

IOAN MYRDDIN LEWIS, 1930–2014

Mention the name Professor Ioan Lewis when you are in a group of Somalis, or people interested in Somalia, and one is almost bound to get a reaction. The distinguished social anthropologist, who died on 14 March 2014, is a household name in many parts of Somalia, especially the former British protectorate of Somaliland, which declared independence in 1991 but has not been recognized internationally. He is viewed by many as the founding father of Somali studies, an area of academic pursuit almost as difficult and controversial as the country itself. His work continues to inspire, and to generate controversy and debate. I have heard Somalis arguing vigorously about the theories of ‘Professor Lewis’ in the teashops of Mogadishu, Hargeisa, Nairobi and London. I have seen heated discussions on Facebook and Twitter and in internet chatrooms.

Ioan Myrddin Lewis was born in Scotland to a Welsh father and a Scottish mother. His father died when he was young, so he and his mother moved in with her parents who lived in Glasgow. His first area of academic interest had nothing to do with Somalia or the social sciences, as he started off studying chemistry at the University of Glasgow. As an undergraduate, he found out about a scheme whereby students of natural science could convert to human science. He switched both subject and university, moving to Oxford to study social anthropology. There he studied under the pioneering social anthropologist Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, whose works on the Nuer and Azande of South Sudan are ethnographic classics.

Lewis’s interest in Somalia was sparked in the 1950s while he was conducting desk research about communities in the Horn of Africa. His *Peoples of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar and Saho* was published by the International African Institute in 1955 as part of its *Ethnographic Survey of Africa*. He then received a research grant from the Colonial Office and set off with his wife, Ann, for the British Protectorate of Somaliland. They ‘went native’, living among the proud, hardy nomads of the Isaq clan as they herded their camels, sheep and goats through the dry, harsh scrubland. The Lewises had a slightly superior tent, and carried live chickens on their camels to ensure a supply of fresh eggs.

Initially, the Somalis did not welcome Lewis. At the time, they were particularly distrustful of the British, who had handed over to Ethiopia territory they saw as rightfully theirs. The nineteenth-century explorer Richard Burton described the Somalis as a ‘fierce and turbulent race of republicans’; Lewis wrote about their ‘open contempt for other people’.

One young man was especially aggressive towards Lewis, wrapping a cloth around his mouth every time he came near him in order to avoid being ‘contaminated’ by this foreigner. When Lewis met the man again many years later, he was astonished to discover that he had actually inspired him to take up social anthropology and to write a well-received book about the Somali warrior poet Sheikh Abdille Hassan, also known as ‘The Mad Mullah’, who for twenty years fought against colonial forces, including the British.

Lewis eventually won the trust of the Somalis, and developed great affection and respect for these tough people. He returned to Britain in 1960 and completed his doctorate in social anthropology at Oxford University. His fieldwork was written up into what was to become his most well-known book, *A Pastoral Democracy*. This classic work has been reprinted many times. Lewis was a prolific writer, publishing some thirty books in his lifetime.

Lewis moved to southern Africa, where he taught at the University of Rhodesia. He then returned to the United Kingdom, taking up lectureships at the University of Glasgow and University College London. In 1969, he was offered a post at the London School of Economics and Political Science, becoming a professor at the age of just thirty-nine. He remained there until he retired in 1992.

Lewis was popular with his students, who he electrified with his passion for Somalia. According to the Norwegian academic Jan Haakonsen, 'I have read so much of his words and heard so much of his achievements that, had I been a Catholic, meeting him for the first time must have been comparable to meeting the Pope.' He also inspired many Somalis, encouraging them to study their country and its people. Upon Lewis's death, Professor Said S. Samatar of Rutgers University wrote: 'A great tree has fallen. He taught us how to look at phenomena that the ordinary and uninitiated cannot perceive – the flash and vibrancy of peoples, how to hear the hidden voices of cultures and above all how to see the unseen beauty in others.' There were also tremendous academic disputes, with younger scholars, both Somali and non-Somali, challenging Lewis for focusing so closely on the clan as the central feature of Somali society.

Although he is best known for his work on Somalia, Lewis studied other areas in the Horn and East of Africa. He also had a fascination for spirit possession, and his book *Ecstatic Religion* compared possession and trance in various cults around the world. He edited a volume of papers, *Islam in Tropical Africa*, arising from the International African Seminar in Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria in 1964, following this up in 1991 with a coedited collection on *Women's Medicine: the Zar-Bori cult in Africa and beyond*, resulting from a conference in Khartoum. He supervised several doctoral theses that carefully detailed possession cults in Ethiopia and Sudan.

Lewis was an active supporter of the International African Institute, serving as Joint Honorary Director from 1981 to 1983, Honorary Director from 1983 to 1989, and Consultative Director from 1989 to 1995. He was also chair of the African Educational Trust in the 1990s. He was a passionate advocate of the cause of Somaliland, and lobbied the British government to grant the territory legal recognition.

He also served as an expert witness in Somali-related legal cases, particularly those concerned with immigration and asylum. Lawyers say that he was generous with his advice and knowledge. A senior partner at Wilson's Solicitors, Michael Hanley, says that the firm's library is stocked with books by Lewis, essential reading for lawyers working on Somali cases. He says:

The great thing about Lewis's expert evidence was that it was always to the point – powerfully corroborating some part of a disputed account, or succinctly destroying some point of objection raised in a Home Office refusal letter. Ioan was a great fighter for the Somalis and for the individual clients. He liked a battle. He got wholly deserved recognition from the Tribunal in several cases. I got the impression that he cared little for the recognition

that he received. He was always willing to help and an absolute joy and privilege to work with. Quite often in response to a lot of paper, Lewis just sent us an erudite letter of a few paragraphs, explaining exactly what needed to be put across!

Lewis's works and boundless enthusiasm for Somalia were a tremendous inspiration to me personally. One of my first reporting assignments for the BBC was to cover multiple conflicts in Somalia and Somaliland in the 1990s; Lewis's books were essential preparation. They also served as a bedrock for my own book, *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, war and hope in a shattered state*. His endorsement of my manuscript was of great importance to my publishers and to me. Lewis was something of a legend in my family: he taught two of my sisters at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and he met my mother after she worked as a nurse in Mogadishu during the bloody conflict and ensuing famine of the early 1990s. Like me, they remember him with great affection and respect.

MARY HARPER

MARY HARPER is the BBC's Africa Editor and Somalia Expert. She is the author of *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, war and hope in a shattered state* (Zed Books, 2012). Email: mary.harper@bbc.co.uk

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

An extensive bibliography of Ioan Lewis's published works (monographs, co-authored works and edited volumes, book chapters, journal articles, reviews and newspaper articles), prepared with the assistance of Markus V. Höhne of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, is available as supplementary material with the online version of this obituary. See <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S00001972015000583>>.