

Selim Aga: New Light on his Life and his Explorations in West Africa

by James McCarthy*

Around 1834, an eight-year-old shepherd boy, Selim Aga, was captured by Arab kidnappers from near his home in the Muslim kingdom of Taqali on the edge of the Nuba Mountains in what is now Kordofan in Sudan. For the next year, he travelled down the Nile, passed from one master to another, and crossed the feared Bayuda Desert. After many privations and abuses, he arrived at the slave market in Cairo. Some weeks later, he was purchased by Robert Thurburn, the British commercial consul in Alexandria and taken back to the family home near Aberdeen in Scotland. However, before that, Selim accompanied the Thurburn family (complete with housekeeper and Italian servant) on a tourist trip up the Nile as far as the first cataracts, the whole journey taking a month. The purpose of this was to view the great antiquities, and given Thurburn's wealth and position, they would have travelled in considerable style, with every possible comfort. There could hardly have been a greater contrast to the wretched circumstances in which the young slave had travelled by the same route only a short time previously, now properly fed, clothed and having become something of a pet with the indulgent Thurburns. He undoubtedly used the experience over ten years later when lecturing to accompany the famous 'Panorama of the Nile' in the heart of London.

Although he was born in Taqali in the Nuba Mountains which is in present day Kordofan, Selim in one of his publications describes himself as 'A native of Darfur.' Given what is happening in that region today, there are striking parallels to his own experience in 1834, when government-sponsored raids from the north were commonplace. The enslavement of the twelve-year-old Mende Nazer in 1998, also from the Nuba Mountains, and so graphically described in her book *Slave: The True Story of a Girl's Lost Childhood and her Fight for Survival*, is a very close modern parallel.

At Peterculter, near Aberdeen, Selim was left in the care of Thurburn's brother, John and his wife Elizabeth, residing in one of the finest mansions in the area, derived from the Thurburns' profitable business in Egypt. He was educated in the local school and in the Thurburn home. There is a complete dearth of information between his arrival in Scotland around 1836 and his departure for London in 1849. What is known is that he had a son as a result of a liaison with a local woman, and his direct living descendants have been traced in Scotland and USA. (There is evidence from the 1891 census that the couple may have had another son.) There is no record however that he ever returned to his natal home in the Sudan. He did however write a remarkable narrative of his capture and enslavement in faultless idiomatic English. The work was published in Aberdeen and London in 1846 and 1850 respectively. To this author's knowledge, this is the only such record of someone caught up in the greatly-increased incidence of slavery and slave raiding brought about by local

rivalries and the needs of the Turco-Egyptian regime under Muhammad Ali for more troops.

After leaving the Thurburn household around 1846, Selim lectured for a year to fashionable London audiences at the popular illustrated 'Panorama of the Nile' at the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851. He even petitioned Lord Palmerston with his ambitious '*Plan for the Amelioration of Africa*' and was given an audience with one of the Foreign Secretary's staff. His 'Plan' was based on nothing less than the construction of an East-West transcontinental railway to encourage local commerce.

In 1857, Selim accompanied Dr William Baikie's expedition up the Niger as steward to the expedition surveyor, Lieutenant John Glover, RN. There is evidence that he played a not insignificant part in the subsequent rescue of that important pioneering expedition, when he accompanied Glover on a hazardous overland journey to Lagos to obtain help for the shipwrecked crew. He subsequently became Richard Burton's much-valued servant in the English explorer's various travels in West Africa in the early 1860s. Burton, no admirer of Africans, accorded Selim many accolades for his skills and reliability in many dangerous situations. Burton was a notorious racist who held negroid Africans in contempt, suggesting from his physical characteristics that Selim must have had northern blood-lines. From his experience of Selim on a number of hazardous journeys in West Africa, Burton has nothing but praise for the man he came to regard as a friend as much as a servant. When he travelled with Burton up the Congo, he is likely to have been the only African of his time, let alone a former slave, who had travelled on the three great rivers of Africa.

When Selim had the narrative of his capture and transportation down the Nile published in the *Geographical Magazine* of 1875, doubt was cast on its authenticity, one editor claiming that 'it was manifestly the work of a cultured European'. In a subsequent letter to the magazine, Burton refuted this, giving an admiring portrait of his valet. In an article for the Royal Geographical Society Burton refers to '... my steward, Selim Agha, an invaluable man, a native of Tegulet, and a protégé of the late venerable Mr Robert Thurburn, of Alexandria. He had spent a dozen years of his life at a school in Scotland, where he learned to cook, doctor, spin, carpenter, shoot, collect specimens, and stuff birds – briefly everything ... he took all the trouble of life off my hands.' He might also have mentioned that Selim was both literate and numerate; capable, for example, of accurately recording meteorological observations. While Selim tells of his early years up to his arrival in Scotland, apart from a solitary reference to his time with the Niger expedition of 1857, we are dependent on the sparse mentions of him by Burton for the years 1861 to 1864.

Apart from its personal interest, Selim's story may be of some historical significance, not least in its descriptions of the culture and customs of the remote Kingdom of Taqali, where he himself was betrothed at the age of eight. In Selim's early recollections of his life there is a valuable addition to our knowledge of one of the most fascinating societies in Africa at this time, not least because of its lineage as a Muslim domain straddling both Arabic and Black African cultures. The most comprehensive background to this region from earliest times is provided by Professor Janet Ewald in her scholarly study *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves: State Formation and Economic Transformation in the Greater Nile Valley, 1700-1885*, although she was apparently unaware of Selim's account.

There are numerous accounts by former slaves taken from West Africa to the American plantations, but there is nothing comparable in length, quality or style which relates to the East or North African trade. Indeed, Selim's work rivals even that of the West African former slave, Olaudah Equiano. Nor is there any record of a European having penetrated the Nuba Mountains by the 1830s, although the Austrian Pallme got close around the time of Selim's capture, but was prevented from entering Taqali itself. He did however have extended conversations in El Obeid with a Prince of Taqali, who may well have been one of the three princes of that territory referred to by Selim.

All of the above is contained in the biography of Selim Aga published in 2006⁽¹⁾ and first presented at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in August of that year. However, as a result of further research, new and interesting information has come to light which helps to fill in some of the many gaps in Selim's history. The Revd William Jowett on his visit to Egypt and Palestine on behalf of the Church Missionary Society in 1818 reported on 'Abyssinians in Egypt' (According to the *Missionary Register* of 1819 natives of Abyssinia and the neighbouring parts had frequently come under Mr Jowett's notice in Egypt.) On the sight of some of them in Alexandria he has the following reflections:

At dinner, Mr. Thurburn's slave waited. He is a black youth, a native of Darfur; a Mahomedan, with a white turban and scarlet clothes. Mr. Thurburn also has two Slaves, a mother and daughter from Abyssinia, natives of Gondar. When I see such people, I feel immediately a secret affection springing up in my inmost soul...⁽²⁾

This is a reference to the household of the British commercial consul Robert Thurburn who was subsequently to bring Selim to Scotland for his education. However, despite the similarity to Selim in this description of a 'black youth', especially his origin in Darfur, the dates do not accord with other records. Selim was brought to Britain in 1836 when he was described as a 'young slave boy', whereas the Darfur native referred to by Jowett would by then have been no younger than his late twenties.

Another more relevant item has come from a somewhat surprising source and is of special interest as a pen-picture of the young man, given that until Burton's description of 1861 (when Selim would have been in his thirties) there is apparently no other for his earlier years. The English novelist Sarah Harriet Burney, a half sister of the more celebrated Fanny Burney, was a prolific letter writer. From a boarding house in Cheltenham where the Thurburn family was staying, she wrote to Anna Grosvenor on 2 February 1843:

Their names Thurburn. They have a beautiful place, a sort of Castle, in full sight of the Grampians, of which the daughter shewed me a sketch. They have moreover, a young Abyssinian, or Nubian servant, purchased from motives of compassion when ten years old by a brother of Mr. Thurburn who saw him in the slave market at Cairo, and sent him to Scotland as a present to his sister-in-law. He is now 17. She has had him thoroughly instructed, Christened & confirmed. He keeps his original name of Selim, and wears on week days, the dress of his country (a very becoming one, I assure you) and, on Sundays, a

livery Jacket and trowsers. A better creature – more honest, affectionate, and true, I have seldom heard of. He sings scotch ballads like a nightingale, & we have had him frequently in the drawing-room for the sake of hearing him. He has no *mauvaise honte* [false modesty], and no conceit, but sings because his sweet mistress tells him to do so. His handwriting is that of a gentleman & he spells as well as you or I. When Mr. Thurburn is indisposed, which is not seldom, poor soul! Selim sits by his bed-side & reads to him. He waits at table incomparably and as far as he has been taught, does everything well.

This sheds considerable light, not only on Selim's personality and skills, but also on his relationship with the Thurburns. It confirms Burton's statement that he was a Christian, despite being referred to frequently as a Muslim elsewhere, and his deportment also fits with Burton's high opinion of him. The image of Selim singing 'scotch ballads like a nightingale' and reading to the ailing John Thurburn, is perhaps no less surprising than his later appearance in the heart of Piccadilly as an informed lecturer on the Nile. (There is evidence that while he was in London, he was a member of the Scottish Presbyterian Church there.) The author goes on to say:

As for Mrs Thurburn I have no words to express my liking for her. She is the gentlest, most unselfish, the most quietly well-informed, & the most interesting both in looks and manner of any person I have for a long time been so fortunate as to encounter...⁽³⁾

The reference to Selim being a 'present' specifically to Mrs Thurburn perhaps explains his exclusive dedication to her in the narrative of his early years. The writer's admiration for Mrs Thurburn's character and knowledge is also significant, as Selim's dedication indicates how large a part she played personally in his upbringing and education. Prior to his service with Burton, Selim wrote on 3 October 1860 from Lagos to the then president of the Royal Geographical Society:

I have the honour to introduce myself as the late confidential attendant of Lieut. Glover late of the Niger Expedition and respectfully beg to state that I am now collecting objects of natural history for the Liverpool Company (?) Museum, and have in my employ five of the most efficient native interpreters lately attached to the escort of Lieut. Glover. It is my intention next dry season to make a hunting excursion into the interior and with a view to visit Kano and the Hausa Country I will try if possible to recover the papers and books of the late Dr. Vogel, now I believe in possession of Sidi Ali the Great Shereif of Mohammedan Africa.

With this view I write request the countenance of the Royal Geographical Society to aid my efforts in procuring a gratuity for the purchase of presents for the King and Chiefs of the Yoruba, Nufeh (?) and the Faria (?) countries, and also a suitable gift to Sidi Ali of Kano to induce him to give up those valuable papers.

The journey there and back will not occupy more than five months.

I have the honour to be Your Obedient humble Servant,
Selim Aga⁽⁴⁾

There is no record in the present Liverpool Museum of any collection of natural history specimens by Selim Aga, but neither is there anything to suggest that Selim, noted for his truthfulness and integrity, did not collect on behalf of one of that city's institutions. However, this activity on the part of Selim was quite unknown to the present author. The 'hunting excursion' referred to would have been for that very purpose, and it says something for Selim's enterprising attitude that he should have mustered the most reliable staff from the Baikie expedition to prosecute this venture. The German explorer Dr Eduard Vogel, an astronomer and naturalist, had been sent to link up with Dr Heinrich Barth. However, after setting out alone from Lake Chad in December 1855, Vogel had disappeared somewhere to the east, and it would not be until 1873 that Gustav Nachtigal, travelling in the same region, would discover that he had been murdered in the district of Ouaddai. Selim is likely to have been made aware of Vogel's disappearance during his time with the second Baikie expedition up the Niger.

On 21 November 1860, Glover (to be appointed first governor of Lagos in 1863) wrote to Dr Norton Shaw, secretary of the Royal Geographical Society, from Bonn:

Selim Aga was my most trusty and trusted Head servant during my stay in Africa, since which he has settled in Lagos, and has written to me about his intended visit to Kano. I first heard of Vogel's papers being in the possession of the shereif Sidi Ali at Kano in October last year while on a visit to Dasaba, the king of Nuppe and Bidda. Dr. Baikie heard the same report some months earlier, but like him in everything else he kept it to himself: from the account of the man who told me and who was an old servant of Barth's they are the papers sent by Vogel to Corporal McGuire before he started the Corporal from Kano on his journey home, and the papers recovered after he was murdered, that is they are the Dispatches which Corporal McGuire was bearing at the time of his murder, and not the papers of Vogel at the time of his death... .

... With regard to Selim Aga and my five other old followers who are with him, I think that their enterprise is deserving of all encouragement, and I am quite sure that Selim Aga properly authorised would be more likely to bring back not only a good account of the last hours of the murdered men, but would be able to recover their missing papers at less cost than the more imposing expedition which is to start from the North, and there cannot be a doubt that the way to Kano, Katsena and Kuka, is from Lagos not Tripoli – I am sorry that I had left London before I got your letter. Any further or more detailed information I shall be happy to give if called upon.

Ever very sincerely yours

John H Glover ⁽⁵⁾

In his description of his servant, Burton states that 'Selim returned to Africa in 1857 with that failure of failures, the Niger expedition'. In a letter to the *Geographic Magazine*, Burton makes a further reference:

In 1860, [Selim] returned to his natal continent, after volunteering personally to ascertain the facts concerning the murder, in Waday, of Dr. Vogel, attached to

the Central African Expedition. The late Sir Roderick Murchison and others were favourable to the plan, but they at length determined that all measures should be left in the hands of the late Dr. Baikie. ⁽⁶⁾

At another point in the same narrative Burton says, 'In 1860 Selim Aga proposed to recover the papers of the late Dr Vogel... Dr Baikie, chief of the Niger expedition, proposed to do this himself. So Selim was thrown out, and Dr Baikie had not yet done it' – a typically waspish Burton remark to diminish explorers other than himself, with the implication that Selim was quite up to the job, as Glover had indicated, had it not been for the preferences of the British geographical establishment. ⁽⁷⁾

Liberia became a sovereign state in 1847. The outstanding Liberian patriot Edward Wilmot Bryden was appointed secretary of state in 1864 following his visit to England. However his championing of the blacks of the interior against the dominance of the mulattoes led to considerable tensions, and by 1870 the country was in uproar, with the indigenous Greboes in open revolt against the settlers from USA. Serious violence broke out in 1871 when Wilmot was forced into exile and the president, Roye, died in suspicious circumstances. ⁽⁸⁾ This is the background to Burton's claim that in a letter to him from Selim, the latter stated that he had been 'put up for President'. ⁽⁹⁾

It seems now that Selim must have spent a minimum of nine years in Liberia, since the Société de Géographie refers to him in their *Bulletin* of 1868 as having spent the last two years in that country. Further, the same publication claims that he conducted an expedition to the higher reaches of the Niger, having accomplished this in nine days from Cap Palmas, but was prevented from going further by the local people, who did not welcome foreigners into their territory. ⁽¹⁰⁾ That Selim was engaged in exploration while in Liberia is confirmed by Burton who says '... he made sundry journeys into the interior'. Some of these expeditions were reported briefly in *The Anti-Slavery Reporter & Aborigines Friend of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* and by the American Colonisation Society in its *African Repository*, claiming in 1867 that Selim had made 'some important discoveries' by the time he had travelled eighty miles up the Cavalla [Cavally] River. ⁽¹¹⁾

It is known that around this time that Liberian settlers were interested in the potential of the resources of the interior for exploitation. The question arises as to how Selim was financed for these expeditions or indeed how he made a living during this time. In his *West African Sketches*, Ellis described the preliminaries to the attack by the Greboes on the settlers, which resulted in Selim's death, including the complete incompetence of the Liberians. He quoted the *Liberian Independent* of 23 December 1875 which described the complete disarray and demoralisation of the Liberian army, which was quickly put to flight by the native tribesmen. According to the *Independent*:

Mr. Selim Aga, the Egyptian traveller, was also overtaken by the barbarous Greboes, and one of them 'Bye Weah' by name, after allowing him to read his Bible, which he had by him in his pocket, and which he made a present to the barbarian, chopped his body all about, cut off his head, which he took to his town, and threw the body with the gift into the swamp. Mr. Aga went to the battlefield as assistant-surgeon, and his head makes eighteen Liberian heads cut

off by the Greboes and placed in a circle, around which they made a fence, according to the sayings of the Greboes themselves.⁽¹²⁾

According to Burton in *To the Gold Coast*, 'The account sounds trustworthy, especially that about the Bible: it is exactly what the poor fellow would have done. But many have assured me that he was slaughtered by mistake during the rout of his party. R.I.P.'⁽¹³⁾ In 1868 G.W. Gibson, missionary to the Episcopal Church of Liberia, in commending the opportunities of the land to the ex-slave settlers, was moved to say:

The interior of Africa, hitherto unknown, is now being thrown open, and its climate soil, rivers, productions, its unbounded wealth and treasures, made known to the world. Burton, Livingstone, Barth, Speke, Baker, Du Chaillu, Sims, Seymour, and Selim Aga, are so many agencies raised by a wise Providence, to go out and view the land, preparatory to His great work.⁽¹⁴⁾

The inclusion of Selim in this pantheon of august explorers may in part be because he is the only non-European among them, at a time when the Liberians were seeking to promote home-grown heroes. Nevertheless, it confirms that by this time he was regarded as a *bona fide* explorer in his own right, while the record of his life demonstrates that by any standard, he was a quite remarkable individual of wide-ranging talents. In piecing together Selim's story, I have unsurprisingly come to regard him with great admiration, given his inauspicious start in life. He clearly took every opportunity for education and self improvement, and but for his untimely death, would almost certainly have become an important figure in the Africa of his time.

1. McCarthy, James, *Selim Aga: A Slave's Odyssey*, Edinburgh, 2006.
2. *The Missionary Register*, 1819, p. 367.
3. Clark, L.J., ed., *The Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, London & Athens [GA], 1997.
4. Royal Geographical Society Archives, CB4/1488.
5. *Ibid.*, CB4/703.
6. *Geographical Magazine*, 1875, p. 204.
7. Burton, Richard Francis, *Abeokuta and the Cameroons Mountains*, vol.1, London, 1863, p. 10.
8. West, Richard, *Back to Africa*, London, 1970, pp. 236-41.
9. Burton, Richard Francis & Cameron, Verney Lovett, *To the Gold Coast for Gold*, London, 1883, vol. 2, pp. 62-4.
10. *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, series 5, vol. 6, 1868, pp. 166-7.
11. American Colonisation Society, *The African Repository*, Washington, 1868, vol. 43, p. 203.
12. Ellis, B.A., *West African Sketches*, London, 1851, pp. 170-71.
13. Burton, R.F. & Cameron, V.L., loc. cit.
14. American Colonisation Society, vol. 44, p. 232.

James McCarthy is a writer whose published works have focussed on the links between Scotland and Africa, especially through Scottish explorers. He was the first white post-graduate student at Makerere College, Kampala, Uganda in 1959 and previously commanded African troops during the Mau Mau uprising.

Email: jmc36@ukonline.co.uk