Mitak Abune Teklehayimanot

The forest of Mitak Abune Teklehayimanot was formerly heavily logged but is now regenerating freely and is not confronted with any threats. This historical monastery is in decline and lies in a region affected by depopulation. This is associated with the abandonment of large tracks of land, which are reverting to secondary scrub.

Name: **Mitak Abune Teklehayimanot**

Status: monastery
Site Code: SU03
Floristic Region: SU
Region: 4 (North Shewa)
Altitude: 2600 m
Latitude: 09° 34' N
Longitude: 39° 41' E

Woodland/forest:
Status: relict disturbed forest
Size: ca 5 ha
Dominant species:
canopy: *Allophylus abyssinica*, *Podocarpus falcatus*, *Prunus africana*
shrub/ground: *Desmodium repandum*, *Pavetta oliveriana*, *Vernonia auriculifera*
No of woody species: 43
No of species with less than 5 individuals: 1
Threats: none

Photograph: The large building in the centre is the hall where Emperor Menilik used to hold court. The church is to the left in the monastery forest. The area to the right close to the river is mostly *Juniperus procera* secondary forest. Also note the cover of secondary scrub.

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Nestling below a cliff at the end of a mountain ridge, Mitak Abune Teklehayimanot extends on a steep hill side all the way to a river. The monasterary ground is mostly covered by forest, but is composed of various patches that have suffered from differing degrees of logging pressure. Some parts have many large trees left, especially *Podocarpus falcatus*, whereas heavily logged areas form an impenetrable thicket 2-4 m high. Some of the species variation observed is also due to catena variation, the area closest to the river being quite damp.

The lower mountain slopes on the other side of the river have much tree regeneration, mostly *Juniperus procera*, but elsewhere in the vicinity of the monastery there are vast areas of secondary scrub, however junipers and other large forest trees appear to be absent from this vegetation type. The remaining of the landscape is composed of agricultural and grazing lands as well as many cliffs. On either side of this mountain ridge there are two permanent rivers often forming deep gorges.

History

Over the past half-century the importance of this monastery has steadily declined although it is still a major pilgrimage site. The number of monks is now very low and the surrounding countryside is slowly being abandoned by its inhabitants as soils become exhausted or are washed away. When Ankober, within less than a days walk to the North, was still the Imperial capital, Emperor Menilik used to visit Mitak Abune Teklehayimanot and would held court in a hall which is still standing today with all its internal structure still preserved.

Formerly, pilgrims were allowed to removed *Podocarpus falcatus* to be used as a cattle medicine. The monastery community soon realised that this practice threatened the species and bark removal was banned.

Conservation status

Although badly damaged by bark stripping the population of *Podocarpus falcatus* is unique in the area. The site provides a good source of tree seeds for the surrounding countryside. Secondary succession is slowly taking place following the abandonment of substantial areas of depleted/eroded soils on steep slopes.

The wall separating inner and outer yards has just been topped with recently cut *Juniperus procera* stems. This is carried out to enhance the beauty of the site.

Nearly all large *Podocarpus falcatus* have been stripped of barked by pilgrims to extract medicine for cattle. Although some trees have 90+% of their bark removed up to a height of 2 m, surprisingly they suffer from little dieback. This practice has now been discontinued.

Threats

A sharp decrease in the local human population in recent years, and that of the monk population in particular, may lead to illegal timber extraction. The hall is an architectural gem but the structure is leaning badly and it is unclear whether there is a danger of it collapsing.

Management

No particular management is requirement as natural regeneration and succession appear to be proceeding without any impact from livestock or human harvesting.