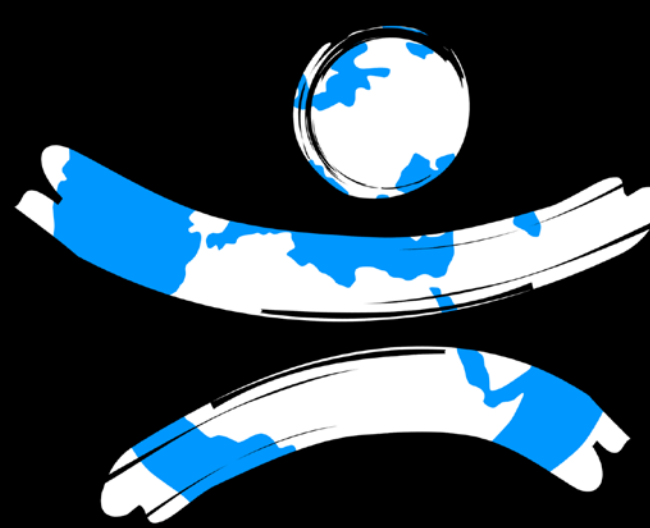


CONVERSATIONS WITH THE EARTH



INDIGENOUS VOICES
ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Farmers without Borders

With the climate wreaking havoc on traditional foods, to diversify is to live.

Two indigenous communities (the Gamo from the Highlands of Ethiopia and the Quechua of the Peruvian Andes) living in highland regions on opposite sides of the Atlantic, are connecting with each other in order to discuss one common objective: saving their staple crops (enset in Ethiopia and potatoes in Peru) from the consequences of climate change, including higher temperatures and disrupted rain cycles. The crops may be different, but the lesson is the same. It is critical to keep indigenous agriculture and agrobiodiversity alive and well.



Photographer: Nicolas Villaume

Captions: CWE

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The Gamo Highlands are part of the Omotic-language region of southern Ethiopia, an ancient center of human inhabitation located on the western escarpment of the Rift Valley. Today, there are more than fifty interdependent communities living on the escarpment, along lakes Abaya and Chamo. This story focuses on residents of Doko Village.



Lakes Abaya and Chamo | Gamo Highlands, Ethiopia



Doko Village Woman in Field of Enset Trees | Gamo Highlands, Ethiopia



Halimbe Soazo (on right) | Doko community, Gamo Highland, Ethiopia

Often called “false banana” for its resemblance to the fruit tree, enset is a richly versatile food source. After childbirth, mothers eat the enset’s nutritious gelatin called itema. After a death, mourners are served with the freshly dug root cut to pieces and boiled. And in between, daily life depends utterly on bread, fried dumplings, and other dishes made from enset roots and stalks. But it is more than just food. “Enset is incomparable with any

other crop,” says Halimbe Soazo, who periodically processes enset to the rhythm of traditional work songs with other women of the Doko village. “It is used for everything: fences, curtains, seat cushions, bags, string, rope, animal feed. We can’t think of our lives outside of enset.”

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Shagre Shano Shale, community leader | Doko village, Gamo Highland, Ethiopia

Since time immemorial, villagers in the Gamo Highlands have timed the planting of the staple enset crop with the rhythm of the seasons, accompanied by specific rituals. “In old times, there wouldn’t be rain during the dry season, and in the rainy seasons we had rain,” says Shagre Shano Shale, an elder in the village of Doko. “Those things have changed.”

These changes have disrupted enset’s growth cycles, sending it into decline. So Gamo Highlanders like Shagre must seek ways to guard their culture and find a new defense against famine



Shagre Shano Shale, community leader | Doko village, Gamo Highland, Ethiopia

In September 2009, Doko village elder Shagre Shano Shale traveled with a group of Ethiopian scientists to an indigenous agriculture preservation project in the Andes of Peru known as the “Potato Park.” The purpose was to observe how six Quechan indigenous communities had banded together to preserve their sacred staple food – hundreds of

varieties of potatoes. Following the cross-indigenous interchange, Shagre returned with an agrobiodiversity blueprint for his Gamo community in Doko Village. On his first day back, he consulted with his fellow elders, sharing how efforts in the Andes were relevant to their own work to preserve enset, their staple food.



Doko Village Enset Farmer | Gamo Highland, Ethiopia

In Doko Village, each enset plant historically produces multiple healthy new plants. These are separated and replanted, to the sound of singing by local farmers like this crew of Belachew Beyene. However, in recent years, there has been an unprecedented disruption in rainfall patterns that has depleted local grasses and stressed livestock, resulting in less manure for fertilizing enset fields and stunting the growth of the crop itself. Farmers are

left with fewer, weaker, and thinner plants that are more susceptible to disease and drought. Meanwhile regional temperatures have increased, spreading an enset blight in lower elevations. These experiences resonate with Doko Village’s contemporaries among the Quechua people in Peru, who are working to save their potato fields from the effects of climate change.



Women processing Enset plants | Doko village, Gamo Highland, Ethiopia

In the Peruvian Andes which have become significantly hotter in recent years, potatoes are now growing at elevations up to 200 meters higher than before. There are now challenged by new pests and blight not present at lower elevations. But the Quecha communities at the Potato Park, near Cusco, Peru, are reviving traditional diets and the spiritual practices related to farming. They are also developing micro enterprises and identifying, collecting and propagating many varieties of potatoes. Greater diversity creates a greater likelihood

of successful harvests and adaptation. “In Cusco I have seen about 300 varieties of potato,” says Gamo elder Shagre Shano Shale. “We can replicate those experiences.” Many enset varieties have fallen out of use, he says, “but if we work hard, we can regain them.” That’s my message to the community: preserving and collecting. This message resounds from the traditional enset farms of Doko Village, to the Quecha’s ancient potato fields in the Andes, and to a world facing potential climate-related famines.