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Introduction



Konso Landscape, Culture & Development

This book is about the construction of a landscape. The landscape in question is the intensive agricultural terraced landscape of Konso in south-west Ethiopia. The book focuses on the role of culture in the construction of the landscape, and explores the significance for development of the landscape itself, and the social and cultural institutions that construct and maintain it. Through this study of one landscape and one people it is hoped that the processes and connections between different aspects of people's lives and their environments will be better understood, contributing to understandings of landscape production in general, and generating insights that will be of relevance to initiatives concerned with environmental conservation and the tackling of poverty.

Konso lends itself to this study. It is an excellent example of an indigenous and intensive agricultural landscape that has been maintained for at least four hundred years, despite what can only have been enormous social changes. The Konso hills rise to a height of 2000m out of the dry Rift Valley plains, and the rugged hillsides are scored with dry stone-walled bench terraces constructed meticulously by hand. Each terrace is divided into square-ridged basins and covered in a riot of crops such as sorghum, maize, millet, *qat* (the narcotic), cotton, coffee, beans, and sweet potatoes. Trees are also grown on the terraces. There are other hilly areas in the region: some are terraced or have other soil and water conservation structures, but none is worked as intensively as Konso (Amborn, 1989). Moreover, the terraced landscape of Konso is indigenous and predates historical memory: it has been produced by the people themselves and has been cultivated continuously, sustaining lives, for a long time.

Terraced landscapes in Sub-Saharan Africa are more common than might be expected, given the stereotypical image of the African landscape as wide plains and scrub bush. Yet there are few detailed studies of African terraced landscapes, and those that exist are mostly of terraces of relatively recent provenance. These terraced landscapes have been produced, to

greater or lesser levels of success, from colonial or postcolonial development policies (Tiffen *et al.* 1994; Yeraswork 2000; MacKenzie 1998; Carswell 2007). Indigenous terraced landscapes have been much less studied, and in some cases little is known about them. Grove and Sutton's (1989) list of examples is not exhaustive, but it includes twenty-three cases in West Africa; at least two in Sudan (Darfur and Kordofan); terracing in Konso and around Harar in Ethiopia; the Pare Hills and Engaruka in the Rift Valley; terracing in Rwanda, Burundi and the Kigezi area of Uganda; Ukara island in Lake Victoria; and Nyanga in Zimbabwe. The terraces of Nyanga in Zimbabwe (Soper, 1996) and of Engaruka in Tanzania (Grove and Sutton, 1989) have been studied, but these have been abandoned and the studies are archaeological. Grove and Sutton conclude that hitherto research into indigenous terraced landscapes represents 'gross and misconceived offerings' (1989: 118), and that analysis has been 'mishandled at both practical and conceptual levels' (1989: 117). It seems that the striking aesthetic of terraced landscapes has hindered research endeavours: when rugged hillsides are transformed by contour bench terraces, it is as if a set of horizontal grid lines has been laid over the uneven land. The neatness is attractive and has often led researchers to interpret the terraced landscapes as physical manifestations of culture triumphing over nature, ordering it and pulling it into line, 'stamping the imprint of man (*sic*) on the earth' (Spencer and Hale, 1961: 1-2). The examinations of indigenous terraced landscapes have tended to display a degree of romanticism, an 'antiquarian and sentimental bent' (Grove and Sutton, 1989: 115), or have treated terraced landscapes as mere 'curiosity' (Netting, 1968: 4).

Most existing studies of terracing have focused almost exclusively on the material and climatological processes involving water, soil and climate. What is missing from these accounts is an understanding of the way forms of social and cultural organization work with the water, soil and climate, to produce the landscape and transform it (Parsons, 1987). Terrace construction requires huge amounts of labour to be mobilized for shifting soil and stone (Netting, 1968), and terraces require constant maintenance, as they are often damaged by rain (Guillet, 1987). The terraces may be accompanied by improvised irrigation canals, harvesting rainwater and channelling it to the crops, which require management and cooperation between field neighbours. They are usually cultivated permanently, and require frequent manuring to maintain the fertility of the soil. Terracing therefore demands 'constant and intricate attention' (Grove and Sutton, 1989: 114).

There is a gap, therefore, in understanding terraced landscapes in Africa, especially indigenous terraced landscapes, together with the role they play in livelihoods, and the ways in which they are produced and reproduced. Through a study of Konso, this book aims to go some way towards filling this gap. In doing so, it illuminates a form of landscape which has particular significance for development. Terraced landscapes

are forms of intensive agriculture, which means that, because of the way the land is worked, they produce more than the land might do otherwise, and they conserve soil and water. By dividing a hillside into horizontal strips the area of cultivable land is not increased but the available resources may be used more carefully and sustainably, thus allowing permanent cultivation. The terraces prevent soil being swept down hillsides; the flat surfaces enable rainwater to infiltrate into the soil; the stone walls create micro-climates of shade and warmth reflected from the stone walls, preventing frosts (Donkin, 1979; Denevan, 2001). Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) use the words 'landesque capital' to describe structures such as this, as they are forms of investment in the land itself; the land becomes more valuable as its capability is improved or maintained, allowing the production of food and resisting degradation over time.

The value for development of such intensive agricultural systems and forms of landesque capital is clear. Surrounded by plains of less intensive agriculture, terraced landscapes have been viewed as 'islands of sustainability' or 'islands of hope' (Bebbington, 1997: 189, 191). Today there are serious concerns about food security and environmental degradation in Africa and globally. Land in Africa used to be considered abundant, but this is no longer the case. More and more, there are accounts of pressures on land and increasing numbers of landless people. Historically, understandings of change in people-environment relations have been dominated by ideas that have been characterized as 'Malthusian', which posit that population growth will lead inevitably to the over-exploitation of resources, environmental degradation, destitution and crisis. Over the past two decades many scholars have accepted the arguments put forward by Leach and Mearns (1996), and by others, that showed that Malthusian arguments were often applied erroneously to African environments. Frequently no environmental degradation has accompanied population growth; the Malthusian arguments persisted because they served certain powerful interests (ibid). However, in the current climate (meteorological, economic and political), very real pressures on lives and environments have become evident, and Malthusian arguments seem to be in ascendance again (Diamond, 2005). In this context, investigations of landscapes of intensive agriculture like that of Konso are of particular value because they show that the outcome predicted by Malthusian theories is not inevitable. It is possible for people to follow the contrary scenario set out by Boserup (1965), that increased populations can lead to land improvements, investments in environments, and increased or sustained food production. The scenarios set out by the Malthusian model suggest that carrying capacity (the number of people that can be supported by given natural resources) is fixed. The Konso case, together with other work on terracing by Tiffen *et al.* (1994) and Carswell (2007), shows that carrying capacity depends on how those resources are used and by whom. Intensification through terracing is not only possible and valuable, but in today's world it may be imperative. The questions then become, how can

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intensification be produced and sustained? Does it have a cost, and if so, for whom? What are its limits? These are the questions that are explored further through the analysis of Konso.

While terraced landscapes in general have significance for development, landscapes such as Konso have further value because of their indigeneity. Indigenous terraced landscapes are produced out of the application of indigenous technological or environmental knowledge.¹ Until the 1970s and 1980s, these forms of knowledge were frequently denigrated as inefficient, unscientific, chaotic, undisciplined, and, often, harmful to the environment. Development was equated with a particular brand of modernization in which 'Western' scientists and 'educated' administrators were seen as having the 'modern' knowledge, technology, forethought and sensibility to manage the environment and to arrest any advancing degradation. Such modern development projects often failed, however, and frequently resulted in environmental damage. At the same time, research showed that indigenous knowledge often provides ingenious solutions to difficult problems and is the product of generations of experimentation and experience in particular environments (Richards, 1985; Fairhead, 1992; de Boef *et al.* 1993; and Reij *et al.* 1996). The practices that result from the application of indigenous knowledge can be much more effective and efficient than previously thought; they make inventive use of available and renewable resources, making them environmentally sustainable. Soil conservation or irrigation structures, for example, made from local resources are easier to replace than those manufactured industrially. The techniques are also often risk averse: they focus on sustaining livelihoods and environments over time, instead of concentrating on producing surplus.

The 'discovery' of the value of indigenous knowledge and environmental practices led researchers and development organizations to try to learn from and to support indigenous knowledge. In an approach sometimes characterized as 'small is beautiful'², development practitioners and activists have stressed that sustainable solutions to world environment and development problems may be found in these practices. As a consequence, attempts are being made to transfer indigenous knowledge and techniques from one situation to another:

It is quite apparent that indigenous innovations, which are found to be effective in one part of the globe, can be equally effective when made available to populations in similar ecological conditions in other parts of the world. The documentation of the vast amount of unrecorded, often rapidly disappearing indigenous knowledge could provide the basis for many effective development interventions, if this knowledge could be shared (Warren, Slikkerveer and Brokensha, 1995: xvii).

The present study follows this direction: much can be learnt of value for development from Konso where local people combine multiple soil and water conservation techniques to maintain soil fertility and raise food

crops. But the Konso case underlines the point that attention must also be paid to the social and cultural dimensions of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge, like all knowledge, is a product of the culture and society in which it is generated and performed. Knowledge is created, passed on, modified, organized and enacted in a particular social and cultural context. Technical know-how and access to technology mean nothing if the capacity to implement that knowledge, to maintain a set of practices and technologies, or to distribute the benefits, is absent. Extracting and transferring indigenous knowledge from one context to another will only be possible if the organizational capacity required to implement that knowledge successfully is present (even if the ecological conditions are similar). The point may seem obvious, but in the field of environmental management, the focus has often been on technique at the expense of the social and cultural dimensions that make that technique possible. An additional and related point is that, as knowledge is performed by people who are organized in particular patterns and through particular ways of managing access to and use of resources, the practice of indigenous knowledge is also political. Consideration of the power relations involved in the practice of indigenous knowledge is necessary if development organizations are to have any chance of achieving their aims of helping the poorest and most marginalized. The study of Konso is designed to illustrate how these social and cultural dimensions of knowledge and landscape production can be understood, and to explore their practical and political significance for environmental management and development. In the following sections of this introduction, I demonstrate that, although the importance of the social, cultural and political dimensions of environmental management has been understood before, the approaches to those dimensions have been limited. I argue for a more nuanced and ethnographic approach that centralizes culture, power and change over time in the analysis.

Institutional approaches to environmental management and development

In the language of development literature, the social and cultural dimensions of environmental management are usually referred to as institutions. Their practical significance is illustrated beyond doubt with reference to the example of irrigation. In Africa, hopes and investment have been placed in irrigation development as it has been seen as a way to transform environments and livelihoods for the better.³ In the main, irrigation developments have underperformed seriously, however, and escalating costs, environment and technical difficulties have been only part of the explanation. According to Adams (1992), problems have often arisen because there has been inadequate consideration of the institutional dimensions of irrigation management. For an irrigation system to succeed,

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