

Short Report

Wisdom of Ari:

Community-Based Technology in South Omo

Ethnographic Exhibition on the Peoples of Ethiopia

Masayoshi Shigeta

Kyoto University

From 22 February 1995 to 26 March 1995, the exhibition titled as above was organized by Gebre Yntiso (Addis Ababa University) and myself at the Ethnographic Museum of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. The exhibition was sponsored by Society of Friends of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The main theme of this exhibition was to introduce the Ari people's way of life in South Omo using their products of "community based technology."

Spirits of the exhibition

Those who are living in the modern, affluent society with full of highly consumable goods, tend to think the material culture of people like Ari as "poor," "retarded," or even "primitive." One of the spirits of this small exhibition was to provide a counterargument against such kind of prejudice. We are sure that visitors at least got some impression that their life is materially rich, convenient, well thought, ecologically adapted, and beautiful, and we still have much to learn from their wisdom. However, even though we tried to praise their community-based technology and their products, we must admit the fact that people have gradually started using industrial products such as plastic cups, plastic water tanks, glass bottle in the place of wooden cup, clay pot and calabash, respectively. In this exhibition, objects were displayed in an open space. Visitors were free to touch any materials and practice.

Who are the Ari people?

The Ari reside in the

southern margin of the Ethiopian Highland and western side of the Rift Valley. The population of Ari is reported to be 109,124 in the 1984 census. The Ari language, araf, belongs to the Omotic language family. Their habitat is a land of diverse vegetation ranging from lowland Acacia Savannah to Afro-Alpine vegetation. The Ariland has dry season, *haashin*, and wet season *bergi*. There are about 1,200 mm rainfall per year at around 1,300 m above sea level, while the monthly average temperature does not go below 15 C even at 1,600 m. The Ari territory is divided into nine geographical sections, each of which is represented by a local chief called *baabi*. In Ari's folk classification of territory, there are highland (*dizi*), midland and lowland (*dawla*). At the periodical markets, Ari people exchange the products of highland with those of lowland.

The Ari who are predominantly agricultural people, hold a great repository of crop diversity. Crops are categorized into two groups, *isin* and *tika*. *Tika* includes yam, taro, ensete and other vegetable crops. *Tika* gardens, where coffee, ensete and other root crops are extensively found, show a good companionship of these crops. Ari households are dispersed within a village enclave and gardens of *tika* surround each household. *Isin* consists of grain crops such as barley, sorghum, tef and maize,


Ethnographic Museum, Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES)
Addis Ababa University
Ethnographic Exhibition on the Peoples of Ethiopia

Wisdom of Ari

Community-Based
Technology
in South Omo

22 February - 26 March (Closed on Mondays)

Opening of Exhibition
5:30 PM 21 February 1995
Video show "Ensete and Ari people"
Special lecture "Indigenous Science and Technology of Ari"
At Makonen Hall, Sidist Kilo Campus, Addis Ababa University



Sponsored by Society of Friends of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies

and pulses such as lentil, pea and faba bean. *Isin* crops are always grown in fields called *wony haami*, which literally means fields of labor. When working in *wony haami*, people often organize labor exchange groups. After the work, people get together, drink, dance and sing.

Members of Ari society are categorized into three caste-like social groups: *kantsa*, *gashimana*, and *mana*. These three groups do not intermarry each other. While *kantsa* and *gashimana* are farmers, *mana* people are experts in metal work (*fakamana* or *gitamana*) and pottery (*damana* or *dongermana*). Although *mana* people have been socially discriminated and subordinated, their contribution towards the welfare of society is tremendous.

What is "Community-based technology (CBT)"?

"Community-based technology (CBT)" can be defined as a technology that creates commodities necessary for the people's basic needs of their daily life. CBT products may be characterized as having the following features: They are in most cases made by the local people for their own use exploiting the local materials available in their vicinity. CBT products can be on sale in the local market but not in the large scale commercial venture. Value of CBT products is mostly utilitarian and has no excessive additional value. Although people are deeply attached to the products, aesthetic points or antiquity has not been taken into consideration as monetary value. The diffusion of CBT and the use of products are localized. In Ari's case, CBT for wooden products and other crafts spread evenly. However, CBT for metal products and clay



Prior to the public opening, some guests were invited

products are restricted to certain craftspeople's groups. The extents of CBT products are not only limited to the artifacts such as tools and utensils. They also include consumable products such as processed foods and disposable crafts for one-time-use. Lastly, CBT is not a kind of static nature. It keeps changing through the dynamic process of interaction among the people and their demand, natural and social environment.

Video Program

During the exhibition, 23 minutes' video program "Ensete and Ari people" were continuously shown. The program focuses on the lively relationship between Ari people and ensete (an Ethiopian endemic crop). The wisdom of Ari people is explored in their sophisticated method of propagation, multipurpose utilization of different parts and conservation of wild species. The original of this ethnographic video program was filmed in November 1994 by Documentary Japan, Tokyo Ltd. and aired on 30 November 1994 in Japan. The Amharic version of this program was especially made for this exhibition.

Wisdom of Ari

In this exhibition, a total of 157 cultural objects of Ari people were classified into four

groups. These are (1)Wooden Products, (2)Iron Products, (3)Clay products, and (4)Products made from other materials such as i)bamboo, ii)phoenix, iii)ensete, and iv)others.

(1)Wooden Products

The CBT of wooden crafts is evenly distributed among most Ari men. These products are made using a hand ax, wokka. People are selective in cutting down trees. Some of the favored trees are *asha* (*Cordia* sp.), *gomi* (not identified), and others like *wom'a* (*Ficus* sp.). They also make use of curved branches as handles of iron tools. Most of the wooden products have their original design of black strip drawn by using heated iron stick. Most of wooden products are made for domestic use, while others are taken to the market for sale.

(2)Iron Products

Fakamana or gitamana persons are experts in metal work. The CBT of iron products is developed in making agricultural tools. People totally rely on their local iron products for agricultural activities. Crude iron locally extracted from iron ore used to be the sole sources of these metal tools until iron scrap became available in the market. People maintain the CBT of iron products very well not only for the agricultural tools but also other utensils



Clay pot for brewing local beer

such as knives and spears. Some artisans have even developed the technology to the extent of repairing machine-guns.

(3)Clay Products

Damana or *dongermana* women are experts in pottery making. Clay products are one of the indispensable household utensils for Ari's daily life. They are achieving the full self-sufficiency in the clay products. Since the raw material (clay) is available in several places of Ariland, clay products are made in almost all territories of local chiefs. CBT of clay products are totally hand made without using chemical input. It is said that clay products last as long as ten years if they are properly handled. It may be noteworthy that they do not use firewood but only dried grass for burning.

(4)Products made from other materials

The range of Ari's CBT is wide enough to produce almost all the necessary commodities for their daily life. Among others, Bamboo, Phoenix and Ensete are the most frequently used raw materials.

i)Bamboo (*oisi*, *shomboko*): In Ariland there are two different types of bamboo (African highland bamboo and lowland bamboo) used for craft production. In the exhibition, doors, musical instruments, *woisa*, beehive, *mesaba* and plates made of bamboo are displayed.

ii)Phoenix (*metsa*): Phoenix tree, *zambaba* in Amharic, is spontaneously growing in plenty in the swampy area. Mats, baskets, beds and sieves are made of dried leaflets and midribs of phoenix.

iii)Ensete (*agemi*): Ensete is one of the most important cultivated plants in Ari. Almost all parts of ensete can be utilized for different purposes. Apart from the usage as food, the white strong fiber obtained from the pseudostem is the most useful one. Among the ensete fiber crafts, *gori* (skirt), which is used to be the favorite dress has begun to be rarely used. Presently it is common to see Ari women wearing cotton skirt.