

ETHNOLOGICAL APPROACH OF TERRACE FARMING

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The vast distribution of terraces in the geographical Sudan zone of West Africa leads to the question why and under which conditions an agrarian society might apply this particular form of farming. From an anthropologist's point of view it is essential to understand why farmers practise this form of farming and therefore try to explain the reason for it. The best way to gain insight is the description of terrace farming and when taking a closer look, we realize that farming is nowhere only an isolated agricultural activity.

Terraces are always the visible expression of a multitude of practices, economic as well as social and religious. Terrace farming becomes a significant form only in this context. The economic side shows that terrace farming means high input of labour into each particular plot since most fields are cultivated permanently. Only then is terrace farming profitable. It is only possible to cultivate plots permanently when farm yard manure is used to keep the fields fertile.

This applies to most terrace farming societies, which entails cattle rearing and even keeping it in stables in order to produce farm yard manure. However, keeping animals in such a way is very labour intensive compared with strategies where cattle is temporarily given to herders (e.g. to the Fulani) to look after. Therefore terrace farming does not only require additional labour in terms of building and maintaining the terraces themselves, but also in regard of the necessary keeping of livestock. Another point to make is the fact that fields under permanent cultivation tend to develop lots of weeds. Getting rid of weeds requires intensive hoeing periods, much more than shifting cultivation does.

What are then the advantages of terrace farming? First: The harvest is secure. Terraces are found in mountain areas, where especially during the 19th century people felt relatively protected against slave raids. However, shelter was also important in peaceful times. Terrace farms are more resistant towards changes in rainfall and therefore offer also more reliability regarding the yield. Second: The fields are normally found nearby and around the settlements. The fields are easier to reach especially during the rainy season in order to plant, to weed or to choose the right moment for harvesting.

STRAUBE (1971)¹ pointed out that the context of high labour intensity, limited quantity of a possible harvest due to limitations of land and a guaranteed yield have to be seen as strategic means. Therefore, from an ethnological point of view I would propose to use the term "complex of

¹ For the references see p. 172

intensification" instead of terrace farming. The term "complex of intensification" allows us to distinguish it better from the other dominant West African agricultural technique, shifting cultivation. Shifting cultivation can be seen as opposite to terrace farming since it lacks many of the techniques, terrace farming requires, like the extensive use of farm yard manure etc.

I do not want to discuss the religious ideas of terrace farming societies here to any greater extent. However, it needs to be mentioned that the land as such does receive great symbolic attention and in many cases we find a special priesthood attached to it. We will see that the example given about the Kassena is not necessarily exclusive. In reality we very often find a mixture of different elements.

FROEHLICH (1968) described terrace farming as a comprehensive cultural trait, too. The great number of light and darker marked areas scattered on his map of West Africa demonstrate how difficult it is to really prove hypothetical ideas. His main intention was to distinguish between groups who show all initial features and others who fulfil them only partly. However, the map does help to understand that terrace farming is closely related to the "complex of intensification" and widely distributed within the West and Central African Sudan, although it is always distributed like islands within larger regions.

A closer look at the Gurunsi language group shows again how difficult it is to interconnect such islands if we apply a cultural historical point of view (DUPERRAY 1984). Only three out of seven ethnic groups - as far as I observed (Kabyè, Lamba and Kassena) - are practising terrace farming. I wonder whether a portion of less than 50% is sufficient to prove a common network of language history and farming technology. My contribution ends with a question mark and a call for more research in order to understand the economic and cultural implication of African terrace farming better.