

Gurage Ensete Cultivation

The Sabat Bét ("Seven Houses) Gurage region is one of the most densely population areas of rural Ethiopia. Two factors sustain this density: 1. A remittance economy in which Gurage workers work in season in urban areas such as Addis Ababa and transfer monetary support to rural families that do not have sufficient land to afford a subsistence economy; 2. The ensete (ensete edulis), or false banana, plant that is both drought resistant but also requires relatively little land for the starchy root product that serves as a source of food.

In the sections below, how ensete is cultivated and harvested is shown in a series of photo images taken in and around the village of Emdeber, where I lived and taught secondary school history as a Peace Corps volunteer in the mid-1960's.



The ensete plant produces a flower but no bananas, even though its trunk and leaves clearly mark its relationship to banana plants.



A close-up shows the dark color of the ensete flower. A typical ensete plant takes up to seven years to reach maturity. Given the acidic soil in which the plant is cultivated in Gurage country, each season is marked by digging up plants and re-rooting them in a rotational pattern.



Digging up an ensete plant for rotation, a farmer relies on a two-pronged digging tool, known as a “maresha”.



Rotating ensete plants typically is done in teams, with adjacent area farmers joining in a process of digging while chanting local songs.



A young man displays his machete tool used to trim the leaves prior to felling the plant.



Once the leaves are removed, the machete tools are used to sever the roots of the plant to facilitate the felling of the trunk.



View of a felled ensete plant, with soil still held to the plant by the roots.



The machete tool then is used to trim the roots and soil from the plant.



Preparing the root is done by women, using serrated wooden chopping tools.



As women trim the root of the ensete plant, they do so in groups in which both singing and providing updates on neighborhood news unfolds with the rhythm of the chopping.



A cleaned ensete root ready for chopping into pieces before crafting a pie-shaped mass that will be fermented, and then baked into its final form, and known as “kotcho”.



Women are very skilled in cleaning ensete for food preparation.



Women serve as the basic news source for the region, sharing information and stories as they emerge.



Chopped enset root accumulating



The digging stick creates a mash



Once the ensete mash has been prepared, it is buried in an ensete leaf hold where it ferments prior to baking into kotcho patties.



Men often use maresha tools to turn over the soil in a field where ensete plants will be transferred to in a new growth cycle



As with the work in the ensete field, preparing the ground often proceeds with a chanting of the thrusts and heaving of the soil.