

## Machbuba -An Oromo Slave-Girl who won the heart of a German Prince

Kathrin Schmitt

A lot of people, particularly Oromos, have heard the story about a certain Oromo girl who was taken to Germany as a slave of a German aristocrat in the nineteenth century. This is an attempt to shed light on the interesting story of this girl.

First of all, what they heard was a true story that began in 1837 in the former Empire of Mehemed Ali. The German prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau had visited Egypt where he found a beautiful girl on the Cairo slave market and purchased her on the spot, as he was deeply impressed by her appearance. She was called Ajjamé at that time, a name she was given by the slave traders; her real name was Mahbuba or Bililé. She accompanied the Prince during his travels to the Orient and back to Europe from 1837 to 1840. She died very young (when she was about 16 years of age) in Bad Muskau, a little town about 160 km south of Berlin, in 1840. There are no descendants of her. Her grave in the church of Bad Muskau still exists. The castle of Bad Muskau, where she had spent less than a year, is now a museum in which one can find a sculpture and a portrait of Mahbuba.

Thanks to the comprehensive diaries and correspondence of Prince Pückler (9 volumes) some information about Mahbuba's life has been preserved<sup>1</sup>. Pückler particularly liked to describe impressions, feelings and moods and attached only a secondary importance to facts. As a consequence, we know only a limited number of real facts about her life though much was written about her.

The story of Mahbuba is part of the history of slavery in Northeast Africa. In an article entitled "Machbuba, the 'Beloved': The Life and Romance of an Ethiopian Slave-Girl in Early Nineteenth-Century Europe", Richard Pankhurst, notes that: "The early nineteenth century witnessed an extensive slave trade from Ethiopia as from many other parts of Africa. Contemporary estimates indicated that over 25000 Ethiopians of both sexes and all ages were being exported every year, mainly to the Sudan, Egypt, and Arabia. Smaller numbers were thence conveyed to other regions, among them India, where the 'Habshis' or Abyssinians, at times played a major role in political affairs, and Europe, where several Oromos, or Gallas, from southern Ethiopia assisted the German scholar Karl Tutschek in producing the first Galla dictionary and grammar"<sup>2</sup>.

### Mahbuba's life

It is not known where and when Mahbuba was born. All she remembered about her background was that she and her sister were captured by slave traders and witnessed how her father and all of her brothers were killed and her home was burnt down. At the time she

was about eight to eleven years old. She came to Gondar and finally ended up on the Cairo slave market where Prince Pückler bought her. Many pages of his diaries are filled with emotional words of admiration for the beauty of Mahbuba. The Prince was on an excursion to Nubia and Sudan and decided to take the girl with him. He certainly treated her better than an oriental slave holder would and declared she was now free, though in the beginning he kept her under lock and key as a harem wife before he seriously fell in love with her.



*Portrait of Mahbuba by an unknown painter from Sorau (today in the Prince Puckler Museum of Bad Muskau)*

As he observed her, Pückler discovered she was an 'appetizing' savage girl whom he thought he would have to teach manners, but whom he found to have better manners than most Europeans had. She was with him during his travels to Palestine, Syria and Istanbul and had to dress up and disguise herself as a Mameluke boy. The romance between the two was not without problems. When she was caught red-handed as she allowed someone to take liberties she felt so much ashamed that she wanted to fling herself out of the window and die, because she knew she was dependent on the Prince and would perish if he banished her. Luckily she was rescued by the Prince just in time. She begged for forgiveness, whereby he forgave her, and thereafter their mutual affection was stronger than ever before<sup>3</sup>.

When they arrived in Europe they stayed in Budapest for a while. It was there that Mahbuba received the Holy Baptism. In Vienna (Austria) Prince Pückler introduced Mahbuba into the aristocratic high society and

caused a real sensation with her exotic appearance. To make it easier for her to be received with respect he introduced her as an "Abyssinian Princess" who was now his foster child - this is how the press reflected it at that time<sup>4</sup>. To give Mahbuba some refinement in manners and education Pückler enrolled her in a boarding school in Vienna. She was very eager and intelligent and learnt a lot; she had an aptitude for languages and spoke fluent Italian after a short while. She preferred to learn something rather than going to receptions and paying visits at the royal court.

Though Pückler and Mahbuba were treated with respect in Vienna, they were nastily criticised in Germany. Pückler's divorced wife Lucie did not want him to bring Mahbuba to his castle in Bad Muskau because this was an offense to public decency. However, it was certainly jealousy on the part of Lucie, who did not wish to tolerate any competitor and did not believe in the fairy tale of the 'foster child'. She was well aware that Pückler was in love with the black girl and caused a lot of problems, not wanting to admit the girl to Pückler's house. At that time, however, Mahbuba was already mortally ill, and so Lucie finally was forced to give in<sup>5</sup>.

Mahbuba arrived in Bad Muskau in August 1840. Her health did not improve despite a health cure at a spa; she suffered from consumption of the lung. In October 1840 Pückler travelled to Berlin leaving Mahbuba behind in the castle. He charged a doctor to send him reports about her state of health. All he could report, however, was the near end of a young life. Mahbuba passed away on 27 October, 1840 and was buried on the following day in the churchyard of the town. All those who had known Mahbuba felt sincere sympathy at her death because they had all been impressed by her kind-heartedness and her natural character<sup>6</sup>.



PÜCKLER IN GENERAL'S UNIFORM.

### The Mystery of Mahbuba's Origin

On the basis of the references available it is difficult to prove Mahbuba was an Oromo, though we know she was. Of course she is called an "Abyssinian" in all of these sources, but this is mainly due to the insufficient knowledge about the variety of African peoples around that time.

There are some indications, however, which allow conclusions about her origin, such as her outer appearance when she was purchased by Prince Pückler on the Egyptian slave market and her own statements in discussions with the Prince which he found remarkable enough to be noted down in his diaries. These two indications seem to be more informative and more likely to give an idea about her real background than just assumptions.

The only recorded evidence that she must have been an Oromo is fact that Mahbuba once met Otshu Aga<sup>7</sup>. Aga had learnt some songs from Mahbuba which he hadn't known before. Obviously, they communicated in their native language which must have been Oromo. Now, several Oromos, or Gallas as they were called at that time, assisted the German scholar Karl Tutschek in producing the first Oromo dictionary and grammar in 1844. It is a well known fact that Karl Tutschek acquired his knowledge about the Oromo language solely in Germany from Oromo informants. One of them was Otshu Aga. He found out that Mahbuba's real name was Bililé or Birilé, who came from Guma. Guma, which is today a district located in southwest Ethiopia, was an independent Oromo kingdom in the 19th century<sup>8</sup>.

In his book *Die Rückkehr*, (The Return) Pückler gives a brief mention of the girl's name: "Ajiamé, who told me only today that she was given this name by the slave traders and that her real name was Machbuba which means "golden",<sup>9</sup> It seems Pückler got something wrong here, because the Arabic word 'Mahbuba' means 'beloved'.

In Pückler's discussion with Mahbuba<sup>10</sup> we find what she remembers about her origin:

"You are an Abyssinian," I said, "there are lots of Christians. Are you also Christian or are you Muhammadan?"

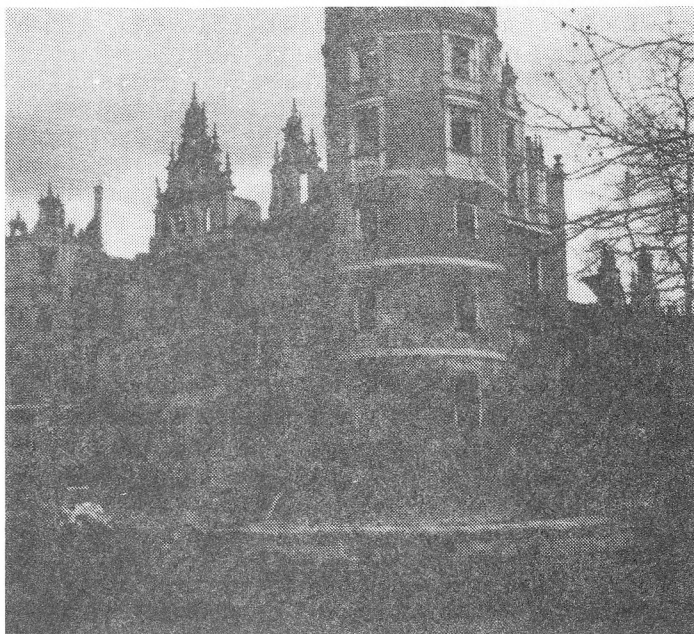
"I don't know," she replied quietly, "as I was so young when I was snatched away from my fatherland. I remember only the flames around us when the town was burning, and how my father and my brothers were killed, and my sister and I were dragged away bound. Beyond that I don't know anything else. Isn't it the same to you whether I am Christian or Mohammedan?"

From a historic point of view Mahbuba's abduction from her home might have happened during one of the many raids when numerous Oromos, particularly from southwest Oromoland, were caught as slaves and taken to the north via Gondar through Sudan to Egypt, which was a well-known slave trading route.

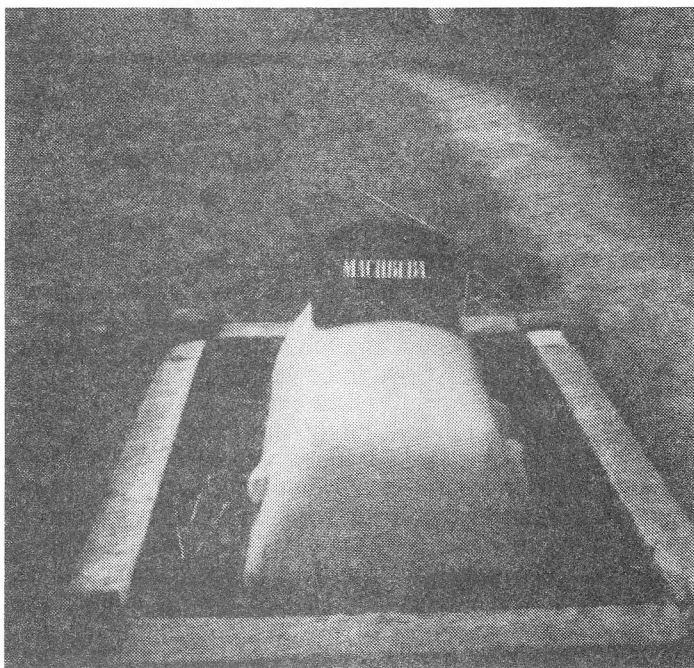
We know that Mahbuba was about 10 to 12 years old when Pückler found her, so she was of course too young to know more about her background when she was abducted from her home. In addition to that, they

had problems to communicating in a common language, which would be necessary for such a conversation.

It seems that it is no longer possible to find out the exact truth about Mahbuba's background. Nevertheless, I think it is quite a romantic story and Mahbuba or Bililé can certainly claim to have been the first Oromo girl in Germany.



Above: The castle in which Mahbuba passed away  
Below: Mahbuba's grave in the churchyard of the Evangelist Church in Bad Muskau.  
Photo Kathrin Schmitt



The memory of Mahbuba is still alive even after 150 years. There is a group of black German women who call themselves "Machbuba's Sisters". They feel emotionally attached to Machbuba's fate since they are in principle in the same situation as she was - being black among only white people was not easy in the 19th century, nor is it today. Machbuba's sisters met to set a signal of Black German identity and self-assertion in a period of new racist attacks in Germany.

#### References

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