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Author(s): Jan Monteverde Haakonsen

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# IN MEMORY OF I. M. LEWIS

*Jan Monteverde Haakonsen*

*Email: jha@rcn.no*

More than forty years ago, Professor Ioan Myrddin Lewis delivered his inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics where he had recently been appointed professor. There he stated the following: 'in making me in what I am as an anthropologist, the Somalis have much to answer for' (Lewis, 1973: 26). I am tempted to paraphrase his words to state, 'in making me what I am not only as an anthropologist, but as a human being, I.M. Lewis has much to answer for'.

The fact is that Professor Lewis was a crucial element in starting my career and thus, unwittingly, to a great extent determined much of the rest of my life. This obituary will thus be quite personal, from the point of view of somebody (one among many others, both Somalis and non-Somalis) whose life I.M. Lewis's presence and writings have had an impact on. There are plenty of other sources describing his scholarly career, including a voluminous 'Festschrift' in his honour, published only a few years ago (Hoehne and Luling, 2010) and the unusual interview with him in *Bildhaan* (Geshekter, 2001), which I recall he described to me as 'rather bizarre'. Lewis himself has also contributed to our understanding of him as a scholar and as a human being, particularly in his article 'An Anthropologist at Large in the "Cinderella of Empire"' (Lewis, 1994), based on a previous article published in *Anthropological Forum* (Lewis, 1977).

Ioan, as I gradually came to address him, had a most unusual career. Not that his academic course differs dramatically from that of many other brilliant scholars, except perhaps that he wrote up his Ph.D. at Oxford in six months and that he was appointed as full professor at one of the most prestigious universities in the UK at the tender age of 39. What is truly unique about him is that, for almost fifty years, he was not just *the* authority on a 'tribe' in the traditional sense of earlier ethnographers, but the acknowledged expert of a whole people and a nation.

I.M. Lewis was an anthropologist, a social anthropologist, no doubt about that. But as the 'doyen of Somali studies', as he was referred to more than once, he was also a historian, a political scientist and even an authority on religion and poetry. And it all stemmed from his interest, one is almost tempted to use the word passion, for the Somali people and their history, culture and society.

It was not at all given that he should become either an anthropologist or the leading figure in Somali Studies. Born in 1930 as the son of a Welsh father and Scottish mother, he originally aimed at becoming a chemist. He spent his

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first childhood years in London before moving with his mother to his maternal grandparents in Glasgow following his father's untimely death from tuberculosis when Ioan was just seven. His parents, incidentally, originally met in Iraq where his father had been a journalist with the *Mesopotamia Times*, so he was obviously not the first in his family to have an adventurous spirit.

As his mother worked during the day, little Ioan had ample opportunity to spend time with his grandmother and grandfather, a retired carpenter. During World War Two, he was sent to the countryside for safety and returned to Glasgow to enrol in Glasgow High School before continuing to Glasgow University, where he started studies in chemistry at the age of seventeen. He seemed set for a chemistry career and co-published his first academic article in 1951 in the *Journal of the Chemical Society*.

But fate decreed otherwise. Thanks to an initiative taken by the Nuffield Foundation to recruit physical scientists to the social sciences in order to make them more 'scientific' the young chemistry graduate applied for and succeeded in obtaining a grant to the Institute of Anthropology at Oxford University. Here he obtained a graduate diploma and the equivalent of a Master's degree. The Institute at the time was headed by the legendary E.E. Evans Pritchard who, among other things, is known for his description of the segmentary lineage system among the Nuer. Although not frequently referred to by him, Evans-Pritchard's works no doubt had a considerable influence on Lewis' own later studies in Somalia.

His first supervisor at Oxford was Franz Steiner, however, a polyglot Czech refugee whose premature death in 1952 coincided with his first preliminary ethnographic work on the Somalis. Ioan decided to continue where Steiner had left off. His interest in Somalia was triggered further by having become acquainted with two giants in Somali Studies, the famous Somali poet and folklorist Muse Galal and the eminent linguist B.W. 'Goosh' Andrzejewski.[1] Ioan's Oxford years not only set the course of his academic career. He also met an undergraduate student named Ann who was to become his wife, mother of his four children and life-long companion. By the time of his death in March 2014, they had been married for nearly sixty years.

It was in this period he completed his first, Somalia-related work, the monograph *Peoples of the Horn of Africa* (1955, republished with supplementary appendices in 1993). His next ambition was to do fieldwork among the Somali nomads he had read so much about. After a short stay as research assistant at Chatham House the young Ph.D. student succeeded in obtaining a very

1. 'Goosh', incidentally, had a decisive influence on me, too. I was fortunate enough to have him as my first teacher of Somali during a few weeks in London in early 1981 as I was on my way to take up my first job as a research supervisor at the Somali Academy of Sciences, Arts and Culture (SOMAC).



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sought-after research fellowship from the Colonial Social Science Research Council to go to Somaliland, at the time still a British protectorate. His only worry was that the fellowship was conditional on his being incorporated within the Protectorate administration but, as he has written later, his 'misgivings on this proviso turned out to be totally misplaced' (Lewis, 1994: 3). Nevertheless, his association with the colonial authorities has given rise to the misconception put forward by some of his critics many decades later that he was a colonial anthropologist at the service of empire or that he was 'caught up in colonial cosmology', as one has written (Ingiriis, n.d.).

Nothing could be further from the truth. Those of us who knew him and have read his reflections on his relations with the protectorate administration know that he was never at its service and that his heart was genuinely with the Somali people from the start. He called strongly, among other things, for their right to be self-determined and independent. He was also very critical of his own government for having ceded the important Hawd grazing area to Ethiopia a few years before, an injustice the Somali nomads constantly reminded him of during his first fieldwork period:

> All the people would say 'what about the Hawd'. I would say I have come to collect this and that information, and they would just say well, what about the Hawd. This went on and on. (quoted in Haakonsen and Keynan, 1995: 16)

The Somalis' obsession about the Hawd question at the time was not the only frustrating experience the young field investigator experienced during his first stay in Somaliland:

> Also, I found that typically you would give a little explanation of what you were doing to a group of people and then a new person would arrive and he would expect the whole thing to be repeated, and this process went on and on, and it took days and days. As a novice unused to the Somali scene, I found it infuriating (ibid.)

Those of us who have had the opportunity to be working in Somalia decades later can easily identify with his frustrations back in the 1950s. Even the International Red Cross Committee (ICRC) recognised this challenge. In an advertisement for a position as a cooperation delegate in Somalia during the 1990s, they listed all the formal requirements for the position, adding that any candidate would also need to have 'a capacity for endless discussions with Somali elders'!

Even if he described negotiating with Somalis as 'very time intensive, very laborious', requiring 'tremendous patience', I. M. Lewis added that it also required 'sympathy and sensitivity' (ibid). Indeed, in his writings he did not hide his empathy with and admiration of the Somali nomads, their egalitarian



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outlook and the democratic structure he saw embedded in the intricate social organisation based on the segmentary lineage or clan system. His continuous emphasis on the clan system and clan relations has at times put him under fire both from Somali 'intellectuals' and some of his academic critics (e.g. Besteman, 1996; Kapteijns, 2010). After Somaliland's independence from Britain on 26 July 1960 and the creation five days later of the Somali Republic when former Italian Somalia obtained its independence, many 'modern' Somalis made it a point not to speak about clans that they saw as somewhat archaic for a new-born state (instead, they would ask each other about their ex-clans, as Lewis has pointed out in many of his writings).

It did not help either that the military dictator Mohamed Siad Barre ceremoniously buried the clans in 1970 and introduced harsh punishments for even mentioning the name of a clan. By now recognised as the world authority in Somali studies I.M. Lewis continued to emphasise the importance of clans and the lineage system in Somali society, much to the annoyance of Barre (who himself was a master of manipulating clan allegiances to his own advantage). The famous article 'Kim Il-Sung in Somalia' (Lewis, 1979) was a clear statement in that regard. Even today Lewis' 'clanism' is denounced by many Somalis, who accuse him of contributing to the divisiveness of Somalia. Yes, clans can be divisive (but also a uniting force), but to deny their significance in Somali society and not least politics is like going blind-folded into a minefield. Almost everything in Somalia, and to a large extent also in the ever-growing expatriate Somali communities around the world, is based on the clan-system rooted in the traditional pastoral society. The clan system is hardly an invention of the 'colonial anthropologist' I.M. Lewis.

His contributions to making Somali pastoral society known to the world cannot be overestimated, however. His book *A Pastoral Democracy* has long since become a classic in anthropological literature but, as indicated initially, I.M. Lewis contributed immensely to making Somali poetry known (much in collaboration with Andrzejewski, (see e.g. Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964) and he wrote about various interpretations of Islam in Somalia (e.g. Lewis 1984), about politics and, in later years, the sad and violent conflicts. His interest in religion allowed him to expand geographically, leading to publications such as *Ecstatic Religion* (1971) and later the more general reflection on his discipline *Social Anthropology in Perspective* (1985). But perhaps his major contribution outside the discipline of anthropology is his work on Somali history, including four books in updated versions since his first, *The Modern History of Somaliland* (1965, subsequent versions in 1980, 1988 and 2002).

The political situation in Somalia deteriorated gradually in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, particularly following the so-called Ogaden war in 1977 when Somali forces (though never admitted by the regime at the time)



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were soundly defeated in their efforts to 'liberate' what they referred to as 'Western Somalia'. The ill-fated military campaign also led to an influx of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Somali refugees from Ethiopia. Contrary to most observers, however, I.M. Lewis did not see the Ogaden war as the turning point in Somali tragic modern history, but rather Mohamed Siad Barre's ascent to power in 1969 (Geshekter 2001: 75).

The increasingly repressive regime became more and more brutal as various (clan-based) opposition movements started armed revolts in various parts of the country. As in all violent conflicts, truth was among the first victims. The news propagated by the regime could not be trusted in any way but, fortunately, the Somalis had the privilege of having access to the BBC's Somali service. And people listened. It is not unusual for the attentive observer to see nomads suddenly stopping their camel caravan at 5 p.m. to pull out a short-wave radio and tune to the news in Somali from London. However, with the 1980s came Margaret Thatcher's long reign of power, with economic policies that included drastic cuts in public spending. On the cut list was, to Ioan Lewis' great chagrin, also BBC Somali Service. He thus embarked on a tireless lobbying effort to prevent it from disappearing. The House of Commons, meanwhile, approved the budget cuts that would have annihilated the Somali Service. The only hope was now the House of Lords, that – in the eyes of non-Britons – rather odd and archaic institution. The 'House' was not known for going against decisions made in the House of Commons, particularly not when it was dominated by the Conservative Party, as during the Thatcher years. But Lewis managed to find a sympathetic ear among the Lords to argue for the preservation of the Somali Service. Eventually the House of Lords approved the budgetary cuts with only a few exceptions, one being the Somali Service that continues to operate even today! Once again, Professor Lewis had stood up for 'his' people.

Disaster truly struck Somalia in the aftermath of Mohammed Siad Barre's fall from power in January 1991 and the ensuing internal conflicts led to the great famine in 1991–1992 and the US-led United Nations military intervention. I.M. Lewis was concerned by what was happening in his beloved Somalia and the fact that the massive UN military presence in the country opened the way for hordes of aid workers and volunteers from all over the world. Although they were for the most part well-meaning helpers, most of them had absolutely no understanding of the country, its society and its culture.

I.M. Lewis thus quickly produced a 115-page booklet entitled *Understanding Somalia: Guide to Culture, History and Social Intervention* (Lewis 1993), 'intended to provide a brief introduction to key features of Somali culture and institutions', as he wrote in the Preface. However, he also warned that such a 'brief introduction to a very complex people and their country is, of course, no substitute to first-hand experience'. Nevertheless, it was a very valuable



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insight for people who had hardly heard of the country until recently and who were on their way there on shorter and longer missions. I was myself very involved in Red Cross operations in the country at the time, including recruiting and dispatching delegates to the field. They all received a copy of the booklet before they went and it helped them be prepared to face the war-torn country.

The civil war was mostly confined to the south of Somalia at the time. The north, the former British Somaliland, had achieved a sort of peace and had declared itself independent on 16 May 1991, an independence that no state has recognised to this day. But here, too, clan differences were harbouring a new, potentially disastrous conflict, especially within branches of the dominant *Isaaq* clan-family that Lewis knew so well from when he first went to Somalia. Together with his former student, Dr Ahmed Yusuf Farah,[2] he took up an assignment with Action Aid to help lay the ground for the long-winded negotiations between clan-elders (see Lewis and Farah 1993). The negotiations eventually led to the establishment of a state that has been functioning to this day, and which has been holding regular parliamentary and presidential elections ever since.

Years later, Lewis brought the wrath of many Somalis on himself, especially Somalis from the South, when he openly advocated the recognition of Somaliland. That led to a number of sharp criticisms from even prominent Somali scholars, such as Professor Ahmed I. Samatar at the University of Minnesota, a staunch federalist who had earlier criticised Professor Lewis for his 'retired ideas' (Samatar 2001) and had long been one of his biggest critics. Yet, even Samatar had to admit, in an interview with another prominent Somali scholar and namesake, Professor Said S. Samatar, that when it came to Lewis 'all of us have been influenced, one way or another, by his work' (Samatar 2006).

Like all academics, Lewis has had to face his share of criticism, especially in the latter years when more and more Somali and non-Somali scholars took up an interest in Somali studies. I never got the impression that it bothered him, as long as the critical arguments were based on a profound knowledge of Somalia and Somalis, including a command of the Somali language. But he could be harsh on anyone he did not consider up to his own rigorous academic standards. In the long interview conducted by Professor Charles Geshekter in *Bildhaan* (2001: 77) he said,

> One of the most disappointing things to me in the work of people who present themselves as social scientists interested in Somalia and Somali Studies, with some remarkable exceptions, is their superficiality and lack of any serious empirical underpinning, without adequate command of

2. He was also my student for a while during my period as a research supervisor at SOMAC. After completing his MA at LSE, he continued to complete his Ph.D. under Professor Lewis' supervision. Ahmed, unfortunately, died of cancer a few years later at the age of 46.



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> the Somali language, but above all, the lack of serious in-depth empirical research.

Clearly, such statements can be quite devastating to those they are addressed to (who were sometimes also explicitly named, as in the course of the above interview). Yet, Ioan was a kind and tender man. His gentleness and very British politeness must have been quite a contrast to the rough and direct tone of the Somali nomads that he spent a life-time studying and living with whenever he was in the field. I remember I found it rather exasperating each time we were together and happened to walk together through a doorway or into an elevator. He would always insist on letting the other person in or out first. As I was his junior in every respect, I always contended he should go first, but mostly to no avail, he seldom budged. Sometimes he would only agree to go on when he realised we were blocking the passage for other people.

I will miss Ioan. Although I did not pursue an academic career myself, I consider him in many ways my mentor, particularly since Somalia has continued to be a very central part of my life, after my first couple of years in the country when I had a direct working relationship with him. I know many others will miss him, too. One is my old-time friend Mohamud Siad Togane, a poet who has spent most of his adult life in Montreal where I met him in my student days. In fact, he was the first Somali I ever met. I take the liberty of concluding by quoting from his poetic tribute to the father of Somali Studies, written shortly after Professor Lewis' passing:

> *Much have I traveled in the clannish crazed mazes of sawmouthed Somalis*
> *And many crackpot clanships and catastrophes seen*
> *Round many cultish camps and vicious Somali circles have I been*
> *Which bards in fealty to kat and cadence hold*
> *Oft of one wide expanse have I been told*
> *That deep-disguised Darod Sayyid ruled as his demesne*
> *Yet did I never ever breathe in the quintessence of Somaliness*
> *Till I heard lionhearted Lewis speak out loud & bold in Blood & Bone*
> *May the lion-hearted man rest in peace.*

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**I.M. Lewis** published thirty monographs, a dozen edited books, some ninety articles in refereed journals and a further seventy to eighty chapters in edited books and in encyclopaedias, so the above list is in no way representative of his enormous production. For a complete list of his publications, see M.V. Hoehne and V. Luling 2010 (reference above), pp. 403–421.



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