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CULTIVATING IN THE INDIGENOUS WAY, EATING IN THE NATIONAL WAY: CHANGING FOOD AND IDENTITY AMONG THE MALO, SOUTHWESTERN ETHIOPIA⁽¹⁾

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ABSTRACT Although teff (*Eragrostis tef*) is a minor cereal worldwide, it is cultivated most extensively in Ethiopia and still expanded in cultivation area. This article considers why this millet is so important in this region by analyzing the case of the Malo society in southwestern Ethiopia. Their indigenous techniques used for cultivating teff suggest that they have been cultivating it since long before the incorporation of their territory into the Ethiopian empire at the end of 19th century. However, it is also known that teff cultivation began extensively in this area no more than a half century ago. Although several factors contribute to the expansion of teff cultivation, the most important factor is the adoption of a national food item known as *injera* in the mid-1970s. Malo people knew about it before but did not eat it because it was strongly associated with the imperial settlers who exploited them. Following the Ethiopian revolution during 1974–1975, however, they started to enjoy *injera*. Currently, it is one of their most popular dietary items consumed on holidays and at markets. Not only the taste of *injera* but also the rising identity of the people as Ethiopians seem to be involved with the food's popularity.

KEYWORDS: Ethiopian identity; *injera*; Malo; National food; Teff cultivation.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Russian agronomist and plant geneticist N. Vavilov's study (Vavilov 1951), Ethiopia is renowned for being one of the world's centers of origin of cultivated plants. Some domesticated plants from the region, such as *Coffea arabica*, have spread worldwide and have become global crops, while several others have been cultivated almost in the country until now. A very fine millet, teff (*Eragrostis tef*), is one of the latter. Most such minor local crops are losing their importance and are being forgotten as the production of global crops increases (National Research Council 1996: xiii). In fact, the cultivation of maize is rapidly expanding in Ethiopia, and it is already the largest in production and the second largest in terms of cultivated area.

Nonetheless, teff has long become the largest crop in terms of cultivated area

in the country to date. Furthermore, its cultivation has been increasing expanding in recent years. Although the millet is globally just a minor crop, it continues to be of extraordinary importance in Ethiopia (and Eritrea). Why is teff so important there?

This question seems closely related to the way it is consumed, particularly the unique local fermented pancake known as *injera*, a national staple food in Ethiopia (Bultosa 2016). *Injera* is well known to have been served with special dishes as well as to have been consumed as part of daily diet among the Amhara, a major ethnic group in northern Ethiopia (Abbebe 2006; McCann 2009). Although it is commonly believed that *injera* has been eaten in northern Ethiopia since ancient times, based on the analysis of historical records, Ishikawa recently proposed a new theory about when *injera* was established, suggesting its recent emergence (Ishikawa 2021, 2023). Based on the author's anthropological fieldwork among the Malo of southwestern Ethiopia since the early 1990s, this article discusses how *injera* has gained popularity and how the cultivation of its main ingredient—teff—has expanded in the society.

Malo people reside in the steep mountainous country from the lowland to the highland (ca. 1,000 to 3,000 meters above the sea level) and cultivate teff in the remote outlying fields of the lowland settlements. Although it is unknown when teff cultivation began in the land, their teff cultivation techniques suggest its ancient origin. Regardless of its minor importance until recently, the Malo had various ways of cooking it, such as leavened or unleavened bread, porridge, and gruel. Strangely, they did not have *injera* even in the imperial period, when the injera-eating Amhara settlers came to the land following its incorporation into the imperial territory at the end of the 19th century.

However, during the Ethiopian revolution in which the Amhara settlers were driven away, the Malo began eating *injera*. Currently, *injera* is highly popular among the Malo, and as its demands increase, its main ingredient, the cereal teff, is being cultivated extensively in the lowlands.

This paper first introduces the unique cereal teff below, and then outlines the Malo land and society. After that, it describes the agricultural techniques of teff cultivation in Malo. Thereafter, it considers several factors for the expansion of teff cultivation and adoption of *injera* eating. This is followed by a discussion of transformations of the symbolism of *injera* and the identity of Malo people.

TEFF AND ITS CULTIVATION IN ETHIOPIA

As mentioned above, teff has many unique agronomic traits, which are discussed below.

First of all, the grain is extremely small at only about 1 mm in length and diameter. Therefore, its transportation is easy, and it is possible to sow it widely with a small amount of seeds: moreover, it is believed that teff would have been a great advantage in the time of constant warfare (Jones, 2010). Although when the cultivation of this cereal started remains unclear, it is assumed that, by the time the Semitic-speaking peoples crossed the Red Sea from the southern Arabian

Peninsula in the 1st millennium BC, the local Cushitic-speaking peoples had already cultivated teff (Stiehler 1948: 274; Bultosa 2016: 209). Archaeological evidences thus far indicate the domestication of teff in northern Ethiopia in several centuries BC (D'Andrea 2008: 559). Subsequently, it was transmitted to Yemen on the opposite coast of the Red Sea, but it barely spread to other areas. However, teff was introduced as a fodder crop in South Africa in the 19th century and continues to be cultivated there. In the latter half of the 20th century, Ethiopians who migrated to the United States brought teff with them, and today, it is commercially cultivated in Idaho and other states (National Research Council 1996: 229; Bultosa 2016: 210).

The characteristic of its cultivation is that the cultivation period is as short as about three months. It is also known that the crop has high tolerance to dryness. It has been reported that teff does not die even when it is affected by abnormal dryness, such as drought, wherein other cereals become scarce (Jones 1988: 37). Teff also has the advantage that it can be stored as seeds and food for long periods without concerns of pests for several years (Jones 2010: 886).

In terms of nutrition, teff contains larger amount of proteins than maize and wheat, with a better amino acid spectrum, and also has a high content of minerals such as iron, calcium, and zinc. Due to that, it is said that there are few anemia patients in Ethiopia. In recent years, it is attracting attention as a healthy food in Europe and the United States because it does not contain gluten (Jones 2010: 886; Bultosa 2016: 215).

However, this millet also has obvious drawbacks, such as low yields per area. Although the yield of teff is gradually improving, it is undeniably still at a low level compared to other cereals, such as less than half that of maize in Ethiopia. Therefore, the Ethiopian government, for which increasing food production is an important national issue, encourages high-yielding maize cultivation in collaboration with international organizations. Nevertheless, the millet is almost consistently cultivated in the largest area in Ethiopia, and its cultivation has expanded in recent years (Figure 1).

However, the cultivation area of teff in Ethiopia is not uniformly distributed. The regions where the cereal is grown widely are the historical Ethiopian territories of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, where plow cultivation has been the main cultivation method (Simoons 1960: 68; McCann 1995). Central Ethiopia, where the current state capital of Addis Ababa is located, was a territory of the ex-pastoralist Oromo before its consolidation into Ethiopia in the late 19th century. Although teff cultivation using plow was practiced before that time, it became more active in the beginning of the 20th century when the national capital moved to Addis Ababa, and today, its suburbs are the most predominant area for teff cultivation (Seyfu 1997: 33; Tanaka 2018: 70–77).

There have been several discussions on teff cultivation in southern Ethiopia, especially in the southwest, where various small ethnic groups live. While some assume that the millet was introduced after the area's incorporation into Ethiopia at the end of the 19th century (e.g., Abbink 1988; Pauli 1959a, 1959b), others consider that teff cultivation was practiced before then (e.g., Haberland 1959, 1984; Straube 1963; Orent 1979). Because the traditional political structures and

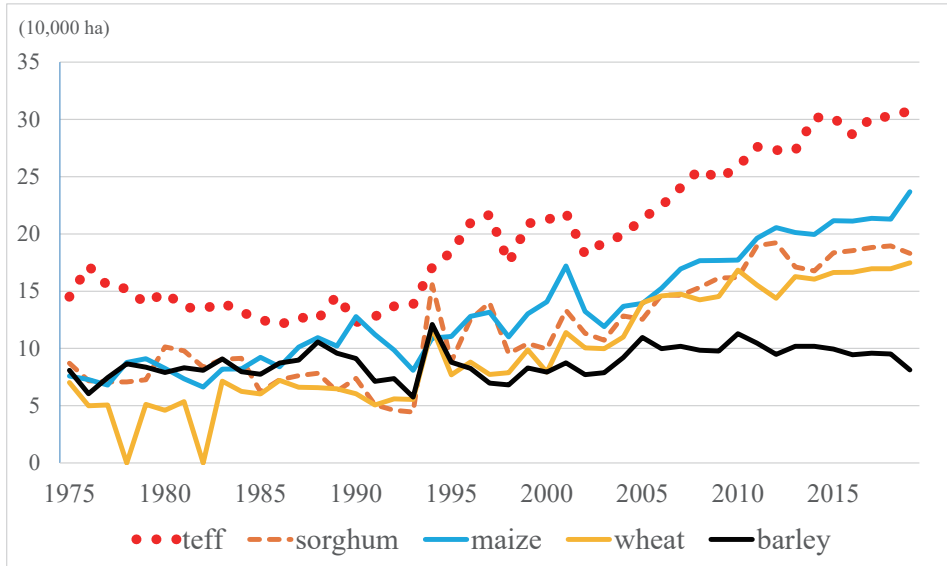


Figure 1 Cultivation area by major cereals in Ethiopia.

Compiled from the data in the annually issued *Report on area and production of major crops* by Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency.

population size greatly differ between the ethnic groups in southwestern Ethiopia, it may be difficult to collectively discuss the beginning of teff cultivation and introduction of plows in the region. Nonetheless, few discussions examined how the cereal is actually cultivated in the society. Therefore, the cultivation and utilization of the cereal is described in the case of the Malo society, where the author has been conducting anthropological fieldwork since the early 1990s, following an introduction of the Malo society below.

MALO SOCIETY: LAND AND HISTORY

Malo people live in the steep mountainous areas, which range in elevation from 1,000 meters to 3,000 meters above the sea level (Figure 2). The majority of the Malo are subsistence farmers living on crop cultivation and livestock raising. While both male and female household members grow diverse crops such as root and tuber crops, legumes and vegetables, fruits and spices in small domestic gardens, mostly males farm cereals in the large outlying fields, often utilizing cooperative labor with neighbors (Fujimoto 2013: 25–29). A rich variety of crops—as many as 100 species—are cultivated in the land today, although most of them were introduced there within the half century when people’s movement became frequent and trading activities increased (Fujimoto 2007: 32).

The land use for cereal cultivation in the fields varies from the short fallow type (*shook’a* or *shoyk’a*) practiced near the house to the long fallow one (*ottse*) in the remote field. Teff is largely cultivated in the remotest fields with the long

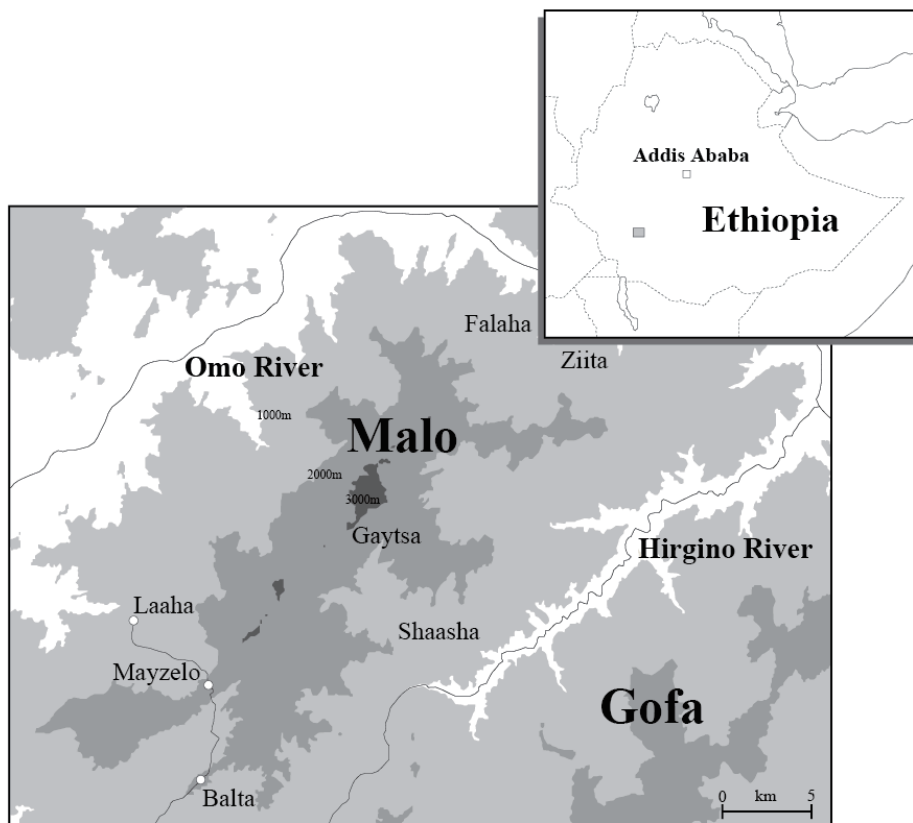


Figure 2 Malo land in southwestern Ethiopia.

(about 8 years) fallow land use. Additionally, the Malo raise livestock such as cattle, sheep, and goats, although all in small numbers of around 3 to 10 in each household. The increasing population of the people is assumed to be at about 80,000. While it is increasing remarkably in the highlands above 2,000 meters in elevation, it is declining in the lowlands below 2,000 meters due to the following social factors.

As mentioned above, until their incorporation into the Ethiopian empire at the end of the 19th century, multiple ethnic groups lived together in the southwestern part of the current Ethiopian territory, forming more or less autonomous polities such as kingdoms or chiefdoms. Among these were the Malo, speakers of the Omotic languages of the Afroasiatic phylum, and inhabiting the southern basin of the Middle Omo River.

Estimated from the genealogy of kings derived from oral traditions, the Malo established a kingdom in the late 18th or early 19th centuries and expanded its territory to the west and south through frequent battles with the neighboring groups. At the end of the 19th century, however, they were conquered by the imperial troops (Fujimoto 2007).

During the kingdom era, people moved quite freely between the kingdoms,

however, the situation greatly changed after the incorporation into the empire. The fate of the Malo and other southwestern farming societies drastically changed in this period.

Along with the imperial soldiers, settlers called *nāft'ānya*, mainly the Amhara, came to colonize the southern peasant societies in the early twentieth century, bringing with them Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity of their faith. They grasped power and imposed harsh labor and tribute on the local peoples (Abbink 2007; Donham 1986) and also the Malo. If the latter opposed, the imperial soldiers relentlessly exerted violence and even killed as a warning to others. Restricted in movement and trading, people were in a state of land-confined serf in the first half of the twentieth century.

Although there was a brief interruption associated with the Italian occupation (1936–1941), the imperial regime continued thereafter. The conventional hereditary system was replaced by the governmental appointments, but the structure through which Amhara officials enjoyed privileged control did not change. In this process, most of the Malo were deprived of their land and fell into tenancy for the Amhara landowners. Some of the Malo left their villages to escape from this pressure, living in the shadows of wild forests along the Omo River but occasionally reappearing in the village to loot food resources.

Under these circumstances, the Ethiopian Revolution broke out during 1974–1975, which ended the imperial state regime, and military socialists called *derg* took power thereafter. They proclaimed land reform and corrected uneven landholdings through redistribution throughout the country. In Malo land, although radical land redistribution did not take place, uneven landholdings were checked and corrected. The land-holding Amhara were then swept away from the southwestern peasant societies and fled to the Lower Omo Valley near the Kenyan border, which the revolutionary state power did not reach. The Malo people regained their land and started clearing it for cultivation.

However, numerous settlements in the Middle Omo Valley were suddenly attacked by the agro-pastoralists from the Lower Omo Valley who were assisted by the former Amhara landowners, and more than 1,000 local people were killed with their livestock looted and houses burned in 1976 (Fujimoto 2009a). Thereafter, most people who survived the attack gave up their settlements. The assaults by lowland agro-pastoralists continued intermittently. Due to security concerns, local people continued to flee from the peripheral lowlands. As a whole, however, most Malo have remained in their home villages even in the context of the state's neoliberal economic policy following the establishment of the EPRDF regime in 1991 (Ficquet & Dejene 2015).

MALO TEFF CULTIVATION: ITS UNIQUE TECHNIQUES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

I. Malo teff cultivation techniques: (1) distribution and land use

Although Malo people live in elevation ranging between 1,000 and 3,000 meters above sea level, they grow teff in the lowland areas lying at 1,000 to 2,000

meters above sea level. Teff cultivation in Malo land is distributed lower in elevation than that in northern and central Ethiopia where the cereal is sown most widely at 2,000 to nearly 3,000 meters above sea level (Seyfu 1997: 23; Bultosa 2016: 211).

Teff is cultivated in the outlying fields (*gade* in Malo) located farthest downwards from the settlements, more or less at an hour' walking distance. It is sown most extensively in the remotest fields. This spatial arrangement is due to several agro-ecological traits, such as that its cultivation is suitable for long-fallowed fertile lands, which will be described below; moreover, the cereal is less susceptible to feeding damage from wild animals such as baboons, the fields can be easily viewed even before harvest because of the crop's low height, and a short period is needed for watching the crop before harvest because of its early growth.

Although the cereal is monocultured in the lowland outlying fields, the fields are grown for one year, up to 2 to 3 years, and at longest for 5 years. Further, it is common to have a period of fallow lasting 4 to 10 years, which is about twice the period of cultivation, before the fields are re-opened. Teff is cultivated on long-term fallow land (called *ottse*). This is also in contrast to the case in northern and central Ethiopia, where the cereal is usually grown under the short fallow land use system.

II. Malo teff cultivation techniques: (2) four methods of field tillage

Teff cultivation in Malo land begins with the preparation of fields, involving sequential tasks such as sowing, weeding, and harvesting. Tillage is the most important process in the preparation of fields. Three methods are distinguished by the agricultural tools used for the tillage (plow, digging sticks, and hand hoe) and which method is used in a field depends on the land condition, among other factors. Additionally, because hoe cultivation is locally divided into two types, there are actually four methods of tilling teff fields. The techniques of teff cultivation used in Malo are described below with special reference to the four methods of tillage.

Teff cultivation in Malo begins with setting fire to the long fallow land during the dry season from December to February. Because sowing is performed half a year later, firing is not used to fertilize the land with ashes. Its purpose is to promote regeneration into fresh vegetation by burning perennial herbs and shrubs that are dying in dry season, thereby making it easier for farmers to cut fresh herbs and shrubs when preparing arable fields in the rainy season. When the farmers burn an area located close to the settlement, they do it at night, when there is no wind, to prevent the fire from spreading to the settlement. Moreover, the fire is more noticeable at night than at daytime. This landscape of field burning, called *ts'araga*, at night is typical of Malo lowland settlements in the dry season (Figure 3).

In May and June, fresh herbs and shrubs are cut off using a sickle-like tool, called *wale*, with an outwardly curved handle (Figure 4). It is common to be performed by four to eight people through cooperative labor called *zafe*. They also prune the tall trees that remain in the field using a hand ax called *kalta*.

After a week or so, when the cut herbs and shrubs have dried, farmers collect and assemble them into several spots in the field, thereafter burning them. A big fire during this season does not stand out in the field as compared to a fire in the dry season, because it simply produces white smoke and burns for a longer period.

This process is followed by tilling the fields in June and July. The plow cultivation is performed by using Ethiopian plow (*marasha*) with a pair of oxen in a field relatively close to the settlement, with a gentle slope and no remaining trees or stumps (Figure 5). Plow cultivation is considered more productive than other cultivation methods; however, in Malo, only some wealthy farmers do it, as most farmers do not own a pair of oxen, and the method is only of limited importance. This is quite different from the cases in northern and central Ethiopia where field preparation for teff is normally performed by plow cultivation. Although it is unknown when the plow was brought to the Malo land, it is undoubtedly a relatively recent introduction because most of the terminologies referring to the plow parts are in Amharic and the technology used for plowing is still foreign to the people.

In contrast, hoe is used for cultivation in steepest fields far from the settlement, and all the terms referring to it are of the local language. One of the two types of hoe cultivation, called *kurche*, is applied to an open grassland savanna that is dominated by flora of perennial grasses of the genus *Hyparrhenia* (Figure 6).⁽²⁾ *Kurche* is a technique to wither the grasses by digging out the roots using a hoe,



Figure 3 Field burning (*ts'araga*) at night in the dry season.



Figure 4 Field clearance using a sickle-like cutting tool.



Figure 5 Plow cultivation using a pair of oxen.



Figure 6 *Hyparrhenia* grasses.

instead of tilling the soils throughout the field, usually performed by one or two people (Figure 7). Furthermore, another type of hoe cultivation, called *garpe*, is applied to the landscape of woodland savanna. After pruning with a hand ax, the soil surface is scratched and tilled shallowly using a hoe called *konte* or *gashta*, by four to ten people in *zafe* cooperative labor (Figure 8).

There is an additional method of teff cultivation—digging stick cultivation—which is applied mainly to the highland fields of 2,000 to 3,000 meters (Figure 9). Holding two 1-meter or longer digging sticks in each hand, farmers till the field by inverting several 10 centimeter square soil lumps. This method tills the deepest, often performed side-by-side in pairs because the work load is heavy. However, it is used only for a limited area in teff cultivation, because the cereal grain size is small and does not require deep tilling, unlike other cereals.

As discussed above, the most common method of tilling teff fields in Malo is extensive hoe cultivation, which remarkably differs from that performed in northern and central Ethiopia where more intensive plow cultivation is most commonly used.

III. Malo teff cultivation techniques: (3) sowing, weeding, and watching fields

After tilling by any of these methods, farmers broadcast the seeds in each field (Figure 10). Holding seeds in a gourd container with one hand, they sprinkle a small number of seeds on the ground with the other hand by lightly waving the



Figure 7 *Kurche*, a type of hoe cultivation applied to the grassland.



Figure 8 *Garpe*, a type of hoe cultivation applied to the woodland.



Figure 9 Field tillage using a pair of digging sticks.



Figure 10 Broadcasting teff seeds.

hand. After sowing, they do not cover the seeds with soil, which is unique to teff cultivation. It is believed that, as the seeds of teff are smaller than those of other cereals, they do not sprout when they are covered with the soil. Because the seeds are left uncovered on the ground, they are more or less eaten by birds, although it is not a big problem. Farmers are more concerned about whether it will rain a few days after sowing. Further, said the farmers believe that the sown seeds will be wasted if there is no rainfall a week after sowing. Therefore, they pay close attention to the weather, especially the trends of rain clouds.

It is noteworthy that more than 20 varieties of teff are known in Malo (Table 1). These varieties are divided into three types by the form of inflorescence: a dense compact type in which inflorescences are densely compacted, a spread type in which inflorescences are sparsely dispersed, and an intermediate type between the two (Figure 11). It is for the intermediate type that the number of varieties and area of cultivation are large. The compact type matures earlier than the others, but does not yield many seeds. Therefore, farmers usually sow the seeds in a small amount at the periphery of the fields, and do not sow the spread type at all because they consider it a weed due to its extremely low yield. There are white and red seeds in each type, and their usage is roughly divided. Because the seeds of teff are extremely small and the management of the varieties is difficult, it is common to mix several varieties of the same type and color in a field instead of separately sowing the seeds of each variety.

Weeding is conducted about one month after sowing, and is done only once because the cereal grows fast. The farmers usually pull the weed out by hand, although sometimes they shallowly till the surface of the field using a hoe or hand ax. Weeding is accomplished by about 10 to 20 people of the same cooperative labor group (Figure 12). This time, however, women and children also join the work.

When the teff ear drops and begins to turn golden, farmers begin watching the

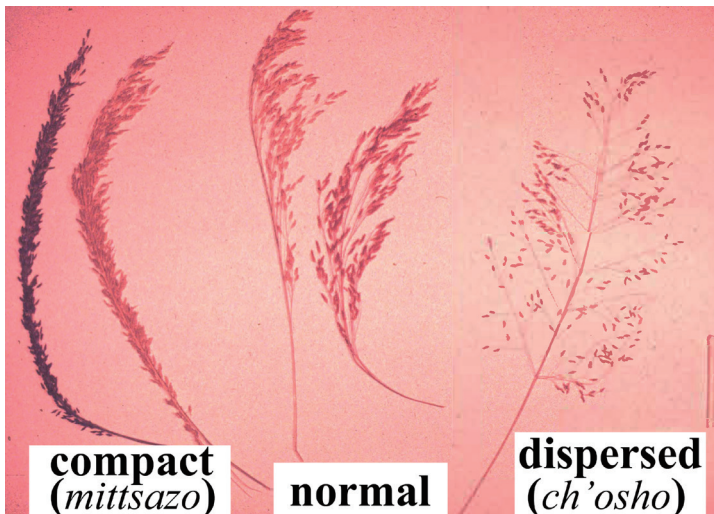


Figure 11 Three types of teff inflorescence.

Table 1 Teff varieties in Malo

| Local Names | Inflorescence Type | Seed Color | Glume Color | Frequency |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| <i>jilga</i> | normal | white | grey | common |
| <i>mid'd'aaro</i> | normal | white | white | common |
| <i>buk'ullo</i> | normal | white | white | common |
| <i>dorsa</i> | normal | white | yellow | common |
| <i>doodishe</i> | normal | white | yellow | ordinary |
| <i>jeemishe</i> | normal | white | purple | common |
| <i>shonte mentsa</i> | normal | white | red | ordinary |
| <i>salla dorsa</i> | normal | white | ? | rare |
| <i>zok'o jilga</i> | normal | red | grey | ordinary |
| <i>ts'aame</i> | normal | red | pink | ordinary |
| <i>manizo</i> | normal | red | red | ordinary |
| <i>tishikilo</i> | normal | red | ? | rare |
| <i>jilga mittsazo</i> | compact | white | grey | ordinary |
| <i>mid'd'aaro mittsazo</i> | compact | white | white | ordinary |
| <i>buk'ulo mittsazo</i> | compact | white | white | ordinary |
| <i>dorsa mittsazo</i> | compact | white | yellow | ordinary |
| <i>doodishe mittsazo</i> | compact | white | yellow | ordinary |
| <i>jeemishe mittsazo</i> | compact | white | purple | ordinary |
| <i>shonte mentsa mittsazo</i> | compact | white | red | rare |
| <i>zok'o jilga mittsazo</i> | compact | red | grey | rare |
| <i>ts'aame mittsazo</i> | compact | red | pink | rare |
| <i>manizo mittsazo</i> | compact | red | red | rare |
| <i>boots ch'osho</i> | dispersed | white | grey | ordinary |
| <i>zok'o ch'osho</i> | dispersed | red | grey | rare |

fields in the daytime by looking down from the plain huts built on a hill top to stop wild animals such as the Anubis baboon or velvet monkey from eating the crops. Compared with maize and sorghum, the fields of which have to be watched over day and night, teff takes a considerably lower risk of damage caused by animals. Therefore, it is common for a child or an old man to watch several large fields alone.



Figure 12 Weeding teff fields in a cooperative labor group.

IV. Malo teff cultivation techniques: (4) harvesting, drying, storing, and threshing

In Malo, cereal harvesting is performed mostly by manually pulling out the stalks, and teff is no exception. Farmers pull out the teff culms with one hand (Figure 13), remove the soil, and place them in a batch (*danke*) with the other hand; when the hand is full, they keep the batch in the field without tying it up, where it is left for a few days (Figure 14). This is done because harvesting teff in the dry mature stage causes grains to shatter. Teff is therefore unique in being harvested at an earlier stage when it is not so dry and mature compared with other cereals.

Next, the task of root cutting is performed from November to December. Farmers bring a stand made of a three-pronged tree (70 to 80 cm in height) to the field and place it upside down as a platform, on which a double-edged knife (*massha*) is horizontally pierced and fixed (Figure 15). Thereafter, they hold the dried batches of teff horizontally with both hands and press them from above onto the fixed knife blade to cut off the root (Figure 16). The stand made of the three-forked tree is called *pede*, which is a peculiar instrument that is specifically used to cut off teff roots. The technique of removing roots by pressing batches against the blade of a double-edged knife fixed horizontally with the wooden stand is also unique to teff cultivation.

Next, the batches are piled together, forming a large bundle called *mirk'e* (Figure 17). When the bundle reaches a diameter of fifty to sixty centimeters, farmers turn it around with a string made of rubbed teff culm, bind it together,



Figure 13 Farmers pull out teff culms with one hand.



Figure 14 Teff batch (*danke*) left in the field to dry.

and leave it in the field for further drying.

After drying the bundle in the field for approximately a week, they carry it home by loading it on mules or carrying it on the head (Figure 18). Then, they place the bundles on logs in the front yards of houses and dry them for about a month (Figure 19). Because of the high shattering trait (property of seeds that drop easily from the ear), it is necessary for farmers to not only harvest the cereal at an early stage but also to dry it thoroughly over a long process after the harvest so that it can be stored in the granary. Such a careful drying process is also unique to teff cultivation. Thereafter, without threshing, they store the harvest in the teff granary (*tullo*) in the form of bundles (Figure 20). In northern and central Ethiopia, not only teff but also other cereals are commonly stored in grain after threshing; however, in Malo, cereals including barley, wheat, maize, sorghum and teff are all stored unthreshed, which suggests different traditions of cereal cultivation.

In Malo, only men are allowed to take the bundles in and out of granaries; women are not allowed to enter the granary, which is one of the Malo's traditional taboos (*etts'*). They thresh several bundles of teff when necessary, such as when they consume the cereal domestically, trade it with neighbors or relatives, or sell it for cash in the market. There are several methods of threshing teff, including by beating it with a special wooden stick, by trampling it on their feet as if rubbing it on the ground, and by rubbing it between hands. However, the method



Figure 15 A three-pronged wooden stand (*pede*) on which a double-edged knife is pierced.



Figure 16 Removing teff roots by pressing batches against the knife fixed with the stand.



Figure 17 Tied teff bundle (*mirk'e*) left in the field to dry.



Figure 18 Carrying teff bundles on the head.



Figure 19 Teff bundles put on logs in the front yard for drying (*d'ik'e*).



Figure 20 Storing teff bundles in the granary (*tullo*).

of threshing by letting domestic animals such as oxen step on the teff, which is common in northern and central Ethiopia, does not occur in Malo. Finally, winnowing is done by using a winnowing basket.

V. Malo teff cultivation techniques: (5) suggested long cultivation history

When we examine the teff cultivation in Malo, we can find several unique things that are not found in northern or central Ethiopia, 1) cultivation based not on plow but on hoe techniques, which is combined with the long fallow land use system, 2) techniques employed for harvesting such as pulling out by hand, cutting roots using a peculiar tool and technique, careful drying for a long period, storing the grain unthreshed in the granary, and threshing without using animal power (Table 2). The diverse range of over 20 local varieties of teff also suggests that teff cultivation is not new in Malo. From these facts, it will be incorrect to think that teff was brought to Malo land after it was incorporated into Ethiopia at the end of the 19th century; rather, it is more likely that teff cultivation had been conducted using indigenous agricultural techniques since long before that time.

RECENT EXPANSION OF TEFF CULTIVATION THAT MEETS LOCAL CONDITIONS

I. Expansion of teff cultivation: (1) socio-economic factors

The above discussion of teff cultivation techniques strongly suggests that teff cultivation is not new in the Malo land. However, Malo elders unanimously agree that teff has not previously been cultivated in such a large area as that observed currently. This may be because teff was not so important in the past as it is now, regardless of being an ancient crop.

According to the Malo's narratives, sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) had been grown the most in Malo land. It is said that sorghum was the most common cereal both in the lowlands and highlands until recently, although it is becoming a minor relict crop, especially in the lowlands. Malo elders say that more people lived in

Table 2 Comparisons of teff cultivation

| | The Amhara (northwestern Ethiopia) | The Malo (southwestern Ethiopia) |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Cultivation Range | 1,500–2,500 meters | 1,000–2,000 meters |
| Land Use | continuous cropping with short fallow | temporary cropping with long fallow |
| Major Method | plow cultivation | hoe cultivation |
| Harvest | reaping with a sickle | pulling out with hands |
| Storage in Granary | threshed seeds | unthreshed bundles |
| Threshing | animal power | manual labor |

Source: Simoons 1958, 1960 and the author's fieldwork.

the lowlands in the old days and they could watch the sorghum fields before harvest. As already noted, Malo lowlands have long suffered population decline since their incorporation into the Ethiopian empire at the end of 19th century due to economic decline and deterioration of security. However, the biggest damage to the lowlands was caused by the raiding attacks by the agro-pastoralists coming from the Lower Omo Valley after the collapse of the imperial regime in the mid-1970s (Fujimoto 2009a). Numerous people fled from their settlements and many settlements were abandoned.

It is true that teff fields, as noted above, can be watched alone because of its low height, and the cereal is suitable for cultivation in remote areas because few wild animals come to eat it. On the contrary, sorghum plants often take half a year or more to grow, depending on the variety, must be weeded twice, and need to be watched carefully for over a month before harvest. Simply put, sorghum takes more time, effort, and manpower to cultivate than teff. Teff cultivation was in accord with the social environment of the Malo lowlands where the population has declined.

Additionally, macro-political and economic factors may also have been involved in the shift of local cereals from sorghum to teff. Although the Malo had formed an independent kingdom before the imperial incorporation, they were requested for tributes of grain and livestock by the Amhara settlers coming from north and central Ethiopia following the incorporation. After the Italian occupation period (1936–1941), a land survey was conducted and payment by cash was imposed on the Malo instead of payment in kind. Under these circumstances, the local economy in Malo lowlands seem to have gradually shifted from a self-sufficient one based on sorghum cultivation during the kingdom period of the 19th century to that in need of surplus production for tribute in the imperial period during the first half of the twentieth century, followed by the pursuit of cash during the latter half of the twentieth century. As teff is lighter in grain weight than other cereals and has superior transportability and storage properties, it was suitable for

sale outside the Malo land. Today, Malo lowland farmers sell almost half of their teff production in markets outside the land.

II. Expansion of teff cultivation: (2) agronomic and dietary factors

The remaining half of local teff production is consumed in the Malo land. Teff cultivation in Malo has not expanded as a mere cash crop. According to the people, teff is not a crop that fills hunger, but one that grants vitality with just a mouthful of it. They say that the dishes made of teff are more delicious than the same dishes made of other cereals. The Malo lowland people traditionally grow teff with a strong attachment to it. However, other factors are also likely to contribute to the expansion of teff cultivation in the land.

At present, people in the Malo lowlands eat meals including teff only several times a week. Although the cereal occupies most of the cultivation area, it is not a major staple crop that is consumed in daily meals. Teff can be cooked into various dishes, such as fermented flat pancakes (*sollo*), unleavened baked bread (*boora*) (Figure 21), fermented or unfermented steamed bread (*d'ufe*), unfermented porridge (*shendera*) (Figure 22), or used as material for local beer (*daana*) among others; nonetheless, most of these dishes can also be cooked using other cereals.

In their daily diets, the lowland Malo do not consume teff or other cereals but rather root and tuber crops such as cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), yautia (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*), sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*), taro, yams, *enset* (*Ensete ventricosum*) and some maize. In fact, these crops other than taro, yams and *enset* came into cultivation in the land during the 20th century. Cassava and yautia are, in particular, new arrivals that were not in the land in the olden days of the elder people, which means that the crops that provide local staple foods have greatly changed during the 20th century. In the past, sorghum, yams (Guinea yam, *Dioscorea rotundata-cayenensis*) and taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) were the most common staple crops. Taro continues to be one of the staples, but sorghum and yams are seldom eaten. However, with the advent of new crops, it may be speculated that the local food production in Malo has increased as a whole. As long as they can recall, the Malo people have never experienced food shortage or famine.

Thus, it is possible that, although the cultivation of teff was previously much



Figure 21 Unleavened baked bread (*boora*).



Figure 22 Porridge (*shendera*) with dip sauce.

smaller in area due to its low yield, teff is increasingly being consumed domestically with a more relaxed food situation in recent days. In other words, the changes in local food conditions also seem to have positively affected the expansion of teff cultivation.

Another noteworthy thing is that teff is consumed today even in the highlands, which are 2,000 meters above sea level, where the cereal is rarely cultivated. Moreover, the consumption of teff in the highlands is almost exclusively in the form of fermented pancake known as *injera* in Amharic. That may be the biggest factor contributing to the expansion of teff cultivation. Elder people in the highlands informed me that they had never consumed the cereal when they were young, although they had known of it. According to their memory, it was simply a lowland cereal that was cultivated and consumed only within the lowlands. Because it was not cultivated in the highlands, they had no opportunity to consume the cereal. While teff has been long cultivated as a traditional crop and consumed in various dishes in the lowlands, the cereal seems to have been previously not found and consumed in the highlands. However, the situation has changed completely since the adoption and spread of *injera*.

SPREAD OF INJERA AND ITS BACKGROUND

I. What is *injera* in Ethiopia?

Injera (*sollo* in Malo) is a pancake made from the fermented batter of teff flour which is left overnight to form bubbles, poured on a clay or iron griddle (*mit'ad* in Amharic, *beshe* in Malo) and baked for a few minutes in the form of a crêpe with a diameter of about sixty centimeters (Pankhurst & Volker-Saad 2003) (Figure 23). This food item is characterized by a sour taste caused by lactic acid fermentation, and also by its fluffy and texture resulting from the fermentation bubbles. People spread the *injera* on a round table (*mesob* in Amharic, *leemate* in Malo) and put a sauce of beans, vegetables, fresh cheese, and/or meat called *wat'* (in both Amharic and Malo) in the center. They sit around the table, tear it with their hands from the edge, and eat it with the *wat'*. This dish is always served at events such as weddings and annual festivals (Figure 24), and when it comes to eating out in town, there is no other dish that is more popular. Although *injera* has been major part of the daily diet in northern Ethiopia (Abbebe 2006: 35; McCann 2009: 78), in Malo, it is only currently gaining popularity as a kind of luxury food eaten only once or twice a week. Surprisingly, it is only within the past half century that *injera* came to be consumed in the land, regardless of its main ingredient teff being cultivated since long before the land's incorporation into Ethiopia.

II. Politico-cultural powers viewed in restaurants' menus

Injera has been consumed by some peoples such as Amhara in northern Ethiopia for centuries, but may have been introduced to various areas by northern settlers

after the Ethiopian empire expanded its territory and annexed the south at the end of the 19th century. Most southern towns (*katama*) were established in the beginning as imperial fortresses, and then modified into towns. Because the settlers' cultures dominate the towns, *injera* has been a staple dish there along with whatever local peoples in the surrounding areas grow and consume, Amharic has been a dominant language, whatever different language local peoples speak on the daily basis.

Currently, almost all Ethiopian restaurants, especially those in large or small rural towns, serve *injera* dishes regardless of whether teff is cultivated in the areas. One cannot find various local food items in the restaurants but only *injera* dishes, regardless of the town's location in the country. It must be noted that restaurants nationwide do not reflect the diverse local food cultures but surprisingly show uniformity. The politico-cultural power structures are visible in all the Ethiopian restaurants' menus. However, there is more yet to discuss about *injera*.

III. *Injera* as a symbol of exploitation to reject in the imperial period

According to Malo elders, the Malo people observed the Amhara settlers eating *injera* daily during the imperial period, but never consumed it in their own diet. *Injera* was not unfamiliar to the Malo. However, they refused it because it was a food associated with the Amhara, whom they strongly hated because of their exploitation. As noted above, Malo people were suppressed by arms and heavily exploited by the Amhara settlers under the imperial rule. Therefore, they refused to adopt *injera* and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as their symbols of food and faith, respectively, although some local officials who allied with the Amhara settlers ate *injera* with them and followed Orthodox Christianity. Therefore, for the Malo people, *injera* may have been a symbol of the Amhara's unforgivable oppression and exploitation in the imperial period, which the people rejected strongly.



Figure 23 Pouring *injera* batter on the clay griddle.



Figure 24 Eating *injera* at a housewarming ceremony.

IV. *Injera* as a symbol of freedom to enjoy in the revolutionary time

Strangely, however, when the Malo drove away the Amhara landowners from Malo land following the 1974–1975 Ethiopian revolution, they began to prepare and eat *injera*. The recipe was already known because local women worked in Amhara households as maids and served *injera* to them in the imperial period. Malo people still continue to dislike the Amhara people and their culture, including Orthodox Christianity. Nonetheless, why did they adopt *injera*? The answer may be related to a festive atmosphere of resulting from the expulsion of the settlers and the resurgence of their lands during the early revolution.

American anthropologist Sidney Mintz claimed that Caribbean slaves, who had been brought from West Africa to the Caribbean region for nearly four centuries, kept their limited freedom through growing, cooking, and eating their own food, such that they even created a unique Afro-American Caribbean cuisine (Mintz 1996); however, apparently nothing was discussed about how ex-slaves enjoyed their freedom by eating their food after emancipation. Nonetheless, it is almost certain that people tend to feel free when they have a wide range of food choice. One can enjoy and taste freedom when tasting food.

Although the Malo were not enslaved, they substantially fell into serfs over half a century. Food was not regulated in the meantime. However, people were undoubtedly in distress and their food choices were extremely limited. More than half of the cereal harvests were paid as tributes to the landowners, who generously used them to make local beer to entertain those who joined cooperative labor (Fujimoto 2013). Malo farmers mostly consumed root and tuber crops in their daily diets, which the Amhara never ate, considering it a symbol of poverty.

In such circumstances, the situation changed drastically due to the Ethiopian revolution. People escaped tenancy, regained their land, and enjoyed their freedom. In such a celebratory atmosphere, people tasted *injera*, which had been always served to Amhara landowners at festivals during the imperial period.

V. The taste popularity makes *injera* persist and settle during the hardship

Subsequently, however, Malo people faced an unprecedented crisis. Lowland agro-pastoralists people call *golde* or *goldiya* who colluded with the chased-out ex-landowners conducted raids and devastated numerous lowland settlements along the Middle Omo River in 1976. Most intensively attacked in Malo land was the area where teff was cultivated. Consequently, the local farmers fled away from the lowland settlements and several settlements were totally abandoned. Nevertheless, teff cultivation was never abandoned, but has rather increased over time, as described above. This is probably because people never abandoned *injera* even when they experienced great ethnic hardship. But why did they retain the *injera* eating custom?

Injera is now a favorite dish for the Malo people. The popularity of *injera* among the Malo may be related to their preference for sour foods with lactic acid fermentation. Malo people consumed not only dairy products such as curds but also *enset* fermented with lactic acid bacteria and cooked as unleavened bread,

porridge *etc.* (Fujimoto 2011). The sour taste preference among the Malo is quite traditional. Above all, it appears that the *injera*'s fluffy texture, which was not found in the traditional Malo foods, has fascinated the people, regardless of *injera* requiring more attention than making other foods. Furthermore, the convivial style of eating together with friends around the round table is the most suitable for a festive meal.

VI. Becoming Ethiopians through eating a national dish

As discussed above, Malo people avidly prefer *injera*'s taste, which has now become a favorite dish for them. However, that is probably not the only reason *injera* has gained wide popularity in Malo; the transformation of people's identity with the state may also have been involved. It seems that, through eating *injera*, the Malo have moved forward as Ethiopians, because they consider eating *injera* and speaking Amharic as important elements of being Ethiopians, which people call *abaasha*.

During the imperial era, the Malo people hated and denied the Amhara-dominated Ethiopia, but after the revolution, they gradually recognized themselves as Ethiopians, for better or for worse. In the early 1990s when I started my fieldwork among them, I was often told that they were not *abaasha*, indicating *abaasha* means the Amhara. They generally still do not like the Amhara because of the past, but they now recognize that the Malo are Ethiopians as well.

The Malo no longer consider the Ethiopian state as an enemy that suppress them. Rather, they believe that the state can more or less support and benefit them, and it seems that they are willing to live as Ethiopians. Their identity seems to have gradually changed in these decades. Although it may be taken for granted, for the people living in the remote or peripheral Ethiopia to identify as Ethiopians is a recent development. Currently, almost all Malo children go to elementary school, and Amharic is spoken to varying degrees as they know the language is essential in towns. However, the Malo still feel almost powerless in the Ethiopian state, and are keen to participate national affairs. The adoption of Ethiopian cultures, which people once had strong hostility toward, may lie behind the spread and establishment of *injera*.

Most Malo people do not migrate from their land but rather hope to live in their home villages. Nonetheless, their identity seems to have substantially changed from ethnic Malo to national (Ethiopian) Malo in the recent decades. In reality, Malo people still eat *injera* mostly on celebrations and holidays instead of doing on a daily basis. Regardless, they have already established their own customs of eating *injera*. It may be said that, through becoming *injera*-eaters, the Malo have become Ethiopians. Rural peoples living in remote areas such as the Malo may have gained an identity as Ethiopians through eating *injera*. This is another process of becoming *injera* as a national dish.

CONCLUSION

Teff is a minor cereal globally, the cultivation of which is mostly confined to Ethiopia (and Eritrea), where it is an extraordinarily important cereal cultivated over the largest area. Why is teff so important there? According to my fieldwork conducted on the agricultural techniques of the Malo in southwestern Ethiopia, they have been cultivating the cereal since long before their territory was incorporated into the Ethiopian empire at the end of 19th century. Nonetheless, also found that it was not until less than a half century ago that teff cultivation came to be conducted at such a large scale as today. Several factors, such as the improvement of the food situation accompanied by the introduction of new crops, are considered to be associated with the expansion of teff cultivation. However, most importantly, a new food item—the fermented pancake known as *injera*—was adopted following the Ethiopian revolution in the mid-1970s, rapidly gaining popularity among the Malo people.

Prior to the adoption of *injera*, teff was only a minor lowland cereal in Malo cultivated on a small scale and consumed almost domestically in the form of diverse dishes such as leavened or unleavened baked bread, fermented or unfermented steamed bread, porridge, gruel, and beer. Teff had nothing to do with the Malo highlanders. The Malo saw the land-holding Amhara settlers eating *injera*, but did not adopt it as their own dietary item or more precisely, rejected it. *Injera* was a symbol of the Amhara who exploited the Malo people. When the Amhara settlers were swept away in the country's revolution, however, it was no longer meaningful for the Malo to continue rejecting *injera*. Thus, they tasted it during the festive atmosphere after people regained their land and freedom. The symbolism of *injera* drastically changed from that of exploitation to that of freedom. However, this period did not last long. Soon after, the Malo faced an ethnic crisis due to the raiding attacks by the agro-pastoralists and ex-landholders. Countless people fled from the lowland settlements and numerous settlements near the Omo River vanished. Regardless, teff cultivation has persisted, or rather, flourished in the land. Additionally, perhaps because of its sour taste and fluffy texture, *injera* has gained popularity and has been incorporated as one of the Malo's dietary items.

Furthermore, the transformation of the Malo's identity may be related to *injera*'s rising popularity. During the imperial era, Malo people were oppressed by the Amhara settlers and rejected the latter's food and faith—*injera* and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Although most of the Malo people have not adopted the faith, they have adopted eating *injera* as well as speaking Amharic to varying degrees. The Malo no longer have a strong hostility or fear against the state; they seem to have chosen to become one of the Ethiopian peoples in the recent decades. This changing identity may be reflected in the people's diet as well.

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NOTES

- (1) This article is a revised and updated version of the author's previous article published in Japanese (Fujimoto 2019).
- (2) *Hyparrhenia* grasses (*H. diplandra* and *H. cymbaria*) are often used by Malo lowland farmers as indicators to assess whether the soil at a particular site is ready to resume cultivation and which method of hoe cultivation is most appropriate (Fujimoto 2009b).

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