

Community-based management of Afro-alpine ecosystem in Ethiopia

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The Guassa area of Menz

The Guassa area of Menz is found in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia. The area is 111 km² patch of Afro-alpine moorland with an altitude of 3200-3700m asl, that has persisted in its current, relatively pristine state for the past four hundred years. It is part of the Amhara National Regional State of North Shoa locally known as Menz, and 265 km northeast of the national capital Addis Ababa.

The natural resource management system of the Guassa area dates back to the 17th Century. Given that it persists, this makes it one of the oldest conservation areas in sub-Saharan Africa. The area was set aside as a resource for the community, who use it for harvesting the “Guassa” grass (*Festuca* sp.) for thatch, for various household and farm implements, grazing livestock, and harvesting shrubs for fuelwood. In essence, the use of these resources was restricted to a limited number of users during a limited period. The right to use the resources of the Guassa area depended on the prevailing land rights and tenure system, ‘*Astme irist*’ that was based on ancestry lineage and the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church.

The Guassa protection like any other indigenous natural resource management system had a system of regulation and enforcement through an institution. The people in Menz developed an indigenous institution, known as “Qero System” for protection and equal distribution of the natural resources. Qero System entailed user communities in the area democratically electing an elder as a headman, called the *Abba Qera*. The *Abba Qera* was then responsible for protecting and regulating the use of the Guassa area.

The *Qero system* could entail the closure of the Guassa area from any type of use by the community for as long as three to five consecutive years. The length of closure depended largely upon the growth of the Guassa grass. When both of the *Abba Qera* felt that the grass was ready for harvest, he would announce the date of the opening to the community. This usually took place at public gatherings such as church ceremonies, market places, or burial ceremonies.

The area was usually only open for use at the height of the dry season – around February or March each year. There was also a sequence to its use: only once the grass cutting was over were livestock allowed to graze the Guassa area. When the wet season started, the use of the area was once again prohibited, giving the resources time to regenerate. The traditional date of closing each year was the 12th of July, the date for breaking the second most important fasting season of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

While the area was closed, the prohibition of its use was strictly enforced by the users themselves. Under the leadership of the *Abba Qera*, household heads regularly patrolled the area. Every able male household head was obliged to take part. Failure to participate would result in severe punishment – in some instances, punishment could even result in the burning of the absentee’s house.

Change in the Management of the Guassa Area

In 1974 a popular uprising, a revolution, swept the country. On March 4th 1975, the new revolutionary government proclaimed the nationalization of all rural land. Over large parts of Ethiopia, the relationship between tenant and landlord was dissolved. The proclamation abolished private and community ownership of land and gave all farmers usufruct right to cultivate land within the framework of state ownership. It also established peasant associations to distribute and regulate the use of land. As a result, the Qero system was abolished, together with its mechanisms of natural resource management. The changes also gave people who had earlier been excluded from resource use uncontrolled access to the Guassa area.

One of the strengths of community-based institutions is their resilience – their capacity to cope with change. When the Qero system was abolished, the community adapted to the condition set by the new regime. They brought their case to the new local administration, and a new “Guassa Conservation Council” was formed through the eight peasant associations. To some extent this replaced the former Abba Qera, with the aim of overseeing the activities of the peasant associations for the protection of the Guassa area. The main function of the Guassa Council was to enforce agreed by-laws, particularly to control illegal uses of the Guassa area during the closed season. The system was enforced by community scouts elected by the community. Illegal users are prosecuted in the local courts, while repeated offenders were taken to the *woreda* (district) court.

On top of this, the Guassa Council decided there was a need for a management plan which would be recognized at the regional government level. In effect, this would mean the classification of the area as a community-based and managed protected area – the first of its kind in Ethiopia. Such a classification would secure the traditional form of land-use and the livelihoods of the local community. Recently, a draft management plan was reviewed by all stakeholders. It is anticipated that the management plan will be approved by the regional conservation authority, thereby giving an ownership certificate of the Guassa area to the communities.

Biodiversity benefits

By regulating the exploitation of the area, the ancient system has also protected the unique and diverse fauna and flora of the area. The Guassa area harbours many of the endemic species of fauna and flora associated with the Afro-alpine ecosystem. For example, there are 22 mammal species found in the area, 27% of which are endemic to Ethiopia.

This includes the most endangered canid in the world, the Ethiopian wolf (*Canis simensis*). With an estimated 530 individuals in the world, Guassa - Menz protects one of the major populations outside the protected area system of the country. The other important species of the area is the endemic gelada baboon (*Theropithecus gelada*). As it is the only surviving member of a once widespread genus *Theropithecus*. These magnificent animals with their lion-like manes, lip-flip threats are the only grazing primates in the world. They aggregate into huge herds of up to 400 animals. They too

deserve the protection afforded to them by the Guassa area. Bird species have also benefited from the Qero system and 111 bird species have been recorded in the area of which 12 are endemic to Ethiopia.. One striking feature of the birdlife in the Guassa area is the abundance of birds of prey that feast, with the wolves, on abundant rodent population.

Rain that falls in the Guassa area starts a long journey to the Mediterranean through the Blue Nile. Indeed, 26 rivers, springs and streams have their origin in the area. The ecological service provided by the protection of the vegetation by the local community is invaluable to all the downstream users.

In general, indigenous communities have developed ways of life remarkably tuned to their local environment. Their long association with their territories has resulted in developing strong ties to their lands, expressed in customary laws, complex religious ceremonies, symbolic activities and extremely detailed knowledge of their resources. Such knowledge may be deeply coded within traditional lore, handed down and refined from generation to generation. The long association with their environment and commitment to remaining there in the future equips indigenous communities for prudent management of natural resources – even by present day standards.

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