



ISSN: 2278 – 0211 (Online)

The Role Of Cultural Practices In Trees Management Practices Among The Qemant Community Chilga Woreda (District) Ethiopia

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Abstract:

The age old sacred groves are one of the first instances of indigenous environmental management in general or trees in particular in many communities of the world. Ethiopia is not exceptional having many ethnic groups have diverse cultural and heritage management practices. The case of Qemant community is not exceptional.

This study is about the role of cultural practices in tree management among the Qemant community Chilga Woreda (district), Ethiopia. In the Woreda (district), the community practices indigenous cultural trees management practices since time immemorial.

The research deals with cultural beliefs, values, and taboos of indigenous cultures in trees management practices at Chilga woreda. Accordingly, local religion, ecological knowledge, medicinal value and benefits of the trees considered as units of analysis for the study.

The main objective of the research is to investigate and reveal the indigenous knowledge of Qemant community trees management and to purpose ways for maintaining useful forest knowledge for sustainable development.

Both primary and secondary methods of data collection tools employed to gather information in the study area. Data collection tools such as focus group discussions, observations; interviews documents both published and unpublished used and reviewed.

The major findings of the research indicated that indigenous cultural practices of the community have important roles in forest management practices in general and trees in particular. It is believed forests preserved for this purpose is strictly forbidden to use it. Yet, the majority of the community knowledges have limitations on their effectiveness, functions and implementations because of the change of religion to new once, thus, decline importance showed. This called for a new strategy to transform indigenous cultural practices by creating synthesis with scientific knowledge and their application on forest management and trees in particular. As recommended, this will be done by the collaborative effort of the local communities and the government. This needs actually urgent solution. Therefore, it will open up the possibilities integrated knowledge between the government and the community for forest management practices and trees in the study sites

Key words: Cultural values, indigenous, ecology, sustainable development, cultural diversity, environment, trees, management, Chilga Woreda(district)

1. Background Of The Study

1.1. Introduction

In the past, development planners, policy makers, experts . . . etc devalued indigenous knowledge, depicting it as 'primitive', 'simple' and 'static' (Atteh, 1992:15; Grenier, 1998:5). This historic neglect contributed to the decline and the shift from indigenous knowledge to 'Western' knowledge for African development program (Howes, 1980:323; Chamber 1979: 1 cited in Atteh, 1992:18).

However, development program imposed from the West failed to achieve its intended goals due to inappropriateness for African local conditions (Atteh, 1992:145; Simmons, 1974:33 cited in Muchena and Vanek, 1995:506). Lack of understanding of the physical, social, political, economic, technological and cultural difference between the West and the third world countries have become hindrance for development.

There is no uniform approach for development. In actual case, there are different and appropriate answers for development depending on history and cultural heritage, religious traditions, human and economic resources, climatic and geographic conditions, and political pattern of nations (Yeshambel, 2009).

Due to the aforementioned facts, today the world recognizes the need to change policies and practices by giving due attention to the needs and rights of local communities (Steiner and Oviedo 1997:33). Here, the case of trees management is not exception. Thus, utilizing the potentials of indigenous knowledge is actually the key to local level development in general and trees management practices in particular. One of the resources to be exploited to assure sustainable environmental management is, therefore, The Role of Cultural Practices in Trees Management Practices among the Qemant Community Chilga Woreda (district), Ethiopia. .

1.2 Objectives Of The Study

1.2.1. General Objective

The main objective of the study is to explore and reveal the indigenous knowledge of Qemant community in forest management practices in general and trees in particular and to propose ways for maintaining useful forest knowledge for sustainable development

1.2.2. Specific Objectives

- To assess the richness of Qemant indigenous knowledge for trees management practices as an essential first step towards successful development.
- To pin point the different indigenous knowledges of the community
- To investigate the potentials and limitations of indigenous trees management practices.
- To recommend possible solutions for limitations of indigenous tree management practices.

2. Study Area

The Qemant located in different Woredas of North Gondar zone. These are: Lay Armachio, Quara, Dembiya, Metemma and Wogera. Among this Woredas of Qemant the researcher selected Chilga Woreda. Chilga Woreda located at a distance of 60 km to West of the town of Gondar. This Woreda selected because most of the remaining speakers of the Qemant and followers of the earlier religion dominantly living at Chilga. Furthermore, the abundant sacred trees for religious practices (Degenna) located in this Woreda.

3. Methodology

In this study, both the primary and the secondary sources as method of data collection were used. This includes interviews, focus group discussions, observations, participant observations, document analysis and other data sources.

4. Results Of The Finding

4.1. The Various Tree Management Practices Of The Qemant Community

The practice of management of plant species by the indigenous communities went back to their immemorial past. Similarly, the practices of environmental management are very ancient tradition among the Qemant ethnic group. The people of Qemant have rich tradition of trees management on sacred sites through the justifications of socio religious issues. Though the ancient traditions of environmental management of the Qemant under threat with the influence of modernization, tree management practice still continues in some Qemant inhabited areas.

The age old sacred groves are one of the first instances of indigenous environmental management in general or trees in particular in the Qemant community. Among the many cultural values attached with this aspect of trees management are the use of religion, ecological balance and medicinal values are some of them. These core ideas are discussed below.

4.1.1. Religion

Natural worship has been a key force of shaping the human attitudes towards conservation and sustainable utilization of natural resources in the world (Zewide, 2007). The doctrine of the religion behind those sacred groves may vary but ultimately the experience of conserving trees in the name of the religion is apparent at worldwide. Thus, trees not only meet the economic and ecological needs of the people, but also form an integral part of their culture and spiritual tradition.

Whatever definition religion may have this research attempted to conceptualize its meaning from a functionalist approach or its purpose for environment management. As its name indicates, a functionalist definition one that lays stress on the functions rather than the belief content of religion.

Similar with the above, in Ethiopia such traditional practices have been invariably operating since time immemorial. Sacred groves are potential areas of rare and endemic species and can be regarded as the remaining of the primary trees left untouched by the Qemant community, thus, the age old sacred groves are one of the first instances of indigenous environmental management in general or trees in particular in the community.

Though the majority of the Qemant communities are Christians, some people still practice indigenous religion together with Orthodox Christian elements. The indigenous religion of the Qemant people called to be Hegelebona by the local community. Hegelebona has a long history of protecting and managing of trees.

If anyone sees a patch of indigenous age old trees in the Qemant inhabited areas it is likely to be Degenna (ritual sites) where by Hegelebona is practicing. It is believed that sacred trees in the area dated back to several thousands of years when Qemant society was in primitive state.

For the Qemant, sacred groves provide the inextricable link between present society to the past in terms of bio-diversity, culture, religion and ethnic heritages. It is a place where their ancient long lived cultural practice maintained and exhibited through this patches of trees. These trees protected for the belief that the deities resided.

As indicated above, some of the Qemant follow Hegelebona (ancestral worship) with the central focus on tree patches which signify sacred groves. In this sacred sites Qedassie (praying and thanks giving ceremony) performed in the weekly (i.e., Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday), monthly and annual level festivals and holy days.

According to informants as the case of Ethiopian Orthodox Church traditions, the Qemant 'Hegelebona' preferred big trees (forests) of hilltops for religious ceremonies due to the following reasons. In other words, the sacredness of hilltops for Qemant community manifested in three general ways: - Firstly, certain peaks are singled out by the Qemant cultures and traditions as places of sanctity. These hilltops the ones traditionally known as "sacred hilltops" have well established networks of myths, beliefs and religious practices of their religion, Hegelebona. This justification tried to make linkage by community with Mount Sinai occupies a special place in the Bible as the imposing site where Moses received the Ten Commandments. In this aspect, according to informants, the ten commandments of the Christian Bible made its base the Qemant Hegelebona religion.

The Qemant religion (Hegelebona), actually; shares common element not only with Christianity but also with the Jewish Heberic religion. In many case, the religious difference that lies between Qemant Hegelebona and the Jewish Heberic is in the former case eating

many of the flesh of scarified animal though burnt some of them. But the Jewish burnt all the flash of the scarified animal until it turned to ash.

Secondly, hilltops usually contain sacred sites and objects such as stones, groves, burial or are associated with the activities of important holy persons such as attaching with their own tradition of the founding religious persons of 'Yener' or 'Emete Aykel', whom she was a mother of the 'Yener', the founding mother of Hegelebona. And the biblical Aberham used to pray for his god inside the deep forest. Finally, hilltops (mountains) commonly awaken an individuals a sense of wonder and awe that sets them apart as places imbued with evocative beauty and meaning.

Due to the above reasons, the Qemant cultural experiences, the general expressions of sacredness to hilltops (mountains) through the views they have of them such as center of the religion or source of universe or life. It is in these sacred sites that the religious followers of Hegelebona strictly forbidden let alone to cut down trees but also to use dried leaves. This is because according to priests everything in this sacred site is sacred and highly associated with the holiness of Adera (God). Thus, these view or themes as differentiate the experience of sacred and provide a starting point for developing a frame work for sacred sites and determining their potential for helping to manage the environment (forest) in general and trees in particular, and in maintaining cultural diversity.

4.1.2. Ecological Values Of The Sacred Site

Although the main purpose of ritual site is as places for worship, burial and mediating religious festivals, they also provide valuable and secured habitats for plants and animals. The biodiversity rich sacred groves are immense ecological significance. They play important role in the management of flora and fauna.

The several rare and threatened species are found in sacred groves (Degnna) which are becoming the last refuge site for these species under the shelter of Hegelebona religion. The sacred groves are ecological and a great heritage of diverse gene pool of many tree species. According to informants trees which are not visible of any area still common to see in sacred sites of nearby localities.

Besides the sacred groves importance in religious services of Hegelebona performances, the vegetation of sacred groves has certain distinctive ecological benefits. Informants stated the indirect benefits of these sacred groves such as reduction in erosive forces of water, conservation of soil, maintaining hydrological cycle, providing desired water quality and store houses for seed of useful species. Furthermore; this helped to maintain the desirable health of ecosystem, reduce habitat destruction, some tree species leaves are also important in improving the soil fertility through efficient nutrient cycling. Informants gave stress on recreational value attached to the sacred sites besides the religious services in Helebona it provides (non Hegelebona followers).

Thus, the religious practices in maintaining sacred groves in Qemant also contributed to the promotion of local or regional or national level management strategies of forest in general and trees in particular.

4.1.3. Medical Value Of The Sacred Site

According to many study conducted in different parts of the world on the importance of sacred groves showing that not only arrange of values (religion and ecological) the places contain but also the knowledge of using these as medicinal purpose. In other words, the role of sacred groves in the conservation of the regional medicinal plants has been emphasized in several studies from different parts of the world. According to the WHO (2006) assumption that 3.5 billion developing countries people relay on plant centered traditional medicine for their primary health care treatment. In Africa, according to different findings around 80% of the populations are using traditional medicine for their primary health care needs. This is because over one third of the population of Africa could not access to primary health care provisions. Furthermore, in Ethiopia more than 80% of the population still depends up on traditional medicine for their primary health care demands (Ministry of Health, 2007).

It is obvious that traditional medicine is important particularly for rural people of Ethiopia those did not have access to formal health care. The case of Qemant communities is not different in which most of the people still resides on traditional medicine for primary health care demands. This is because lack of accessibility to modern health services facility particularly the rural people which constituted more than 85% of the population. Besides this; most of the traditional medicine provided for people with little or no payment, which contributed the healers (herbalists) rural based health service providers.

Traditional medicine in Qemant are not only used for curing diseases but also protection, promotion of the human physical, spiritual, social, economical and mental aspects of the individual. Thus, the destruction of sacred sites, which is rich in relative term in biodiversity, for Qemant may lead to the total elimination of their age old knowledge of traditional medicine.

4.1.4. Current Problems on Sacred Groves

Earlier sacred groves were indicator of the phenomena of environmental managements. According to informants their ancestors were fully aware that the natural resources that sustained them must be conserved for the sustenance of future generations. But at present fast growing population and on farm activities are the prime causes of deteriorating quality status of the groves. Furthermore, people changing attitudes, erosion of their traditional beliefs of Hegelebona have caused degradation of sacred groves over the years.

Many of the sacred sites was ceased to exist including the forest patches, which have been preserved for centuries as religious justifications. The fate of those remaining age old trees are also under ruthless exploitation and destruction, which in turn brought a server reduction and complete loss in many cases in biological diversity and ecological as well.

The groves located near the settlements are disappearing at a faster rate. Most of the sacred groves, as indicated above, are seen disappearing due to inevitable factors like animals grazing and human interference. This has done considerable ecological damage in the region making the soil more acidic and adversely affecting nutrient cycle and soil fertility. This was also a serious health problem on humans in which lots of individuals are victims of many problems such as blindness, deafness and physical handicapped.

Furthermore; Qemant the local people living nearby the sacred groves are poor and so they depend on the grove to meet their vital domestic necessities such as fuel wood, demand for more arable land, construction purpose, medicinal use (to a certain extent) and others. These further aggravated by the high population density of the area. This is directly related to increasing population led to over exploitation of resources. Thus, as long as the concerned body giving economic bargaining power to these people, the management of the sacred groves would not be successful and would totally collapsed in the near future.

4.1.5. Conclusion And Recommendations

4.1.5.1. Conclusion

- The study communities have valuable knowledge on trees management as the finding clearly witness.
- The indigenous trees management practices identified in the study area involve indigenous religion, such as establishment of sacred sites for religious services, ecological knowledge and the medicinal values of the trees.
- However, the study revealed that the indigenous practices of trees management have problems in their function, implementation and effectiveness. For instance, in many areas of the community the age old indigenous practices of religion are on the verge of death and the problems of forest and trees are interpreted as curse of god. This shows that the major elements of indigenous practices of the area cannot provide effective solution for the problem of trees.

4.1.5.2. Recommendations

The result, therefore, urged and called for immediate solution for the problem. Accordingly, the following recommendations are forwarded. This will be done through the establishment of intensive forms of Participatory Management program in the study area. To achieve this, there is a need to integrate indigenous knowledge in one side and scientific forest management knowledge in the other.

The achievement of the community rule is heavily relied on enforcing regulations. In this regard, the government should support the local laws and the morale of the community for the implementation of the joint effort of forest management in general and trees in particular. Accordingly:-

- Sacred sites should have a defined area under adequately strong pressure of management. In other words, proper legislative support and specific policies should be enforced. Human interference should regulate by encoding various indigenous practices along with scientific implications rather than only depended on the Hegelebona religious practices and prescriptions.
- A management plan should be periodically reviewed. These sacred groves need proper conservation and protection by formulating consistent conservation strategies in order to save them from the further degradations.
- A procedure to ensure that users are involved in the preparation of the management plan and setting of management prescriptions.
- A procedure to monitor species and set management prescriptions for them.
- A procedure to ensure sustainable harvesting techniques (only taking dried leaves, and cutting them in certain intervals after enriching the area)
- Include in the school curriculum indigenous knowledge in general and environmental management practices specifically works to the community and the country at large.

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