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# Aba Asirat

Since the fall of the Derg regime the large Aba Asirat monastery has suffered from extensive deforestation. The site has afflicted by a major conflict of interest over the control of the natural tree resources between the monastery (preservation) and the local community (exploitation).



Name: **Aba Asirat**

Status: monastery

Site Code: GJ03

Floristic Region: GJ

Region: 3 (East Gojam)

Altitude: 2360

Latitude: 10° 17' N

Longitude: 37° 45' E

Woodland/forest:

Status: relict but largely logged

Size: > 10 ha

Dominant species:

canopy: *Albizia schimperiana*, *Bersama*

*abyssinica*, *Croton macrostachyus*

shrub/ground: *Acyranthus aspera*,

*Phytollaca dodecandra*, *Clausena*

*anisata*

No of woody species: 51

No of species with less than 5 individuals: 6

Threats: wood extraction, conflict with local community, grazing

Photograph: The monastery is at the base of the cliff with logged out forest around. Above the cliff, on the plateau there is extensive planting of eucalypts.

Aba Asirat monastery is situated on the eastern slopes of a canyon right at the edge of the main highland plateau. This small canyon runs East and feeds directly into the Blue Nile. The upper part of the monastery is delimited by a ca 50 m high cliff whilst the remaining consists of a mainly steep slope down to the river's edge.

The original monastery forest covered the whole left side of the valley, however today no high forest remains. Over the past decade all trees have been cut down but for a few around the old church, and the woody vegetation remaining is essentially coppice regrowth. There are also some large areas of scrub and open grazing land. The monastery does not have any agricultural land.

In the surrounding landscape there are a few church woodlands (see site account for Yekibna Hawariyat) that are generally either well or totally protected from human interferences. Outside these sacred groves there is little or no natural vegetation left and landuse is a mixture of agricultural and grazing lands and eucalypt plantations. There is also an important urban centre, Debre Markos, nearby.

## History

The monastery was established about 120 years ago, the old church standing right next to a permanent water source. Much of the monastery land (over 50 ha) was forested until the fall of the Derg Regime in 1991. The plateau above has long been denuded of native trees but for a few churchyards. Recently a new church and much larger than the original one, was built on flat ground closer to the river.

## Conservation status

Although only around 10% of the 51 recorded woody species have low population sizes many more may be locally threatened because of the continuing heavy cutting pressure exercised by the local population. Potentially this monastery could form one of the largest areas of natural forest in the vicinity of the large town of Debre Markos.



View of the new church and young boys carrying bundles of wood up the only path leading to the plateau. This unsustainable removal of wood

products is the cause of a major conflict between the monastery and local communities.

## Threats

Since the fall of the Derg Regime the forest resource has been all but annihilated with just a few large, but mainly branchless, junipers remaining near the old church. The pressure for wood is so intense that tree stumps of *Albizia gummifera* and *Albizia schimperiana* are being uprooted and removed from the site. There is a severe conflict between the local orthodox population and the monks as to who has the right to control the timber resources. Monks have been repeatedly threatened by the local population and appear to be powerless to save the last remaining tree. Lack of money prevents them from employing an armed guard. In many areas herbivory by livestock is important. There are here and there some large patches of *Tagetes minuta*.

## Management

Evidently the resolution of the conflict between the monastery and the local population over the control of natural resources is the key to the successful management of this large piece of land. Ideally the area should be zoned with parts being allocated to the local community for the sustainable harvesting of native trees. If and when the on-going conflict is resolved there is then much potential in rehabilitating and planting native tree species in substantial areas of logged forest.