Waakka

Contemporary contexts of memorial emblems for Konso heroes

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Introduction

The following study concerns *waakka*, memorial statues for 'traditional' heroes among the Konso in Southern Ethiopia. I aim to describe the symbolic meanings of *waakka* and explore the reasons why they are erected and the current challenges around the errection and preservation of *waakka*.

The Konso are one of the Eastern Cushitic-speaking groups in Southern Ethiopian. The community is organized into nine exogamous clans. Within each clan there are several lineages. The position of the headship in a clan is always hereditary. Extended families can establish their own lineage after some generations (at least five or more). Both the head of the clan and lineageare called *poqalla.*[1]

Individuals differ in their status, which are either achieved or ascribed. *Xormuman* (the Konso term for heroism) is a valued status among the Konso. Men have to be clan chiefs, outstanding hunters, killers of human adversaries,or economically and politically eminent in order to be considered as heroes. Killers may transfer their heroic status totheir respective clan heads. Sometimes, killers can transfer their insignia to their clan chiefs (or lineage heads) and Amborn (2002) suggests that this mechanism shows that the act of killing is a social affair. According to Konso tradition, clan heads are not allowed to shed blood, except during sacrificial ceremonies. Thus, in order for a clan head to be a hero through killing, their fellow clan members must transfer their status to them. The hero is praised and honoured by his family and the community. After his death, he is rewarded with the erection of statues (*waakka*) with small stones, known as gravels, erected infront of them. The ultimate purpose of erecting statues and gravels is to praise heroes and their spectacular achievements in order to inspire younger generation to be heroes like their forefathers. In this, these statues build a bridge between past and present generations (Thubauville 2012).

Methods of Data Collection

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in multiple locations in the Konso area. Relevant data was gathered from both primary (first-hand data from knowledgeable individuals and direct observation of places where *waakka* are displayed) and secondary (second-hand data from literature written by different authors and photopgraphs captured by individuals) sources. Informants were purposefully recruited on the

1 *Poqalla* are heads of clan. They wear silver bracelets on their right wrist. All Konso people are descended from *poqalla* families. Below these clan heads are lineage *poqalla* who are descendants of clan *poqalla* and wear iron or brass bracelets. Any senior family can establish its own lineage. There are only nine clan heads while there are several lineage heads.

basis of their knowledge of the culture of *waakka*. The major applied methods included:

- Observation: Visiting locations where *waakka* are displayed.
- Key informant interviews: Individuals with extensive knowledge about Konso culture and *waakka* like owner families of *waakka*, clan leaders and elders were interviewed.
- Personal experiences: I am a native of the Konso community and my own first-hand experiences, observations and knowledge about *waakka* have been incorporated into the study. However, I have tried to place my own knowledge in the context of other data sources to try and avoid bias.
- Photography: Several *waakka* were photographed to capture the details of the statues.
- Consultation of archival materials: Some historic images were retrieved from the Frobenius Institute's photo archive.
- Referencing of academic and non-academic media: These secondary data sources were examined to provide historic and ethnographic background materials for the study of *waakka*.

The Meaning and Representation of *Waakka*

According to local explanations, the word *waakka* comes from *waa*, which means 'something', and *aaka*, which implies 'grandfather'. Hallpike (1972) noted that *waakka* denotes 'something of the grandfathers'. The name indicates that *waakka* can only be produced and erected for male elders of the community, who qualifies the local craiteria of heroism.

Waakka are wooden anthropomorphic statues erected on graves, near a pathway, on communal ground or at the entrance of a village to represent the total achievements of dead Konso heroes (Hallpike 1972, 2008; Cowen 1978; Amborn 2002; Otto 2004; Poissonnier 2009, 2014; Awoke 2010). They are carved from the wood of the juniper tree, which the Konso consider to be holy and which grow in the large forests owned by the clan chiefs (Poissonnier 2014). These forests are believed to be sacred and *waakka* can only be carved from the trees that grow there.

During their expeditions to Southern Ethiopia, researchers from the Frobenious Institute (i.e., Jensen, Haberland and Straube) were fascinated by the cultural phenomenon of the erection of *waakka,*which they characterized as an important element of the 'meritorious complex' (*Verdienstwesen*). They identified the three main elements of the meritorous complex as follows: (1) 'arranging and sponsoring large feasts of merit'; (2) killing a foe or large game; and (3) the erection of a monument by the man's descendants to memorilaize him after his death and as a confirmation of his high social status (Braukämper 2003; Poissonnier 2009). Thubauville (2012) has written that the team quickly realized that the statues were of importance for their theory and so documented them thoroughly.

In Konso the noteworthiness of a man is sometimes ascribed, but mostly achieved by doing something considered remarkable: being wealthy; killing a male adversary or dangerous wild animal; being clan chief; or being a great war leader (Hallpike 1972, 2008; Cowen 1978; Amborn 2002; Kimura 2004; Poissonnier 2009; Awoke 2010).

The erection of *waakka* follows large-scale memorial ceremonies[2] (Shako 2004; Thubauville 2012). The authorized wood carver – chosen for his skill – is invited to the house of the dead hero. While working on a *waakka*, the wood carver lives in the family's compound (Poissonnier 2014), where he receives payment for his work and is supplied with good food, including meat, honey and alcohol (Watson 1998). Before he arrives, *jaqa* – a local alcoholic beverage – is prepared, honey is made ready and a goat is butchered for him. Until he finishes carving the wooden sculptures, he consumes the meat and drinks the *jaqa* mixed with honey. The food and drink is offered daily on behalf of the deceased because it is believed that the carver is connected with the dead hero (Poissonnier 2014). It is a symbol of respecting and honoring the deceased. After finalizing his task, in addition to cash, the carver receives a big gourd of *jaqa*. As the payment is costly, families of the deceased order *waakka* according to their wealth and capacity.

On the day of the erection of a *waakka*, lineage members, neighbours, relatives and villagers (in the case of clan *poqalla*) are invited to attend the ceremony. Invitees may bring *jaqa* to the house of the hero. Poissonnier (2009, 2014) states that the larger the group of descendants, the greater the feast and the bigger and more expensive the monument. A ceremonial dance called *shileta*[3] is performed. During the erection, the statues are painted red with dye made from a kind of rocky soil (Shako 2004). Either a goat or an ox is slaughtered to accompany the ceremony and chyme and blood are placed on the grave of the hero.

Fig. 1: Author with a group of *waakka* in the public space of Debana village

2 For the clan chiefs the erection of *waakka* is carried out after nine years. The corpse of the chief is mummified and both the burial and the representation of *waakka* is made on the same day. For other heroes, the ceremony depends on the ability of the family to make all the necessary arrangements. But families always need at least a year to conduct the ceremony. The ceremony is a rite of passage conducted to incorporate the dead into the world of the dead.

3 *Shileta* is a mourning dance performed when a person dies after his/her son has given birth to a grandson. It is performed for elders of both sexes, even though they may not have *waakka.*

Waakka are always erected so that they face the road and stand in a straight line. They are usually erected on the family's or a lineage member's farmland situated near to a main road. As Poissonnier states:'Only outstanding deceased people's monuments are allowed to be erected on a communal village ground and can be remembered as "more heroic" than others' (Poissonnier 2014). Such types of monument are very rare throughout Konso. For example, as you can see from figure 1, only individuals who have made extraordinary contribution to the village are represented in public spaces. The *waakka* of many heroes can be displayed together on the same row. If the graveyard is situated on the main road, *waakka* can be be erected close to the tomb. I found only one clan chief informant whose family's *waakka* are erected on the tomb.

Waakka always appear in groups (Amborn 2002) with the hero in the middle surrounded by his wife (wives), slain enemies, animals killed, weapons used and other achievements, for example, figures that symbolize the deceased person's farmland. Many authors have described the arrangement and characteristics of these figures (Hallpike 1972, 2008; Cowen 1978; Amborn 2002; Shako 2004; Poissonnier 2009; Awoke 2010; Jensen 1936 cited in Thubauville 2012; Richer 2016).

Symbolism is the major feature of *waakka* statues. Every statue has its own symbolic meaning. The tallest statue, usually with *xhallassha* (phallic forehead ornament) and a visible penis, represents the hero. It is skillfully curved, as are the spears, Konso shields and, more recently, Kalashnikov guns that surround him. Next to him in a line – again finely carved – stand his wives; the first one on the right and the second on the left side, both wearing traditional bead necklaces. Slain enemies are roughly carved, represented as thin and castrated and positioned on the extremes of the line. All *waakka* have eyes made from ostrich eggs. Black colour is applied to mark eyebrows. A game animal killed by the hero is shown in front of the statues, where one can also find gravels representing the number of agricultural fields he owned in his lifetime (Shako 2004).

Fig. 2: *Waakka* with Kalashnikov

Some *waakka* of *poqalla* contain wooden sticks with notches that represents the number of successive generations.

Challenges to the Continuation of the Tradition of *Waakka*

The construction and erection of *waakka* is currently declining due to several challenges. Today, there are many conservative Protestants in Konso who are against many cultural practices including the the tradition of *waakka*, which they consider to be objects of idolatry. Amborn (2002) correctly refutes this and states that, although Konso people acknowledge and respect *waakka,* they are not cult-like images and people do not worship them. A possible reason for the Protestants' condemnation of *waakka* may be a dislike for the ceremonial rituals performed when the statues are erected.

Fig. 3: Sticks with notches in a *waakka* assembly

Another human factor is the illegal trafficking of the sculptures. *Waakka* have been stolen and illegally sold to tourists and even on the international art market (Watson 1998; Poissonnier 2009) because of their artistic value and popularity among foreign tourists and collectors (Grant 2006). I observed a shop in Addis Ababa where both inauthentic and real *waakka* were displayed for sale. The fake ones are sold for a cheap price but the real ones are expensive. Poissonnier (2009) has correctly stated that 'many of the older and more valuable sculptures have disappeared all together from the villages of the Konso and the administrative authorities of that region feared that they might soon disappear completely'. Moreover, even if stolen *waakka* are found and returned to the community, according to Konso culture, it is forbidden to re-erect them (Richer 2016). Since *waakka* erection is associated with burial, people believe that a person dies only once and cannot be buried twice. Therefore, families that have *waakkas* rescued from the black market and returned to them, hesitate to re-erect them.

The rapid expansion of modernity has also had an adverse impact on the *waakka* tradition. Today, the younger generation is indifferent to indigenous cultural practices in general and the customs of *waakka* in particular. Moreover, killing of enemies and wild game is forbidden by law today. As a result of the above explained factors, very few new *waakka* emblems are still erected.

All these factors mean that *waakka* are now very rare throughout Konso land. It is particularly difficult to find newly made, original *waakka*. Even though it is not culturally correct, some families have removed their own *waakka* from the original places they were erected and re-positioned them in or nearby their houses in order to protect them from thieves. During my visit to the villages of Buso and Purquta in September 2015, I observed three families who had displayed their *waakka* in front of their main gate. One of the clan chiefs (Bamalle) also displayed their *waakka* in their homestead.

Natural factors are also challenging the sustainability of *waakka* figures. Jensen observed that most of the time they are covered with a simple thatched roof that covers the whole group of figures and protects the monuments from weathering (Jensen 1936, cited in Thubauville 2012). However, these simple thatched roofs decompose easily, exposing the *waakka* to damage from the sun, rain, humidity and wind.

Fig. 4: *Waakka* inside the village of Buso

Fig. 5 and 6: Damaged roof over a *waakka* assembly

Attempts to Document and Preserve *Waakka*

As Amborn observed, anyone travelling through the Konso region could not fail to be impressed by the wooden sculptures displayed along the roadsides (Amborn 2002). The earliest published photograph of *waakka* was taken around 1915 by Hodson (Cowen 1978). Azaïs and Chambard (1931) introduced Konso to the scholarly and public world with fifteen excellent photographs of *waakka* (Shako 2004; Amborn 2002; Cowen 1978), while Jensen (1936) and Nowack (1954) wrote descriptions of Konso *waakka* (Cowen 1978). Later scholars who have described Konso *waakka* include Hallpike (1972, 2008), Metasebia (2001), Amborn (2002), and Poissonnier (2009).

The 1934–35, 1950–51 and 1954–55 Frobenius Institute expeditions to Southern Ethiopia were, amongst other things, meant to document *waakka* (Amborn 2002). However, the expedition members also bought and smuggled *waakka* from the Konso as well as from the neighbouring Kusume area. Today these are kept in the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main, Germany (see Figures 8 and 9 in Thubauville 2012). Numerous pictures of *waakka* and the carving of the *waakka* assemblies that were collected for the Weltkulturen museum can be found in the photo archive at the Frobenius Institute (see for example, Figures 7, 8 and 9).

Fig. 7a and b: *Waakka* in the Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main

Fig. 8: Carving *waakka*

Fig. 9: *Waakka* displayed at the expedition camp

Poissonnier (2009) explains that concern that old *waakka* were disappearing prompted a mission to study and inventory the sculptures, planned and carried out by the Ethiopian *Authority of Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage* (ARCCH) in cooperation with the *Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes* (CFEE). The process of documentation led to the establishment of the Konso community museum. The museum was inaugurated in 2009 with the purpose of preserving *waakka* that had been rescued from the black market. The museum was also established as a research centre. In 1996 Ethiopian customs officials seized 200

Fig.10: *Waakka* display inside Konso Museum

waakka, illegally trafficked and intended for the international art market. These were stored in the Konso department of culture for about a decade, and given to the community museum in 2009. As mentioned above, as it is unusual to re-erect stolen *waakka* at their original home, some of the seized *waakka* were displayed in the museum while others were stored in the museum.

Fig. 11: *Waaka* in the IES museum

Outside of the Konso district, *waakka* are displayed in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) Museum and the Ethiopian National Museum in Addis Ababa (see Figure 11).

The former political party of Konso,[4] the Konso People's Democratic Union (KPDU), included a *waakka* in its party emblem and promised to help the society to maintain and preserve the sculptures (Shako 2004) (see Figure 11). The head of the party was Shako Otto, who understood the value of preserving the peoples' heritage and was committed to working towards the conservation of *waakka*. In spite of being a medical doctor by profession, he has made a valuable contribution to the literature on Konso, publishing several articles on Konso culture (Otto 1994; 2004)

Ethiopia has had its own stamps since the last decade of the nineteenth century, and these have been important in highlighting the country's natural and cultural heritages. In 2002, designer Bogale Belachew designed a stamp series featuring *waakka* that was printed at Österreichische Staatsdruckerei, Austria (see Figure 12). These stamps were and are still used by the Ethiopian Postal Service and have played a significant role in familiarizing the world with Konso *waakka*.

Fig. 12: 'Stamp series' used by Ethiopian Postal Service, 2003

Some tour operators place *waakka* figures on their web pages, while local hotels in Konso town also have *waakka* monuments and wall paintings (see figures 13 and 14), purpose-made to attract tourists.

4 After the downfall of the military regime in 1991, Ethiopia has adopted an ethnic-based federal system of government. Konso was represented by its own party (KPDU) until it was dissolved in 1992, when a number of political parties formed a coalition (SEPDM, Southern Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement) representing fifty-six ethnic groups in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region.

Fig. 13: *Waakka* at Green Hotel

Fig. 15: Small *waakka* produced for sale to tourists

Fig. 16: Display of *waakka* at village gate and a communal house to show the leading generation's achievements

Fig. 14: A sketch of *waakka* at Konso Edget Hotel No.1

Some local craftsmen and children produce small *waakka* for sale to tourists travelling to/from South Omo (see Figure 15). There is no specific social category who produce these *waakka,* and any skilful person can carve them both for sale or for the dead hero. Most of the producers sell them to tourist guides – who sell them on to tourists – for little money and the work does not provide their primary income.

The *waakka* display at the main gate of Majjala village (see figure 16) is contributing to the preservation of the *waakka* tradition, albeit in a new form: they do not represent an individual hero but represent community achievement as a whole. This is a new invention that has never been seen before. Some of these new structures of *waakka* display the heroism of all the village men – the generation at power. The generation that rules the community is required to accomplish certain things – for example, building new or repairing old public places (*moora*) – and must be renowned for its leadership and management of the community's resources. Traditionally, after retiring, stones would have been erected in some places to commemorate its achievements.

The Future of *Waakka*

The *waakka* tradition is undoubtedly under threat as the depredations of theft, decay, youthful indifference, and outdatedness take their toll. Yet, these challenges are not insurmountable, and a determined effort to conserve and reinvigorate this valuable piece of Konso heritage could secure the *waakka*'s future.

In the first place, there is a need for periodic inventory and documentation work on the existing *waakka*. This would help to identify the status of the remaining *waakka* in the region. As Christians are against the tradition of *waakka*, continuous and unreserved attempts should be made to make the younger generations in Konso aware of the value of *waakka* in preserving their identity, culture and history. Also, the whole community should protect genuine *waakka* from theft and smuggling. Moreover, the *waakka* tradition could be continued and adapted for modern times. Traditional criteria for heroism – such as hunting and killing – for example, should be changed for criteria with contemporary value: success in business, good education, community service, serving in the military, etc. Finally, souvenir shops should be established in different places in order to provide inauthentic *waakka* for tourists.

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