RESEARCH ARTICLE

A CONTESTED TERRITORY IN A SACRALIZED LANDSCAPE: THE FIGHT OF THE GICH COMMUNITY OVER SEMIEN MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

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ABSTRACT

Local community involvement is widely considered vital for the sustainability of heritage management projects. Yet, it is often the case that heritage-related projects lag behind in community involvement. In the Semien Mountains the creation, first, and expansion, later, of the National Park has led to several conflicts with the local communities that for centuries have been inhabiting the area. Local communities have only been passive actors in the plans to expand the park set up by UNESCO and by local decision makers. This paper investigates the causes that led the Gich community, one of the communities affected by the park's expansion, to refuse the resettlement plan offered by the authorities. Qualitative research methods were employed, including document analysis, community conference and interview of informants. The paper shows that although the local community of Gich was highly attached to the park's heritage assets, their level of involvement in the heritage management was very low due to shortcomings in the design and implementation of official policies. Therefore, their attitude towards the park's managers has been until the present day one of mistrust and opposition. The paper recommends to policy-makers a series of measures more empathetic towards local communities, such as development agencies acting as true communication facilitators and regional authorities nurturing sincere relationships with the locals.

INTRODUCTION

Within the field of heritage management, community participation has long been recognized as a crucial aspect in heritage management policies. Thus, since the 1960s official policies have encouraged community participation heritage management. However, until today community participation in heritage management decisions is poor and far from what is theoretically expected (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999, p. 146). Community involvement in planning matters can vary from loosely reached informal arrangements to highly structured formal relationships. Scholars recognize four distinct forms of positive relationships between stakeholders in planning: cooperation, coordination, collaboration and partnership (Greta, 2012, p.

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45). These four categories can be imagined as moving along a continuum between low levels of involvement and high levels of decision-making power going to local communities. Community development would be found towards the partnership end of the scale of stakeholder involvement and can be described as a process of developing or building up communities to enable empowerment, self-sufficiency and control over their environment. Community development differs from community consultation, the most common method of involving local communities in heritage management, in that it achieves more active participation and an increase in overall community confidence in its capacity to take decisions (EWCA, 2014, p. 32).

Within the context of World Heritage, the empowerment of communities, as well as of other stakeholders, to facilitate management of their heritage is a form of capacity-building. In fact, capacity-building is one of the four Strategic Objectives or four 'Cs' for promoting the implementation of the *World Heritage Convention*, as outlined in the *Budapest Declaration on World Heritage*, adopted by the World Heritage Committee in 2002 (see Cultural Institute of Macau, 2005; Op den Camp, n.d.). A fifth 'C', for Community, was added in 2007 to the already established 'Cs' of Credibility (of the World Heritage List), Conservation (of World Heritage properties), Capacity-building and Communication (increased awareness-raising, involvement and support for World Heritage; EWCA, 2014, p. 32).

A great number of the studies on community and heritage management fall short in providing an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic contexts of every particular heritage and on the low scale community participation in heritage management. Issues such as who represents the community, the manner in which the local communities should participate, the balance between varying and sometimes conflicting community interests and other processes that empower local communities are often disregarded. The intention here is to provide a study of a conflict that emerged during the implementation of a large scale heritage management project that failed to involve the affected local communities. The study focuses on the case of the Gich community that for years persisted in its refusal to the project of relocation pushed forth by the managers of Semien Mountains National Park (SMNP).

Written and oral data was collected for the study. On the one hand, documents from the office of SMNP situated at Debark and from the Begemdir Governorate General Archival center located at Gondar (today North Gondar Zone Administration Historical Archives, NGZAHA) were studied. On the other, in-depth interviews were conducted with people from Gich village. In addition, in June 2014 a workshop with the Gich community was arranged, which included about seventy four people and it lasted for half a day. The data collected was analyzed by using categorizing strategies (thematic analysis) and connecting narrative strategies (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96).

What is a local community?

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the beginning of community-based heritage management, which was introduced as an approach to rural development (Seble, 2010, p.42). As Catley emphasized community-based heritage management is an effective method "to educate and remove stigma of charity and involve local people in decision making" (1999, p.64). Therefore, the aims of community-based heritage management lie at the core of the community. Yet, before analyzing what community-based heritage management entails, we might try to respond to the question of what does the term 'local community' actually mean? It is a combination of words often used freely in the heritage world, assuming that people living within the same area will all homogeneously fit into the same interest groups commonly referred to as a 'community' (Ibid.). It must be clear that although the term 'local community' does refer to villagers and inhabitants living within the same geographical area, the fact that there is heterogeneity, differences in interests and power conflicts within every local group need also to be taken into consideration. As Scheyvens suggests "in all communities there are inequalities which may be exacerbated by the introduction of a somewhat lucrative industry to which all will not have access" (Scheyvens, 2000, p. 16). Gender inequalities, power relations, and education levels of those belonging to the community may also affect the community's sharing of the benefits brought about by tourism and other industries.

Rural communities are more commonly found in developing countries. According to Mann "such traditional, locally based communities are breaking down in the West and the urban developing world largely due to the global economy's demand for a mobile labour force" (Mann, 2000, p. 23). Rural communities have inhabited areas of exceptional biodiversity and ecosystems for centuries, thereby they have been spurring the interest for the safeguarding of the "cultural heritage, enhancing the conservation of the natural heritage, while at the same time improving the economic benefits of the local communities" (Asker, 2010, p. 2). Unfortunately, there is often unevenness in the distribution of returns of tourism in the developing world. Thus, while tourism may provide a venue for communities and people to enhance their income or livelihood, the bulk of benefits tend to flow away from them. Additionally, the real power and decision-making is normally kept away from the local communities (Reid & Sindiga, 1999, p. 67).

There is concern with the consequences of increased accessibility and affordability of tourism on natural environments. As a result, several authors have attempted to create protocols that will help in implementing community-based heritage management projects (Mann, 2000; Mowforth & Munt, 2009; Seble, 2010). If implemented effectively, the community-based heritage management should allow the local communities to manage and sustainably use the natural resources surrounding them. This ultimately could provide capacity building for the community, promote sustainable conservation of the environment and bring economic stability. Local communities tend to put pressure on the ecosystems thus resulting in

degradation and destruction of the environment. Lack of education, poverty and the urge of basic needs such as food and water are the main factors that result in tourism having negative impacts upon the environment.

THE SEMIEN MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK: A CONTESTED AND SACRALIZED TERRITORY

The SMNP[2] (13° 11' N, 38° 04' E) is located on the Amhara plateau of northern Ethiopia. The area lies about 120 km north-east of Gondar. The Park was established in 1969 (Henze, 2005-06, p. 1), with the main goal of ensuring the survival of the highly endangered walia ibex (Ethiopian Tourism Commission, n.d; NGZAHA, Letter No. m5/5/20/66, 1974). In 1978 the Park became one of the four World Heritage sites (World Heritage Committee, 1978). Following its establishment as a protected area, the Park attracted international attention and became easily accessible to visitors, especially to researchers. Thereafter, a series of studies were conducted on the area by both local and foreign scholars on different fields. The landscape of this world heritage is one of the most breathtaking sites in the world. It includes more than 500 plant and 23 mammal species; among the mammals four of them are endemic to the region (Greta, 2012, p. 30; IUCN, 2000). In spite of the creation of the Park, the tradition of hunting walia by

Figure 1: *View of the landscape around Gich village*
Source: Photo Marshet Girmay, 2016.

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2. Semien (also Simien, Samen) in Amharic means north. The origin of this time-old name could be found in Aksumite times. In a Greek inscription from the Monumentum Adulitanum a 3rd-century Aksumite ruler boasts of his conquests in "inaccessible mountains covered with snow" where "the Samene people dwell"; Munro-Hay, 1991, pp. 222-23.

local communities continued. This led Emperor Haile Sillase I to enforce a law against those threatening this species (NALA, 1968, Letter No. 1702/6/59). In parallel, the same government started to promote the Park (Ibid.,Letter No. 442/44/62). Thus, the establishment and promotion of the Park has kept the poaching somewhat under control, although illegal burning and cultivating within the Park continued to be a threat (Ethiopian Tourism Commission, n.d).

Historically, the habitat of walia ibex has coexisted with at least two villages, Sankaber, 14 km away from Ambaras, and Gich. Accordingly, it was at these two villages that the imperial government's action to promote the park started (NGZAHA, Letter No. m5/5/20/66, 1974; Community Conference with Gich villagers, 2014).

Ambaras is found on the outskirts of the national park and is approximately 14 km from Sankaber camp. The latter site has become an almost obligatory stop for most of the visitors of the Park, who often make a halt there to spend a night. The community of Ambaras provides the possibility of renting mules for trekking tours and every day twenty to thirty men walk to Sankaber Camp with the hope of finding employment. The population of Ambaras is estimated at least to be between 100 to 150 households. Gich village is found at the heart of the SMNP and it is one of the oldest communities in the region. It is the largest settlement in the Park, with approximately 400 households and a population of 1,980 individuals. Most of the trekking tours pass through this village en route to Chenek camp, the last stop before Ras Dashen peak (Greta, 2012, p. 12; Henze, 2005-06, p. 207).

The area occupied by the SMNP can be considered a sacralized landscape for the indigenous communities who have had huge and deep attachments with it. For the Gich community in particular, its identity purely emanates from this landscape. Thus, SMNP is a place the local inhabitants show reverence to because of its ability to append them with their ancestors and the spirit world; it is a space, as Kotze and Van Rensburg have emphasized, "that communicates and entrenches traditional, cultural and spiritual values espoused by the community" (Kotze & Van Rensburg, 2003). In this sense, specific places or entire landscapes might be considered as sacred irrespective of the nature and the history the place withhold. Concomitant with this, the identity of present and past societies is often closely associated with specific locations and structures in the landscape (Fowler, 2003, p. 78). These landscapes may become cultural or sacred landscapes by virtue of the symbolic interaction between people and their natural environment over space and time (UNESCO, 2008, p. 47). Sacred landscapes are, therefore, defined as geographic areas that include both cultural and natural resources and are associated with historical developments, events and activities or which exhibit cultural values (Jopela, 2011, p. 3; Ndoro, 2001, p. 72).

Yet, with hindsight it can be argued that the landscape of the SMNP is also sacralized by the national authorities, the international experts and the visitors. The conservationist bodies, whose policies can be traced back to

an ideology of nature first developed in the Christian west (see Carvalho & Steil, 2013, p. 108 et passim; Simpson, 1992, p. 557 et passim), see it as their main task to protect the natural landscape from encroachments by 'contaminating elements' and, thus, to preserve the nature in a 'wild', 'pristine' state. The tourists, on their hand, worship the natural landscape in a similar way as devout people do when they go to pilgrimage-sites: they aim at encountering an unspoiled wilderness and face this encounter as a process for "spiritual elevation, moral regeneration and an ideal of happiness" (Carvalho & Steil, 2013, p. 104). Within this mindset, indigenous groups are seen either as a 'backdrop' to the scenery and wildlife or, in the worst case, as a threat to it; thus, the need to eradicate or control them is a necessary consequence of the pretense to conserve the environment.

During the Derg regime (1974–1991) the Park suffered from neglect and poaching of wild species resumed. During this period the Park's fauna and flora were seriously affected and the habitats of some endemic species diminished dramatically. The Park became almost inaccessible and its designation as a world heritage site lost its practical meaning. Starting from 1985, following the insurgence of northern groups against the Derg, people started settling near the Park. An additional factor threatening animals' habitat was the area's strategic importance, when it became a battleground between the rebels and the government forces (Henze, 2006-06, p. 208). Roughly 2,500 Amhara people lived in the Park, but some 1,800 were forcibly evicted in 1978–79 and in 1985–86 (Berihun Tiru, 2011, p. 10; WCMC, 1992). This policy was at the time much-resented and even today it continues to spur hatred among the local people towards the government. Therefore, due to the central government's unique concern for wildlife, instead than for local communities, the initial policies to manage the Park in cooperation with local inhabitants failed (Ibid). Thus, during a community conference held in June 2014 with the Gich village locals, they complained that "the priority is given to the animals than we humans".

At the same time, the gradual growth of the local population and its associated practices (agriculture, human settlement, and overgrazing) threatened the sustainable conservation of this natural heritage. As a consequence, in 1996 the World Heritage Committee placed the heritage on the Danger List because of a serious decline in the population of walia ibex due to human settlement, grazing, and cultivation (EWCA, 1978; UNESCO, 2008).

Recognizing the ever increasing risks for the Park the government of Ethiopia, together with other groups, took an initiative aimed at bringing a solution to this rampant problem. Accordingly, a detailed plan was formulated. The plan had two main foci: on the one hand, to open the wildlife passage and connect the old and the new boundaries and, on the other, to gain the involvement of the local communities (Simien Mountains National Park, 2009). A priority of the plan was to compensate those who should be relocated. Thus, emphasis was given on how to reach a mutual understanding (Ibid). Yet, in spite of these concerns, the relocation plan was clearly focused on open passages to reach wildlife habitats with the

consequence of clearing settlements and diminishing the high human pressure in the area. Yet, without a true livelihood development plan for the communities, the 'relocation with compensation plan' was hardly to be a success (Berihun Tiru, 2011, p. 34).

As indicated above, shortly after the foundation of the SMNP, in 1979, about 700 people were displaced against their will from the lower slopes of the northern escarpment (WCMC, 1992). Thereafter, several other relocation campaigns were implemented. The more recent ones were launched after UNESCO had put the Park under the endangered list of Work Heritage Sites in 1996. The last relocation campaign to be carried out affected the Arkwasiye residents, who offered some resistance but finally gave in to the demands of the official authorities (Berihun Tiru, 2011, p. 32; Berihun Tiru, Jungmeier, & Huber, 2012). Relocating the villagers of Gich was also part of the plan. The community hosts more than 400 households who still are living with agriculture and rearing animals. The relocation of Arkwasiye residents was a difficult one and it did not count with the support of the people. People complained that they had not been fully compensated. Their experience was well noticed by those still waiting for relocation, particularly by the Gich community. So, due to the lack of a credible and generous compensation plan, all the attempts to relocate them were in vain (Semien National Park World Heritage, 2008).

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

In the Ethiopian context local community participation in heritage management has been far from smooth. Traditionally it has been the regional government (in the present case the Amhara National Regional State or ANRS) that monopolized power and decision making on all issues related to heritage. However, concerning the world heritage sites UNESCO has had the upper hand over the regional government in monitoring and managing the sites and, at the same time, it has harmonized its policies with those of the local management plan. Currently, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development granted powers to the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (EWCA) to manage the SMNP (EWCA, 2014). Until 2010, the park was being managed by the Culture, Tourism and Parks Development Bureau of ANRS based in Bahir Dar. The change from regional to federal government in the park's management has undoubtedly brought about confusion to the various stakeholders. Though since this restructuring, the shifts in park's employees, new regulations and the management schemes have been enforced, the process of implementation has been slow.

Until now, the park's management plan designed by the local authorities and based on UNESCO guidelines has been partially implemented. Some of the objectives of the plan that have been already accomplished include demarcating and extending the park's boundaries and relocating the inhabitants from the village of Arkwasiye. Informants from the office of the SMNP believe that if the management still remained in the hands of the regional authorities instead of transferring it to the federal level, more of the management's planned benchmarks would have been achieved (interviews

with Abebaw Yihun, Teshome Hailu, and Zerfu Alebachew). The same informants emphasized that the employees were already familiar with the way things worked, that the local communities had established relationships with their team, and they were involved with the park's issues at grassroots level. Although the reasoning for the change of management from regional to federal was not revealed in any of the interviews, it seems that ANRS's Cultural, Tourism and Parks Development Bureau is no longer involved in any way in the SMNP. The Bureau's role is confined to releasing regional permits and administration works, but consultancy and management is completely beyond their jurisdiction. So, a sense of frustration was expressed when discussing the matter with some of the informants in the office of SMNP situated at Debark, who had worked at the park for 7 consecutive years, (interviews with Seyoum Worku, Tazebew Abay, and Worku Melesew). With regards to the shift in the management of the park, it was mainly village elders and scouts who were aware of it and most of the local inhabitants admitted that when it comes to the legal matters of the park local communities are neither involved in the decisions nor informed on their outcome. Most elders stated that the shift in management has only detached previous relationships and that it would take time to re-establish new relationships with the new employees of the park, a fact that would affect its management process.

Appiah has argued in heritage issues that there are no legitimate or illegitimate communities (Appiah, 2006, p. 308). He is sympathetic to the view that local loyalties and allegiances are important because they determine who we are. Accordingly, he encourages the communities to embrace both local and universal loyalties and allegiances and denies that they should necessarily come into conflict with each other. The concept of the universal value of heritage has been criticized as a form of neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism whereby researchers and others exploit host communities in the name of science (Hamilton, 2000, p. 67; Watkins, 2000). Considering the need to understand the past, whether from a heritage or a local community perspective, the local communities that own and have an interest in the heritage should benefit more from the resources and should play an important role in their management and in the conduct and practice of the discipline. Community participation is one of the most effective ways of sustainably managing the heritage site including owners and stakeholders.[3]

In 2011 the Semien Mountains National Park Ecotourism Cooperative Establishment (SMNP-ECE) was inaugurated (Greta, 2014). This SMNP-ECE involved all concerned *kebele*s (i.e. districts, a term that refers to the smallest administrative unit of government in Ethiopia) of the park. In the Community Conference held in 2014 it was stated that the Cooperative was formed as a result of "situations that are creating risk to the security and benefits of the communities, as the residents of the park do not receive

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3. Regarding the stakeholders, not all of them share the same features and demands towards the heritage. Some are inclined to threaten the heritage. Others have a dominant position and tend to use their legitimate right over the heritage contrary against dependent groups who lack power to execute their own legitimate rights.

equitable benefits from the tourism services". The mission of such ecotourism cooperative was "to build a strong cooperative movement, realizing the social and economic prosperity of its members and ultimately better the life of the community" (SMNP, 2008).

After the management was transferred from the region to the central level, the local officials at Debarq and Semien established a system of community development so that all communities could benefit from tourism. Yet, the system turned into a blessing in disguise (interview with Sisay Mekwonent). The park headquarters used a drawing system to distribute to the *kebele*s of the park tourism-related tasks such as serving as scouts, cooks, and porters. Thus, Gich community might be selected to cater to the tourists for the months of September and October and, then, the draw would select another village for the following months. On this basis all villages will be assigned a similar amount of time serving the tourists so that they all have the chance to benefit from this industry. Yet, although presented as even handed, the efficiency and transparency of the 'draw' is dubious. For instance, those villages that are selected for the peak seasons are likely to gain the most benefits, as the influx of tourists makes it possible to earn more generous tips and the work itself is spread throughout the day. Inversely, if a village is selected to cater to tourists in the rainy seasons (May to September), when the number of tourists dwindles to almost zero, the village may not benefit at all from tourism and must wait at least half a year in order to be placed back in the draw (Community Conference with Gich villagers, 2014).

THE RESISTANCE OF GICH COMMUNITY TO
THE RESETTLEMENT PLAN

Unlike other villages of the SMNP such as Limalimo, Miligibsa, and Arkwaseye, the largest village of the area, Gich, which is found at the core of the park, is very reluctant to abide by the policy of resettlement. It bears mentioning that, as Debonnet (2006) has pointed out, "the people in Gich village are depended on food aid for 5 to 6 months a year; this clearly shows the unsustainability of the current livelihood strategy" (p. 89). Despite the fact that the living standards are becoming harder to deal with, when the inhabitants of Gich were asked about resettlement at the conference, they made it clear that it was not an option:

> We live at the heart of the park, this is our home; we know nothing better. We have heard about plans for resettlement, we have discussed with officials of the park but we oppose them, unless it promises a much better life for each and every one of us and we don't want to exercise similar life that the Arkwaseye people are entertaining but we don't mean that our desire is to be financially buoyant (Community Conference with Gich villagers, 2014).

The inhabitants of the Gich village argue that their ancestors have been living inside the park with the wild animals for many years; however, they criticize the fact that more attention is given to animals than to human beings. Daily and Ellison (2002, p. 37), together with Rosenzweig (2003, p.
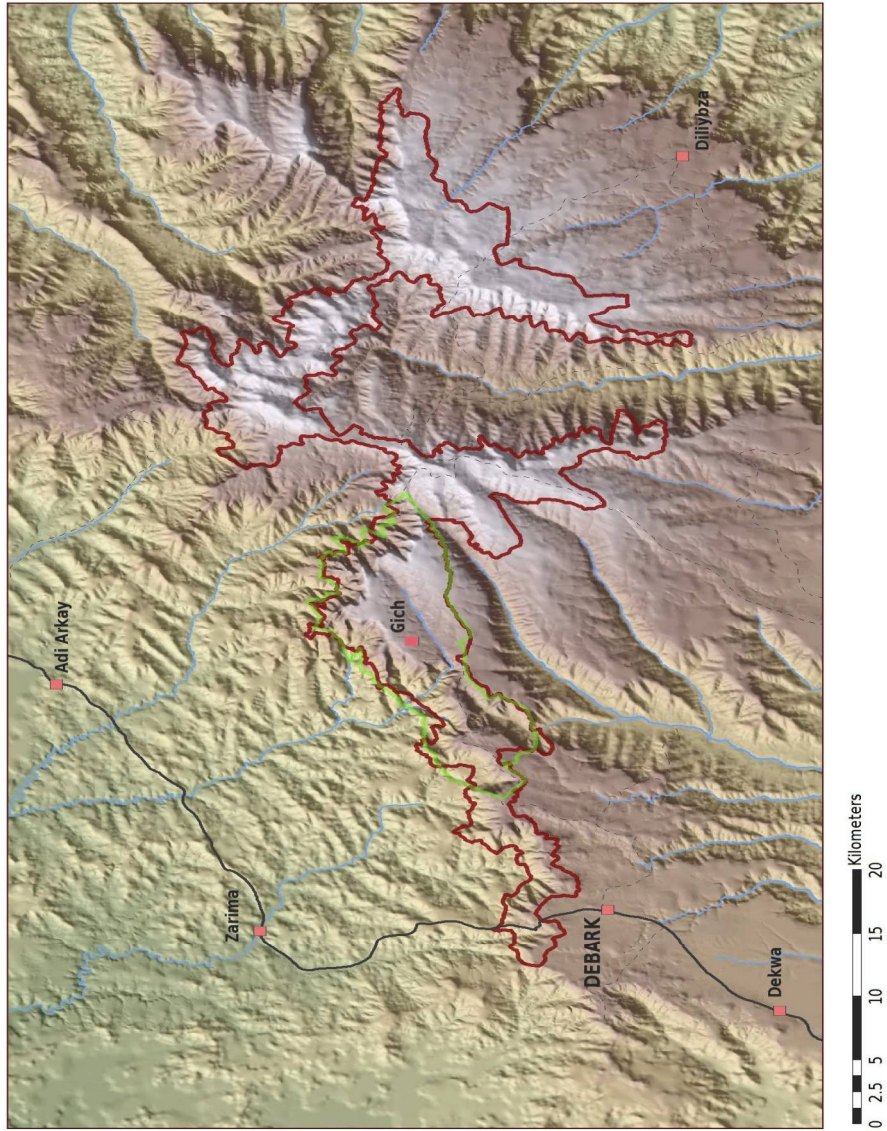
Figure 2: *Map of Semien Mountains National Park and location of Gich village; in green and red, the 1969 and 2016 boundaries, respectively*
Source: Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Gondar.

91), have emphasized that the main purpose for developing the management plan for the protected area should be the establishment of 'win-win' solutions that satisfy human needs while maintaining ecological functions. Similarly, the Gich inhabitants worry about the eventual shortage of land for their families if they abandon their homeland. Obviously, the value of this national park is not confined to the Gich community or even to the country at large since it is a world heritage. Thus, given its global value, the Gich community expects to be offered similar means of livelihood in addition to their current ones if the relocation proposal is materialized. Otherwise, they believe that they will not be able to cope up with the life outside their locality to which they have age-old attachments. This potential conflict addresses the issue of realignment of the park's boundaries, which now includes a large number of villages.

The topic of human resettlement in heritage sites these days is always a controversial one, and touches upon ethical and human right subjects. UNESCO has made it clear that if the reduction in human presence is not made, the SMNP will remain within the list of endangered sites (IUCN, 2000). When an individual in the local Semien Park office who prefers to remain anonymous was asked why this could be, he mentioned that Gich was the toughest village to deal with, as the village became aware of EWCA's plans to spend USD 8 million on a resettlement plan for the village (Anonymous, 2014; Greta, 2012). Therefore, the inhabitants of Gich want the highest compensation and will not budge if they do not get what they want.

LIMITED LIVELIHOOD OPTIONS

Historically, subsistence livestock and arable farming were the main sources of livelihood for the Gich community. Arable farming was not prohibited but is generally not viable because of the roaming of endemic wild animal populations. Despite the difficulties, the communities in the areas have resorted to producing subsistence crops. The Gich communities shared the view that they should be given the opportunity to participate in the management of the park (Community Conference with Gich villagers, 2014). The communities believed that the wildlife resources in the park had survived and even increased because of the harmonious traditional co-existence. Their argument was that communities should not be alienated from wildlife resources since they had a long history of co-existence with and dependence on wildlife based on indigenous knowledge systems.[4]

The different initiatives pushed forth to manage the park have, however, not been able to address all equity issues since not all members of the affected communities have benefited, and the Gich community did get some

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4. Indigenous knowledge is defined as the local, traditional knowledge of people in a given geographic area. It is an integrated body of traditional knowledge exercised in traditional education systems and traditional institutions; Grenier, 1998.

lessons from the already relocated neighborhoods. The people of Arkwaseye and others are not as such comfortable with the relocation process. As it turned out, the post relocation life did not unfold as they had been told. It was found that the majority of participants of the community conference with Gich residents had problems with the relocation process. More than half of the participants identified specific problems which they linked to the park. They emphasized their willingness to contribute to its improved management if allowed to do so through participatory and inclusive approaches without compromising their interests.

The Gich community felt that the issue related to resettlement is a source of conflict because they were only forced to resettle without having a saying on it. Moreover, their question regarding compensation was not fully answered. Thus, they pointed out that they painfully accepted to sacrifice their historical and cultural attachment with the park's territory for the benefit of the country but officials did not applaud this as a sacrifice. Respondents also reported that their interaction with the neighboring communities for service acquisition and market access was curtailed by restricted movement. Gich residents were more concerned with being denied rights to harvest the vegetative natural resources in the park. There were also arguments that since communities were not allowed to harvest the resources they should be given other direct benefits from the park.

It should be reminded that the current livelihood strategies of the local communities living inside the park are very basic. Infrastructure, access to basic medical facilities, and education are almost absent. The dominant economic activities are agriculture, crop yielding and livestock rearing. In addition, due to the lack of family planning, the population is constantly on the rise and pressure on the land is excessive.[5] According to interviews, the prices of living amenities like food and clothing have increased over the past twenty years and the standard of living has risen considerably (Interviews with *qes* Alemu Sitotaw, *ato* Mequanint Belew, and Sitotaw Abuhay). The local communities can no longer sustain their ever-growing villages solely on crop production and trading; the dominance of poverty therefore instigates hem to theft and corruption and to the lack of distribution of benefits within the communities. The villagers are also aware of the fast short-term benefits in working as escorts, cooks, porters or mule renters. This adds to the competition, and makes it even harder to fairly distribute work opportunities. Even though tourist numbers are constantly increasing in the Semien Mountains World Heritage Site, the supply versus demand ratio is largely unbalanced. One of the members of the Gich village states, "We need help, we are poor and no matter how much we all work, under these conditions little will change. If tourism is improving the life of people in the area, we also deserve to be included – it is only right. We may not have knowledge, training or capacity at the moment, but we are willing to learn for a better future" (Ibid).

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5. During my stay with the Gich community I could find out that the family size increased drastically since the last twenty years. Locals told me that they are in trouble to cope with life with the limited resources at their disposal vis-à-vis the considerable rise in the number of their family members.

Similarly, given the alternative land use options that protected areas can be put to for generating local and national income, there has also been increasing pressure to justify the economic contribution of protected areas to national development and livelihoods of communities adjacent to these areas (Salafsky & Wollenberg, 2000; see also Chirikure & Pwiti, 2008). This pressure is partly due to the under-appreciation of the role protected areas play in livelihoods of communities in their vicinity. In addition to this, the local communities adjacent to these areas have livelihood strategies that fail to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the protected areas. There is a global consensus that we need to enhance rural livelihoods, conserve biodiversity and increase productivity at a landscape level. For protected areas to succeed as venues for biodiversity conservation they need to enlist local support for conservation by addressing the livelihood needs of adjacent communities. To achieve this there is a need to understand the current impact of protected areas on the livelihood and survival strategies of the communities. This insight will enable management, together with stakeholders, to identify appropriate sustainable strategies for local communities to meet their livelihood needs and to reduce destructive practices in the heritage environment (Ibid).

It has been observed that the lack of community participation alienates communities from the park (Greta, 2012, p. 43). Local park officials understood that the exclusion of communities from the management of this heritage compromises the security of the areas; thus, there are risks associated with such injustice as forced displacement, restriction to access to livelihood resources and cultural erosion. In consequence, there is need to tap on indigenous knowledge systems for heritage management. With time, the alienated local communities became increasingly activists, demanding a stake in the management and protection of this heritage which has a worldwide significance. In addition to direct and meaningful involvement, they insisted on benefiting socially and economically from the resources of the heritage. They called for empowerment and lobbied governments and donor bodies to perform accordingly and for need policies designed to ensure fair treatment of local or indigenous peoples and the heritage itself. For them, this is uplifting the indigenous communities from a sub-standard treatment they had been experiencing so far.

CONCLUSIONS

Human communities living in and around protected areas have age-old relationships with such areas. The local communities from Gich depend on the resources of the SMNP for their livelihoods and cultural survival. These communities have, however, been excluded from the management of the park, against the co-existence principles between communities and protected areas. The exclusion of local communities, which are often better placed to conserve the resources because of their traditional indigenous knowledge systems, is inimical to natural resources conservation efforts. The establishment of protected areas was justified on the basis of existence of unique natural resources and landscape systems and relationships with local communities. The relationships embrace cultural identity, spirituality

and subsistence practices which frequently contribute to the maintenance of biological diversity. Such profound relationships have, however, been ignored by heritage officials in the study area. Exclusionary resource management practices leave communities without adequate natural resource access to support their livelihoods, resulting in over-exploitation and degradation of species and habitats in protected areas. Moreover, local communities have developed a negative outlook towards all those who uphold a firm position regarding the protection of the heritage. Left unchecked, the exclusionary approach to community participation might lead to the impoverishment of local communities, constraining the effective management of protected areas. Therefore, involving communities in the management process by exploiting their indigenous knowledge would benefit both the heritage itself and the local communities.

The inhabitants of Gich currently are unwilling to cooperate with any stakeholders on the idea of resettlement or alternatively they claim extremely high amounts of compensation for accepting resettlement. This is where development agencies can come in as communication facilitators. They can act as 'middle-men' among government officials, the park wardens and the villagers of Gich. Development programs can gain much if development agencies nurture relationships by spending time with the locals and by proving them that their intentions are positive. Thus, it is recommended that the development agencies may give only such promises which they can actually afford to offer and, thereby, help the local officials in developing the strategies to address the resettlement proposal.

Since Gich is the largest of all the villages within the SMNP, it is suggested that the smaller communities may be resettled first on a voluntary basis. This will show Gich that the smaller villages are provided for with better livelihoods and it may also create an atmosphere of trust. Resettling a village like Gich without the inhabitants' full consent is likely to be difficult, and may not be the optimal solution, considering that the locals provide for the tourism industry, which is a positive factor for the park. An alternative solution could be giving each inhabitant of Gich the choice of either staying in the park and working along with international development agencies as sustainable natural resource management contributors (i.e. training for scouts, tour guides, and small enterprise creation) or resettling outside the park voluntarily, accepting a fair compensation for their losses. Moreover, giving priority for the local people's well-being and approaching them sympathetically would help in avoiding suspicion and mistrust among the villagers.

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List of Informants

Name	Sex	Age	Date of interview	Place	Remarks
Abebaw Yihun	M	41	June 1, 2014	Debark	He is working as an expert in the Office of SMNP and he provided a great deal of information on the topic under discussion
Alemu Sito-taw, *qes*	M	67	March, 2014	Gich	A local peasant who is also an opinion leader in the communi-ty. He has also a large tract of land in the area and he rendered a great deal of information on their age-old attachment to the area.
Mequanint Belew	M	51	March 20, 2014	Gich	He is a tailor and reputed to possess knowledge of the histo-ry of the SMNP and the question of the community.
Seyoum Worku	M	39	June 2, 2014	Debark	Same as Abebaw Yihun
Sisay Mekwonent	M	43	June 2, 2014	Debark	Same as Abebaw Yihun
Sitotaw Abuhay	M	45	March 2, 2014	Gich	He is a well-known orator in the village and is well informed about the causes of the conflict between the government and the community. He has represented the community many times to address their question to the respective offices.
Tazebew Abay	M	38	July 10, 2014	Debark	He is working in the Office of the SMNP situated at Debark and was a potential informant who has provided invaluable information on the causes of the conflict between the government and the Gich community.
Teshome Hailu	M	46	July 10, 2016	Debark	Same as Tazebew Abay
Worku	M	34	July 10, 2014	Debark	Same as Tazebew Abay
Zerfu Alebachew	M	41	July 11, 2014	Debark	He provided invaluable knowledge about the management of other protected areas and their comparison with what is going on in SMNP.