

The Social Meaning of Storage Pits, with Special Reference to the Derasha and Harari of Ethiopia

Year: 2011

Place of field work: Ethiopia

Name: Yui Sunano

Key Words: storage pit, sorghum, Ethiopia, Derasha, Harari

Research Background

Storage pits that are used to store grain and nuts have been made throughout the world, dating as far back as several millenniums B.C. Storage pits provide underground food storage. They are made by digging the soil. The shape of storage pit is like a sack or flask shape. Traces of storage pits have been excavated in archaeological digs around the world. Their use declined when the cultivation of rice and wheat became more prominent, as these crops are not well suited to pit storage. But, storage pits continue to be used in Derasha Special Woreda, Ethiopia. The local term for a storage pit is *polota*. Local residents store sorghum in these pits. The storage pits is also found in Harar, Ethiopia, where it is called *bora*. Boras have been examined in previous research (Remessa, 2008).

Research purpose and aim

Polotas are used in the Derasha area specifically to store sorghum. All family units have two or three polotas. Sorghum can be stored in a polata for between three and 20 years without insecticide. The Derasha area has two rainy seasons (February–July and August–November), with a total rainfall of 800 mm. Local residents cultivate sorghum to support themselves and maize to sell. However, the rainfall is less than 300 mm during the sorghum cropping term. This is not enough to allow proper cultivation of the plant. As such, the sorghum crop yield is unstable in this area. Local residents store sorghum in a polota during good harvest years. They use this sorghum when they are unable to realize sufficient crop yields. The polota is thus a very important food storage tool and it also has social meaning. In this research, I aimed to understand the social meaning of storage pits in each area in order to compare polota and bora.

Fieldwork results and achievements

Polota and bora are storage pits that are used to storage sorghum. Sorghum can be kept in these pits and be protected from insect and rat damage, fire damage, or theft. However, the storage terms differ between the two types of pits. The storage term of a polota is several years, but the storage term of a bora is just one year. The Harari peoples state that sorghum is more perishable in a bora than in a storehouse. However, the staff of the NGO say that local residents do not like to make storehouses. A bora does not provide good-quality storage. However, the Harari peoples continue to use them—this is related to social factors.

The Harari area is a desert area. As such, it is difficult to obtain trees to build storehouses. The Harari peoples make a bora by digging a pit. Initially, people used boras solely for storage. Now, however, boras also have social meaning. It is not considered good for people to openly display wealth. As such, resident peoples hide their grain in boras. They do not mark the place of their bora in order to hide it from others. In this way, they try to avoid the curses and questions of others. They also say that if they store grains in a storehouse, the devil will come and steal the grains. Local residents fear being known as wealthy. In addition, grain storage in a bora enables taxes to be avoided. As the amount of tax is determined by the crop yield, the grains are hidden under the ground to prevent the officers from determining the crop yield accurately.

In contrast, the Derasha people display their wealth openly. They build polotas in open spaces such as the road or the garden in front of the gate. In doing so, they avoid the envy of others and enable easy cooperation during times of hunger.



Picture 1 Polota storage pit



Picture 2 Displaying sorghum from a polota

Implications and impacts on future research

Both polota and bora are used for storage and have important social meanings. Wealth is openly displayed in the Derasha area where grains are stored in storage pits,

whereas it is hidden in the Harari area. This research clarified that the people in both areas continue to use storage pits because of the social background. Future research will examine why the Derasha people consider the display of wealth to be a good thing.



Picture 3 Displaying sorghum from a bora

Reference

Lemessa, F. 2008. Under and Above Ground Storage Loss of Sorghum Grain in Eastern Hararge, Ethiopia, *AMA-AGRICULTURAL MECHANIZATION IN ASIA AFRICA AND LATIN AMERICA*, *Ethiopia*:49-52