

On a recent sunny day in southwestern Ethiopia, the Konso people danced through the streets and sang enthusiastically to the music of a marching band. Their colorful clothing, traditional masks and shields, and decorative feathers hinted at what a special occasion they were marking: the announcement by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that Konso has been added to the official list of World Heritage sites. The Konso Cultural Landscape has found a place on this prestigious list in recognition of the unique biocultural resources that thrive there. The landscape consists of productive and unique terraced settlements spread over 21 square miles in the semi-arid Konso highlands, 375 miles southwest of Addis Ababa. Deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn travelled to Konso to mark the occasion.

Distinctive Traditions and Practices

The Konso, a Cushitic-speaking people of southwest Ethiopia, are well known for their distinctive religious and cultural traditions including their unique funerary rituals involving elaborate music and dance. Konso culture is also famous for its carved wood statues called wagas, which memorialize important people in the community. The wagas are often arranged in groups and erected on graves or at the entrances of the maze-like paths that lead to Konso villages. UNESCO describes these statues as exceptional living testimony to funerary traditions that are on the verge of disappearing.

The Konso's resilient agricultural techniques, centered on extensive terracing and productive methods that nurture a web of agrobiodiversity, have also gained them attention. Farmers in Konso practice a highly sophisticated brand of terrace, agroforestry and manure agriculture that consistently provides bountiful harvests. When there are food shortages in the surrounding area, the web of relations that exists throughout the biocultural landscape responds and provides for all. For centuries, the Konso have succeeded in sustainably growing millet, sorghum, corn, cotton and coffee, khat, beans, moringa, and many varieties of trees in their fields. They also raise cattle, sheep and goats that serve as important currency to exchange with other communities.

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A Cultural and Sacred Landscape

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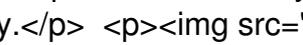
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Picture: A public gathering in the Konso village of Gaho. The unique governance and community structures of the Konso Cultural Landscape were recognized by UNESCO. Photo: Yonas Beyene

Powerful Recognition

UNESCO's announcement on the importance of Konso sends a powerful message, especially to those in Ethiopia who may be losing touch with their heritage.

For the stewards of Konso's sacred sites, the international recognition brings legitimacy to their efforts and their methods, which are often at odds with efforts to introduce new values and development. Ethiopia is extremely rich with cultural and linguistic diversity, and Southern Ethiopia is important historically for forging regional and national identity that is based on unity in diversity.

 In the case of the Konso, as with many Indigenous groups, the younger generation can particularly benefit from the clear message that their cultural traditions are worth holding onto.

Most of the young people are forgetting their culture, Dinote Kusia Shankere, a cultural officer in Konso, told the Agence France-Presse. I'm happy because this inauguration can change the young generation's mind so they will be devoted to (preserve) the culture.

The World Heritage Site designation may also provide a boost for biocultural tourism in Ethiopia, which is important in securing sustainable economic growth.

All of this gives the Konso much to celebrate not only the UNESCO designation itself, but the continued flourishing of their own special culture that is now recognized around the world.

Picture: Waga statues represent and tell the stories of the deceased, of wives and husbands, hunters and warriors. They form a part of the elaborate funerary traditions of the Konso. Photo: Yonas Beyene

Source: www.christensenfund.org