he did not visit Ethiopia and conduct empirical research and because his

tutor and main informant, Abba Gorgoryos, was not a native of Təgray, we see some understandable errors in the way some of the names of the districts mentioned in his account are written. The mention by Ludolf that the Dob<sup>ca</sup> were ‘pagans’ is less probable. We have evidence that shows that the Dob<sup>ca</sup>, at least those in southern Təgray, converted to Islam long before the time of Gragn (Aḥmād Gərañ).<sup>8</sup> Some local informants even claim that the Dob<sup>ca</sup> were one of the earliest peoples in Ethiopia to embrace Islam. Whether that is true or not, it is also clear that the Dob<sup>ca</sup> were not ‘pagans’ in the time of Ludolf. This misunderstanding, I think, could be partly the result of the direct translation of the information that Abba Gorgoryos provided to Ludolf. By then, it was common to refer to all non-Christians as ‘አረምያን’ (Geez for ‘pagans’, ‘infidels’ etc). It is possible that Abba Gorgoryos himself might not have known the exact religion of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> in his time but there is also the possibility that Ludolf might have directly translated the word ‘አረምያን’ as ‘pagans’ without understanding the context in which the word was used. It seems that Ludolf’s description seems to have taken root; his successors continued to refer to the group as ‘pagans’ until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, in spite of its shortcomings, Ludolf’s work remains one of the few very important sources on the Dob<sup>ca</sup>.

The Swiss scholar Werner Munzinger (1832–1875) was another Germanophone researcher who in a way dealt with the Dob<sup>ca</sup>. He was an orientalist, ethnographer, linguist and explorer mainly known for his travels and ethnographic works in what is today Eritrea, particularly in the Keren area. He joined universities in Berlin, Munich and Paris and studied different subjects including natural science, oriental languages and history. He went to Egypt then to Massawa for business in 1852–1853 before settling in Keren and marrying a widow from the area in 1854. Between 1853 and 1859, along with his trading activities, he was engaged in research and in publishing his findings. Between 1861 and 1862, he participated in the ‘German Africa Expedition’ sponsored by a nobleman from Gotha. After eleven years in Africa, Munzinger returned to Europe and reported on the results of the expedition. After he returned to Bogos in 1864, he continued with his research and started a political career<sup>9</sup> (Müller and Smidt 2007: 1070–71) which would later cost him his life.

Between 1864 and 1875, Munzinger was in the service of the British, French and Egyptians.<sup>10</sup> It seems that he had played a significant role in ‘facilitating’ the 1868 Napier expedition, undertaking some ‘reconnaissance activities’ for the British and taking part in the delegation sent to Adwa to arrange a meeting between Napier and Kassa Mircha (later Emperor Yohannes IV) (Rubenson 1976: 257–59). But Munzinger is mostly remembered, at least in Ethiopia, for the services he rendered to the Egyptians. According to Bahru, he was ‘the architect of Egyptian expansionism’ (Bahru Zewde 2001: 51). Munzinger was killed on 14 November 1875 during an expedition from Tajura to Shewa that aimed to occupy Awsa, secure the Shewa-Tajura trade route and ‘contact Menelik and persuade him to attack Yohannis ‘without delay’.’ Munzinger, the majority of his soldiers and Ras Birru, Menelik’s envoy, were killed in a surprise attack by the ‘Afar near Lake Assal in Awsa (Rubenson 1976: 314–325).<sup>11</sup>

Munzinger published several works on Ethiopia and Eritrea including the *Narratives of a Journey through the Afar Country* (1869). In the *Narratives*, Munzinger gives a detailed description of the ‘Doga’, which I presume refers to the Dob<sup>ca</sup>. I say this because all the features that Munzinger describes are similar to those described by other scholars when writing about the Dob<sup>ca</sup>. Both Munzinger’s ‘Doga’ and the Dob<sup>ca</sup> are described as Muslims living along the escarpments, known for their involvement in long distance trade and for their aggression towards ‘others’. Munzinger’s description also concurs with what local narratives say regarding the origin of the name Dob<sup>ca</sup>. According to these narratives, the name is derived from the word ‘Dog<sup>ca</sup>’ (a Təgərińńa word for highland), a name given to them as they were living in the highlands.<sup>12</sup> Some people/societies even confuse Dog<sup>ca</sup> and Dob<sup>ca</sup> or use them interchangeably; this could also be the case in Munzinger’s narrative. The existence of local oral traditions dealing with the Dob<sup>ca</sup> in some parts of Təgray, such as the Irob, ‘Edaga Ḥamus and Atsəbi-Wonbārta areas in eastern Təgray and the Alagä, Mayəw, Ḥaşänəgä, Mohoni and Chärchär areas in southern Təgray<sup>13</sup> further strengthens my point. But most importantly, Munzinger treated the Təgərińńa speaking Christians, the Dob<sup>ca</sup> and the ‘Afar separately in his accounts.

In the *Narratives*, Munzinger writes: ‘On the westside of the salt

plain, on the brow of Abyssinia plateau, we found successive terraces, but communicating to each other; together they are prolonged the length of Abyssinia, from Agame to Asubo (...) [Oromos], and are called *Doga*’ He further writes, ‘They are said to be very wild. They do not cut their hair, and wear long beards; they are called Mussulmen, but they never pray, and do not approve others doing so, as they say it stops the rain;<sup>14</sup> they have immense troops of camels; they are brave men, and far-famed thieves.’ He finally concludes that the ‘Afar resemble the Agaw and the Doga resemble the Oromo (*ibid.* 208–216). He also tells us that they ‘have the same manners and customs as the Abyssians’ (*ibid.* 218) and they speak Təgərińńa because of their long close contact with their neighbours, the Təgərińńa speakers: ‘The Doga, on account of their friendly relations with their neighbours and masters the Abyssinians, like the people of the Tigré, speak the same language’ (*ibid.* 223).

Munzinger’s research focus was in Keren and the western lowlands of Eritrea and the ‘Afar, but still his description of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> is significant as Müller and Smidt (2007: 1071) rightly observe: ‘His well-researched ethnographic publications remain an important source until today.’ What is interesting about his description of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> is its correlation with the local oral accounts. Moreover, his work strengthens the tentative perspective that the Dob<sup>ca</sup> at one time might have occupied areas stretching from southern and south-eastern Eritrea to southern Təgray if not beyond (as far as ancient Ifat and Dawaro) along the eastern long distance trade. Furthermore, his work likely either clarifies or complicates further, depending on our perspective, the debate on the origin and linguistic background of the Dob<sup>ca</sup>.

Friedrich Gerhard Rohlfs, a German physician, explorer, writer and diplomat, was born on 14 April 1831 in Vegesack and died on 2 June 1896 in Rungsdorf. He published various books and articles focusing on Ethiopia and northern and western Africa. His contact with Ethiopia started when he was assigned by the King of Prussia to accompany the Napier expedition as an observer. Before his assignment to Ethiopia, he had ‘explored, mapped and described regions in Algeria, Morocco, the Sahara and western Africa.’ (Bairu Tafla 2010: 407). As part of the Napier expedition, he was able to document what he saw and heard about the

people, places and events. After that he would continue to explore northern Africa. He and his nephew, Anton Stecker, managed to go across the Sahara desert and 'map and describe a region which was yet widely unknown to Europeans.' (*ibid.* 408). In 1880 Rohlfs was assigned as envoy to the Ethiopian court under Emperor Yohannes IV (*ibid.* 407–09). In February 1881 he and Stecker 'arrived in Ethiopia with a letter and presents from the German emperor. This was the first response by a head of state to the appeals made by Yohannis' to assist him in solving the problem with Egypt (Rubenson 1976: 349). Emperor Yohannes made him 'his delegate' with an assignment to conclude peace with the Egyptians on his behalf – a mission in which Rohlfs was unsuccessful (Bairu Tafla 2010; Rubenson 1976). In the meantime, he and Stecker continued their research on Ethiopia. Stecker, with the permission of Emperor Yohannes IV, 'explored the Lake Tana region and Goggam as well as a large part of the Oromo country south of the Abbay' (Bairu Tafla 2010: 408). His hope of going further south was never realized because Emperor Menelik would not allow it. Later he managed 'to visit northern regions, including parts of the 'Afar depression, until he returned to Europe via Massawa' (*ibid.*). As Bairu (2010: 408) comments: 'The publications of both Rohlfs and Stecker are today among the most reliable sources for geographical, historical and ethnological studies of Ethiopia'.

Rohlfs published two important books on Ethiopia: *Im Auftrag Sr. Majestät des Königs von Preußen mit dem englischen Expeditionscorps in Abessinien* (1869) and *Meine Mission Nach Abessinien auf Befehl Sr. Maj. des Deutschen Kaisers, Im Winter 1880–81* (1883). Though both books seem very interesting, the focus of this paper is the first because it discusses the Dob'a area. In this book he gives a detailed description of the geography (topography) including the fauna and flora found in the area, the dress and hairstyle of the inhabitants together with the ornaments they used and the houses he saw among other things. His descriptions appear to be accurate save for some stereotypes – a not uncommon feature in Westerners writings about 'non-western societies,' particularly Africans, at the time. His works are significant in a number of ways, but the one published in 1869 is particularly important for showing the local boundaries that existed at the time of his visit:



Fig. 1: Gerhard Rohlfs

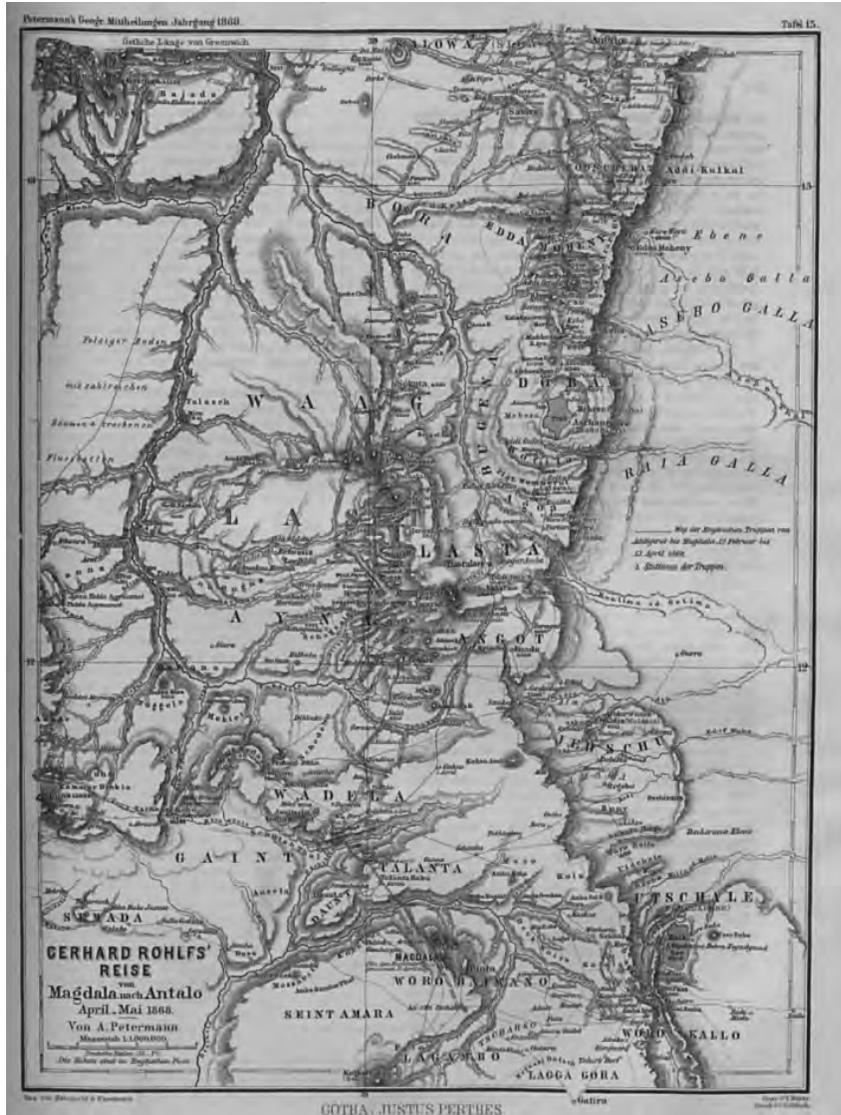


Fig. 2: Rohlfs's Route in 1867–68 via Doba'a, as shown on a map designed by August Petermann published in Gotha 1868



Fig. 3: Rohlfs's Route in 1881–82 on a map published 1882 in Gotha

With the end of the watershed [south of Dogoa-Zebit Mountain or Farar-Amba], the influence of the Christian religion also ends and we are in a totally Muslim controlled area. As we reach the southernmost point of Uadjerat, we also encounter political boundaries: to the West everything is still Enderta country, while the Muslims towards the South and East are tributary to the Prince Gobesieh of Lasta. (Passage referring to his 11<sup>th</sup> of March journey).<sup>15</sup>

This work also sheds some light on the nature of the inter-ethnic or group relationships existing in the area at that time: ‘In fear of the (...) [Oromo], whose territories start here, people have chosen the eastern side of these inaccessible steep cliffs as their residence.’ Rohlfs narrates that the area he called ‘Doba or Doba May or Mechan’ which includes Ḥāšāngä was a Muslim territory. He tells us that the Muslims had similar features to Christian neighbours: ‘They [the Muslims] differed in nothing from their neighbours [the Christian population], neither in shape, colour of skin nor dress or language, but they didn’t wear blue ribbons around their necks. This was the only sign in this area that you are a Christian’ (*ibid.*). This description correlates with what Munzinger (1869) and d’Abbadie (1890: 238) wrote about the language of the Dob<sup>o</sup>a. Based on the information provided by one of his informants, d’Abbadie tells us that the Dob<sup>o</sup>a had no language of their own; they spoke Təgərińńa (though their dialect was a little different from the Təgərińńa spoken in Təgray proper) and the language of their neighbours, the <sup>o</sup>Azäbo Oromo.

Compared to his predecessors and even his contemporaries, Rohlfs’ description of the history and culture of the Dob<sup>o</sup>a is limited. It also seems that he had not consulted the then available source materials on the Təgray in general and southern Təgray/Dob<sup>o</sup>a in particular, but his description of the geography and settlement of the area is interesting. What is more astonishing is the detailed way in which he described the place names, and the map that resulted from his two visits is of great importance to the study of the Dob<sup>o</sup>a. His map is one of the few major source maps we have on Dob<sup>o</sup>a.

What is most interesting about Rohlfs is that the toponyms he documented in the area relate perfectly to local narratives today, a fact that

supports Bairu’s assertion that, ‘his descriptions of people, events and places are astoundingly rich and accurate’ (Bairu Tafla 2010: 408). Local informants tell us that the Dob<sup>o</sup>a in southern Təgray are mainly found in the territory that they call Shäwə<sup>o</sup>atä eməba (seven mountains/villages): Ofəla, Mänəkärä, Ḥāšānəgä, Ḥaya, Mäkkän, Ḥəzəba, and Qäran Gorəba. All these places along with the names of other villages are indicated on Rohlfs’ map with astonishing precision. The precision could be the result of the fact that the British had a camp there and had probably been there for some time and knew the area well. This combined with Rohlfs’ great scholarship must have helped him produce this outstanding map, superior in all ways to maps produced before his time or by his contemporaries.

### Concluding Remarks

It seems clear that the Dob<sup>o</sup>a may have been one of the major peoples in Ethiopia and the Horn or at least in northern Ethiopia. Although their traces are insignificant today, they were probably hugely influential in both politics and in long distance trade (particularly the trade in salt or Arəho trade).

Little is known about the Dob<sup>o</sup>a, because so little research has been done on them. I contend that this paucity of sources might have thwarted scholars from doing meticulous research on the group. But the scattered sources materials available can be used as a base in copiously studying the group. Viewed from this angle, the works of the Germanophone scholars reviewed in this paper, though they require serious scrutiny and analysis are essential as they shed some light on the history and culture of the group.

What is interesting is that the works of these scholars, particularly those of Munzinger and Rohlfs, correlate significantly with other written source materials and with local oral narratives. Thus, by using these and other sources materials, reviewed or not reviewed here, I contend that it is now possible to reconstruct some facets of the history of the Dob<sup>o</sup>a and even to draw some, tentative, conclusions on some of the contentious issues of the Dob<sup>o</sup>a particularly about its origin, linguistic affinity, geography, settlement history and its final upshot.



Fig. 4: Rohlfs' map of southern Tigray (detail of another version of the 1868 map designed by August Petermann, with the route of the British in red, and Rohlfs' return travel in yellow)

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### Photo credits

Fig. 1: Gerhard Rohlfs, from Smidt 2005:21

Fig. 2: Rohlfs’ Route in 1867–68 via Doba’a, as shown on a map designed by August Petermann published in Gotha 1868, from the Perthes Map Collection, Forschungsbibliothek Gotha (code: 54\$111782090)

Fig. 3: Rohlfs’ Route in 1881–82. on a map published 1882 in Gotha, from the Perthes Map Collection, Forschungsbibliothek Gotha (code: 547\$111782023)

Fig. 4: Rohlfs’ map of southern Tigray (detail of another version of the 1868 map designed by August Petermann, with the route of the British in red, and Rohlfs’ return travel in yellow), from the Perthes Map Collection, Forschungsbibliothek Gotha (code: 54\$11178008X)

### Endnotes

- 1 In the past few years there have been a few attempts to scientifically study the Dob<sup>ca</sup> for example, by Eloi Ficquet and Chikage Ôba-Smidt. Eloi Ficquet has done research focusing on the Awsa area, <sup>c</sup>Afar region, and Chikage Ôba-Smidt has studied the oral traditions of Dob<sup>ca</sup> lineages among the Rayya Oromo but with a focus on the ethno-history of the local Oromo group, not on the Dob<sup>ca</sup> (not published yet). I have also been doing research on the issue for the last two to three years. Some of my findings have been presented at international conferences held in Ethiopia and Germany between 2012 and 2014 and I also have some articles in preparation for publication in the proceedings of these conferences and in some reputable international journals.
- 2 An article dealing with the literature review of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> is being prepared.

3 Here we should bear in mind that the intention is not to discuss the history and cultural identity of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> and make conclusions on the contested and unknown aspects of its history including the origin, linguistic affinity, settlement and geography and the final upshot of the group. Though by now, given the sources at our disposal, it is possible to make tentative conclusions about some aspects of the history and culture of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> but refrained from doing that as this is not the purpose of the paper.

4 Such as Alvarez 1881; Bruce 1790; d’Abbadie 1890; Munzinger 1869; Rohlfs 1869; Salt 1816.

5 Such as Guidi 1912, 1955; Perruchon 1893; Stenhouse 2003; Esteves Pereira 1888, 1900.

6 Such as Conti Rossini 1904.

7 Such as Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006; Ahmed Hassen and Nosnitsin 2007; Beckingham and Huntingford 1954; Ficquet 2014; Huntingford 1989; Hussein Ahmed 2000; Ludolf 1682; Merid Wolde Aregay 1971, 1974a, 1974b; Pankhurst 1997, 2005; Tadesse Tamrat 1972; Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba 2010; Tellez 1710; Tsegay 2005; Trimmingham 1965.

8 For instance Alvarez (1881) describes the Dob<sup>ca</sup> as Muslims.

9 On this issue see also Smidt 2005.

10 For a detailed discussion on his role in the politics of Ethiopia, particularly northern Ethiopia, and his services to the British, French and the Egyptians see Rubenson 1976.

11 His Bilin wife was also killed in this surprise attack.

12 There are other local narratives with different views. These local narratives have it that the original place of the Dob<sup>ca</sup> was Dob<sup>ca</sup>ân in Yemen thus the name Dob<sup>ca</sup>. Place name similarity between Yemen and some parts of southern Tigray is forwarded as evidence for their Arab origin (Fesseha Berhe forthcoming).

13 The majority of the areas mentioned are found along the escarpment, a point which further strengthens Munzinger’s description.

14 There are local oral traditions which support this point. According to these traditions, even though the Dob<sup>ca</sup> had been Muslims for ages, they did not strictly observe Islam. These oral traditions have it that Mähämäd Azan, a nineteenth century wäli (holy man) had to come to the Dob<sup>ca</sup> land to ‘guide’ them in properly observing Islam.

15 I thank Till Trojer, Hamburg University for translating Rohlfs’ passages into English.