

NIGUSI MEMARTA AFARI MEBATA:

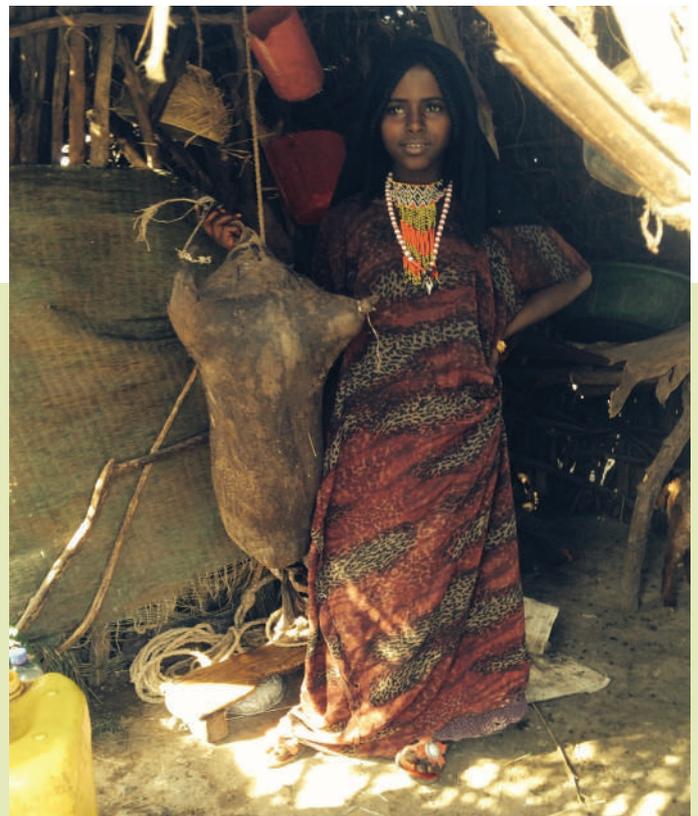
the king and his rules shall pass, but the ways of the Afar shall last forever

There are 1.8 million Afar in Ethiopia, making them one of the largest groups of mobile pastoralists in sub-Saharan Africa.

When deciding to migrate, the Afar rely on three traditional institutions — the *Edo*, *Dagu*, *Adda* — to make land assessments and forecast the weather. However, with climate change threatening many natural habitats across the region, methods integral to survival grow more unreliable, exposing the Afar to grave food insecurity.

The three pillars of Afar life

The *Edo* are traditional rangeland scouts who travel ahead to evaluate a potential area using indigenous knowledge of the land passed down through generations of the Afar. *Dagu* is a strict social convention that requires friends or strangers to exchange detailed news with one another in passing or on meeting. The last institution is the *Adda*, who are the traditional administration and make decisions based on information from the *Edo* and *Dagu*. The community's needs are placed first, and the *Adda* will take into consideration a variety of factors for migration, from timing, duration, and routes to the planning of festivities, marriages, the selling of livestock, and food rations.



Storing water in traditional water containers made of goat and sheep skin is practiced as a response to traditionally predicted drought.

In recent years, conventional modern strategies of rangeland improvement undertaken by government officials or researchers have proved too expensive and resource-heavy to benefit poorer, pastoral communities. Pastoralists prefer to rely on skills crafted through generations of indigenous knowledge. Still, these have their limits, and many pastoralist communities are struggling with the effects that climate change is having on the land.

Mekelle University saw an opportunity to combine the Afar's intricate understanding of the natural world and the technology and scope of conventional rangeland management to create a hybrid knowledge system that could benefit all parties.

The survey included working closely with ten Edo scouts who agreed to share their methods of rangeland assessment. Together graduate students compared the various techniques practiced by pastoralists and government bodies to assess resources and rangeland.



A one to one Dagu.

Indigenous knowledge proves superior to conventional, modern methods

Like generations before them, the Afar rely upon their rich and complex understanding of the land to make decisions. The *Edo* scouts evaluate potential areas in great detail. While conventional surveys may assess a site for groundwater potential, the pastoralists inspect the water quality - whether suitable for animals or people or both - and the estimated longevity of the source.

For land suitable for vegetation, conventional researchers may use aerial photograph analysis, whereas the pastoralists also assess the prevalence and extent of toxic plants that are fatal to livestock.

Then some factors may not make a conventional report at all, such as the presence of potential diseases and pests such as ticks, which can threaten livestock, or if an area is prone to rains that bring mosquitoes and malaria. Local politics is important to the Afar too: rangeland can become unsafe if another non-friendly clan is present.

The critical nuances of *Edo* rangeland assessment would be lost in the data-heavy surveys made by government officials or researchers. However, the latter's use of satellite technology and land coverage data means that they can assess a large area of land quickly and efficiently.

Combining the technology of conventional methods with the detailed, indigenous understanding of the land became the most obvious path for creating a more efficient assessment method.



A group of Afar individuals doing dagu.

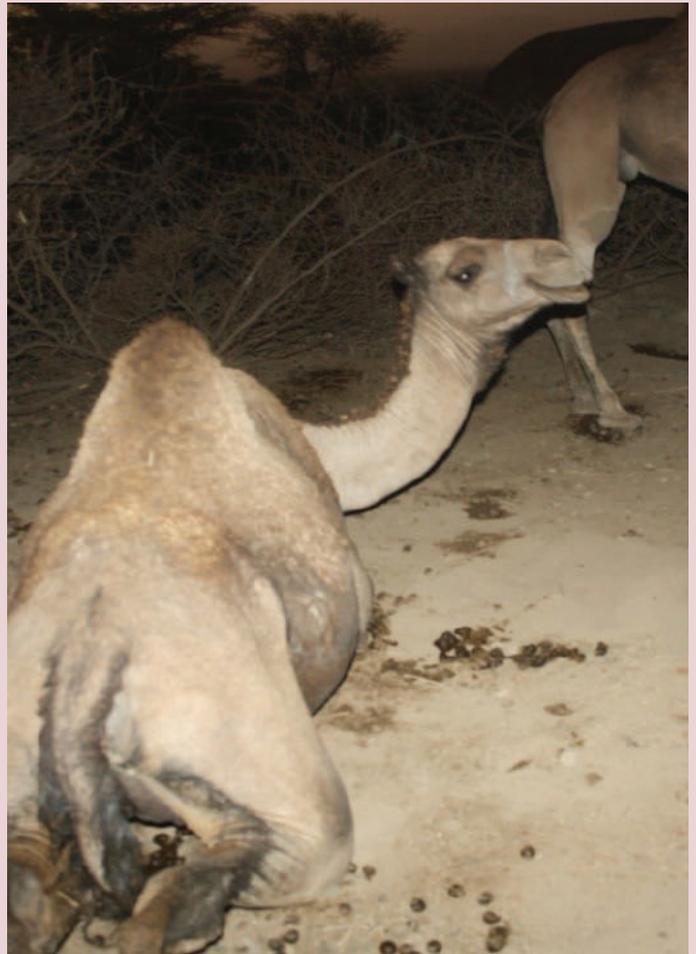
Preservation of tradition with a modern twist

The outcome has been beneficial to both parties.

Recording indigenous practices means that the ancestral knowledge of the Afar, which might otherwise have been lost, has been preserved for posterity.

Furthermore, as the project gathered international attention, the *Edo* have been invited to share their expertise with specialists to improve rangeland assessment worldwide. On the international stage, there seems to be a growing understanding that modern technology has its restraints and that following the natural workings of the land gives greater insight and greater appreciation.

A kibu or sacrificed calf being presented to a lactating camel to initiate milking (calf sacrificing is practiced in response to traditional weather forecasting).



Weather reports make all the difference

When asked how the project could support the Afar, the pastoralists requested regular reports from the conventional weather forecasting system. In previous years, the Afar have predicted the weather through observations of the land, such as plant life cycles, wind cycles, or the behaviour of insects. Climate change now makes natural cycles less predictable. Further, travelling long distances to far located rangelands to observe indigenous indicators is laborious and time-consuming for the *Edo*.

Now, monthly weather data is delivered to the villages to be used alongside indigenous parameters for decision making. It has come at a vital time. As extreme weather and climate variability grow more frequent, the reliability of traditional rangeland monitoring systems is declining. The integration of indigenous knowledge with modern techniques is effective at strengthening and preserving the Afar's way of life while also recording it for future generations to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Author: Mulubrhan B Gebremikael, Associate Professor of Rangeland Ecology and Pastoralist Development, Mekelle University, Ethiopia

Email: mulubrhan.balehegn@mu.edu.et

WHO IS AFSA?

AFSA brings small-scale farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, faith groups, consumers, youth and activists from across the continent of Africa to create a united and louder voice for food sovereignty.

AFSA encourages the use and reproduction of this case study for non-commercial use provided that appropriate acknowledgment of the source is given.



For more information and more African case studies see our website www.afsafrica.org