

## **The Konso revisited, or how anthropologists get things wrong.**

[1997]

**C. R. Hallpike**

In May 1965 I found myself, rather bemused and not speaking a word of their language, among the Konso of what was then Gamo-Gofa Province, in the remote south-west of Ethiopia. After a couple of weeks at the Norwegian Lutheran Mission, during which I was given a few preliminary lessons in the language by a Konso teacher at the Mission school who spoke English, I went to live in Buso [1], one of the traditional Konso 'towns' (as I call them, since they are very large settlements), and plunged into my anthropological studies. The Konso, like almost all sub-Saharan peoples in Africa, have no writing of their own, and no previous linguistic work had been done on them except for a few very inadequate word-lists. Essentially, then, I had to learn the language by myself, and while the Konso were very helpful in telling me the names of everything that I asked about, they were mostly entirely uneducated and the older men, especially, knew only Konsinya, or some Orominya (Gallinya) which I did not speak either.

Looking back, I would say that the greatest weakness in my anthropological training at Oxford (which was typical of British anthropology as a whole) was that we were given no training in how to elicit the grammar of a language from non-literate informants. Since my time a great deal of work has been done on the Konso language, and I have been much impressed by the speed with which trained linguists can uncover the basic structure of a language, so there is no doubt in my mind that every anthropologist should be trained in practical linguistics. If I had had such a training I would also have been able to use the services of the teacher at the Mission much more effectively

than I did.

After four or five months, however, I acquired sufficient grasp of the language to be able to ask the basic questions I needed for my research and, generally, to understand most of the answers as well - rather a different matter! I had a small number of friends who became accustomed to my accent and my grammatical errors, and who had some idea of what I was trying to discover, and they would act as my interpreters to other Konso who did not know me so well: 'What he really means is...'; 'What he is asking is...', and so on. It is actually possible to build up a surprising amount of information by asking a set of simple questions: 'What is your name?'; 'What is your father's name?'; 'Is he an eldest or a younger son?'; etc. But as my knowledge of the language increased there was, correspondingly, less incentive to make further progress in the more difficult areas of grammar, such as relative clauses, so that I never really understood the subtler aspects of it, and certainly had great difficulty understanding them when they were talking among themselves [2].

I was also hampered by the lack of previous anthropological research on the Konso and on this area of Ethiopia as a whole. Only two anthropologists had visited the Konso before me, Professor Adolf Jensen in 1935, and Dr Richard Kluckhohn in 1959. But their stays were short (5 weeks for Jensen, and 3 months for Kluckhohn), and their publications are full of gross inaccuracies and misrepresentations. There was also very little on the neighbouring peoples, except Dr Paul Baxter's Ph.D thesis on the Borana which was very helpful, as was Professor Knutsson's book on the Macha. (I should, however, have given more attention to Haberland's *Galla Sud-Äthiopiens*, and Straube's *West Kuschitische Völker Süd-Äthiopiens*, but I did not then read German, and I was prejudiced against Haberland and Straube because they were associates of Jensen.) In Papua New

Guinea, by contrast, where I worked from 1970-72, there were unpublished theses on both the neighbouring peoples of the Tauade whom I was studying, a wealth of other anthropological studies of Papua New Guinea, as well as copious government records. But these were not available in Konso: the local Amhara Governor and his officials were always courteous, but their relations with the Konso were those of hated colonialists, and questions about these relations from a foreigner would not have been welcome. So basically I was working in the dark, trying to build up a picture of Konso society and culture from what was virtually scratch, and in this respect my predicament was not untypical of the ethnographic situation in my day.

In 1997 (March - May) I was fortunately able to make a return visit to the Konso after 30 years, and this gave me the chance to reassess the conclusions published in my book *The Konso of Ethiopia* (1972). Although I was only able to spend about 8 weeks of this time in the field, I had kept up my knowledge of the language, and the drastic changes that have occurred since my first fieldwork made the collection of information far easier than it was then. In the first place, the level of education has greatly increased; many of the younger generation are fluent in Amharic, and a few speak English, some well and others at least enough to be useful informants. (If I were to return to Konso for a longer stay, my first priority would be to learn Amharic.) I was also fortunate that the missionaries presently there, [1997] Mr Benedikt Jasonarson and his wife Margret, had also been almost the first missionaries in Konso (before my first visit), and they were able to give me a wealth of information about the early days of the Mission, and how and why Christianity was accepted, which I never knew when I was first there.

Ato Beyene Kaylashe, who speaks good English and acts as interpreter for Mr Jasonarson

when he preaches, was able to give me a large number of moral and religious terms, and Ato Dinode Kusiya, of the Ministry of Information and Culture, supplied me with a detailed set of population statistics and a thorough account of the modern administrative structure. (On my previous visit all I had been able to obtain was a gross population total.) The new regime, the Ethiopian Popular Revolutionary Democratic Front, has restored a great deal of local autonomy and the Konso now to a considerable extent are the masters of their own affairs which meant that the administration was much more open than the old Imperial government of thirty years ago. Ato Korra Gara, of the Ministry of Agriculture, has made it his life's work to preserve a written account of traditional Konso culture, and besides giving me a copy of his monograph in Amharic, a dictionary, and other invaluable material, also had many long conversations with me. One hour with him was worth several weeks of research on my first visit. I also had the opportunity of reading a paper by Ato Estiphanos Berisha on his family history; he is the late President of the South-West Synod of the EECMY, and a Konso by birth and upbringing.

Not surprisingly, this wealth of new material and sources of information, as well as the further researches which I made while living again in Buso have made it possible for me to reassess my earlier work and discover certain aspects of it that were mistaken, or at least in need of amplification.

I will begin with the question of land tenure and the status of the *poqalla*. The *poqalla* is a lineage head who inherits his office in the male line, and his principal function is to bless the members of his lineage at various ceremonies. (These are accurately described in my book.) But *poqalla* is also the title of certain major religious officials: the Kalla, the Bamalle, and the Qufa

whom I term 'regional priests' because they have essential functions involved in the age-grading (or *gada*) system of each region, and also intervened as peacemakers when the Konso towns fought one another in the past. In my book I treated the *poqalla* as essentially religious figures, but was unaware of the great importance of land tenure in their status. [And at the time of writing this paper Dr Elizabeth Watson's D.Phil Thesis on Konso land tenure was not yet available.] As I record in my book, the Konso were very unwilling to discuss details of the land they owned because of the tax implications of this information, so I was unable to make any significant progress in this area. Nor, it should be added, did my informants ever say that land ownership was important in the status of the *poqalla*. But as soon as I read the family history of Estiphanos Berisha a very different picture emerged. He is the heir of the leading *poqalla* family, Bata, of the town of Degato:

The family was one of the first settlers in Konso, and occupied a wide area of farm land with about forty tenant farmers who used some parts of the land for themselves and also worked in the fields of the family. They were the ones who worked for the family throughout the whole year. At summer time they sowed, and then weeded, and finally gathered the harvest. They also paid annual taxes [rent] - one silver [Maria Theresa] dollar each to my grandfather, and at times when the mother of the family [the *poqalla*'s wife] gave birth, they also contributed money and brought a leg of well-fed bull and offered it to the family...Some years ago when my grandfather was about to die, he passed over to me about 60 fields which are in the hands of the former tenants and clan members. During Haile Sellassie's time and even during Mengistu's time he sold many fields, but these are what have remained as if they were still ours.

The estate of the Ashum family, also of Degato, was estimated for me at about 20 hectares, which is presumably comparable to the ancestral estate of Bata; I also obtained estimates of the Bamalle's land as about 20 ha., the Qufa's as about 10 ha., and those of the Kalla (the most important regional priest), as about 40 ha., not including a very large juniper wood. (The Bamalle and the Gufa also owned juniper woods.) Further testimony to the significance of the *poqallas*'

estates comes from the policy of the Communist Derg in Konso: they went out of their way to denounce the *poqalla* as exploiters of the people and imprisoned some of the wealthier and more important ones, and 'gave' their land to their tenants. (Or, more precisely, since the Derg nationalised all land, said that the tenants could use the land without paying rent.) Clearly they would not have done this if the *poqalla* were simply concerned with performing religious ceremonies.

It also became clear to me on my second visit that the *poqalla* were the first settlers in the different parts of Konso, and claimed large tracts of land which then became the basic form of their wealth. I was originally misinformed about the rules of land inheritance. While I was correctly told that the eldest son inherits his father's homestead (and the *poqalla*'s is large), I was told that the land was divided equally among a man's sons, except that the eldest son receives a double share. This turns out to be incorrect: the eldest son receives at least 60% or more (if he has brothers), while his younger brothers receive decreasing shares, so that if there are three or four sons the youngest may get little or nothing. This has enabled the *poqalla* estates to survive without serious diminution over many generations.

I was also told that originally members of a lineage did not live close to their *poqalla*. While this true in the towns today, where lineage members are scattered among a number of different wards, it was not the case before the towns were formed (a process which I now believe began in the early seventeenth century). I was led to this new conclusion by a study of 12 ancient stone-built homesteads near Buso, which were all close to a previous homestead of the Bamalle. These were last inhabited when Konso was invaded by horsemen in chain-mail (presumably Muslim warriors, since the Oromo (Galla) did not wear armour, although by this time they had horses), and this was dated

for me on my first visit at around 1600 (see *The Konso*, pp.45, 92. [In the revised edition of 2008:82-3 I give the date as about 1593] ). Since I believed that lineage members did not live near their *poqalla* I did not appreciate the significance of these homesteads. On my second visit, however, I enquired more closely into the families which owned them, and discovered that they, and the surrounding land, still belong to the direct descendants of the original owners and that, with one exception, these families are all of Argamyda clan and, specifically, are the descendants of the Bamalle through the Xrele family, who are still leading *poqalla* in Buso. They therefore provide a unique insight into the ancient settlement pattern of a *poqalla* and his kinsmen in relation to their land, and show that, contrary to my earlier information, they did all live clustered on the family estate.

One of the features of the *poqalla* is that they retain the same family name over the generations and, within the lineage, there are also other prominent families who, though not of *poqalla* status, still retain their family names as well. This permanence of family names is important because there are cycles of office holders which are repeated over many generations, and it is necessary to have permanent family names in order for the cycles to be adequately memorized. In my book I therefore said that the sons of an eldest son take their father's last name - Xrele, Bata, Bamalle, and so on - while the sons of younger sons take their father's first name. Some of my informants told me that this was so, and it is certainly an elegant system for distinguishing senior from junior lines, but unfortunately it is incorrect! I did not realise that the family name is distinct from the personal names of the individual. These are actually inherited in a manner which is very common, whereby all a man's sons take their father's first name. So, for example, the son of Orano

Gahano was called Karo Orano, his son was Kadano Karo, and so on, but their family name remains Bulgo. One may also refer to Kadano Karo as Kadano Bulgo, especially when, as in this case, he is the senior member of the Bulgo family. The family name of their *poqalla* is Xrele, taken from the founding ancestor, and within the Xrele lineage there are a number of families, such as Bulgo, Tawysa, Teana, Gembo, and so on. These family names originated with some distinguished ancestor in the past whose memory is thus perpetuated, without his being a *poqalla*. The fact that the families which owned the ancient stone homesteads four hundred years ago in Buso are still extant shows very well the antiquity of these family names within the lineage.

Each lineage also belongs to one of 9 patrilineal, exogamous clans which are dispersed throughout Konso - the Bamalle, for example, is of Argamyda, the Kalla and Qufa of Kerdita, and so on. When I first lived with the Konso they told me that all the surrounding peoples, including the Borana, had the same clans, which as far as the actual names are concerned is certainly false. They also asked me how many clans we had in England, and when I replied that we had none they were most disconcerted, and asked how in that case we knew whom we could marry. I therefore dismissed their ideas about the clans of neighbouring peoples as an ethnocentric illusion. But on my second visit I was discussing the clans of the Hummer with Mrs Jean Strecker, and she told me that some of her informants said their ancestors had come from Konso, and before that from a place called Ala, and she asked me if I knew of it. There is indeed an area to the north of Konso by this name and some of the Konso, too, have come from there. This suggested to me that, while I already knew of many Konso families who were supposed to have originated outside Konso, I had misjudged the importance of migration, and the need to have some means of classifying and integrating people who

move from one group to another. The thesis of Ato Hansemo Hamela on the Gidole, and Ato Korra Gara's monograph both show that while the names of the clans do indeed differ from one language group to another, there is nevertheless a genuine and stable correspondence between the clans of the different language groups. And from Korra Gara it also became clearer that the different clans are thought of as having different collective personalities; so Toqmaleda are dishonest, Eeshalyda happy-go-lucky, Tigisyda mean, and so on, and their totems also have some relation to these stereotypes. Thus the clans turn out to be a basic means of classifying people on the basis of personal characteristics as well as patrilineal descent, and this form of classification transcends linguistic boundaries and allows the easier integration of immigrant families.

One of the greatest puzzles of my first research was the fact that the Konso reckon months by the moon, but claimed that their lunar months always stood in the same relation to the seasons (allowing of course for the usual variations in the weather from year to year). Since the lunar year is roughly 11 days shorter than the solar year this is a physical impossibility, and the lunar year will get about a month ahead of the solar year every 3 years. But when I tried to explain this to my informants they were baffled, and I could discover no means by which they corrected their calendar. But if they did not correct their calendar, how could they believe that the months were in a stable relationship with the seasons? The first light on this problem was shed in 1988 by a letter from Dr David Turton who, at my request, when visiting the Konso in 1987 had enquired what month it was on 15th December, and had been told that it was Olindela. This was exactly the same month as when I had been there in December 1965, and so proved that the Konso were correct in claiming that their calendar did indeed remain in a constant relationship with the solar year. The next question was how

they achieved this. On my recent visit the next clue was supplied by Dr Shako Otto, a physician residing in Addis Ababa who had been born and spent his early years in Konso. He told me that he had heard a song which said that Oiba comes twice in some years. Repetition of a month is, of course, a well known method of calendrical adjustment, but he could not tell me when or why Oiba was repeated, or who decided when this should be done. All I knew was the sequence of the months, and that Oiba was supposed to be at the end of the dry season, Bona. When I got to Konso I asked, at the new moon on April 7th, if the month which began on that day was Pillelo, but was told that it was only Murano, the month which precedes Pillelo. It then turned out that Oiba had been repeated that year because the rains had been late (in fact they did not begin until 28th March, instead of the middle of February). In other words, if the rains do not come in Murano they say that it is still Oiba. This repetition of Oiba if the rains do not come in the next month is essentially the solution to the calendar problem. In my correspondence with Dr Turton I had speculated that they might repeat a month, but if the answer were so simple I wondered why no one had been able to tell me what it was. The difficulty was produced by my conceptualization of the problem as one of the synchronization of two cycles - the lunar and solar years - but the Konso are quite oblivious to this problem, which is why they were baffled when I discussed it with them. (They say that their year is 360 days, and that of the Amhara is 365 days, and regard this simply as a cultural difference, with no idea that one is more accurate than the other.) What they *are* interested in is simply that the great rains should have started in the month after Oiba, and so if this does not happen they say that it is still Oiba. The problem of who decides when to repeat Oiba does not, therefore, exist since it is a matter which all the Konso can observe for themselves. (There are further complications about the frequency with

which Oiba is repeated, but the essence of the matter is as I have stated it.)

When I was investigating murder and its social consequences I asked my informants in Buso if the victim's family would accept blood money in compensation. They were very shocked by this suggestion, and said that this would be the equivalent of selling a person, and that the murderer had to be killed in revenge to settle the matter. Putting a monetary value on a person is certainly repugnant to their moral values: they said that they hated the craftspeople, *xauta*, because in the past some of them had sold their children to the Borana for meat in times of famine, and that while presents were given by the husband's family to that of the bride this was only to create friendship, and was not a bride *price*. So I accepted what I was told about vengeance, but at the same time I was puzzled by two things. One was that apparently they made no distinction between deliberate and accidental homicide, and the other was that a killer could seek sanctuary in a *poqalla*'s homestead. But if a killer had himself to be killed, there seemed little point in sanctuary since he could hardly spend the rest of his life there.

This a lesson that one should follow up such puzzles and inconsistencies and not just accept them as part of the culture. When I returned this year I asked the present Kalla, Wolde Dawit, about homicide. Previously, I had been told that the Kalla, like the Bamalle and the Qufa, intervened in battles between towns, but no one had mentioned their role as mediators in disputes between individuals, and I wanted more information on this. Wolde Dawit told me that if a man killed someone he would flee to the house of the Apa Timba (a ritual officer in each town), who would then take the killer under his protection to the homestead of one of the regional priests, where the killer would live in a special house called *akita*. The regional priests would then send their

representatives, *saarra*, to mediate between the families and try to persuade the relatives of the victim to accept compensation. Not all would, but when they had done so a ceremony of purification would be held to cleanse the land, and the killer would have to go and live elsewhere. He also said that there was a clear distinction between deliberate and accidental killing, *tarsha*, and that in the latter case no purification was necessary, and the killer could go back to live in his town.

But not everyone agreed with this. Korra Gara said that in the case of deliberate killing the family would kill the murderer and refuse compensation. Another informant said that the kin of the dead man would ravage the crops and kill the stock of the murderer's lineage to force them to hand him over to them for vengeance. One of the problems here is that killings within towns are very rare, and would in any case have been dealt with by the police, so that a good deal of conjecture is involved in determining what would happen. But what also emerged from this inquiry was that the regional priests were far more important in the settling of individual disputes than I had realised, and even today their services, especially those of the Kalla, are still in demand. Far from being just ritual officers, the regional priests have traditionally had the essential function of being a final court of appeal.

I was always puzzled by the problem of how land conquered by one town from another (as Buso took land from Majella, or Degato from Patangaldo) was distributed among the new owners. On my second visit I was able to resolve this as follows. A tax called *mala* is paid to the town officials at harvest time by all who farm land within the boundaries claimed by the town. When in the past a town enlarged its boundaries by warfare this did not therefore disturb the rights of ownership of those who farmed the land, but merely required them to pay *mala* to the conquering

town. No one, however, had thought to tell me about *mala* and I, having no idea of its existence, could not discover it for myself.

I was also much less aware of the importance of the *suaita* (witch-doctors) than I should have been. While I collected a good deal of information about them, and even attended the *séances* of one of them at Gaho, and also knew about the evil-eye and evil spirits, I simply did not give sufficient weight to this aspect of Konso life, because the people were generally too afraid of these dark forces to talk about them freely to the enquiring stranger. Since my return, however, when the fear of 'saytan' - the Amharic term for evil spirits and forces in general, as well as the Devil - has greatly diminished, it is much easier to gather information. So it appears that at the time of my first visit many children, especially boys, were dying and it was believed that evil spirits and the *suaita* were responsible, and evil spirits were also being seen as bright lights moving in the darkness. Unknown to me, the Konso were actually in a general state of extreme dread about the powers of evil:

When the evil spirits got people they appeared to them in different forms and struck them with agonizing pains and killed them. For example, my father told me that one day his brother was going to the field, when suddenly someone met him and struck him with fire on his right cheek and at once his right eye was gouged out and thrown out hanging on his chest. When people found him, they brought him back home but the same day he died...Immediately after sunset, the evil spirits appeared as bright lights moving out in the fields and flying like birds from one hill to another. Many people were possessed by them and became mad. Many committed suicide. (Estiphanos Berisha)

It was this extreme fear of the forces of evil that was the foundation for the acceptance of Christianity, since Jesus was believed to be more powerful than the evil spirits.

Secrecy was also the reason why I was mistaken about the lack of medicines among the Konso. I observed that their main remedy for aches and pains was to apply the glowing end of the fire-drill to their bodies, the shoulder being a favourite place, and also that they did not know of the

purgative properties of the castor-oil plant, or the hallucinogenic properties of *Datura stramonium*, and so I concluded that if they were unaware of these well known facts they could have little knowledge of other medicinal plants. This belief was supported when I made a list of 80 plants and was given a medicinal use for only 4 of them. Yet I was mistaken, because medical knowledge among the Konso is not part of the general culture but, on the contrary, is kept secret by those who have it as a means of earning money, and Korra Gara gave me a list of 34 plant remedies for humans and animals which he had collected with great difficulty over a number of years. This is the sort of information that is only going to be accessible therefore to someone who spends far more time in the field than is normally possible for the anthropologist.

Sometimes informants are willing enough to give information, but get into a muddle which the anthropologist is unable to unravel. A case in point is my analysis of the terms *daldida* and *sargata* which I say (1972, p.107) 'cut across our concepts of 'affine' and 'cognate''. The list of relatives given as *daldida* and *sargata* in Table 25 (p.108) is indeed a confusing mixture of cognates and affines, but in this case I was misled by my informants who, as I say were themselves unsure on these points (p.107). On my return I took up the problem again with Korra Gara, who told me that the *daldida* were simply all one's blood relatives who were not of one's patrilineage, i.e. were cognates, and that the *sargata* were one's relatives by marriage. In my discussions with my informants on my first visit I had tried to build up an understanding of what *daldida* and *sargata* meant by getting lists of specific relatives, because it was difficult for my informants to give me general definitions of kinship concepts, but this led only to confusion, as I suspected at the time, and have only now resolved with the help of an English-speaking informant.

One of my greatest surprises was the discovery that the Kalla, the most important regional priest, is only allowed to marry one wife, which I first read about in the paper by Ato Tadesse Wolde on the burial ceremony of the Kalla (*Sociology Ethnology Bulletin* of Addis Ababa University 1(2), 1992, p.14). This was subsequently confirmed by my informants when I returned to Konso. How did I miss this very interesting piece of information during my original visit? When I discussed the marriage of the Kalla, the Bamalle, and the Qufa I was told that the Kalla only marries girls from Pa' aidi, but my informants never mentioned that he is restricted to only one wife, which is a unique and extraordinary restriction for the Konso, among whom it is the *poqalla* above all men who is normally expected to have several wives. Again, the story of the Kalla's two wives, which is given in my book (1972 p.288) only reinforced my assumption that of course the Kalla married more than one wife. But the man who told me this story did not mention that the particular Kalla in the story was doing something exceptional by having two wives. (The version given by Tadesse Wolde introduces its own problems: it refers to 'angels' sent by God who talked with the Kalla, but all my informants were unanimous that there is no idea of angels in traditional Konso religion, and there is no word for them in the Konso language. Moreover, the point of the story is that God Himself is offended by the stink and goes far away, but this essential point is confused by the presence of angels in place of God.)

Another of my mistakes was the result of asking the wrong question, and of my own ignorance of livestock. I say (p.25) that bulls are not castrated, but the question I actually asked was 'Do you cut off the testicles of bulls?', to which they gave me the truthful answer 'No'. But what they really do is to crush the seminal tubes with sticks applied to the scrotum so that the testicles

atrophy, but the animal *appears* entire to the inexperienced eye. Since I do not come from a farming family I was insufficiently familiar with the physiology of bulls' testicles to pursue my enquiries more effectively.

Looking back over this catalogue of errors we can draw a number of cautionary lessons for the anthropologist doing fieldwork in societies such as the Konso. The first and most obvious is that the linguistic difficulties are formidable, and the only way fully to overcome these is for the anthropologist to spend a number of years studying the culture (which is impractical in most cases), or to use the services of expert informants who can speak the language of the field-worker. Secondly, while I took care to consult men who were acknowledged to be well informed, they were all entirely without education and so naturally did not always understand the purpose of my enquiries. It is very difficult for such people to put themselves in the place of the outsider who knows nothing initially about their society, and they are liable to assume that what is obvious or familiar to them will also be known to the anthropologist. Thirdly, I was not sufficiently diligent in trying to resolve puzzles and apparent inconsistencies in my data. Part of the problem is that when one is living in a traditional society like the Konso one becomes, in a strange way, lulled into the simple acceptance of their customs without reflecting enough upon them. So on a number of occasions I would go up to Addis Ababa for a rest, and only when I was thinking about my material would some problem suddenly dawn upon me, which I could then go back and make further enquiries about.

Another reason for ethnographic error or incompleteness is simple reticence by the people on certain matters. I have given some examples of this: land and property, the fear of evil spirits and the witch-doctors, and the secrecy of medical remedies, and others might be mentioned, of which the

most obvious is the relations between the sexes, and sexuality in general. This is an area of culture which the Konso, probably like most people, find distasteful and embarrassing to discuss with strangers, and I personally am equally reticent in this respect so I did not push my enquiries in this direction very far..

More generally, the anthropologist who only spends a year or two with a people must accept that the picture of their society and culture which he or she constructs must necessarily be of a fairly general nature. Sometimes one will be lucky enough to be involved in situations where a large amount of detailed information can be obtained (as I was in Buso, where I witnessed many important ceremonies, or at Gaho, where I was able to attend a number of *séances* with a *suaita*), but often one must be content with a fairly general summary of the society's institutions and customs.

It is also worth pointing out that return visits such as this do not only resolve, to a greater or lesser extent, the problems of earlier fieldwork, but may also create new ones. An example is the question of the resolution of homicide, where we now know a good deal more than is contained in my book, but where there are also new conflicts of opinion which need further investigation. One must therefore be prepared to accept that any anthropological account of a society is only provisional and can never be thought of as in any way complete or final. As Korra Gara said to me, 'Your book laid the foundations of Konso studies, and now we must build on it', which is exactly right. The most useful parts of my book are the detailed lists of facts and names of people, maps of towns, descriptions of ceremonies, and so on, while the least useful are the theoretical speculations about the meaning of various symbols.

In conclusion, I must emphasise that the Konso whom I met on my return were very insistent

that their traditional culture should be described as it really was, and not distorted by 'politically correct' revisions. For example, there is no doubt that when I was first there, the farmers disliked and despised the craftspeople; now these animosities have to a large extent disappeared, and no doubt this is a good thing, but that is no excuse for pretending that they never existed. Again, they used to regard the Borana as their enemies because they would come and try to kill Konso men in order to emasculate them. Here, too, things have changed and the Government has effectively put a stop to these raids so that the two peoples were at peace, at least in 1997, and this, too, is obviously a good thing. But that does not justify the pretence that they were always good friends, and that any fighting was only encouraged in this [twentieth] century by the Amhara.

There is a disturbing tendency for anthropologists to assume the role of advocates for 'their' people, and to promote their interests without regard for the truth, like lawyers defending their clients. This not only self-defeating, since the general public will soon realise that the new anthropology is not to be trusted, but it is also a betrayal of the people concerned, to whom as scholars we owe it to preserve a truthful account of their way of life as it really was, so that future generations can know how their ancestors lived when the old ways have passed into history.

### *Notes*

This paper was written shortly after my return from a short visit to the Konso in March-May 1997. The book to which it refers is *The Konso of Ethiopia*, 1972. A substantially revised edition was published in 2008.

1. The conventions of Konso spelling are currently being revised, but in this paper I have not thought it worth while to depart significantly from the spellings in my book.

2. One will sometimes come across ludicrous claims by anthropologists about their linguistic prowess. Here is an example from Papua New Guinea, whose indigenous languages are notoriously difficult:

'I used no English whatever after my second day there. I had no interpreter, but acquired the language by contagion. At the end of three months nothing said passed over me, and nothing much in a quarrel with many shouting more or less simultaneously.'

In fact, a noted East-African linguist once said to me that to understand the people properly when they are talking among themselves needs about two-and-a-half years of daily practice.

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