

21st Century COE International Workshop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: A short report on “Arsii study tour”¹

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Introduction

Arsii study tour encompassed diverse agro-ecological areas. It covered a relatively dry and hot central rift valley region and some parts of the cool Arsii-Bale highlands. On the initial day of the tour, 24 October 2003, we observed the rift valley region between the towns of Ziway and Awassa on the Addis Ababa-Moyale road. The area is known for its diverse bird life, beautiful lakes and acacia woodland.



Photo 1: Rift Valley Birds



Photo 2: Maize Fields in Rift Valley

The major subsistence systems of this region are livestock raising and maize cultivation. On 25 October 2003 we paid a day long visit to the villages around the small town of Wondo Genet on Arsii-Sidama border. On 26 October 2003 we visited the barley and wheat growing Arsii-Bale highlands. On the final day, 27 October 2003, we visited Arsiiland along Dodoalla-Assela road on our way back to Addis Ababa. The following short report focuses on the observations made on the second day of the study tour in and around Wondo Genet.

Diversities of two Sorts: A brief overview of Wondo Genet

Wondo Genet is located on the edge of the rift valley. True to its name, Genet, which means heaven in Amharic, Wondo Genet is an evergreen area. Production is possible here year round through irrigation. What could impress one in Wondo Genet, however, is not about its greenery alone, but the diversity of two sorts it exhibits: ethnic diversity of its residents on one hand and plant diversity of its gardens on the other. Ethnically, the Oromo (mainly Arsii and Gujii), the Sidama, Amhara, Gurage, Wolayta, Kanbata and Hadiya converge here. Except for the Oromo and the Sidama, others have come to the area as migrants and established themselves through time.

Unlike the crops fields and gardens that we observed in other parts of the rift valley, which were dominated by a single crop species (see photo 2 above), the dominant feature of Wondo Genet gardens is the diversity of plant species. Food crops and cash crops are mixed-cropped in most of the gardens. Enset (*Ensete ventricosum*), bananas, *khat* (*Catha edulis*), sugarcane and fruit trees of different types are some of the major plants one could observe in these gardens. However, one would wonder about the clearly observable imbalance between the food crops and cash crops in these gardens. Cash crops, for instance *khat*, overwhelmingly dominate most of the gardens.

¹ Members of Arsii study tour were: Andi Amri, Lim Boon Hock, Yasuaki Hirai and Mamo Hebo from ASAFAS (Kyoto University) and Wubshet Demewozu from SoSA (Addis Ababa University).



Photo 3: Enset (left) and Banana (right) in a Wondo Genet garden

If the balance between the cash and food crops is adopted, Wondo Genet can be a source of sustainable livelihood not only to its diverse inhabitants but also can serve as a bread basket for the surrounding areas. Nevertheless, the actual distribution of cash and food crops, how the balances between the two categories can be achieved and the interaction between the two categories as well as the interaction among the diverse ethnic groups that inhabit this area awaits deeper research.

Besides the Wond Genet proper, areas surrounding it display interesting contrasts that solicit for comparative research. Wondo Genet is a pocket in-between Oromo (in northern and north eastern parts) and Sidama (in southern and south western parts). Oromo inhabited areas surrounding Wondo Genet are characterized by scattered settlement patterns, grass-roofed huts, plots of maize and grazing lands. The Sidama parts, on the other hand, are strikingly different. Here the landscape is dominated by densely populated settlements, corrugated iron-roofed houses and diverse crops. Differences in housing styles partly reveal differences in production patterns which in turn demonstrate the financial statues of the two groups. The former are subsistence producers while the later are cash crops growers who can afford corrugated iron-roofed houses which is a symbol of social and financial status in rural Ethiopia.

Why such striking differences in production practices have developed in such a close proximity? Have cultural backgrounds of the two groups played some role in influencing the livelihood orientations they have opted for? Are there significant physical environmental (soils, sources of water and temperature) differences between the two parts? Our brief observations during the study tour cannot provide answer to these questions. Rather, it could stimulate researchers who are interested in comparative livelihoods studies from both socio-cultural and ecological points of views.