Virginia Luling, Ph.D., 1939 - 2013

Virginia was a long-standing and unswervingly loyal member of the Anglo-Somali Society. As Honorary Secretary from 2008 she responded to matters as they arose with quick conscientiousness and wise counsel. Virginia took a particularly helpful interest in this Journal. She resigned as Secretary after she was diagnosed with cancer in the autumn of 2012, feeling unable to continue with the Society’s work at the high standard she expected of herself.

Virginia Rose Luling was the youngest of three sisters born to their artist father and novelist mother. After leaving school she followed her mother and grandmother to Somerville College, Oxford, where she studied classics and Norse languages. At Oxford she came to admire J.R.R. Tolkien whose thought influenced her entire life, both intellectually and spiritually. She went on to study social anthropology at London University and gained a Master’s degree in 1965. Her thesis was on government and social control among peoples in the Horn of Africa, in particular the Oromo.

It was field research for her Ph.D., under the supervision of I.M.Lewis, that took her in 1966 to Somalia where she lived in the town of Afgooye, near Mogadishu, for three years. Lewis had recently visited the town, with its peculiar tradition of an annual ‘stick fight’, and he suggested that an investigation into its background would make a good research project. The photograph shows Virginia in Afgooye in 1967, with friend Faaduma Cusmaan Diine. Completion of the degree was delayed until 1972 by the family circumstances following the untimely death of her mother. During the 1970s she taught for the Open University and volunteered locally for the newly-formed Survival International.

Virginia’s Ph.D. thesis plus on-going research was the basis of her book, *Somali Sultanate: The Geledi City State over 150 years*, published by Haan in 2002. She had returned to Afgooye in 1980 and in 1989. The strangest of her visits was in 1996, after the fall of the Siad Barre régime, when for two days only she was able to drive out from a half-ruined Mogadishu, in a vehicle guarded by young men with AK 47s, to a dreamlike encounter with the people she had known in happier times.

The book is a study of life in Afgooye, and of the two clans whose home it has been for three centuries, the Geledi and Wacdaan. Virginia described it as a political entity before the colonial period, a small republic of allied lineage groups with at its head the *Suldaan* who is both a religious and a political leader, but who works with and is responsible to the elders (*akhyaar*). She saw how it changed and yet preserved its key institutions under Italian colonisation, then after the independence of Somalia, later under the 'Scientific Socialism’ of Siad Barre, and finally into the violence and political fragmentation that followed his fall.

Her work is notable for the sensitivity with which she viewed the relationship between anthropologists and the peoples they study, which she believed imposed its obligations. Virginia described her experiences in Afgooye in Issue 39 of this Journal. She was very much aware of the cultural and psychological baggage which she took with her to Somalia and which made it impossible for her to be impersonal and objective in her investigations. In retrospect she had qualms about not being invited in the first place and not asking her ‘subjects’ whether they wanted to be researched.
In those early days Virginia did not foresee the phenomenon of such a flow of Somali refugees into the UK as happened in the 1990s, nor that she would become so involved in Somali life in the UK. She found herself writing ‘expert’ reports on Somali asylum seekers whose identity had been questioned by the British authorities, responding to questions and appeals for help of different kinds, and by simply meeting people socially, sharing meals and news. There was no neat line between ‘research’ and just life.

From 1983, for 20 years, Virginia worked for Survival International, as editor of the Survival journal and then as Africa Cases Officer. During those years of travel she produced field reports on various countries and sent long and vivid letters home. She also enjoyed welcoming African visitors to her very small London flat. She retired in 2004 being at this time very active in the work of the Oromo Relief Association. In 2008 Virginia was instrumental in arranging the Anglo-Somali Society’s small donation to the Hawa Abdi Hospital on the outskirts of Mogadishu towards Afgooye which was founded by the remarkable Dr. Hawa Abdi Dhiblawe and run with the help of her daughters Dr. Deeqa Adan Mohamed and Dr. Amina Mohamed Abdi. In 2009 Virginia interviewed Deeqa on a visit to London (see Journal 46, page 41).

Apart from several articles, her most recent publishing venture was to co-edit, with Markus Hoehne, Milk and Peace, Drought and War, (Hurst & Co., 2010; see review elsewhere in this issue of the Journal), the tribute to her friend and former supervisor, Professor I.M.Lewis. At the time of her death she had been working on a history of the Begedi clan.

Virginia combined an adventurous, sociable, and compassionate life with a reserved, unassuming, and private demeanour. For many years she was attracted to and inspired by the spirituality and work of the Society of Friends (Quakers), eventually coming to God in whom she had ‘decided to believe’. When she was no longer able to live alone she was cared for by her niece Miranda and her husband Fred in whose home Virginia was able to welcome many friends, family members, and Quakers. She is survived by her sister Rosemary.

David Brooks