

CHAPTER II

KONSO LAND AND LIFE

The Konso Highlands are rugged and stony, cut by deep valleys that reach far into the heart of the country. To maintain the soil of their fields on the steep slopes the hills have been contoured with terraces from base to summit. Although stone terraces are found elsewhere in the region, perhaps nowhere else in traditional Ethiopia has the hand of man so impressed itself on the landscape as in Konso. Built of dry-stone wall, the terraces are still recognizable even after decades of neglect, where the dryness of the soil or other factors have led to their disuse, and so the whole extent of the Konso Highlands bears witness to the almost unthinkable toil of unnumbered generations.

Their lives are devoted to their fields and crops, and every visitor has remarked on their love of work. They recognize their own pre-eminence in this respect, and boast of their endurance and hardihood in the fields as other people do of warfare or riches. As the working parties move in line over the terraces, hoeing and weeding under the burning sun, they keep up their spirits by intermittently bursting into choruses of ferocious whoops and yells, that suggest the battle cries of a charging army, and are in strange contrast to the peaceful nature of their work.

From the overflowing abundance of stone, basalt in most cases, they derive the material not only for terraces to protect against soil erosion, but for walls along the main paths to keep cattle out of the fields, and to encircle their towns. Stone is as much a part of their life as soil, and is used for grinding grain, in the form of columnar basalt as phallic emblems, for sharpening knives, as anvils, for throwing at enemies and birds, for building dams in streams, for house-building in some parts, and for defence, in the form of town walls, as well, of course, as being essential for agriculture. I was told that in the past, when iron was rarer, they also made knives from obsidian blades. Their use of stone gives a clarity and definition to their towns and homesteads which is extremely striking to the observer; it conveys a sense of harmony, order, and industry, and is in these respects a true expression of their values.

There are many groves of trees in Konso, and some large juniper woods belonging to major *poqallas*. This tree flourishes in the Highlands and is of great significance in ritual and house-building. Large quantities of wood are used for the latter, and some of the timbers are massive; but juniper is only one of the trees used,

and the Konso are familiar with the properties of many woods in relation to durability, strength, and other qualities. The fields are dotted with trees, whose leaves provide food for both people and animals.

The basic crop is sorghum, which has been grown in this region of Ethiopia for many centuries. (In the first edition I referred to it as "millet", which was customary among Africanists at the time, but the correct modern usage is "sorghum".) I was given the names of 24 varieties of sorghum, but in the opinion of Messeret there are only 19, and the numerical discrepancy is due to local variations in the names. A selection of varieties is grown in each area, chosen to fulfil a number of criteria such as taste, resistance to bird attack, insects, and drought, length of ripening period, suitability for making beer, and so on (see Hallpike 1970a:37-8; Messeret 1990:179-81 for a list of varieties and their properties). Sorghum is particularly suitable to the Konso environment because of its drought resistance and its fast ratooning, enabling two crops to be obtained from one sowing, the first harvest producing 70% of the total yield (Messeret 1990:178).

Maize seems to have been known before the arrival of the Amhara: Darragon refers to it as growing in Turo, and Donaldson Smith also observed it in Amarro country, but its name, *poqolota*, is obviously derived from the Amharic *baqqollo*, and so it seems likely that its cultivation is not of any great antiquity in Konso. Other varieties were introduced later by the Mission, but apparently it only surpassed finger millet as the second staple food in the 1960's (ibid., 181). Barley is popular on the Takati plateau (about 6000ft.), which has a dry montane climate, and some wheat is grown there to a lesser extent. They also grow a variety of pulses: kidney beans, pigeon peas, Tonga beans, mung beans, and cow peas (see Appendix A for all botanical names). A very important type of crop is known as *pakana*, of which there are several kinds. These are drought resistant and can be left in the ground for a long time (4-6 months) until they are required in times of crop failure (ibid., 184). The tubers are pounded with clubs into a pulp and left on stone slabs to dry in the sun. This process removes the poisonous substance they contain (which apparently burns the mouth), and they are then ground into flour and used for food or beer, always mixed with sorghum. Some flax is grown for its edible seeds, as is sunflower, which was introduced by the Amhara. Taro and yams are also traditional crops which are grown in the few locations where irrigated gardens exist. Tree foliage (*mita*) from the "cabbage tree", *shelaqta*, is an essential item of their diet. The trees, which have a

smooth silvery bark, are planted in the homesteads as well as in the fields, and women and children harvest the leaves with hooks on the end of poles. The leaves are boiled and eaten with the cooked balls of sorghum dough which form the staple diet.

In 1965 I observed a small amount of ensete in the Elbola valley at Buso which had permanent irrigation, and on the cool plateau around a large pool, Xampara, where the soil was noticeably moist, and also at Gaho nearby where about a dozen homesteads out of seventy had one or two plants. (It is a small tree often called “the false banana” because of its large, banana-like leaves, and its food value comes from its starchy root.) It could probably be grown more widely, but the people say it takes too long to mature, and yields comparatively little food when it does in relation to the time it takes to grow. It ripens in 5 -- 6 years when it is dug up, the root is cut into pieces and then buried in a pit for about a week to ferment, with straw on top. Then it is dug up again, pounded and put in the sun to dry (like *pakana*). Since then it has apparently declined very much in importance, and the Farm Africa survey of Gaho in 1992 makes no mention of it there.

Cotton and coffee are the two traditional cash crops which have been traded with the Borana long before the arrival of the Amhara. A number of crops or food plants have been introduced subsequently: bananas, papaya, prickly pear, limes, oranges, citron, tomatoes, red peppers, hot peppers, onions, garlic, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, and cabbage, while *tef* and cassava were imported in the 1970s or 1980s. The Amhara are said to have introduced, many years ago, a superior variety of cotton which has entirely displaced the indigenous variety that now presumably survives by wild propagation. The eucalyptus tree was introduced by the EECMY in 1974, and now provides a good deal of firewood and building timber.

Yields from Konso crops are poor by comparison with the rest of Ethiopia, due among other factors to the degree of land fragmentation among small proprietors, and to soil degradation. Not only is the crop yield poor, but, especially before the introduction of new cultivars during the twentieth century, the traditional Konso diet was extremely monotonous. The basic meal consists of boiled dough and tree leaves, eaten three times a day, while sorghum, the staple crop, is an unappetising cereal that is regarded by northern Ethiopians as fit only for cattle. *Chaqa*, the beer made from it, is a sour alcoholic grain soup, usually served hot, which compares unfavourably with Ethiopian *tej* (honey wine) or beer made from barley. While Konso coffee is excellent, traditionally it was not drunk but the beans were roasted and eaten on ritual

occasions, like *khat*; and honey was not used to make a drink either. (They now infuse the leaves of the coffee bush to make a drink, but this has been learnt from the Amhara as the name, *hola*, indicates.) Milk, if available, is drunk only by children, and butter, which is very expensive, is used more as a cosmetic than as an item of diet. Meat, to be sure, is sold in the markets as a luxury, but there is a notable absence in Konso of the spices which elsewhere in Ethiopia are used to produce a range of appetising dishes. Chickens were kept in the traditional society, but only for their feathers, since it was forbidden to eat any kinds of bird or their eggs. I draw attention to this very limited and austere diet of the traditional society since it helps us to appreciate better the great hardship of their lives.