

# **THE EVOLUTION OF A SUSTAINABLE ENSET-LIVESTOCK-BASED LIVELIHOOD SYSTEM IN THE ARSII OROMO HIGHLANDS, SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA**

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Enset farming system is widely seen as sustainable, and enset has been acknowledged as a vital crop for food security in Ethiopia. However, the production and consumption of enset, and research on enset, have largely been localized to the traditional enset areas that researchers refer to as the ‘enset culture complex’. This paper deals with the evolution of enset cultivation in the hitherto pastoral Arsii Oromo highlands of the Kokossa district. The district is situated on the periphery of the ‘enset culture area’ inhabited by the Sidama people. Despite the centuries-long side-by-side existence of the Arsii Oromo and Sidama societies, the Arsii Oromo did not adopt enset farming from the latter group as early as they might have done. The Arsii Oromo were initially reluctant to adopt enset farming, as they considered the crop an ‘inferior’ food (and the food of ‘others’), compared with barley and cattle, which were indigenous to the Arsii Oromo. In addition to these cultural factors, the conflict over land between the Arsii Oromo and Sidama might also have contributed to slowing the rate of adoption.

In the late 1880s and 1940s, rinderpest epidemics devastated the livestock-based economy of the Arsii Oromo. The droughts of the late 1880s also devastated cereal-growing areas. Historical and oral sources indicate that the neighboring enset growing regions survived both of these catastrophes. It appears that the Arsii Oromo came to understand the resilience and importance of enset from these experiences. Consequently, they eventually adopted and embraced enset, first as a food item and later as a crop for cultivation. This paper explores the process by which the Arsii Oromo in the Kokossa area adopted enset. The paper also examines the current status of enset cultivation, and discusses the tremendous role livestock has played in making a sustainable enset-livestock-based livelihood system in the Arsii Oromo highlands.

**Keywords:** Enset, Livestock, Sustainable livelihood, Arsii Oromo, Sidama