

# Interview with Professor Ioan Lewis at his Home in London

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Charles Gesheker

**cg:** I wanted to start with basic things. I have your *vita* here with date of birth. Could you tell me where you were born?

**il:** I was born in Scotland, in Glasgow. But I'm actually half Welsh or English — and English because my father, who was a journalist, was Welsh, and we lived in London. In fact, curiously, the last place we lived in London when I was a child was near here and my father died when I was seven and we moved up to my mother's parents, to my maternal grandparents. I was brought up there from the age of seven until I left the University of Glasgow and came to study at Oxford.

**cg:** Is there anything in particular that you reflect on that began to move you toward social anthropology as a field when you were in secondary school and in the university?

**il:** I didn't actually know either the word "anthropology" or "social anthropology" while I was at school, nor really while I was at Glasgow University until just about the point when I was graduating in chemistry. Strangely enough, I did some research on the synthesis of anti-malarials, which was published with my supervisor in the *Journal of the Chemical Society*. I saw some advertisements, which the Nuffield Foundation put up, advertising conversion studentships for people trained in the natural sciences to move into the human sciences, and I applied. I thought they looked interesting. I was lucky because there was a very informative academic at the University of Glasgow whom I then met. He was actually a social anthropologist specializing on Burma who had been introduced to Glasgow University as an exotic import to set up a program of Third World social anthropological studies under a new government scheme. This was to develop in various university

centers the teaching of social sciences. My contact was a former British administrator in Burma who had fought in the Burmese campaign as a rather daring colonel. He happened to meet the vice chancellor of Glasgow University while travelling and they got on very well. He was subsequently appointed to this new post at Glasgow University to set up social anthropology. Unfortunately, he was a great proselytizer and that's, of course, a good thing but his proselytization was rather undiplomatic. He told various pillars of the Glasgow University establishment that the trouble with them was that they didn't know anthropology and if they knew a little it would greatly improve their understanding of the classics and Old Testament, which is no doubt true but didn't make him a very welcome character. He was gradually frozen out of the University of Glasgow and moved into Scottish television, first of all being the quizmaster of a popular quiz show on in the early days of Scottish television. He ended up as the managing director of Scottish television, a role which he regarded as a form of applied anthropology.

I met this chap who kindly explained to me a bit about social anthropology, and suggested some reading matter and where I might apply to study for it through this Nuffield Scholarship scheme. He suggested Oxford, where he had studied briefly with Evans-Pritchard, and I applied for a Nuffield Studentship to study social anthropology there. I was very lucky because I was selected for an interview for this studentship, which was held in London. When I got to the interview panel, I discovered that the chairman of the panel was the vice chancellor of Glasgow University, my university, who was a well-known, academic politician called Hector Hetherington. His son was the editor of the Guardian newspaper and he was at this time a major figure in academic politics in Britain. Rather typically, he said to me, "I think we may have traveled down on the same train, but I, of course, traveled first class." He was just slightly off-putting.

There was a panel of people, none of whom I had the remotest idea who they were. They started asking me questions about "what have you read?" I had been advised that I should read a bit of Evans-Pritchard's works, which I had looked at as I traveled on buses and tramcars in Glasgow. They started asking me things like, "What do you think about Evans-Pritchard's book on Azande witchcraft?" which I hadn't read thoroughly at all. I was just vaguely aware of it. I was guarded and rather unenthusiastic, so they asked me what I thought, and I said things like "a bit boring." Then they all fell about

laughing and I couldn't understand this. But unknown to me Evans-Pritchard himself was one of the interviewers, and his enemies on the panel relished my ignorant remarks. I had no idea who they were but it worked out well. Some weeks later I got a letter from Evans-Pritchard saying, "Although you were so rude about me, I'm pleased to tell you..." And he was a kind, nice, and stimulating and marvelous person to be a pupil of. He regarded it as a kind of joke.

**cg:** It was when you were at Oxford that you began your interest in Somalia and Somali Studies?

**il:** Yes, that's right and that was an accident. I had completed a conversion course in anthropology, which was a postgraduate diploma, having done a degree in Chemistry. I got this postgraduate diploma and was looking for a subject for writing what was then called "B. Lit.," more or less the equivalent of a master's degree in those days. The chap who had been one of my supervisors when I was doing this diploma was a quite famous man who wrote about taboo, Franz Steiner, who was a Czech refugee in Oxford. He had been given some money from the International African Institute to compile a bibliography on the Somalis and to write an ethnographic survey of the Somalis and related peoples in the Horn of Africa. He hadn't actually written this. He'd only compiled the bibliography, which was a good one, and he felt guilty about all this. He suggested that I should perhaps take this project on for my B. Lit. So I wrote a thesis, a library scissors and paste job, on the Somalis, the Afar, and the Saho, in order to produce this ethnographic survey for Daryll Forde's International African Institute, *Survey of Africa*.

This book came out, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, in 1955. By then, unfortunately, Franz Steiner had died of a heart attack so I was left with his marvelous bibliography and the stuff that I had done through him more or less by accident. In the course of all that, I met various Somalis, notably Musa Galaal. I also met an intriguing character, and he must have been the first Somali I met, called Abdi "Telephone" who was in charge of various security telephones in government offices in central London. I don't know if he was actually in charge but he worked with the scrambling machines for various telephones in government offices in central London. He was an intriguing, flamboyant character. One thing led to another. Then I met Goosh Andrzejewski and I became a pupil of his as far as linguistic matters were concerned, and a lot of other things in Somali Studies.

**cg:** It seems like by dint of circumstance or coincidence, you had contact with three rather enthusiastic individuals: Abdi “Telephone,” Goosh Andrzejewski, and Musa Galaal. It was probably hard for you to resist their kind of enthusiasm.

**il:** Oh, yes, of course. I wasn’t really, as a young enthusiastic student of social anthropology, in the market for resisting. I was in the market looking for fields that were interesting, exciting, and relatively unexplored from the point of view of the subject of social anthropology, which was the case with the Somali scene. I had met an archaeologist who had done some work there during the Second World War. I came across other people who had been there in the British military administration, as well as some people who had served after the War in the Somaliland Scouts, as it was then called. I met a little caucus of people, a little network would perhaps be a more accurate description, who were either Somalis or concerned with Somali Studies.

**cg:** And then you went up to Oxford for your Ph.D. work?

**il:** I was already in Oxford and I had this research grant from Nuffield and they extended it to cover the equivalent of what is today a master’s degree. Then I applied for research funds to do research in Somalia amongst the Somali. I was very lucky. I secured a grant under the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund scheme for research in developing British protectorates, colonies, and dependent states. They had never allocated one of these before to Somaliland, so I got one. Before that, I had been working for a year with the great doyen of African administration or colonial rule in Africa, Lord Hailey, author of the famous *African Survey*. I had been his research assistant, which was an incredible experience because he was a demanding person who seemed to think he was still Acting Viceroy of India, and I was his sole research assistant.

**cg:** It was right at that time, in 1954, that Somaliland and Somali topics become the subject of a kind of political explosion. Can you comment on that? Because you came into Somaliland just after the transfer of the Haud back to Ethiopia.

**il:** That’s quite right. In fact, I met at that time a number of the members of Somali delegations who came to London to protest about the transfer to Ethiopia of the Haud. I got to know some of them in a rather superficial way and was attracted by their cause and eagerly wished to support them in my small way.

**cg:** Was this part of what you referred to as your “youthful idealism” at the time? Of course later, you became involved in giving speeches or talks and exhortations to some Somali groups.

**il:** Yes, of a rather limited kind.

**cg:** Was this something that fired you further? There was a sudden contemporary political dimension to the study of the Somalis.

**il:** Yes, indeed. I was very taken. I was attracted and impressed by the Somali nationalist cause, the desire of the Somalis to get independence and to get themselves together as a state, including the various territories that had been divided by colonial rule, by the African partition.

**cg:** Was this unusual for someone to be in Britain, studying social anthropology and then to adopt or embrace Somali nationalism which had a strong component of de-colonization and anti-colonialism as well?

**il:** No. I would have thought that most of the students that I knew and can think of, my contemporaries who were doing anthropology, were probably leftist in political orientation and certainly very anti-colonial. They were trained to be suspicious of colonialism and that was the overall ethos under which we were schooled. I think also it was a question of, as you said a moment ago, youthful romanticism, adventure, and political activism, if you like.

**cg:** I was intrigued by some of the things you have written about your relationship with the Protectorate Administration. You mentioned that the Protectorate Administration attracted a high proportion of people of “exceptional character, including many unusual individuals with eccentricities.” Can you elaborate on that and explain where you fitted into this scheme of things? You have devoted nearly fifty years to the serious study of Somalia. How did you find these Protectorate people and where did you see yourself in terms of their characteristics?

**il:** Well, first of all, officially, I was incorporated into the Somaliland Protectorate Administration as the lowest possible ranking expatriate. I came right at the end of the list of the expatriate officials. This seemed to me initially a big problem because I had been trained to avoid colonial officials in carrying out field research in Africa. I had the idea they would try to subvert my activities or co-opt me in some way that would not be productive for my intellectual, political independence. I had been led to assume that was the situation. So when I found that I had been incorporated into this Protectorate Administration I was

troubled and worried. I wondered whether it would work out for me at all. The Protectorate Administration wouldn't allow any loose, unaffiliated social science researchers to mill around in Somaliland in the middle 1950s, unless they were part of the Administration and theoretically subject to its control, on the grounds that the Somalis were, in their eyes, lively and vivacious characters with a tradition of active resistance to whatever seemed to smack of anything that they didn't like, particularly if it seemed to have some tinge of Christianity.

In other words, there was the memory of Sayyid Muhammad Abdullah Hasan and his nationalist movement, rebellion, or whatever you like to call it. I think, myself, that it was a proto-nationalist movement. That memory was still quite vivid and strong in a curious sort of way. None of the people I met ever had any direct contact with that period. But this sort of ghost was a kind of a memory that haunted the political imagination to a large degree of the Colonial Office in its dealings with Somalis. And that affected the people who were sent to work in the Somaliland Protectorate. At least it affected them officially. What they did when they got there was another matter. But officially, it did. So, there was an incredible anxiety not to disturb the Somalis. I would say the guiding motto of the Protectorate Administration was to do nothing that would upset Somali opinion. The aim was to do what the Somalis wanted within the limited budgets available to the Protectorate Administration, which generated a very pro-Somali administration. In fact, people who didn't get on with Somalis were quickly weeded out and discouraged from continuing in the colonial service in Somaliland. They were advised to transfer to other territories.

**cg:** Can you comment on some of the characteristics, or the kinds of things that would predispose a non-Somali to "get on" with the Somalis? What would predispose someone to realize after a month that this wasn't a place he wanted to be?

**il:** Obviously, they had to be adventurous characters who were attracted by the notion of a semi-desert country, and nomadic movements of nomadic peoples, the sort of haughty dignity of people like the Somalis, and who were not simply interested in pushing their own authority over some local subservient population. They had to be people who were interested in arguing democratically in an egalitarian fashion with a tough-minded local population. If they weren't like that, they couldn't possibly succeed with Somalis. They had to like that kind of environment or be interested in its wildlife, as a number of

them were. Generally, they should regard the Somalis as a development challenge to which they could perhaps contribute something for their betterment. The people that I met in the Administration were concerned to make some contribution to the welfare of the Somalis. Obviously, there were some who were not, but the major ethos was to contribute to the development of the Somali people in one way or another.

Following this train of thought, it wasn't surprising that they should have been so supportive of Somali efforts to get the Haud grazing land returned to Somaliland and taken away from Ethiopia and that they should be so pro-Somali and anti-Ethiopia. There was an interesting polarization between the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office. The Foreign Office, with its larger concerns, was pro-Ethiopia in this context, but the Colonial Office was pro-Somali. This was very evident "on the ground" in the sorts of activities of Somaliland administrative officials. For instance, when the British ambassador from Addis Ababa came on a visit to Somaliland and met the governor of Somaliland and the senior officials, their relations were not fantastically cordial. There was quite an impact of the Somali point of view versus the Ethiopian point of view. It was interesting to me, the extent to which these English, mainly British (some of them were Polish) colonial civil servants had been, as it were, brainwashed by the Somalis. I mean there was a notable extent to which Somali ideas and values were transferred to these expatriate officials. Those who got on better with the Somalis were those who made this transference best.

**cg:** Can you give me some examples of that?

**il:** Oh, sure. This illustrates the kind of character of this administration also. When I was there, from 1955 to 1957, [it] was a crucial time because it was the beginning of the transfer of power, the promotion of independence and the preparation for independence, just the beginning of it, and a great step up in education and development activity. The hierarchy of this tiny little "Cinderella of the Empire," as it was well described, consisted of the Governor at the top, then the Chief Secretary, and, under him, the next senior official was the Commissioner of Somali Affairs.

The Governor at the time [Theodore Ousley Pike] was a genial Irishman, interested in rugby and livestock; he used to travel round on trek in the interior with trucks filled with growing vegetables and two cows. Somalis knew him as "two cows."

The chap who was Commissioner of Somali Affairs, substantively, was an interesting man indeed. He was a member of the British Communist Party and was exceedingly democratic in his activities and general ethos. At various points, he was Acting Chief Secretary, i.e., he would act for his senior when his senior was on leave. Sometimes, when the Governor wasn't there and the Chief Secretary wasn't there, this particular individual was actually *de facto* in administrative charge of the whole Protectorate. He was a man of considerable experience in district level Somaliland administration. For instance, he had demonstrated that bait that was distributed to kill locusts was harmless to livestock by eating it! He did things like that.

At one point, there was an unfortunate golfing accident where a golf ball struck a Somali. It was from a club wielded by somebody who was an administrative official. The Somali naturally sued for damages. There was a certain slowness in the pursuit of this legal matter and this "Communist" Commissioner of Somali Affairs, who was personally quite wealthy, let it be known that, unless the matter was proceeded with quickly, he would fly out at his own expense a famous left wing barrister from England (Dingle Foot). That, of course, accelerated the legal process and the matter was brought to a speedy conclusion. There were people like that in this administration. He was the only one whom I happen to know was a member of the Communist Party, but there were all sorts of people you would not expect. I suppose the most knowledgeable ones had had some experience with Somalis during the Second World War; for example, John Drysdale, who'd been with a Somali battalion in the Burma campaign, and various other people who had military experience with Somali units.

**cg:** Mr. Richard Darlington?

**il:** Yes, that's right. And also a remarkable character who used to run the Anglo-Somali Society, Colonel Eric Wilson, whose life was saved by Somalis in the war and who was forever grateful for that.

**cg:** That was apparently what convinced Richard Darlington to devote the rest of his life to education at Amoud because he was left for dead, stabbed in the face by a bayonet in one of the Burmese campaigns, and his life was saved by the Somalis.

**il:** Very interesting. Well, he wasn't the only one. People had very strong bonds—at least some of these officials had strong bonds of personal loyalty as well as friendship with Somalis.

**cg:** I was recalling as you were saying this, there were some British officials — I don't know if you overlapped with them or not — who spent long periods of time in the Protectorate. I was thinking of John Hunt in geology, Edward Peck who did veterinary science, and Dudley Walsh.

**il:** They'd all gone. Walsh was much earlier but John Hunt was just retiring when I went there. He had recently written that encyclopedic but scatterbrained survey of the Somaliland Protectorate. But he left a legacy in his little department of people going on long treks with camels and expecting all his expatriate officials to also go trekking with camels to get to know the country at first hand. I knew a number of young officials and their wives who did this for weeks on end. A very interesting experience for them, as you can imagine.

**cg:** In the back of the first edition, and in all subsequent editions of *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, was a carefully delineated map that folded out and opened up. I think the map was from about 1945 or 1946. As part of your research, did you have access to maps and other kinds of materials as part of the official Protectorate?

**il:** Oh, yes. I was given access to anything that I knew I wanted. I may have wanted things that I didn't know existed. I was treated very well by these officials. Despite my fears and worries about becoming a kind of an adopted client of the Somaliland expatriate administration, I was a fantastic beneficiary. What was really wonderful was that nobody tried to interfere with me at all. Let me be more accurate. When, on a rare occasion, people tried to interfere with me, the Governor, who knew something about social anthropology, told them to stop. I was absolutely given *carte blanche*. In retrospect, I could say that I got away with murder (metaphorically, not literally, of course) in the way I exploited this situation to the benefit of my own activities and research.

**cg:** From my recollection of your writings, it was during this time that you had interesting encounters with two rather different Somalis who seemed to have an impact on you. You talk about meetings with Mohammad Abshire and also the chance encounter with Aw Jama Omar Ise. Could you elaborate on your early contacts with them; after Musa Galaal and Goosh and Abdi "Telephone"? Having said this, could you identify the most memorable encounter or event that occurred to you during that period of field research and which Somali, for example, had the greatest impact on you at this time?

**il:** If I could just respond to your question about Aw Jama Omar Ise. I met him first when he was a so-called “bush wadaad” near Las Anod, at a place called Wudwud, when I was trying to collect material about the clan history of the Dulbahante and material about Sayyid Muhammad Abdullah Hasan. I met this man who covered his mouth with his cloth whenever he spoke to me because I was obviously a disgusting infidel, a potentially polluting infidel. He made cryptic responses to things that I asked him, and generally exuded a rather sinister, forbidding impression. I became slightly frightened of him and thought perhaps he would try to murder me as I lay in a camp bed in a tent. He didn’t, as far as I know, and we had numerous conversations, but I never got very far with him.

However, he turned up in my life much later, in the south, on a subsequent visit to Mogadishu and the Benadir Coast. I met him in Mogadishu. By that time, he had turned himself into a self-taught oral historian, aided by the other man you mentioned, Mohammad Abshire, who lent him or gave him a tape recorder because Abshire was very interested in Somali nationalism, being a nationalist and interested in the history of Sayyid Muhammad Abdullah Hasan, and he was quite keen to encourage people to study that topic.

So, there was Aw Jama Omar Ise now doing research with a tape recorder. He told me that he had watched me and made inquiries about me in the bush, after we had first met. And that in the end he had come to the conclusion that I was a fairly harmless character and wasn’t some kind of spy, as he had first assumed, and that I wasn’t doing anything which disadvantaged his kinsmen. He came to the conclusion that, since my spoken Somali was rough and rudimentary compared with his natural, flowing Somali and his huge grasp of vocabulary, he could do much better than I could the kind of research I was trying to do, which, to a certain extent, was absolutely true. He’d become an oral historian (also, of course, literate in Arabic), really self-taught apart from possibly the demonstration effect of an infidel at work in the interior whose techniques he could obviously improve on (some of those techniques, not all of them, perhaps). He developed from that into a considerable figure, although he lacks a formal Western education. He’s produced wonderful work. I think he’s one of the very best historians of the Dervish period.

**cg:** Was there any incident that you recall during that period of twenty months of research in the Protectorate that was singular or that

convinced you that you were doing the right thing in your field research? Or whether you were doing the wrong thing?

**il:** At that time in a young researcher's life, one tends to be rather self-confident if he is doing research in such circumstances, and one is not likely to feel that he is doing the wrong thing. I was attracted by Somali nationalism and I made a visit of about a month to Somalia in the south in 1956. That was at the point when internal self-government was being handed over by the Italians to the Somalis. I toured all the main provinces of southern Somalia and most of the main districts. I was interested in finding out what was going on there. I met the local district commissioners, provincial commissioners, and police chiefs.

It was at this point that I met Mohammad Abshire, who was then the regional police commander of Isha Baidoa. That's where we met and we got along personally very well. I met a number of other characters around that time, many people who subsequently became prominent politicians and government ministers. I knew the Mariano family from the north and I knew various politicians in the north while I was up there. I attended a lot of meetings of the Somali Youth League (and also the Hizbia Dighil-Mirifle Somali) often in the bush, which was interesting. When I went back to Somaliland, I arrogantly made some small interventions at local meetings of the National United Front, the NUF. I said in my rather inadequate Somali that the south seemed very advanced compared to the north and it was time the northerners got themselves going politically—a very simplistic comment.

**cg:** In what sense was the south more advanced politically?

**il:** It was impressive to go around the whole country and find that there was a Somali district or provincial commissioner everywhere; that the police chiefs were Somalis. There was a big educational program and the politicians were well organized in the Somali Youth League. They were obviously heading for imminent independence in 1960.

**cg:** At that time, six years on in terms of the UN's sponsorship, there was a timetable already for the former Italian Somalia's independence, which made all the difference in the world, I assume because of the money. But when did you first hear talk of a potential union between the Protectorate and the south? Was that on the agenda in 1956?

**il:** Oh, yes, because that was part of the original SYL manifesto, the union of the Somali territories.

**cg:** What was the feeling about that in the north when you came back and talked about a rather different timetable. You said the “new day is dawning in the south but it’s still nighttime in the north.” How did the Somalis in the Protectorate respond to that?

**il:** I don’t know how the Somalis as a whole responded because I didn’t hear it. I can only say that probably some of the politicians that I knew were annoyed with me for being so cheeky as to make comments on the speed of their nationalist movement. But obviously, the main nationalists in the north, as far as I know anyhow, were committed to union with Somalia and to union with, as they then saw it, the Somalis in French Somaliland, the Ethiopian Ogaden, and northern Kenya. Obviously, there were nuances to the extent of their willingness, their eagerness, to pursue those goals, but I don’t recall meeting anyone who was hostile to that project. The strategic aspects and the tactics of it were a different matter. But the general project, as far as I know, was widely endorsed by the leading politicians. Some of them probably had reservations and wanted to guard their own power bases. But that wasn’t something I really knew about at that time.

**cg:** You mentioned several times that it was fairly easy (a) to do social anthropological field research in the mid-1950s, and (b) to identify with Somali interests and the Protectorate Administration government itself identified with Somali interests.

**il:** That, of course, made it easy.

**cg:** This question of “Somali interests” interests me as they were defined in the 1950s. I want to ask you about “Somali interests” in 1999, but what would you say were Somali interests in the 1950s? Besides independence, what were the top concerns of the Administration or of yourself when it came to defining Somali interests in the 1950s?

**il:** I think that the Protectorate Administration would have wished to prepare Somalis to be in a position to govern themselves in a modern sense and, therefore, wanted to provide a sufficient degree of in-depth education to try and develop the limited, as they saw it, economic resources of the north, primarily the exports of livestock, and to get Somalis trained in civil administration. All those rather obvious things at a rather simple level, I think. What happened was the pace of all this suddenly accelerated in a way that the Protectorate people who were administering the territory in 1955 – 1957 never envisioned. They thought there would be perhaps a period of ten years or that Somalia

would be independent for quite a bit before Somaliland possibly joined with Somalia. And in this interval, Somaliland would get its act together in terms of the development of education, training, of possible economic resources to a higher pitch, which would enable the Somalilanders to be potentially an autonomous enterprise if they wished to be so. I don't know whether anyone seriously considered how autonomous Somaliland would be economically. But if they did, they probably saw this in terms of livestock exports. There was a big input of livestock health assistance through the veterinary department.

**cg:** You once claimed that the Somalis were "pre-capitalist capitalists." Can you elaborate?

**il:** They obviously are in the literal sense in relation to their livestock and their interest in maximizing livestock holdings but also being prepared to sell their livestock. Only recently I became aware, when speaking to some Afars in the hinterland of Djibouti, of the extent in which the Afar have a much more mystical or symbolic attitude toward camel's milk—for instance, that it shouldn't be sold, that you should give it to people, if you dispose of it at all. I never came across anything like that in my dealings with Somalis. I can't remember meeting any Somalis who were not thoroughly commercialized, if we could use that expression, and who were unaware of and were not part of an economic order in which things were bought and sold. I don't think there are any, in that sense. I don't think there are any sort of pre-capitalist Somalis, or if there are, I haven't met them.

**cg:** This reminds me of something Gordon Waterfield commented on in his book *Morning Will Come* (1944) and I wondered how much you saw of this in the mid-1950s? That was the extent to which rural Somalis in the bush not only had a connection to urban Somaliland, but were conscious of the outside world. Can you comment on what you saw in the 1950s?

**il:** I always found Somalis extremely cosmopolitan and this partly explains their interest in radio broadcasting and news broadcasting. That interest is reinforced by the availability of news programs in Somali around the world. I always think of an experience that I had much later on the Jubba River in southern Somalia when I was doing some work with an NGO development agency, when we were looking at refugee settlements in Somalia, and were trying to cross the river. We were waiting for the little ferryboat to come and there was a quite impressive Somali family with livestock standing, waiting for the

ferry, as well. The man was diverting himself, making good use of the time by frolicking in the river and he kept shouting to me “Why don’t you come and join me?” I said, “Well, that’s very kind of you but, unfortunately, I’m afraid of crocodiles. You obviously aren’t, but I am.” I got talking to his wife, who had a huge transistor radio, a “block blaster,” whatever they call it, a huge one on the back of a burden camel. I asked her what were her favorite programs. She said she liked Radio Ethiopia for music, the BBC for truth, and Radio Mogadishu for news. She was really very funny. This was a good illustration of the extent to which Somalis were tuned into the wider world. The examples she chose, apart from the BBC, were mainly local stations, but I’ve met many Somalis who listened to Peking or Soviet transmitters all over the place or any available broadcast in Somali and, to some extent, in Arabic. Obviously, these are people whose experience of the world is not limited to their locale. In that sense, they are locally-bound in their lifestyle but their thoughts and awareness of the world are a great deal wider, it has always seemed to me.

**cg:** You finished your field research in 1957, then moved to take a university position in Rhodesia.

**il:** That’s right. In what is now Harare. I was one of the founding members of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, as it was then called—now the University of Harare.

**cg:** This was where you essentially worked on *A Pastoralist Democracy*?

**il:** Yes, I wrote it there.

**cg:** How did you spend your time and what were your main responsibilities when you were in Rhodesia?

**il:** Teaching African Studies and not teaching Somali Studies at all. I had no scope for teaching Somali Studies other than aspects of Somali life that were germane to some social anthropological work I was doing or writing. I had no opportunity to teach Somali Studies as such. We didn’t have a course in Somali Studies or even in studies of the Horn of Africa.

**cg:** Since you had just come from a period of intense research in Somaliland, were you able to draw from your own personal experiences into your course work?

**il:** Oh, yes, of course. Yes, but not specifically within a “Somali Studies” framework. In fact, I’ve never, except for a very brief period at

University College, taught any course which was specifically on the Horn of Africa or on Somali social anthropology.

**cg:** Really?

**il:** No, never.

**cg:** Is that unusual?

**il:** It was just the way that we've carved up the pedagogics of teaching social anthropology in Britain. As I said, I did teach a course on the Horn of Africa when I was at University College, but that's a very exotic subject, or at least it was then in the late 1950s. There weren't many takers and it was a minor course in my teaching duties.

**cg:** I'm in a different situation than you are, but whenever I talk about Somali Studies or Somalis or Somali history or culture and any of the incredibly interesting facets to it, my experience with students is they become drawn to Somalia, they want to learn much more about it because, I think you and I would agree, they are an intrinsically attractive and extremely important people to try to make sense of.

**il:** Well, they've got an interesting set of social arrangements, which are certainly rather unusual and make good material for thinking about society and how social organization works. Somali concepts and elements of Somali social organization and politics have crept into all my teaching in social anthropology without exception.

I remember a rather witty professor of sociology at the London School of Economics saying that there was no aspect of general, comparative sociology which could not be illustrated with reference to the Somalis as far as my lectures were concerned. There was a lot of truth in that. For example, I wrote a standard textbook of social anthropology called *Social Anthropology In Perspective* (Penguin, 1976), a rather successful textbook that's filled with examples relating to Somali society and Somali culture, put in a comparative framework. I've never taught a solely Somali course, or hardly ever, and rarely one on the Horn of Africa. I've used the material in a broader comparative framework in general social anthropology, political anthropology, or comparative religion teaching. A lot of the ideas which I have tried to develop in the study of religion have come from my experience in Somalia, as I directly acknowledge. The same is true in my theoretical contributions to kinship and comparative politics. On all these areas my theories were triggered by Somali examples. Thus, my contributions in books like *Ecstatic Religion* (first published by Penguin, 1971)

can ultimately be traced back to Somali *saar*. This is why I have repeatedly referred to anthropologists as “plagiarists.” This basis of so many “theories” in social anthropology is a major theme in my most recent book, *Arguments with Ethnography* (Athlone Press, 1999).

**cg:** Did students ever come to you wanting to develop a graduate program, a graduate level interest in Somali Studies.

**il:** No, unfortunately, they didn’t. That would have happened if I’d been teaching at the School of Oriental and African Studies, which would have been a natural development, but it wouldn’t develop in the way we organized teaching at the London School of Economics, which was not by area but by topic.

**cg:** What’s the key difference between the two universities in that sense?

**il:** The School of Oriental and African Studies is an area specialist school, as the name suggests, and so African Studies breaks down into parts of Africa, and there are, consequently, courses on these various components. Goosh Andrzejewski was very lucky because he could spend his life teaching the subject he was most interested in, namely, the Somali language. But I couldn’t get away with that in social anthropology, except by subterfuge, by using endless Somali examples in a more general context.

**cg:** You are arguably the most prolific scholar on Somali Studies in the English language. No one has written more than you have on a wider range of topics.

**il:** Perhaps not, but that’s the way things have worked out.

**cg:** I remember you once said something to the effect that “when it comes to explaining who I am or what I have become, the Somalis have a lot to answer for.”

**il:** Oh, yes, I did say something like that.

**cg:** Could you elaborate on that? What did you mean by that?

**il:** I was thinking originally in terms of becoming slightly more politically cynical or slightly more cynical about political activity. I had learned a little bit about politicking from the Somalis and, as a naive apolitical person, had picked up a certain amount of techniques in politicking through my experience with Somali politicians, rural and urban. I think that’s what I meant, and my experience of trying to have professionally successful relations with the general Somali public. You

asked me earlier about incidents that had occurred and one incident that I didn't mention was near Hargeisa. I went on a number of occasions to the tomb of Aw Barkhadle Yusuf. I went to try and get material about the history of Aw Barkhadle Yusuf and some idea about the importance of pilgrimage to him. And as you know, if you go there three times, it's equivalent to going to Mecca once, as it is also with Sheikh Huseyn in southern Ethiopia. I went there three times and, on one of the occasions, it must have actually been during the Saint's memorial festival. There was a big crowd and, at one point, a man who was obviously in a somewhat ecstatic state appropriately enough, came brandishing a sword and appeared to be about to belabor me with this big, archaic sword. Fortunately for me, however, a number of other people intervened and some local Somali elders got hold of this man and restrained him. That was probably the most physically menacing experience I had.

Obviously, I've had other experiences — with being stoned by children and things like that, which was a common experience of foreigners who toured around the bush where they were considered to be pagans and “gaal” and attacked by Somali youths. That often happened to those who traveled in the bush inside Somaliland or Somalia; although this did not happen in southern Somalia where people are quiet, passive, and much less aggressive. I remember being struck how the Rahanweyn and Digil, with whom I spent several months on three occasions, were quiet and peaceful and, in comparison with their nomadic countrymen, remarkably pleasant and friendly on first contact. They used, sometimes, the attractive honorific expression “Aw,” not only for true Islamic scholars, but also for people towards whom they wished to show some degree of respect. I remember being addressed as “Aw Maaliin” by a number of these southern Somalis in villages where I was camping. It was touching to be fitted into the category of teacher, student teacher, “Aw Maaliin.” I never received such a greeting in the north that I can recall. Actually, some Westernized Somalis have been kind enough to refer to me as “Maaliin,” but that's a subsequent sophistication. This was a more traditional response.

**cg:** I remember that the Somalis gave a nickname, not necessarily a flattering nickname, to Reese whom they used to call “Kabba Kabba.” Are you aware that they ever gave you a nickname or told you of a nickname for yourself?

**il:** The nickname that I have heard in the north (there are probably lots that I haven't heard because they're abusive) was "*Ferhaan*," which means cheerful or something like that.

**cg:** This takes me back to a point that I raised a little while ago. What do you think are the characteristics of a non-Somali that are perhaps important for getting on with Somalis? I often thought that one characteristic which a non-Somali should not have would be to be a taciturn, withdrawn person, given the verbal nature of Somali culture and its poetry and, also, an interest in humor which you and I share. You once told me you were interested in puns and the role of puns. Is that another little "open sesame" that you may have had but weren't aware of at the time, but that the Somalis noticed that made your own entry into the culture easier because you saw the lighter side of things? You were able to joke, or able to make puns?

**il:** I don't think that northern Somalis are strongly interested in pun type humor — or at least not in my experience. I was disappointed because, obviously, with a restricted Somali vocabulary as I had, there are still various possibilities for making puns, which, in my simple way, I hoped might be of interest or of amusement. But I honestly couldn't say that I could chronicle much success in this activity because I simply didn't find it. The kind of characters that get on with Somalis... I agree that a withdrawn character with a taciturn nature is not likely to get on very well with Somalis.

On the other hand, I think Somalis like people who are quite good at listening. I mean, they want to talk all the time and often they have a lot to say that is extremely interesting from different perspectives. But that requires somebody who is willing to listen, to pay attention, and to be patient, because it's nothing, as we both know, for Somalis to spend hours discoursing in a circular way on some theme, possibly avoiding the kernel that they're really interested in, until the punch line comes. If you're temperamentally or professionally prepared to do this, then I think you are at some advantage in dealing with people who greatly value oral performance. I think humor is very important. I agree with you. But, unfortunately, I didn't find that the pun lines were, in my own limited experience, very successful. I think I discussed this with Goosh, and I don't think he had found any experience of a comparable interest in punning himself. But who knows? I'm really mainly talking about northern Somalis.

**cg:** Something you mentioned a little while ago struck me. You were saying how peaceful and quiet you found things in southern Somalia

...

**il:** I found people between the rivers.

**cg:** ...people in southern Somalia, as opposed to this reputation of turbulence and truculence in the north. Your recollections of the 1950s and even the early 1960s seem to be rather exuberant and joyful in an optimistic, anticipatory time.

**il:** Oh, yes, definitely.

**cg:** Then things seemed to change, obviously. Your recollections of Somalia over the last twenty-five years became of a very different sort. But ironically, it seems that it's in the north, relatively speaking, where there's less turbulence, less truculence (in terms of the 1980s and 1990s); while it was the south that became the most disturbed, most chaotic, the most violent.

**il:** Yes. But it was natural that it would become the most chaotic and the most violent society. It wasn't the Rahanwein and Digil who were the most violent and turbulent. It was the people of nomadic origin, the Hawiya people and some of the Darood groups of the south, who did all these things which are seen to the outside world through the activities of so-called warlords. It's natural that it all happened in Mogadishu, or in the area around Mogadishu, the Benadir coast, because that formerly was the seat of government, power, and access to resources, as you have pointed out, amongst others, to external monetary gain and aid of all sorts. The main channel for financial advantage and therefore power, weapons, and everything, is the south, especially Mogadishu; whereas the north was mainly a place for exporting livestock, getting money and wealth through livestock. It wasn't a center of political power, except in a limited way in the brief period before the union of Somaliland and Somalia, and in the short history of the Somaliland Republic, which is in many ways exemplary. I think it's a lesson, a monument really, to what Somalis can achieve if they put their minds to it constructively. The same is true, to a certain extent, in the case of "Puntland." Both these examples are remarkable and deserve all our support.

**cg:** As someone who spent his early research time in the British colonial part of Somalia, do you think the differential colonial legacy is still salient, now forty years after independence?

**il:** Yes. I think Somalis will refer to these colonial differences, and attach a lot of importance to them — perhaps the more austere character of British rule compared to the less austere and more flamboyant character of Italian colonial rule, which in many respects was more superficial than the British one, which was more profound although limited in its scope. But I don't know, really. There are elements in the two colonial legacies which can be selectively pointed to and developed and which are of some influence in this sort of background thinking of Westernized Somalis. One has to remember that some major figures in the south had crucial political or administrative experience during the British military administration of Somalia, so there is a certain element of British influence in both areas. Different periods, but in both.

You mentioned Mohammad Abshire who was a police officer in the British police force of Somalia (the Somalia gendarmerie) after the British military takeover of Somalia, after the defeat of the Italians. So was, of course, Mohamed Siyaad. He was actually the same rank, same period, same experience. But they were two incredibly different personalities. I remember Mohammad Abshire telling me that at one point they were asked to write essays on their picture of the ideal police officer and they produced, as you can imagine, totally different pictures.

**cg:** Can you elaborate on that?

**il:** Well, Barre's one was, of course, highly despotic and stressed the issue of maintaining order by force. Abshire, of course, was saying (well, I don't know if it's true or not), but Abshire's own account was more egalitarian, and with the emphasis on reaching consensus and so on with the public. Those are interesting facets of these two very different personalities, I think.

**cg:** You wrote this interesting article with a title that was sort of tongue in cheek, "Kim Il Sung in Somalia," in which you shrewdly and critically delineated this configuration, this M.O.D. Having written that as a strong criticism of Siyaad's pattern of government, and given what you say in *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society* (Red Sea Press, 1994), had you been there and had he listened to your advice, what would you have counseled Siyaad as an alternative approach to this kind of trinity?

**il:** I think it would just have been, as his own clansmen advised, to have spread the range of involvement in his administration in a less monopolistic fashion. Something simple like that. But he was clearly a

despotic leader, dividing and ruling from a small clique power base, employing money and arms, coercion, outside that power base to maintain his rule. Obviously, he could have maintained and been a more popular figure if the power base had been widened to effectively include all the major groups in a way that was acceptable and which was not coupled with an authoritarian judicial system which was corrupt. If he had been a more democratic ruler in the style of, let's say, the ruler of Tanzania, things could have been different. He came into power, like so many military leaders, with a lot of public support initially, because people were fed up with the inefficiency, as they saw it, and the corruption in the previous government. So, he had a very good launching pad but, unfortunately, he didn't develop that in a serious fashion.

**cg:** You don't think that given the strength of the "call of kinship," although he was despotic and authoritarian, wasn't he perhaps responding to that "call" himself in that sense?

**il:** Well, he was, given his despotic blueprint. He was responding to it in his way; in such a way as much as possible to conserve his power or even build it up further with sops to various other groups while relying primarily upon, and giving major benefits to, his own close kin and their clansmen. Any one-man ruler would have been likely to behave in that way in Somalia, because if somebody wasn't behaving in that way, he wouldn't have been a one-man ruler. They would have wanted to have some serious power sharing.

**cg:** When you did the collaborative work with James Mayall on the *Menu of Options*, both of you and the team explored decentralized forms of governance and suggested that decentralized structures are required for progress toward reconstruction. What would you say to the possibility that maybe the actual endpoint in Somali politics may—in light of political realities, history, and what has happened over the last forty years—not be the reconstruction of what had been there before, but that the endpoint itself is a decentralized rearrangement?

**il:** Oh, yes, indeed, I think that's the most likely scenario. I think probably we were using the phrase *reconstruction* in a general sense to mean restoration of some kind of civil state. We were not meaning reconstruction in the sense of the re-formation of the similar power structure to what existed before. I don't think that was at all our thinking. We were trying to make the obvious point, which any political scientist knows well, that a structure that starts off as a series of little

autonomous or semi-autonomous units can easily come together as some kind of federation if it wants to. And, after all, the Somali state, when it existed as a Somali state, was itself a federation of two units. There isn't any reason why there shouldn't be some federal organization whether it's actually a state or whether it's something looser, an economic union and, perhaps, an airlines union, naval, fishing union—there are all kinds—like the European Union. There are all kinds of possible bases for collaboration between political units, short of forming a single centralized polity, which I don't see at all likely to happen in Somalia.

I don't see how it can happen. It could only happen, I think, if some external force was interested in re-colonizing the country, which, of course, it isn't. That is an almost impossible scenario. The other possibility would be if one of the major warlords were to get such an advantage in resources, particularly arms, that he could realistically conquer the whole country and build up a new dynasty. That is the only other internal possibility. But I think that is extremely unlikely now, fortunately.

**cg:** We're having this discussion in December 1999, and I've just returned from South Africa. In 1899, at the southern end of the continent, a critical war had broken out, the South African War. Today, it's being celebrated, acknowledged, and rewritten at length in South Africa. Similarly major events were taking place in Somaliland in 1899. But this year there is no acknowledgment, no commemoration, no discussion, no retrospective, no conference, nothing on the development of the Dervish period or on Sayyid Mohamed Abdullah Hasan. Obviously, with national institutions gone, there isn't anyone to take the lead in that. How ironic as the century ends.

**il:** Except that, as you know very well, Sayyid Mohamed Abdullah Hasan is a very controversial figure and it's interesting that, at least as far as I know, in Somalia hardly anybody regards him as a saint, whereas his various adversaries, his various Somali religious adversaries, a number of them, regard him as a saint. Of course, he attacked the cult of saints so, in a way, it's consistent with his religious position that he is not regarded as a saint, generally speaking. On the other hand, it says something about the status of his movement in the national context of Somalia, doesn't it?

**cg:** What would be your assessment of him, now that you know how the 20th century turned out for Somalis? Where does Sayyid Mohamed fit in, as far as you are concerned? Still a proto-nationalist?

**il:** He certainly provided a symbolic figure to which Somalis could refer as someone who heroically defied the might of the colonial powers in the whole area and produced his wonderful poetry which moved people so strongly. I don't think he had any other concept of the destiny of his country except that of Somali independence—a sort of an isolationist nationalism or proto-nationalism, as you said a minute ago. You will remember that one of the main British accounts of the Dervish war ended with thoughts about how sad it was that it had all finished without generating a surge of sympathy for the local inhabitants. The uprising of the Mahdi in the Sudan compared with the uprising of Mohamed Abdullah Hasan in Somaliland—look at what happened after both events. In the British-administered Sudan, a university was started, named after General Gordon (Gordon College), which became the University of Khartoum. Nothing comparable happened in the Somaliland Protectorate when the Sayyid eventually died and his forces evaporated. Various colonial people have reminisced about that, making that comparison and regretting there wasn't an equivalent input of funds for positive educational purposes to Somaliland. Of course, the circumstances were very different in the cases of the Sudan and Somaliland. Sudan was an important place at that time in colonial ideas, whereas Somaliland was not.

**cg:** She was a "Cinderella" and when did the clock strike midnight for Cinderella, to continue the analogy? Was it in October, 1969? Or January, 1991? Or was it in the spring of 1978?

**il:** I think, unfortunately, it happened in 1969 because as soon as somebody with the character of Siyaad came to power, it was almost inevitable that everything that has happened, would happen. Don't you think? It was not inevitable that he came to power, but given that he did come to power, and that he had the human characteristics and nature that he had, then more or less everything else followed, with certain other factors playing into it. Obviously, Ethiopia, Kenya, foreign policy, the Cold War, so on—but essentially, it was really a one man show, with a man with a very autocratic model of government.

**cg:** I once wrote about it in a positive way, that I'm now slightly embarrassed about, in terms of various projects like sand dune stabilization, literacy, drought relief, and so forth, in the 1970s, as a histo-

rian who could not anticipate 1980 or 1991. I think everything changed, fell apart, and the die was cast after the Ogaden War. That turned out to be a serious miscalculation.

**il:** I agree with you about the Ogaden. But I don't think that was the point at which dictatorial rule began. Dictatorial rule began in 1969, not openly but slowly, and it built up momentum. But it was there then. I don't think it was something which was invoked in the wake of the Ogaden War to hold the place together.

**cg:** When did you begin to sense this yourself?

**il:** I think it was quite obvious from the start in 1969. Certainly from the early 1970s. It was clear that there was already a tight political regime, and the Somalis weren't supposed to meet foreigners. It was tight police control, military police control, from shortly after Siyaad took power. I think most people imagine that there was a period of gradual decline or that the whole thing declined much later. I don't think that is true. I think the seeds of decline were there then. Or at least the seeds of despotic rule were there, and the despotism which produced all this chaos with other external factors playing into it. Unfortunately, many of the warlords unconsciously, sometimes openly, refer to Siyaad as a kind of role model. Many poor Somalis now feel that they were better off with Siyaad alone there—because it was relatively orderly at various points in his regime, especially in the beginning.

**cg:** What would be your advice to an aspiring social anthropologist today who wanted to do research on the Somalis?

**il:** The most accessible Somali communities are obviously the refugee communities dotted around the world. Anyone who did any serious, empirically-based, in-depth social anthropological research on them would be contributing to our understanding of the adaptability of Somali institutions, as well as of the Somali people, and also to the extent of radical social change taking place amongst them. This would be very useful and important documentation. That would be the most accessible, but also, as far as I know, the least studied in any depth. I can only think of one or two studies, at least in the United Kingdom, that I'm familiar with. Both are short term, and only one is really much good, in my opinion. The other possibility is to do research on Somali communities in areas of relative tranquility in the Somali region, in Somaliland for instance, possibly in the northeast, in the Puntland State, and perhaps in some Somali regions of Ethiopia.

There has been a lot of incidental research by staff of non-governmental organizations and some research on peacemaking and reconciliation. I think the most impressive I've seen is that by Dr. Ahmed Yusuf Farah, the man who wrote the very good study of the production of myrrh and frankincense and its gum export. He has done good work also for the European community and the UN, on local level reconciliation activities where he's made a serious empirical analysis, not just the usual fly-by-night NGO account, which tends to be extremely superficial. He knows what he's talking about, as a trained Somali social anthropologist with in-depth field experience.

**cg:** He studied under you?

**il:** Yes, I have to say I'm a partisan, naturally, because he got his Ph.D. in our department.

**cg:** I notice your collection of essays, *Arguments with Ethnography* (1999). What would be your advice to a newcomer to social anthropology in light of the kind of analysis of ethnography and anthropology that's contained in your book?

**il:** One of the most disappointing things to me in the work by 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 the Somali language, but above all, the absence of serious in-depth empirical research. As far as anthropological research is concerned, there is Ahmed Yusuf Farah, whose work is entirely exemplary. He's not somebody who has any ambition to be a well-known theoretical anthropologist. He's essentially a modest man with a field-working ambition to do serious professional research, which he does very well in my opinion.

Then we have two other Somalis who have done impressive work. One of them is A.G. Mirreh whose work is, unfortunately, in German, who wrote an excellent German doctoral thesis in the 1970s, based on research in what is now Somaliland. That work updated some of what I've done and examined how changes have occurred relating to further economic commercialization. It's a very good study, although it's difficult for me because I don't read German with any fluency at all. I wish it was translated into English because, as far as I know, it is the only serious, professionally qualified, empirical social anthropological research on the Somali hinterland which I've seen by a Somali in that period. More recently, Marcel Jama, a Somali who is trained in France,

has done an extremely interesting piece of research for his French Ph.D. on the border region close to Borama. This is a micropolitical history of two or three different groups and how they've responded to incorporation into states, Ethiopia and Somalia, at different periods, and what they've done since then. That's a very interesting piece of work. Apart from that, I'm not aware of any qualified Somali social anthropologists who have worked in the area. Perhaps there are some I don't know about.

**cg:** Let me ask you a loaded question and put the nitro on the table and you can add the glycerin if you wish. When I spoke to you about coming to do this interview, you were candid in saying that you were not impressed by a considerable amount of Somali Studies scholarship that has come from American universities, in a number of different fields, over the last twenty years. Could you elaborate on that and tell me what you think is going on, or what's at the root of the lower quality of the research? Exactly what is it that you find, as the doyen of Somali Studies, so unacceptable?

**il:** What I have personally in mind is the disappointing quality of many publications on Somali themes these days. Language studies are different but it's obviously easier to study the Somali language. You don't have to go to Somalia. You can study linguistics and the structure of Somali. But for the rest, in the social sciences, with the exception of serious historical research by, for instance, Said Samatar, Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, Lee Cassanelli, and yourself, there is very little published political history or straightforward history based on direct observation. We have a lot of superficial little studies by people going and asking this or that, or making a little study in a market, but we do not have extended in-depth studies of how people behave over a period of time — the student who's writing the account spending a long time in the field and interacting with his informants through the Somali language. An unfortunate idea has also grown up, that if somebody is a Somali who happens to be Western-educated, that in itself makes them an authority on Somali culture and society. Well, it does with reference to language automatically, obviously, if they speak Somali fluently (and they don't always, of course). But it certainly does not automatically make them an accredited authority on other aspects of social science subjects. For instance, I'm a British person. I live in London, but I am certainly not a reliable informant on the British constitution, nor do I know anything particularly about politics, except lit-

tle bits that I've dabbled in. There are vast areas of British history of which I'm totally ignorant and I would be a poor informant on most social science subjects if I was encountered by some exotic, foreign anthropologist who wished to use me as an informant. So the notion that simply because you happen to be a native of a particular culture doesn't transform you into a qualified social scientist of that culture and I think this has to be understood more deeply than currently is in a lot of the writings on Somalia. Just the citation of some Somali doesn't convey authority unless the Somali concerned is a professional producer of authoritative accounts because of their research base. The problem is the lack of a serious research base outside linguistics, where I am, as I said before, not competent to judge.

Then, of course, there are non-Somali social anthropologists who have produced works of importance and distinction, based on detailed first-hand research with an excellent command of spoken Somali: Virginia Luling on the Geledi sultanate (now at last in press); and Bernhard Helander whose fieldwork in the Bay region is ethnographically as well as theoretically exciting and whose major book we hope to see published soon. There is also the interesting work of Jan Hakonsen and of several younger Italian anthropologists from Sienna, although their field research was short-term and did not include command of spoken Somali. I cannot think of any comparably significant work by American anthropologists, few of whom in any case carried out extended fieldwork in Somalia. Sadly, such U.S. anthropological interest as there is in Somalia has coincided with the most negative influences in anthropology, generally post-modernism and what Tom Wolfe calls "rococo Marxism." Unfortunately, these baleful tendencies have, of course, strongly affected all the social sciences, including history, and have affected many of those who work in Somali Studies.

It is disappointing that the two latest works which are presented by people who call themselves social anthropologists relating to Somalia are, in my opinion, rubbish and should never have been published.

**cg:** Can you say which ones they are?

**il:** Yes, of course. Catherine Besteman is one of these people. Very ignorant, extremely pretentious, and totally lacking in serious scholarship. It is not enough to produce a bibliography with a lot of names in it. It is necessary to read the material and digest it, as you know very well yourself. It's necessary to be able to control Italian literature as well as literature in English or French. Very little in German, but some.

There are few people who have taken this step. Unfortunately, there are a number of books which illustrate the need to publish (the publish or be damned syndrome) in order to advance one's career professionally. But I personally have strong reactions to the way in which Somali culture and Somali social institutions can be exploited. As an anthropologist, I regard social anthropology as an intrinsically exploitive activity.

**cg:** What do you mean by that?

**il:** One is using another people's culture for the purpose of one's own research interest, one's own intellectual research interest, for the purpose of one's career, for the purpose of one's whole livelihood. In my case, I live off the insights and information that I've collected from Somalis in Somalia. I'm very conscious of that.

**cg:** Whom did you consider your primary audience? Was it non-Somali English speakers? Or was it English-speaking Somalis?

**il:** No, it was non-Somali English speakers at first, obviously. But I always hoped it would reach an English-speaking Somali audience as it gradually has done; some of it anyway, which is a measure of pleasure. I still regard the anthropological endeavor as intrinsically exploitive. If you haven't got some exotic community to study, you can't be an anthropologist. If you want to study your own community, you have to exoticize it in some sense. With historians, it doesn't really matter because with your subject matter, they're dead, the people you study. Or a lot of them, by definition. You're studying the past. And that's also exploitive but you know, it doesn't matter.

**cg:** The subjectivity and the essential nature of history come alive when we study others. Some African historians say that we realize ourselves most fully when we engage with others who are unlike ourselves. Let's assume that is true for the sake of our exchange. What have you learned from Somalis that has enabled you to learn more about yourself?

**il:** You touched on that when you asked me about the question of learning about political activity or learning or sensitizing oneself toward a political dimension of people's interactions. We dealt with that earlier when I think you raised that as a question. You quoted something I had said about losing my political innocence or something like that.

**cg:** About Somalis being responsible for who you are.

**il:** I mean one becomes more aware of one's own ethnocentricities by studying other people's ethnocentricities. In a sense, I think that might be one of the basic justifications for teaching social anthropology as a subject at the university level: to make people more aware of their ethnocentric assumptions and the extent to which they have ethnocentric assumptions by confronting other people's ethnocentric assumptions, thereby coming to realize that the world is a multicultural place where there are a wide variety of traditions and religions and that if you want to understand the interactions of the bearers of these different cultures, you have to know a bit about their backgrounds. It's an obviously simplistic point, but I think that might be one of the main justifications for teaching social anthropology as a university subject. I quote one of the oil sheikhs saying something along those lines when his daughter studied social anthropology. I rather agree with that.

When I argue that anthropology is exploitive, this is not a position that is well received by my colleagues who think that they are not exploitive people and who regard themselves as being always on the side of the angels, by definition, whoever the angels may be, despite the fact that cosmologies change and angels change. I feel that if one recognizes that one is, in a way, indebted to a foreign culture, as I feel I am for my livelihood, then the least I can do is to try to present that culture accurately and to approach it with appropriate scholarly respect. The kind of standards that apply if you were doing French Studies, Italian Studies or German Studies, should apply when you are doing Third World Studies.

Unfortunately, a lot of people make their careers out of slipshod, superficial work in the Third World, which just becomes a plank in their Ph.D. construction and their career development. I'm not saying that wasn't the case with me, but at least I'm aware of that and I have tried to honor and respect the culture and social institutions of the people I'm interested in. It is necessary to treat them with appropriate seriousness and not to imagine that by spending a few months amongst them without speaking their language and without seriously understanding them, or the literature that relates to them, I could write something significant about them. That's really my position.

**cg:** This is odd. It sounds like I am hearing Ioan Lewis criticize Ioan Lewis, and Gesheker comes to defend Ioan Lewis. Are you saying that the way social anthropology was taught, the skills that were developed, and the career that you exemplify is not the way that social

anthropology is now encouraged in the United States, in the sense that you concentrated for over forty years on a particular area of the world, drawing generalizations and other interests from it? Are you suggesting that maybe Somalia is just a kind of ticket on the way to someplace else?

**il:** It is for a great many people who produce accounts of it. That would be fine if it was a ticket based on serious, original, in-depth research. This is really a plea for serious, empirically-grounded field research in which people spend several years, or over a year and a half, in a community where they learn about how they really live through learning the language, learning the culture, and the political culture as well as culture in a more esthetic sense. And who read the appropriate literature in depth. But those who simply light on Somali culture like a mosquito and try and suck its blood for a bit, and then push off somewhere else, those people, unless they happen to be brilliant (which most of them aren't), have, I think, nothing to contribute to scholarship.

**cg:** It sounds like you have a gloomy and despondent assessment of the current state of Somali Studies scholarship, with a few exceptions?

**il:** Well, I do, and it's not limited to Somali Studies. It's reinforced by the so-called post-modernist tendency, which I think is complete nonsense, because it encourages superficiality, ignorance, and the notion that anything goes. I am not interested in the ethnocentric thoughts of some half-baked young person who's making a career in a university. I'm interested in the thoughts and ideas which a particular foreign community that I might be studying has. I am not interested in the opinions of some ignorant person from the First World who is simply engaging in superficial ethnocentric ego trips.

**cg:** There was a book that I've read reviews of, that seems impressive, and I hope you're not going to deflate my balloon on this. It was by Sharon Hutchinson, called *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping With Money, War and the State*.

**il:** I haven't read that one.

**cg:** It won the Talbot Prize from the Royal Anthropological Institute.

**il:** Yes, I know. I haven't actually read that book.

**cg:** It kind of situates Evans-Pritchard's work.

**il:** I've read some of her articles. In fact, I've been involved in a debate with her on her interpretations of Nuer marriage. I think she's

probably very good. There are a number of impressive younger Africanist anthropologists but, unfortunately, the general ethos is very negative and ethnocentric, from my point of view. It is interesting how the themes of slavery and race haunt the minds of Americans, which one understands. The extent to which this is exported, ethnocentrically, around the globe is not surprising, but is not conducive to serious scholarship, which would look at the local conditions and try and appraise them with an open objective eye, without the ethnocentric assumptions of current American society and politics. But as soon as people look for race and slavery everywhere, it's just pointless.

**cg:** What is Ioan Lewis's favorite book?

**il:** In what subject?

**cg:** In the world.

**il:** That's a difficult question to answer because I read a lot of novels, which I like very much. Obviously, I like classical novels like Conrad. But I think I would require notice of that question, to tell you the truth. I mean there are so many novelists that I like. My favorite novels tend to be those with a cross-cultural flavor, e.g., the works of V.S. Naipaul, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Kazuo Ishiguro, Vikam Seth, and others. I also enjoy Hilary Mantel and Alison Lurie. There are a number of Canadian novelists I like very much.

**cg:** Do you like Margaret Lawrence?

**il:** Yes. She would not be at the top of my list but certainly I do like her. She's one of the more interesting connections with the Somali scene, isn't she? I used to know quite well Barbara Pym, who edited my *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, and published it.

**cg:** Any comments on Nuruddin Farah as a novelist?

**il:** I'm afraid I find him a baffling novelist and quite disappointing because I have a rather old-fashioned notion of what a novel is. There should be a clear story line in it and I find his recent writing indecipherable. I don't feel myself at all moved or interested by it, or interested in it.

**cg:** A number of us have admitted to one another, quite independently, that we've never finished his novels.

**il:** I finished one or two of his earlier books; but only the early ones. I know a bit about the way he works because he spent a long time in London. I've seen him sitting, writing with a big dictionary beside

him, also with a glossary of words. He would think of a straightforward way of saying something and then would say "How could I make that more elaborate?" Like Henry James, really, almost. He is sort of interested in complexifying his language. Whereas, as a speaker I think he's very gifted. I've listened to excellent speeches he's given, that I've enjoyed. I've listened to quite interesting radio broadcasts he's made, but I find his writing very disappointing.

**cg:** What are your three most significant accomplishments in the field of Somali Studies? What is your favorite book, or favorite project, that you've completed on Somalia? Again, without any forewarning.

**il:** I suppose I quite like having just recently re-read this book, *A Pastoral Democracy*. Yes, I quite like that, although I think I could rewrite it now in a linguistically slightly different way, perhaps. I liked the poetry book which Goosh and I wrote. I suppose that I quite like this little book, *Saints and Somalis* (Red Sea Press, 1998), which I've recently published, although it is really a collection of essays, which were written some time ago.

**cg:** I agree with you. I like the book you wrote with Goosh. Some of us often wondered why the two of you, because you were always twinned with each other and mistaken sometimes as you admit, hadn't done more together or written more things together.

**il:** I suppose it was just a question really of time and opportunity, and he was a linguist and I was an anthropologist, pursuing different careers.

**cg:** I was going to ask you what is the greatest love of your life? What's your greatest regret? What's your greatest fear? What is your worst habit? Who was your most influential teacher? What are your current projects? Somali society is in the thick of a violent fragmentation and physical and mental exhaustion. Do you see any practical solutions to the predicament?

**il:** No. I only see solutions that are built on local experience, which are happening slowly at a local level. I don't see any way in which the situation can be facilitated or remedied globally by some vast external action except, as we said before, by re-colonization, which isn't going to happen. Obviously, I'm very sad that Somalia has disintegrated, like anyone would naturally be very sad. I can see how awful it is for Somalis to find themselves exiles and asylum seekers in foreign countries. I'm going to court tomorrow about an asylum seeker and their

situation is, in many respects, tragic. Although their sort of basic life circumstances may be not so bad, having lost a country, their ethnic identity tied up with their country, which they once belonged to, it's a tragic thing and I feel very sorry for these people who have lost everything, not through their own fault after all.

It is difficult to know to what extent we could attribute the chaos in Somalia to many of the individuals who turn up as asylum seekers, unless they happen to be ex-warlords, as some of them are in Britain. Or members of military gangs or parts of the power structure of Siyaad, as some of them tend to be. But apart from that, I don't see how one can implicate other ordinary people in the factors that caused Somalia to collapse.

**cg:** If I asked you what you think were the key factors aside from the despotism and the tyranny of Siyaad, would there be institutional factors that you would include as well?

**il:** Oh, yes. I think it's extremely difficult to create a centralized state out of Somali tradition, which is uncentralized. Not just decentralized, but uncentralized, and which isn't only a matter of the center versus locality; it's a matter of shifting identities the whole time. I mean the Somali system is so flexible, it's very difficult to pursue a coherent political path. And very difficult to have stable political consensus, except at a local level of grouping. That, it seems to me, is the basic kind of problem in the background of Somali political experience. If you compare it, other African countries with an experience tradition of political centralization haven't fared much better. But nevertheless, the factors which would have to be somehow overcome, controlled, or accommodated, are really formidable in Somalia by any standards.

**cg:** The paper which I presented in Perth and in Toronto, which I'm fleshing into an extended essay on the meaning of the 20th century to Somalis, tries to change some basic key dates. I treat 1896 as the start point for 20th century Somalia because of Adowa, followed by the treaty of 1897. I try to interpret the past century in terms of the dispersal of power, concentration of power, and redispersal of power, and use that as an overarching theme. The other thing is to globalize a regional history. It is impossible to understand the fate that Somalis experienced without understanding the nature of the Cold War and how it fitted into different ...

**il:** And the way in which they utilized it.

**cg:** And manipulated it.

**il:** I find it irritating the idea that the Somalis were simple victims who, through all kinds of external pressures, acted as they did, which is current in a lot of political science writing about Africa.

**cg:** Your writing clearly states from the beginning the Somali initiative in which Somalis have a tradition of trying to engage people in their own political disputes.

**il:** Exactly. I think we're both aware of and have experienced that. Obviously, the fact that you have global polarization creates an opportunity, which Somalis tried to exploit in various ways with an overall lack of success in the long term.

**cg:** Thank you, Professor Lewis. ●