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Horse culture & tourism development: Towards initiating horse tourism in Awi Zone, Northwestern Ethiopia

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Abstract: This study was aimed at investigating the horse culture and horse tourism potentials of Awi Zone. It was undertaken based on descriptive design and qualitative approach. Hence, non-probability sampling techniques, such as purposive and snowball, were employed to select the study sites and participants of the research. In-depth interview, focus group discussion, field observation and document analysis were used as instruments of data collection. The finding of this study revealed that horses and horsemens play significant socio-cultural and economic role in Awi zone. There are also horse culture related tourist attractions that can be exploited for tourism development. The first groups of attractions are the various elements of horsemen involvement in the annual religious celebrations, among others, the gugis (a polo-type game) show undertaken after the completion of the escorting of the Arc of the Covenant. The second group of attractions are the various elements of the annual celebration of the Horsemen Association of Sebat Bet Agaw, among others, gugis, shimit (speedy riding), segria (walking hastily), chifera (dancing), zelay (jamping) shows. However, the development of the horse

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

There is close interaction and interlock between the inhabitants of the highland areas of Awi Zone and horse. Since early times the residents of these areas are largely identified with horse and horse related cultural practices. However, there is no comprehensive research undertaken on the horse culture and horse tourism potentials of Awi Zone. Thus, this research is intended to fill the knowledge gap already stated. This study has multi-dimensional importance. Firstly, it generates information on the horse care culture and on the socio-cultural and economic role of horse in Awi zone. Secondly, it identifies possible tourist attractions related to the horse culture of Awi zone and encourages those who have strong affiliation with horse culture and other governmental and non-governmental organizations to launch horse tourism in the study area. Thirdly, it reveals possible challenges which could constrain the development of horse culture and horse tourism in the study area.
culture of Awi Zone is constrained by different challenges which include shortage of breeding land and fodder, lack of adequate know-how on senga (gelding horse) breeding, management, taming, and lack of infrastructure and equipment. Thus, in order to develop the horse culture of Awi zone solutions need to be sought for its challenges and horse tourism need to be launched to support the local as well as national economy.

Subjects: Sport and Leisure Studies; Anthropology - Soc Sci; Social & Cultural Anthropology; Tourism

Keywords: horse; horseman; horse culture; horse tourism; Awi

1. Introduction
Historically, horse formed a critical component of human transportation system throughout the world by playing significant role in facilitating the movement of peoples for different drives such as commercial and military purposes. Then, peoples began to use horse for recreational, sport related activities and to perform various works. The same role is still played by horses especially in rural areas at different parts of the world. However, these days, the majority of horses in developed western nations are kept for recreational use (Anthony, 1986; Ollenburg, 2005; Zukauskaite, 2009). Greater dependency on horses to meet socio-cultural and economic needs of the society also gave rise to the initiation of a tradition referred as horse culture, i.e., a community whose day-to-day life is connected with the herding of horses and engagement on horse related ceremonial or ritual activities to meet socio-cultural and economic demands (Birke, 2007; Helgadottir, 2006; Sabrbassora, 2015).

The gradual growth of the interest of peoples to use horse and other equines for leisure and refreshment contributed to the emergence of a new type of tourism called equestrian or horse tourism, which started in Europe, North America and Australia in the 1950s and 1960s (EUQUUS, 2014; Evans, Siguroardottir, & Helgadottir, 2015; Pickel—Chevalier, 2015). Since the beginning of the 1970s, the equine sector in general and horse tourism in particular is strongly growing in the developed western nations. Its social and economic importance shows in the turnover of the sector in employment, in the amount of enterprises, in the number of peoples engaged, and in the amount of peoples taking an active interest in the sector (Evans et al., 2015; Haggblow, Rantamaki-Lahtinen, & Vihinen, n.d.).

The economic and social impact of horse tourism in Europe is outstanding. Its footprint on the European economy is about EUR 6bn of economic impact. The revenues of the sector are coming from different sources such as horse race betting operators, horse owners, race-goers, state contributions and sponsors’ fees. Horse racing employs, directly or indirectly, more than 300,000 peoples. It includes different occupations such as trainers, jockeys/drivers, veterinarians, farriers and horse betting employees. Each one of the 170,000 race horses across Europe, directly or indirectly, generates 1.8 jobs. Horse racing related jobs also represents 2.4 % of all agricultural sector jobs in Europe. It also contributes to the preservation and care of a colorful country side with 6.8 million hectares of land are used to breed horses across Europe. Different European regions benefit enormously from horse-related activities with horse races considered as events of national importance bringing together spectators from all age and genders with an impact on other equestrian competition and activities (European Pari Mutuel Association, 2009).

Ethiopia has almost 50% of Africa’s horse population (Mululelum, Mekonnen, & Wudu, 2012). Ethiopian interaction with horse can be traced to early times. The kings and nobilities of the country were reported to have strong and beautiful horses which were used not only to travel from one area to another but also for warfare purposes during territorial expansion, the fight against rebels and for hunting activities (Pankhrust, 1989). According to the report of Central
Statistics Agency (2007), Amhara region has about 257,320 horses, of which about 57,025 are found in Awi Zone. The study of the horse culture and horse tourism potential of Awi Zone is important for various reasons. There is close interaction and interlock between the inhabitants of the highland areas of Awi Zone and horses. The residents of these areas are largely identified with horses and horse related cultural activities since early times. For instance, the Awi are one of few group of people in Ethiopia who largely depended themselves on horses for plough agriculture (Alemu, 2008; McCann, 1995).

Horse is also used, among others, for different ceremonial purposes, such as gugis (a polo-type game) and shimit (speedy riding) show undertaken by members of horsemen associations at kebele/sub-district/, wereda/district/ and zonal levels. These and other horse related cultural activities can easily attract the attention of tourists if they are organized and developed systematically. However, the horse culture of Awi Zone is not used for tourism development and it is not generating income to support local as well as national economy. Still horse is playing its traditional role in the study area. Thus, investigating the horse culture and horse tourism potential of Awi Zone is essential to generate information which could help to develop the horse culture by launching horse tourism in the study area.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study area
The study area, Awi Zone is located within the latitude of 10.95° N and longitude of 36.5° E. It lies at an altitude range of 1800–3100 meters above sea level (masl) with average altitude of 2300 (masl) (Yeshambel, Mengistu, & Getachew, 2011). It is predominantly inhabited by the Awi, an ethnic group which belongs to the central Cushitic sub-family and inhabit in Northwestern Ethiopia (Alamneh, 2004).

2.2. Sampling techniques
Since this research was undertaken based on descriptive design and qualitative approach, non-probability sampling techniques, such as purposive and snowball, were employed to select the study sites and participants of the research. This is because, according to Creswell (2007: 85), “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposively select participants or sites (or documents or visual materials) that will best help the researcher to understand the problem and the research questions.” Accordingly, Awi Zone was selected because it is one of few areas in the country having a well-established horse culture ranging from horse plough to the use of horse to various ceremonial or ritual purposes. Then, from the nine weredas and three town administrations, four weredas (Banja, Ankesha Guagusa, FagitaLekoma and Guagusa Shikudad) were selected based on their importance in the existence of a well-established horse culture.

Based on the same criteria, study kebeles such as Kessa-Chewsa and Wusla-Kindika (from Banja), Den-Zuria and Hatata-Ena-Akababew (from Ankesha Guagusa), Gula and Meto-Lekoma (from Fagita Lekoma), Addis Alem and Wonjela-Gyorgis (from Guagusa Shikudad) were selected. Research participants, which include individuals from different backgrounds, were also selected purposively in consultation with chairmen of horsemen associations.

2.3. Instruments of data collection
The main research instruments used to collect the necessary data for this study are:

2.3.1. In-depth interviews (IDIs)
Semi-structured in-depth interviews were undertaken in each wereda with eight horse breeders, eight horse merchants, twelve members of horsemen associations, four religious fathers, eight elders and four fly-swatter producers. Interviews were also undertaken with four experts in each wereda from different backgrounds. IDIs were undertaken to generate information about the horse breeding and horse care practices of Awi people, the socio-cultural and economic role of
horses and horsemen, and possible challenges that affect the development of horse culture and horse tourism in Awi Zone.

2.3.2. Focus group discussions (FGDs)
Two FGDs (one with adult owners of horse and the other with elderly) were held with eight members in each study kebeles. This instrument was used to generate information about the horse tourism potentials and possible challenges that affect the development of the horse culture and horse tourism in Awi Zone.

2.3.3. Field observation (FO)
Observation of horse related rituals and practices were undertaken to comprehend the horse breeding and horse care practices of Awi people, the socio-cultural and economic role of horses and horsemen, the horse tourism potentials and possible challenges that affect the development of horse culture and horse tourism in Awi Zone.

2.3.4. Document analysis
Various published and unpublished documents and statistical data were collected from governmental and non-governmental organizations found in the study area and used to support the analysis of this study.

2.4. Data analysis techniques
The information obtained from IDIs, FGDs, FO and documents were analyzed using qualitative description and thematic analysis with methodological triangulation of ideas obtained from different sources.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Horse breeding and horse care practices of the people
Awi Zone is the home of large number of horses. According to the information obtained from Zonal Agricultural and Livestock Department (2018), there are about 66,835 horses in the study area. In order to generate information on the horse breeding and horse care practices of the people, field observations were undertaken and various questions were posed to informants. Some of the questions posed are: What are the pack animals found in your locality? Explain the process of the birth of a pony from conception up to delivery? How the newly born pony is cared from delivery up to its arrival for work? What are the names given to horses? On what basis these names are given? How horses for different activities are selected? The in-depth interview and observational results are discussed as follows.

As it is reported by informants, horse breeding is along establishing culture in the study area. It is obtained by inter-breeding female horse (Bazira/Gibara)\(^1\) with male horse (Korma).\(^2\) The birth of horse from conception to delivery takes 9–10 months. The newly born and young horse (pony) is known locally as gilgel/gilgeal. The pony is delivered with the effort of the mother horse either in the field or in the stall locally known as gat/gatsi, where domestic animals are kept at night. In order to protect it from damage after delivery, the pony remains outside the stall at night for about two months. As soon as its birth, the newly born pony is provided with the mother’s milk. After a week, it starts grazing grass and goes to the field with the mother. As it is observed during field work, leaving the fecund female horse in a good pasture land during day time and with mowed grass during night time in the locality is believed to have contribution for the fecund horse to provide adequate milk for the pony. But it is practiced only by few breeders in the locality because of lack of fodder. After a year, the pony is provided with bars of salt in the evening to protect it from internal parasite. Similarly, the fecund horse is also provided with bars of salt in the morning. Serving the fecund horse and the pony with mowed grass every evening continues as much as possible. They are also served with barely (slightly cooked with salt) a week or twice. Within 3 to 4 years, both the male and female pony reach for work (such as for plough, loading and riding or racing). The female pony also reaches for reproduction.
According to informants, though some care is made by local horse breeders, with varying degree, for the newly born pony and the fecund female horse, in order to get gelding horse, locally known as senga/sengi, few horse breeders provide special care during pregnancy and after delivery. The care undertaken for the female horse during pregnancy and after delivery includes reducing the work burden, cleaning the stall and providing food such as grass. But such practice is not done by most of the horse breeders, which affected the birth of a good structured senga horse in the locality. After delivery, the pony, in addition to the milk of its mother, is provided with additional food such as grass and barely.

As it is reported by informants, the Awi provide names for their horses on the basis of their service, color and behavior. Based on their service, the Awi name their horses as agassess/agassies, senga/sengi, bazra/gibara and mesina/kura. Based on their color, the Awi people also provide different names to their horses, which help the community to differentiate one horse from the other. The major color-based horse names and their meaning are: Shanko/shanku—full black horse, fenzofanzu—gray and white mixed horse, shasho/shashu—full white horse, bulo—yellowish horse, dama—full red horse, Bora—full red horse with white color in the forefront, gemer—mixed colored horse, grach—a horse with black and white mixed color. Based on their behavior, the Awi people also provide different names to their horses. Behavior-based horse names are given mainly for senga horse. This is because the behavior of senga horse is largely obtained during the taming process called giria/giregn. In other words, the different types of training given for the senga horse can result in different type of behavior on the horse. Behavior based senga horse names which are common in the locality are Chefari, Segar and Chole. In order to engage in various activities, different types of trainings are given for horses for about 6 months, the process of taming locally known as giria/giregn. The technique of taming applied on horse varies according to the purpose the specific horse is going to serve.

3.2. Socio-cultural and economic role of horses and horsemen
In order to analyze the role of horses and horsemen in Awi Zone, informants were asked about the socio-cultural and economic functions that horses and horsemen are playing in the study area. Besides, observations of horse related rituals/practices and document analysis were also undertaken. The interview, observational and document analysis results are discussed as follows.

3.3. The role of horses and horsemen in annual religious celebrations
The Awi are predominantly adherents of Orthodox Christianity. As a matter of fact, there are large numbers of churches in each locality. As it is observed during the field work, the annual celebration of each church takes place with extraordinary religious benediction and feast. As there are large number of horses in the locality, horsemen play significant role in giving brightness to the religious celebration by escorting the Arc of the Covenant and by showing horse gugis, an activity which stayed in the study area for a long period of time. On the day of annual religious celebration in each parish large number of horsemen gather themselves and escort the Arc of the Covenant from its church to its place of sprinkling the holy water, and the vice versa. They give brightness to this religious event by raising the flag of the country and by voicing the horsemen songs accompanied by trumpet. Some of the horsemen songs voiced in this celebration are songs locally titled as “Sengaw Abeba”, “Sengaw Aymolo” and “Yesengaw Get”.

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**Figure 1. Gugis game in annual religious celebration.**

Source: Awi Zone Culture & Tourism Department, 2017.
After the end of escorting the annual religious celebration, the horsemen were observed engaging themselves in gugis show on horse racing field. The application of the horse show is explained by one of my informants as follows:

In order to show the gugis game, first friends having senga horses, with somehow equal power, pair themselves. One of the friends holds a gasha (a shield) and the other 1 to 2 zeng (axis). Then the horsemen start the game from the same line. After some distances, the shield holder provides the opportunity for the zang holder to hit the shield, usually from 1 to 2 times, in first round game. In second round game, the two horsemen exchange their role and continue the competition. In these two round games, the one who hit the gasha successfully with zang and became forerunner is considered as a winner. The one who failed to do so is considered as a loser.

After the gugis game is concluded, the horsemen are observed enjoying the feast of the day’s religious celebration prepared by the residents of the locality. The horsemen are served with Ethiopian local foods and drinks known as injera, wet and tela. At the end, the whole process of escorting the day’s religious celebration is concluded with the blessing of elders and religious fathers.

3.4. The role of horsemen in mourning ceremony

Mourning is the other socio-cultural practice in which horsemen had active participation in Awi Zone in general and in the highland areas in particular. As it is observed during the field work, the horsemen place themselves at the center holding the flag of the country and undertake funeral chant and bragging, turn by turn, by remembering the patriotic and other deeds of the deceased. Trumpet is largely used to give brightness to the funeral chant, which is composed by chant leaders based on the role, age, status and sex of the deceased. In other words, funeral chanting conveying different messages are organized for patriots, fathers, mothers, horsemen, prominent individuals, committed farmers, etc. There are various cultural practices undertaken during the mourning ceremony. Some of the horsemen are observed wearing special horsemen decoration, known as lofisa, on their back and head. Besides, 10–15 senga
horses wear special dress, decorated with crosses, in all of their bodies except their legs and head (see figure 3). According to informants, this is a long established cultural practice in the locality. Previously, it was undertaken with the death of wealthy man as manifestation to his asset. But these days, it is also employed in the mourning ceremony of most of the individuals who reached adolescence stage. With the death of either the husband or the wife in the horseman family, their kuta (white cotton toga) is placed on the neck of the senga horse of the household head (husband), as the sign of sadness. This horse is not climbed until the end of the ceremony. The painting of St. George is also observed climbing on a long stick and forced into the ground. This is mostly done with the death of members of the horsemen association.

3.5. The role of horsemen in escorting guests

According to informants, the other role of the horsemen in Awi Zone is involving in the escorting of higher government officials and distinguished guests visiting different parts of the study zone. Besides, public holidays, demonstrations and watershed developmental activities are also escorted by horsemen. As it is reported by informants, the involvement of the horsemen in the escorting of guests and higher government officials was an activity undertaken in the locality starting from the reign of Emperor Haile Sellassie I (1930–1974). The process of involving the horsemen in escorting guests is explained by an informant as follows:

In order to involve the horsemen in escorting, first the concerned bodies or government officials send a letter to wereda or/and zonal horsemen associations, which in turn send messages to the horsemen associations at qetena\(^{11}\) and kebele\(^{12}\) levels. With receiving the message of escorting, the horsemen come out with their horses, flag and lofisa, and undertake the task of escorting by placing themselves in the right and left side of the road. During the escorting of the guests the horsemen voice songs titled locally as ‘Aymola’ and ‘Sengaw Abeba’.

3.6. The role of horsemen in wedding ceremony

The other social event practiced with the active participation of horsemen in Awi zone is wedding (Figure 5). In order to participate horsemen in the wedding ceremony, according to informants, first the head of the household of the groom makes call of escorting for the horsemen and they reach on the required time. Then 10–15 horsemen take the groom out of his home and continue their journey to the bride’s home by raising the flag of the country. As soon as they reach the bride’s home, they are invited a feast. Then they receive the bride and make her have a sit with the groom. After blessing is undertaken by the elders, discotheque is undertaken by the best men, locally called Mize, and the horsemen. Then the couples are climbed on two senga horses separately and continue their journey into the bride’s home with discotheque. The songs voiced by the horsemen in wedding ceremonies are titled locally as “Eyawlega Shebo”, “Ayrede”, and “Mushiraw Abeba”. These music are brightened with trumpet. As soon as they reach the groom’s home, they unclimbed themselves and tie their horses and enter into the booth and enjoy the feast. After the blessing is undertaken, the horsemen go to their home.
3.7. The role of horsemen in horse sport competition

In 2009 the government of Ethiopia has prepared a directive aimed at expanding cultural sport (Youth & Sport Ministry, 2008). One of the cultural sports practiced in Awi Zone with active involvement of farmers is horse sport competition. The process of involving horsemen in horse sport competition is reported by one of my key informants as follows:

In order to undertake horse sport competition at wereda and zonal levels, there are preconditions to be done with the collaboration of experts of youth and sport offices/departments and horsemen associations of the kebeles, weredas and the zone. For wereda level competition, first the task of screening is undertaken at kebele level by the respective horsemen association of the kebele. Usually 4 candidates are selected from each kebele. Then, the screening is undertaken at qetena level and usually 4 candidates are selected from each qetena and sent for wereda level horse sport competition. For zonal level competition, equal number of candidates, usually four, are selected from each wereda. Two are the main competitors (1 for gugis and the other for shimit). The rest two are reserves.

Horse sport competition at wereda level is undertaken in one of the well-known fields of the district. But zonal competition is undertaken by moving from one wereda to the other annually. The competition is undertaken focusing on gugis and shimit show. A part from its socio-cultural importance, horse is playing significant role in Awi Zone in plough agriculture, loading and transportation and handicraft production.

3.8. Plough agriculture

The other important contribution of horses in Awi Zone is plough agriculture (Figure 6). Awi Zone is one of few areas in Ethiopia well-known in horse plough (Alemu, 2008; McCann, 1995). Horse plough is largely practiced in areas with highland agro-ecology such as Banja, Ankesha, Guagusa Shikudad and Fagita Lekoma Weredas. The use of horse successfully by the Awi for plough agriculture is the result of long years of effort. This effort is reported by one of my informants as follows:

Before 40 or 50 years, the use of horse for plough agriculture was a difficult task. As a result, horses were used for plough agriculture by using two individuals, one pulling in the front side and the other driving the horse at the back. The horses were also bitted repeatedly. The difficulties faced in the use of horses are reported to have emanated from lack of experience on taming horses for different purposes and absence of farm equipment suitable for horses. But gradually the Awi are well-experienced on the taming of horses for plough agriculture and on the production of farm tools suitable for horses, the skills which are now highly embodied in the life of the peoples in the highland areas of Awi zone.
Equipment used for horse plough are locally called as kenbererkut, kanchilt, yeft-gind, korencho/qorench, miran, yemofe—ofinch, mofer, moreshe, degir, vogel, mergecha, teza, and awtargemed. They are made from leather, wood and iron by local artisans. The three tools which are exceptional to horse plough are yeft-gind, korencho/korench and awtar—gemed. The rest are also used for ox plough.

3.9. Handicraft production

Different types of handicraft outputs are produced from horse fly-whisk (Figure 7). The most important are hand fly-whisk and lofisa. Hand fly-whisk is produced in Awi Zone from fly-whisk obtained from the horse’s mane and tail. As the fly-whisk of the horse’s mane is soft and short it is used to produce shorter hand fly-whisk. On the contrary, the fly-whisky of the horse’s tail is long and it is used to produce longer hand fly-whisk. Hand fly-whisk is used for the decoration of car, for chasing away the fly (for elders) and cleaning items, as decoration for those dressing traditional white cloth and as gift item.

Lofisa is a special horsemen decoration dressed by horsemen on their back (Figure 8) and head during mourning, wedding, annual religious celebration, gugis and shimit show and escorting of guests (see the figure 4). As it is observed during the field work, different types of lofisa are used by the horsemen of the locality. The commonly used are those made from the hair and fly-whisk of horses, wild animals, goats and colobus monkeys. However, the most colorful and favored lofisa in the locality is the one made from the hair of white and black colored colobus monkey. A study has also proved that the sale of local handicrafts produced from horse fly-whisk could have a good potential to develop community business enterprises in Awi Zone (Zemenu, 2017).

4. Tourism development in Awi Zone

4.1. The current status of tourism development in Awi Zone

Before considering its horse tourism potentials, it is important to highlight the current state of tourism development in Awi Zone, which is the home of several cultural and natural tourist attractions and heritages. Lake Zengena, Lake Tirba, Water Falls (such as Fang, Garcho, Dondor, Tiski), Kambo Cave, Ura Mineral Water, Elala Forest, Zirhi Mountain, the Monasteries of Gimjobet Mariam, Sigadi Mikael, Gum Eyasus and Wolte Petros are among the major tourist attractions. Besides, there is a very fascinating horse culture that can be used as tourist attraction Ye Bahil – eno- Tourism Bero. (2010 Amete Mihret). Despite huge tourism potentials, tourism development in Awi Zone is found in its infant stage. For instance, according to the information obtained from Zonal Economic Development Department, in 2020, the domestic and international tourist flow is reported to be 427, 518 and 552, respectively. The income obtained from domestic and international tourists is also reported to be 49, 169, 570 and 62,802 Ethiopian Birr, respectively. As it is observed during the field work religious tourism has greater share in the domestic tourism of the locality. This shows that especially the role of international tourism in the economy of Awi Zone is insignificant.

According to informants, even the institutional readiness in Awi Zone to use the horse culture as a resource to tourism development is very low. The two main governmental institutions at zonal and wereda level, having concern with the horse culture are culture and tourism department/offices and youth and sport department/offices. The contribution of the former in developing the horse culture is limited in undertaking promotional work, which is not adequately and systematically done. The latter has better role in developing the horse culture in its activities of undertaking horse sport competition at various levels. As the result of lack of institutional readiness, horse culture related possible tourist attractions are not identified, organized and communicated by the concerned bodies in Awi Zone. Besides, as reported by informants, there are no tourist guides and tour operator agencies in Awi zone which are working to market attractions found in the locality in collaboration with national tour operators performing their activity in northern Ethiopia.
4.2. Horse tourism potentials of Awi Zone

As already mentioned, there are various socio-cultural events taking place in Awi Zone with active involvement of horsemen and with large number of spectators. As a result, some of these horsemen related events can be used as attractions, both for domestic and international tourists, if they are organized systematically. Cognizant of the advantage of horse tourism, European countries such as France and Hungary have recognized the economic potential of horse tourism and are exploiting this segment of tourism to support their national economy (EUQUUS, 2014). Likewise, there is a possibility to exploit the horse culture of Awi Zone for tourism development.

After undertaking deep investigation on the horse culture of the study area through field observation, FGDs were undertaken to identify horse culture related tourism potentials of Awi Zone. The discussants were asked the following questions: What are the cultural practices which are undertaken in Awi Zone with active involvement of horsemen? Which aspect of the horse culture of the zone is celebrated colorfully with varieties of horsemen talent shows and with large number of spectators? Which aspect of the horse culture can easily attract the attention of tourists and can be exploited for tourism development? Therefore, based on their colorful celebration with varieties of horsemen talents, two major attractions are identified by the researcher’s observation and by the participants of FGDs, as major horse culture related tourist attractions of Awi Zone. These are horsemen involvement in the annual religious celebrations and the annual celebration of the Horsemen Association of Sebat Bet Agaw, which are discussed briefly below.

4.3. Horsemen involvement in the annual religious celebrations

Annual religious celebrations are undertaken in each parish of Awi Zone with the active involvement of horsemen and with the presence of large number of adherents of Orthodox Christianity. As it is observed by the researcher and supported by the participants of FGDs, there are three important elements of the annual religious celebration of Awi Zone that can be exploited as tourist attractions both for domestic and international tourists.
These are:

1. The horsemen escorting of the Arc of the Covenant from its church to the place where the sprinkling of holly water is undertaken, and the vice versa.
2. The gugis show undertaken by the horsemen after the completion of the escorting of the Arc of the Covenant (see Figure 1).
3. The feast enjoyed by the horsemen and the observers of the gugis show and its closing ceremony (see Figure 2).

In order to use the annual religious celebrations of the highland areas of Awi Zone as tourist attraction, generating information on the involvement of the horsemen in annual religious ceremony (which is already discussed above) and the identification of the churches having easy access to tourists is important. As observed by the researcher and pointed by the participants of FGD, the following Table 1 is a list of some churches in each highland weredas of Awi zone having easy access to tourists and colorful annual religious celebration with dramatic gugis show undertaken with the presence of large gathering of adherents of Orthodox Christianity.

| Name of the Wereda | Name of the church | Date of annual celebration |
|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Banja              | Kassa Mariam       | Tir 21/January 29           |
|                    | Akayta Medhanealem | Hidar 27/December 06        |
|                    | Chewsa Mikael      | Tir 12/January 21           |
|                    | Bata Zemerarta     | Tahisas 3/December 11       |
| Ankesha            | Gimjabet Eyasus    | Tir 6/January 14            |
|                    | Den Giorgis        | Tir 19/January 27           |
|                    | Dangula Yohannes   | Tir 13/January 21           |
|                    | Gimjabet Mariam    | Tir 21/January 29           |
|                    | Gimjabet Sillassie | Tir 7/January 15            |
|                    | Gimjabet K/Mihret  | Yekatit 16/February 23      |
|                    | Kiros              | Tir 8/January 16            |
|                    | Urana Mariam       | Tir 21/January 29           |
| Fagita Lekoma      | Endewuha Yohannes  | Tir 6/January 14            |
|                    | Gafara Bala Egzabiher | Tir 16 January 2024    |
|                    | Addis Kidam K/Mihret | Yekatit 16/February 23   |
|                    | Addis Kidam Gebriel | Tahisas 19/December 27     |

(Continued)
4.4. Annual celebration of the horsemen association of Sebat Bet Agaw (seven house of Agaw)

A clear manifestation of the existence of close interaction between the Awi people and horse is the availability of long-aged and well-organized horsemen association from kebele to zonal levels. According to Zemenu (2017), the annual celebration of this association is a typical culture of the Awi ethnic group which stayed and passed their horsemen talents down from one generation to the next. The researchers own observation and participants of FGDs identified three important elements of the annual celebration of the Horsemen Association of Sebat Bet Agaw that can be exploited as attractions both for domestic and international tourists. These are:

(1) The different horsemen talent shows, such as gugis, shimit, segria, chifera, zelay.
(2) Exhibition of unique cultural practices found at different parts of Awi Zone, such as different Awi songs, traditional wedding ceremonies, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, Awi cultural foods and traditional handicraft outputs.
(3) The process of feast preparation, feast enjoyment of the members of the association and the closing ceremony of the feast and the whole celebration.

Therefore, in order to use this celebration as tourist attraction, generating brief information on the genesis of the Horsemen Association of Sebat Bet Agew is important. According to informants, the major spirit that instigated the foundation of Horsemen Association of Sebat Bet Agaw was Ethiopian victory at Adwa over the Italian invaders in 1896. Apart from the involvement of Ethiopians from all over the country, horses were reported to have deployed to transport logistics, to exchange information and to fight against the enemy. It is also reported that St. George’s Arc of the Covenant and the clergy were said to have marched to the war front together with Emperor Minlik II. As a matter of fact, there is a strong belief on the Ethiopian side that the victory of Adwa on Yekatit 23 1888 Ethiopia Calendar (2 March 1896) was scored not only by the heroic struggle of the Ethiopians but also by the role of St. George’s Arc of the Covenant. Like that of the Adwa period, in the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935/36–1941), Ethiopians who confronted the enemy through guerrilla warfare were said to have used horses to transport logistics and for speedy exchange of information.

According to informants, since Agaw Meder (the present Awi Zone) was the home of large number of horses and horsemen, a year after the liberation of Ethiopia from fascist occupation, Agaw patriots were said to have collected the horsemen of the locality and agreed to establish an association of horsemen to remind the role of St. George’s Arc of the Covenant, which is symbolized by horseman, in the fight against the enemy. Thus, Horsemen Association of Sebat Bet Agaw was established in 1942 and the members of the association continued to celebrate St. George’s day of 23 monthly and annually with a feast. This association also became symbol of Ethiopian patriotism. It was organized at wereda, deputy wereda and kebele levels and named based on the spirit of the Seven Agaw brothers who were said to have come from Lasta/Sekota and created settlement in the former Agaw Meder and Metekal Awrajas. These days, this association is structured at four different levels namely at kebele, qetena, wereda and zonal levels. At each level of structure, there are ten executive bodies having different responsibilities within the association.

| Name of the Wereda | Name of the church | Date of annual celebration |
|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Guagusa Shikudad   | Tilili Zebarruk     | Tir 13/January 21            |
|                    | Amberra Mariam     | Tir 21/January 29           |
|                    | Wanjela Gebriel    | Tahisas 19/December 27      |
|                    | Chiranta Mariam    | Tir 21/January 29           |
|                    | Askuna Giorgise    | Tir 19/January 27           |
|                    | Marita Abo         | Tir 5/January 13            |

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5. Major challenges to the development of horse culture and horse tourism in Awi Zone

In order to exploit the horse culture and horse tourism potentials of Awi Zone for tourism development, the evaluation of the existence of conducive environment in the study area for the utilization of the potentials is essential. To generate information on this aspect, field observations and FGDs were undertaken. The participants of the FGDs were asked to point out major challenges to the development of horse culture and horse tourism in Awi Zone, and the impact of those challenges. The results are discussed briefly as follows.

5.1. Shortage of breeding land and fodder

As it is observed during the field work, due to population growth, these days there is shortage of common grazing land in the highland areas of Awi Zone. This is also confirmed by the participants of FGDs. On the contrary, there is an increase in the horse population, which worsened the problem of fodder in the locality. Besides, shortage of breeding land has also an impact on the taming of horses for different purposes, an activity which requires wider area. This forced the people to give focus on mule breeding than horse breeding, an activity which is undertaken for the sake of sale, within 3–4 months, mostly out of Awi Zone. Contrary to the study area, horse culture and tourism development are considered as essential in country side preservation in European countries. As a matter of fact, 4% of European agricultural land is dedicated to horse breeding (European Pari Mutual Association, 2009).

5.2. Lack of adequate know-how on senga horse breeding, management and taming

As it is reported during FGDs, there are several problems in the area of senga horse breeding. Firstly, there is no habit of selection breeding. In other words, the selection of a good structured female and male horses focusing on getting a good senga horse with a good physical structure is not practiced in the locality. Secondly, there is in-breeding of horse in the locality. This created a serious problem in getting improved senga horse in the locality. Thirdly, the female fecund horse, called bazaar/gibara, is not exempted from work all in all, such as farming, loading and pulling a cart, which has an impact on giving a birth to healthy and structured senga horse. This is further supported by key informants which stated the existence of serious problem in the feeding of a horse. As horse is used only as pack animal, there is no effort made to improve its feeding. Horse in the locality is left to sustain itself by grazing whatever is found on the ground. The lodging place of a horse has also a problem. Horses don’t pass the night on clean place free from dung, urine and stone. Literature also reveals that the overall husbandry, feed and feeding of horses in Awi Zone is found to be poor owing to shortage of feed resources and lack of awareness on horse management (Bimrew & Zemenu, 2017).

The participants of FGDs also pointed the existence of lack of adequate horse taming skill in the inhabitants of the highland areas of Awi Zone, as compared to other areas of the country, especially North Shewa. Absence of adequate fodder and wider vacant area in the locality affected the taming habit of the people, because without these making taming is impossible. Because of the existence of problems on senga horse breeding, management and taming, these days’ things became difficult in Awi Zone to get senga horse having good structure. As a result, the local people are significantly dependent on other areas (such as different parts of Oromia Regional State and Ogera in South Gonder) to satisfy their demand of senga horses.

5.3. Lack of infrastructure and equipment

The most important horsemen talent show infrastructures to be fulfilled are horse competition fields. These fields need to have the length of 400–600 meters and the width of 50–60 meters. Besides, it needs to be comfortable for horse talent show and competition with absence of ups and downs, holes and stones. However, according to participants of FGDs, standardized horse fields are not prepared in most parts of the zone (Wotatoch ena Sport Minister. 2001 Ameta Mihret). The researcher has also observed horse racing fields with several holes and stones. There are also materials to be fulfilled for horsemens racing fields with several holes and stones. There are also materials to be fulfilled for horsemens talent show and competition, which include horse equipments, whip, axis, shield and traditional cloth. Most of these materials can easily be fulfilled by the
horsemen of the locality. There are also other equipment to be fulfilled, but out of the capacity of
most of the horsemen of the locality. These are danger preventions, such as head, waist and hand
preventions, to be used by the horsemen during horse racing. As a result, most of the time, the
local horsemen undertake horse talent show and competition without having the latter equip-
ments, a condition which often made them vulnerable for danger.

5.4. Lack of systematic promotional work
Though the horse culture of Awi Zone is long-aged and going back to early times, this culture is not
well-known by most of Ethiopians and the international community. As a result, this culture is
confined to meeting the socio-cultural and economic demands of the local people. It is not used as
a resource for tourism development and is not exploited for local as well as national level
development. Its underdevelopment and under exploitation is emanated, among others, from
lack of systematic promotional work through electronic and print media. Meaningful effort is not
made to communicate with different tour guide enterprises, which are largely operating in
Northern Ethiopia.

5.5. Lack of coordination of the stakeholders
There are different governmental institutions and the horsemen associations having concern with
horses and the horse culture of the zone. The main governmental institutions are agriculture,
livestock resource, culture and tourism, youth and sport offices and departments. According to the
participants of FGDs, most of them undertake some activities in relation to horse and horse culture
but there is no coordination of these bodies aimed at developing the horse management, taming
and the horse culture of the study area. A study also revealed that the existence of marked
fragmentation and lack of cooperation in stakeholders is one of the challenges that affected
ecotourism development in Awi Zone (Zemenu, 2017).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1. Conclusion
So far attempts were made to investigate the horse culture of Awi Zone and its potentials for
tourism development. This study revealed that the inhabitants of the highland area of Awi Zone
and horses are two faces of a coin. As a matter of fact, weredas with highland agro-ecology, such
as Banja, Guagusa Shikudud, Fagita Lekoma, Ankesha, and rural kebeles of Injibara Town
Administration have long-aged horse breeding and horse care culture. In order to get a horse,
which is used for various socio-cultural and economic purposes, the inhabitants of the aforementioned areas perform various activities from its birth up to its arrival for work. For instance, to get
a gelding horse locally known as senga/sengi, some breeders provide special care for the fecund
female horse during pregnancy and after delivery, which include reducing the work burden,
cleaning the stall and providing food such as mowed grass and barely. The phony which is
expected to be a senga/sengi, in addition to the milk of its mother, is provided with additional
food such as mowed grass, barely (slightly cooked with salt), and bars of salt. The Awi have special
affiliation for senga horse than other horses used for plough, loading and transportation, since
they are used in the locality for various socio-cultural ceremonies. Besides, the Awi have also their
own culture of providing names to their horses based on their service, color and behavior.

The study also revealed that horse and horsemen play significant socio-cultural and economic
role in Awi zone, such as in annual religious celebration, mourning ceremony, escorting guests,
wedding ceremony, sport competition, loading and transportation and handicraft production.
There is no socio-cultural event which is undertaken in the highland areas without the involvement
of the horsemen. Plough agriculture is also undertaken predominantly by horse, an activity which
makes Awi Zone distinct from most parts of the country.

The study also revealed the existence of horse culture related tourist attractions that can be
used for tourism development. The first groups of attractions are the various elements of
horsemen involvement in the annual religious celebrations, which include: 1) The horsemen escorting of the Arc of the Covenant from its church to the place where the sprinkling of holly water is undertaken, and the vice versa; 2) the gugis show undertaken by the horsemen after the completion of the escorting of the Arc of the Covenant and 3) the feast enjoyed by the horsemen and observers of the gugis show and its closing ceremony. The second group of attractions are the various elements of the annual celebration of the Horsemens Association of Sebat Bet Agaw which include: 1) The different horsemen talent shows, such as gugis, shimit, segria, chifera, zelay; 2) Exhibition of unique cultural practices found at different parts of Awi Zone, such as different Awi songs, wedding ceremonies, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, cultural foods and traditional handicraft outputs; 3) The process of feast preparation, feast enjoyment of the members of the association and the closing ceremony of the feast and the whole celebration.

Even though Awi zone is one of the areas in Ethiopia having strong horse culture, its development is constrained by the existence of different challenges, which include shortage of breeding land and fodder, lack of adequate know-how on senga horse breeding, management and taming, lack of horse talent show infrastructure and equipment, lack of systematic promotional work and lack of coordination of stakeholders.

6.2. Recommendations
Based on the findings, the following major recommendations are forwarded:

As horses in general and senga horses in particular are playing significant role in the socio-cultural and economic life of the people of Awi Zone, attention need to be given to preserve adequate horse breeding land and improved species of grasses need to be introduced in to the locality.

In order to get a well-structured and healthy senga horse in Awi zone, the local people need to be provided with adequate knowledge and skill of senga horse breeding, management and taming. Besides, efforts need to be done to get improved horse breed by hybridizing the local breed with the improved one.

In order to develop the horsemen talent of the zone, the necessary infrastructure (such as standardized horsemen talent show fields, horse culture training and recreational centers) and modern horsemens equipment (especially head, leg and waist preventions) need to be prepared and fulfilled.

Horse tourism need to be launched by using some elements of the horse culture of Awi Zone, such as horsemen involvement in annual religious celebration and the annual celebration of Horsemens Association of Sebat Bet Agaw. So that the horse culture of the zone can contribute for local as well as national level development.

In order to exploit the advantage to be obtained from horse tourism in the study zone, systematic and timely promotional work need to be undertaken through electronic and print media.

Cover Image
Source: Awi Zone culture & Tourism Departement, 2017

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**Notes**

1. In double local words italicized and written in parenthesis and separated by slash line throughout this paper, the first represents Amharic word (the national language) and the second represents Awngi word (the language of Awi people).
2. The italicized single word throughout this paper represents Amharic local word.
3. This is the name given to male horses which are used for plough, threshing (mud and crop) and loading activities.
4. This is the name given for gelding horses which are loaded with horse track/equipment and used for transportation, guigs (a polo-type game), shirmit (speedy riding), marriage, mourning, and escorting activities. A horse having good physical appearance, well-structured body, straight-legs and active behavior is selected as sengo and.
5. It is a name given for female horse. It delivers a horse (by inter-breeding with a male horse called korma) and a male (by inter-breeding with male donkey known as allelie). A part from reproduction, baza is used for plough, threshing (both mud and crop) and loading purposes.
6. It is a name given for sterilized female horse.
7. Dancer horse without strong interest on speedy running.
8. A horse having the habit of walking hastily without shocking the man.
9. Highly runner horse with the habit of exceeding others.
10. A polo-type game.
11. A cluster of kebeles formed within wereda/district/for administrative purpose.
12. The lowest administrative unit under wereda.
13. The month and date of the annual celebrations can be altered conditionally with the agreement of the local people. Therefore, it needs periodic checking.
14. Walking hastily.
15. Dancing.
16. Jumping.

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