

# The Konso of Ethiopia

## 1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

- Afro-Asiatic → Cushitic → East → Konso-Gidole → **Konso**

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

- **kxc**

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

- In the far southwest of Ethiopia at latitude of 5°30 N, and a longitude of 37°30 E.

1.4 Brief history:

- The Konso have developed their culture in “a high degree” of isolation for the many centuries they have inhabited their land. Trade with the Borana brought vital salt. Although the Konso partake in many elements of the Cushitic culture, their way of life is not shaped by the outside influences that had such a big impact on traditional Abyssinia.

*“Judaism and Christianity, Moslem and Galla invasions, the Portuguese, Italians, and other Europeans, have largely passed them by...they were independent within living memory; in 1897...the armies of Emperor Menelik II, armed with rifles, passed through Konso, and subdued it by their usual policy of promising that if tribute were paid no violence would be done to the people, but that any resistance would be crushed.” (1p5)*

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

- In 1954 the Norwegian Lutheran Mission arrived and established a school and clinic the year after. In the 60s the school had about 140 students, and the government school that was later established had about the same number. Even though the school and clinic have been very successful, the religious efforts of the missionaries were not as successful.

*“There is...no idea among the converted Christians that the beliefs of their ancestors are wicked; the present missionary...never heard from a potential convert that he wanted to become a Christian because the Konso religion was bad. One should not forget that their new Christianity is a very simple type, added on to, rather than replacing, their fundamental beliefs.” (1p6-7)*

- “The imposition of law and order by the Amhara and the pacification of the region has had important effects on their society...Now Amhara courts, which apply Ethiopian law and do not recognize local law, have been established with the power of an armed police force to support them.” (1p7)

1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

- Highland environment is hard, dry and rocky. They live at elevations between 1,500 and 2,000 meters according to Joshua Project.

*“...climate is of the dry montane type with temperatures ranging from below 15 °C at night to 32 °C during the day at the hottest time of the year. The Konso Highlands run across the Rift Valley in an east-west direction and are situated in the dry belt of Ethiopia with an unreliable rainfall not exceeding 800 mm per year. There are two rainy seasons: the big rains are concentrated in March and April and the small rains fall around October and November. In general, the rains come in the form of violent thunderstorms which seldom last more than two hours.” (4)*

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

- The total population of the Konso people is 242,000. Traditionally, they had an average of 3,000 people living in each walled, autonomous village (6). According to Joshua Project, the Konso homeland area is about 1000 square kilometers, and Ethnologue lists the Konso as being located South of Lake Chamo, at the Sagan river bend, and a few being located in Kenya.
- "Homesteads are extremely cramped, the roofs and huts touching and overlapping each other in many cases." (1) And an estimate in the 60s was perhaps 250 people per square mile.

## 2. Economy

### 2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

- "The economy of the Konso rests on an exceptionally intensive agriculture involving irrigation and terracing of mountain slopes" (5). Terrace agriculture supports their main crops of millet and corn and several varieties of sorghum. Cotton and coffee are cash crops.

### 2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

- Get milk and meat from cattle, goats and sheep. They also use their dung (and human feces) for fertilizer in the fields.

*"Each family keeps cows, sheep and goats in the family compound, more precisely in the lower part of it, moonna, and collect manure in a special basin on the ground, usually just outside the house fence, where it is allowed to cool down and dry. The manure, when ready, and before the new planting season, is then brought by women to the fields to regenerate exhausted soil." (8)*

### 2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

- Do not use bow and arrow, but rather spears and stones "which they can throw with great force and accuracy, a skill they have perfected while scaring birds from the crops." (1)

### 2.4 Food storage:

- Food is stored in granaries that are raised up on stilts and walled with cane. (1)

### 2.5 Sexual division of production:

- Men and women work in the fields, but women are particularly responsible for more routine activities like weeding, scaring away birds and harvesting in addition to domestic household chores.
- Men do the hard labor and work with iron since women are not allowed to.

### 2.6 Land tenure:

- Plots of land can be bought and sold individually and may only be owned and inherited by men. Women can rent if they are widowed, however.

### 2.7 Ceramics:

- Pottery is done only by the women of the Hawada artisan group. They make mostly pots that are for cooking and carrying water. Only a few rudimentary tools are used to make the pots, such as a piece of scrap metal, a broken gourd, a bowl for water, and a flat stone to work the clay on. The skills that women learn are passed down to them from their mothers. (11p248)

### 2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

- Not found

### 2.9 Food taboos:

- Chickens are only kept for their feathers; and all birds and eggs are forbidden foods as well as most wild animals and fish. (14)

### 2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

- Not found in the dry highlands.

### 3. Anthropometry

#### 3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

- The Konso are described as “small and wiry.” The men tend to be taller than the women and resemble the Borana more. Women are described as being shorter and having more “Negroid” characteristics. (1)

*“The Konso are small and wiry people, varying in color from reddish-brown to almost black, but they are on the whole brown. Some have thin lips and the tallness of the Borana, while others are distinctly more negroid, and shorter, but prognathism is slight even among these. They tend to have high cheek-bones and pointed chins.” (1p21)*

#### 3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

- Being described as “wiry” indicates that the Konso are not a typically heavy-set people.

### 4. Life History, mating, marriage

#### 4.1 Age at menarche (f):

- Not found

#### 4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

- If a boy and a girl conceived a child before they had reached the appropriate age-grade for marriage then they would be required to abort the child. (10p80)

#### 4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

- The average size of a family is 5; husband, wife, and their children.

#### 4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

- Women are not supposed to have any more children (or sexual intercourse) after their first son has married.

#### 4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

- Children typically marry around the age of 15 (2).
- Due to the prohibition on men of the Farida marrying, their marriage may be delayed until they are over 30.
- The youngest age at which girls are allowed to marry is 13.

#### 4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

- Although divorce is easy for both men and women, it does not happen very often. In practice, only about 2% of women have actually been divorced (1).

#### 4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

- Traditionally, the Konso were monogamous, but now Non-Christian Konso can have three or four wives (2). However, only about 10% of men have enough wealth to have more than one wife. (14)

#### 4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

- In one Konso town, Buso, the main gift in bridewealth is a cotton blanket given to the father of the bride. Sometimes there is also money given.

*“Whatever is given, it is stressed that is it only to establish friendship between the groom and his new father-in-law. The husband also gives his wife butter and honey for three months after the marriage, and this is considerably more expensive than the presents given to her father.” (1p113-114)*

#### 4.9 Inheritance patterns:

- *“The eldest son inherits his father's homestead and twice the share of land that is inherited by each*

*of his younger brothers. If a man dies without heirs, the nearest male relative within the lineage will inherit. Women cannot inherit any form of property, nor can they transmit property rights.” (14)*

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

- There may be conflict between a girl and her parents when she refuses to marry the man that they want her to.

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

- There are four words in the Konso language that denote a wide range of effeminate behavior, and the most widely used is *sagōda*. A homosexual relationship is regarded as “sterile, unnatural, and hence deplorable.”

- Although a *sagōda* will be bullied and ridiculed, they are allowed to still live in the towns.

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

- The Konso are exogamous and must marry outside of their own clan.

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?

- No belief in partible paternity,

4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”)

- No beliefs outside of what a mother would usually be considered. They believe that babies are born in the 9<sup>th</sup> month of gestation, when they are in fact born in the 10<sup>th</sup>. They begin to count from the first time the menses do not appear. (1p278)

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

- No

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

- No hard data found, though there was a case where there was joke about some men going to rape a homosexual man.

*“On inquiring what it was about I was told that they were joking with one elderly man, who had the reputation of being something of a sagōda, and saying that they would take him out into the fields and rape him.” (1p151)*

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

- The preferential category for a spouse may depend on which town a person is living in.

*“For the Konso who live in Garati, all parallel-cousin marriage is prohibited, but marriage is allowed with cross cousins as long as they are not eldest daughters, whereas in Takadi and Turo, all cross-cousin marriage is forbidden, as well as all parallel-cousin marriage.” (14)*

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

- If a woman feels that she is being sexually neglected by her husband she may divorce him.

- Adultery is a serious offense, and the husband is justified in killing the wife and her seducer if he finds them in the act and her family would not avenge her. (1p116)

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

- No evidence found.

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

- If a man has more than one wife, then the remaining wife/wives will raise the deceased’s children.

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

- Not found

4.22 Evidence for couvades?

- None found

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

- No such distinctions found
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?
- There is a high respect for elders in Konso society, especially grandparents.
- 4.24 Joking relationships?
- Not found
- 4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations
- Descent is patrilineal and the status of priesthood follows primogeniture.
- 4.26 Incest avoidance rules
- Members of the same clan are considered brothers and sisters, and for them to have sexual relations is considered incest. "Licentious" talk is forbidden between real brothers and sisters.  
*"on the road men and women take care to discover each other's clans before indulging in such [licentious] talk." (1)*
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?
- There is hardly any ceremony when it comes to a marriage. A feast at the home of the groom's father will take place. In Garati, the girl will bring three of her friends to sleep with her for three nights before she sleeps with her husband on the fourth night. In Takadi the girl will sleep with her husband on the first night and they will have sexual intercourse. (1)
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?
- Naming is based on the principles of primogeniture and the unity of the sibling group. (1) Priests alone have retained their family names throughout the generations, unchanged.
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)
- Marriage is usually within the town, but a man may go outside of his town to seek a wife.
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?
- Parents can arrange marriages, but their arrangements are not necessarily binding. Even though a girl is expected to comply with her father's wishes, if she is determined enough to marry someone else, "her father is powerless to stop her." The family may go and accuse the man she marries and even go to the government, but in the end her will prevails. (1)  
*"A girl and a boy like each other; the family [of the girl] forbids it. The girl says 'I like him and will marry him'. She hides from her family and marries him...She says 'I will go with my husband, my belly desires him, I do not want my family, I will go with my husband.'" (1p114-115)*
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:
- "Socially, they are categorized into two distinct social groups called 'Etenta'/Farmers and 'Xauda'/Artisans. In the past, marriage between those groups was forbidden and contacts were very limited." (6)

### **Warfare/homicide**

- 4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:
- Not found
- 4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:
- Homicide was the only crime that could not be punished or atoned for by compensation. "The victim's closest agnates had the duty of killing the murderer, and this act of vengeance was supposed to settle the matter and not produce a feud." (14)
- 4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:
- No information found

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

- Relationships mostly restricted to the trade market. They have not been very affected by road construction in Ethiopia because of their geographical position. (1)

4.18 Cannibalism?

- No evidence found

## 5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

- The larger villages are typically between 2500 and 3000 people, and the average is about 1500.

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

- Traditionally there was no seasonal mobility patterns, but due to water shortages and competition for land, the Konso have been migrating out of their traditional areas into neighboring regions. (12)

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

- Each town/village is governed by an autonomous council of elders. "The social status of all males, and of some females, is defined by a generation-grading system. Although a generation grade theoretically encompasses the men in an entire region, it does not actually function beyond each town's borders and therefore does not prevent conflicts between towns." (5)

5.4 Post marital residence:

- The Konso are patrilocal, and the eldest son is expected to live with his wife at his parent's house. Younger sons are not expected to live with the parents and he will take his share of land and build his own residence upon it and bring his wife to live with him there. (8)

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

- Mark territory by construction of walled towns. The walls reach up to 4 meters high and 2.5 meters wide in some places. (8)

*"Their sites are chosen for their defensive advantages, and generally they crown the summit of a hill, or are built upon a spur, so that the terrain falls away steeply on three sides, leaving only the level round of the fourth to be especially heavily defended."* (1p27)

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

- Parent/child relationships tend to be more formal or strained than the grandparent/grandchild relationship. However, the grandfather is the most highly respected family member.

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

- Not found

5.8 Village and house organization:

- *"Each town is separated into two divisions, and a man who is born in one is forbidden to live in the other. The divisions have no other social function, however. They are divided into wards, which may contain twenty to eighty homesteads. The average population of a homestead is five, comprising a married man, his wife, and their children. Homesteads are always on two levels; ideally, the upper level is for humans and the lower level for animals. Each homestead contains sleeping huts, kitchen, granaries, and animal stalls and is surrounded by a wooden fence. These fences form continuous walls along the paths within the towns."* (14)

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

- Married and unmarried men sleep in large men's houses that have "phallic clay roof-pots" in order to preserve their strength "which they believe is dissipated by too much indulgence in sexual intercourse." (1)

#### 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

- Beehive sleeping huts that may last 70-80 years. They are constructed with a low arched doorway that is only 3 feet high so that anyone entering must crawl on their hands and knees, and so if it were an enemy he would be at the mercy of the occupant. (1p33)

#### 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

- There are nine exogamous patrilineal clans that are found in all three regions of the Konso, but the lineages do not have a part in determining who makes up elders' councils or the social organization in towns. The nine clans are Tigiṣīda, Saudata, Argamīda, Toḡmaleda, Mahaleda, Eeshalida, Pazanda, Kerdita, and Elida. (1)
- Lineages are headed by priests and through which property is inherited.

#### 5.12 Trade:

- Markets are ancient in Konso society, and they have long been familiar with salt bar currency. In precolonial times, salt was the most significant import and it was exchanged for coffee and craft products. (14)

*“A traditional market is held every day at a different location, outside one of the towns. Here the artisans sell their wares, and farmers also sell grain, tree foliage, honey, butter, and other agricultural produce. Animals are slaughtered for meat at these markets; in the past, only artisans were butchers, as the slaughter of animals for sale rather than ceremonial use was deprecated.” (14)*

#### 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

- The generation-grading system defines social status, and craftsmen form a distinct social class that is of lower status than farmers. (5)

### **6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)**

#### 6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

- Symbolism and ritual are more important than myths as expressions of the Konso worldview. (14) Women and children are excluded from the sacred places in which rituals are performed, but they can be spectators.

#### 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

- The two main groups of religious specialists are priests and diviners. Priests (who are always men) have the duty of blessing their lineage, ward, town, or region and they do so in public rituals. Diviners may be male or female and most are feared because they are believed to be possessed by evil spirits. Their advice is sought in secret “not only to discover the mystical source of illness or other misfortunes but also to cast spells on one's enemies.” (14)

#### 6.2 Stimulants:

- None found.

#### 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

- In each region, the most elaborate passage ritual ceremonies occur in the gada system at a time when everyone is promoted to the next generation grade.
- There are also rituals for when a child is born; it goes into seclusion with its mother for three months and then is named in a complex ritual.
- Death rituals involve mourning at the family's house and the men of the ward dig the grave. After a few months a young bull is sacrificed

#### 6.4 Other rituals:

- Still create wooden funeral statues (the only ones in Ethiopia) erected in memory of incredible

men in each lineage. Called *wagas* or *waakkas*.

*“wagas, memorial statues to a dead man who has killed an enemy or an animal such as a lion or a leopard. These stylized wooden carvings are arranged in groups, representing the man, his wives, and his vanquished adversaries.” (5)*

*“They act as a historic memory of the Konso society through the biography of eminent people of each lineage. Erecting waaka is a living tradition but the number of artisans is very few.” (7)*

#### 6.5 Myths (Creation):

- No complex tradition of storytelling or legends.

*“They are, compared with many primitive people, relatively inarticulate, in the sense that they have remarkably few legends or stories either about the world around them or themselves, in which their hopes and attitudes are portrayed for others to see. They have no folk-heroes, and no tradition of heroic recitation...nor do their songs, what there are of them, convey much of interest. They have no proverbs which in other cultures provide such a wealth of insight into their beliefs.” (1)*

- Do believe that their nine clans were founded by the children of the first humans.

#### 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

- The Konso are most renowned for their stele erections and wood carvings of anthropomorphic wooden statues that represent the dead. They are considered a megalithic people.

#### 6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

- Women and children are excluded from ritual ceremonies, except for being able to participate in dances which are purely for entertainment.

*“Women’s dances tend to be dull and monotonous, as they link arms and move slowly round in a circle singing a simple refrain...then the men make their entrance...running around the arenas, screaming and flinging their spears into the centre.” (1p31-32)*

#### 6.8 Missionary effect:

- The Norwegian Lutheran Church has not been very successful in truly converting the Konso. They still practice their traditional religion even though they have added aspects of Christianity onto it.

#### 6.9 RCR revival:

- None found

#### 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

- “The person is comprised of flesh, “vitality” (seen as the pulse), which disappears, and of the soul, which becomes a ghost. There are no rewards or punishments in the afterlife.” (14)

#### 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

- None found, but it is considered dangerous for someone to dream of a dead person and may be an omen of their own death. (14)

#### 6.12 Is there teknonymy?

- No

#### 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

- Practice a traditional religion that centers on the worship of a single god, *Waaq* or *Wağa*.

*“They believe that God, Wağa, withholds the rain from towns which are too disturbed by too much internal quarrelling...No one who lives among them can remain unaffected by their deep and passionate preoccupation with rain.” (1p23)*

- Numbers are important in ritual for the Konso.

*“2 represents a woman, 3 man, 5 marriage, 6 the death of a woman, and 9 the death of a man: 3 and 5 are good numbers, whereas 6 and especially 9 are very bad numbers that are thought to bring misfortune.” (10p89)*

## **7. Adornment**

### 7.1 Body paint:

- Face and body paint is white and red (2).

### 7.2 Piercings:

- None found

### 7.3 Haircut:

- Typically priests and diviners wear their hair long as a symbol of their separation from the rest of Konso society and is associated with sanctity or animality. Cutting the hair equals a re-entry into society or the “imposition of social control.” (1p326)

### 7.4 Scarification:

- None found

### 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

- Waist ornaments, rings and beaded jewelry are passed down from mothers to their daughters.

Beaded jewelry signifies a woman’s status.

*“Girls wear strands of beads around their waist while mothers wear two strands on each ankle and grandmothers one strand. The number of blue beads in the anklets indicates the gender of their children. Men also use beads with young boys wearing white beads or cowry shells for protection and men of high ritual status donning dark blue transparent glass beads.” (13)*

### 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

- When a new mother and her baby come out of seclusion, the mother puts on a long skirt that reaches below her knees.

*“...formed of a large skin which is wrapped around the woman, and not cut away anywhere. Tied with a leather belt it is very similar to a rather old-fashioned European skirt... The mother also puts on a black goat-skin as a cloak.” (1)*

### 7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

- Women’s skirts are traditionally made of leather in three flaps and gives the general impression that women’s clothing is designed to conceal any anatomical detail suggesting female genitalia.

*“We would rightly conclude from all this that whereas the penis is admired, the vagina is feared...a man said to me: ‘Some girls’ vaginas are so strong that they can snap off a man’s penis.’” (1p152)*

### 7.8 Missionary effect:

- Men now wear trousers since the law demands it and have started to adopt the Amhara attitude that nakedness is shameful.

*“Before the Amhara enforced the wearing of trousers the only male garment was the blanket worn as a toga, but in any hard manual labor the blanket is an encumbrance, and men used to go completely naked when working.” (1p152)*

### 7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

- Not found

## 8. Kinship systems

### 8.1 Sibling classification system:

- The rules for naming are as follows:

- “1. All siblings have the same second name; this includes half-siblings.
2. In the second generation the sons of eldest sons alone keep their father's second names, while all the sons of younger sons take their father's first names.
3. Half-brothers are counted as younger brothers in the inheritance of names, whether or not they are the first-born sons of their mothers.” (1p100)

### 8.2 Sororate, levirate:

- Present in Konso society. “A man may marry his deceased wife's sister, and a woman whose husband dies may marry his brother, but if the husband was an eldest son who died without an heir, his wife is expected to bear a son in his name by one of his brothers.” (14)

### 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology

(Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

- Terminology is of the Omaha type

## 9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

- All their animals, even chickens are given personal names and dogs and monkeys are considered very humanlike. A good dog (or even a monkey) will be buried like a human, wrapped in a skin and buried with a grave marker.
- A defeated enemy's penis would be cut off and worn around the wrist.
- Lineages are divided into three categories representing: God, Earth, and the Wild.

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