Dhina: A Multi-purpose Communal Tree-and-shrub Belts Around The Nucleated Settlements Of The Konso

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines multi-purpose communal forests, called the dhina, which surrounds the Konso settlements. Qualitative research, primarily in-depth interviews and field observations, were employed to explore the multiple purposes and current status of dhina. Moreover, as a native to the study area, the investigator was able to utilize his personal experiences as another source of information. Results of the study show that dhina was purposefully conserved by the communities since the time the nucleated settlements in Konso were established. The forest has multiple purposes including: fire control, latrine, garbage dump, grazing land, fruit gathering, and hiding places during times of conflict. Moreover, the study shows that dhina harbors several indigenous plant and animal species. Finally, the result indicates that the process of modernization and development process threaten the survival of dhina.

Keywords: Dhina, Village, Conservation, Konso

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE KONSO

Konso people live on and around a small range of mountains, some 600km south of the country’s capital, Addis Ababa, in the south Rift Valley of Ethiopia [1-5].

Konso hill-top settlement patterns of densely populated walled towns [8, 9, 5] are unique in traditional Ethiopia. Inside the village, there are unique arrangements of private houses, snake like crisscrossing foot paths, and well-designed public places called Moora [6].

Inside the village, each homestead is separated from another by a high wooden fence that maintains privacy between neighbors [5]. Wooden fences base on stone terraces high some inches above the ground. Age old stone walls surround the traditional village settlement. The wall was said to be built for defensive purposes. It provided protection from dangerous wild animals and attacks by other groups trying to steal livestock and capture people in earlier times [7, 3]. Villages have entrances in different directions and in the past they were closed at night for protection. Today, village entrances are no longer shut at night. (Figure 1)

Outside the village wall, a mini forest, known as dhina, is maintained by local people. This small strip serves as buffer between walled towns and the surrounding agricultural field [8].

Beyond the dhina, Konso have their family farms. This study aims to understand the nature, uses of, and cultural contexts of the Konso dhina. (Figure 2)

Some reflections on research gap and methods

The Konso are relatively well studied by comparison neighboring groups in the far South Ethiopian region. Several leading European scholars have studied Konso since 1930s including foreign scholars include Jensen, Haberland, Hallpike, Amborn, Kimura, Watson, Demeulenaere, Forch, Poissonnier, Ellison, and Shinohora just to mention few of them. Ethiopian nationals who described about Konso include Ongaye, Shako, Korra, Alemayehu, Beshah, Tadesse, Metasebia, Galunde, and Menfese are few of them.

However, the existing literature has limited information about Dhina and its multiple uses by the Konso. But, the document prepared for registering the Konso cultural landscape as UNESCO world heritage site list [9, 10, 1, 3, 6] provides some few information about dhina in her B.A senior essay. Therefore, this paper is aimed at exploring the multiple uses and changes occurring with the Konso dhina.

Methodologically, this paper employed qualitative techniques. Informal open-ended interviews with community members, observation, semi-structured interviews with key informants, and photography were employed. Additionally, journal articles, books, and websites were consulted to generate secondary sources of data.

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The multiple functions of Dhina

Biodiversity conservation: The value of sacred groves in the conservation of biological diversity which keeps the ecological processes in a balanced state has been well recognized [11]. Therefore, dhina is an important reservoir of biological diversity. They preserve different species of animals, birds, trees and shrubs [11] argues that several rare and threatened species are found only in sacred groves, which are, perhaps, the last refuge for these vulnerable species. (figure 3)

In this study an attempt was made to count the list of some trees, shrubs, climbing plants found in the dhina. Since the aim of the research is not to document the plant and animal species I excluded several types of weeds, plants and shrubs and animals for further investigation by experts. In the following table the list of dominant flora in the dhina is provided.

The big trees in these sacred grooves are used for hanging bee hives. Moreover, plants such as Kulqualeta (Opuntia vulgaris) play significant role as source of food. In Konso, children gather fruits of Kulqualeta (Opuntia vulgaris) plant as a supplementary food source.

Protective from fire accidents: Traditional Konso villages are highly compact where houses are very close to each other. Each family homestead contains several thatched houses. When a fire broke out it causes devastating damage to the property. Cognizant of this fact, the Konso developed protective mechanisms. A shrub-belt, containing primarily harrata(Euphorbia tirucalli), was planted on each side of the village. Yilma describes that most of the woods that contribute to the dhinas are Euphorbia tirucalli, which are used to prevent and control fire that suddenly arises in the town.

Kansite gives the following explanation

The main threat for a village is the risk of burning when fire broke out in one house due to overcrowded settlement. Particularly in the dry season the woody and grass houses can easily flare up very quickly. Water is often not available around. As a result, dhina plays important role thanks to their dominant species, Euphorbia tirucalli(hara’ta) which produces abundant latex and its branches are used to extinguish fire.

When fire accidently broke-out, every man of the village run to the dhina to cut its branches to extinguish the fire. According to Lakew and Kansite the Konso have a wonderful skill where all men of the town have social and moral obligations to mobilize and work in a fire brigade.

A place for hiding from enemy: These small patches of sacred grooves around the villages were believed to have been used as a protective cover for the village from sudden enemy’s attack. In the past these forests very dense so that when enemies came to attack the village, people could easily hide inside it and defend themselves from the enemies. Demeulenaere confirms that in the early culture history of the Konso settlements, harsh conditions existed, such as war, and people hid in the dhina.
The Konso saying “dhinaaawaa waapalets” indicates this reality. Literally, it is to mean that dhina is like a dress which covers and protects and gives a beauty for the village.

**Traditional waste depositing place:** The knowledge of public hygiene enabled Konso people to demarcate special places where people defecate and dispose waste materials from private houses. [8] stated that this communal latrine is strictly segregated by gender. Hence, it is since time immemorial that Konso people have developed their own system of waste management. This system of removing the garbage from their homesteads has been described by Hallpike and Lakew as that humans defecate (a public toilet) in these places and dump garbage from their homesteads. Each partition (sub-village) of the village has its own dhina.

**Burial place**

In Konso custom there is no village cemetery but a person is buried in a cemetery of lineage fields. Each Konso lineage (extended family) owns its grave yard located at a senior member’s field. Thus, the traditional custom segregates people to be buried in different areas. Hence, Hallpike stated that landless people, castrated men and strangers were buried in Dhina. Today, it is easy to find numerous remnants of broken, fallen and decayed wooden and stone burial statues in the dhina.

**Change and continuity in the uses of dhina**

Traditionally, Konso villages are administered by a local council called xela. This council has the responsibility to manage every
village affair. These include, punishing wrong doers, mobilizing labour for communal work, distributing unused land for farmers, and distributing land to newly married couples so they can build their own houses. Dhina can be fully or partly distributed for those who would build their own houses. Then some land will be taken from individuals who have farmlands next to the dhina and demarcated as dhina. Today many dhina are either neglected or fully/partly deforested due to the general socio-cultural changes occurring in the area. The power of the traditional authorities such as xela, in governing communal resources has weakened. Currently, the culture of distributing land freely for married couples does not exist. Thus, population growth coupled with the culture of privatization of property ownership has significantly changed the tradition of demarcating dhina. Therefore, today we can find only remnants of the previous dhina; but the culture of demarcating new dhina areas doesn’t exist.

The modern government’s public health campaign against open defecation has changed the traditional role of dhina as place for human defecation. The former dhina are cleared for the construction of dry latrine as a community toilet. (Figure 4)

Recently, dhina has been cleared in favor of establishing Christian worship places, constructing village schools, peasant association office, health post, dry latrine pits, flour mills, communal houses for rent and many other modern development and infrastructure features. Moreover, grazing and firewood collection which were deterred in the past are now a common threat for the dhina forests [12].

Despite the serious damage, remnants of these grooves dominated by euphorbia trees of the former dhina are seen around many villages. In some villages only in some locations very dense marks of dhina are still surviving.

CONCLUSIONS

The spread of modernization and Christianity among indigenous communities have resulted in the alteration of traditional cultural beliefs and practices. The Konso indigenous dhina forests which have been preserved and protected for generations have gradually deforested. Dhina have been either cleared, faded away or disappear. Therefore, the multi-dimensional socio-cultural changes have caused the gradual disappearance of dhina. The respect for sacred places have been eroded due to the process modernization which have converted such places into development infrastructure thus the sanctity was lost. Therefore, there is an urgent need to revitalize the age-old traditions to protect the local ecology and environment through the conservation of dhina.

REFERENCE


