

## **IN THE BOGOS' COUNTRY**

**By Mrs. Luisa Reinisch, the wife of Leo Reinisch, (1890s.)**

With the occupation of that large and natural mountain fortress which is the Bogos' country, the Italians have seized for the port of Massawa not only a sanitary station, but also a territory which will produce them sufficient means of substance for their African army.

To this be added that they now possess a great portion of the very ancient commercial route that from the times of the Ptolomais and the roman emperors was used for the transportation of the central African products to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Sahel is the name of that vast plain which extends north of Massawa, between the sea and the first lines of the Abyssinian highlands.

Usually, the caravans from Massawa take two days to reach the valley which gives access to the western mountains. This is the Lebca's river valley which, when in flood, it sends its waters direct to the Red Sea, otherwise spreading about in the Sahel plain zone. Along the Lebca's valley, except in some short-cuts, the route follows the river turns, and it reaches, after three days, the watershed on the high passage of Meshalit.

One straight ascent covered with savage shrubs, gives way from Sahel to that passage that, at the same time, Divide Rivers, regions, and peoples. Lebca remains backward in the Ad-Temariam. In front of the Anseba is the Begguik country.

When slowly descending from the mountain ridge, the vegetation is much more abundant and varied, giving the visitors a comfortable sensation, having nothing to see during the previous five days' journey. Soon after, there it opens a splendid and closed valley, through which the Anseba flows, which has the aspect of a river during the rain period only, though always showing with abundance spots of plants along its banks.

The Beggiuk is the pre alp of the Boggu, and it is inhabited by the friendly Tigre tribe who, similarly, are pastoralists and agriculturers. Their fields of hurrah extends back to the river banks, and from one field to the other one can see, amid a platform, on which a black man, shouting and frenzily jumping, agitates a kind of a sling. He is only but an alive bugbear, often a servant who guards the fields of his master from the monkeys, birds, and other animals.

Continuing on our way, we then arrive to a place where the mountains restrict the valley, and where a river streams is engaged in finding a way through the rocky walls which steeply fall down on both the banks. This natural doorway is Tzebab. Here, with two machine-guns and ten soldiers only, it is possible to contend against an entire army. We are now at the borderline of Beggiuk, and soon after in the very land of the Boggu. We follow for a while the Anseba which comes from the south. Some few miles ahead, in the same direction, the river goes through a very similar rocky gate, by the name of /Gordobertina or Agortina/ that borders with the South Hamasien.

On its entire course in the Bogos country, the Anseba is always protected eastward by closed mountain chains. We stopped following its course, keeping westward it's not so small affluent, the Daari river. Here, too, banks of superb vegetation and fields of durrah. Soon we came to see a joyful sight of gardens cultivated in Egyptian manner..... (two lines illegible). Beginning from the Tzebab gate, there stretches interrupted from east to west, another mountain chain with many buttresses. We see from afar how these buttresses are so well aligned at the foot of highly elevated mountains, vastly extended and of horrible features, delimiting northward the highland of Keren.

All in a sudden, we find ourselves in a very animated life: huge stock of horses, oxen, camels, and sheep, guarded by shouting shepherds; girls bringing water, soldiers under their burdens, naked boys merrily playing among peoples. Every corner is dominated by uproar, a savage confusion.

It is going late in the afternoon, the sixth day of our journey. We are now on the high plateau of Keren. The animals are drinking water at Da'ari river. Slowly we proceed on the back of our tired camels toward the last steep slope.

We cross through the Tantarua village. A monolith near the center of the plain which is used as soldiers' camp, we hear a military welcome of trumpets and drums. Flocks enter the village, bellowing and pushing each other, while the men either shout or sing, and from some tucul resounds some musical note. Such is the late noon-life of Keren. All the Bogos country consists of this large highland, and another smaller, the Juffa, where there are open corridors such as toward the lowering Da'ari and the Anseba, as well towards some few other more or less wide or strict valleys. All these valleys and plains are intercommunicable with each other by means of adits or shores of water courses, but with regard of communicating with foreign countries, there are only three natural gates. Of these we already mentioned two: Tzebab in the N.E.; Gunderbertina /Agortina/ in the S.E., and third is the Ashera on the outlet of the vast and marvelous valley of the Boggu: this leads to the Barca, on the Sudan way.

In this country there are about 30 villages and 20,000 peoples. Like an island on the sea or an oasis in a desert, that happy land is confined with mountains of natural bulwark. So, a fortress by itself, it can be self-efficient, and there is no water shortage, because the Arasuh which can supply water to the Keren people, has a perennial water source, like the Da'ari and Anseba. Keren, the capital, with complementation of tuculs like all others so called towns of the country, gave its name to this highland because it was the first residence of the Bogos people. It lies at the foot of the steep mount Zeban which closes the southern plateau. On the east there is Tantarua, Mogareh to the west with an ancient Abyssinian church, and near the center of the plain, the Urdi (camp) and Suck where Greeks, Arabs and other merchants live. At the time of my visit, here and there were some tobacco plantations, property of Europeans.

The Urdi (?) is really a steep valley that, high towards the south, there falls perpendicular to the north and other directions. The houses of the southern part of the town are constructed one over another like small palaces. Long ago, that elevating ground was the cemetery of the Bogos.

It is understood that the Italians occupy now not the fortress only, but the entire Boggu, because the fortress or the military camp is nothing but a place of gathering and, in case of continuity, the prison and the command post of the market place.... On the fortress there are some 800-1,000 soldiers, periodically brought from Barca.

The forces of Ras Alula used to come to this country from time to time to extort taxes from the poor Bogos, so these were obliged to pay taxes to two masters, the old and the new ones.

Fortunately, things go for the better now. In the town of Keren there is a church of French missionaries, one school and a college for girls dependent on them. Like other Europeans, these missionaries have planted beautiful gardens.

On the back side there is a wonderful rocky wall which forms the borderline with the highly positioned Juffa, smaller but more attractive than Keren. It has a grandiose access to the deep valley of Boggu, the very granary of the country. Looking from the heights of Juffa, the

Boggu seems like a country of fairies. Divided from south and east by chain of mountains, high and savage beyond imagination, it lies northward by the plateau of the Bogos. Only eastward there is a small hollow that leads to Barca. There, as on the doorsteps of his second but beloved country, Gebre Tarke, the father of the Bogos, wanted to be buried, and be erected to his memory, a pyramid, which, big enough now, will become bigger in the future, because, every Bogos, when passing there will throw a stone whispering some blessing.

And, there is buried another man that new conquerors will be interested about. He is father Stella, an Italian Catholic priest. He came there at the beginning of the 1850s. For a long time he lived alone. He took affection of the people, and he was of great help to them in many ways, at that point that they considered him like their father. As the customary of the country, that all men should take a wife, there was offered him one of the more aristocratic girls. He then abandoned the religious order, was married and became father of many children. He established the Shitel colony, just at the door step of the Boggu, and died very much honoured. After his burial, under his tomb there gushed out a water spring. This fact was considered as divine grace, and Abuna Stella henceforth was worshipped as a saint. 400 years ago the Bogos people led by Ghebre Tarke took refuge to this country (coming) from the Abyssinian province of Lasta, persued by the warrior soldiers of Mohammed Gagn. They subdued the ancient people of that country, the Tigre, who pay them taxes to this day, even if they live autonomous and never intermingling with them. The constitutional form of the state is republic-aristocracy. A Shum - a kind of a chief or a prince within the lineage of Ghebre Tarke family is elected for life. He must be always the oldest of the family having rather a restricted power, almost nominal. Our John, a Bogos whom many of Vienna will still remember was from that family. During our stay in the Bogos, the authority of the shum belonged to his uncle from his father's side, named Beri, old, weak, ill who had lost 600 cattle thus becoming poor. Nevertheless, his poverty was of no impediment, so he remained chief up to his death.

Many of the Hamassien and Mensa people, because of the continuous wars by the Abyssinians came to seek refuge in the Bogos. All these Abyssinian refugees became, ipso jure, servant of the chief but in a form that was quite moderate servitude. The Bogos, all in all aristocrats as they are, never get married with them. Quite strict oral customary laws regulate their actions. Full of sagacity, understanding and openness, these regulations are the most interesting monuments of intellectual capacity of an African people. In Leo Reinisch's book by the title Bilin Texte (Lipsia, 1883), there are found proofs of the subtle perspicacy and exquisite juridical laws.

The Bogos are beautiful people physically well proportioned, rather big than small; they act full of pragmatism and subtlety, being their behavior almost irreproachable! Virtually speaking, their natural intelligence put them much in a higher position than that vulgar mass of our (people). Great oratory facility is quite natural for them, having time and opportunity of exercising and showing in their meetings, being they for great part of the year free from work. Among them are some extemporary speakers. Their vocabulary is among the richest of the world possessing also great euphony as one can be well convinced by the names that will follow.

If you are to compare the Bogos people with the civilized people of Europe, there would be more than one who would reject our praise. Of course, all countries have their own cultures, their own views. Even some logic is quite different. Yet, in basilar principles, there are great similarity between this country and our one. Theft for example, is punished even here, and it occurs rarely. Justice is severely exercised, and with no difficulty is put in practice. The blood vengeance already quitted since the time of Munzinger, was replaced by compensation in money or cattle. In conclusion, here is the explanation of some few words.

The Bogos call themselves by the name of Bilin which means 'Christian'. It was the Tigre people that call them 'Bogos', as to say "conquerors, belligerents". The capital gave the name to the well extended highland of Keren but it is often called by the Tigre people with the name of Senhit, which means the "bald", for the reason that the last ascent from Da'ari up to the highland, it present to those who arrive up there, a denuded, uncovered territory. The British made Senait of Senhit. However, it is an important territory where the Italians established themselves in these few days.

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