

Chapter 8 – Understanding across a Culture

In this final chapter of my exploration into how we come to understandings, I take the question to a wider geography, by considering its flow between many people, over a period of several years, across a large area. The culture of the people involved was broadly an East African pastoralist one, and the story is taken up by Nura Dida, himself an East African pastoralist, who was deeply involved in the pastoralist gatherings in Ethiopia from 2004, if not before.

Pastoralist gatherings from the pastoralist perspective

I asked Nura if he would join my colleague, Jarso Guyo Mokku, and I to explore what had been happening with the gatherings. We were at a hotel in Nairobi in May 2008. The sun was slanting through the big window and the traffic hummed outside on Uhuru Highway. I was asking questions and adding a few things here and there. Jarso was interpreting between English and his mother tongue, *afaan Oromo*.

Before I move to the subject of our discussion, I start with a brief examination of the art of interpreting between languages, to give context to the conversation that follows. This brief exploration allows us to add more texture to some of the linguistic aspects of understanding. As a special hermeneutic case, it illustrates, I think, the coming together of traditions as horizons of meaning, the part played by environment in linguistic cadences and the strengthening of the thing itself and its bond with the speakers as it travels from one language to another.

Translation and interpretation

Nura called it our agenda. At least Jarso would translate the word Nura uses in his language, *afaan Oromo*, into the English word 'agenda'. I feel I almost

understand this Oromo language; many of its modulations are familiar after six years of help from Jarso to understand the details of what is being said. Jarso translates fluently, so that neither he nor I really know which language we are in, but I am aware that the words are his, so I asked him about it.

Jarso said that he translates in order to build relationships. He is not just translating words in a technical fashion but working to create meaning.

‘I never imagine at one moment that I am translating for anybody, so I am not seeing myself in that moment as a translator. And one other thing is the connection between the communication I am involved in, in view of why am I doing it, linking to the objective, the point of communicating. There is the immediate purpose of passing the message from this person to the other, but it has to have some link with the overall goal – why am I doing this? For me, it is both for the purpose of passing the message and also for really establishing relation with the person.’¹⁰

Interpretation in this context incorporates not just the thing the original speaker is talking about, but also the interpretation of that thing by the interpreter and the interpretation of that thing by the one receiving the translation.

Jarso says, ‘There are times when you are actually translating literally word for word. That is the base. But there are times when the discussion is so deep that they won’t grasp the meaning of what is being talked about, because the words won’t make sense to them, because they mean a different meaning. In the different context, or cultures, they mean different things. So for the person to be able to understand what the other person is actually trying to say, it is very important for you to be able to know what type of stories you can tell this person so they can precisely understand the message that this person is trying to pass other than the words. And that is why sometimes I would use a story, use a story which is more or less – which I know is familiar to the person, to be able to help him understand. And then, after he has understood, that is when I will tell what the person said word for word.’

Gadamer notes that an interpreter assisting two people who speak different languages to speak to one another is a heightened instance of the hermeneutics of conversation. *‘The translator must translate the meaning to be understood into the context in which the other speaker lives. This does not, of course, mean that he is at liberty to falsify the meaning of what the other person says. Rather, the meaning must be preserved, but since it must be understood within a new language world, it must establish its validity within it in a new way (TM 384).* Heidegger likewise makes a point that interpretation is not something pasted on top of a perception, but that it is bound

¹⁰ Interview with Jarso Guyo Mokku, April 2008, Nairobi

to the instant of recognition – I hear the thing spoken of *as* something, otherwise I would not see or hear it at all (BT 189). Jarso is hearing what each of us says as something that he recognises and he is moving it into the words of the other language as just that same thing, or as near as he can make it. His understanding of what that thing is will be what he tries to put into words for the other.

Understanding does not come *after* something is interpreted, but interpretation is grounded in understanding and arises from it, as in an interpretation of a piece of music (BT 188). Understanding is not static. It is constantly on the move and interpretation creates connections and conclusions and makes and is made from the play of dialectic (TM 260).

The conversation in which Jarso is an interpreter is a conversation that includes him in a particular way. He does not give new opinions, but he brings his understanding into the play through his versions of the things being discussed. This is not only something that can be said of translation from one language to another, but also about conversation in general. Each interpreter grounds what they hear into their own horizon and each interpreter is always from a different cultural world than the other, even if they are from the same household, speak the same language, have grown up together and so on. The matter of the thing being talked of is always given greater depth by the multiplicity of horizons of its interpretation. Perfection of translation is not to find the words that mean exactly the same but the words that permit communication on what is being said.

Afaan Oromo is a language that sounds to me like the land it comes from. A big country with high escarpments and hot thorny valleys where the dry leaves rustle, cows grumble, hyenas woop, hornbills hoo hoo and lammergeyer eagles cry across the high thermals. I am pointing to this connection of language and geography, because I want to emphasise that these wide connections to place and physical environment are among the basic elements of understanding. These connections seem particularly important to the people of oral cultures that I have met – people who make their lives with the land. In practice, attention to my surroundings develops in me at least a rudimentary familiarity with the cadences of thought and physical reality that make sense in that place and to those people. Familiarity comes slowly, especially where our exposure has been to something

entirely different. It brings with it a broader potential for understanding, because the connection to the other is greater than the individual with whom I speak, or even just his or her human history being spoken; the earth too has a powerful influence on what and how people are saying and interpreting things. The environment is, I would argue, playing a continuous part in all our understandings, an idea that is strong in Native American and many other ecologically sensitive cultures (Abram 1996; Cheney 2005). Abram suggests that environmental cadences are particularly resonant for people who do not emphasise writing and for those who live from the land: *'the sensible, natural environment remains the primary visual counterpart of spoken utterance, the visible accompaniment of all spoken meaning. The land, in other words, is the sensible site or matrix wherein meaning occurs and proliferates'* (Abram 1996:139).

The gatherings

Jarso, Nura and I focused on the contribution to understanding of the big pastoralist gatherings on which we had collaborated over the last four years. Telling the story of how one after the other, these gatherings created a conversation, Nura described a debate between individuals that became discussions across entire geographies. I start the story with an introduction taken from my notes, and then move to listening to Nura.

The first Yaballo meeting

I first met Nura at Yaballo in 2004. Jarso and I walked into a back room of a little hotel. The room was mostly taken up by a bare table around which were sitting a group of men wearing traditional off-white shawls and headcloths. Jarso introduced me, first to Guyo Roba, the leader of the *yaa rabaa dorii*, the retired leadership council, and then to others from his council, *hayyu*¹¹ and assistants, then to Tache Harro, the *abaa gadaa*¹² of the Gabra Migo and his *hayyu*, and lastly to Nura Dida. He introduced himself as a Borana elder and an advisor to the Borana *Gadaa* Council. I asked the assembly if it was accepted that the meeting should go ahead and they said, yes. They had appointed a committee to guide it. They accepted our offer to

¹¹ A *hayyu* is a councillor and a judge. The *gadaa* council of the Borana consists of one *hayyu* from each of the major clans of the Borana. The same system is used by most of the different Oromo groups.

¹² The *abaa gadaa* is the 'father of the *gadaa* Council' spiritual leader and convenor of the council.

pay the costs of the meeting, and they said that two bulls had been contributed for the opening ceremony. I asked what else they wanted of us. Nothing more, they said. Later we went to another hotel and sat in the courtyard. We met more elders who came, sat on wooden chairs, talked, and went away on mysterious errands.

The meeting was in a meadow under some acacia trees. Haji Boru Guyo said that the agenda was to find a strategy to deal with drought, inter-clan conflict, and the problem of addiction to alcohol and *chaat*¹³ and the expansion of cultivation into the grazing land. They divided into separate groups, Borana, Guji and Gabra. The Borana allowed us to take notes.

One elder said: 'The grazing land is shrinking because of cultivation. People have enclosed the land for private use, and people have started to sell the land, which is not our tradition. We should be able to protect the land through our traditional custom. The land should be divided into farmland and grazing land, which could be done by our elders with the assistance of government.'

It was quite a strong thing to say in Ethiopia, where all the land belongs to the State and it is the government that has been promoting that pastoralists settle and cultivate, giving up their old unruly ways of 'wandering around following their animals'.

The Borana group decided the following: 'Regarding farming by our own traditional elders and government assistance for this farming, the farming in ritual places should be stopped. By taking our meeting decision to the communities of our areas, the farming land should be demarcated from the grazing land. Except for community enclosure, the private enclosure of land should be stopped.' Then Liban Jaldesa, *abaa gadaa* of the Borana spoke: 'The *gadaa* is with you to strengthen your decision and all of you pass the message of decision to your district administrations and local leaders. It is all pastoralists who must decide to solve our problem.'

Nura's perspective

'Every meeting has its own life. For pastoralists our life is about meetings. There is no single day without meeting. Each meeting has its own agenda, its own procedure. There must be an idea behind the meeting. After the meeting there is understanding about the issues: what was discussed and what was resolved, what are the difficulties and what is the way forward. People may not be clear before, but after they should be very clear. There is no meeting that people leave without consensus. When they go back they tell the story to each other; what they heard, understood and clarified. You start from the rules. Anything heard outside the meeting is assumed to be hearsay. Facts will be presented. If you are not prepared to speak in the meeting it is considered not known, non-existent.'

¹³ A narcotic leaf.

‘Let’s come now to these meetings of diverse people, inter-clans inter-institutions. They are as many as those other meetings which are internal. You can have an inter-institutional or inter-tribal meeting on water, pasture, settlement or rights. We can come with different knowledge, different ideas, different interests, different laws. Basically the frame is the same, processing the idea.

‘Let us now focus on the Yaballo story as an example¹⁴. It involves the government and pastoralists and NGOs. It could be white people like you. There were many others with different laws, different knowledge, different perspectives and interests that came to the Yaballo meeting. The thing that brought them together is not the knowledge they have, is not the interest they have, it is actually the shade that brought them together with all those differences, because they all have one interest¹⁵. The future is what they have focused on. It is not the knowledge or the interest. What they have in common is the end of that meeting. That is the shade. The resolution is what is binding them.

‘So for that type of meeting when you come together [with such different people], we might be talking about livestock, it is very difficult to try to get into the story of the interests and the knowledge that we have. So each will keep their interest, keep their knowledge, everybody will keep that to themselves. So the thing to agree on with all those differences is first the agenda. And everybody will agree to the agenda based on their interests, their knowledge and whatever. Now the issue is not what people understand, it is what you are going to speak.

‘At Yaballo, first Guji, Borana and Gabra pastoralists each had their own separate meeting. We then came together before we approached the other people. Then we had a common story with Gabra and Guji, although each of us also had our own knowledge and interests. There are layers and layers of things which we left at the base, but there is one specific common line of story that we brought to the table. We wanted the other [government and NGO] people to understand that line. We would make them understand, support us on it and respond to it. We now listened to what they heard, based on whether it would enhance that new line of understanding, or it would create difficulties for us. How much of that agenda will be supported, will be opposed, this is the line that we now set ourselves to listen to.

‘The follow up that the government did after that meeting was not about the substance of the discussion. The question was how did you organise that kind of complex meeting? And we told them, our life is all about

¹⁴ The meeting took place in June 2004 and was attended by about 150 pastoralist elders and 50 government and NGO representatives.

¹⁵ The shade is the place of the meeting which is under the shade of a tree. In Borana culture and that of many other pastoralists I have met, it is also the symbolic place of decisions and judgements. Shades are temporary and they become so by prayer and by the presence of the correct people.

managing such things. So we tried to help them understand our life, our laws about meeting. It is every pastoralist under the bush is expert at that.

‘Of course, that debate went very far. That is the line of how that meeting at Yaballo developed into a new line of discussion and debate. And then, this story has continued. What we talked there I have actually forgot, but the whole thing we have now emerged out that the new knowledge that pastoralists have knowledge on gatherings, they can organise meetings, they are expert on that.

‘Now before we move on you should ask clarification questions. All the things I have said, you have a right to say something about it. And I know there were a lot of things about that Yaballo thing even for us. I am not looking at any written story; I am just picking them from my mind. I just picked one line of story. And I want you to limit yourself to that line of story so that we reach with you the same level of understanding. If there is something that I said which is not clear I can reword it. If there is something I said that is surprising or brought a new thing, then you can ask a clarification question. I want us to get to the same level on the story that I have presented.’

I replied, ‘I remember at the end of the meeting, after they heard the elders speak, the government responded. I forget who it was who spoke, but he said that ‘you have not talked about this, you have forgotten about that, why didn’t you mention HIV’ or something like that. He was not polite. How did you see it?’

Nura said, ‘ It was not in our interest, those things they talked about. Not because it is not an issue. It was just that it was not the reason for the meeting, it was not the story line we were discussing.’

I replied, ‘I think that you came to that meeting with an agenda. And that agenda had been taken around, I think, by Haji Boru and you. How did you build that agenda?’

He said, ‘That meeting had an owner. There were people who had put their minds to it. It was Haji Boru and Borbor who called for the meeting. They are the ones who summoned people to the meeting. And they never told people what the agenda of the meeting was. But they had said – we have an idea. So because both of them were known, people came to the meeting, coming to listen to the idea of Borbor and Haji Boru. So when they called, people came. They all came because they know both of them.’

To the things themselves!

I thought the Yaballo meeting was supposed to *reconcile* people, i.e., bring into alignment the different interests and agendas of those who came, through some kind of logic or compromise, but Nura noted that the divergent interests were

secondary. The subject of the discussion was purpose, the matters of farming, conflict, animals and alcohol. I remembered hearing about the interests and agendas when we talked in the evenings – they gave each of us at the meeting a sense of dynamic and tension – but were not what it was about. A meeting, he suggested, contributes to an agreed purpose by making use of understandings that people bring. The subject is, in effect, a force that draws on and activates understandings. The subject is the thing that everyone is talking about and asking questions about. I had been thinking about reconciliation and understanding as the things that people were talking about, making them deracinated phenomena and forgetting that they intend something specific. Understanding is always understanding of something. Reconciliation is reconciliation about something. When that something is worked on, then understanding, reconciliation and so on have a chance of arising.

Purpose in meetings such as this one pulls understanding from an internal reflection to a connected deliberation. As Nura said, the common interest was the future, for which each person had a responsibility. The concrete relevance and resonance of the purpose affected the quality and degree of agreement on it, which in turn affected the understandings that came into play. In this case the subject was about who would be in control of which resources and how. The agenda was apposite and urgent for the pastoralists. I knew this from the way the elders debated what had been said long after the main meeting ended each day, from the way they stayed with it and didn't leave, and from how the conversation continued after the event. Others, who spoke at the end of different subjects that had not been on the agenda – of bandits and backwardness, for example – were less interested in the subject. I could tell because they did not answer on the subject, but added new ones. They brought less understanding to the table, heard less what others were saying and made less of a contribution to understanding in the meeting. It was this measure of agreement that Nura said that the elders were keeping an eye on.

Nura said that the shade, the tree under which we sat and debated, was a symbol of purpose and an institution that guided the way each person spoke. I was aware that our understanding was being engaged in specific ways by the place and

culture. The concept of shade has a history and powerful meaning. I focused on the place, its cultural significance, its rules of speaking and listening, and its juxtapositions of traditional and bureaucratic. Nura added that purpose and shade are one. The shade creates the possibility to speak of the purpose in a particular way. The currents of understanding are affected by both.

The conversation was about substantial things. The pastoralists did not theorise about what might be, they tended to stick to what they had seen and experienced and what could be done. It was about what was happening to the land, how they educated their children and how war was hurting people. It was the first time that I had paid proper attention to the way they focused on precise things and how they spoke and answered one another by recognising first what they had heard and then what they had to add. Their scrupulous consideration of what was, rather than what might be, caught my attention. If they do not speculate does that also mean they do not innovate? In the next part of the interview with Nura he talks of recognising potential to do things differently in a pastoralist he met from Cameroon. It is not unusual for pastoralists to copy ideas from one trusted person or group to another. I would hazard, however, that they are hardly a blue-sky thinking group of people.

When, after two days of meeting among themselves, the pastoralist put their points to people from government and NGOs, they watched intently for the reaction. Nura said that the elders listened very carefully to hear what the officials had heard. The reaction informed the way the debate unfolded in the months and years after the meeting. They were looking to see where there was support and where there was antagonism. Borbor once said to me, of the art of listening in the pastoralist way, *'when you listen like that you will know the path to understanding.'*

The Government Administrator announced that a second meeting would take place within six months and a committee would be formed. It never happened. 'When something is dead,' said Nura, 'it's buried. They buried 'Yaballo Two' because of the structures that were given the task of calling it.' It was no longer in the hands of Haji Boru and Borbor, neither was it with Nura, nor with any of the traditional Councils. It was made the responsibility of an appointed committee who could not, or would not take its purpose forward. 'But,' Nura added, 'the idea was taken far and wide. It became a storyline. It was about us doing what we needed to do for

ourselves. Every other pastoralist meeting that came was taking forward the idea. At the annual clan meetings and the meetings about water and pasture, it was added to the agenda, or it was discussed before the meeting started. The Yaballo storyline was raised at sessions wherever people were sitting to talk and tell each other stories. There were small meetings on the subject that were organised by individuals who were not at Yaballo, but who had heard the story and had the idea. They took it up. And each story added to the spiral of things that were happening.' The storyline travels. It is nourished by people's interest in exploring and developing it.

Two years passed in this way. 'Eventually,' Nura continued, 'a major opportunity came with the gathering you financed at Qarsa Dambi. The whole idea about the Qarsa Dambi pastoralist gathering was part of the discussion that was going on in every other place. So when setting the Qarsa Dambi agenda it was being influenced by the knowledge and discussion and views that came from Yaballo and that's two years down the line. That gathering at Qarsa Dambi was another big event in the whole thing. The stories that were shared after that, the impact of the process of knowledge that went into the pastoralist discussion was very, very powerful.' Qarsa Dambi is a tiny settlement of three or four houses and a roadside teahouse. Not far from the settlement the Oromo pastoralists, with help from our project, put on a great gathering of pastoralists in July 2006. 350 people from 22 countries in Africa were hosted by the elders and leaders of the Borana, Guji and Gabra peoples. The meeting was chaired by Nura, backed by a committee of the three groups. There were perhaps 275 pastoralists and another 75 government officials, NGO people, donor officials, academics and business people (Scott-Villiers 2006).

The visitors came dressed in their traditional clothes, Kel Tamachek of Mali in deepest blue, Somali men in their Indonesian *mawees* (sarongs) and Muslim caps, Ethiopian Oromo women in multicoloured cloths, Kordofani Sudanese in bright white *jalabiya* and turbans, Hamar from southwest Ethiopia in beads, leather and ringlets. Aid agency staff drove from Kenya up the corrugated Marsabit road, along with scores of Kenyan pastoralists Maasai, Samburu, Somali, Turkana, Rendille, Borana and Gabra in buses and minibuses. From all the lowlands of Ethiopia came Somali, Afar, Guji, Gabra, Bale, Hararghe, Kereyu, Borana, Hamar, Arbore, Nuer, Nyangatom, Dassanech and Kara. A camel cheese maker from Mauritania and another from Niger put on demonstrations. Touareg activists made impassioned speeches. Smiling Cameroonian *Lamidos* gave detailed expositions of their system of traditional government and its modern situation. Traders discussed tariffs and phyto-sanitary obstacles, elders discussed conflict, peace and governance. A camel milk bottler from Kenya showed off her wares. Wodaabe and Zaghawa musicians from Niger and Sudan played haunting desert music. The people met all day long and all night too, round fires, out the back of the camp, meeting, talking, inquiring, analysing and working things out.

‘You can’t explain the knowledge you gain,’ said Nura. ‘But when something happens and you end up responding to it in a way that you didn’t before, or to be more precise, in the way you have always done, but somehow differently, you know it has something to do with the gatherings at Qarsa Dambi and other places. Qarsa Dambi was a combination of many people coming with different knowledge. The beginning of understanding is the fact that they seemed different. They physically looked different, they spoke different languages, they had different attire, but when they spoke, what they said was exactly what we could immediately visualise. We were linked to it.’

Nura continued. ‘The other reason it was a powerful event was that its content was so clear. Everybody heard the other person. Everybody understood what was going on. Whatever you wanted to say, you said, and you were happy. Whatever you wanted to respond, you responded, and you were happy. So there was clarity in terms of articulation and clarity in terms of hearing what was said. And while each thing that was said was so localised, the diversity and distance between the people made it a global issue. It was like people were talking about your village and a village far away all at once. You remained alert. It clarifies what you already know because they have used different words to say things that you know very clearly in your own head. The details they come with add new details to your own understanding. Because of the way they explain, because of the different words they use, it expands your edge.’ He repeated it, ‘It expands your edge.’ It could have been Gadamer himself talking. There was no demolishing of what we already knew. We expanded our edges.

Trust and surprise

What opens the edges of our horizon to expansion? What engages the edge? What brings our own understanding into play? It is difference? Is it trust? Nura expected to misunderstand the foreign pastoralists. The 2004 Yaballo meeting and its two-year tapestry of debate had kept alive a continuing question about how to organise and govern alongside the state. He was alert to that; it was the subject of a great network of discussion. As the strange pastoralist from Cameroon stood up, Nura heard him begin to speak in a foreign tongue before the translators set to work in ripples of explanation. To his surprise, Nura recognised what the man was saying about customary and state law, governing and being governed. Was it because the translator had twisted it to fit what he or she knew to be the needs of the listeners? Nura mentioned that their villages seemed like neighbours. He could *recognise himself* in what he heard. He said their villages were far apart, but felt like the same village. His understanding, with its questioning edges came

forward to be expanded in that moment of recognition and connection with the other. It was a matter of trust, recognition and difference at once.

After the gathering at Qarsa Dambi, according to Nura, the stories and understandings lived on. 'The women who ran the camp restaurants made money from the event and they invested it in local restaurants. When I go there they don't want to take money from me, because Qarsa Dambi provided them capital for their businesses. No, let me pay I say, it was just business. Of course, then we talk about the gathering. It's still alive, because every time I want to pay, it's a story, every time they want to refuse me, it's a story. And we exchange knowledge and information and it keeps going.' The capital they took home from Qarsa Dambi was a part of the flow of understanding. It made up a part of the living storyline. 'I now use that road every time I go to Moyale. There is no day I am asleep when I pass Qarsa Dambi. I look at the site.'

'For the different people,' Nura went on, 'the Qarsa Dambi story is now at the third/fourth generation. The discussion continued on. As the stories were heard, they moved from one group to the other. People would ask, 'who did you hear it from?' So and so heard it from so-and-so, who heard it from so-and so, who heard it from so-and-so, who was at the meeting. Generally the list of participants that went to Qarsa Dambi is part of the knowledge of the people now. When you meet them they say, 'ah you were at Qarsa Dambi, can I ask you something?' So the participants became an authority in relation to trying to clarify some of the good stories that people have heard. This is how it is evolving. And this is why people want another Qarsa Dambi, to refresh that good storyline. So that the number of people who hear it first hand will increase and the thing will continue and continue.'

Nura went on, 'there were major peace meetings that started at Qarsa Dambi, but which went on, like the Borana, Gabra, Guji peace meeting. There was a whole series of peace meetings after that. What energised those peace meetings and interests of the people who called them was what was discussed at Yaballo. There was a peace between Borana and Guji, there was Gabra, Borana, Garre – all these ideas – cross border discussion about peace, all these discussions were ideas that were created in the discussion at the Yaballo meeting and continued at Qarsa Dambi and then afterwards.'

'With conflict, when it is very hot we just wait for things to cool down. We help each other; remind each other what we have said. You can't talk much when the place is on fire. People are being killed. People get agitated on both sides. We don't speak up when the situation is so wrong, because we will not be listened to. The brain that is going to die in that war will not be listening. But after the dead ones are buried, now you can talk to the ones who are going to live. What we are doing is from every incident, we want to use that opportunity to tell leaders and officials to behave differently next time. It has never been like this. Now because we have been talking to

each other, people understand more about where these conflicts are coming from.'

A year later the newly registered Oromia Pastoralist Association had its first board meeting at Matahara. There were twelve members, each from a different pastoralist group in Oromia. The understanding seeded at Yaballo, discussed all over the region and consolidated at Qarsa Dambi had taken this group to this point.

'We know we have knowledge,' said Nura. 'We are first working to get fast recognition. When people realise the knowledge we have, they will value it and they will value us. We use the opportunity when we speak to speak the right thing. We speak differently from other people.'

Another elder took up the theme, 'We are leaders of people. We lead by making up our mind and sharing it with the people. If they agree with us we lead them. If they come with a new idea, we make that person a leader and follow him. We create energy. I imagine that our world is shaped the way it is because of lack of understanding: they of us and us of them. They [the government and aid agencies] don't understand the choices we make, or the way we use our wealth. And we cannot learn the world as there is a lack of peace. Peace will lead to a new situation of where our minds will be.'

In October of that year the new Oromia Pastoralists' Association called clan leaders from all the Oromo pastoralist groups in Ethiopia to a camp at Haro Qallo, a ridge above Negelle town. The meeting convened to hear and discuss the results of research commissioned by our project into livelihoods in neighbouring Somali Region. The research, led by Stephen Devereux of the Institute of Development Studies, had surprised Somali people across that region, because it was, they said, an accurate presentation of their lives. Presenting it to the Oromo was a way of stimulating further debate.

'At Haro Qallo,' resumed Nura, 'there was an understanding which was established that we have a big problem with land issues. Because we had this in the back of our mind, the meeting provided a platform, based on the Somali experience, to now focus on that problem and talk about it. So we took the opportunity. There was nothing to block us from thinking about it. We looked at the issue of who is supposed to do something about it. We know who is suffering, we know who is affected by it, but who is supposed to do something about it? So we went into the discussion and debates and also we did deeper analysis, referring to the original agenda of Yaballo and the decision that we should take opportunity at any time to discuss the things we need to do for ourselves. So we approached it by looking at weaknesses in each institution in terms of how this problem came to be: weakness in government, and weakness in our customary institutions.'

'There were failures on our part. We have a very elaborate legal system. We stopped using that when we started listening to others. We tried to pilot crop farming and work it out. And as we tried that, the farms started to

expand. As the crops expanded and started threatening the place, people started enclosing land, which is more or less like farming, but it's for pasture this time. People started using the common community land that animals need to survive. We are responsible for that. We were weak on that because we were not consciously doing it, we were each one responding to the situation.

'There were two things that happened at Haro Qallo. We told the government that it was our meeting and we are the ones who invited them. And that was seen to be acceptable, so we learned something, that we can actually call government to a meeting. We have always been following their instructions. But now we invited them, they came. We asked them to speak, they spoke. We asked them to listen, they listened. It gave us a new understanding – a new knowledge – that this thing can happen.

'On the land questions we asked, is there hope in doing something about it? We said yes. Is it easy? We said no. Who is going to do it? We'll do it ourselves. We encourage each other to do that. And we asked, which frame are we going to use? We will use our institutions and our knowledge. We decided to ignore all new knowledge and all new institutions until we get to a level where we can't move. At one stage we are going to need new knowledge to come and help us open up, that's when we will ask for new ideas to come in. This is what we are working on. We took responsibility.

'We contracted on one thing with senior government officials. One thing we agreed is that we will never hold them responsible for things we have not complained about, even if government does wrong. We took that responsibility and they contracted us on that. They also took responsibility for one thing and we contracted them, the fact that if we want to do something and the policy is silent and we do a good thing, the government will not stop us doing it. It is what we agreed at Hara Qallo. This is what all of us took back home. We took it wide, far, to pastoralist areas for people to understand what had happened at Hara Qallo. ...The beginning of my feeling of good started in Hara Qallo, because I think of not only attendance of government but the response of government was also very good.'

Compare what Nura is saying about the government participation at Hara Qallo and the story from Yaballo in 2004. The atmosphere has completely changed. I was at the first day of the Hara Qallo meeting and I heard the Regional Minister for Education speak to the elders as if they were true constituents of his polity. Some government officials at least were being drawn into the circles of understanding that the pastoralist leaders were convening.

In December 2007, we invited more than 500 Somali pastoralist leaders from Ethiopia and neighbouring countries to a gathering at a place called Hudet. Another fine camp, this time the tented villages were strung along the edges of a dry river under tamarind and acacia trees. The women had their own camp at one end, the members of parliament, official visitors and journalists at the other. In between lay the geography of interconnecting

villages representing every clan in Somali and their neighbours the Oromo and Afar. When the pastoralists arrived there was only one thing people wanted to talk about. Peace.

Nura says, 'for the first time, I think, there was an understanding established that the Oromo and Somali can sort things out together. They can relate to each other well. They can also share issues. This was one of the understandings established at Hudet. Of course, Hudet was not only about knowledge between Oromo and Somali, but between the Somali themselves. I met people there who had met other Somali clans for the first time.'

'There was a lot of discussion about land conflict. And there was one understanding which was reached, that this problem will not be solved by complaining, unless pastoralists do something using their own law and their own knowledge. I think many people left the meeting happy. It appears, from the stories that I have heard, that it was a memorable gathering for the Somali community. From day one to the end, I think there was a lot of understanding.'

'Since Hudet I have been in contact with the elders of Somali. We call each other, they call me, I call them. We meet, we chat. We exchange ideas, we discuss problems. We consult each other, advise each other. We plan together. So we are truthful with each other. Some things we can do nothing about, we also share with each other. This discussion and calling has not been there before. It's a new thing. This is what came out of Hudet.'

It is late afternoon. The sun has cooled and the rush hour traffic has built up on the highway. I draw in the threads of what I have heard and — did I give the threads back to Nura as I should have done? I hope so. My notebook says that at the end of the Yaballo meeting there was an understanding, a spark of an idea that pastoralists need not wait for something to change in hitherto untouchable spheres. After Yaballo there was a weaving of debates and conversations through the structures of society in the meetings that usually discuss welfare and production and in the peace meetings that the elders organised, and the understanding grew and spread. At Qarsa Dambi, the Oromia pastoralists heard descriptions of people and places that they recognised and yet who did things differently and they 'expanded their edge'. Then the behaviour of the government officials at Hara Qallo and at the peace meetings showed that some of them had joined the conversation too. Contrast that with the dismissive, rattled response of the administrators at Yaballo three years before. Then the Somalis took a step into the same conversation. They spoke to each other about peace in a region where conflict, blame and betrayal is a daily reality. I believe that they thought things then, however briefly, that they hadn't imagined were possible.

Connections and networks

It is now possible to add a spatial and multiple element to my previously more temporal and one-to-one view of understanding. Understanding travelled and developed, not only from a tradition into the present and future, but also across space and between people. This means that the projective element of understanding is multiplied as people move and talk. Might the understanding have distorted into the unreal, as in the idea of Chinese whispers? As multiple people in a variety of different places took up the matter of the discussion, the topic itself became better connected to the people and the places of the debate. In this case (and it is not always the case) the clear single topic of all these conversations, the understanding of which was brought forward from each person as they joined into the conversation, magnified the subject until it became more concrete, commonplace and evident. The idea of pastoralists doing things for themselves (beyond the usual range of things they did for themselves and re-occupying terrains of action that had been taken over by the State) now became a possibility. It was an idea that had at one time been unthinkable.

The debate is alive again, as Borbor said. It travels across the country from one person to another, from one meeting to another, along roads and goat paths, in messages and across the phone network. The subject is the people themselves and their own understanding of who they are and what they can do and be. The tradition is brought forward again and again, deliberately in their stories and inadvertently in the language that each person uses. But in bringing it forward in discussion with one another, they are making the world anew. They are re-describing, as Rorty might put it (Rorty 1989). I had no idea it would happen like this. This form of re-description mirrors the development of language and history. It is one that can only happen in a multiplicity of voices in a series of encounters. By relying on the conversations of many, rather than only those of the elite, re-description lays the ground for the cliché of the future. Now, there, it is something new. I see that all the different people in this story conversing and debating, pondering and plotting, and all the different places where the discussions happened, and all the new artefacts and institutions that were inextricably affixed to the conversation – the trees, the money, the politics – are having their own

multiple effects on what travels forward as understanding. It demonstrates that coming to understanding is a function of all of life co-operating at once.

Nura, I believe, made a substantial contribution to phenomenological inquiry into understanding in his explanation on that day. He pointed to the aspects of understanding that arise with others in conversations between many different kinds of people across large areas of space and over time. He gave a new connective dimension to the character of event that is common to all understanding. The qualities of mobility, communality and oral expression of pastoralist people may well have had a bearing on why it was clear to him that understanding arises in its travel across people, time and space. He offered me an aspect of understanding that I had not yet found in the literature. This event of understanding illustrates again that in the coming together of different people, with their different systems of meaning, different cultures, different ways of articulating the world and holding it together –and where there is openness– new understandings have the potential to arise.

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