

## COMMENT 2

### THE ROLE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE BASIC NEEDS OF EAST AFRICAN PASTORALISTS

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**ABSTRACT** In reflection upon the worthy work of Professor Shinya Konaka and his colleagues, this contribution discusses the idea of “Localization of Humanitarian Assistance”. Several critical questions arise from a humanitarian situation where the needs are assessed: we have to know what people need and what they don’t need. We need to determine coping mechanisms that need not substituted but rather facilitated. To not undermine and further marginalize we need to know what resources, skills and social capital East African pastoralists have and how they are activated, where and when. The discussion is organized in observations from on one hand, archaeological and heritage perspective and on the other, personal experience of refugees and IDP life in the East Africa. It concludes that people do not only need food and shelter to survive and that cultural heritage is a basic human need too. Without the traditional skills and coping mechanisms that are inherent in the cultural values that glue people together, it is difficult for East African pastoralists to survive. Violence and neglect against people and environment are related to the destruction and neglect of cultural and natural heritage, which are people’s means of livelihood and sources of identity and dignity.

**Key Words:** Localization; Cultural heritage; Development; Basic needs; Archaeology; Knowledge-centered approach.

## INTRODUCTION

I thank Professor Shinya Konaka and his co-organizers for inviting me. I am very honored to be participating in this workshop and to be giving comments. It should be noted I am the first generation of a pastoralist family to go to university. In my understanding of the relationship between the dynamics of change, I find this international workshop on the East African pastoralists extremely interesting; not only because I come from the background of having both direct and indirect experience as a person, but also as a researcher studying current and ancient history of pastoralism, particularly in the Somali society.

In terms of the rich ideas presented in the last two days by the present scholarship, some of the issues that I would like to touch upon are the “Localization of Humanitarian Assistance”. Also listening to everybody’s presentations, I think I have already given direct comments on most of the presentations, however the issues that I felt reappeared frequently are naturally associated with the idea of localization.

Localization as far as I understand also relates to culturally contextualizing

humanitarian assistance; in the displacement context of East African pastoralists, what is needed and what is not needed? How do pastoralists balance continuity and change? what objects of material culture do they keep? What can be improved or replaced with a more effective and sustainable technology? I have seen these few days the issue of categorization and how, for example, the “Articulation-Sphere Approach” is addressing this issue in terms of looking at deconstructing these presumptions that currently guide practitioners in the humanitarian assistance models. I find that very interesting because I think through these kinds of approaches you can potentially find the local agency and the response mechanisms of the displaced.

### A SELECTIVE APPROACH TO TECHNOLOGY

Firstly, before categorizing them just as pastoralists, we need to ask what, when and why they change and how? We need to know why they would use a certain (new) thing over another (old). Is the thing (or idea) what they need? They keep challenging us (development experts/aid workers) on all these questions. I know this from my own fieldwork. Some of my assistants are in fact pastoralists, who were hired because of their particular relationship with the cultural landscape and their proximity to a site to be able to protect it. We also selected them because they use phones and can update us. However, it was new to me that they use smart phones and in fact, seem to prefer them. They told me that they follow the prices of camel, international football results, and other news; locally like the Hadhwanaag news website or international like the BBC. In Somaliland, in order to attract new customers, telephone companies have occasionally even distributed solar mobile phones for free. This might be a suitable prospect for a pastoralist who has no immediate access to electricity. This demonstrates a selective approach to technology, in more than one way. Not only is the notion of a phone itself important in the local oral culture where people transfer information orally, but also the type of sustainable and realistic resource in solar energy, shows a localization approach. It fits in within their way of life which is very dynamic and mobile.

### CULTURAL VALUES OF RECIPROCITY, PEACE AND INCLUSION

Secondly, in this process of categorization, we have seen how in some reports, reciprocity is something we see in layers of a society from the perspective of actually looking at its own agencies. We may discover perhaps how systems that are in place are linked to ways of responding to and dealing with droughts, conflicts, and environmental problems. These traditional but evolving mechanisms shows continuity. Like the phone, it fits with the culture, and hence, has a history, but it also has a future.

The reciprocal system, as I develop below, is not restricted to pastoralism. For example, people who have a regular income, may it be earning through a job, a

business or even from remittance abroad, might share their income with not only the core family, but also with relatives, friends and colleagues in need. It is my experience from my time working in this region too. I would say, generally people tend to keep probably as little as just 20% of their monthly earning for themselves, and the rest goes to communal obligations (clan compensation/insurance), paying somebody's medicine or hospital time, financially assisting with weddings or funerals or births of children, paying education to relatives' children. Hence, perhaps up to 80% goes to others. What is interesting is that those who are given money, also give in turn to others. If I give somebody 20 US\$ here, 50 US\$ there, they might in turn each only keep about 20% of what I give them because they in turn give to others in need; in this way reciprocity is continuous in the chains of relations and economic needs. So, there is a culture of sharing and it is this kind of culture that actually sustains the community, even that in the Diaspora. We saw this in one of the presentations, in the example of refugees who have been identified in certain criteria and hence given rights and benefits while others in similar conditions have not, and some who have shared with others when they see the system somehow did not recognize their fellows due to technicalities.

However, the prevalence of reciprocal belief does not mean that there is no inequality—there is a great inequality indeed and I suspect it is increasing, especially with uneven access to resources nationally and internationally. Yet, this is also how remittance works. If someone might have somebody outside in the West with a job or income who can send money, and the neighbors back home know that, the relative back home has a responsibility towards the neighbors. So this sense of responsibility beyond for yourself, your family or even beyond your kin, I think, is quite important for the sustainability of a society.

Again, today we have seen the contradictions of aid workers. They have a role in the field to make decisions, however some of those decisions can also unintentionally break down the real cultural values that I just described that glue people together, that help foster peace, that create equality, and egalitarian values.

I have mentioned the criteria that can exclude some and hence create disconnection in the community. These kinds of criteria or external evaluation of local needs can have enormous impact. For example what happened in Somalia in 2004 is that we were given a transitional federal government by the UN. Somalis had not elected that government. It was a “top-down” approach, indicating, it seems, that the loudest of local leaders were given positions. This is a sentiment I have heard from Somalis at the time, as I myself happened to be in Kenya at the time of the first discussions of the TFG (Transitional Federal Government). I was in Kenya to excavate archaeological sites nevertheless Somalis shared with me their grievances as I visited East-leigh area of Nairobi, claiming warlords were basically put into leadership positions in order to create a representation. That again can be questioned; what kind of message was that sending from the international community to the local people? It is important to understand that aid and humanitarian work are seen in the light of international political interventions of places like Somalia. If all of a sudden, the person who is believed to be responsible for killing innocent people is at the same time the representative of the community,

then obviously power will be fought. I think those decisions that are made beyond the people's own conclusion undermine a sustainable solution. We have no sign of the solution yet to what's still happening in Somalia. This is not only relevant to the aid work context, but also politically, in how, for example, services are delivered and potential "top-down" approach. Yet, thanks to reciprocity and resilience people are not just waiting but moving on even if it is hard to plan the future in a conflict zone.<sup>(1)</sup>

My second point then goes back to the traditional/local agency and coping mechanisms. The indigenous conflict resolution methodologies which allowed leaders gather and disarm militia and set treaties from 1991 until 1997 in Somaliland provided a process of peace building and reconciliation. It led to the building of a constitution and creating a nascent democracy, which of course has its faults, but still succeeded in achieving peace for over two decades. The local agency has created cultural values that people share and a sense of community responsibility, which translates into, among other things, taking not only responsibility for other people in terms of sharing resources, but also responsibility in terms of creating peace and making the war a community problem that should be solved by the community.

Furthermore, the notion of localization brings a central issue to the community. In the place—or locale, where you live, you do not want that place to be contaminated, even as a nomad who is moving. Yesterday we heard somebody saying that even nomads feel displacement. It challenges assumptions such as that displacement does not affect nomads as much as settled people; feeling displaced can mean a traumatic change in a pastoralist relationship with the land and the landscape. Not only do these landscapes become places one associates with war, and problems, but also pastoralists' experiences, skills and knowledge are tied to particular landscapes which provide particular means of meeting their basic needs. So food, shelter and medicine are all linked to local resources and people's knowledge of those local resources. If they are displaced, they will struggle to find water and food resources, medical plants and trees to make shelter from (Fig. 1).

There are all sorts of relationships with the land, including a potential right to the land. During displacement, it might be difficult to know how to behave on the new land. Who does it belong to? Do you belong here? How can you cultivate, or how can animals interact with the land? Can they graze freely? What is allowed for you to do? What are your rights? So, the idea of localization can be looked at also from the perspective of place.

Then we should reflect on one of today's cases—how shared rituals and fictive kinship can link underdeveloped communities with sedentary communities in an exchange economy. It is common that clans are incorporated into the nation-building process, which is a political act. One of the results are the creation of some kind of political dominant narrative which homogenizes the mixes of people.

The process of mobilizing for nation by having a homogenous look and dominant narrative is that it undermines diversity. But in times of conflict, these kinds of cultural values get de-prioritized because there are scarce resources. The issue of racism and identity and belonging are problem and relevant to the issue of



**Fig. 1.** Women building a Somali traditional house

localization. Are, for example, the Bantu Somali not local? What are their rights to the land and resources? Again, talking about people who are marginalized, the Bantu Somalis, suffer discrimination, marginalization and oppression. We heard today the comments of some Bantu Somali refugees (as presented to us by Prof. Seiji Utsumi [not included in this volume]) but also reflected by, I would add, this community in Maine in the US.

Is Somalia home to everybody or is it a place that displaces people, like the Bantu Somalis? How can that be looked at in the context of this workshop? I will be very interested if there are any potential forums for discussion and promotion of minorities, especially issues relating to cultural rights and with the voices of the protagonists of those struggles, both in the Diaspora and in regional displacement.

## CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A BASIC NEED

Furthermore, I would like to mention the issue of violence to the land as well as the people through an environmental point of view from my own struggle working with Somali cultural heritage. Basically, archaeological parallels may be applied to the idea of “localizing”, from the perspective of working with culturally contextualized theoretical framework with the local community. One of the things I faced when I started studying archaeology was why do people not identify with archaeology. Not only that, but they were indifferent to the destruction of sites and the looting of their museums. I was educated in the West where museums and objects are important. When I finally asked people “What’s your heritage?” that is when they started to talk to me about heritage from their own local perspective, in terms of landscapes and experiences—what their grandpar-

ents taught them, about places and the making of an object etc. I realized the fact that they were not ignorant about their culture. They knew all the information I needed to know about a cultural object or a pot just through their experience (Mire, 2007). It was this knowledge and memory they seemed to value more than the objects themselves.

Then I realized that although the people I was interviewing were not nomads—they were people in the Diaspora—they were displaying enormous pride in this knowledge and wanted to preserve what was nomadic culture. That was in contrast to their lack of interest in the museums and the archaeological sites. I asked myself why.

I realized actually this comes from the nomadic pastoral culture—where people keep very little and they keep (intangible) knowledge instead. They preserve their way of life through oral transmission of knowledge. They preserve the knowledge of building huts, making objects and technology through practice and training from early age. Since everything is organic that they make and it can disappear anytime, what they need to keep is the knowledge to recreate it when they need it. I called this the knowledge-centered approach (Mire, 2007).

Even the people in the diaspora are preserving that knowledge. In fact, after I realized this way of preserving living heritage and skill, I thought about the fact that we used to spend many summers outside of Mogadishu. In fact, we were supposed to learn how to build huts. After few years when the war came, it was those skills that made us survive in those landscapes (Mire, 2015a). Their way of actually preserving heritage was through knowledge; a knowing that is executed and materialized to meet basic needs. It is this that has led me to realize that cultural heritage is a basic human need, not a luxury.

In the 1980s Mogadishu, we were raised to have one foot in the city, and in the city economy, while also training and knowing our land, culture and life beyond the city. I assume there was this mistrust against the government and the city economy because people sometimes did not get their salaries as civil servants. They had to make things, cultural products, especially women to sell in the market and to relatives to make ends meet, as did my own mother.

All these ways of always having a backup plan in terms of skills that can execute and materialize means has been critical and the idea of preserving knowledge as in the knowledge-centered approach (Mire, 2007; 2011) is very different from archaeology where we are focusing on remnants of monuments and objects to be kept. It showed me that actually they have their own ways of looking at the past beyond monuments and objects. Also I believe this might be a regional perspective, and in some ways, probably one of the reasons I am enjoying these presentations is the variety and diversity of contexts we are getting from all over Eastern Africa.

## ARCHAEOLOGY OF PASTORALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES

Speaking from an archaeological point of view, we know that pastoralism existed for at least 5,000 years (Fig. 2). We can date that through the archaeol-

ogy. This gives us a way of looking at it long-term: this remarkable subsistence economy has survived at least for 5,000 years and has sustained our societies in East Africa (Mire, 2008).

How were we then able to actually sustain this? It is interesting because, again going back to the categorization, not everybody was a pastoralist. Also there were times when these Africans shifted from being pastoralists temporarily; they became fishers because of the environment or conflict in the past.

I was responsible for analyzing fauna of Kenyan faunal remains, found in Lake Victoria, and it was the lakeside shell middens. I was expected to find just fish and shell but in fact I found sheep teeth. We thought that East African farming started around 400 AD, but these sheep teeth dated from 1500 BC (Lane et al., 2007). It means that people on Lake Victoria were conducting a mixed subsistence economy at least for 4,000 years; they were farming, fishing, and hunting. In the context of our case, these identities can change people in conflict as we are seeing now in displacement, and could have happened in history. Somalis, for example, started feeding of game during the war which they in normal case would not- so temporarily they hunted to survive, that does not make them hunter-gatherers!

Again, when we are looking at these current regional problems, we have to look at the past—how people have been dealing with similar problems. All of the problems that I am concerned with as a professional and as someone who lives in the region from time to time such as illicit activities like looting of antiquities, destruction of sites, poaching the Somali wild ass and hunting endemic birds, illicit fishing and dumping of toxic waste, burning of trees, are all more or less regional problems, throughout East Africa.



**Fig. 2.** Pastoralism dates back at least 5,000 years: Dhamblian rock art site

Again, we have erosion, we have droughts, we have also spread of aggressive plants. The town of Bon in Somaliland has been completely taken over by cactus (Fig. 3). The local people are now importing almost all their food. The cactus has taken aggressively habitat of the local flora. Furthermore, the fauna is dying as the flora is disappearing. For example, the camels have nothing else to eat except the cactus to their detriment. On my visit to this town a few years ago, I was guided by the governor who showed me the belly of a camel that died. The camel's stomach got tied together by the thorns of the cacti. Also, the pastoralists cannot sell their livestock because everybody knows that it is feeding on cacti. So what are the people of Bon supposed to do? What can the government and the international community do?

There is also an important archaeological site nearby the Bon town. The site is known as Abbasa and completely covered by cacti (Mire, 2015b). Hence, for me the cactus is a problem not only for the livelihoods, but also because of lack of access to the site. However, the cacti protect the site from looters at the same time. This example shows that environmental problems facing the local pastoralists and their animals are also impacting archaeology and local engagement and benefit from archaeology through tourism.

Another environmental problem that impacts the archaeology is the burning of charcoal. A Neolithic site of mixed landscape, natural as well as cultural, named Lukuud near Hargeisa, is also potentially important for tourism. It has lithic industries and rock art, yet, it also faces an environmental problem; people are cutting the trees in the site, and it impacts the site's class in the long term. Its landscape would probably no longer be identified as a mixed cultural and natural landscape. People are not only cutting its trees but also digging holes to burn charcoal in and that way also disturb the archaeological stratigraphy and material culture. The



**Fig. 3.** Abbasa archaeological site and the town of Bon in Somaliland has been completely taken over by cactus

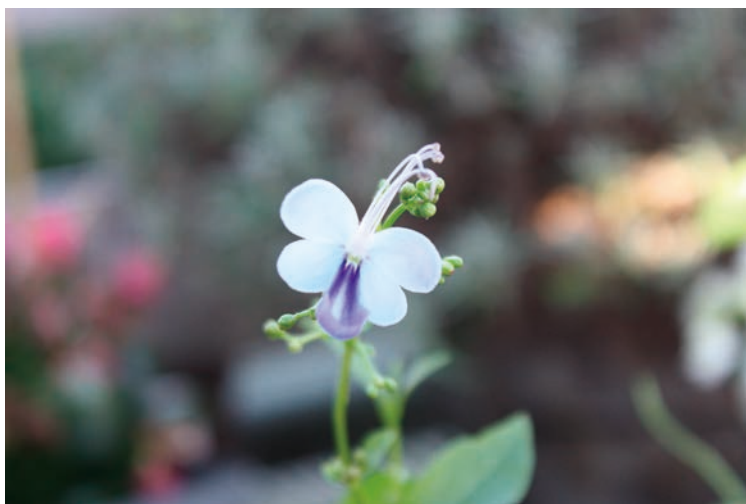


short-term gain of selling charcoal to feed the international demand is undermining local long-term sustainable environmental and tourism possibilities.

In addition, people are in a vicious cycle destroying their future as trees take a long time to regenerate and relevant for the healthcare. The tree from the forests such as the butterfly bush (Fig. 4) (*rotheca myricoides*) are used for many different illnesses. Many researchers are studying these plants including Japanese researchers who found that many important components for heart and for allergies, and serve as an antidote to poison (Mire, 2016).

Again, the *wagar* trees (Fig. 5), the African olive, are too being cut although in the past they were sacred (Mire, 2015c). Often when indigenous institutions declare a sacred forest, it's not just a spiritual designation, but also a conservation mechanism to stop people from cutting or mistreating it. These are some of the ways that pastoralists are preserving their landscape. The African olive is a hard wood which has a great deal of functions including practical, medical and spiritual. When all of these cultural values break down, it causes trauma. During the drought in 2011, there were officially and publicly organized rain prayers, held in Hargeisa Football stadium and led by the President himself. The interesting thing is these kinds of prayers are in fact linked to the traditional Somali culture. Even in the pre-Islamic times, ceremonies were held at sacred landscapes including sacred trees, wells, and mountains to pray for rain. These shrines and these sacred landscapes are often still important places linked now to the Islamic religion and the commemoration of Muslim saints (Mire, 2015c). These landscapes are important to them and again the knowledge-centered approach preserves practices and the landscapes and skills. It is also why the places are important to pastoralists too.

When it comes to emergencies, it is easy to forget the spiritual and cultural needs, but humans do not just need food to survive and rebuild, they need their



**Fig. 4.** The butterfly bush (*tiire*) *Rothea myricoides*



**Fig. 5.** The *wagar* tree

cultural heritage which is a moral compass. These are important to us for survival beyond breathing. The right to live in dignity is also having, not just food, but also having your cultural values acknowledged and protected.

As a final point, I would like to invite a discussion that can explore how culture can be part of the contextualization of the problems and their solutions in terms of dealing with the issue of displacement; how to nurture cultural values that will create peace, and bring people together. Again, culture is also linked to the political situation. We know (pastoralist) culture can contribute to conflict resolution (as happens in Somaliland) and we also know that it can potentially benefit economic development. Cultural heritage is already contributing to the post-conflict economy of Somaliland (Mire, 2011). For example, some of the rock art sites are now used for tourism. A lot of displaced pastoralists scattered all over the region can be potentially part of development of heritage tourism resources. Also environmentally, we are losing knowledge, due to war and people in displacement, but also to natural death of older generations. We need knowledge about certain practices. One of the areas that need urgent recording is ethnobotany, which is disappearing also with the burning of trees.

To conclude, cultural heritage is fundamental to people's ability to meet their basic needs; environment, economy, security, social life, health and education all

benefit from cultural knowledge of landscapes and people's dynamic identity, practices and beliefs.

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#### NOTE

- (1) Since this comment was delivered, the Somali people have elected a government which seems to bring a new hope. This shows lessons are being learned from the past.

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