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Cultural, economic, and symbolic value of the enset crop in Sebat-Bet Guraghe, Southwest Ethiopia: a qualitative study

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Enset, with its starch-rich corm and pseudostem, is a staple meal for over 20 million Ethiopians, although it is almost unknown outside of a small production zone in southern Ethiopia. As a result, to fill a gap, this study investigates the Gurage people of Ethiopia's socially constructed indigenous knowledge in producing and consuming the enset plant and its economic, cultural, and symbolic representational value, which has received little attention from several authors. In achieving the study's stated objectives, a qualitative research approach was used, allowing the researchers to investigate the lived experiences of the local people. Although secondary data sources were used to analyze the discussion in this study, primary data was predominantly used. This primary data was collected through observation, key informant interviews, casual conversations, and focus group discussions. We found that the Gurage people are somewhat different from other enset cultivating societies in enset cultivation and transplantation. According to the study's findings, enset is a factor in wealth stratification. Despite the previous studies, we discovered that enset plays a significant role in socializing the study people in various ways. Based on the study's findings, the researchers recommend a more in-depth study focusing on the medicinal, disease or frost tolerance, pest and pathogen incidence importance of the enset plant in Chaha Woreda.

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Introduction

E*nset* is a Herbaceous plant related to the banana family in morphology but distinct in utility and life cycle (Yemata, 2020). *Enset* is known by different names to different people. However, it is most commonly known by two: *Enset ventricosum*, named after the Australian botanist F. Witch in Angola in 1857. Horaninow named the second species, *enset edulis*, in 1862 to distinguish it from the banana (Acero et al., 2018).

In Ethiopia, *enset* is known by various names for different ethnic groups, such as *Asset* for the Gurage, *Workie* for the Oromo, *Wase* for the Sidama, *Ense* for the Amhara, and *Uto* for the Kaffa, and so on (Tsehaye and Kebebew, 2006). Its cultivation in Ethiopia is more concentrated in the southern part of the country, likely due to the region's suitability for plant growth (Addis et al., 2010; Boyana et al., 2018; Degefa and Dawit, 2018). *Enset* cultivation is much more common for a meal in Ethiopia's southern nation and nationality. However, in Wolayta, Sidama, Keffa, Hadya, and the study areas of Chaha *Woreda*, people are highly attached to the *Enset* plant in cultivation and consumption (Sahle et al., 2021).

In terms of cultural significance, *enset* is used for various purposes (Addis et al., 2010; Dirsha, 2020). For example, in Europe, it is used as a climate moderator, while in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, especially in the southern parts, it is used as a daily meal, for curative purposes, as a sign of wealth status, and for building houses. They produce and consume the plant in different contexts due to the social and cultural environment in which the production and consumption of the *enset* plant differ (Boyana et al., 2018; Dirsha, 2020). The literature related to southern Ethiopia, particularly the Gurage people, was primarily concerned with the people's political organization and social structure (Gemechu et al., 2021; Kassahun Sadessa, 2015). Those appear not to emphasize the economic, cultural, and symbolic significance of the *enset* plant in the community. Various studies are being conducted on the *enset* plant (Ashenafi et al., 2020; Gemechu et al., 2021; Mekonnen et al., 2020; Tsegaye and Struik, 2002; Yemataw et al., 2016; Zewdie et al., 2008). The positive aspect of these studies is that they attempted to investigate and explore the production, cultivation, and consumption of *enset* in Ethiopia. They also attempted to link the *enset* plant to its biological and geographical distributions to improve subsistence agricultural practice in Ethiopia.

The prior studies on the *enset* plant, in one way or another, fail to place sufficient emphasis on the economic, cultural, and medicinal importance of the *enset* plant consumption with its regulations as a separate field of study; instead, authors focused on the plant's historical background, debates on its origin, cultivation methods, and drought resistance. With the study's primary goal in mind, this research attempts to address the economic, cultural, and medicinal significance of *enset* production and consumption among Chaha Gurage communities. True, most of the preceding authors' studies on the Gurage people of *enset* culture were not focused on the economic and socio-cultural value of *enset* production and consumption. The cultural attachment to the *enset* plant and its various methods of consuming the plant is not considered. Because previous studies on the *enset* plant culture of the Gurage community were limited in availability and focus, or because studies with a focus on economic and socio-cultural importance were lacking, this study attempted to fill the gaps. As a result, the primary goal of this research is to look into the socially constructed indigenous knowledge in producing and consuming the *enset* plant and its economic, cultural, and symbolic representational value among the Gurage people of Ethiopia, which has received little attention from the authors.

Study objective

The study's overall goal is to assess the economic, cultural, and symbolic importance of *enset* production and consumption in the Chaha *Woreda* of Gurage Zone, South Ethiopia, by highlighting the knowledge mentioned above gaps. This study tried to explore three objectives. First, this study examines the economic value of *enset*. In this section, the authors try to inspect the value of *enset* for wealth stratification and financial opulence in the Cheha community. Also, the issue of how the *enset* plant could serve as an income-generating scheme in the study areas was investigated. Second, this study attempted to explore the social value of the *enset* plant. In this case, the study examines how the *enset* plant strengthens social bonding and is a means of socialization. Third, the study explores the symbolic value or representation of the researchers in the details of this section describes how the *enset* plant is the symbol of life and how the plant is given the feminine characteristics of the Cheha community.

Significance of the study. The study contributes to the investigation of the *enset* plant's symbolic values. It could be a valuable and essential resource for future research by social scientists and others into the symbolic, ceremonial, and ritual aspects of *enset*. Although the study primarily focuses on a particular location where *enset* production and consumption are prevalent, the findings are expected to represent the entire Gurage community. The knowledge we studied in terms of cultural consumption of *enset* and its symbolic value is thought to be shared by the entire Gurage society.

It also adds knowledge by demonstrating the significance of understanding how the Gurage community consumes the *enset* culturally and the feasts associated with the plant. The study is also beneficial to those individuals or organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, researching the *enset* plant and its products. It also helps those who need to promote *enset* culture among the Gurage community; the research findings assist them in feeding a clear understanding of the issue and using it in their mechanism for their findings. Furthermore, a social anthropological approach to *enset* may raise awareness of culturally specific local knowledge that can be used to determine the cultural value of eating the *enset* plant.

Methods

Study area. According to the current Ethiopian Federal Government structure, the Gurage administrative Zone is located in southern Ethiopia, in the Southern Nation Nationalities and People's Regional State, and covers an area of 593 square kilometers. *Gurage Zone* is one of the region's 14 zones and four special *Woredas* (districts). It is bounded in the south by Hadiya, in the east by Siltie, in the northeast and west by the Oromia region, and in the southwest by Yem special *Woreda* (see Fig. 1) ("Map of Ethiopia", 2011).

The Zone is divided into 13 *Woredas* (districts) and two reform city administrations. Chaha, Soddo, Meskan, Mareko, Kebena, Abshge, Gedbano Gutazer Wellene, Ezha, Muhirna Aklile, Gumer, Geta, Enemorna Enner, and Endegagn *Woredas*, as well as Wolkite and Butajira city administration, are among the *Woredas*. Wolkite is the Zone's administrative center, located 155 km southwest of Addis Ababa and 430 km from Hawassa, the SNNPRS's capital city. According to CSA 2007, the population of the Gurage Zone is estimated to be 1,340,376 million people, with 658,229 females and 622,253 males. Agriculture is the backbone of their economy, and the region is well-known for *Enset* plant production and the source of essential product items. The study's focal point is Chaha *Woreda*, part of the Sebat-Bet-Gurage.

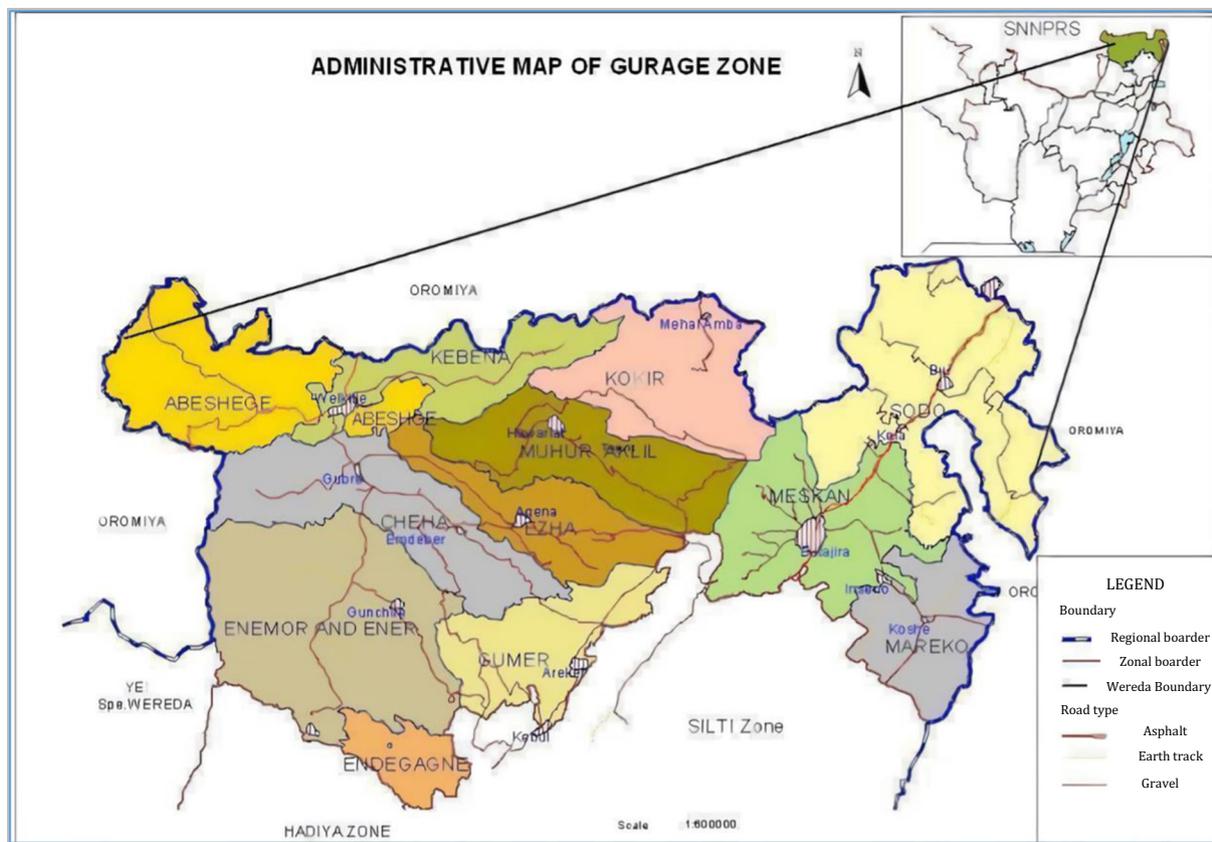


Fig. 1 An image that shows the thirteen Woredas and two reform administrations of the Gurage Zone.

The Sebat-Bet-Gurage, according to (Shack and Hailemariam, 1992), includes Chaha, Geta, Muhre and Aklil, Endegane, Yinor and Anner, Ezra, and Meqwerqwer. The study area is located among the Sebat Bet Gurage. It is bounded in the east by Gumer, in the north by *Ezra*, in the northwest by Abshge, in the southwest by Oromia, and in the southeast by Ennemor and Anner (see Fig. 2).

Study design. This study used a qualitative approach; however, the researchers used a phenomenological research design. According to Groenewald (2004), the phenomenological study design shows or investigates specific individuals' conscious and lived experiences through examining time, space, and personal history to understand social reality. With this in mind, this study employed a phenomenological study design to assess the depth of understanding of the value of *enset* for wealth stratification and financial opulence in the Cheaha communities. Also, how the *enset* plant could serve as an income-generating scheme in the study areas was investigated. In addition, this study design was used to inspect the social value of the *enset* plant and how the *enset* plant could strengthen social bonding and be a means of socialization. This study design was also used to understand how the *enset* plant could be the symbol of life and give the feminine characters of the Cheha community a voice by examining and analyzing instances of their daily lived experiences. Data for the study were collected from carefully selected participants in the study areas between February 16 and April 1, 2021. A qualitative method was chosen because a social anthropological study requires fieldwork to gather information and allows the researcher to study the phenomenon holistically (Baxter and Jack, 2015; Hornberger, 2003). According to Ritter (2021), the researcher is more involved with the phenomena being studied in the

qualitative approach. Additionally, the researcher and the research participants interact to influence one another and inseparably interact in qualitative research and holistic methods with a strong potential in revealing complexity (Baxter and Jack, 2015).

Data collection tools. In this study, data were collected using qualitative methods such as observation, key informant interviews, informal discussions, and focus group discussions.

Non-participant observation. As one of the different fieldwork techniques in ethnographic studies, observation helps to look at what is going on in the natural setting where the study community lives, their interactions, situations of their livelihood in general, and the geographical environment (Li, 2015). Li (2015) also mentions the ability of participant observation in establishing the researcher's close rapport with the participants in the study. Furthermore, the observation method allows the researcher to keep detailed records about each event and practice in the natural setting of the study area. The rationale for using observation as a data collection tool in this study is that it allows the researcher to construct effective and reliable information while still being present in the study area (Akdeniz, 2019; Kite, 1999). It allows the researcher to observe and follow the daily activities of the society being studied, including learning about their culture and experiencing their indigenous knowledge. The researchers started to observe without participating in the societal settings since the data collection procedure began on February 16 and continued till the research was completed. The type of observation the researchers used in this study was non-participant observation. The researcher believed non-participant observation efficiently reveals the difference between what people say and do (Maretto, 2018). With this in mind, non-participant observation was used to answer the first and third objectives about

Table 1 Profile of the key informants or participants of the study.

Code	Sex	Age	Place	Occupation	Date of interview
Ki-1	M	35	Welkite	Instructor at Welkite University	February 16, 2021
Ki-2	M	65	Yefetereq	Farmer	February 19, 2021
Ki-3	M	60	Yefetereq	Farmer	February 19, 2021
Ki-4	F	45	Yefetereq	Farmer	February 19, 2021
Ki-5	M	58	Welkite	Finance Officer	March 3, 2021
Ki-6	M	67	Emdiber	Elder	March 4, 2021
Ki-7	M	30	Gubre	Instructor in Welkite Industrial College	March 6, 2021
Ki-8	F	50	Yefetereq	Merchant	March 16, 2021
Ki-9	M	60	Welkite	Expert in Agricultural office	March 17, 2021
Ki-10	F	52	Yefetereq	Farmer	March 19, 2021
Ki-11	F	46	Yefetereq	Farmer	March 19, 2021
Ki-12	M	78	Yefetereq	Priest	March 19, 2021 March 21, 2021
Ki-13	M	23	Emdiber	Preparatory School Student	On March 22, 2021
Ki-14	M	50	Yefetereq	Militia	March 22, 2021
Ki-15	M	40	Welkite	Head of Cultural and Tourism Office	On March 24, 2021
Ki-16	F	54	Yefetereq	Merchant	March 28, 2021
Ki-17	M	64	Yefetereq	Farmer	March 28, 2021
Ki-18	M	63	Yefetereq	Local Dentist	April 1, 2021

Note that participants in the interview were also employed in the two Focused Group discussions.

Data collection procedure and ethical considerations. This study was approved and reviewed by the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers, and Anthropologists Institutional Review Board (ESSWA-IRB). After receiving approval from the ESSWA IRB, this study was critically evaluated by Wolkite University research center and Wolkite University sociology department staff members independently (ref. no. SOCI/799/2021). Before starting the data collection procedure, the researchers have provided an informed consent/formal letter of request written by the Sociology department at Wolkite University and research institute. The chosen participants, based on purposive samplings, were asked about their willingness to participate and provide information about the issue in the study. To ensure the validity and reliability of our data, we briefly tell the participants about the overall objectives and aim of the study. The researchers also promoted the issue of confidentiality by informing them that they may decline to participate if they are unwilling to reveal the intended information. The issue of confidentiality is maintained by informing participants that they may decline to participate if they are unwilling to reveal the intended information. We also gave them each an informed consent form, read it aloud to the informants, and answered their questions about their agreement and other confidentiality issues. Participants agreed to participate in the study after hearing and reading about informed consent. The data collection process was held from February 16 up to April 1.

Field experience. On Monday, February 16, 2021, we began our journey by bus from Addis Abeba to the southwestern part of Ethiopia. After three hours, we arrived in Welkite, the capital of Gurage Zone. The following day, we first contacted various personalities, particularly zone cultural and tourism officials. The zone officials provided us with some guidelines and background information about the study area and the people. They also demonstrated their cooperation by providing us with their tape recorder when ours was unfortunately damaged. After 2 days in Welkite town, we began our journey to the study area, Chaha Woreda, and a specific location called Yefktereq. According to informal conversations, the meaning of the place name is related to goats; its Amharic equivalent is *Yefeyel Dereq*; the goats that live in this area do not care about people or cars. The area is

28 km from Welkite town and can be reached in six hours by foot. People’s friendliness astounded us on our foot journey; everyone said: *Esham, Yetenbe, Bafermeten* to greet us. As our informant informed us, there are replay words such as *Esham, Eyam, Eye-etenbe* that we needed to learn.

While walking, we noticed various things, such as when we arrived in the area, the day was Wednesday, and it is a weekly market day, as our key informant informed us, which is held twice a week on Wednesday and Saturday. Different trade items are exchanged in the market, such as *Kocho, bulla* (a processed starch or dough made from *Enset*), fiber, *Jiba*, corn, and potato, but we were surprised to see meat, which is one of the market commodities we had never seen before. After some observations in the market, our key informant and we began our journey, which was about 30 min away from the main road. We saw several cattle in the field and a *Khat* tree, various plant species, *Gesho* (a plant used to ferment local beer), an *enset* plant, and beautiful houses. After we arrived at the study site, the first rapport was conducted with *kebele* officials, to whom our key informant introduced us and briefed us on our study. Following the rapport with the officials, we went to our key informant’s uncle’s house, where we stayed until we had gathered all the data.

During the first night of the day, we observed many things in our host family’s house, such as “Walker”, where the surrounding peoples gather to talk about various issues. They came with their *Khat* when they came, which gave us an excellent opportunity to introduce ourselves and this study and engage in informal conversations. During our conversation, they used the phrase *Emboneshe or Atbozen* to break the silence or encourage guests to speak. The women make coffee simultaneously, and everyone, including the children, drinks it with salt. When each person enters the house, he or she says *Wohemwarky* (how are you), and each individual stands up for him or her before saying *Torato*, which means sit down. All of the families gathered for dinner after finishing their *Shengo* (talking), and we ate *Kocho* with Gurage *Gomen* and cheese.

Moreover, the son of our host family made a bed for us out of *Enset* fiber, which they call *Jiba*. There were cows on the backside of our bed, and on the left side, there was a dog, both of which lived in the same house. When the night ended early in the morning, the household began to prepare coffee, so we awoke

early in the morning and observed what they did. Finally, when the coffee was ready, the son of our host family called all neighbors by saying *Qawa-Teqawe*, which means “come for coffee drinking”. The neighbors came and drank coffee repeatedly, each person drinking two to three cups of coffee on average in one session. The day was rainy and cold, so we all gathered around the *Gordet* (place of cooking) like a campfire to stay warm. When the rain stopped and the sun came out, our host family’s father, or *Gashe*, introduced us to the surrounding farmers. We began our field observation and informal conversation right away.

Gradually, as we became more acquainted with the environment and the people, we began to conduct interviews with various personalities, such as elders respected by the people, farmers, women, and children. On the other hand, the FGD session took place while people gathered in our host family’s home for *Shengo*. During the stay time in the study areas, we met with various officials in Welkite, including the Gurage people’s Self-Help Development Organization Office, the Gurage Zone Cultural and Tourism Office, and the Gurage Zone Communication Affairs Office. Furthermore, we also visited the Welkite town public library and read some materials about the area.

Data analysis. Thematic or qualitative analysis was used to analyze the data for this study. As is common in social-anthropological research, the visual aim is to the issue under discussion, the collected primary data through observation, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions, not only for this study but also because the primary technique of data collection is a qualitative one. Qualitative analysis is vital for providing a complex description of how people experience a given research issue; it also effectively identifies people’s intangible socially constructed knowledge (Chenail, 2015). In general, qualitative analysis aided the researcher in describing, explaining, examining, and interpreting the issue at hand; thus, the qualitative analysis method was used. Data were manually analyzed in six steps using a thematic or qualitative approach. The following actions were included in the analysis plan: First, we familiarized ourselves with the data. It comprises data transcription and translation into English and reading and re-reading the data. Two, generate the starting codes. Initial codes were developed by systematically coding noteworthy characteristics of the data across the whole dataset while keeping the stated objectives in mind. Then, for each code, data extracts were compiled. Three, look into themes. The themes were looked for throughout the complete data collection. This stage mainly entails categorizing codes into prospective themes and collecting all the data related to each potential subject. The analyst tried to think about the link between codes, themes, and degrees of themes in this stage. Four, go over your themes and sub-themes carefully. Fifth, write a report. The report was divided into two sections: analysis and discussion. The analyst’s narrative and illustrated data extracts were included in the analysis section. The discussion section included the analyst’s perspective and past study findings.

Results

The study’s findings were examined in light of the specific objectives, and then triangulation was used to perform analysis and interpretation, with specific qualitative topics examined independently. To obtain or gain a thorough understanding of the problem and address the study’s stated objectives, this study included 18 key informants, non-participant observations, and two focus group discussions that comprised eight discussants. Data in the result section were presented by carefully looking at themes and sub-themes in line with the study objectives.

First, data related to the economic value of *enset* were presented, after that, the social value of *Enset* followed, and thirdly, the symbolic value of the *Enset* crop in the study areas was thematically presented.

Enset plays an indispensable role in the economic, social, and cultural lives of the *Enset*-cultivating people. The Gurage communities are well known for their hard work and generosity toward one another, as evidenced by the establishment of self-helping traditional institutions such as *Equb* and *Iddir*, which exist throughout Ethiopia and are thought to have originated in Gurage (Yemataw et al., 2016). The rural settler’s *enset* cultivation is the backbone of Chaha *Woreda*’s economy, as it is in other Bete-Gurage communities. *Enset* is deeply ingrained in almost every aspect of Gurage life; the Gurage’s most arable land is set aside for *Enset* cultivation. Concerning the economic and socio-cultural importance of *Enset* (Ullendorff, 1950) explained as follows:

..... It is the *Enset* that becomes *Wussa*, and it is the *enset* that becomes met-juice oatmeal, it is the *Enset* that becomes fiber and rope, it is the layer and leaf of *enset* with which one warps the butter and cheese, it is the *gwaye* kind of *Enset* with which one feeds and heals from his sickness, it is the central parts of the leaf of *Astara* with which a cow that has refused to be milked Gurage’s soul is, in fact, the *enset* (Ullendorff, 1950, p. 43).

***Enset* and wealth stratification.** The Chaha Gurage people interpret the term status as a way to attest to or indicate social stratification. Previously in the study area, status’ was not assigned based on achievement but rather on different criteria such as birth, family background, sex, and placing oneself in a particular social group. However, this attitude has changed, and status is now assigned to an individual based on his/her achievements, qualities, and efforts. According to (Tesfaye Retta, 2021), wealth stratification in Gurage is based on the number of *Enset*, and wealth such as the possession of cultivated land often used for *enset* plantation is an index for economic status. Furthermore, failures or successes in other businesses are explained by one’s financial situation. As a result, the economic status of artisans in Gurage was meager, as many of them were denied the right to own land and *enset*. The dominant groups were the central land and *enset* owners. As a result, they used to have a prosperous economic status. As a result, farmers who own many *enset* plants regard themselves as superior to those who own fewer *enset* plants and provide labor services to the wealthy and powerful.

According to key informants (KI-1 and KI-18), the *enset* plant is a factor for social stratification or economic classification among the Chaha Gurage. Among the study area, people use the *Enset* plant as a magnificent sign of prestige or wealth and its multipurpose use as food, binding things, contracting houses, shading, and other financial security. Farmers who have much *enset* in their compound proclaim their superior status because they can feed their families better. Those who do not have such many *enset* plants, on the other hand, are unable to feed their families and are forced to engage in other non-formal activities to supplement their income. They could be selling their labor to those with a large *enset*. As a result, the number of *Enset* and *Enset* plantation fields is key to determining wealth (status).

The key informants (KI-2 and KI-17) revealed that wealthy farmers only cultivate some particular *enset* plant varieties. Such medicinal varieties are generally scarce and only exist in the hands of the wealthier farmers. *Guarye*, *Astara*, and *Qebnar*, for example, are not found in every household; they are mainly used



Fig. 3 Partial view of Yeftere market.

to heal bone fractures. Similarly, some *enset* products or dishes, such as *Yawatarye*, *Brambrate*, and *bullā*, are considered high-status peoples' food, and they are mostly eaten and exist in the wealthiest households; these types of food have the best quality, and they are eaten on special occasions, such as when there is a public feast or ceremony, and when special guests are arriving. One of the informants (KI-3) describes his experience with the wealth indicator criterion as follows:

Previously, the quality of cloth worn by a person was thought to be an indication of his social rank; however, today, social and economic status is associated with wealth, wealth that is measured in terms of the number of *enset* held, and people who have special knowledge, such as men known for their medication, who can make a debate, elders, and religious leaders have respect in the community (Key informant interview). (KI-3).

Enset and financial opulence. Even though they grow different cereal crops, the people in the study area rely heavily on the *enset* plant. This is not only for consumption but also for generating income or securing their finances, most of the time for various activities that require money in cash, such as purchasing different raw materials for home, paying land tax, buying cloth for children, and themselves, paying school tuition fees and house rent for children who learn far from the village elsewhere in town, wage labor during the time of cultivation and harvesting time and for covering other social and financial costs such as *Edir*, *Equb*, *bête Gurage Shengo*, etc. As we observed in the *Yefektereq* market, a variety of *enset* products such as *Wussa*, *Bullā*, *Qancha*, and layers of mats made of dried *enset* midribs help generate money to cover other needs.

According to the informant's report (KI-4 and KI-5), most *enset* products are ready for market after processing; when it is well processed and achieve their quality, the yield earns a significant additional income. However, some farmers sell it before the process is finished to cover their losses. Women do the purchasing; they sell a small amount of *Wussa*, *bullā*, or a layer of a mat at the village market, held twice a week about 30 min away; they carry the products on their backs. If the products are loaded, they are transported on the back of a donkey, and men participate in the purchasing activity to assist women. While we were in the market (*Yefektereq*), we observed that the cost of a single bundle of *Wussa*, which they informed us, ranges between 250 and 300 Birr depending on quality and season. Seasons play a role in the increase and decrease of the price of *enset* yield, and during the

rainy seasons in *Sene* (June), *Hamle* (July), and *Nehase* (August), the price of *Wussa* (*Enset* yields) skyrockets because *enset* is harvested only during the dry season. After selling what they have in the market, the women purchase various trade items for their home consumption, one of which is raw meat, which is sold in the market and not seen in any other markets (see Fig. 3).

Regarding the benefit earned from *Wussa*, *bullā*, layers of mats, or any other *enset* yield among men and women, the study indicates that women in the study area sell most products. The study indicates that women cannot ask for money from their husbands because they have the right to use the money for different domestic purposes, whether it is for household or personal needs. Similarly, men's responsibility is to uproot the estimated amount of matured *enset* based on family size for a year. When it is sold in load through a donkey, men do not control the quantities of *Wussa*. However, sometimes when the estimated amount of food cannot feed the number of families per year, a disagreement may occur between a husband and wife.

There is a saying among the local people that goes about the above idea:

Wasəməmama wätäqusu: namänə bərotə šəronənā

This shows how shameful it is to borrow *Wussa* from neighbors and not properly budget the consumption for the year.

Social bonding and income-generating scheme of *Enset*.

According to the study, farmers do not carry out the *enset* cultivation and harvesting process individually; instead, they perform the activities (tasks) cooperatively or through hired labor. In the first case, the community forms a *Jege*, a traditional form of labor organization formed separately by men and women. As a result, the men's worker party primarily focuses on the cultivation process, such as preparing or cleaning the field, hoeing the field, sucker propagation, and transplanting, all of which are done in rotation by *Jege*. While harvesting, decortications, manuring, weeding, and food preparation are tasks, women perform individually or in groups (*Wusacha*).

Jege: a reciprocal work party. According to the informants (KI-6, KI-16), being a neighbor, a committed friend, or an active relative is a criterion for forming a *Jege* or a reciprocal work party. There is no limit to the number of participants in the group, and they focus on shortening the period to complete the tasks in each participant's field as soon as possible. There are jokes, fans, and songs while carrying out the tasks. The songs and sayings are primarily intended to elevate the status of the *enset* field owner (KI-6).

Another informant (KI-7) describes his experience with reciprocal work as follows:

A common form of work habit is significant, and when we work together we share many experiences, it enables us to perform large tasks in a short period, it also generates income, which means that labor collects laborers in this system while we are doing the task we share several socioeconomic, political, and cultural issues, everyone likes this form of organization because there are fun, sayings, jokes, and songs, we work through enjoying ourselves (KI-7).

Hired labor. According to the focus group discussants' report (FGD #1), those farmers who do not have numerous family laborers mostly use hired labor. In the Chaha case, these include widows, older people with no children, and in some cases, sick people. To have a sound output or yield, protection from any damage in the absence of follow-up, and care, farmers use waged

labor. Sometimes farmers with no family labor get a free labor service from their neighbors, especially in the case of sick people and the elderly. Both male and female farmers own a small amount of the *enset* plant and are unable to feed their families and those who are considered inferior or have a low status in the community work as wage laborers. Having enough *enset* to feed one's family is considered a status symbol in this community. As a result, people who cannot adequately feed their families sell their labor to earn a living.

Male hired laborers perform the same tasks as reciprocal male workers in the cultivation process, such as preparing the field, hoeing the field, manuring the field, sucker propagation, and transplantation. On the other hand, female laborers perform the same tasks as reciprocal female party workers in harvesting, decortication, squeezing, and weeding. Discussants in FGD stated the payment of hired labor as follows:

Previously, when a person served as hired labor, he or she took wage in the form of the kind; they took *enset* and its product (*Wussa*) because they knew how much it benefited them, for example, a woman who served in the harvesting process waged three or four *enset* when she harvested about fifteen *enset*. However, today's hired laborers prefer to be paid in cash rather than in kind, and they also receive food and drink while performing their duties (FGD #2 participants).

We tried to determine why they prefer to receive their wages in cash and how much money they earn per day while there, but they could not tell us why or how much money they earn. Today, most transactions are conducted through the monetary system rather than in kind. On the one hand, *enset* cultivation and harvesting create employment opportunities for poor farmers who have low social status in the community; on the other hand, high-ranking families generate income by selling the *Enset* yield and paying the labor fee from their purchased income.

The socializing aspect of Enset. In the process of *enset* cultivation, Chaha youth have the opportunity to learn, understand, and practice the indigenous *enset* cultivation processes. At the same time, the *enset* harvesting process allows Chaha girls to learn and practice the traditional ways of the *enset* harvesting process or work culture. Girls are not permitted to participate in all harvesting activities, but they are permitted to participate in specific activities, such as smashing (chopping) and *Amichoo* (corn). Among the Chaha Gurage, there is a custom of *Amichoo* smashing competition among the girls; this competition paves the way for girls to find their future husbands. After the competition, the winner girl is blessed and wished a good husband by the community of older women. There is a belief that to find a good husband, a girl must be hardworking; if she is lazy, her chances of finding a husband decrease.

A focus group #1 discussants in the study confirmed that:

If a woman is sent home due to infertility or laziness, her chances of finding a second husband are slim. If she does not migrate, she may eventually resort to changing one husband for another. Other women in the village are likely to single out a woman as a 'worthless woman,' referring to a woman who cannot find a husband (FGD #1 discussants).

In the same vein, key informants (KI-8 and KI-9) confirmed that: the girls eagerly await the *Amichoo*-smashing occasion because the competition involves songs, tricks, and fun; it also helps them to familiarize themselves with the different socio-cultural practices of the community, work culture; and, most importantly, it provides an opportunity to find a good husband, as parents mainly arrange earlier marriage. The children had no power or choice in selecting their partner; their marriage was

determined by their parents' will or choice. Today, this tradition has changed; the children choose their bride or bridegroom, and the community elders approve and bless them.

When asked how the *enset* plant related to social integration, the informants (KI-10) stated that:

As is well known, the majority of the *Gurage* communities migrated to various Ethiopian regions, particularly Addis Ababa, but they never lost their rural connection. The impression is that they migrate for seasonal labor, but they return to their place of origin (home) once or twice a year. The reason is for the *Meskel* or *Arefa* celebration, and secondly, the attitude to maintain or cultivate their *Enset* farm that, a person who does not take care of (maintain) his *enset* farm is considered a rootless person (careless, deviant) even if he is well established in the city and has no need of farmland (KI-10).

In their study, (Yemataw et al., 2016) assert that during the period 1880–1885, when most Ethiopian regions experienced drought and famine, the *Gurage* Zone never experienced drought. Thus the lowland *Gurage* people, who were predominant cereal crop producers, began to exchange their cattle, commodities, and even their children for *enset* yield. It appears exaggerated, but it happened, and a strong relationship developed due to this type of exchange. According to Yemataw et al. (2016), the *enset* plant depicts how the plant has relationships with social integration and enables people to adapt to the existing environment and contend with the climatic environment. There is a societal relationship today, even if the means and exchange of items are different from in the past. Farmers of the *Chaha* Gurage have been self-sufficient because they are the primary cultivators of *enset* and the lowland *Gurage* peoples, notably the Gummer Gurage, have obtained *Wussa* (*Kocho*). This reciprocity has led to a good relationship, regional integration, and intermarriage.

On the other hand, while collecting the data, we observed a massive tree in the middle of the plant of *enset*, and the residents told us this tree was planted in this area on purpose. We asked them about the purpose of the tree, and they revealed that there were some eye-evil people in the area. However, this tree has some mystical power to protect our *enset* from those eye-evil people unless our entire *enset* crop is damaged. Meanwhile, in the people's socialization process, the community has set some demonological aspects and the way the people should protect themselves from that spirit. Thus, the residents reveal that there is no life without this tree because if our *enset* plant is damaged, all of our lives will be disorganized and unable to survive in the given environment. They also described the tree as a faithful guardian of the community (see Fig. 4).

Enset and its symbolic representation

Enset and its feminine character. When the Gurage community describes the method of *enset* cultivation, they use a human character to imply that *enset* is similar to people. For example, they stated that *enset* is similar to a young child in its early stages of development and must be treated as such. As a result, most people draw a parallel between childbirth and *enset* reproduction and refer to it as if they are speaking of men.

Enset has a feminine character, according to interviewees and focus group participants, who compare *enset* to a mother who gives birth. According to the informant, when one girl reaches adolescence, she marries and gives birth after losing her virginity, which is valid with the *enset* plant.

When an *enset* matures and reaches the *Hiba* stage, farmers uproot it and prepare it for propagation. After uprooting the matured one, the next step is to cut its pseudostem and



Fig. 4 A tree that protects the Enset plant from the evil spirit.

make a hole, as the locals say they are destroying the eye, and the hole is filled with soil or dung. As a result of destroying the corm's eye, the plant loses its virginity and is ready to give birth (KI-11).

Gemechu et al. (2021) state that to become a mother or give birth, a woman, must have sexual intercourse and become pregnant by sharing a bed with a man. The same thing happens with *enset* unless the plant eye is destroyed and filled with soil, it cannot give birth (sprout tender plants), so the plant fails to meet the criterion expected of *enset*, and society refers to this plant as *Wurush* (it became male). The myth surrounding the origin of *enset*, on the other hand, indicates that the plant is conceived with a feminine character.

Enset symbol of 'Life'. *Enset* is considered a tree of life among the study people; most Gurage peoples use *enset* in their social, economic, religious, and cultural activities. Their lives are inextricably linked with the plant. While we were in the field, we observed this fact, even though people produce other cereal crops such as maize, *teff*, and wheat, barely parallel to the *enset* cultivation, they are not using those crops for their consumption but rather for the market. They prefer to eat *Enset*. As a result, *enset* is very important to the people.

Informants (KI-12, KI-113, and KI-14) explain the close relationship between *enset* and the Gurage people; *enset* is 'life' for them because many aspects of life in the community rely on it. The Gurage society survives by consuming *enset* products from childhood to old age and until the end of life. According to one of the informants:

From the time of my childhood up to now, I have consumed *Wussa*. This indicates that my survival depends on this plant (KI-15).

In a similar vein, the focus group participants described their experience as follows:

Most Gurage people regard *enset* as the foundation of life, long before introducing other crops such as *teff*, maize, and wheat. However, *enset* yields are now supplemented by some annual crops; however, people still prefer *enset* because it was considered the only valuable crop by our grandfathers and fathers when other cereal crops were unknown. People believe that *enset* means 'life', that if there is no *Enset*, there is no life, and that if we do not have *enset*, we will die (FGD #1 discussants).

In the same vein, Tilahun et al. (2020) point out that the symbolism of the tree of life requires special attention because it allows people to have direct contact with God. Similarly, we observed that people in the area pay special attention (care) to their *enset* because it is their tree of life; they care for the *enset* field, apply manure every morning, and protect it from animal damage. Several sayings glorify *enset* and its yield, one of which is as follows:

Wuye wusa: Wuye Wusa

Wusa bäqe tä wä

Kätəfo tärämädämə

It demonstrates that people prefer *Kitfo* to *Wussa*. *Wussa* is a fermented product derived from the *enset* pseudostem that is mainly consumed in the form of bread. *Wussa* is a good energy source due to its high carbohydrate and starch content, but it is said to have a low protein content. Thus, based on informant reflections and participant observation, we identified the Gurage people, particularly the Chaha Gurage society, as highly in touch with the *enset* plant. They signify the plant as a significant social and economic basis which they incorporate into their daily routine.

Discussions and conclusions

The Chaha Gurage people are one of the seven houses of the Gurage, a group of people who share a similar way of life and origin and are collectively known as the Gurage. The laws of Chaha concerning relationships, how their houses are built, how their food is prepared, their occupations, their recreational activities, and indeed all laws, do not differ significantly from those of the others belonging to the seven houses of Gurage (Ullendorff, 1950). The Gurage's seven houses are like twins; while they are all the same, they are distinguished by minor details. Economically, the Chaha Gurage people rely heavily on *enset* plant cultivation. They have their farming, cultural rhythms, and rituals geared toward maintaining their agro-ecological system as a means of survival. For a long time, the people of the study area have developed various mechanisms for *enset* cultivation, propagation, harvesting, processing, and marketing. Although the people grow small-scale crops, they rely heavily on *enset*, their staple food.

Convergence with the Plant of *Enset* has been the subject of numerous studies. So far, historical and social anthropological studies in the Chaha Gurage have focused on rural-to-urban migration, marginalization, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, micro, and macro-organizations and have had little to say about the economic, socio-cultural, and symbolic aspects of *enset* related to its production and consumption among the Chaha Gurage people (Wondimu and Kebede, 2021). As a result, to fill a gap, this study investigates the Gurage people of Ethiopia's socially constructed indigenous knowledge in producing and consuming the *enset* plant and its economic, cultural, and symbolic representational value, which has received little attention from the authors. The data used and analyzed in this study is primarily based on primary data gathered during fieldwork using various mechanisms such as key-informant interviews, observation, and focus group discussions. There were both male and female participants in the study. Furthermore, the study included participation from concerned governmental officials, such as cultural and tourism officials, individuals with extensive knowledge of the *enset* plant, and those who are good storytellers.

According to the study's findings, the *enset* plant is not cultivated far from the village, as most farmers cultivate the plant close to their village. The findings of Negash and Niehof (2004) and Tesfaye Retta (2021) assert that the Chaha people rely heavily on an *enset*-based farming system that integrates socioeconomic, cultural, and ecological components by cultivating and maintaining the *enset* plant. People also ensure their food security by cultivating *enset*. Despite their findings, this study discovered that the *enset* plant is cultivated near the farmers' houses to protect the plant from harm, and it also represents the myths and tales of *enset's* origin and introduction. Besides, the Cheha community plants an *Enset* crop near their house to protect the plant from the evil spirits and eye-evil people.

This study's findings also revealed that the Chaha community believes that *enset*, or people's souls, originated from heaven as a gift from God. Because of this belief, the people commemorate its origins on the third day of each month. This study's findings were consistent with those of Egizabher et al. (2020) and Tsehaye and Kebebew (2006). Despite the previous studies, we found that the Gurage people are somewhat different from other *enset* cultivating societies in terms of *enset* cultivation and transplantation. For example, when the Chaha Gurage was transplanted, they left a space in each plant called Mara. These spaces are suitable for the plant's growth; the plant gets air quickly, and the space allows people to pass in between.

Economically, the findings of the study revealed that *enset* is a factor for wealth stratification for the study people; those who own many *enset* in terms of size, variety, and ability to heal various forms of the disease are considered wealthy and gain respect in society; *enset* serves as a key for wealth stratification. Similarly, Sahle et al. (2021) and Negash and Niehof (2004) assert that *enset* in southern Ethiopia is everything for the study people; they are financially secure by using *enset* plant products, and they also use the plant products to cover various social duty expenses such as *Equb* and *Iddir* (Traditional saving system in Ethiopia). Despite the previous studies, we discovered that *enset* plays a significant role in socializing the study people in various ways. For example, during the cultivation, transplantation, and harvesting seasons, the community carried out their activities in a collective form known as *Jege*, which allows them to share various issues during a specific period while doing their work, and it also allows the youngsters to practice and experience their culture.

Unlike the results of Birmeta et al. (2004) and Negash and Niehof (2004), the findings of this study also reveal the existence of a traditional labor organization known as *Jege* (a common form of labor organization), which plays an essential role in pooling the required labor in the process of cultivating and harvesting *enset*. Furthermore, the study findings describe the method of *enset* cultivation, and they use a human character to imply that *enset* is similar to people. Similarly, Gemechu et al. (2021) state that a woman must have sexual intercourse and become pregnant by sharing a bed with a man to become a mother or give birth. The same thing happens with *enset*; unless the plant eye is destroyed and filled with soil, it cannot give birth (sprout tender plants), so the plant fails to meet the *enset* criterion, and society refers to it as *Wurush* (it becomes male).

Study limitations

Before data collection began, the researchers announced to the participants that the data collection process could be ceased if they were not willing to participate—however, the agreed participants engaged in the study. Meanwhile, we could not get further information despite the research objectives due to the participants' shyness. This issue might raise the issue of credibility since this research is qualitative.

Though the researchers further recommended complete participants' observational research that did not reveal the researcher's status, their status remained anonymous.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that the *enset* plant among the Cheha communities has social, economic, and symbolic value, and their livelihood depends on it. Economically, the study's findings revealed that *enset* is a factor in wealth stratification for the study people; those who own many *enset* in terms of size, variety, and ability to heal various forms of the disease are considered wealthy and gain respect in society. Also, *enset* plays a significant role in socializing the study population in various ways during the period of cultivation and transplantation, which allows them to share various issues during a specific period while doing their work. It also allows the youngsters to practice and experience their culture. Besides the socializing effects, *enset* in Cheha communities is considered a symbol of life because they linked their lives with the plant. Despite our efforts to investigate the economic, cultural, and medicinal symbolic value of *enset* in its production and consumption in Chaha *Woreda*, Gurage Zone, South of Ethiopia, the researchers recommend a more in-depth study, focusing on the medicinal, disease, or frost tolerance, pest, and pathogen incidence importance of the *Enset* plant in Chaha *Woreda*.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This study was approved and reviewed by the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers, and Anthropologists Institutional Review Board (ESSWA-IRB). After receiving approval from the ESSWA IRB, this study was critically evaluated by Wolkite University research center and Wolkite University sociology department staff members independently (ref. no. SOCI/799/2021).

Informed consent

Before starting the data collection procedure, the researchers provided informed consent/formal letters of request written by the Sociology department at Wolkite University and the research institute. The chosen participants, based on purposive samplings, were asked about their willingness to participate and provide information about the issue in the study. To ensure the validity and reliability of our data, we briefly informed the participants about the overall objectives and aim of the study.

Additional information

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