

Book review: Elizabeth E. Watson, 2009, *Living Terraces in Ethiopia – Konso Landscape, Culture & Development*, Woodbridge and New York: James Currey (an imprint of Boydell and Brewer) Eastern Africa Series. 242 pages.

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Which social and political conditions ensure the sustainability of indigenous intensive agricultural systems such as the terraced systems described in Eastern Africa? This question, of concern to academic scholars as well as development organisations, is approached by Elizabeth E. Watson, Lecturer in the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, from the Konso case, a densely peopled mountainous territory in southern Ethiopia entirely shaped by agricultural terraces. For the author, most existing studies of terracing have focused almost exclusively on material and climatological processes. Watson adopts a different perspective, as she places an emphasis on understanding the way forms of social and cultural organisation work with the water, soil and climate to produce the terraced landscape and transform it. In doing so, she opts for the institutional approach to environmental management and development as developed by Melissa Leach, which maintains that indigenous ecological knowledge and practices are deeply embedded in social and cultural institutions.

The author draws on extensive fieldwork done between 1996 and 1998 for her PhD, completed with several additional visits done up to 2008. Her book appears as an ambitious demonstration underpinned by original empirical data and strong references to the academic literature in human geography, social anthropology and environmental studies. One may regret though that the bibliography on Konso seem not to have been really updated compared to the PhD dissertation although substantial social science research has been conducted in Konso since 1998. The first part of the book is devoted to showing the links between Konso agricultural practices and the Konso 'lineage heads' called *poqallas*, considered by the author as the most relevant institutions to understand the social process of terracing (chapters 2, 3, 4). The second part of the book looks into recent religious, social and political changes and their consequences on *poqallas* activities impacting agriculture (chapters 5, 6, 7).

The first chapter is dedicated to a general presentation of Konso intensive indigenous agriculture. Some elements are rapidly introduced, such as the terracing techniques, the irrigation systems, intercropping, manuring, which together form characteristic traits of agricultural intensification, defined as an increased investment (in labor or capital) per surface unit. Terraces as well as other stone works (flood protection works, channels...) are presented as 'landesque capital', that is, long-standing elements of intensification visible in the landscape. The essay looks into the social construction of these landscape-scale agricultural artefacts. However, contrary to what the title and the introduction may suggest, the book does not aim to embrace comprehensively the landscape production (introducing other elements of the landscape and solid information about emic views of landscape would then have been necessary), but the social process of terracing.

Chapter 2 (“Social life of agriculture”) is central to the rationale of the book. It deals with the social organisation of farming activities. If most of the daily farming activities can be done in the frame of the household (digging the soil, sowing, weeding, harvesting, scaring birds), more labour intensive activities such as terracing require to be done in the frame of working groups. It is scientifically acknowledged indeed that agricultural intensification is possible only through a strong social organisation. In Konso, working groups are organized according to friendship, clan or neighbourhood identities. Calling a group to work on one’s field implies paying the workers, or more often, participating in turn in working groups on other members’ fields. In any case, the provision of local drinks (and sometimes meals) for all the participants is requisite in organizing a working party on one’s field: this restricts access to work group labour for the poorest people.

In order to characterize inequalities in access to labour, Watson collected quantitative data about the use of work groups between March and September 1996. The main result is that 4 out of the 48 people sampled use significantly larger amounts of extra-household labour than the others, with a ratio of nine to one (283 person days vs. 31). These four people happen to be *poqallas*, or ‘lineage heads’. Watson also noted a difference in the use of extra-household labour: most of the simple farmers used the majority of labour to cope with peak labour demands at times of sowing and weeding, whereas the four *poqallas* invested a higher proportion of their labour on activities such as terracing or restoring irrigation infrastructures (p. 71). Watson also proposes an estimation of the landholding and concludes that *poqallas* own more land than non-*poqallas*, with a ratio of 3.15 to 1 (139 units of yield to 44). Part of this land is lent to lineage or clan members, in return for which farmers supply days of labour to the *poqalla* each year (customary system called *piyolada*). This set of data is used to conclude that *poqallas* are forms of institutions “who have a larger share of land than others, and they use this share of land to gain access to a larger share of labour. The labour they have access to is used in the construction of the landesque capital, that improves the land capability and enables a larger population to be supported” (p. 78). The theory defended here is that the *poqallas* would represent the main institution which would have permitted the development of a terraced landscape.

If I have set out the reasoning so extensively, it is because it justifies the orientation of the rest of the book. The following chapters will then focus on the figure of the *poqallas*, to look more in detail at their cultural and political role in the society, at the risk of wandering from agriculture and terraces. The author stresses the multiple dimensions of their activity, which contrasts with previous understandings of *poqallas* presented as ‘religious leaders’. The nature of their power is discussed, whether it is due to a submission of the people to their economic domination (a ‘class-like’ relationship) or to their agreed subordination to a hierarchy considered as a manifestation of the sacred.

In the last part of the book, Watson insists on the dynamics of the system previously described as the ‘orthodoxy’, following Bourdieu’s term. The integration in the Ethiopian state starting from 1897, the introduction of Christianity and the revolutionary regime of the Derg (1974-1991) had strong destabilizing impacts on the local institutions. The conclusion goes against neo-Malthusian discourses: “If environmental degradation is taking place, it is not so much directly linked to population growth, but to the institutional history, to the decline of the *poqallas* and to the inability of people to raise enough labour to maintain the larger forms of landesque capital” (p. 222).

For various reasons, both internal and external to the book, it is difficult to follow Watson’s choice to focus almost exclusively on *poqallas* to approach the agricultural practices and dynamics.

The main reason lies in a serious omission about land tenure in Konso. If it is true that *poqallas* are larger landowners than the rest of the population, and that they invest more in

landesque capital, they do not own more than 10 % of the cultivated land (estimation made by reviewer with two different methods<sup>1</sup>). If one follows Watson's theory, how can the existence of the terraces on the other lands be then explained? Two hypotheses could be proposed. The first hypothesis would be that the figures collected by Watson in 1996 are not representative of the organisation of agricultural works, and overestimate the role of *poqallas* in organising terracing activities. Indeed other figures about access to labour collected by Watson for the years 1994, 1995, and 1996 and presented in her PhD (p. 162) show important annual variability. The second hypothesis would be that the terraces on privately owned lands used to be maintained through other institutions that have disappeared or have been weakened recently, but Watson's contemporary approach can not grasp their past significance... This point seriously questions the relevance of Watson's picture of Konso 'orthodoxy', and consequently the architecture of the book, with its opposition between the orthodoxy and the social mutations since 1897.

Of course nobody will expect a research based on ethnographic inquiries to be able to portray a society as it was one century ago. The uneasiness that the reader may have is more due to the fact that Watson infers strong statements about a supposed causal link between the disintegration of the institution of the *poqallas* and the deterioration of the structures supporting indigenous intensive agriculture from a quite speculative understanding of Konso 'orthodox' society, in which the diversity of working organisations that can be mobilized to build terraces is reduced to one.

Further doubts are raised about the theory defended in the book as Watson says very little about the well-documented egalitarian generation-grading system (known in other Oromo-related groups under the name *gada*), and seems to have a disproportionate *poqalla*-centred understanding of Konso society. In the end, her description of a hierarchic society appears thus in strong contradiction with other interpretations, which insist more strongly on the division of power and on the strong resistance to hierarchy (see the anthropologist Hermann Amborn, or the archaeologist Birgitta Kimura, who respectively speak of a *polycephalous* and of a *heterarchic* society).

The attempt of Watson to go beyond the monograph exercise and to fit her ethnographic data into larger theories about social organisation and natural resources management, is sensible; but she may have gained in soundness by limiting her ambitions to a study of the links between land and labour access and *poqallas*, and their dynamics. Particularly the quantitative data presented in Chapter 2 as well as the different steps of her demonstration would have needed to be more robust to counter convincingly the rest of the literature on Konso. These reservations in no way lessen Watson's credit for her original data and fascinating interviews (for example on land access customary systems, on the literal reconstruction of *poqallas*, on the arrival of the Ethiopian troops, on emic views about the introduction of Christianity...). Her work undoubtedly sheds a new light on the economic role and the agency of the *poqallas*; furthermore, it contributes to a better understanding of the social change in Konso.

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<sup>1</sup> On the basis of the number of *poqallas* listed by Watson in her PhD. dissertation (p. 112) compared to the estimated number of households in Buso, weighted by their relative share of the landholding; and on the basis of the number of fields owned by *poqallas* in Buso listed by Watson in her PhD dissertation (p.141).