

The Resilient Nature of Common Property Resource Management Systems: a case study from the Guassa area of Menz, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Many communities world-wide face serious environmental degradation, including deforestation, overgrazing, soil erosion, overexploitation of biodiversity and serious air and water pollution problems, all associated with mismanagement of natural resources. However, natural resource management institutions that are based on systems of common property can often prevent many instances of mismanagement of natural resources. To this end this paper examines how a common property resource management system in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia survived various government sponsored development packages and social changes. In the district of Menz, the Guassa area, common property resource management worked under an indigenous resource management institution known as the Qero system, based on the existing Atsme Irist indigenous land tenure system. The rules of exclusion governing access to the use of the Guassa area resource were aspects of the Atsme Irist land tenure system that conferred usufruct right on the members of a group tracing their lineage back to their pioneer fathers. Furthermore, the user community was organised at parish level, an arrangement that gave the Guassa area the status of consecrated land, under protective patronage of the Christian church in Ethiopia.

Following the 1974 Socialist Revolution in Ethiopia, the then governing regime proclaimed the Agrarian Reform in 1975. All land that was in private ownership or communal tenure was transformed into the state or public land tenure system. In turn, this result in the formal ending of the Qero system in Menz. However, as further social and economic changes took place, such as land redistribution and villagisation programmes, the Guassa common property user community informally responded to these changes by forming new indigenous institutions that were in line with the new social and political order. As a result, the current Guassa resource owners have continued to manage their natural resources under a modified common property system until now. Furthermore, this system of management has been extremely important for the livelihoods of the local community, for environmental sustainability, and also for the conservation of the endemic and endangered flora and fauna of the area. The Guassa area illustrates how resilient can be true common property resource management systems when exposed to rule changes and pressure from outside forces. Instead of collapsing when the rules were changed, the existing common property resource management system evolved into a new institution that has adapted, chameleon-like, to the new political order.

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1. Introduction

The success of managing natural resources sustainably requires both an understanding of ecosystem processes, and of the interactions between people and the ecosystem. Conservation biologists are most usually seek to understand the first, but often fail to understand the second. Recent interest in indigenous resource management systems arises for several reasons. First, from the failure of many formal, state-sponsored conservation initiatives and the search for viable and sustainable alternatives to current models of resource use that advocate exclusion in the name of protection. Second, from renewed interest in indigenous resource management systems arising in part from a new found pride in traditional values and institutions in developing countries. Indeed, most cultures and practises in the developing world emphasise responsibility and a vested interest in the community, rather than on individualism (McCay and Acheson, 1987; Little and Brokensha, 1987; Berkes and Farver, 1989; Lalonde, 1993; Wavey, 1993; Alcorn, 1997).

True common property resource management systems call upon the users to co-operate in the inclusion, exclusion and appropriation of the valuable resources that are governed under traditional rules. In such systems, there exist rules concerning who may use the resource, who are excluded from using the resource, and how the resource should be used with a minimum of internal strife or conflict among or between the users. Consequently, rules mutually agreed upon by all members of the group provide an efficient means of conflict resolution. Indeed, users themselves often point out that their local rules serve primarily to reduce conflicts over resource use, over and above other possible functions (Berkes and Farver, 1989). Indigenous common property resource management systems promote the ideals of communal welfare and responsibility. Such principles are enshrined in the codes of resource appropriation and protection. It is no accident that traditional resource management systems are almost always community-based.

Ethiopia was once richly endowed with common property resource regimes amongst its diversity of ethnic groups (Admassie, 2000). The structure of

indigenous land tenure systems in Ethiopia were varied and evolved through a complex of processes. The major forms of land right and land tenure system that operated in Ethiopia were *Atsme Irist* and *Gult*, features of which were analysed by Welde-Meskel (1950), Pankhurst (1961), Hoben (1973), Markakis (1974), and Rahmato (1984, 1994). However, these tenurial systems were suspended by the 1975 Agrarian Reform, which was proclaimed as a result of a popular uprising against the monarchy that swept the whole of Ethiopia in 1974. Nevertheless, since 1975, the indigenous common property resource system in the Guassa area of Menz has continued to protect local livelihoods (Ashenafi and Leader-Williams, 2005), as well as endemic and threatened biodiversity, including an important population of the Ethiopian wolf (*Canis simensis*), the world's most endangered canid (Ashenafi *et al*, 2005).

This paper aims to understand the dynamics of the common property resource management system that operated in the Guassa area of Menz of Ethiopia and how it has been affected through government-sponsored changes and its subsequent replacement by another form of common property resource management systems. Information on the past and present common property resource management system will be reviewed based on what factors determine past and current membership of, and exclusion from, the user group and what detrimental changes have occurred to affect the smooth operation of the traditional common property resource management and how have these changes been accommodated to retain the resilience within the system?

2. Study Area

This study was conducted in the Guassa area, located in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia, at latitude 10⁰ 15'- 10'' 27'N and longitude 39⁰ 45'- 39'' 49'E. (Fig. 1). Politically, the study area lies in the Amhara National Regional State of North Shoa Zone, in the Gera-Keya Woreda (District) popularly known as *Menz*. Menz lies 265 km north-east of the national capital Addis Ababa by road. The total area of the Guassa is 111km², and its altitude ranges from 3200 to 3700m above sea level.

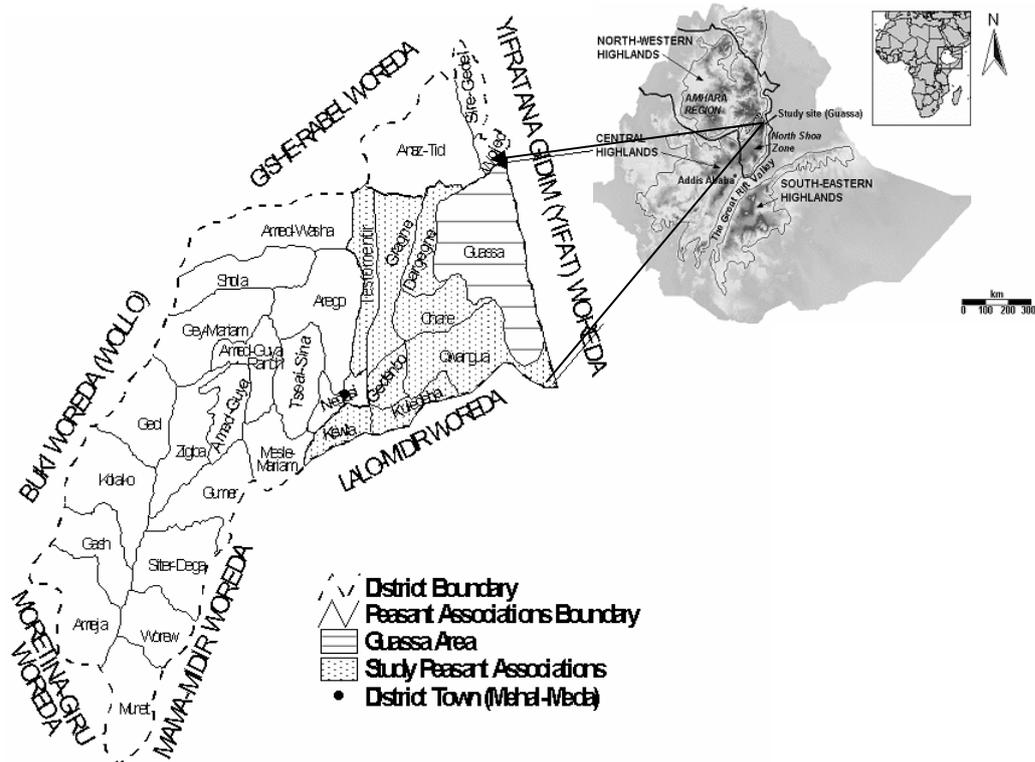


Fig. 1. Map showing the highland blocks of Ethiopia, and the location of the Guassa area and the Farmers' Associations.

The climate of the Guassa area varies according to altitudinal gradients and the size of the mountain block. The vegetation of the Guassa area is characterised by high altitude Afro-alpine communities, within which different habitat types predominate, comprising: *Euryops-Alchemilla* shrubland; *Festuca* grassland, *Helichrysum-Fesutca* grassland; and, *Erica* moorland. The area derives its name from the so called “Guassa grass”, which comprises four species of *Festuca* highly valued by the local community. The area is rich in biodiversity and contains several endemic and threatened species of flora and fauna, including the second largest remaining population of Ethiopian wolves, and the largest population remaining outside a formally protected area (Ashenafi *et al*, 2005).

The Guassa area is managed by the community for various uses such as grazing land, firewood collection, and the cutting of Guassa grass for various purposes such as thatching, and household and farm implements like ropes

and whips (Ashenafi, 2001). The Guassa area is now managed by eight Farmers' associations (Fig.1), the local institutions that were established across Ethiopia following the 1975 Agrarian Reform.

3. Results

The results presented here are largely based on the participatory social science methods and findings of a previously published study for which the fieldwork was completed in 2001 (Ashenafi and Leader-Williams 2005). However, we also add new information that updates the situation and events from 2000 to 2006, to further demonstrate the resilience of the Guassa common property resource management system.

3.1 The Traditional Qero System of Indigenous Common Property Resource Management

Our study participants recorded that their pioneer fathers (*Aqgni Abat*) in Menz, Asbo and Gera, started the indigenous management of the Guassa area in the 17th Century. At the outset, Gera noticed an expanse of open land in the eastern part of Menz and demarcated the Guassa area as his pastureland. Later, Asbo and Gera later sub-divided the land in two parcels, following a horse race, with the boundary sited where the first horse dropped (Ashenafi 2001). The two pioneer fathers set the Guassa area aside for the primary purpose of livestock grazing and use of the guassa (*Festuca*) grass. The right to use the resources of the Guassa area depended on the land rights and the prevailing land tenure system known within Ethiopia as *Atsme Irist* (Welde-Meskel 1950; Hoben 1973). *Atsme Irist* was a right to claim a share of land held in common with other rightful landholders based on an historical ancestor. Those who can establish kinship through either parent may enter a claim to a share of the land from elders controlling the allocation. Hence, under *Atsme Irist*, the Menz people who could trace their descents from the pioneer fathers, Asbo and Gera, could use the Guassa area.

To promote the rational use of resources in the Guassa area, the members of the land holding group in the *Astme Irist* land tenure system adopted an indigenous institution to manage the common property resources, known as

the *Qero* system. The *Qero* system worked by choosing a headman (*Abba Qera* or *Afero*) who was responsible for protecting and regulating use of each area. The Asbo and Gera areas each had one *Abba Qera* (*Afero*). The *Abba Qeras* were mostly elected anonymously in the presence of all users of the common property resource. To be elected as *Abba Qera* a candidate had to be able to trace his ancestral lineage through his patriarchal or matriarchal line to Asbo and Gera. The terms of office of *Abba Qera* could last from a few years to a lifetime, depending on the performance of the office holder.

The user communities of the Guassa were further subdivided at a *Tabot* or *Mekdes*³ (parish) level. The Asbo side users were organised under six parishes, while the Gera users were organised under eight parishes. Each parish had one headman esquire (*Aleqa* or *Chiqa-shum*) who was answerable to their respective *Abba Qera*. Our study participants pointed out that the organisation of the user community into parishes gave the Guassa common property resource area the status of consecrated land, under the protective patronage of the long-established Christian church in Ethiopia.

The *Qero* system could entail the closure of the Guassa area from any type of use by the community as long as 3-5 consecutive years. The length of closure largely depended upon the growth of the *Festuca* grass and the need felt by the community. Several participants suggested that the length of closure depended on the success of crop harvest and on the frequency of drought in the area.

When the *Abba Qera* of both Asbo and Gera felt that the Guassa grass was ready for harvest, they would announce to the rightful owners of the Guassa user community the date of the opening, either at church ceremonies, market places, burial ceremonies or at other public gatherings. The area was usually opened at the height of the dry season of that particular year, usually around

³ *Tabot* is an icon-like replica of the Arc of the Covenant, central to the belief of Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox (Monophesite) Church. It is kept in the Holy of Holies, which is called *Mekdes* of each church. In rural Ethiopia particularly among the elders it also represents the church and the parish.

February. Once the grass cutting was over, the livestock took their turn to graze the Guassa area.

When the wet season approached, the community prepared to leave the Guassa area. The date of closing was culturally predetermined as the 12 July (*Hamle Abo*) following the opening. The reason for this particular date is that it is the breaking day of the “Apostle’s Fasting” (*ye hawariat som*), which is the second biggest fasting season next to Lent for the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church.

Prior to 1941, the user communities used to pay a levy (*giber*) to the king through their respective *Abba Qera*. The levy for using the Guassa area was nine cloaks and an unknown number of sheep. During the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I, the payment of tax in kind was abolished and payment was replaced by money. From 1941 to 1974 everybody with the use right to the Guassa area had to pay one *Birr*⁴. The *Abba Qera* collected this and kept the receipts in his own name to later show the to the people.

Laws were enforced for the protection of the common property resource under the *Qero* system. This worked by enacting various bye-laws and by the entire community working together under the leadership of the two *Abba Qeras*. The *Abba Qeras* frequently patrolled their respective areas with the household heads (*gollmassa*) on dates chosen by the *Abba Qeras*. Every able male household head was obliged to go out on patrol, and failure to participate would result in severe punishment for absentees. In some instances, punishment could result in burning down of the absentee’s house.

Rules were in place that prohibited the use of the Guassa area during the closed season. Various bye-laws were enacted by the user community to enforce the protection of the common property resources. All informants made reference to punishments where someone found cutting or grazing livestock in the Guassa area during the closed season was supposed to pay:

⁴ Birr is the local currency of Ethiopia, US\$1= 8.20 Birr at present.

100 daula of gomen zer (100 sacks of cabbage seeds);
Irtib yeanbessa lemd (a wet lion skin);
Andi kolet barya (a one-testicled servant);
yebirr zenezena (a silver pestle); and,
Yekechemo mukecha (a mortar made out of a shrub which never grows a stem).

None of these items were available in Menz and some of them were not available anywhere at all! Hence, these penalties were taken as the price for violation of community rules because, if impossible to obtain, no one would dare to touch the common property resource in the closed season. In addition, if someone was found violating the bye-laws and unable to meet the prescribed penalties, he was stripped of his *Astme Irst* right of owning land and, thereby, was forced to evacuate Menz.

When someone was found cutting grass in the Guassa area, the most effective and highly enforced bye-laws were those that involved a serious beating. Furthermore, if someone thatched his house using *Festuca* grass that was cut during the closed season, his house was burned down. If livestock was found grazing, the livestock was slaughtered and the skin would be given to the parish church to make a drum. If a trace of freshly cut *Festuca* grass was found in someone's homestead, or if someone was seen to have made a fresh rope, he was considered to have cut the Guassa, and measures were taken by the *Abba Qera* of his area. If fresh dung was found in the Guassa area, it was the responsibility of the local esquire to find out as whose cattle had been in Guassa.

3.2 The decline of the Qero system in 1975

In 1974, a popular uprising (*Abiot*) against the monarchy swept the country. One of the most popular mottos of the revolution was "Land for the tiller" (*meret larashu*). The 1974 uprising was hijacked by a military junta called the *Derg* as a vanguard to the revolution. On March 4th 1975, the *Derg*, proclaimed the nationalisation of all rural land and dissolved the relationship between tenant and landlord, and between customary tenure and privileges. The proclamation abolished private and community ownership of land and replaced this with state ownership. Therefore, the proclamation gave a

uniform usufruct right to all farmers within the framework of state ownership of the land. The same proclamation also provided for the formation of farmers' association by farmers. Hence, the *Qero* system of the Guassa area, was formally abolished, together with its associated common property resource management rules and enforcing mechanisms.

Based on the prevailing political and social order, it was considered appropriate to pass the management to eight farmers' association living adjacent to the Guassa area. Likewise, the Woreda (District) Administration Council passed a directive regarding Guassa area management. Based on this, the management of the Asbo side was given to Dargegne Farmers' Association and the Gera side management was given to Qwanguie Farmers' Association. This resulted in marginalisation of the former rightful owners of the Guassa resource from its management.

The eight farmers' associations with control over the Guassa have boundaries drawn around them that are based on political and topographic considerations, rather than on including homogenous kinship descent groups. Discussion with study participants indicated that members of some farmers' associations living nearby Guassa had previously been marginalised from the management of Guassa on the pretext that they were not direct descendants of Asbo or Gera. Key informants mentioned that most residents in Yedi, Ferkuta and Yehata villages had been born outside the legitimate marriage of Gera, which is regarded as an important criterion for land distribution and ownership in the *Atsme Irist* land right system. Fewer members of some other farmers' associations, including Chare and Dargegne, fell in this category of marginalised users. In all cases, the marginalised users were settled in agriculturally marginal land close to Guassa, while the rightful owners remained settled in the low-lying agriculturally productive land further from Guassa, as they had been in the past. As a result, there was a marked change in those who controlled the Guassa after the *Qero* system had been abolished.

Most respondents described the management of the Guassa after the 1975 Agrarian Reform as ineffective and very bureaucratic. The responsibility for enforcing the laws was given to the farmers' association (*kebles*) adjacent to the Guassa area, but they undertook few patrols. The local militia had afforded little protection to the resource users, and only infrequently took action against offenders, because of corruption and inefficiency.

One 59 year-old informant from Gedenbo Farmer's Association described the situation of Guassa management after the 1975 land reform as follows:

“When the revolution came we were told everybody is equal, there is no difference amongst people and everybody has a right to use the land regardless of his birthright. The same thing happened to Guassa. There was no *Qero* or *Abba Qera* to look after it. Those people whom we used to exclude from the Guassa management became owners of the Guassa overnight and everybody start to scabble for the resource.”

Another 58 year-old respondent from Gedenbo Farmers' Association described the situation as follows:

“The Woreda does not care about the Guassa because they always tell us you have to catch the offenders in the act of cutting (*Ige kefinge*). Otherwise it is not possible to accuse somebody of cutting grass. Then the people started cutting it at night when no one can see them. The police do not understand how we value the guassa grass, they do not know that the guassa grass is “our cloth, bread and butter” (*libsachin ina gursachin*), we cannot afford to buy corrugated iron sheets to cover our house. The only cloth we have is the guassa grass.”

3.3 Management of the Guassa Area since 1975

The community soon realised the consequences of an open access resource and responded automatically by seeking to re-instate a common property resource regime. A 51 year-old informant from Chare Farmers' Association noted as follows:

“Following the destruction of the *Qero* system we the people, who had no choice of any other material to thatch our houses and with nowhere to go to collect firewood, formally complained to the Woreda administration in 1977. The administration at first ignored our grievance. Later, with repeated nagging of the administrator by our elders, the Woreda administration at last agreed the Guassa area should be protected.

Following this agreement the Woreda clearly notified us to stop the use of the old bye-laws which were working under the *Qero* system on the pretext that they oppose the right of individuals and are reactionary. The community bye-laws were replaced by a monetary fine to the Woreda Ministry of Finance Office and wrong doers should be prosecuted by the law at the local court.”

One 64 year-old informant from Gragne Farmers’ Association describes the Guassa management scenario as follows:

“Since the revolution the Guassa was only once or twice closed properly. I remember clearly in 1982 we got news that the Guassa was being farmed from the Yifat side. Then we went out and pulled their crops and destroyed their farms, and later a serious conflict broke between us and the Yefat people. The local administration had to intervene to stop this situation and, after a big problem, they stopped coming again. After that it closed only for a few months in the wet season and it will be open again in the dry season. I think there are lots more people who need the Guassa grass and the number of livestock has increased, so closing it for long period like in the old days has become a problem.”

On the basis of information obtained from the group discussion and key-informant interviews, three important factors are responsible for the decline of effective management in the Guassa area, following the 1975 Agrarian Reform namely: institutional failure; repeated land re-distribution; and, villagisation.

The Guassa Conservation Council was formed from the user community as the new common property resource managers to replace the former *Abba Qeras* and to oversee the activities of the Farmers’ association towards the protection of the Guassa area. Most study participants accepted that the Guassa area had been managed by the Guassa Conservation Council, formed from the user community, since the 1980s. This resulted in a complete transfer of power from the parishes to the newly formed farmers’ associations. Currently, all the Guassa area users from the eight farmers’ association select members of the Guassa Conservation Council. The main function of the Guassa Conservation Council is to control illegal uses of the Guassa area during the closed season. The Committee usually uses the local militia from the adjacent farmers’ associations of Dargegne, and Qwangué to conduct

patrols. Illegal users may be prosecuted in the local courts while repeated offenders will be taken to the District court.

4 Discussion

In response to tensions among individuals seeking access to resources, indigenous resource management institutions can arise to ensure continued access to the resources and to restrict use by outsiders (Mantajoro, 1996; Ostrom, 1991, 1997). Indigenous resource management institutions for resource management include a wide variety of forms, rules and common understanding about how problems are formally addressed and solved in a particular community. Sometimes institutions are formed formally, with electoral procedures for specified tasks and rules that outline the rights and duties of all members. In other cases, institutions are not formally constituted, but still manage to regulate the use of the resources over a long period of time (Little and Brokensha, 1987).

Indigenous land tenure systems in Ethiopia were varied and evolved through a complex of processes before they were suspended by the 1975 Agrarian Reform. The major forms of land right and land tenure system operating in Ethiopia were *Atsme Irist* and *Gult*. Features of these tenurial systems has been analysed by Welde-Meskel (1950), Pankhurst (1961), Hoben (1973), Markakis (1974), and Rahmato (1984, 1994). However, the indigenous common property resource system of Guassa has not been described previously, and this study has provided the first such description.

The *Atsme Irist* land right and land tenure system worked by conferring inalienable usufruct rights equally to all living members of cognatic descent groups who could trace their lineage to a particular pioneer father (*Aqgni-abat*) who was credited with the original clearing or establishing of a recognised claim to the land. Those who could establish kinship through either parent could enter a claim to a share of the land from elders controlling the holding and allocation of land. This in effect, is a descent corporation. That

is, a person could inherit *Atsme Irist* from either parent because of ambilineal descent principles prevail in *Atsme Irist* areas (Hoben, 1973; Cohen and Weintraub, 1975).

The *Qero* system was an indigenous common property resource management institution that arose based on the existing *Atsme Irist* indigenous land tenure system. The rules of exclusion governing access to the use of the Guassa area resource were aspects of the *Atsme Irist* land tenure system that conferred usufruct right on the living members of a group tracing their lineage to the pioneer fathers Asbo and Gera. Only those persons who could prove their lineage to these two pioneer fathers were recognised as full members of the user community (*ristegna*) and permitted to exploit the common property resource on an equal footing. Needless to say, all persons who did not belong to the two *ristegna* groups of Asbo and Gera were excluded.

The *Qero* system was organised on the basis of two formally elected headmen (*Abba Qera*). The role and function of the *Abba Qera* was to mobilise the beneficiary communities for equitable resource distribution, and to enforce the bye-laws for protecting the common property resource. This indicates that it was a formal institution, which was established in response to a need to regulate the use of the common property resource in the Guassa area. Rules of protection and utilisation, as well as their enforcement, were essential aspects of the *Qero* system. These rules were tied up with the traditional tenure system and reflected the prevailing feudal system. Thus, the commons were not outside the overall socio-economic and political system, but rather were an integral part of it. The management of the common property resource was part and parcel of the wider tenurial and administrative system.

The common property resources of the Guassa area have been managed for hundreds of years by these rules, which were enforced by the members of the community acting individually and in groups. Outsiders, and even rightful owners, not abiding by the rules and regulations governing the mode of resource appropriation and enforcement of the law were excluded. The protection of the common property resources was re-enforced with the

prestige, power and authority of another local level institution, the parish. Hence, the rules of protection and utilisation and their enforcement operated and survived by leaning on another more hallowed institution, the church. In the process, the Guassa area become a kind of sacred entity, equivalent to what Durkheim (1965) called “the extraordinary contagiousness of sacred character”.

The Guassa area has not been brought under crop cultivation, despite the general craving for land in Menz, due primarily to its peculiar physical attributes. The Guassa area is above the tree-line, and neither trees nor crop cultivation yield the expected results. Hence, there is no permanent human settlement in the area. However, the Guassa area plays an important role in the economics and survival strategies of the communities living adjacent. Therefore, it is not surprising that the community has a vested interest in safeguarding the Guassa area.

4.1 The Resilience of the former Qero System

The Guassa area shows what happens when the rules by which common property resources were traditionally managed suddenly collapse under pressure from modernising forces. The reason behind the Guassa’s demise, and the subsequent suffering of those who depend on its resources, is easy to pin-point. In Menz, the undermining of the Qero system is no doubt the most debilitating impact of the 1975 Agrarian Reform. The transformation of land ownership from communal tenure into the state or public land tenure system, abolished the regularity of the Qero system. Thus, a common property regime that formerly provided assurance that the resources on which all rightful owners collectively depended would be available sustainably, is no longer fully functional. The same assurances cannot be provided by the adoption of different property rights, in this case state ownership, since the approaches for sustainability and equity are different.

Two major and five minor redistributions of land have taken place since the 1975 Agrarian Reform in Menz. Other studies in the Central Highlands have found that 85.5% of households have less land than before the 1975 Agrarian

Reform (Wolde-Mariam, 1991; Admassie, 2000). Whenever land redistribution has taken place, this has also brought a partial or complete change of farmland. This repeated redistribution of land has decreased the size of private crop and grazing land holdings, which has ultimately increased pressure on the Guassa area for grazing and for encroachment as agricultural land. In turn, this has resulted in the inability of the community to be self-sufficient in food production, as well as to lose interest in land management practices.

The villagisation programme is another state-sponsored social change that seriously affected the Menz population. The Ethiopian villagisation campaign began in late 1985. Its aim was to move the majority of the rural population into the new villages by the end of 1995. The policy was part of the revolutionary *Derg* government's drive towards agrarian socialism in an undeveloped, pre-dominantly peasant-based, rural society. Although the physical focus was on creating a new spatial physical structure, moving people closer together into a grid-patterned village, the change was intended to have a radical and uplifting effect on the social and political life of the peasantry (Pankhurst, 1992; Tafesse, 1995).

The impact of the villagisation programme in the Guassa area was an extensive collection of guassa grass for thatching. Communities living far from the Guassa area, up to a day's walk, came to collect the grass, which increased the number of users to very high levels. Another influence of the villagisation programme was that increased distances to other grazing lands, and the problems of livestock management, forced people to move their livestock into a semi-permanent residence in the Guassa area. This was because there was no area in the villages where livestock could graze under the watchful eye of a household member. If left unsupervised, the animals were likely to trample someone's crops. Pressure from within and from outside forced the then military government to abandon its villagisation programme in March 1990. The Guassa community quickly responded to this by abandoning the new villages and going back to their former homesteads.

Although the villagisation programme is now shelved, its impact has nevertheless, remained in the area.

The whole cost of these exercises was resented by the community, mainly due to the mismatch between the different perceptions of government and of local communities which later led to absolute poverty.

4.2 The Existing Management of the Common Property Resource

Gibbs and Bromley (1989) described common property resource management institutions as having the capacity to cope with changes through adaptations. This in turn leads to the stability of the management system and an ability to cope with surprises or sudden shocks, which further increases the resilience of the system. This has been evident in the Guassa area. When the *Qero* system was abolished, the community responded by forming another indigenous conservation system under the Guassa Conservation Council, which is online with the existing political socio-cultural situation of the country, which is a different form of community-based management institution for the management of the Guassa resource.

Following the recent drought in 2002/3, the community has shown much greater resolve in managing its common property resources. The former Guassa Conservation Council no longer exists. Instead, a series of new Guassa conservation council committees have been formed in each of the eight peasant associations, while a new overarching Guassa Conservation Council Committee has been formed at Woreda (District) level with one representative from each peasant association. This Guassa Committee at the Woreda level works with the Woreda administration, police and justice offices to prosecute offenders who break bye-laws. The bye-laws have been strengthened following the formation of the new councils at Farmers' association level and Woreda level. The recent bye-laws work under the *Idir* system, which is an indigenous institution formed to help members in times of difficulty. Prosecutions under the *Idir* system have the respect of every member of Ethiopian society.

In conclusion, we have shown how the common property management regime in the Guassa area of Menz, Ethiopia, has proved resilient under the imposition of many social and political changes and still continuing managing the Guassa area resources. Therefore, unlike the “Tragedy of the Commons” model proposed by Hardin (1986), the common property resource owners of the Guassa have responded to these changes by maintaining their traditional values, so preventing the resources on which they depend becoming *de facto* open access. While the management of the area has changed many times, the Guassa users’ community has moved to ensure that their area retains the conditions necessary to ensure common property management continues.

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