UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX AT BRIGHTON

Briefing

Institutions for Natural Resource Management

ET10

Characteristics of 'traditional' forest management

Key Points:

1. The few remnant forests in Amhara Region were preserved because of their inaccessibility and utility
2. Forests were preserved through simple rules of exclusion and use based on the prevailing tenure system
3. Community cohesiveness, and homogeneity backed by history and religion helped to preserve forests
4. State penetration and control of forests led to breakdown of rules and open access resulting in the destruction of the forests

This Briefing is one of a series produced jointly by the Forum for Social Studies (Ethiopia), Centro de Experimentação Florestal (Mozambique) and the University of Sussex (UK). Each is designed to summarise research findings and encourage feedback. The Briefing is part of the 'Marena' research project, funded by the UK's Department for International Development.

Whether or not forests have ever been commonplace in the Amhara Region (ANRS) is an issue that is still open to debate, although they are likely to have been more extensive than what we encounter nowadays. Today, most of the Region is devoid of natural forests.

Yet a few patches of natural forests have survived mainly along escarpments and river gorges. The reason behind the survival of these few remnant forests is inseparably linked to the way they were traditionally managed as common resources.

Factors contributing to forest retention

Three groups of inter-related factors provide a potential explanation: the attributes of the forests themselves, the rules of traditional management, and the characteristics of the communities managing them.

Attributes of the common forests

Where forests have been effectively protected and managed as common property resources, this is primarily because of their particular attributes. This refers on the one hand to attributes of the land that is still covered by trees, and on the other to attributes of the trees themselves.

Land on which forests are to be found today is often unsuited for crop production. Most of these forests are established on very steep hillsides or cliffs, and are therefore virtually inaccessible to plough oxen. This is particularly the case with almost all of the natural forests that are found along the eastern escarpment of the plateau. The inaccessibility of these forests can be confirmed by the fact that many attempts at clearing roads deep inside them for the purpose of extracting logs have either failed or have been found too expensive to make the effort worthwhile.

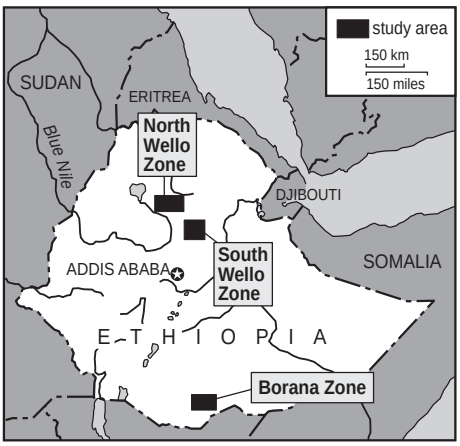
The trees in natural forests also provided the raw materials for production of traditional farm implements that are crucial for subsistence farmers. In some cases, the forests provided ideal conditions for beekeeping. Meanwhile, dry branches and leaves were important as fuel, and the grass that grew under the trees was a source of fodder for communities that resided in the immediate vicinity of the forests.

Rules of traditional management

Certain features of the rules governing traditional management of the forests also contributed to their sustainable utilization, and hence to their preservation.

First, traditional forest management was efficiently handled in many places through rules on exclusion and rules that specified the modalities of utilization. The former excluded all people other than a group clearly delineated usually on the basis of kinship or territory. The latter rules sometimes specified seasonal utilization, and types of trees and purposes for which they could be used.

Secondly, the rules, as well as the way in which they were enforced, often reflected the evolution of traditional practices at a local level. As a result, they tended to be perceived as legitimate regulations, to be complied with in the same way as other community norms.



Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the rules on exclusion and utilization used to be part and parcel of the tenure system. This lent further legitimacy to traditional management practices, and allowed them to be backed up by the local judicial-administrative apparatus, as was the entire tenure system.

Community attributes

Additional characteristics of the communities have made crucial contributions to the enforcement and maintenance of rules governing the management of the common property forests. Chief amongst these traits is community cohesiveness.

History and myth as to the origin of the community, the existence of venerated community symbols, and fairly small size have led to the emergence and maintenance of a cohesive sense of community in certain localities.

For example, in the Amhara Region, belief in common ancestry, and identification with the ancestral Ark of the Covenant (*tabot)* and the hamlet (*got)* fulfilled such a function. In this region (as in Tigray) it was not uncommon to find traditional forest management rules that were effectively enforced because of the fact that they had been associated with and placed under the protective wing of a church or holy spring (*tabal*). Such, for instance, was the case with Wuraf forest in North Wello and Desse'a in Eastern Tigray. Relative homogeneity of the community, particularly in terms of occupation and wealth, appears to be an important feature in this regard. Likewise, communities that are fairly well insulated from the potential havoc that is often induced by external forces (such as penetration by commercial interests) stand a better chance of preserving their traditionally managed forests.

Changes in attributes

The traditional management of remnant forests has virtually collapsed in almost every case in north Wello, as the factors that are discussed above became progressively weakened or invalidated.

Although one cannot completely discount penetration by commercial interests, in many cases, it was the nationalization of land and the reorganization of rural communities into Peasant Associations (PAs) that allowed various actors to treat the common forests as virtual open-access resources.

Having become legally state-owned, decisions on their protection and use came under the jurisdiction of state functionaries. Most of the remnant forests were taken over by the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA).

Control by state agents was then used as a springboard for expansion of state forest plantations, at the expense of the local communities' farm and grazing-lands. This led to the negation of the sense of community ownership of the forests as well as, in those cases where they used to be identified with churches and *tebel*, the corruption of their semi-sacred nature. Such processes have helped to set the stage for high levels of deforestation in the early-1990s.

Concluding comments

In areas where communal or sacred forests occupy inaccessible or unproductive land, and where there are relatively small, well-defined communities that have evolved local rules for their management, their preservation has been easier. Elsewhere, changes in land tenure, and the passing of responsibility for land management to the state, has probably contributed greatly to deforestation.

The Briefing team:

Contributors to the Briefings include:

- Richard Black and Elizabeth Harrison, School of African and Asian Studies, University of Sussex
- Yeraswork Admassie, Alula Pankhurst and Tarakegn Yibabie, Forum for Social Studies, Addis Ababa
- Elizabeth Watson, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge
- Jessica Schafer, University of Oxford
- Patrick Matakala and Antonio Serra, Centro de Experimentação Florestal, Maputo, Mozambique
- Antonio Ribeiro, Department of Politics and Communication Studies, University of Liverpool

We welcome comments and feedback, which should be sent to:

Richard Black (r.black@sussex.ac.uk) or
Elizabeth Harrison (e.a.harrison@sussex.ac.uk)

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T01	Conflict, 'Post-Conflict', and Natural Resource Management
ET02	An overview of Natural Resource Management under the Derg
ET03	Migration,Resettlement and Return
ET04	Returnees and Natural Resource Management
ET05	Struggles over 'the land of the deceased'
ET06	Government, community and donor relationships in NRM
ET07	Participation: a dilemma for extension agents
ET08	Interpretation of user rights
ET09	Conservation and participation in 'community forests'
ET10	Characteristics of 'traditional' forest management
ET11	Conflict, transition and deforestation
ET12	Identifying the 'community' in a contested woodlot
ET13	Gender and Natural Resource Management
ET14	Inter-group conflict over land tenure
ET15	Participatory paradigms
ET16	Trends in irrigation management
ET17	Conflicts over communal grazing areas
ET18	Forest management in Desse'a