

# IOAN LEWIS

Ioan Myrddin Lewis

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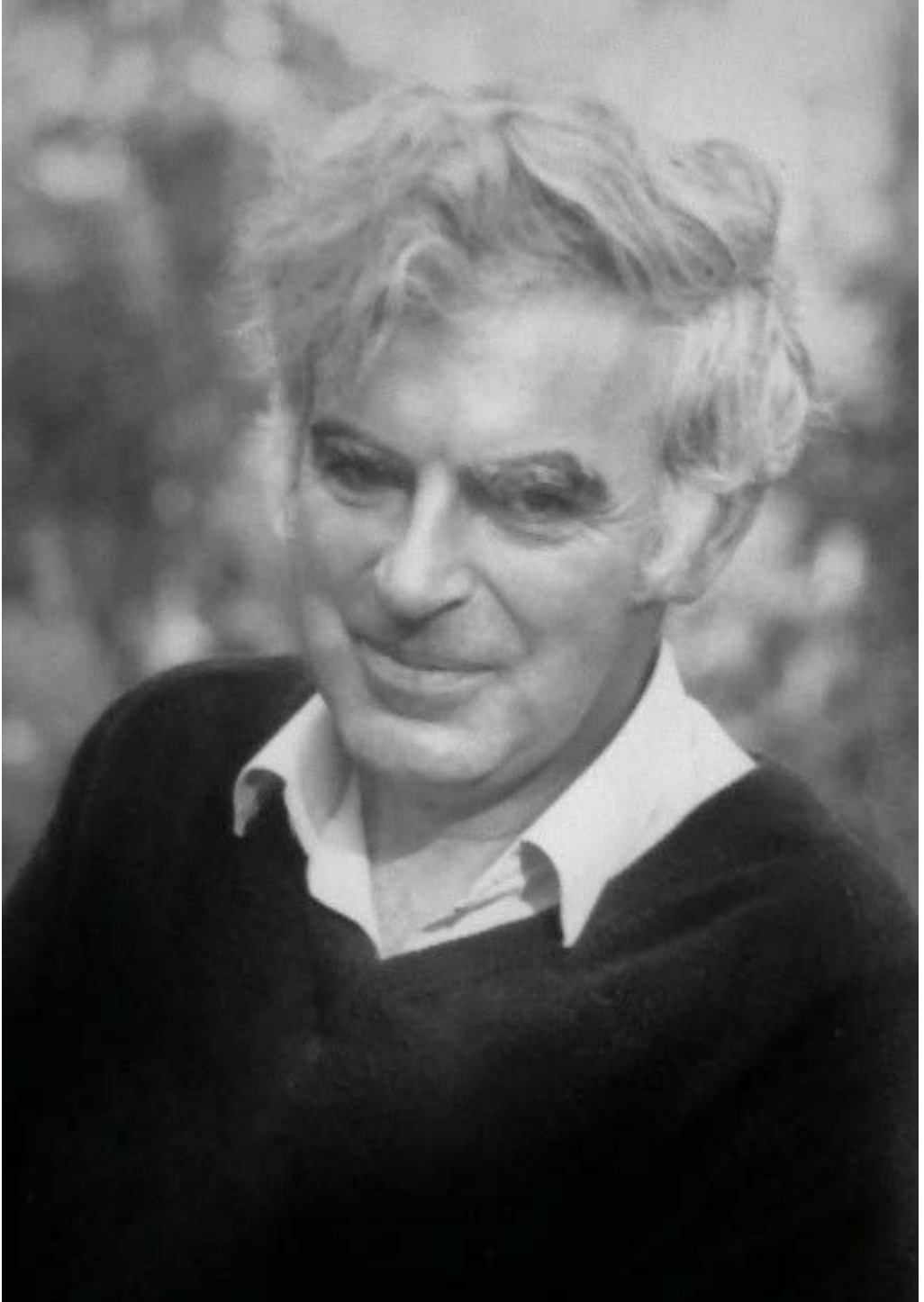
elected Fellow of the British Academy 1986

by

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Ioan M. Lewis originally studied chemistry, then moved into social anthropology at Oxford, focusing on the Horn of Africa. Intensive fieldwork followed from 1955, with his wife Ann Elizabeth Keir, in the British Somali Protectorate; and to a lifetime's interest in the wider regions of Somali speakers, their oral literature, and later their radio and other international communications. After a brief period at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, Lewis taught at Glasgow University and University College London before being appointed to the Chair of Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics in 1969. Dedicated to strengthening academic exchanges, especially across Africa, from his *A Pastoral Democracy* (1961) onwards he remained a prolific writer well beyond retirement.



IOAN LEWIS

Ioan Lewis is remembered for his life-long academic energies and intense commitments to the post-war strengthening of the more systematically observed, objectively presented and rationally argued side of social anthropology—but even more so for his life-long commitment to the Somali peoples of north-eastern Africa. Very few other anthropologists have maintained the decades of active interest, and indeed direct involvement, in the people and politics of the regions where they conducted their original fieldwork. Lewis embarked on his research in what was then the British Protectorate of Somaliland at the age of 25, became Professor of Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics (LSE) at 39, maintained links with the wider Somali-speaking regions of north-eastern Africa through decades of political upheaval and went on publishing his ideas in print and online until he was over 80. Some of his later public exchanges concerning Somali affairs, perhaps especially with the younger generation of more gender-conscious anthropologists and Somali-speaking scholars growing up world-wide, could be quite sharp. At the same time, from his early years he devoted a good deal of time to maintaining regular contact with a wide range of colleagues through attending and organising international conferences, chairing scholarly institutions and publishing widely on varied topics, occasionally in French and German, but especially Italian. The most complete bibliography of Lewis's writings I am aware of was compiled for *Milk and Peace: Drought and War*, a Festschrift devoted to Somali culture, society and politics in 2010.<sup>1</sup>

I first met Ioan Lewis in the mid-1960s, shortly after taking up my first post teaching social anthropology in the University of Khartoum, where Ian Cunnison was continuing as the first professor of our department since it was launched in 1958. Of course we deliberately used a good deal of ethnographic material relating to north-eastern Africa in our teaching, and I remember being a little nervous talking to a class about Azande witchcraft. I need not have worried; a couple of northern Sudanese students, one of them a woman, made a laughing comment on these lines: 'Oh, that makes sense. We have quite a few ideas like that in my home village!' But on another occasion, when I was using some of Ioan Lewis's descriptive accounts of the differences between northern (mainly pastoralist) and southern (mainly agricultural) Somalia, and how this ecological contrast had an impact on the forms of Islamic institutions and practice in the two regions, the students went distinctly quiet. Before I had quite finished, a young man stood up and asked how I could think that Islam would be affected by a small difference in geographical circumstances. It was clear from his tone of voice that I was in no position to teach such things (and I did not argue, but quietly put my papers together and left a little early).

<sup>1</sup>M. V. Hoehne and V. Luling (eds.), *Milk and Peace: Drought and War: Somali Culture, Society and Politics. Essays in Honour of I. M. Lewis* (London, 2010). For the Bibliography, see pp. 403–22.

Ioan Lewis came through the department at least twice during my five years there, once as our external examiner, and then as one of many global participants in a major conference held at the University in 1968 on the theme of ‘Sudan in Africa’. The majority of the contributions in the resulting volume concerned history, politics and law, but one section contained three social anthropology papers. Professor Cunnison and I each presented papers discussing our respective fieldwork in the country, and Ioan Lewis gave a paper investigating the extent of spirit possession across north-eastern Africa, a topic which he had already started exploring world-wide. His well-known *Ecstatic Religion* was soon to appear (in 1971);<sup>2</sup> while the Khartoum conference volume appeared a year later (1972).<sup>3</sup> However, Lewis’s own survey-style paper published there was itself re-published by the LSE in 1999, and again by Berg in 2004, as part of a collection representing key papers of his entitled ‘Arguments with Ethnography’. There were virtually no changes in the later editions, apart from slight variation in the title and the insertion of a few subtitles; but there was one, rather long, extra footnote. This drew attention, very reasonably, to some more recent work done on spirit possession in the Sudan, especially by Janice Boddy, of the University of British Columbia, among the women of the northern Nile valley. However, echoing some of his more general disagreements which had deepened over the years about the properly objective character of ethnography, Lewis distances himself from her ‘cognitive’ approach, suggesting that through refocusing or reframing the experience of possession, women are able to ‘confront and transcend the socio-cultural categories which constrain them’. He clearly disagrees with her claim that, thus enabled to think and feel differently, they are empowered to experience ‘more felicitous outcomes in their encounters with others’. Lewis goes on to suggest that this claim ‘is, unfortunately, undocumented and remains hypothetical. Space which might have been devoted to exploring how this bold hypothesis might be tested, is instead given up to a “post-modernist” account in which the author’s literary and other sensitivities are projected onto the Sudanese women concerned, without the adducing of any evidence that the latter share them.’ Lewis’s criticism is then extended, retrospectively, to a key work of mid-twentieth-century Oxford anthropology: ‘In this respect, Boddy’s account can be seen as an elaboration of similar tendencies to ethnographic overwriting present in a more subtle and less intrusive form in Lienhardt’s (1961) well-known study of Dinka religion.’<sup>4</sup> Of course anthropologists always have a hard

<sup>2</sup>I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (London: 1971); 2nd edn, *Ecstatic Religion: an Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (London, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>I. M. Lewis, ‘Spirit possession in North-East Africa’, in Y. F. Hasan (ed.), *Sudan in Africa: Studies Presented to the First International Conference sponsored by the Sudan Research Unit, 7-12 February 1968* (Khartoum, 1972), pp. 212–26.

<sup>4</sup>I. M. Lewis, ‘Present and past in North-East African spirit-possession’, in I. M. Lewis, *Arguments with*

time in combining what they hope will serve as a straightforward account of human behaviour on the one hand with what they often feel to be an equally important capacity on the other to sense, and engage at least partially, with the self-consciousness of others. In his personal work, Lewis maintained a distinctive perspective: his style was to take a clear, pragmatic approach to the description and comparison of the forms of social organisation. He rarely engaged with those philosophical or qualitative ambiguities of human consciousness, reason, emotion and mutual communication that have come to inspire more recent anthropology in the UK (often, admittedly, derived from the Continent).

Over subsequent decades, I met Ioan every now and then, whether at large conferences, small seminars, annual general meetings of Africanists or anthropologists and so on. His contribution to the oversight and welfare of such official bodies was very substantial, quite apart from editing books and journals such as the wide-ranging *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, then known as *Man*, for thirteen years at a time of social anthropology's expansion (1959–72). This was also a key period in the consolidation of his own career, following his lecturing positions in Glasgow, then in London at University College where he was promoted to Reader; and then as early as 1969 his appointment as Professor of Social Anthropology at the LSE. Sally Healy, a former colleague of Lewis's in the Africa Educational Trust, has pointed out that while the 1960s saw a burgeoning growth in African studies generally, Somalia received scant attention at that time, and 'Lewis emerged as the leading British scholar in a badly neglected field. He was a vigorous advocate of Somali causes and a regular guest on the BBC World Service and the BBC's Somali Service, which he campaigned successfully to save from closure. He saw his advocacy as fulfilling a debt to the Somalis, on whom he depended for his work as an anthropologist.'<sup>5</sup>

### Early years

Offspring of a Welsh family on his father's side, Ioan Myrddin Lewis was destined to spend a good part of his younger life in Scotland. His father, John Daniel Lewis, started his career as a professional journalist, soon moving to Iraq where he became editor of the *Mesopotamian Times*. It was there that he met and married Mary Stevenson Scott, whose family was based near Glasgow. The couple then made their

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*Ethnography: Comparative Approaches to History, Politics and Religion* (London, 1999), chapter 6 (reprinted Oxford, 2004), pp. 80–96; see footnote 7, p. 96, referring to J. Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison, WI, 1989) and G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: the Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, 1961).

<sup>5</sup>S. Healy, 'Lewis, Ioan Myrddin (1930–2014)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, in press.

home in London, where his experience included work on the *Sunday Times*—and also a brief period as editor of the *Daily Mirror*. It was not long before they were expecting a child. Mary moved briefly up to Scotland to be back in her parental home for the birth (which took place on 30 January 1930), returning to London with baby Ioan soon after. I was most fortunate in 2018 to have the chance of some extended conversation with Ann Lewis, Ioan's widow, and their elder daughter Joanna, in Shropshire, where part of the family then lived.<sup>6</sup> I learned that the original Lewis family still live in the Lampeter area of Wales, and still speak Welsh. Ioan's father spoke it too, and talked of teaching it to his son one day; but sadly he died when Ioan was only 7 years old. His mother then moved with the boy back to the Glasgow area, where Ioan was brought up, spent most of his school years, entered university life and confidently embarked on what was to become a remarkable academic career. In a recorded interview conducted by an organisation based in Somaliland but devoted to cultural and historical preservation across the whole of the Somali-speaking regions in 2010, Ioan was asked what had helped him become a writer. He replied 'My father was a journalist and my parents and grandparents valued literature and poetry', before outlining his scholarly training and mentioning the inspiration he received from Somalis in London 'who jointly inspired me' among others.<sup>7</sup> He was also known for observing occasionally that the Somali people were themselves responsible for making him the person he was; but while his forebears clearly had a role here too, his own career was indeed formed in due course with the help of an extremely supportive family of his own who shared much of his long-term commitment to the region and the people. It was not long after Ioan had embarked on postgraduate studies in Oxford that he met Ann Elizabeth Keir; they married, left together for the British Protectorate of Somaliland (where the first of their four children was born) and, very shortly after, to Rhodesia, where their adventures continued.

### From chemistry in Glasgow to anthropology in Oxford

Ioan came into anthropology from an unusual starting point, as he was completing his four-year BSc at Glasgow University in chemistry in 1951. His attention was

<sup>6</sup>I was able to make contact with Ann Lewis through friends who had known the family for some years, and in addition to the personal conversations we were able to have at her home on 17–18 June 2018 we remained in touch through a number of letters and emails.

<sup>7</sup>'An interview with Professor I. M. Lewis' was conducted by the Farshaxan group, established to share and disseminate historical and cultural memories of the Somali region generally. See the online article of 6 October 2010, about the interview: [http://www.somalilandhorta.com/news/2010/oct/news2010oct6\\_5Article.htm](http://www.somalilandhorta.com/news/2010/oct/news2010oct6_5Article.htm) (accessed 12 April 2019).

caught by a Nuffield Foundation scheme offering to fund students in the natural sciences who wished to cross over into the human sciences. He was given advice by a former British administrator in Burma who had studied briefly with E. E. Evans-Pritchard in Oxford (this must have been Henry Noel Stevenson, who had since moved to Glasgow University in order to set up a programme in Third World studies and social anthropology). He encouraged Lewis to apply to Oxford. According to a very engaging personal interview recorded decades later with Charles Gesheker, an American colleague, the young Lewis had started looking at some reading he suggested on trams and buses around Glasgow. When interviewed for the Nuffield scheme in London, he was asked what sort of things he had read; what did he think of Evans-Pritchard's book on Azande witchcraft? Reflecting back half a century, Lewis remembered feeling rather vague and answering something like 'a bit boring...'. The interview panel fell about laughing; unknown to the students, Evans-Pritchard himself was a member of it. But Lewis was offered a grant; and shortly afterwards received a kind letter from Evans-Pritchard saying 'Although you were so rude about me, I'm pleased to tell you...'.<sup>8</sup>

Thus it was that Ioan Lewis settled into Oxford as a graduate student member of St Catherine's Society in the autumn of 1951 (five years later it would be formally integrated as a full College of the University). He attended the Institute of Social Anthropology for most of his lectures and tutorials. Shortly after E. E. Evans-Pritchard's appointment to the Chair in 1946, the Institute had acquired its own premises (separate from the geographers) at E. B. Tylor's former home, Museum House in South Parks Road, which is where Lewis would have first studied.<sup>9</sup> However, that handsome building had to be demolished in 1952 because of the expansion of the science buildings in the area, and the Institute as a whole moved to a nearby address at 11 Keble Road (by 1965/66 being moved again to 51–53 Banbury Road). During his first academic year studying for the Diploma in Anthropology Lewis was no doubt surprised at the philosophical questions anthropologists often liked to ask about the materials of basic ethnography. One of his tutors for this year was Franz Steiner, a refugee originally from Czechoslovakia with many languages and several years of research experience in different countries. Steiner had been given some money by the International African Institute and was engaged in compiling a bibliography of sources on the Somali and related peoples, but his health was failing and he had not written up the required text for them. He suggested that Lewis could act as his assistant and use the material

<sup>8</sup>C. Gesheker, 'Interview with Professor Ioan Lewis at his home in London', *Bildhaan: an International Journal of Somali Studies*, 1 (2008), 52–4. See <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/bildhaan/vol11/iss1/7> (accessed 12 April 2019).

<sup>9</sup>A photograph of the building appears in P. Rivière (ed.), *A History of Oxford Anthropology* (New York and Oxford, 2007) p. 37.

during 1952–3 for his BLitt thesis (today the equivalent of a Master's degree) which often followed the Diploma year. Franz Steiner thus became his research supervisor, during an interesting time at which Steiner himself was evidently giving priority to his reflective analysis of belief, emotion and ritual in the book *Taboo*.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately he died from a heart attack in November 1952, but Lewis decided to continue the project; Evans-Pritchard took over his supervision, and the thesis was finished the following year. This led directly to an invitation from the International African Institute's *Ethnographic Survey of Africa* to submit the work for a volume focused on the Somali and other peoples of the Horn of Africa (which duly appeared in 1955 and has remained in demand; the latest reprint emerging as recently as 2017).<sup>11</sup>

For Lewis, as for many students at the time, life in Oxford was busy and eventful. Regular gatherings of anthropologists, mainly on Friday evenings after the weekly seminar for visiting speakers, were already well established in the Lamb and Flag pub in St Giles. Students of all kinds were in the habit of dropping in to join friends on the upper floors of the Kemp Café on Broad Street, opposite Balliol College. In my conversations with Ann Lewis, she explained that this was where she first met her future husband, introduced by a mutual friend, the economist Roland Artle, probably towards the end of 1951.

Ann herself had arrived in Oxford a little earlier, joining St Anne's College in 1949, in parallel with the appointment of her father, Sir David Lindsay Keir, as Master of Balliol College. The family had come from Belfast, where her father had been Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University. Rather in parallel with her future husband, Ann had developed interests in science at school, but like other undergraduate science students coming to Oxford at that time, including medics, had to spend her first year on various topics in the humanities. She initially embarked on a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE), but was 'truly turned off by the Economics' and after the first year transferred to Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology (PPP)—pointing out to me that the School of Psychology on Banbury Road was the first department in Oxford to have computers. Ann completed her BA in 1952; her main tutor throughout had been the relatively young Iris Murdoch, recently appointed to the College. I did ask Ann whether she had ever met the anthropologist Franz Steiner, who had led Ioan Lewis to his research interests in the Horn of Africa, and whose relationship with Iris Murdoch was already quite well known before his unfortunate death in late 1952. She had not met him, but was half aware of him, and explained how surprised she had been in St. Anne's one day to see three obviously grief-stricken men in black clothing outside Iris Murdoch's study door.

<sup>10</sup> F. B. Steiner, *Taboo, Truth and Religion* (London, 1956).

<sup>11</sup> I. M. Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar and Saho* (London, 1955).



Soon after completing his BLitt Lewis moved to London and began work as a research assistant to Lord Hailey (of the famous *African Survey*) at Chatham House. Partly because of his knowledge of the relevant literature and history, he then secured the first grant ever to be awarded under the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund for fieldwork in the British Somaliland Protectorate. In this he was supported by John Beattie, a former colonial officer who had left the service in order to take up social anthropology at Oxford, starting with the Diploma in 1949, pursuing research in East Africa and later taking up a lectureship back in the Institute.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile Ann had joined Lewis in London; their engagement was announced in September 1954, and the wedding took place soon after, on 30 December. Among the documents the family showed me was a letter written by Evans-Pritchard from All Souls, addressed 'Dear Ioan', thanking him for the invitation to the wedding but apologising for the fact that he and his wife would not be able to come, because they themselves had a new baby and the travel would not be easy.

One might think that the imminent fieldwork which the newly married couple were planning would not be particularly easy either. But they were able to gather plenty of advice in London. There even happened to be two Somalis living next door to their flat in Gloucester Road. Lewis had recently become fascinated by the Somali language, especially from meeting Bogumil Andrzejewski (often nicknamed Goosh), a Somali language specialist who by then was teaching at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS). In an interview recorded by Dr Gorge Kapchits in 2015 with his widow, Sheila Andrzejewski, Goosh had graduated from Oxford in 1947 with a degree in English language and literature and an existing knowledge of several other languages. He was eventually offered a job in British Somaliland, not to teach but to make a study of the language with a view to creating an alphabet: 'We knew nothing of the country but he accepted the job with joy!'<sup>13</sup> On his appointment in 1948, Andrzejewski joined SOAS as a postgraduate scholar in the Department of Linguistics and Phonetics, and was introduced to the Somali friends mentioned. They already had experience advising the late phonetician Lilius E. Armstrong of University College London (UCL), who had pioneered the study of tone in Somali and Kikuyu as well as her comparative work on European languages.

In the 2008 interview conducted by Charles Geshekter, Ioan Lewis mentions some of his own first encounters in London: 'I met various Somalis, notably Musa Galaal.

<sup>12</sup> John Beattie's support for the initial grant, and for subsequent contacts with the colonial authorities in the British Protectorate of Somaliland, are gratefully acknowledged in the Preface to Lewis's first major work, *A Pastoral Democracy* (Oxford, 1961) p. vii.

<sup>13</sup> G. Kapchits, 'The traveller to legendary lands', interview of 31 January 2015, with Sheila Andrzejewski, Goosh's widow. See: <https://wardheernews.com/traveller-legendary-lands-wardheernews-interview-sheila-andrzejewski/> p. 3 (accessed 12 April 2019).

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.’ And on his later meeting with Goosh Andrzejewski, with whom he became life-long friends: ‘I became a pupil of his as far as linguistic matters were concerned ... 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.’<sup>14</sup> He then applied for funding to carry out research in the British Protectorate. It was quite a fraught time, as by 1954 there were Somali delegations in London to protest against the British decision to transfer the region of the Haud, in the north-western corner of the country, which had been largely a Somali grazing area, to Ethiopia. Nevertheless, once Lewis arrived, despite his worries about being treated as ‘an adopted client’ of the British administration (and perhaps because of the excellent contacts he had been able to make in London), nobody tried to interfere with his work. The fact that he had delved already into the study of the language, and the various modes of transcription then under discussion, would no doubt have impressed both the British and Somalis he was meeting.

### To Somaliland

The Lewises left for the Somaliland Protectorate (in those days by sea through the Suez Canal) in September 1955, returning in June 1957, only three years before the country gained its independence. During their twenty months, spent mainly on fieldwork, Ioan met several men already very knowledgeable about Somali affairs as a result of their wartime experience followed by service in the colonial administration. These included John Drysdale (later Oriental Secretary at the British Embassy in Mogadishu), who was among those acknowledged in the Preface to Ioan Lewis’s first major book, *A Pastoral Democracy* of 1961. He later contributed the opening chapter to Lewis’s substantial Festschrift of 2010, providing a sense of continuity between

<sup>14</sup> Gesheker, ‘Interview with Professor Ioan Lewis at his home in London’, pp. 55–6.

many aspects of Somalia's earlier history and international connections.<sup>15</sup> The authorities would have recognised that Lewis was an unusual researcher in that he had thoroughly read the older literature relating to the region, and was ready to pursue his own enquiries and concentrate on his own agenda. They gave Lewis a good deal of freedom to do his own travelling and investigations; he was evidently trusted, and even welcomed into ex-Italian Somaliland. At the same time, we have to admit that unlike many postgraduate anthropologists he would not have had much opportunity before or during his fieldwork to ponder what fellow researchers were doing elsewhere in Africa, or the debates developing within UK anthropology at the time.

For the first months, Ioan and Ann enjoyed the opportunity for travelling together, through the wide semi-desert landscapes and mobile communities of pastoralists across the country. They had an early Bedford truck, a driver, a cook, an assistant cook, and various hangers-on, along with tents, chairs and so on. Their first base was at the religious settlement of Sheikh, not far inland from Berbera on the coast, after which they moved on to the small town of Burao a little further south. However, because they were expecting their first child they had to establish a home in Hargeisa, the capital, on higher ground to the north-west, where most of the colonial officials lived and there was a hospital. After Joanna's birth, Ann stayed on there while Ioan resumed his excursions, often travelling by camel (sometimes with live chickens attached), to visit the nomads' camps. When I asked Ann whether she herself had picked up any of the Somali language, she laughed and replied 'Oh, just kitchen Somali!'—at home she had a cook, and a cleaner. Overall, the field research was obviously more of a co-operative project than many such expeditions, or than most anthropologists would have set up for themselves.

Clearly Ioan must have been extremely efficient in the way he observed life in the field, making use of the extensive reading he had already done in conducting his enquiries. He must have started organising his material for the planned DPhil thesis well in advance of returning to London in June 1957. The long vacation was just starting in Oxford, so Lewis evidently devoted most of the summer in London to writing up his thesis. Arrangements were made in Oxford for its submission early in the autumn, and a successful oral examination took place in October 1957. The internal examiner was John Peristiany, who had received his Oxford DPhil on the Kipsigis people of Kenya in 1938, and then became a Mediterranean specialist, taking up a lectureship back at Oxford in 1950. The external examiner was Ian Cunnison, who after his own doctoral research for Oxford in Northern Rhodesia had undertaken work in the early 1950s, at Evans-Pritchard's suggestion, for the Sudan government on

<sup>15</sup>J. Drysdale, 'Reflections, 1943-1963', in Hoehne and Luling, *Milk and Peace: Drought and War*, pp. 19-33.

the Baggara nomads of its northern deserts. Cunnison then joined Manchester University in 1955.

I understood from conversation with Ann Lewis that the reason for the haste over completing the DPhil was that they had no money, so Ioan needed to get a job, and was looking to see what was available. For the Lewises, Ioan's success in gaining the DPhil no doubt helped raise their profile again in Oxford. One piece of welcome news was that the Master of Balliol offered two places at the College for Somali students, and invited Ioan to suggest whom he might consult about potential candidates.

### Teaching in Rhodesia, Glasgow and UCL

The first opening that came Ioan's way was at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, where he was offered a position as Lecturer in African Studies. The foundation stone in Salisbury had been laid by Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 1953. The British government formally adopted the institution by Royal Charter in 1955, and the following year saw the setting up of a special relationship with the University of London. Lewis became one of the founding members of the new University—now the University of Harare. There were strong links with British anthropology already, through the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) where Max Gluckman had played a key role. Others, including Ian Cunnison, and Clyde Mitchell who had served as its Director from 1952 to 1955, had helped raise the profile of the RLI and worked towards its integration into the new university. No doubt they were among those encouraging Lewis to consider applying in the first place. The Lewis family set out by ship, leaving in December 1957 via Cape Town and Durban, reaching Salisbury in time for Christmas. It was not long after they arrived that they heard news of a new department of Social Anthropology being established in the University of Khartoum, along with the appointment of someone to lead it. Ioan applied for this post, and was disappointed when someone else was chosen—Ann herself remembers that Ian Cunnison was in fact the person appointed.

Lewis was kept very busy teaching in Salisbury, though he found time to publish on general topics in the field of African Studies (the *Journal* of the RLI published an article of his in 1959 on the classification of African political systems<sup>16</sup>). But the main outcome of the couple of years he spent in Salisbury was the progress made towards his major book, *A Pastoral Democracy* (1961), which emerged from the doctoral thesis. In the Preface, Lewis generously acknowledged Mitchell's interest and

<sup>16</sup>I. M. Lewis, 'The classification of African political systems', *Journal of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute*, 25 (1959), 59–69.

comments during the time he was preparing the book. It inevitably took many leads from his extensive reading of earlier literature on the region for his BLitt thesis and the *Horn of Africa* volume based on it, including many sources in Italian. However, the main aim was to present live accounts of the workings of Somali social and political organisation among the pastoralist communities of the then British Protectorate of Somaliland. A key theme running through the chapters on ecology, the organisation of grazing movements, encampments and occasional cultivation is the pre-eminence of the principle of agnatic (or patrilineal) descent in the male line; this gives coherence to clans, in their subdivisions and their wider groupings, their contractual relationships, feuds, and ultimately feeds into national administration and party politics of what was still then a colonial state. Relations established through marriage, whether of an inter-personal kind or a matter of inter-group collaboration or rivalry, were rarely on a significant scale. His supervisor, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, initially through his own work among the Nuer of the southern Sudan, had drawn the attention of a wide range of anthropologists to the model of a 'segmentary lineage system' as a way of grasping how inter-communal politics could work outside the framework of central institutions such as traditional chiefship.<sup>17</sup> Lewis was certainly able to draw inspiration from this direction, and generously acknowledged his continuing debt to Evans-Pritchard. But being steeped already in historical studies of the Somali, with their Islamic background, market centres for trading, rivalry with neighbours such as those based in Ethiopia and encounters with international figures from Asia and Europe, he sought to convince readers of the relative solidity and permanence of their clans and clan structures. The book offered a rich picture of how a relatively self-sustaining traditional way of life could be accommodated into the purview of late colonial rule as a 'Protectorate'. Of course, British Somaliland gained its independence in June 1960, and within a week was joined by the newly independent Italian Somalia to form the Republic of Somalia. From many points of view, the publication of Lewis's book in 1961 was a happy event all round. And despite the cataclysmic political turmoil and conflicts of the coming years in the Somali region, the book remained a staple in the growing field of Somali Studies for decades, republished twice in English and translated into Italian.

In 1960 Lewis returned from Rhodesia and took up a lectureship in anthropology at Glasgow University. He then moved back to London in 1963, having secured a position at UCL. During these years he embarked on an extremely productive publishing career, exploring some new topics throughout but maintaining his interests in the Somali people and managing to visit the region quite often. His *Pastoral Democracy*

<sup>17</sup>E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: a Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford, 1940).

remained, however, the key framework of his rational, pragmatic approach to the nature of human society, which itself led to a remarkable array of extended enquiries into social and cultural practices over his lifetime.

It was not long after Lewis had returned to the UK from his time in Rhodesia that he also moved into active participation in various academic organisations and international networks. For example, he contributed a paper on comparing unilineal descent to the major decennial meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) of the Commonwealth in 1963 (The 'Anglo-American' conference), held in Cambridge, with a volume following in 1965.<sup>18</sup> By January 1964 he found himself organising quite a complicated conference for the International African Institute, 'Islam in Tropical Africa' held at Ahmadu Bello University, in northern Nigeria. The resulting publication of 1966 soon became a classic work;<sup>19</sup> and that same year Lewis chaired the annual meeting of the ASA at Edinburgh University, on the theme of history and anthropology, and introduced the resulting volume of 1968.<sup>20</sup> However, managing such conferences and the editorial responsibilities that followed did not detract from his key interests in the Somali language and oral literature, which had continue to expand from his postgraduate days in Oxford and London and which he then pursued further in the field.

### Ventures into Somali language, poetry and broadcasting

Over a century before, Richard Burton had described from the Somali coast a country teeming with 'poets', 'the fine ear of this people causing them to take the greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetical expressions, whereas a false quantity or prosaic phrase excites their violent indignation.... Every chief in the country must have a panegyric to be sung by his clan...'<sup>21</sup>

The partnership which had already developed between Andrzejewski and Lewis before he embarked on his fieldwork turned out to be long-lasting and highly productive. By the early 1960s, Lewis re-established a creative relationship with Oxford, where Evans-Pritchard and other colleagues, including the linguist Wilfred Whiteley, were preparing to embark on a series of volumes on African Oral Literature with the

<sup>18</sup> I. M. Lewis, 'Problems in the comparative study of unilineal descent', in M. Gluckman and F. Eggan (eds.), *The Relevance of Models in Social Anthropology* (London, 1965), 87–111; republished, without revision, under the slightly different title 'Deconstructing descent', in Lewis's retrospective collection—Lewis, *Arguments with Ethnography*.

<sup>19</sup> I. M. Lewis (ed.), *Islam in Tropical Africa* (London, 1966).

<sup>20</sup> I. M. Lewis (ed.), *History and Social Anthropology* (London, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> R. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa* (London, 1894), vol. 1, p. 82.

Oxford University Press. In 1964 the first volume of selected oral and written prose appeared, compiled by Whiteley; and the same year saw *Somali Poetry: an Introduction* by Andrzejewski and Lewis. These, plus a further two volumes of what was clearly an important series, were favourably reviewed by myself for *Sudan Notes and Records* in 1965; in the same year Lewis published a couple of warm reviews of introductory books on anthropology by colleagues in Oxford.<sup>22</sup>

The central importance Lewis himself gave to language and poetry as a part of his Somali research is reflected in tones rather evocative of Burton's. He reported a personal memory nearly forty years on from his early fieldwork, having met the itinerant man of religion Aw Jama Umar Ise. Of a somewhat 'fundamentalist disposition' he was extremely suspicious of Lewis and his activities among the nomads, 'seeking information about their customs and institutions and writing down their genealogies ... his initial assumption was that I was a British spy, and I found him somewhat menacing in early encounters I had with him.' Some years later they met again: 'Sheikh Jama had become a self-taught oral historian and was busy collecting the poetry of Sayyid Mohammed Abdile Hassan' (already well-known to the Brits as the 'Mad Mullah'). He had received encouragement and equipment in the form of a tape-recorder from a much-respected commander of the Somali police force (later, incidentally, to become a major figure in the political upheavals of the whole Somali region). Aw Jama explained to Lewis that he had closely observed his ethnographic activities, and decided he was harmless; but the work would be better done by a native Somali speaker familiar with the religious background—'I had thus inadvertently made a convert and we became friends and colleagues.'<sup>23</sup> Over the years, especially when he was able to revisit the networks of Somali friends he had come to know, Lewis provided encouragement to a number of Somali scholars and creative writers, including poets. And his own pioneering efforts, especially on the artistic side of the Somali language and culture, helped spread interest internationally among a new generation of scholars; extending for example into women's perspectives and memories, as beautifully represented by Lidwien Kapteijns with Maryan Omar Ali, *Women's Voices in a Man's World*, focusing on the northern Somali region, published in 1999.<sup>24</sup> Kapteijns's work pursued further analyses of social and political events, not simply

<sup>22</sup> B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis, *Somali Poetry: an Introduction* (Oxford, 1964). See review by W. James of *The Oxford Library of African Literature* (vols. 1–4), in *Sudan Notes and Records*, 46 (1965), 176–80. See also reviews by I. M. Lewis of G. Lienhardt, *Social Anthropology*, and John Beattie, *Other Cultures: Aims, Methods and Achievements in Social Anthropology* in *Man* (1965, pp. 158 and 202 respectively).

<sup>23</sup> I. M. Lewis, 'Afterword', in I. M. Lewis, *A Pastoral Democracy*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1999), pp. vi–vii.

<sup>24</sup> L. Kapteijns with M. O. Ali, *Women's Voices in a Man's World: Women and the Pastoral Tradition in Northern Somali Orature, c. 1899–1980* (Portsmouth, NH, 1999).

from women's perspectives but evaluating the re-shaping of the traditional 'clan' factor in recent Somali history.<sup>25</sup>

### To the LSE, 1969

After his very active six years at UCL, Lewis's appointment as Professor of Social Anthropology at the LSE led to a further round of travels, including regular visits to the Somali regions throughout the 1970s and 1980s. He continued to write extensively about Somali society, as well as extending his comparative ideas about social organisation, using a variety of examples from across the world. He became honorary director of the International Africa Institute from 1981 to 1988, and consultative director thereafter. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1986. This is not the place to delve into the appalling events and suffering inflicted on the Somali regions during the later decades of Lewis's career, but it is important to recognise Lewis's efforts during these years to support successive periods of peace-making, educational institutions, and international communications between the world's increasing number of dispersed Somali communities. He had long been aware of the way the Somali in the old days were very attached to the radio, even as they travelled around on their camels. He claimed to have always found Somalis extremely cosmopolitan, and this partly explained their interest in radio broadcasting, particularly as news programmes in Somali became available around the world (no doubt following the dispersal patterns of Somali-speakers as a result of political developments).

Lewis has vividly described (in the Geshekteer interview of 2008) an experience he had in the later part of his career, on the Jubba in southern Somalia when he was doing some work with an NGO development agency. They were looking at refugee settlements across the river in Somalia and waiting for the ferryboat.

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.

<sup>25</sup>L. Kapteijns, 'I. M. Lewis and Somali clanship: a critique', *Northeast African Studies*, 11 (2004–10), 1–24.



Lewis added, ‘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.’<sup>26</sup> He concluded that, obviously, these were people whose experience of the world was not limited to their locale.

I have mentioned Sally Healy’s description of Ioan Lewis’s role as a vigorous advocate of Somali causes, and a regular guest on the BBC World Service and the BBC’s Somali Service. She mentioned also his part in saving the station from closure after a period of complicated challenges from different factions in the Somali-speaking area.<sup>27</sup> Lewis himself did recount how, in the latter days of the rule of General Muhammad Siad Barre, the political opposition often relied on oral poetry, either recorded on cassette tapes or broadcast through the Somali language service of the BBC, to voice their dissent. When the British considered closing the Somali language service down for financial reasons, a delegation of prominent Somali leaders met with the British, and argued that ‘much as they appreciated the ambassador personally, it would be better to close the British embassy rather than terminate the BBC broadcast!’<sup>28</sup> Mary Harper, a BBC journalist who followed events in Somalia for two decades, has provided a very readable account of her experiences, both in the field and back in London.<sup>29</sup> She has emphasised that Somalia may be ‘one of the most conflict-ridden countries in Africa; but it was one of the first to develop a mobile phone system’—and internet use is another modern phenomenon, connecting Somali communities who keep in touch with each other not only for political gossip, which they love, but also for maintaining their complicated trading links and financial dealings across the world. It is a refreshing read, with several references to the help that Professor Lewis provided her and the BBC over contacts and so on over the years. Thanks to a short review available online we do know that he appreciated this lively and very positive account of how the people of Somalia and Somaliland are seeking the best ways of surviving the ongoing struggles in their part of the world, at least in part through their own cultural exchanges: ‘Harper claims to have not sought to produce a work of scholarship, but in fact she provides the most accessible and accurate account available of the contemporary Somali world—pirates and all ... Finally, a striking and pleasing feature of Harper’s approach throughout this book, is the sympathy and empathy she displays towards her subjects, without romanticising them.’<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Gesheker, ‘Interview with Professor Ioan Lewis at his home in London’, pp. 65–6.

<sup>27</sup> Healy, ‘Lewis, Iaan Myreiddin’.

<sup>28</sup> I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali* (Berlin and Oxford, 2002), p. 251.

<sup>29</sup> M. Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State* (London and New York, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> See I. M. Lewis’s review at <http://mary-harper.blogspot.com/2012/03/somali-expert-professor-im-lewis-writes.html> (accessed 12 April 2019).

Other perspectives on Somali history and politics were emerging from research carried out primarily in the southern, more densely populated and largely agricultural parts of the Somali-speaking area, where history had seen many population movements and interactions, and where there were continuing levels of internal conflict, international refugee flight and settlement. Lewis was not always sympathetic to this new tide of research, and in some cases became known for his critical commentaries and reviews; one exchange of 1998 which led to widespread comment began with an article by him roundly criticising some of Catherine Besteman's earlier work on political crises and human suffering in the southern Somali regions. She replied effectively to this rebuff, and the following year a major book was published, relating the modern problems of the Somali regions in part to the legacy of slavery.<sup>31</sup>

### Anthropological arguments beyond the Somali

In the earlier part of his career, Ioan Lewis rarely entered into direct arguments with colleagues over general anthropological issues in the way he, or they, interpreted ethnographic findings. But he held on to a very straightforward way of describing social activity and institutions, rather than speculating on what alternative meanings they might reveal if looked at from other angles. His initial two years at Oxford, after doing well in his chemistry degree from Glasgow, were rather fully taken up with assisting Steiner and then taking over his careful library research on the Horn of Africa. He has left us little of his response to the rising interest in French anthropology among his teachers and fellow students, despite his friend Ian Cunnison being invited by Evans-Pritchard to contribute a translation of Marcel Mauss's *Essay on the Gift*. This appeared in 1954 as the first of what became a long series of translations of creative essays from the French school of Durkheim by Oxford anthropologists, reaching well into the new age of Lévi-Strauss.<sup>32</sup>

By the time Lewis moved back to London in 1963, specifically to UCL, he would have encountered some major anthropological exchanges taking place between colleagues—some of which he took up in his Inaugural Lecture 'Anthropology's Muse' after being appointed as Professor of Anthropology at the LSE in 1969. One of these references has interested me specially, as it raises major criticisms of anthropological theorising by citing Mary Douglas's analysis of animal symbolism among the Lele

<sup>31</sup> C. Besteman, *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Violence and the Legacy of Slavery* (Philadelphia, PA, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> Ian Cunnison is well remembered for having launched the focus on translations from French anthropology with his original English version of Marcel Mauss's 1925 *Essay on the Gift* (London, 1954).

people of the Congo (first presented in an early article of 1957).<sup>33</sup> The Inaugural Lecture, delivered in 1972, opens with ‘the role and meaning of field-work in social anthropology’; ‘I hope ... to suggest a more realistic assessment than is generally acknowledged at the moment of the anthropologist’s debt to those he studies.’<sup>34</sup> He also pays tribute to the ‘tradition of brilliant empirical research’ pioneered at the LSE by Malinowski—and indeed we could all endorse that claim, even in respect of the young Evans-Pritchard, who as a new history graduate abandoned Oxford in 1924 for the sake of pursuing the study of anthropology there with experienced fieldworkers, such as Malinowski and Seligman. Lewis offers some major examples of how fieldworkers can read too much into the explanations of their informants, as Mary Douglas uses her ‘over-fertile’ imagination to explore the symbolically ‘anomalous’ character of the small scaly ant-eater, a pangolin, which plays a part in a fertility cult—leading to her own associations with ‘matter out of place’ and ‘biblical abominations’. ‘Those who disagree with her views may feel that the Lele have much to answer for!’<sup>35</sup> I believe Mary Douglas had only one chance to return to the Congo following her original research, because of political insecurity, and never had another opportunity to pursue pangolins. But her interest in questions of ritual and symbolism expanded seriously, perhaps owing much to the inspiration she gained from Franz Steiner (whose well-known work *Taboo* appeared posthumously). Her fellow-student Ioan Lewis gained a rather different inspiration from him perhaps—the opportunity to soak himself in the literature on the Somali and thus make a very effective start to his career.

The particular issue of the pangolins lasted on the margins of anthropological discussion for nearly thirty years after Lewis’s Inaugural. Close to his retirement in 1993, he decided to bring it out firmly into the open. In 1991 he published a paper in *Man* entitled ‘The spider and the pangolin’: ‘Douglas bases her famous analysis of the “anomalous” pangolin on one type [*the smaller*] and rather passes over the other [*the larger*] ... this offers a unique opportunity to test the validity of theories of symbolisation. A fully satisfactory interpretation should be able to explain the circumstances in which one of the pair is chosen at the expense of the other.’<sup>36</sup> Lewis takes into account a variety of comparative situations from various different linguistic groups across the Congo basin, several studied by Luc de Heusch, and emphasises various ecological factors, such as the prevalent conditions of forest or of open water, which might help explain why one pangolin rather than another is seen as special; or how it

<sup>33</sup>Reference is made to a specific early article by M. Douglas, ‘Animals in Lele religious symbolism’, *Africa*, 27 (1957), 46–57, but Lewis does not make any mention of Douglas’s later monograph devoted to a full-length study of the same people: M. Douglas, *The Lele of Kasai* (Oxford, 1963).

<sup>34</sup>I. M. Lewis, ‘*The Anthropologist’s Muse*’, an Inaugural Lecture (London, 1973), pp. 1–2.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>36</sup>I. M. Lewis, ‘The spider and the pangolin’, *Man*, 26 (1991), 513–25.

might be understood as bringing together animals, humans, and spirits in such a way as to justify the ritual attention brought to it. The argument is then set in motion by contrasting a parallel situation in southern Italy, especially Apulia, where two varieties of the tarantula spider are found—one smaller, with a bite sometimes lethal to men working in the fields, while the larger and more scary-looking one is able to possess women (mainly) and make them dance, in the context of a cult associated also with St Paul.<sup>37</sup> The original article was followed in 1993 by a debate in the same journal, ‘Hunting the pangolin’, consisting of a threesome: Luc de Heusch providing a Comment, Ioan Lewis offering a reply, and Mary Douglas defending herself. She rubbished Lewis’s failure to see that the distinctions of western natural science could never match what species might be highlighted as ritually special in one or another cultural context, where animal categories most often arose from or echoed local understandings of *social* relations. This was followed immediately by further exchanges on ‘Spiders, pangolins and zoo visitors’ between Richard Fardon and Lewis in the next issue, Fardon pointing out that ‘anthropology without speculation’ (whether on the part of the anthropologist or the Lele) would be ‘dull indeed’. Lewis’s rejoinders mainly seem to continue the ongoing circles of the debate, though he ends on a slightly teasing jab at one of Fardon’s comments which ‘hardly does justice to the force of Professor Douglas’s Durkheimian logic’.<sup>38</sup> The contrasting tarantula spiders appeared at least once more in Lewis’s public lectures, specifically an address in Italian which took place in Rome and Naples in late 1995 in honour of Ernesto De Martino, the ethnologist who had originally written about their unusual qualities in 1961 (his analysis, according to Lewis, enabling us ‘to see how Douglas’s argument is seriously flawed’).<sup>39</sup> In Lewis’s collection of essays, *Arguments with Ethnography* (1999), he included a fairly recent Italian tribute to Martino, in English translation.

The relationship between Lewis’s approach and that of younger anthropologists at Oxford seemed to fade over the years. Arguments were developing quite widely in the discipline, not specifically concerned with the Somalis, but with Lewis’s pragmatic realism towards human life and experience in general. Soon after his *Ecstatic Religion* was first published in 1971 a rather sour review of it appeared in the *Journal of the Oxford Anthropological Society* (1972), with occasional barbed comments redirecting the reader rather more favourably towards Lévi-Strauss or even Wittgenstein. The piece was anonymously signed by ‘Two Diploma Students’, who clearly felt they were speaking for their generation’s views at the time. When the collection of Lewis’s repub-

<sup>37</sup> E. de Martino, *La Terra del Rimorso* (Milan, 1961).

<sup>38</sup> ‘Hunting the pangolin’, Comments by L. de Heusch and M. Douglas, with reply by I. M. Lewis, *Man*, 28 (1993), 159–66. See also R. Fardon, ‘Spiders, pangolins and zoo visitors’ and reply by I. M. Lewis, *Man*, 28 (1993), 361–3.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *Arguments with Ethnography*, p. 30.

lished papers brought out by the LSE in 1999 appeared, the *Bulletin of SOAS* carried a review by David Mills, a former student of the Oxford Institute. He commented that it was a ‘brave scholar ... who stands up for the potentials of “functionalist” thinking within the discipline of anthropology’. While suggesting that there is rather more to appreciate in this collection itself, including Lewis’s own efforts to place the variations of the idea of ‘function’ that historically anthropologists have sought, Mills suggests ‘The undisguised sub-text is of course a critique of dilettante theoretical arrivistes.’ At the same time, he is fully supportive of what Lewis calls the ‘fieldwork mode of production’, one aspect of which could be referred to in a much more widely acceptable way as the ‘situated’ nature of knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

Ioan Lewis retired from regular duties at the LSE in 1993, after being diagnosed with heart failure. But over the next two decades, before his death on 14 March 2014, his activities scarcely seemed to cease. His interest in the Somali peoples continued, as he took up a range of activities connected with their future welfare in general, as well as continuing to publish new academic work (and some new presentations of older material). From 1995 to 2005 he was Chair of the Africa Educational Trust and initiated support for the restoration of education in various parts of Somalia. He received a lifetime achievement award from the Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (2003). The *Festschrift* presented to him in 2010, mentioned at the start of this memoir as containing the fullest available bibliography of his work, brings together a very impressive set of contributors belonging to different nationalities, age-groups and disciplines, while the chapters focus very much on Somali themes of the kind he had fostered through most of his life.

*Note on the author:* Wendy James is Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology, and Fellow of St Cross College, University of Oxford. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1999.

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<sup>40</sup>D. Mills, ‘Review of *Arguments with Ethnography*’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 63 (2000), 326–7.

