

Ethiopian artefacts made with plant materials: Vanishing wonders

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The artefacts listed in this paper were collected during field trips to many parts of Ethiopia from 1995 to 1999. The collection gives an idea of the range of plants and plant materials used for the production of everyday articles in Ethiopia. A wide range of materials and objects, from spices, foodstuff and incense, beautiful traditional cotton clothing and elegant carvings to colourful furniture and other household objects made of grass or palm leaves, has been collected. The new and imaginative use of plant materials can indeed be surprising, such as a car seat made from palm leaves and grass. Unfortunately, today many traditional crafts are under threat from the global economy, and artefacts produced from plant materials are replaced with imported products made of plastic.

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Introduction

During field work, which the author has undertaken in Ethiopia since 1995 together with Prof. Ib Friis, c. 65 objects, including samples of spices, etc., made from plant materials by the local people have been collected. The main objective of the field work was to collect herbarium material to document vegetation studies and floristic distributions for the Flora of Ethiopia and Eritrea, but to collect objects made from plant materials by local people was considered an important side issue.

The field work was supported financially and otherwise by the Carlsberg Foundation and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and received great help from the Ethiopian Flora Project. The objects were bought in markets, from roadside vendors and from farmers or nomads,

when we observed objects made of plant material during our travels. Before sending the collections out of the country, the artefacts were inspected by the National Herbarium of Ethiopia and the National Museums of Ethiopia. This was done in order to obtain the necessary clearance for export.

It was thus certified that the artefacts were produced with material of plants that were not threatened, and that the artefacts were not antiques. These artefacts and products are now deposited in the Economic Botany Collections of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, UK, together with plant-based handiwork from all around the world.

The purpose of making these collections has been to record the range of artefacts produced in various parts of Ethiopia, and to identify the

plants used. This must now be considered urgent because plastic and man-made fibres are replacing many traditional materials, even in remote areas. The fundamental idea of the collections is to serve education and conservation.

At the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the general public has access to information about these collections. They are partly exhibited as part of the economic botany exhibitions called *Plants & People* in the Kew Museum (No. 1), the purpose of which is to show an international audience the range of skills and materials used, as well as the beauty of the artefacts produced from plant materials.

Many countries now want to re-establish their cultural identities. Even if the art of producing artefacts from plant materials is lost among some ethnic groups in Ethiopia, collections within local and international museums can at least show what was previously achieved. The collections may also assist future generations to resurrect lost skills. Another purpose is to support plant and habitat conservation. When woodlands, wetlands and forests are used by local people to collect materials for artefacts, food and medicine there is an inherent interest in conserving these areas. At the present time cultures are changing, even disappearing, through globalisation and with them the habitats people traditionally relied upon. If wetlands, woodland and forests with rare species are lost, they cannot be recovered because the rare species are gone. If the skills of producing artefacts are lost, they may never be recovered either. Increasing reliance on man-made materials will mean the economy of many self-sustaining peoples will be adversely affected because most man-made materials are imported, and some of the new materials may

be less suited to local conditions than were the traditional materials.

An example of this was observed during our field work in the Borana region: the Borana people have always used wooden milk churns that have been fumigated with the smoke from burning twigs of *Ocimum americanum*. These wooded churns are now being replaced by plastic buckets, which cannot be fumigated in the same manner. Instead the buckets are washed with often dirty water, which creates potential health problems.

It is therefore hoped that this collecting activity in Ethiopia can be continued to cover an even wider selection of ethnic groups and materials, and that the plants and the skills may be recorded and conserved for future generations.

List of objects, arranged according to region

The objects are arranged according to the traditional administrative regions of Ethiopia, and are listed in the way they are depicted and grouped in Fig. 1. The entries should otherwise be self-explanatory.

Tigray

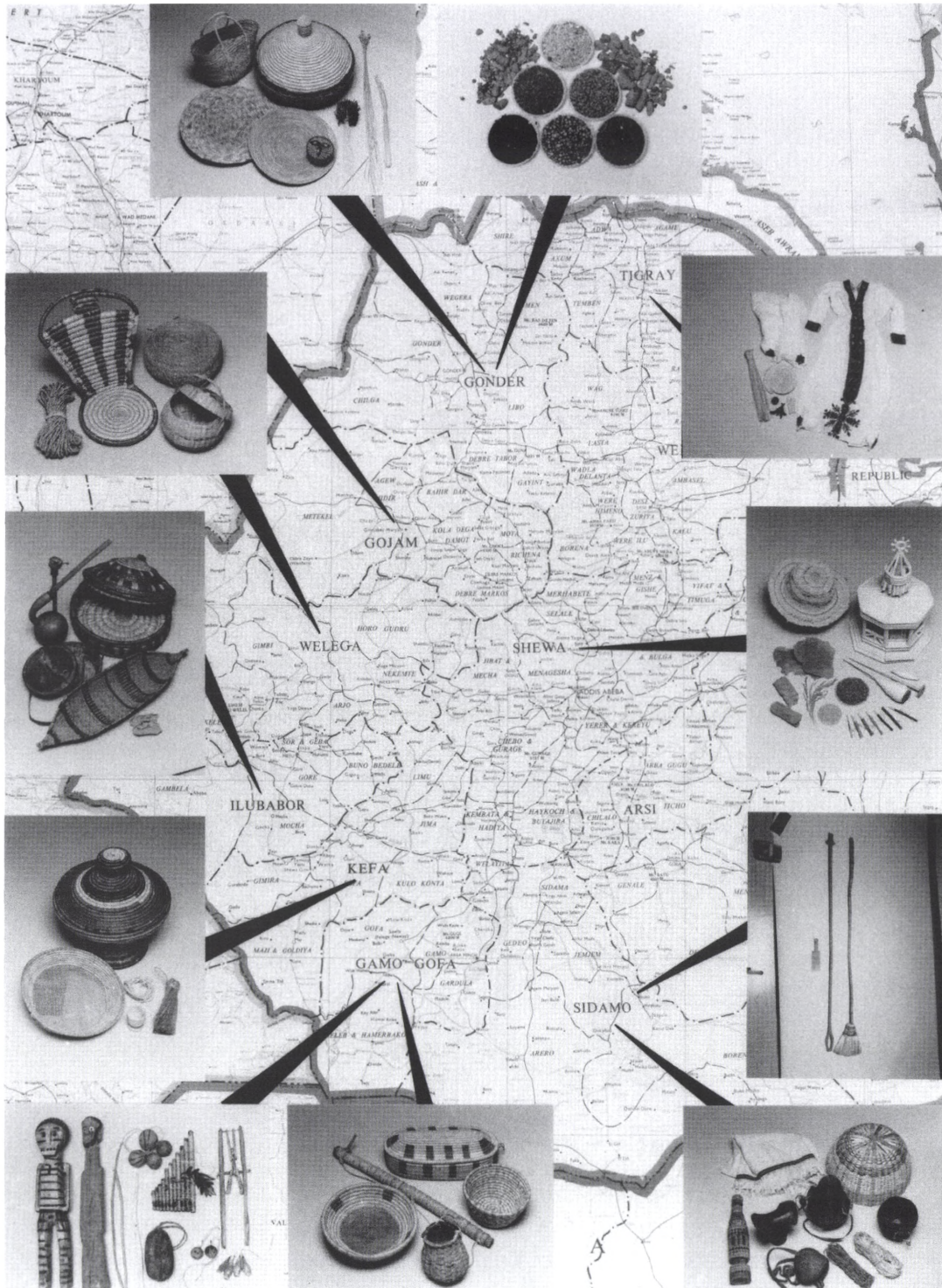
Floor brush. Object made of *Phoenix reclinata* Jacq. (Arecaceae). Local name: *Meteregiya* (Amharic: broom).

Notes: Made from leaves.

Cotton dress and shawl. Object made of *Gossypium sp.* (Malvaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Dress and shawl are worn by women for religious days and other special occasions.

Fig. 1. Map of Ethiopia and Eritrea overlaid with pictures showing groups of artefacts. The artefacts are grouped as in the list. →



Spools for cotton spinning. Objects made of *Arundo donax* L. (Poaceae). Local name: **Qesem** (Amharic: spool).

Notes: Made from stem sections.

Fan (shaped as dish). Object made of *Cyperus involucratus* Rottb. (Cyperaceae). Local name: **Maragebya** (Amharic: fan).

Notes: Made from stems. Used for fanning charcoal stove during coffee ceremony.

Tubers (in small dish). *Cyperus esculentus* L. (Cyperaceae). Local name: **Quni** (Amharic: meaning unknown).

Notes: Used as incense during coffee ceremony.

Tubers used for cosmetic purposes. *Impatiens tinctoria* A. Rich. (Balsaminaceae). Local name: **Enselale** (Amharic: name of a dye).

Notes: Tubers cooked and mashed. Used for dyeing hands, feet and vagina of women a very dark red colour. The effect is to tan the skin making it more pliable and protecting it from cracking. It is done for beauty particularly for special festivals. The use as a cosmetic dye is also mentioned by Cufodontis (1957) who among others records the Amharic name *esosila*.

Gonder 1

Dish/Tray. Object made of *Cyperus involucratus* Rottb. (Cyperaceae). Local name: **Sefade** (Amharic: pan, tray).

Notes: Made from woven leaves. Used for putting Injera on when it comes out of the oven. The dish to the left (mottled light and dark). Next to the other dish is a bundle of the species of *Cyperus*.

Shopping basket. Object made of *Cyperus involucratus* Rottb. (Cyperaceae). Local name: **Thenbel** (Amharic: meaning unknown).

Notes: Made from woven leaves.

Large basket with lid. Object made of *Cyperus involucratus* Rottb. (Cyperaceae). Local name: **Lamat** (Amharic: basket).

Notes: Made from stems. Used for holding Injera. Will take up to 50 pieces, which stay fresh in the basket for up to 4 days.

Dish. Object made of various grasses, including *Pennisetum sphacelatum* (Nees) Th. Dur. & Schinz and *Eleusine floccifolia* (Forssk.) Spreng. Local name: **Sefade** (Amharic: pan, tray), **Gundo** (Oromigna: meaning unknown).

Notes: Made from woven leaves. Used for winnowing and cleaning grain, carrying Injera and as a lid when baking Injera. The dish to the right (uniformly light).

Small coloured basket with lid. Object made of *Eleusine floccifolia* (Forssk.) Spreng. (Poaceae; determination uncertain). Local name: **Mudiy** (Amharic: type of small basket)

Notes: Made from stems. Used for keeping precious items.

Bundle of grass stems. *Eleusine floccifolia* (Forssk.) Spreng. (Poaceae). Local name: **Sebeze** (Amharic: meaning unknown).

Notes: Made from stems. Painted in different colours and used for baskets like the preceding item. Bundle to the right in Fig. 1.

Bundle of grass stems. *Pennisetum sphacelatum* (Nees) Th. Dur. & Schinz (Poaceae). Local name: **Sendedo** (Amharic: name of the plant).

Notes: Made from stems. Used as strengthening when making baskets.

Gonder 2: A selection of spices bought in Gonder market.

Roots. *Curcuma domestica* Valetton (Zingiberaceae). Local name: **Erd** (Amharic: name of this kind of spice).

Notes: Roots used as a spice. Now grown in Ethiopia, formerly imported from India.

Seeds. *Trigonella foenum-graecum* L. (Fabaceae subfam. Papilionoideae). Local name: **Abesh** (Amharic: name of this kind of spice).

Notes: Seed used as a spice in boiled milk and in Injera. Seed used to make a non-fermented beverage. Used medicinally as a cleanser and strengthener.

Seeds. *Brassica nigra* (L.) Koch var. *abyssinica* A. Braun (Brassicaceae). Local name: **Senafech** (Amharic: name of this particular kind of seed).

Notes: Seed used as a purgative (strongly cathartic) by man. Seed used as a spice for special foods during fasting and also to make a dip for raw meat. Cufodontis (1957) mentions the use of the leaves as vegetables, but claimed that in Wolamo the seeds were only used as a medicine. This does not agree with our information from Gonder.

Seeds. *Brassica carinata* A. Br. or *Erucastrum abyssinicum* (A. Rich.) R. E. Fries (both Brassicaceae). Local name: **Gomen Zer** (Amharic: cabbage seeds).

Notes: Seed crushed and used to oil the baking plate for making Injera. Seeds used as cleansing agent (cathartic) by man. Cufodontis (1957) mentions the use of both *Brassica carinata* and *Erucastrum abyssinicum* as cabbage.

Seeds. *Nigella sativa* L. (Ranunculaceae). Local name: **Tekur Azemud** (Amharic: black spice seeds).

Notes: Seed used as a food flavouring, particularly whole in some types of bread. Pounded with garlic and ginger as a spice in meat dishes. See also under Anuak Tobacco (Gamo-Gofa).

Seeds. *Coriandrum sativum* L. (Apiaceae). Local name: **Demblale** (Amharic: name of this kind of spice).

Notes: Seed pounded with chillies into Berberi powder.

Seeds. *Trachyspermum ammi* (L.) Turrill (Apiaceae). Local name: **Nech azmud** (Amharic: white spice seeds).

Notes: leaves used as spice.

Gojam and Welega

Rope. Object made of *Hyphaene sp.* (Arecaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Made from fibres of palm leaves.

Car seat of palm leaves and grass. Object made of *Phoenix reclinata* Jacq. (Arecaceae). Grass not identified. Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Made from interwoven palm and grass leaves.

Pouffe. Object made of Poaceae sp. indet. Local name: **Ketema** (Amharic: leaves of grass traditionally spread on floor during holidays).

Notes: Made from woven grass leaves.

Shopping basket. Object made of *Arundinaria alpina* K. Schum. (Poaceae). Local name: **Zembil** (Amharic: kind of basket).

Notes: Made from stems only.

Shewa

Straw hat. Object made of *Pennisetum thunbergii* Kunth (Poaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Made from woven stems.

Inflorescences and seeds. *Eragrostis tef* (Zucc.) Trotter (Poaceae). Local name: **Teff** (Amharic: name for this kind of cereal).

Notes: Cereal crop.

Bread rolls and flat bread. Object made of *Eragrostis tef* (Zucc.) Trotter (Poaceae). Local name: **Injera** (Amharic: name for the kind of pancake-like bread made from *teff*).

Notes: Bread made from Teff.

Leaves. *Ocimum americanum* L. (Lamiaceae). Local name: **Zeka-keba** (Amharic: spice used to give taste to butter).

Notes: Leaves used as food flavouring.

Cotton and spinning equipment. Object made of *Gossypium* sp. (Malvaceae). Local name: **Yetendefe Tete** (Amharic: cotton from which the seeds have been cleaned).

Notes: Clean cotton. Stick made from bamboo, circular part from gourd.

Model of Ethiopian Orthodox church. Object made of *Zea mays* L. (Poaceae). Local name: not recorded.

Notes: Made from the pith of stems.

Seven toothbrushes. Object made of *Stereospermum kunthianum* Cham. (Bignoniaceae) **Butore**, *Olea africana* Mill. (Oleaceae) **Weyra**, *Pittosporum* sp. (Pittosporaceae) **Ambelby**, *Myrsine africana* L. (Myrsinaceae) **Kechemo**, *Sideroxylon oxyacanthum* Baill. (Sapotaceae) **Tefa**, *Olea* sp. (Oleaceae) **Gerse**, *Rytigynia neglecta* (Hiern) Robyns (Rubiaceae) **Mito**. Local name: Local names above all Amharic. They refer to the names of the trees, rather than to the product.

Notes: Made from twigs.

Ilubabor

Anuak tobacco pipe. Object made of *Lagenaria siceraria* (Molina) Standl. (Cucurbitaceae). The pipe tubes are made of plastic. Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: In the past the tubes would have been made of bamboo or a similar hollow stem.

Lunch Box. Object made of *Pennisetum sphacelatum* (Nees) Th. Dur. & Schinz (Poaceae). Local name: **Ageligil** (Amharic: kind of food container).

Notes: Box of cowhide lined with grass.

Boat-shaped basket. Object made of *Grewia mollis* A. Juss. (Tiliaceae), the grasses used are *Panicum maximum* or *Echinochloa colona*. Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Basket woven from strips of *Grewia* bark and *Panicum/Echinochloa* leaves.

Prepared wrapped tobacco. *Nicotiana tabacum* L. (Solanaceae) and *Nigella sativa* L. (Ranunculaceae). Local name: Anuak tobacco.

Notes: Tobacco leaf is collected, mixed with *Nigella sativa* and crushed. Then packed into a leaf and buried for 15 days after which it is ready for use. Used for chewing as much as for smoking.

Food container. Object made of *Pennisetum sphacelatum* (Nees) Th. Dur. & Schinz or *P. thunbergii* Kunth (Poaceae). Local name: **Ageligil** (Amharic: kind of food container).

Notes: Made from stems.

Kefa

Dining table. Object made of *Pennisetum sphacelatum* (Nees) Th. Dur. & Schinz (Poaceae). Local name: **Misob** (Amharic: basket table made of grass for eating *injera*).

Notes: Made from leaves.

Sieve. Object made of *Pennisetum sphacelatum* (Nees) Th. Dur. & Schinz (Poaceae). Local name: **Genigisha** (Oromigna: meaning not known).

Notes: Woven from stems.

Rope. Object made of *Ensete ventricosum* (Welw.) Cheesman (Musaceae). Local name: **Enset** (Amharic: name of the plant).

Notes: Said to be very waterproof, including having resistance to salt water.

Drinking vessel. Object made of *Cordia africana* Lam. (Boraginaceae). Local name: **Malakia** (Amharic: container for liquid).

Notes: Also used as a measure for liquid.

House paint brush. Object made of *Cyperaceae* sp. indet. Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Made from leaf fibres.

Gamo-Gofa 1 (Konso area)

Female doll. Object made of *Commiphora* sp. (Burseraceae). Local name: **Gahato** (Amharic: name of the tree).

Notes: Figures like these (but larger) are placed over burial grounds as totems. One of a pair with the following doll.

Male doll. Object made of *Eucalyptus* sp. (Myrtaceae). Local name: **Bahr Zaf** (Amharic: tree from abroad, the commonly used name for all species of *Eucalyptus*).

Notes: Model of a wooden totem placed over the graves in burial grounds.

Toothbrush. Object made of *Olea* sp. (Oleaceae). Local name: **Hade** (Amharic: name of the tree).

Notes: Made from twigs.

Frankincense. Object made of *Boswellia neglecta* S. Moore (Burseraceae). Local name: **Qundi** (Amharic: name of the tree).

Notes: Exudate from trunk used as incense. Widely used in homes during the coffee ceremony, and where a dead body is lying before burial. Also used in various religious ceremonies in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Musical instruments. Objects made of *Capparis* sp. (Capparidaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Four fruits and two fruits tied together used as whistles.

Musical instrument. Object made of *Gerrardanthus lobatus* (Cogn.) C. Jeffrey (Cucurbitaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Blown across the top like a flute.

Musical instrument. Object made of *Phragmites karka* (Retz.) Steud. (Poaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Made from hollow grass stems, blown as a Pan's pipe.

Toy. Object made of *Ricinus communis* L. (Euphorbiaceae). Local name: **Gulo** (Amharic: name of the plant).

Notes: Made from wood. Squeeze at base and man vaults over bar.

Gamo-Gofa 2 (other ethnic groups)

Sieve. Object made of *Hyphaene* sp. (Arecaceae). Local name: **Wonfit** (Amharic: sieve).

Notes: Woven from palm leaves.

Food basket, oval with lid. Object made of *Hyphaene* sp. (Arecaceae). Local name: not known.

Notes: Woven from palm leaves.

Alcohol distiller. Object made of *Ensete ventricosum* (Welw.) Cheesman (Musaceae). Local name: **Yearegen mawcha** (Amharic: distilling equipment).

Notes: String and loop made from leaves wrapped around bamboo stem.

Egg basket with small handle. Object made of *Arundinaria alpina* K. Schum. (Poaceae). Local name: **Fundura** (Amharic: meaning unknown).

Notes: Made from stems.

Basket for cereal crops. Object made of *Eleusine floccifolia* (Forssk.) Spreng. (Poaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Often used by small children when selling *colo* (roasted cereals) and peanuts.

Sidamo 1

Comb. Object made of *Podocarpus falcatus* (Thunb.) Mirb. (Podocarpaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Made from wood by Borana men.

Walking stick. Object made of *Acacia sp.* (Fabaceae subfam. Mimosoideae). Local name: **Ororo** (language unknown).

Notes: Made from wood by Borana men. For use by men, partly as a sign of social status.

Sweeping brush. Object made of *Ehretia cymosa* Thonn. (Boraginaceae) and *Phoenix reclinata* Jacq. (Arecaceae). Local name: **Ulaga** (handle only) (Oromigna: meaning unknown).

Notes: Made from wood (handle) and palm leaves.

NB! This artefact is from Kefa but has been placed in this group for ease of arranging pictures.

Sidamo 2

Clothing. Object made of *Gossypium sp.* (Malvaceae). Local name: **Shamma** or **Shemma** (Amharic: outer garment for men).

Notes: Clothing worn by Borana men.

Ornament. Object made of *Podocarpus falcatus* (Thunb.) Mirb. (Podocarpaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Carved patterned ornament from Yavello.

Stool and headrest. Object made of *Acacia sp.* (Fabaceae subfam. Mimosoideae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Made from wood. Yavello Market.

Milk container. Object made of *Acacia sp.* (Fabaceae subfam. Mimosoideae). Local name: **Sorora** (Amharic: meaning unknown).

Notes: Made from wood. From near Yavello.

Fruit basket. Object made of *Arundinaria alpina* K.Schum. (Poaceae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Made from stems. Can also be used to protect domestic birds and small animals.

Camel bell. Object made of *Delonix elata* (L.) Gamble (Fabaceae subfam. Caesalpinoideae). Local name: **Kokegala** (Amharic: meaning unknown).

Notes: Made from wood. Allows herder to hear where animal is and what it is doing. The sound indicates whether the animal is grazing or moving, as well as the speed with which it moves.

Rope. Object made of *Erythrina abyssinica* DC. (Fabaceae subfam. Papilionoideae). Local name: **Qereri** (Amharic: meaning unknown).

Notes: Bark from roots (dark) and branches (light) used as rope.

Milking bucket. Object made of *Erythrina abyssinica* DC. (Fabaceae subfam. Papilionoideae). Local name: Not recorded.

Notes: Made from wood. From near Yavello.

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Reference

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