



## Weighted Digging Sticks in Ethiopia

Sidney R. Waldron

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another use for the perforated stone, although not the same use as in the version of the story I remembered.

I recounted my memory of this story in good faith and supplied Hromnik with my mother's address so he could follow up the information. Her reply to him included the account set out above, but Hromnik has chosen to suppress it to suit his own purposes. Instead, he quotes selectively from her letter in order to launch a personal attack.

4. Hromnik (1984) claims that "the South African stone-weighted digging stick is unique and I wonder whether this uniqueness is real or contrived". He dismissed other evidence, since "the only case to the contrary, from Ethiopia, is based on a second-hand and internally contradictory report which has not been confirmed by any other evidence." In this case he has simply not done his homework. The Ethiopian evidence for weighted digging sticks is well attested and is added to here.

I had personally seen a weighted digging stick from Ethiopia in 1966, collected a few years earlier by Sidney Waldron, an anthropologist friend. I described it from memory (Van der Merwe 1985) as having an iron-clad tip and being 1,5 m long, 50 mm thick and having a stone weight of "about 5 kg, if memory serves". Hromnik seems to find this incredible. Waldron's first hand account published in this issue provides measurements not very different from my recollection: 1,15 m long, 42 mm thick (134 mm circumference), with a stone weighing 3,9 kg and a total mass of 5,7 kg.

I can add that the Musée de l'Homme in Paris has on display in the African ethnography section an iron-tipped digging stick with stone weight at the top. In size and mass it resembles the Harari digging stick described by Waldron. Accompanying photographs show a group of Galla men using such weighted sticks in cultivation. The point is made that the Amhara do not use digging sticks, but ploughs. The practice of putting the stone at the top end of the stick,

incidentally, makes it possible to have a stick which is considerably thicker than the perforation in the stone; this may account for the small bore in some stone weights.

5. Hromnik has not produced written details of his beliefs about perforated stones: why they were made and by which 'earlier people'. The impression I have gained from his verbal remarks may be wrong, but it seems that he believes them to be female symbols that came from India. This would place these beliefs on a par with many of those propagated in his book *Indo-Africa* (Hromnik 1982), and also his recent assertions that stone walls in the eastern Transvaal are the ruins of Sikh temples older than 2 000 years; that there is an engraving of an Indian chariot in Montagu Cave; and that the Earlier Stone Age levels of the same cave contain the ash lenses of Indian-style cremations, to which the associated handaxes do not give the lie since they are found all over the surface in India anyway. I sincerely hope that we will be spared further appearance of such fringe archaeology in print.

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## WEIGHTED DIGGING STICKS IN ETHIOPIA

SIDNEY R. WALDRON

*Department of Sociology Anthropology*

*State University College at Cortland, Cortland, NY 13045, USA*

The weighted digging stick (Fig. 1) is an integral component of the toolkit employed in agriculture in the vicinity of the old walled city of Harar, Ethiopia (see note 1) where it is primarily used as a tilling instrument in soils unsuitable for the simple Ethiopian plough.

Three ethnic groups that were under the hegemony of the city-state of Harar (2) used this type of digging stick: the Harari, the local Oromo, and the Southern Argobba. In Harari, an Ethiopian Semitic language, the digging stick is called a *maxra*, certainly derived from the infinitive 'to dig', also *maxra*. The Oromo in the vicinity of Harar, locally called Qottu, use the term *dongora*, probably related to *danqara*, 'a bar (for gate or door)', or *danqaraa*, 'stick used to keep door closed' (Gragg 1982:99). Oromo is an Eastern Cushitic language. The Southern Argobba, who have lost

their Ethiopian Semitic language, now speak Oromo or Harari (Waldron 1984a:50) and use terms from these languages.

The weight stone is called *zenna un*, 'zenna stone', in Harari, for which no further etymology can be offered. These stones, which appear to be shaped by pecking, are of local Oromo manufacture and were sold by the makers in one corner of the inner market of Harar in a range of sizes. No details are available concerning the exact locale or technique of manufacture, nor of the exact identity of the craftsmen.

The Harari digging stick is employed in three ways. The most important are turning over blocks of soil under conditions of (i) water saturation, and (ii) heavy grass roots, as in fallow lands; it is also utilized (iii) where soil or terrain conditions render the wooden ox plough inefficient.

Farmers who have no draft animals use these digging sticks as their primary tilling instrument. Digging sticks are also used to cultivate such root crops as sweet potatoes. In their short study of Ethiopian farming tools, Mengesha and Lee (1960: 8-9) make these comments:

In the hands of an expert Ethiopian farmer, using his weight and power to drive the *dongora* into the earth, from 200 to 300 sq m of land can be readied for planting in one day.

Often the instrument is handled by teams of four men so its practical ground preparation capacity is from 800 to 1 000 sq m per day.

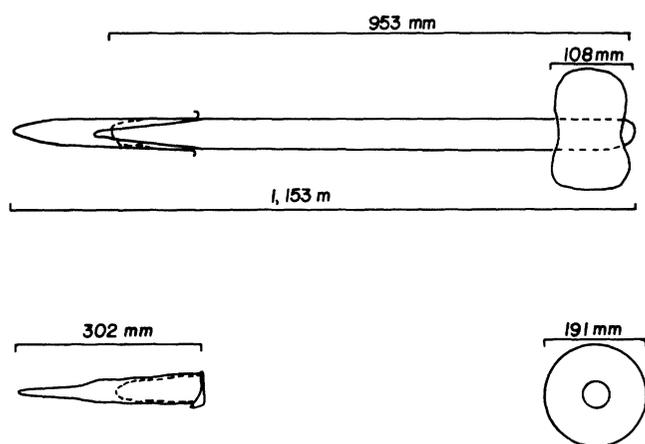
It has a wooden handle constructed of *kitkita* (*Dodonaea viscosa*) or *woira* (*Olea chrysophylla*, olive tree) which measures about 7 cm in diameter and about 90 cm in length. Attached to the leverage end of the tool is a spherical stone to add weight. On the penetration end is a sharply pointed sleeve.

The tool is customarily used with two hands. The operator lifts it about breast high and thrusts it down into the earth, then levers the tool, turning the soil out.

It would be more appropriate to describe the weight stone as cylindrical. The hole through which the wooden shaft is inserted, penetrates the stone. Although the author has never witnessed four men cooperating, teams of two and three men were often observed. With three men, the technique employed is for the men to stand so that they are facing three sides of an imaginary rectangle. By thrusting and prying in unison, they excavate blocks of turf slightly smaller than 1 sq m.

As the quotation above indicates, there are three parts in the Harari digging stick: stone, shaft and metal tip sheath. The stones, as noted, are made by local Oromo. The shafts are made by households as required. The metal tip sheaths are made in Harar by an endogamous 'caste' of Somali blacksmiths called *t'umt'u*. The digging stick upon which Fig. 1 is based is 1,153 mm long and 134 mm in circumference. The metal tip sheath is 302 mm in length and 3 mm at its thickest.

Harari informants state that slightly different stone



MASS (kg): Shaft 0,727 Stone 3,900 Tip 1,045  
Total 5,672

Fig. 1. Harari digging stick.

weights and stick lengths are employed for different tasks. Long shafts with heavy stone weights and very sharp metal tips are used to dig graves. Sticks with no weight stones or light stones are used for cultivating sweet potato mounds. The illustrated digging stick, not noticeably shorter than those used in fields, was the ritual grave digging implement used by the caretaker of the shrine of Sheikh Hashim and was presented to the author by him. Since the Italian occupation (1936-1941) automotive gears have sometimes been substituted for the weight stone, simply being slipped over the upper end of the shaft.

Although several theories of origin for this implement in Harar are conceivable, presently available evidence does not permit firm conclusions. Some of the possibilities are (i) the old Harari farming community may have employed them since distant times; (ii) the Argobba, who probably came from the site of the ancient kingdom of 'Ifat on the edge of the northern escarpment of the Ethiopian Highlands (Waldron 1984a: 50-51), may have brought these implements with them around AD 1400; (iii) the Oromo, who invaded the region around AD 1550, and who eliminated the old Harari farming communities, may have brought the digging sticks from southern Ethiopia; (iv) least probably, the Amhara, who conquered Harar in 1887 (but who do not use this digging stick) might have accounted for the tool; (v) other possibilities.

Preliminary distributional studies indicate that digging sticks are widely used in central and southern Ethiopia, but the sources quoted below usually give no illustrations or descriptions beyond the phrase 'digging stick'. However, Huntingford (1955:27) notes that the Oromo use "an iron-shod digging stick or 'earth-chisel', with a circular stone weight". In this citation, no specific clan or lineage identity or locale is noted. The Gurage also utilize a digging stick in their ensete production although particulars are not available (Shack 1966:6). Both the Oromo and Gurage are of possible historical significance in the region. The Oromo, when they invaded the region in the sixteenth century, relied on pastoral strategies although they came from a background of mixed farming. They may or may not have brought crop growing technology with them. The Gurage may have more ancient ties with Harari since the Eastern Gurage language cluster (Zway, Selt'i, Ennaqor, Walane) contains the most closely related languages to Harari (Hetzron 1972:119) with Selt'i having a particularly close resemblance to Harari (Drewes, pers. comm. 1975). The implication here is that the old Harari farming populations eliminated by the Oromo might have formed a cultural and historical continuum with the ancestors of the present-day Eastern Gurage.

Cerulli (1956) in her now-dated report of the peoples of south-west Ethiopia, notes that the following groups used digging sticks, but gives no descriptive information: Mao, Korma (p.17), Konso (p.55), Didinga (p.73), Badditu, Konta, Bodi (p.99), Haddiya and Sidamo (p.119). Quite possibly detailed comparisons and full distributional analyses may shed more light on the origins of the weighted digging stick. The limited information presented here clearly indicates that digging sticks are of wide distribution in Ethiopia. Moreover, although this type of tool has been stereotyped in the literature as 'primitive', it is a basic hand tool with specific uses in the region of Harar.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, comments are based on field observations by the author, who worked in Harar 1962-1964, 1975 and 1977. The article is written in the present tense although many population changes effected by the government of Ethiopia have affected the Harari, Oromo and Argobba. The programme of villagization has been particularly drastic, relocating the rural farmers of Harar Province in centralized standardized villages. This has removed the Argobba from their homes and has probably begun the eradication of their distinct remnant culture. The Oromo are also affected. Some 4,5 million farmers had been relocated by 1986. Whether or not digging sticks are still used in the government planned and controlled villages is unknown to the author.

2. Until the city was conquered by the forces of Imperial Ethiopia in 1887, Harar was a city state. Although its history and political economy are complex (see Waldron 1984b), the Harari, residents of the old city, owned most of the land around the city and controlled the rural Oromo populations through a system of tenancy. Those living some distance from the city, and thus away from the Harari lands, still depended upon the city's markets which the Harari also controlled.

## A NOTE ON SOUTHERN AFRICAN ROCK ART, MEDICINE-MEN AND NGUNI DIVINERS

L. J. BOTHA

*Department of Anthropology, University of Stellenbosch, 7600 Stellenbosch*

and

J. F. THACKERAY

*Department of Archaeology, University of Stellenbosch, 7600 Stellenbosch*

The study of southern African rock art has usually been restricted to material collected from Bushman-speaking peoples. However, for several years we have been interested in comparisons between concepts expressed in southern African rock art and concepts recorded among Bantu-speaking peoples, notably Xhosa and Zulu. This interest has been stimulated in part by a photograph of a so-called 'Zulu witchdoctor' witnessed by Kidd (1904) more than 80 years ago (Fig. 1). Unfortunately Kidd did not provide a detailed ethnographic account of the event which he photographed, but the photograph shows a woman, almost certainly a diviner (*isangoma*), with cocoon rattles of a kind also used by San medicine-men in dances associated with trance (Marshall 1969). The woman adopted a bending-forward posture and carried two sticks, in a manner which is reminiscent of practices associated with San and of a scene of three therianthrope figures in a painting at Melikane Shelter in Lesotho (Fig. 2).

The Melikane scene is one of the few paintings interpreted by Bushman-speaking informants in the last century (Bleek 1874; Orpen 1874). These informants included a man named Qing who guided Orpen to the shelter,

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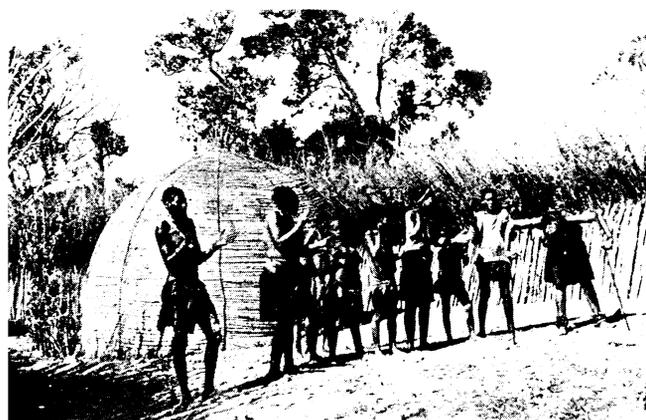


Fig. 1. Photograph of a 'Zulu witchdoctor' witnessed by Kidd (1904).

and who spoke to Orpen through a Bantu-speaking interpreter. Other informants included /Xam Bushmen interviewed in Cape Town by Wilhelm Bleek to whom Orpen had sent copies of rock paintings. Lewis-Williams (1980, 1981) has used the available ethnographic data to