Local Community Perceptions towards the Preservation and Protection of Church Forests, the Case of Gondar City and its Surrounding, Northwest Ethiopia

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Abstract

These days, forests are hastily degraded, vanished, and damaged globally as a result of human activities, destructive industries, and population growth. But, there are exceptional sacred places which preserved forests and have contributed to the biodiversity and ecosystem. In this regard, the Ethiopian Orthodox Churches are the most eminent sites that could be considered as the home of indigenous trees. The main aim of this study was to explore peoples’ perceptions towards the preservation and protection of church forests in selected Orthodox churches of Gondar city and its surrounding. Accordingly, a qualitative research approach was used. Within this, key informant interview and focus group discussions were carried out. Study participants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique and a total of n=38 participants were interviewed. Based on this, the results showed that the local community had a strong perception on church forests and they firmly believed that destroying church trees at the cost of personal or family benefits would result in undesirable penalties in their overall life. They said that cutting trees may result in curse, death or the destruction properties. In general, people saw church forests as ‘untouchable’ although religious followers may use them as a sunshade to protect themselves from sunlight and to carry out some religious events. Indeed, this strong attachment towards church trees is the outcome of religious teaching and beliefs which base on the Holy Bible. Thus, taking this incomparable practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo followers into account, other institutions, professionals, entrepreneurs, factory owners, investors, policymakers, and development planners should adopt this moral commitment to save our native trees and biodiversity.

Keywords: church forests; Gondar; local community; perception; preservation

1. Introduction

Sacred sites are community preserved places, usually small in size, where spiritual, cultural, social, and religious values take place which in turn play a tremendous role in the conservation of natural resources and to stabilize the ecosystem services (Berkes 2009). In the cultural history of humanity, sacred forests highly prove the relationship between human beings and the environment has started in ancient times. It is actually not the feature of a certain religion, but a universal human phenomenon throughout the globe (Alemayehu 2002; Brown 2003). These indigenous trees (mainly found in the churches), specifically in the developing nations, are protected by priests, church students, church and forest administrators, local community members and / or religious followers on the ground that they do have religious, ritual and cultural implications for the community concerned and can represent the ancient ways of conservation (Nyamweru and Sheridan 2008).

Along with its biodiversity benefits, cultural and social values, and provisioning services, forests in the churchyards also provide regulating and supporting services like pollination, control soil erosion, and water flow management (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). Not surprising, church students, for instance in Ethiopia, regularly live in these grave shelters elsewhere in the forest and draw subsistence goods from the forest including wild fruits and firewood but resources here should not be used for personal benefits, they serve the benefits of the common i.e. church (Alemayehu 2007).

The ecology of Ethiopia is rapidly degrading as a result of the growing population growth, natural factors and economic activities, particularly subsistence agriculture. These other determining variables have contributed to the depletion of forests and the decline of biodiversity in Ethiopia to the
extent that some native species are on the verge of extinction. The deterioration of such forests significantly affected economic growth and prosperity. Thus, preserving and protecting the biodiversity has been the challenging task (Tadesse 1998). However, the exception of sacred forests found in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Churches(Alemayehu 2002; Taye 1998). These forests consist of native and ancient trees which have been contributing to Ethiopia’s remaining biodiversity(Alemayehu 2002). Similarly, Orlowska and Klepeis (2018) in their study entitled Ethiopian Church Forests: A Socio-religious Conservation Model under Changehave remarked that church forests grounds are very important for the followers to organize religious associations (mahiber or/senbetie) and to practice it. They added these forests are also used to keep up the social capital among members of the association in Orthodox religion(Orlowska and Klepeis 2018).

Previously, various studies were done mostly on the ecological aspects of church forests and few studied on social and religious facets. For instance, Zewge (2001), Alemayehu (2002), Alemayehu et.al (2005), Bongers et.al (2006), Abiyou et.al (2015), and Dereje and Birhanu (2018) have conducted on the ecological aspects and irreplaceable roles of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Churches in preserving the biodiversity, reducing soil erosion, and maintaining the general ecosystem. In addition, Orlowska and Klepeis (2018) showed the importance of church forests in sustaining socio-religious desires, particularly they help members of the religious association (mahiber or senbetie) to maintain their longstandingsocial ties, traditions and to develop strong values of forest protection.

Despite the attempts made by many researchers on church forests, much emphasizes were given to the ecological aspects and the indispensable role of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo churches in conserving biodiversity and ecosystem in general. Unlike, one of the past researches focused on the importance of church forests in maintaining social capital and religious ties among members. This study, however, was examined the perceptions of the local community (Ethiopian Orthodox Christian followers) towards the preservation and protection of indigenous trees found in the churchyards. It was conducted to grasp their perceptions and strong social, cultural religious attachments with church forests. To this end, four Orthodox Churches in Gondar city and its surrounding were purposely chosen.

2. Materials and Methods

Description of the study area

Gondar is the capital of North Gondar administrative zone. The city is located in the north part of the country at a distance of 738 km from Addis Ababa (Nurhssen 2016). From a religious point of view, Gondar has 44 famous churches in the city and surrounding. However, this study was mainly conducted in some selected Orthodox Churches of Gondar city. The four churches included in this study were Bata Maryam (close to the center of the city), Debre Birhan Selassie (the well-known church which is found in the east part of Gondar), Qusquam Maryam (found in the west part of the city) and Aba Semiw Michael (found in the south).

In general, these churches were selected because of their high forest coverage, long history in contributing the biodiversity and the ecosystem, and feasibility to the study.

Sampling and sample size determination

In selecting the study sites and participants (community members or Orthodox Tewahedo followers), purposive sampling (judgmental sampling) was employed. Since then, the researcher obtained information about community members who could provide relevant data on the issue studied. Hence, the researcher projected this sampling technique to get well experienced and knowledgeable individuals.

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1It is a religious association (in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christian) which takes place once a month, affiliated with a particular Saint
2This is also a religious association that takes place once a week on Sunday
Source of data
The present study, as usual, depended on both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data were collected from the local community (followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity), priests, church administrator, and church students. Whereas, secondary data were obtained from empirical studies, conference proceedings, leaflets, and books.

Data collection methods

**In-depth interview with key informants:** It was conducted with local elders, priests, church students, and church administrators who had special knowledge of church forests and conservation. A total of \( n = 10 \) key informants were selected i.e. three from each church. The interview sessions with key informants were carried out in the churches. Especially, in the day of Saints and Sunday were the apt time during the interview. In doing so, local language (Amharic) was used during the interview.

**Focus group discussions:** The main reason for choosing to use this method was because of its interactive nature that can provide us with evidence from a range of different voices on the same topic of study. The researcher obtained informed consent from group discussants by briefing them about the objectives of the study. Hence, a total of four FGD sessions were conducted. In each group, the number of discussants was seven (\( n=28 \)) and they were community members. During the discussion session, the Amharic language was used.

Data analysis techniques
Following the completion of the data collection process, data were analyzed using the thematic technique. It is believed that thematic analysis permits the researcher to find out precisely relationship between concepts and to compare with the original data (MohammedIbrahim 2012). Thus, in this study, a thematic analysis method was used to know about how the local people perceive the preservation and protection of church forests.

Ethical procedure
Conducting scientific research is not a haphazard work instead it needs systematic and ethical procedures. Thus, from the beginning, approval letter from the Department of Social Anthropology has obtained. In the next step, permission was requested from the church administrators. In addition, both oral and written consents were selected from community members, local elders, and priests.

3. Results
This section presents the major findings of the perception of the local community towards the preservation and protection of church forests. The data gained using key informant interviews and discussions were analyzed and integrated thematically.

Sacred church forests: insiders’ views
During the group discussion session, held in the churches, discussants were asked about their perception towards the preservation and protection of church forests in their respective locality and they vividly described in the following manner:

*Not sometimes, but all the time, it is difficult to separate human beings and nature. We depend on each other. Especially, we are nothing without the environment. But, church forests, in particular, are not simply a collection of different trees rather they are sacred. When we go to church, we kiss the building of the church, even we come to kiss the trees found in the churchyards. Because we strongly believe that in the church everything is holy and blessed by God.*

This entails that these religious followers had a bottomless connection with church forests. It comes not only from the religious teaching but also the social sanctions of the community towards such sacred trees. Every child is informed by the society to respect church trees through a process of
socialization. The researcher has also witnessed this practice since he has grown up within the religious community.

In the same vein, among the local elders interviewed at Aba Semiw Michael church has concisely confirmed that:

> Oh! My child, church forests are everything for us. Imagine, when we take Holy water either in the form of shower or drinking use forest grounds. When we are homeless we use them as a common shelter particularly for church students and church administers. When we carry out religious associations like senbete and mahiber we use trees. In short, they are our resources given by our LORD just as God has given Eden garden to Adam and Eve. Therefore, cutting or touching these blessed trees is absolutely prohibited. That is why we see trees in Orthodox churches that are three hundred years old and older. In our religion, the judgment will be severe when a man cuts trees by breaking down the rules and regulations. It may be segregation from all religious and social events. He/she will be underestimated by the priests and the community. If he does not repent immediately to his confessor he will not get requiem when he dies. For this reason, we have a lot of respect for church trees.

The above report needs no formula to understand it. It clearly shows that cutting church forests is seen as taboo in the study community. Everyone knows the consequences (either in the religious or social life) if one fails to comply with the church rules and regulations about its properties including trees.

In the church of Debre Birhan Selassie, the researcher met priests and asked them about the perception of the community. They explained:

> As you can see there are ancient trees in this church. This directly shows that all the followers of the faith have a deep perspective on these trees. You can use the trees outside the church as you want. You may be able to cut them. You can use them for various services, for example, for firewood, to make farming tools, crotch, to build houses, and others. But, the fact that if you are touching the forests in this church do not expect the penalty from anyone else, rather it will be from God. The Creator's wrath will send not only to you but also to your family. At the onset, the community does not try to control it. If you say why cutting off these sacred trees for personal use will be considered a shame.

The above report tells us about the deep-rooted perception of the community on church forests. They knew that cutting trees will result in punishment from God. The punishment will also negatively affect the life of the family member and relatives of the person who violated the rules of God. As a result, everyone knows that he/she may be subjected to punishment while alive and die.

While informants at Bata Maryam church described the views of the community towards church forests by relating big trees and elders; the connection between nature and humanity in this way:

> Respecting a big tree and a big man (elder) is a blessing. Look, a big tree protects us from sun and rain. And when you value elders you will be praised and will be blessed. Then you will have a good sense of happiness. Trees can hold a lot of soil and can protect soil erosion. Similarly, a big man plays a role in preserving and transmitting cultures to the upcoming generation. This is how the community views the church trees.

So this shows that the community’s respect to church trees; they have a mysterious relationship that cannot be described. It is obvious, there is a close connection between human beings and nature so that their faith plays a pivotal role in the preservation of forests in the long run. From this, it is
important to remind that everybody shall embrace not only a moral lesson but also psychological commitment from the Ethiopian Orthodox followers.

4. Discussion

“He who plants a tree is a servant of God; for he provides kindness to many generations and he shall be blessed by them in all seasons”

-Henry Van Dyke

The findings of the study indicated that local people had a strong social, cultural and religious attachment with forests found in the yards of Orthodox churches in Gondar city and its surroundings. Surprisingly, they had an extraordinary sentiment and treatment towards these native trees. Moreover, discussants (community members who participated in the discussion) explained that:

...It is unthinkable and strictly forbidden to cut and use church trees. Even we fear to touch these trees. Because they are our common umbrella when we live and die. We will use them when as a funeral ground after death. When we alive, we use them to protect us from the sun and to practice religious ceremonies like mahiber and senbetie, monthly and weekly respectively.

To confirm this, in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible it is clearly presented as:

...And the LORD God commanded Adam, saying, ‘of every tree which is in the garden thou mayest eat for food, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, ye shall not eat of it; but whatsoever day ye shall eat thereof, by death shall ye die’ (Genesis 2:16-17).

These sacred trees, according to the Holy Bible, are also forbidden not only to eat but also difficult to touch them. This case is proven in the Bible as:

.. And the woman said unto the serpent, ‘we may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden God hath said, “Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die”’. And the serpent of said unto the woman, ‘By death, ye shall not die, for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil’. And the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was pleasant for the eyes to look upon, and fair to contemplate;and she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat and gave it also to her husband with her, and they did it(Genesis 3:2-19).

This was also reflected by informants in the study sites, they believed that destroying church trees at the expense of personal or family benefits would result in undesirable penalties in their life. Trees in the churchyard are seen as ‘untouchable’ although religious followers may use them as a sunshade to protect themselves from sunlight and to carry out some religious events such as mahiber or senbetie. It might be curse, death or the destruction properties. Indeed, not exaggerating, the strong attachment of the local community and individuals towards church trees is the result of religious teaching and beliefs which base on the Holy Bible.

In line with this finding, Abiyou, Hailu and Teshome (2015) in their study entitled The Contribution of Ethiopian Orthodox Churches in Forest Management assured that the experiences of preserving church forests are the combination of religious and cultural practices through the attribution of spiritual powers to soils, waters, trees, and the likes.

5. Conclusion

The results showed that the local community had a strong perception about church forests and they firmly believed that destroying church trees at the expense of personal benefits would result in undesirable penalties in their overall life. They thought cutting trees may cause curse, death or the destruction properties. In general, people saw church forests as ‘untouchable’ although religious followers may use them as a sunshade to protect themselves from sunlight and to carry out some religious events. Indeed, this strong attachment towards church trees is the outcome of religious
teaching and beliefs which base on the Holy Bible and sociocultural commitments. Thus, taking this incomparable practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo followers into account, other institutions, professionals, entrepreneurs, factory owners, investors, policymakers, and development planners should adopt this moral commitment to save our native trees and biodiversity.

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