A Question of Understanding: Hermeneutics and the play of history, distance and dialogue in development practice in East Africa

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Abstract

This thesis is a phenomenology of understanding in the context of development practice in East Africa. It is framed by stories of my life and work, experiences rooted in European traditions and provoked and expanded in encounter with African traditions.

My question began with methods for dealing with poverty and suffering. Even with all my goodwill and education and the might of large institutions behind me, I found myself part of a series of analytical interventions that seemed to make the problem worse. Yet I would like to contribute to a world where people live together well.

This thesis is the story of how I laid siege to this conundrum, working on it from various angles until I saw development intervention for the incoherent prejudice that it was. How could something as co-operative as living well with others be achieved by something so domineering as methodical intervention? Western development consciousness has not noticed that other cultures cannot and will not bear such hubris. So I questioned the notion that a good method (or a good institution, analytical technique or moral code) is the first requirement for fair co-existence. Development, I realised, is conversations that we join, not instructions that we give.

I asked instead how I and others come to agree, a question that many people in my profession have never asked. In a close examination of the way I have come to understandings in my own life, I draw on the work of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. His philosophical hermeneutics bring together multiple aspects of understanding: its consciousness, historicity, eventfulness, and linguistic and conversational nature. With the help of African thinkers, I gain more perspective—I take part in understandings that are held, provoked and renewed in conversation across time, geography and entire societies.

Through the journey represented by this thesis I have come to understand that understanding speaks the world, its history, diversity and potential. I have come

to know that from understanding comes method, not the other way around. It is an insight that has profound implications for those of us who work in the development field.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to Ibrahim Adano who believed in learning and peace.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis explores how people come to understanding with one another. It is not about methods of understanding, nor is it about understanding why things turn out as they do. It rests on an idea—for which I have Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger to thank—that we are beings whose fundamental state is to understand and to seek understanding. The question then is what kind of understanding and how.

I start by giving a context to the impulse that drove the formulation of the thesis question, before turning to the different frames I considered for structuring the inquiry. I then present the question I am exploring and give some background as to its relevance to me and the people I am working with. I give account of the sources of my philosophical approach and then, in the core chapters of the thesis, I explore the historicity, connectivity and conversational nature of understanding.

To bring the phenomenon into the foreground, I make a close examination of my own experience of coming to understanding over all the years of my life. For a long time I was agitated by misunderstanding between people, as it played out in the political-economic interactions in which I was part and to which I had access in East Africa and in the literature. I will go into more detail as to what I found there a little later, but for the moment I only want to point out that it was not in the objective systems and structures of politics or economics that I found a satisfactory response to my questions about how misunderstanding arises, despite my concerns with the problems I saw it as causing in these arenas. As I searched to understand understanding in others, I became increasingly aware of myself as the interpreter of the understandings and misunderstandings that I encountered. I noted how I was encountering and accounting for the world with theories that I held, developed and discarded. I realised that to comprehend

understanding better I would gain much by looking in minute detail at how my own theory, interest and encounter were co-operating in practice.

In this thesis I tell stories and give narrative, bias and prejudice their due in coming to understandings. I calmed my nervousness about the legitimacy of such a course by trying it, and seeing that stories from experience give weight and truth to the questions I consider. I was further encouraged by reading scholars like Jim Cheney and Greg Sarris, who, drawing insight from indigenous philosophy, show how it is fitting and necessary to tell stories. They demonstrate that what we know is always bound in a historical and environmental narrative (Sarris 1993; Cheney 2005). Similarly, the arguments of Richard Rorty for truths that can only be found in the work of strong poets has resonance with my use of description and re-description in encounter (Rorty 1989; Bergin 2001). You will know when a story is coming because the lines are closer together, the paragraphs are indented and the style of writing changes. It is more descriptive and personal and it has more adjectives. This way of writing is a demonstration of just one of the many things I have learned while writing this thesis: understanding is a dialectic of language.

The narrative that follows looks at understanding in its manifold expressions in my working life, in an arena known broadly as international development. I have come to think of development—as we insiders call it—as a business and a profession, an enterprise, a mission and an exercise in influence. It is a kind of consciousness that guides a way of thinking and acting in the relations between rich and poor, literate and illiterate, industrial and pre-industrial, modern and traditional. It involves notions of progress in economic, technological and organisational realms. But, just as Gadamer urges that the experience of philosophy and art generates '*the most insistent admonition to scientific consciousness to acknowledge its own limits,*' I explore how the experience of philosophical hermeneutics admonishes development consciousness to do the same (Gadamer 1993:133).

Confronting exploitation

I was sitting on a chair in the Sheraton Hotel, Addis Ababa, in December 2004: the Lalibela ballroom, whose soft carpet and glittering chandeliers reminded me of ballrooms at whose entrances I hesitated when I was young; when I wore a green Indian dress and shoes for dancing. The light was dimmed and a screen at one end of the massive room showed an American diplomat talking. She was telling what she saw in Kigali in 1994—the Rwandan genocide. As the film rolled on and the piled bodies of machete-hacked Rwandans filled the screen, patterning the background to interviews with desperate mothers, wild-eyed soldiers, abandoned peace-keepers and plaintive relief workers, I saw people in the audience shifting in their faux-gilded chairs, hands curling around their faces.

The film ended, the lights came up, nobody moved for several minutes. Then a woman stood and told her story, her pain and passion mounting as the history unfolded from her first awareness of discrimination, to abandonment, to slavery, to massacre and miraculous survival, to haunting by the ghosts of her lost children, siblings, husband and parents. And now she works with the government. How often does she go and speak to strangers in African capitals to warn them of the dangers of conflict and complacency? As I listened I thought: this is what I am struggling with, this pain. Real pain, real death generated from words. The way people win power and identity by hurting others; stifling vitality and co-operation. Not just in Africa, in every continent. I tell you this particular story to emphasise how bad it can get and how we are all in some way complicit. From this emerges resolution to understand.

A race riot on a London street, a desiccating famine in North Sudan, a starving 12-year old soldier in South Sudan, a brittle refugee camp on the Kenya-Somalia border, a city smashed by shells, a burning rubbish dump in a Nairobi slum, a fenced off land that once belonged to a proud tribe in Ethiopia, an English girl made mute by discrimination – I was present and I was outraged. I made attempts to find remedies. I had an interest in reparation and adventurous interventionism. But my words of condemnation and mitigating actions did little or nothing to reduce the persistent repetition of these kinds of events. Worse than that, I contributed to their persistence. I was driven to look for an explanation. I came to believe that these outrages stemmed from a profound disrespect within and between societies, generated and sustained by structures of domination and a vocabulary of hierarchy. It was, to me, a failure of *ubuntu* to live up to its most fundamental meaning and promise. *Ubuntu* is a southern African concept conveying, "I see you, we acknowledge each other, we are human" from the

isiXhosa proverb: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which translates: 'A human being is a human being through relationship to other human beings' (Marx 2002:552). Its meaning, for me, is that you and I live through understanding with one another. Although it may sometimes seem that each of us is independent, it doesn't take much scrutiny of the realities of life to see that we only exist by virtue of others. If we have no recognition, we fade away, metaphorically and literally. If we have no recognition we risk the possibility of being so worthless that we can be hacked to death with a machete by one of our neighbours. But it is also true that being recognised is no protection against a machete.

People who are poor, demeaned and excluded are the ones who have to insist over and over that there should be an end to the disrespect they deal with every day. People who have to suffer exploitation demand a response, whether practical or moral or both. Exploitation, I believe, begins with disrespect and lack of consideration. It is seldom us who sort out their problems (us, the victorious, the literate, the middle classes, the comfortable ones) even if we wish we were able to be so heroic. By and large, I think we lack the necessary insight. Now when I say 'we' I mean the development professionals, who are my colleagues, and I.

But it is not all bad stories. There is a constant murmur of respect that permeates everywhere. I believe that it is important just to watch and see what people are doing who are reaching true understandings with others about practical matters. I suggest that once we start to do that, we may find that there will be more and more understandings, because it is in the nature of human tradition to expand upon what it has understood. This is one of my claims. In the course of my work I have learned that the processes of reaching understanding are fundamental human attributes for living. Understandings arise not in each individual, but as interplay between them. Thus I am also claiming that coming to understanding and resolving exploitation are linked. We will consider this in the pages that follow.

You might infer from the many books, television programmes, articles, agencies, funds, laws and institutions devoted to preventing exploitation, dealing with

cruelty and abolishing poverty that there is a serious intent in the world to resolve at least the most extreme situations. But Rwanda told us otherwise. There is of course an interest in protecting the richer nations from rebellion and terrorism (the bitter fruits of resentment and confusion), and there are certainly worlds of co-operation, concern and professionalism, but there is also something wrong. We in the development field investigate how people hurt one another, theorise about behaviours and structures, feel hurt when we are blamed, remember our own sufferings, construct elaborate solutions and make attempts to put them into practice. But the results are almost always disappointing.

I want to be part of a world where people live together well, I want to help to find *'a formula for living in the world with others'* which '*acknowledges a world of competing truths and rights to existence*' (Duffield 2005:157). In this doctorate I have been asking if such a formula is possible in the heavily constrained realm of national elite struggles and international development in the countries where I have lived and worked in East Africa. I ask too if, from my location in the world, I can contribute to such a formula. To both I answer yes, it is possible. But my journey has been a strange one. I did not find what I expected to find, a method of resolution and reconciliation through understanding. I found only understanding itself.

Before I go into the stories that frame what I learned, I take you through the different options I considered for making a contribution through research and give an introduction to my questions.

Choosing the frame for this thesis

I started writing this thesis with confessions of my deficiencies as an interventionist in other people's poverty. I explained my role with pastoralist

leaders in Ethiopia and other African countries[1] as a series of attempts to be a problem solver, backed by hegemonic neo-colonialist tendencies that I was only partially aware of. I described my aristocratic origins with a caustic edge that I had not previously noticed. I then thought, no, this may be an angle, but it is more defensive than useful. It does not help with clarifying the situation and it may even serve to consolidate the problem. Self-victimisation by the oppressed is precisely what I wished to see eradicated, not emulated. Since, in the course of this research, I found that an inquiry into understanding dissipates this kind of self-deprecating behaviour, so I have discarded it as a worn-out and dispiriting mode of being. Having taken this point on board, I felt quite liberated from that corrosive perspective.

I turned then to making an exposé of the failings of the often unbearably selfish development industry, cruel governments and rapacious elites, and likewise I rejected the project as unhelpful. Moaning about the system is second only to self-flagellation when it comes to perpetuating our inertia and our failures to understand. It also justifies the belief that the non-elites are lesser beings in need of patronising guidance or pushing aside while better people put the world to rights.

I changed my introduction once again and headed off on an outline of a handbook for correct understanding of and appropriate political action by leaders of traditional institutions within East Africa's public conversations: its elections, meetings, consultations and national debates. It was to be a rational approach to the prize sought by the leaders and activists with whom I work: political influence and more secure lives. I rejected the handbook approach too, even though I have been writing or implementing handbooks of one sort or another for years, realising that it was once again part of the problem. People cannot generally adopt the advice of handbooks, and if they do they will

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[1]   The 10 million or so pastoralists in Ethiopia describe themselves as people who raise livestock. The English doesn't do justice to the complex of social, institutional, religious, environmental, political, economic and ethical terrain that the title means for them. As societies within the Ethiopian polity, they are currently struggling for recognition (Scott-Villiers 2006). Similar efforts are going on in other pastoralist societies in Africa and elsewhere.

understand them in a variety of ways. The results I saw were not agreements but a cacophony of inappropriate social engineering schemes that created yet more trouble.

It also brought into question whether I should prescribe something as immodest as a new approach to public conversation. My experience and reading has led me to believe that human structures are emergent parts of culture and history, and cannot simply be created (Stacey 2001). Although I may occasionally imagine myself capable of god-like delivery of widely beneficial services to the world, and the aid industry of which I am part makes these claims all the time, the unreality of such claims is ever more obvious to me.

I moved then to inquiring into the possibility that there might be a grand theory of cross-cultural agreement, based on recognising and learning from difference and exploring structures and principles of arbitration in context. I would use the literature of multi-culturalism, post-colonialism, action research and facilitation and apply it to my experiences of facilitated dialogue in East Africa. This theory would inform whosoever might be trying to create dialogue between poor people, government officials and managers of development agencies. Once again I came to a halt—cross-cultural agreement is an important idea for my work, but institutionalised agreements are like structures of public conversation, they are emergent properties of people and their cultures. Prior to creating social institutions or theorising multi- or cross-culturalism is the process by which people who have varying cultures, rationalities, institutions and moral histories actually come to agree. It is a process that few of us in my business have ever examined carefully.

To make a contribution, I realise that I cannot prescribe anything at all. It is not recommendations that are wanted, but stimulating truths that wake us up and add something to our lives. These are more likely to be clarifications of how things are, how they appear and how people come to interpret them, rather than suggestions of what to do. Of course even making clarifications is not straightforward – the descriptions have to be based on having heard well and they may be very contextually specific. Although it is tempting to ask what we

should be doing to create an ideal approach to understanding between cultures and between people, I believe it is more useful to consider what is already happening when people strive for it under the influence of history, distance and dialogue. Neither blame, nor blueprints nor idealist theories are going to contribute to an opening of possibility in this difficult arena. What remains, then, is a rigorous accounting of how understanding happens.

What is understanding?

My main question is the happening of understanding. The kind of understanding I am working with is not, as I first believed, knowledge *of* other things and other people, for example knowledge by the poor of the rich, by the scientist of the technologies or institutions that they wish to use, or by me of someone or something. Rather it is the process of coming to understanding *with* other participants in a conversation about what is specific and concrete. In this, and in much else, my exploration has been profoundly influenced by Gadamer, whose work provides the guiding ideas of the thesis.

For Gadamer, understanding is the coming into language of the world (1993:474). Language is the medium of a relationship of question, answer and agreement between the interpreter(s) and things themselves. He suggests that understanding-as-language is a never-ending process of interpretative change in which the tradition coming forward in language continuously expresses the truth of the subject matter. Understanding is not separate from the subject matter, and as such cannot be fully explored in isolation from it. If the subject matter is the things, people, social and political issues of those involved in development, the implication is to consider where we get our truths from and how we negotiate and account for them.

For a group of pastoralist thinkers I consulted in Ethiopia on the same question, whose tradition is absolutely different from Gadamer's, understanding is a purposeful and rigorous state of engagement with others on the truth of what is there in the world. It is, as they term it, clarity. For both cultures the notion is philosophical.

The presuppositions on which I originally built my question were that understanding was something to be achieved: there were methods of achieving it, people who were good at it and people who were not, and it came into the world as a product of inquiry. None of these presuppositions could really be described as philosophical, they were more scientific or methodological. They set the initial direction of the inquiry and it was only when each one of them had been brought forward and demolished by the provocations of real life that the inquiry managed to make any progress. My presuppositions were strong and their archaeology went deep into my own tradition. I considered it self-evident that understanding was a method.

It was Gadamer who guided me away from looking for a method that you and I might use to overcome ignorance, as opposed to inquiring into the event of understanding. My belief in action had for so long been combined with my desire for instant and admirable results that I found it difficult to accept that a question about what happens might be more useful than a question about how something ought to be done. But I kept faith with the idea of accompanying processes of understanding rather than directing them, and it has proved, I think fruitful, by protecting me from leaping to recommendations and thus maintaining my openness to possibility about what understanding might be.

The relevance of the question

Development

I have been working in international development for 25 years, that is, more than half my life. I am an English woman living and working mostly in East Africa. I have been trying to help change the conditions that seem to be responsible for people's exploitation and suffering. I came into my profession with a hopeful arrogance, a view that 'our' way of doing and seeing things was the result of progress —we had reached a place that everyone else was going to get to eventually. Westerners had simply got there first, not always in admirable ways, but nonetheless we had found something that other people wanted. What exactly that was, I was not sure, but it drew on notions of technology, modernity, order

and an unacknowledged substrate of superiority and power. As Edward Said suggests, Westerners styled themselves as peaceful, liberal and logical and saw foreigners as irrational, degenerate and primitive (Said 2003).

Amartya Sen holds that development is freedom. Being developed, in his mind, means people having political freedoms, economic facilities, transparency guarantees and protective security (Sen 1999). According to the World Bank, development is 'a world free of poverty' (World Bank 2009a). There is a broad literature arguing for national and global development as manifest in economic and industrial growth, employment, political and social order, justice, security and environmental sustainability. There are also coruscating critiques that give insight into development's differential benefits and harms, especially as it is interpreted for the purposes of aid. It is capitalist neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism (Kapoor 2002). It is a '*radical intrusive endeavour*' reflecting new imperatives of homeland security and rejuvenating old colonial modes of government (Duffield 2005:141). It is how elites are nourished on resource flows of aid and illegal trade (Bayart 2000). Different kinds of people get different amounts of good from what is called development, even though the underlying unexamined notion is that it is development for all people, even for all the living world.

The United Nations Development Programme describes development as '*a way of enlarging people's choices*' (UNDP 2009b). Its guiding concept is based on Sen's thinking, but it has become *a way* of doing things, rather than something that people achieve (UNDP 2009a). Likewise, in a section of the World Bank website aimed at children there is a statement: '*In a world that is very rich, many people are very poor. Development is about reaching these people and helping them improve their lives*' (World Bank 2009d). The statements underscore the orientation of development agencies towards doing things for poor and oppressed people (or to them) and also points to their tendency to make imprecise claims which cannot be held to account.

Development, as something that happens, is often confused with the notion of aid, which is something that people do to one another. For the World Bank this

means over US$ 97 billion in loans to developing countries in 2008 (World Bank 2009c:70 & 98). UNDP income exceeded US$ 5 billion in 2007. In 2002, researchers from Johns Hopkins University estimated operating expenditures in the non-governmental aid sector at US$ 1.6 trillion. Aid is the bread and butter of tens of thousands of employees of development agencies around the world. Yet it has been cogently argued by some that aid may be the *primary cause* of corruption and economic failure in low-income countries (Moyo 2009).

As far as I am concerned and hope to demonstrate with examples in the pages that follow, 'development' is a consciousness, a way of theorising the world. The paradigm has its deep roots in the great missionary movements of Christianity and Islam as well as those of other religions, but its current form in Africa was, I think, crystallised when western philanthropy and colonial adventurism co-operated with religious proselytising to create the basis of the consciousness and institutions we have today. Defined by its attitudes towards the ignorant, useful and needy poor, development is an expansive endeavour. Much development thinking also appears to also be grounded in the philosophical consciousness of the Enlightenment, whose institutions categorised, individualised and disciplined the masses (Foucault 1995). Empiricism made the objects of knowledge passive, inviting an *'imperial response to the world'* (Cheney 1998:267). Development remains, I think, a way of bringing the unruly into line.

The lack of clarity as to what happens in development and for whom it is beneficial is rooted in confusions between its colonial, missionary, charitable, diplomatic, political and trading orientations. Its shape-shifting nature has confused its advocates, its practitioners, its critics and its objects. It is, I think, important to comprehend the parameters of development consciousness so that we can see its potential and its limits and understand its tendency to objectify and distance those people and places that it pretends to care for.

Africa

Jean Francois Bayart encapsulates a widespread European view of Africa when he says, '*Europeans still have great difficulty in seeing in Africa countries like any others... They relegate Africa to the classic categories of barbarism or the Newspeak of*

'development,' 'the elimination of poverty' or 'humanitarian aid'' (Bayart 2004). The continent of 53 countries is relentlessly stereotyped as underdeveloped, backward and failing. I used to put it down to low levels of understanding of Africa. And I do mean 'Africa'. The way the rest of the world (Europeans, Arabs, Americans, Asians and others) has dealt with Africa and Africans as a bloc with certain characteristics has had its effect, if only in the adoption and subversion by different Africans of the names they have been called (Fanon 1986; Bayart 1993). I eventually changed my explanation of European behaviour towards Africans to inappropriate understandings *with* Africa. Up to that point, though, I thought that if we outsiders only knew more we would find a way of solving Africa. Living in East Africa for most of my 25 years in the aid business however, I found that Western notions of African barbarism bore little relation to the civilisation and wisdoms of Africa's many peoples. Africa, in the face of enormous difficulties, works, but for an outsider to understand how it works takes some adjustment of paradigm and a willingness to understand with people rather than just about them (Chabal and Daloz 1999).

Chabal and Daloz draw on Geertz in calling culture a 'system of meanings' (Geertz 1973; Chabal and Daloz 2006) Their work suggests that meanings that arise in the complexity of one society are necessarily different to those developed in another. Each person and society has a culture of being and belonging that is in each case his or her own (Chabal 2009). Diverse histories make diverse life-worlds as values, norms, beliefs, expectations and expressions are formed and gradually reformed in the business of daily life and dialogue. The result is that what makes sense to people varies enormously. In agreeing what should be done and why, people are bringing these worlds with them.

In their incisive treatise on our failure to recognise meanings in political analysis Chabal and Daloz observe that the '*realisation that there are other cultural codes leads us not to reconsider our own as one only among many, but to integrate them all into what we claim to be the 'unity of mankind'* (Chabal and Daloz 2006:314). They propose that we should '*stop operating on the assumption that observable diversity is but a veil over fundamentally similar processes… and reject the illusion of paradigmatic ecumenism…*'(327). My experience also brings that unity into question. I have

found no ironing out of historically effected differences between Europe and Africa, or between pastoralists and bureaucrats, or any other pairing of identities; rather there is provocation, and from provocative encounter there is innovation. Establishing agreement between epistemic communities generates potential in ethical, political and practical spheres (Bergin 2001).The question of what is happening when we are reaching understanding in the light of such confrontation becomes vitally important for me.

Development professional

My own interest in how cultural difference works out in coming to understanding also relates to my position as a foreign development professional in Ethiopia, where I have been living until recently. There is a cultural, historical and political distance between me and the people I am working with there. I am a European, white, female, development professional, and they are Ethiopian, African, old, mostly male pastoralists. I am part of a bureaucracy; with my colleagues I devise projects, raise money and run them. The pastoralist elders with whom I engage sit in judgement over disputes, prevail over religious affairs and advise on management of families, herds and pastures that make the prosperity of the tribes. I am a citizen. They are a community. We speak different languages, have different histories, believe different things about what is real and what is sacred and we face different political struggles in life. The words and gestures that pass between the employees of aid agencies and the spokespeople for traditional communities are often misconstrued. Our differences and otherness unfold as a terrain that lies between us as we speak to each other. On a thousand subjects we talk past each other like radios no one is listening to.

In 2000, through a mix of instinct and experience, my colleagues and I stumbled upon a new way of working. We began to aim not for equitable distribution of resources, nor appropriate policies, nor liberal institutions, nor functional schools and clinics (the usual stock of the development trade), but for understanding and communication about these things. We stopped trying to encourage, train or pay people to act in certain acceptable 'developmental' ways, but instead aligned ourselves with their efforts to come to understandings and decisions. I needed to

understand what we were doing and why it was popular with many pastoralists. Some in our profession found our new direction perplexing, even threatening, and we were having difficulty explaining to them what we were doing.

When, at the start of this research in 2002, I examined my motives, I noted that first I had a practical interest in being articulate about my work and making it more coherent. After 18 years in the business, I reckoned that understandings between the players in my game would always be elusive, particularly where cultures were vastly different, but at least I might respond more appropriately to the questions raised by people on whose behalf I was working, as well as to those of my colleagues and critics.

There is also an ethical and normative element to my question. I am exploring understanding as an ontological situation that has implications for living well. As Robert Dostal says, '*the basic posture of anyone in the hermeneutical situation has profound implications for ethics and politics, inasmuch as this posture requires that one always be prepared that the other may be right. The ethic of this hermeneutic is an ethic of respect and trust that calls for solidarity'* (Dostal 2002a:32). I was—I am—outraged by dismissal, mistreatment and exploitation as I see it, and disturbed by the consistent failure of aid and development people to come to understand the true effects of most aid. Apart from the pain it causes, it seems to me to lack insight into the fundamental hermeneutic situation that we cannot live or work well without coming to understandings with others. The withering discrimination that I felt as a young woman growing up in 1960s and '70s Britain has contributed to this stance.

Pastoralist

When I learned from pastoralists that they too were interested in my inquiry, it gave it a sense of greater relevance and connection.

> I have worked alongside pastoralists since I arrived in Africa in 1984 and I have not lost the admiration I first felt when I met a group of Kel Tamachek mounted on camels, dressed in deep blue, looming out of the Sahara desert and asking casually for water in a place so empty the very sky was lonely. Now, I am inviting you to the southern part of Oromia Regional State in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. It is a

territory inhabited by perhaps half a million people whose way of life is to herd animals, working with the unpredictable climate. The land is big and sparsely populated. In the rainy season, you can stand at the top of this ridge at Arero and look out across thousands of miles of grey-green vegetation, across the shelving escarpments and plains of Africa's Great Rift Valley to purple mountains that mark the boundaries of territories and the places of rituals and councils. This is just one small part of the enormous pastoralist land that stretches from the base of the East African highlands, across the Sahel, to the sea at Mauritania in the west; and from the deserts of Egypt and Sudan in the North in discontinuous patches along the Rift Valley to the Kalahari and the Namib in the south. Here in Oromia the soils are red in the rocky valleys, yellow on the hilltops and deep black in places. Some years there is no rain at all, other years there is plenty.

I have been having discussions with pastoralist people in Oromia and its neighbouring regions of Somali, Afar, Southern Nations and northern Kenya for seven years as part of my development work. I have been privileged to take part in and benefit from a process in which pastoralist people, in a struggle for recognition, have taken back some of the initiative over the ways of understanding they had lost.

Understanding is such a fundamental of life that it is difficult to imagine losing it and harder still to imagine the unravelling and silence that its loss engenders. But if, as Gadamer suggests, understanding is '*the form of human life*' (Grondin 2002:51), then its loss is, quite literally, death or at least a vulnerability to extreme exploitation and dislocation (Belenky, Clinchy et al. 1986). African pastoralist societies, like many other traditional societies that are rubbing up against new cultures, powers and technologies, are changing and differentiating. As new cultures fuse with old ones and communal integrity is threatened, the old thinkers say that they have lost meaning and direction (Heavens 2007). Their lands have become food for hungry developers and politicians, their bodies the property of governments and their old-fashioned ways and co-operation with the earth have been ridiculed.

Here is a group of old pastoralists sitting under a tree and talking about how bad things have become. They put their state of affairs down to the arrival of alien and powerful new cultures - religious, economic and bureaucratic - with which they have had little ability to negotiate or come to understandings.

First Elder: 'People have lost hope, they have surrendered. There is a lot of inertia. There is also a lot of division and disagreement. There may be two people who are talented, who could create a vision, but if they come together they will be on opposing sides because of, for example, religion.

They are antagonistic. Traditionally people cared for each other but it is also a matter of necessity that they require leadership. The government has lost direction. It is an unclear government system. In one family now there may be Islamic, Boran and Christian religions. It is democracy that spoiled this. You can do what you want because you want to do it. Not one of them sits down to clarify to each other. They just get on with life.' [2]

Second Elder: 'The culture has changed since government came. People are still making a transition; they have not been completely overrun. The people have not let go of their own culture. There is a tug of war between old and new cultures. In the past if you lied there was a penalty. If you lie now there is no penalty or there is even a reward. It used to be that people who lie were known and they knew themselves and they knew people knew them, so it didn't cause much damage. Now everyone is lying. The confusion is a mix of two ways; neither is clear to the other. Nobody is paying attention.'

Third Elder: 'It has been prophesied that on the verge of collapse the system will come back. The people will not be extinct but confused. Nobody will be able to clarify anything. They will start consuming alcohol. They will get lost and those who get lost will start eating enjera[3]. They will be scattered all over the place. Near the end most of them will refuse to accept the truth. Almost at the collapse, somebody knowledgeable will be born. All that was predicted has come true except this last one. This is the one we are looking for.'

My colleagues and I have been organising gatherings of pastoralist people who come together from different parts of East Africa and many other countries to talk. While the first item on most of the delegates' agendas at these meetings is usually peace (coming to understandings between peoples about co-existence and co-operation), the second item has often turned out to be collaborating for knowledge, recognition and influence. The gatherings, which take place in the open air, in places where pastoralists say they feel most at home, give a taste of new understandings. People taking part say they have learned more about who they are, in relation to others like themselves. Leaders have emerged who have stimulated people to organise and take action on the debates and emotions that burn within their communities – issues like loss of land, political exploitation and violent conflict, and emotions like fear and impotence. I will go into more details

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[2]   Conversation notes, Yaballo, Ethiopia 4/12/07

[3]   A staple bread from the highlands of Ethiopia

on these gatherings and what they may tell us about coming to understanding in later chapters.

Importantly for the relevance of this thesis, pastoralist leaders I have been talking to consider understanding to be a priority. Here, for example are Borana historian Borbor Bulle's words: '*Many pastoralist leaders, and the people, say that the meetings are helping people clarify to themselves a lot of things. …There is a lot of opportunity when elders meet and discuss during coffee ceremony every morning. They share understanding. Before this new understanding was established, people had lost hope. With this new understanding, the debate is alive again.*' [4]

I interpret their interest as being to rebuild their understanding of themselves so that they can rebuild their world, protect themselves from exploitation, knit together the fragmenting elements of their societies and deal better with others. In the question of understanding, then, we have found an area of inquiry that is salient to each of us – each for our own reasons.

Is there an art of understanding?

I have long wanted to know if it is possible to have a hermeneutic attitude, one in which provisional judgements simmering from one conversation become available to another with increasing intensity. The term hermeneutics is drawn from the Greek, *hermeneuō*, meaning translation or interpretation. Aristotle deploys the word *hermeneias* (interpretation) to consider the relationship between language and logic, and Gadamer explains it as the situation and event of understanding - '*the original characteristic of being of human life itself*' (Gadamer 1993:259). But Gadamer also speaks of an 'art of understanding' which is not so much a skilled procedure or discipline, but a consciousness that is hermeneutic – recognising the ever changing historically affected nature of things. '*Hermeneutics demands that a conscious application be brought to bear on the living praxis of understanding*' he says in a reply to his critics — it is this that makes critical review possible (Gadamer 1990:282; Dostal 2002a:10). Can deliberate scholarship and inquiry-in-action weave encounters and questions into ever broader circles of

understanding? For pastoralists engaging in public negotiations in Ethiopia, for people in my business who want to do things differently, I have been asking if there is an art of developing reflective and critical consciousness and pursuing questions in a disciplined fashion so that they yield ever more useful layers of understanding and ever wider debates. This is the terrain of my subsidiary question and its direction points towards the praxis and habits of living with hermeneutical consciousness.

I am now content (within the limits of contentedness set by a hermeneutic attitude) that Gadamer is right to insist that understanding, as a life-sustaining element of being human, is not an action, but a phenomenon that comes about (Gadamer 1977:18). Nonetheless I look at the conditions that create variations in the quality and flow of understanding. How these conditions arise and whether they can they be acted upon in any deliberate way is, I think, a valid question. I hope to demonstrate that, while coming to understanding is something that largely happens to us without our having a great deal of choice about *what* we understand, there are patterns of thought and behaviour that widen the openings for understanding and make the instances of coming to understanding with others more frequent and comprehensive. It is praxis, a way of being and behaving, which changes with experience and attention. I think that for each of us, for each society, there will be practices that increase the intensity of understanding and they will differ from one to another.

I will go on to clarify further the roots and specificity of the question addressed by this thesis, how we come to understandings with one another about matters of mutual concern, in the following chapters. As Gadamer has demonstrated, and I hope to put into context through my own examples and experience, having and working out a question is a necessary part of the phenomenon of understanding. The way in which I have attempted to answer it is therefore both the subject and the method of this inquiry. In the next chapter I turn to the method and philosophical approach of the inquiry.

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[4]   Conversation notes, Haro Bake, Ethiopia 5/12/07

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