

Exploring the Demand of Ethnic Afar Consumers for Locally Produced Date Palm Fruit in Afar National Regional State, Ethiopia: Evidence and Implications for Ethnic Afar Agricultural Entrepreneurship and Business Development

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to investigate the nature and dynamics of the demand of ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date palm fruit in Ayssaita district, Afar Regional State. Qualitative approach was employed to generate data from 14 participants by combining purposive and convenience sampling techniques. The study revealed that socio-cultural (culture, sub-culture, and awareness), the product factors (Stocking of date, plastic packing, accessibility of date, and quality of date), and the market factors (Traders from different market, consumers from different localities, and market price) were affecting each other as well as the demand of locally produced date palm fruit. The joint and separate effects of these factors made the demand dynamic in nature, and the dominant factors also displaced one another over time. Furthermore, the demand itself shapes the consumption of ethnic Afar consumers. Essentially, this signified the demise of the “Particularists’ (Euro-centric) model/frameworks to capture the dynamics of the demand of ethnic Afar consumers and the rise of the systems thinking based empirical framework. The study also indicated that the dynamics of the demand cultivate entrepreneurial spirit on the side of date growers/agro-pastoralists and enables them to have their own involvement in the date (and date related) business of the region.

Keywords: Demand, System thinking, Socio-cultural, Product, Market factors, Ethnic Group, Entrepreneurship, and Business Development

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Introduction

In emerging economies, investigating the nature of production and/or consumers demand for agricultural products catches the key attention of the stakeholders (e.g. Government) due to its significant role in fostering entrepreneurship in agriculture. This is mainly because agriculture-based business development is regarded as one of the pathways from poverty trap and achieve sustainable development (e.g., Ongachi & Belinder, 2025). In fact, the point of emphasis of the countries and their degree of involvement has difference from country to country in accordance with the relative importance of the product, agro-ecology, and their socio-economic history. For instance, in the case of date palm sector, in relative sense, it has reasonable space in the economy of many of the North African countries (e.g. Egypt) and has created job opportunities for millions of people (Bekheet & El-Sharabasy, 2015).

In contrast, in the east, west, and South African countries, the date palm sector lags behind and it requires the involvement of many more agricultural entrepreneurs in response to address the growing of the demand for date palm fruit and to create job opportunities in this specific sector. In Africa's market, consumers have demonstrated different levels of consumption and utilization of date fruit, which could be related with their culture of consumption, level of awareness about the benefits that derived from consuming date palm fruit and the advancement of technologies they in use to process date palm fruit. Furthermore, in the context of Africa, ethnic consumers have different demands for different agricultural products, as it has been empirically demonstrated by ethnic consumers in South Africa (Mason, 2014; Steyn & Labadarios, 2011; Nigeria (Ihayere & Igben, 2020), Cameroon (Kamga et al., 2013), Uganda (Adegboye, 2016), Gabon (Ndong et al 2014), and Congo (Chausson et al., 2019). Additionally, the experience with ethnic consumers has shown that they have the willingness and the zest to pay more for locally produced/made products (Kibret, 2016; Kuada & Bujac, 2018). Put differently, demand for given agricultural products and their consumption is linked with the ethnicity of the consumers (Hahn, 2012; Banks, 2020) and the extended effect of such kind of demand has the practical possibility for the emergence of ethnic entrepreneurs in the area to tap the market opportunity available. Regardless of all these outlined facts, most of the studies on the date in the continent focused on the production and marketing aspects. And this provides a general picture about the demand of consumers for date palm fruit rather than investigating nature and dynamics of the demand of locally produced date palm fruit. And also, these studies overlooked drawing of its implications for ethnic agricultural (Date Palm)

entrepreneurship and business development.

Similarly, in Ethiopia as in many of African countries, the studies that have been carried out for a decade on the date palm (as of Hussen's pioneer work in 2010) has given much more emphasis on the production and/or marketing aspects of the locally produced date fruit and these studies less emphasis on the demand aspects. In fact, some of them, directly or indirectly addressed about the demand sharing commonality; that is, conceptualizing demand as it is commonly nuanced in the conventional market thought which is rooted in the mainstream economics or by following the footsteps of "Kotilerism" and/or "Solomonism" which assume the demand as it resides in producer-consumers dichotomy. In this respect, the work of Lemlem et al (2018), Hussen (2010), and Mohammed (2015), can be mentioned as practical example. More specifically, in Hussen's study it was indicated that as there is high demand for the date palm fruit in Ethiopia in the month of "Remedan" (i.e. the fasting month of Muslims) and then it declines considerably for the remaining period of the year. But, his study was not primarily focusing on the demand of specific ethnic consumers for locally produced date palm fruit.

In Afar National Regional State, ethnic Afars consumers, in Ayssaita and Afambo districts, are known for having of long-standing tradition of producing and/or consuming locally produced date palm fruit (Lemlem et al., 2018; Lemlem et al., 2019) unlike many ethnic groups in the country. By transferring this wisdom from generation to generation, ethnic Afars were and is using the date fruit for different socio-economic purposes, for instance, they have discovered and used it as medicine, even before its medical and nutritional value was recognized by "Scientific Community" in today's developed world. However, recently, it has been noticed that their consumption of locally produced date fruit has started to decline unlike the longstanding tradition they possess. Moreover, behind this scene, it has been noticed that ethnic Afars date growers have started to commercialize their locally produced date palm fruit in the local market. Therefore, considering the existing research gap, this study primarily investigated the nature and dynamics of demand among ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date palm fruit by developing tailor made empirical framework. In doing this, systems thinking was used as theoretical framework for the sake of capturing the dynamics of the demand of the local date fruit. In other words, this study departs from the conventional theoretical frameworks/models such as economic, cultural, and psychological for understanding the demand in general and demands for agricultural products in particular. And these conventional theory frameworks dominated the literature of consumers'

studies in general and ethnic consumer studies in particular. Hence, the theoretical contribution of the paper is first, negates being locked into “peculiarists” (Euro-centric) model/framework in the process of investigating the nature and dynamics of demand and instead it used systems thinking as theoretic framework. Second, it rejects the conceptualization of demand which is inherited from the conventional market thought that regards the demand as it is always residing in producer-consumers dichotomy. Third, unlike former studies in the study area, this paper has drawn implications for ethnic Afar agricultural (Date palm) entrepreneurship and business development by considering behind and beyond the nature and dynamics of demand among ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced dates in the study area. All in all, it will stretch theoretical knowledge in ethnic consumers’ studies of agricultural products and ethnic agricultural entrepreneurship and/or business development studies in particular. The paper will also make practical contribution by suggesting the intervention mechanisms that will enable the achievement of the socio-economic optimality of the utilization of the date.

Literature Review: Benefits of Date Palm Fruit Consumption, Demand for Date Palm Fruit, and Ethnic Consumers in Africa’s Market

Both theoretical and empirical studies have shown that consuming date palm fruit has played an important role in preventing different diseases as well as providing nutrition which is essential for the human body (El-Hadrani & Al-khayri, 2012); AbdulQuadir et al., 2011; Al-shahib & Marshall, 2003; Jin 2003). Put clearly, it helps to prevent our body from bacteria, ulcer, and tumor (El-Hadrani & Al-khayri, 2012); and also it has been believed that as it has the potential to prevent diabetes (Jin 2003), cancer and vascular disease (El-Hadrani & Al-khayri, 2012; AbdulQuadir et al., 2011; Al-shahib & Marshall, 2003; Jin, 2003). It also provides the highest calories compared to commonly known fruits such as banana, orange and apple (AlbdulQadir et al., 2011). The scientific discovery of the benefits of consuming date palm fruit suggests that it is important for women before, during, and after pregnancy. This is because it contains essential elements such as folic acid, iron, and carbohydrates that protect against weak bones, anemia, and fatigue respectively. In other words, it will play a key role in reducing child and maternal mortality rates, which is a serious problem in African countries. Similarly, this is also one of the pressing problems in the study area, but it is more apparent in rural areas (Hirvonen & Wolle, 2019). Having these empirical evidences, it can be fair to make inferences about its potential use to fight hunger and

malnutrition (Al-Shahib & Marshall, 2003; Jin, 2003) in the African continent. Furthermore, the date palm fruit provides different benefits to the growers, for instance, serving as an alternative means of generating food supply as well as income for date palm growers (farmers/agropastoralists), as has been demonstrated by the experience of the growers/farmers in many of African countries such as Ethiopia (Mohammed 2015; Lemelem et al., 2018), Egypt (Bekheet & El-Sharabasy, 2015), Algeria (Bouguedora et al., 2015), Morocco (Sedra 2015), Tunisia (Hamza et al 2015), and Sudan (Khair 2015), Niger (Zango et al., 2016), Nigeria (Gujja et al., 2025). Collectively, the experience that has been noticed from these countries signifies that as the date palm sector has potential on one hand for improving food and nutrition security and on the other hand for creating for job opportunities for considerable population by opening avenue for entrepreneurship and business development as long as efforts are exerted to meet not only the existing but also the emerging needs as it should be. In this regard, the north African countries use the date palm fruits to produce different uncommon products such as bread, alcoholic beverages, and date juice, unlike what it has been demonstrated in Kenya, Ethiopia, Cameroon, and Niger, to name a few. It has also been indicated that it can be used as a coffee extender or to produce alcoholic beverages, bread, and so on (El-Hadrami & Al-kahari 2012); AbdulQuadir et al., 2011). This difference could be the exact reflection of the culture of consuming dates or the advancement of technology used to process the date fruit in that particular country.

Regardless of this variation, a common pattern shows that the demand for date palm fruit reaches its peak in the month of "Ramadan" (the fasting month of Muslims) in most African countries (Wasiwa et al., 2015; Daher et al., 2015; Abdoussalam & Pasternak, 2015). In the context of Africa, literature on consumption and identity, which have used social/cultural perspectives, has also revealed that consumption and demand for different agricultural products have a deep relationship with the ethnic/social identity of the consumers. Related to this, it was noticed that ethnic consumers demonstrate different levels of consumption and/or preferences for different agricultural products/food items in South Africa (among ethnic Black South Africans, White South Africans, and Colored South Africans) (Mason 2014), the Bioko Island of Guinea (between the ethnic Bubi and Fang (Fa et al., 2002), Nigeria (among the ethnic Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, and Fulani) (Adegboye et al., 2016), Cameroon (among the ethnic semi-Bantu, Bantu, and Sudanese) (Kamga et al., 2013), for example. Additionally, ethnic consumers have shown ethnocentrism and willingness to pay more for locally produced products (Kibret 2016; Kuada & Bujac 2000).

Likewise, the study of Chausson et al (2019), which have used social-psychological perspective, found that as ethnic consumers (i.e. ethnic Bantu, and ethnic Villery) consumption and preference is influenced by their perceived reality and the social set up in which they are found in. The same study has also disclosed that the cultural identity of ethnic consumers profoundly shapes their general consumption pattern. And this finding has partial similarity with the work of Hahn (2012), Sasonoke (2020) and Habib and Hossain (2015) that indicated that as identity and consumption reinforce each other.

Even though consumers belong to the same ethnic group, they have demonstrated different patterns in their consumption and preferences due to sub-cultural differences that stemmed from the means of production and/or the location in which they live. The study that also carried out in the context of Nigeria revealed that the accessibility and the agro-ecology of in which ethnic consumers found in creates difference on their consumption and the study underscore on the very importance of the product factor (Ihaya & Igben, 2020). In similar fashion, the demand for date palm fruit can be affected by the selling price and the quality of the date itself. The selling price of date palm fruit is volatile just like other agricultural products in Africa's market. In fact, the degree of volatility differs from context to context. For instance, the experience gleaned from Ethiopia, Afar National Regional State revealed that the price of date palm fruit is more unstable than that of other crops. Moreover, the traders have monopoly power in setting the price (Mohammed, 2015). With respect to quality, improper handling of post-harvest and/or the absence of well-developed packaging materials contribute to the deterioration of the quality of the date in the study area (Regassa et al., 2022; Lemlem et al., 2018; Mohammed 2015) as the case in many African countries. It seems that the very emergence and convergence of the market (e.g price volatility) and product factor (e.g Packaging) related problem has practical possibility not only to deter/re-shape the consumption but also adversely affects the pace of business development in this specific sector. In nutshell, as it can be figured out from the existing patterns of ethnic consumer studies in the context of Africa, competing frameworks such as cultural, economic, or socio-psychological framework has used either explicitly or implicitly to understand consumption and/or demand of agricultural products, and these frameworks are the exact extension of "euro-centric" model/frameworks that theoretically rooted in "analytical reductionism". And this empirical gaps, recalls investigating the demand of ethnic Afar consumers in due considering the context of the study or through "Africanization" of the knowledge.

Method of the Study

This study explores the demand of ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced Date palm fruits by developing tailor made empirical framework and then draw an extended implication for ethnic Afar Agricultural Entrepreneurship and Business development.

Research Design

The case study method was used to approach the why and how aspects of the demand for ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date and to develop a tailor-made empirical framework. The underlying logic behind this is that it is the best approach to handle very complex and not yet well-explored phenomena (Yin 2015). To achieve the main objective of the study, the following procedures were pursued. Primarily, from the districts of Ayssaita, Afambo, and Gewane, which currently produce date (Lemlem et al., 2019) and cover 85 percent of Local date palm production of the country (Indarcanti et al., 2019), Ayssaita district was purposively chosen as the case. The reason was ethnic Afar consumers in general and agro-pastoralists in particular have long years of experience in producing and/or consuming locally produced date and also the district is serving as the market corridor for other adjacent markets.

Data Collection

In the process of collecting the data, considering the socio-economic diversity such as occupation/main means of livelihood, location of residence, and familiarity with production/consumption of date, ethnic Afar consumers were classified into three strata. These were ethnic Afar agro-pastoralist, ethnic Afar pastoralist, and ethnic Afar urban dwellers. But from these strata, only agro-pastoralists and urban dwellers became part of the study. The reason was the inaccessibility of the pastoralists during the data collection period. Accordingly, the representative interviewees were selected from ethnic Afar agro-pastoralists and ethnic Afar urban dwellers strata by employing different sampling techniques. In the process of gathering the data semi-structured interview was used. This is because this type of interview guide gives flexibility for both interviewer and interviewee in the process of addressing related issues that will be raised during the interview (Yin, 2015; Qu & Dumay, 2011; Turner, 2010; Janker & Pennik, 2010; Guba & Lincoln 1994). Precisely, the first interviewee was selected from the agro-pastoralist strata using purposive sampling techniques considering the cultural and religious knowledge of the

date and the interviewee's experience and then the next potential interviewees were selected by using snowball or convenience sampling techniques. Pursuing this procedure, 13 ethnic Afar consumers became part of the study and all of them were male, which signifies gender bias. This might be due to the reference bias of the interviewees. From this total, seven of them were from the agro-pastoralist strata and the remaining six were from the ethnic Afar urban dwellers strata.

In addition to this, in the data processing process, a traders who buy majority of their production and provides to different markets, was identified as potential interviewees and then a female trader-retailer became part of the study. And for this reason, in total, 14 interviewees were interviewed. In the process of conducting interview, to get the confidence of the participants, they were approached through senior religious scholar *Sheh*, who is well known and respected by the community. Additionally, the interview setup was arranged in accordance with the culture of Afar and considering convenient time for the participants (using the cultural knowledge of the author as a member of the community). For this reason, all of the interviews were conducted either after mid-day (local time) or at night (i.e. the time gap between *Maghrib* and *Isha* prayer). In conducting the interview, recorder was used and this enabled me to pay attention to the explanation of the participants. As the need arose, translator (one of the author's relatives, who are native speaker of *Afaraf* or *Afaragna*) was also used to conduct interview with four agro-pastoralist consumers. This was due to the interviewer did not have a good command of *Afaraf* or *Afaragna* language skill and also at the same time the identified interviewees had not a good command of "Amharic" language skill. In doing this, brief discussion was made between the translator and the interviewer with respect to the list of questions which were intended to forward to the interviewees before the actual interview was conducted. The reason was to have a clear and common understanding about the issue under investigation and to conduct effective and efficient interviews. Or, to minimize potential translation bias that will be encountered in the data collection process. In addition to this, as part of the community, the author has clear understanding about cultural, and epistemological, and frame of translation, which is regarded as a common source of translation bias (Simo & Ahmed, 2022). The length of the interviews ranged from 18 to 65 minutes and the overall average length was proximate to 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

In the process of analyzing the data, by using the recorder, which was used during the interview, the Amharic transcriptions of the data was done and then based on this the English transcriptions

of the data was done. By taking sample from each stratum, the English transcription was translated back to Amharic. The main reason was to check the representation of the interviewees' explanations on the issue. After this, by reading and re-reading the transcription, codes were manually developed by mapping out the chain of codes and re-coding in due consideration of the pattern and the chain of it. On the basis of this process, categories were formed and then the theme /factors were identified, and this was done iteratively.

To make further analysis and interpretation of the data, tools such as causal loop diagrams, and feedback loop tools were used in due considering the theoretical framework used (i.e. systems thinking) and the phenomena under consideration. In other words, interplaying with the proposed conceptual framework, the collected data was analyzed, synthesized and interpreted using qualitative techniques, which is essentially iterative in its nature (Yin, 2015, Jankner & Pennik, 2010). In the process, new factors and issues emerged that shape and re-shape the demand of ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date. To capture these issues, maintain stability of the data, and to refine the mapping of the causal interaction, among other things, the proposed conceptual framework that was based on socio-economic, psychological, and product factors was deconstructed, de-deconstructed, and then reconstructed and reconfigured the factors using system thinking as framework.

Ethical considerations

The data for this study have been collected in Ethiopia, following common practice and ethical regulations applicable in the country. A formal ethical approval was secured from Addis Ababa University

Major Findings

To give clear picture about how factors are affecting and being affected by the dynamic nature of the demand, the list of factors and their definitions in this specific study are presented in Table 1 below. Subsequently, in Figure 1 an empirical framework is presented to give visual picture of the causal interactions of factors that shape and re-shape the demand for locally produced dates and how the demand itself shapes and re-shape other factors. In doing this, the key for the shaded factors and the key for the shaded arrows are presented in Table 2 and Table 3 respectively. Next to this, the context of the study and details of the empirical findings are presented. In addition to this, the factors have been highlighted by using the same kind of colors that used to highlight factors in table 1 below (List of factors and definitions).

Context of the Study

In the process of contextualizing, the context of the study area, socio cultural environment of ethnic Afar, the nature of the product, and the date palm fruit market were considered. Agriculture was practiced by a very limited number of ethnic Afar in the area (Ullendorff, 1953), more specifically, near the bank of Awash River, where most of the date palm trees are found. In this area, ethnic Afar has long years of experience in producing and/or consuming date (Hussien, 2010) and can also be regarded as early adopter of the cultivation of the date palm in the country. Still, this tradition continues by transferring their indigenous wisdom from generation to generation. Culturally, the dominant religion of ethnic Afar is Islam (Ullendorff, 1953; Freetal, 2017; Yassin, 2008; Gebre-Egziabher, 2014), which appreciates the production/consumption of date palm fruit as "Sunnah" (i.e. the path of prophet Mohammed (S.A.W). Additionally, ethnic Afar has their own social organization and tradition that is based on clan and communal ownership of land (Hassen, 2011; Piguet, 2007; Gebre-Egziabher, 2014) and the members have collective responsibilities to maintain the welfare of the community (Hassen, 2016; Fre, & Dixon, 2017; Gebere-Mariam, 1994), which does not allow any member to left behind and is even extended to stranger (Hassen, 2016) and for this reason every member of the clan, irrespective of status, receive a due reward from the common assets and resources (Hassen 2016). This egalitarian social makeup was reflected in relation to their production, exchange, distribution, and consumption (including date palm fruit).

The ethnic Afar have also used their indigenous governing system/customary law *Mada'a* to govern their socio-economic affairs (Hassen, 2011), for instance, related to administering the land and the environment to maintain the ecological balance (Piguet, 2007). But, after the Sultanate of Aussa, invaded by the expansionist and assimilationist, the Emperor Minilik, in the late of the 19th century (Yassin 2008; Puddu 2016, Ashami, 2018) and then by the successive regimes of Emperor Haile Selassie and the **Dergue**, they were exposed to different socio-economic marginalization related to the confiscation or nationalization of the land for the sake of expanding commercial farming (mainly cotton) (Gebremariam 1994; Behnken and Kerven, 2013, Markakis & Ayele, 1986; Markakis, 1975; Hundie, 2006; Nicol & Otulana, 2014), more particularly, the southern Afar (including study area), which was the political and commercial center of the Sultanate of Aussa (Hassen 2011). In such situation, the rapid expansion of the state commercial

Exploring the Demand of Ethnic Afar Consumers for Locally Produced Date Palm Hussien & Mohammed, 2026 farming (mainly cotton) in the 1960's and 1970's attracted tens of thousands of migrants from the highlands (mainly from the north) to become laborer in this farming. On the other hand, it forced the ethnic Afar to move away from the urban space and economy although few ethnic Afar agricultural (cotton) entrepreneurs emerged in Aussa (Ashami, 2018). Following this, the highland migrants *Degegna* (Non-ethnic Afar urban dwellers) gained not only numerical dominance but also dominated the urban economy, not counting other factors. In other words, the number of ethnic Afar as well as their consumer base in the urban area was very limited (Hassen, 2016).

But, after the emergence of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Ethiopian state, they were granted regional autonomy, and the level of participation of ethnic Afar in the urban area started to increase, for instance, in the public service, in which they had marginal involvement (Markakis et al., 2021). Even though this was the case, the former Government of Ethiopia itself (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) displaced ethnic Afar pastoralists in relation to the sugar project. In fact, the Government made compensation payments and provided alternative arable land and financial assistance to those who wanted to engage in agriculture (Markakis et al., 2021). But, this resettlement program was not very successful due to its top-down approach or because it did not consider the indigenous governing system as it should be (Markakis et al., 2021) and this forced some of them to search their alternative livelihood in peri-urban or urban areas, among other things. Due to all the indicated reasons and other reasons such as ecological pressure and temporary drought, the number of ethnic Afar urban dwellers has increased from time to time (Nicol & Otulana, 2014). With respect to the market infrastructure, the former Government (EPRDF) exerted efforts and there was improvement. And this has continued under the present Government of Ethiopia (Prosperity Party). In spite of all these, its limitations still affect ethnic Afar date palm growers when they are offering their date fruit to the local market. With regard to food safety and standards, the present Government (PP), in connection with the ongoing reforms, has developed food safety and standards, which has essential role for the development of agricultural products as well as in maintaining the health of the society (Proclamation 119/2019; FDRE, 2020). It has also aim to increase the confidence of the consumers on products (FDRE, 2020). Its enforcement however has its own limitations due to the shortage of necessary resources (FDRE, 2020).

Table 1: List of Factors and Definitions

No	Factors	Definitions
1	Ethnic Afar Date Palm growers	The values attached to producing and/consuming of the local date fruit by ethnic Afar consumers, whose livelihood mainly based on livestock raising and to some extent crop farming (date palm) and/or whose livelihood rests on engaging in public service, trading, crop farming (date palm) and living in the urban area
2	Ethnic Afar agro-Pastoralist	The distinct values attached to producing and/or consuming of the date palm fruit by ethnic Afar consumers, who are the rural community and their livelihood mainly based on livestock raising and to some extent crop farming (Date palm)
3	Ethnic Afar urban Dwellers	The distinct values attached to produce and/or consuming of the date palm fruit by ethnic Afar consumers, who are living in urban area and their livelihood rests on engaging in public service, trading, crop farming, and so on activities and the member of rural community whose livelihood mainly based on livestock raising or/ and to some extent crop farming
4	Awareness of Ethnic Afar Consumers	The knowledge/information of ethnic Afar consumers that they have about the benefits of consuming date palm fruit.
5	Quality of Date palm Fruit	The date palm fruit that fit for the intended purpose of ethnic Afar consumers, who belong to ethnic Afar and can be agro-pastoralists, or urban dwellers
6	Accessibility of Date palm Fruit	Availability of the date fruit to the buyers, who are buying the date fruits at the local market and/or at the area of production for the sake of consuming (i.e. ethnic Afar consumers) or selling purpose (i.e. traders from differ market)
7	Accessibility of by-products of Date Palm	Availability of cultural commodities made from the stem and/or leaf of the date palm tree at the local Market.
8	Plastic Packed of Date palm Fruit	The date palm fruit packed by plastic bag and offered to the local market by ethnic traders
9	Stocking of Date palm Fruit	The produced or bought locally produced date palm fruit and put in “Kesha”,”Madaberia”, or ”Grib” (sack)
10	Ethnic Traders from different localities	The traders who belong to ethnic Afar or any of other ethnic groups in Ethiopia and buy the date in the bulk from date grower/agro-pastoralists for the sake of selling
11	Ethnic Afar Consumers from different Localities	The consumer who belong to ethnic Afar and can be pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, or urban dwellers and came from different localities and buy the locally produced date palm fruit and/or the byproducts of date palm tree
12	Market price	The selling price of locally produced date fruit in the local market, which is determined through negotiation of the actors involved in the transaction
13	Harvesting of Date palm Fruit	The period in which the local date palm fruit gets maturity and starts to be gathered the produced date palm fruit
14	Out of Harvesting	The period remaining after the harvesting period is completed or having little or no stocked date palm fruit
15	Consumption of Imported date palm fruit	The imported date palm fruit which is consumed by ethnic Afar consumers
16	Demand of Ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date palm fruit	The willingness and/or ability of ethnic Afar to buy and/or use their own locally produced date palm fruit that avail in the local market and/or production area

As of the recent past, the harvesting period in which high volume of date palm are available, started to attract ethnic traders from different local market places and also they approached the ethnic Afar consumers (date growers) at the traditional market *Tuesday Market* and/or at the area of production to buy locally produced date palm fruit. Irrespective of the supply differences in the types of date palm fruit available, the opening of this market opportunity paved the way for them to involve in the local date palm fruit market and this facilitated fundamental cultural shift on the side of the ethnic Afar date growers, that is, from being subsistence oriented to commercial oriented. And then, they started to restrict others not to consume their date palm fruit without their permission, which is against their long-standing tradition. On the other hand, this shift helped them to use the date palm fruit as alternative source of income and they used the generated income to invest on livestock and/or covering living costs. As a result of this, they offered their date palm fruit to the market and they made it accessible (accessibility of date palm) increased. In turn, this increased the number of the ethnic traders who approach the local market and buy the locally produced date palm fruit. In other words, this pushed them to limit their willingness to consume their date palm fruit in cyclic manner or by considerably hindering their volume of consumption and the medical and nutritional value of the date (i.e. its health benefits), which they enjoyed for a long period of time.

Regardless of this, the ethnic traders continued to buy and gather the date palm fruit from the local market and then they took and offered in different marketplaces (including the adjacent markets). In doing this, they used plastic package to offer, which enabled the ethnic traders to increase the accessibility of the date palm fruit in the market to ethnic Afar consumers in general and for those who did not have the date palm tree at all in particular. This also increased the willingness of ethnic Afar consumers to consume this locally produced date palm fruit. As a result of the increase of the demand on the side of the ethnic Afar consumers and the number of ethnic traders in the market, the market price of the locally produced date palm fruit was increasing. The ripple effect of this, made the ethnic Afar date growers to become more commercial oriented and to increase the offering of their high quality date palm fruit to the market and as a result they sell their fruits as soon as they offer them on the market and earn better profit. This in turn made them to continually increase the offering of their quality date palm fruit to the local market rather than for household consumption purpose. And this put them in circular problem by considerably limiting their willingness and ability to consume their quality date

palm fruit, which is the opposite of the tradition they had for a long period of time. In fact, this was not only confined to themselves but also its extended effect reflected on the volume and quality of consumption of ethnic Afar urban dwellers as well as on those ethnic Afar agro-pastoralists who did not have date palm tree.

However, in the harvesting period, due to the market price being low compared to out-of-harvesting period and the fruit being accessible in the local market, ethnic Afar consumers had the willingness and ability to consume more date palm fruit. In addition to this, in a different context, in the culture, those ethnic Afar date growers who have acute shortage of finance (mainly ethnic Afar women), became involved in producing and making accessible the by-products of date palm tree to the local market. In doing this, they used their indigenous skills and knowledge to make different kinds of materials (e.g. bed frame), for the market by using the different parts of the date palm tree. The accessibility of these by-products of date palm tree attracted ethnic Afar consumers from different localities and they bought these items for the sake of its symbolic and/or functional values. Contradict to this; in the northern Nigeria, such kind of items has no essential value be it in the rural or urban area and serve as a good source of income (Gujja, 2025). The marketability of these items served as an alternative source of income and to cover their living costs or to buy the stuff needed in their home (including buying dates) and this in turn pushed them to make accessible the by-products of the date palm tree in the market. As a result, it attracted ethnic Afar consumers from different localities. Hence, the reinforcing effect of these factors continued in this way and addressed the needs of the ethnic Afar consumers who were engaged in the local market.

Even though the cultural shifts reflected its rather significant impact on the consumption of the date palm fruit, still, in the harvesting period, the ethnic Afar date growers had the tradition to provide the date palm fruit for any member of the community who came to the production area while the grower is harvesting her/his date palm fruits. Once they ensured as it reaches its maturity, they began the actual harvesting and stocking of the date palm fruit. Using some of this stocked date palm fruit (i.e. the remaining date palm fruit from what was supplied to the market), ethnic Afar date growers celebrated socio-cultural events such as wedding ceremony, *Melhini*, and *Hulumani* if it coincided with this period. In fact, the ways they consumed had shared similarities as well as differences between/among events. For example, in the celebration of wedding ceremony, *Melhini* (the seventh day of newly born baby), *Hulumani*

(first day of newly born baby), they consumed the date palm fruit by mixing with butter and they culturally called it *Tori*. Differently, in the culture, *Tobani* (the mix of date palm fruit, butter, and meat) was provided for the women who gave birth or for bride with the belief that it gives energy and builds her body. But, in the month of fasting *Ramadan*, they consumed the date palm fruit as it is. In terms of volume, in most of the events, it was provided to the guests of the celebration by using small dish and it was a small amount per head. In general, at aggregate level it required those who prepared these socio-cultural events to have a large volume of date palm fruit and in response to this they hold/stock of date palm fruit. As a result of this, producing/stocking of date palm fruit and the culture (the indicated cultural practices) of ethnic Afar consumers (ethnic Afar date growers) were reinforcing each other. In the culture of ethnic Afar, the date palm has high symbolic and functional values in their socio-cultural events. Because of this, they give respect to the date palm tree. This was practically demonstrated by the social/cultural sanction they imposed on those who deviate from the norm and cut the date palm tree. One of the interviewees had the following to say on the issue:

“In Afar culture, it has high value. If you unknowingly cut the female date palm, you will be penalized to pay a cow. Why? This is because it gives fruits in each year. For the sake of penalty, you will pay one cow. There is the time in which it worth birr 8,000 or 10, 000 birr. This is not to cover what has been lost. Rather, for the sake of its respect.”

This cultural protection served as a guarantee for the growth of the date palm tree whether it had an owner or not. Furthermore, it created fertile ground for the intensification of the organic/natural date palm fruit in the area, more specifically, near the bank of the Awash River. This explicitly signifies directly or indirectly the culture of ethnic Afar and the production of date are reinforcing each other. The ethnic Afar agro-pastoralists/growers used their cultural knowledge/traditional production methods (Lemlem et al., 2019) as has been experienced by the grower in Sudan (Khairi, 2015), Djibouti (Daher et al., 2015), Kenya (Wasiwa et al., 2015), and Somalia (Selah, 2015), Niger (Abdoussalam & Pasternak., 2015), Cameroon (Bourou et al., 2015), Mortunia (Sedra, 2015; Nigeria (Gujja et al., 2025). All these together, explicitly show that the culture of ethnic Afar and the production of date reinforce each other. Similarly, the culture of ethnic Afar consumers (ethnic Afar date growers) has also had a profound influence in shaping their awareness about the benefits of date palm tree/fruits and this positively contributes to maintaining the culture

of consuming the locally produced date palm fruit. In this respect, most of the ethnic Afar consumers explained that they became aware of the benefits of consuming the date palm fruit (e.g., protecting against different diseases such as gastric, intestinal, and liver problems) from their culture and religion. This ethnic Afar consumers lived experience is similar with that has been revealed in the study of El-Hadrami & Al-kahari (2012). In their study they have stated that as the date` has medical value for anti-bacteria, anti-fungal, anti-ulcer and anti-tumor. In` other words, the indigenous wisdom of ethnic Afar is similar with what has been discovered by the modern science regarding the medical benefits of consuming the date. In turn, the awareness of the ethnic Afar consumers about its value helped them to maintain their tradition and also to have a strong willingness to pay more to consume the local date fruit. For all these reasons, the culture of ethnic Afar consumers and their awareness reinforce each other. However, depending on the exposure they had, ethnic Afar urban dwellers, unlike the ethnic Afar agro-pastoralists, showed a willingness to buy and consume the new versions of the date palm fruit such as bread, cake, juice and so on. This created an emerging need to consume the locally produced date palm fruit in this form. Nevertheless, this emerging need of ethnic Afar urban dwellers was not attempted to be addressed by the existing local market unlike what has been demonstrated in Algeria (Bouguedora et al., 2015) and Tunisia (Hamza et al., 2015). Irrespective of this sub cultural difference, in the process of defining the quality of date palm fruit, ethnic Afar consumers defined it by the purpose for which they consume it. For example, for medical purposes, the pre-mature “Arisa” date palm fruit was regarded as high quality. But, when ethnic Afar consumers were found in the off-harvest period, the condition pushed them to consume the plastic packed date palm fruit that was available in the retail market. However, in the eyes of the majority of ethnic Afar consumers the quality was regarded as having deteriorated due to being packed in plastic bags. Moreover, they had no willingness to consume such date palm fruit even in normal circumstances, let alone when they had the pressing need to celebrate a given socio-cultural event. Paradoxically, in this period (off-harvest period), its market prices increased compared to the harvesting or immediately after the harvesting period. The adverse consequences of these two contradictory forces (i.e. the decline of the quality of the date and the increment of the market price), caused the demand from ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date palm fruit to become considerably limited. Furthermore, they did not exert much effort to access as well as consume the imported date palm fruit. But, in the month of “Ramadan”,

regardless of the socio-cultural and the market shift that took place on the side of ethnic Afar consumers, consuming the date has high symbolic and functional value. Moreover, they preferred to consume their own date palm fruit as long as it was available in their stock or when the fasting month coincided with the harvesting period. This preference of the ethnic Afar consumers was associated with the quality (e.g. distinct taste and freshness), market prices, it being their own produce, and their cultural attachment to the local date palm fruit. Stated differently, in consuming products, consumers want to display their loyalty to their country and homeland heritage (Ejitor et al., 2019) and also they express their cultural identity through consumption. Implicitly, this signifies that it will serve as an invisible wall that protects the local growers from the fierce competition that stems from the imported date palm fruit.

Even though this was the case, the joint effect of the unavailability of the local date palm fruit in the month of Ramadan (i.e. the fasting month of Muslims) and/or the deterioration of the quality of stocked date palm fruit and the pressing need they had in this particular month forced them to involve in consuming imported date palm fruit regardless of its price. This signified the shift from being price elastic to price inelastic (or the other way round) is determined by a socio-cultural factor rather than as postulated by the Marshallian Economic Model. The justification of the ethnic Afar consumers was to get "Ajir" that can be put in their Spiritual Account (or to pursue the path of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W)). This was expressed by one of the interviewees as follows:

“In our religion, the date has high value. It is called “Sunah”. “Remedan” is not regarded as “Remedan” if the date is not available (on the dish). After you are fasting the whole day, you have to break by consuming the date. It can be a single date. You will get the “Ajir”. It is the first rank...If the local date is available, they will buy it.”)

In contrast, due to the adverse consequences of the aforementioned factors (i.e., being out of stocked date palm fruit and deterioration of the quality of locally produced date palm fruit, all the remaining unsatisfied needs forced ethnic Afar consumers to wait until the harvesting of date palm fruit to come and the stock started to increase. But, this took at least more than half a year due to the time taken for the date palm tree to provide its fruit once again. In fact, for the ethnic Afar urban dwellers and for those ethnic Afar consumers who came from different localities, it took more than the aforementioned period. This was because they were not only forced to wait until the harvesting month to arrive but also until ethnic Afar date growers/ ethnic traders offered their date palm fruit to the market. This physical delay disrupted the flow of date palm fruit and/or

the accessibility of the date palm fruit and considerably limited their consumption in terms of the volume and quality. This clearly indicates that this cyclical problem was experienced by ethnic Afar consumers year after year and also it continues in the years to come until a systematic and well-organized intervention is made in the market.

Behind and Beyond the Demand of Ethnic Afar Consumers for Locally Produced Date Palm Fruit: Implications for Ethnic Afar Agricultural (Date Palm) Entrepreneurship and Business Development

Considering the context in which ethnic Afar (date grower) has passed through in along with the way how the demand for date palm fruit evolved as the passage of time, implication has been drawn for ethnic Afar Agricultural (Date Palm) entrepreneurship and business development. As has been figured out from the empirical experiences, the nature and dynamics of the demand of ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date palm fruit has paved the way for the emergence and development of date palm business cluster in the area. To put it specifically, the cultural shift (i.e. from being subsistence-oriented to commercial-oriented), familiarity with production and/or benefits of consumption of the date palm fruit, being environment friendly with having the customary law that protects the cutting of trees in general and the date palm tree in particular, along with the increase in the demand for locally produced date palm fruit in the local market have practical potential to cultivate the entrepreneurial spirit and make them to have their own market participation.

However, their market involvement has shaped the long-standing socio-cultural landscape and brought the shift from communal ownership to private ownership of land. This shift coincides with the developed regional government rural land use administration policy, which is intended to solve the ethnic Afar land administration and use problem, that is redistributing the land for the sake of giving equal chance for pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, attracting investors, preventing land degradation and creating sustainable environment, among other things (Proclamation, 119/2009ANRS). On the other hand, it contradicts with their indigenous institution/governing system that gives informal power for the clan leader to administer the land (Proclamation, 119/2009ANRS). Regardless of the existing and/or evolving contradiction related with physical capital (e.g. the land), and cultural landscape (i.e. the shift from subsistence orientation to commercial orientation), it has laid the solid foundation for ethnic Afar agricultural

(date palm) entrepreneurship and business development. But, this does not mean that this contradiction should be overlooked as it will bring its own challenges for ethnic Afar agricultural (date palm) entrepreneurs, who intend to expand their date palm farming. In addition, ethnic Afar women, who are facing severe economic challenges, have found business opportunity to engage in date palm-based handicraft business by using their indigenous skills and knowledge. In doing this business, they offered different cultural products which have high symbolic and/or functional values to the local market. In fact, so long as this receives the necessary assistance it has the practical potential to be expanded and to involve them in the export market as has been experienced by women entrepreneurs in Rwanda, Senegal, and Swaziland. Alternatively, it will facilitate the development of agro tourism business.

The development of date and date-related business will increase the production of the date palm fruit in the region and this will play a significant role in maintaining the ecological balance by reducing carbon emissions (Betemariam & Kefyalew, 2022;), creating micro-climate for other crops (Lemelem et al 2018), and preventing sand and wind erosion (Lemelem et al., 2018). The sustainability of environment, in turn, will increase the productivity as well as the level of income (Innocent & Aaron, 2013; Bignotti et al., 2021); Condor, 2020) that can be generated by ethnic Afar agricultural entrepreneurs in date palm and other business makers, who are engaged in date and date-related business in general. Furthermore, as long as the existing practices of ethnic Afar date growers engage in generating and continue to invest in and expand the date palm farming, it will play catalyst role in accelerating rural development (i.e. in the area where the majority of ethnic Afar are found) by having active participation in the input and output market of date palm fruit as is the case for Namibia and Egyptian farmers. In turn, this will create demand for more labor and manufactured products and then this will stimulate the emergence of date-processing and/or other date-based manufacturing in urban areas by speeding up the integration of rural-urban development in sustainable manner.

Moreover, it has the practical potential to pave the way for ethnic Afar date businesses to expand and become visible in the export market of East Africa as well as Middle East by using their location advantage, indigenous knowledge, and their peculiar varieties of date. In other words, the ethnic Afar agricultural (date palm) entrepreneurship and business development can play a crucial role in supporting the regional and national development efforts (e.g. ensuring food security, creating job opportunities, stabilizing the price of date palm fruit at the national level, and serving as a source of foreign currency). Furthermore, this entrepreneurial spirit will spread to ethnic

Afar pastoralists, who were excluded, dominated, violated and exploited for a long period of time and exposed to multiple forms of poverty (Bevan & Pankrust, 2008), and enable them to engage in date palm based business and to integrate their socio-economic transformation with the emerging dynamics of the market economy. In other words, their engagement in the business sphere in general, will result in socio-economic development at individual, community, regional, and national levels, as has been learned from the success of ethnic entrepreneurs such as the ethnic Igbo in Nigeria (Agu & Margaca, 2025), and the ethnic Gurage in Ethiopia (Nida, 2024; Nida et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, as can be understood from ethnic Afar consumer-producers, they faced challenges that are deeply linked to their vulnerability to multitude risks, for instance, product risk (e.g. date disease, lack of well-developed storage, a short life cycle) and are also linked to the rural setting itself (e.g. lack of well-developed physical infrastructure, market infrastructure, and rural finance), as has been experienced by agricultural/farm entrepreneurs in African countries such as Ethiopia (Desale et al., 2019), Nigeria (Herry & Obuah, 2022; Esiobu et al., 2015; Kolomi et al., 2021), Kenya (Gewary et al., 2011; Ntale & Gathaiya, 2015), South Africa (Mugobo & Ukpere, 2012), Namibia (Bignotti et al., 2021), Ghana (Adobor, 2020), and Burkina Faso (Sogue & Akcaoz, 2018). In other words, the convergence of all these challenges along with the existing and evolving contradiction will create stumbling blocks in the process of accelerating ethnic Afar agricultural (date palm) entrepreneurship and business development and for this reason it requires to be guided by appropriate entrepreneurship and business development path that rooted in the interaction and interdependence of multidimensional factors such as their indigenous knowledge, history, culture, and values, among other things rather than heavily relying on Western discourses of ethnic entrepreneurship and business development.

Conclusions

The primary objective of the study was to investigate the nature and dynamics of demand of ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date palm fruit in Ayssaita district, Afar Region, by developing tailor empirical framework using systems thinking as the theoretical framework. In addition to this, the study has drawn implications for ethnic Afar agricultural date palm entrepreneurship and business development by considering what lies behind and beyond the nature and dynamics of the demand. Accordingly, the study found that the demand of the ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date palm fruit was influenced by interlaced and intertwined factors such as socio-culture, product, and market factors, which influence each other. Furthermore, the demand itself shapes the consumption of ethnic Afar consumers. Essentially, this signified the demise of the ‘Particularists’ (Euro-centric) model/frameworks to capture the dynamics of the demand of ethnic Afar consumers and the rise of the systems thinking based empirical framework. Second, the experiences of ethnic Afar consumers have also shown that the demand does not always reside on producer-consumer dichotomy but also on ‘prosumers’ and this requires a re-conceptualization of demand in the context of ethnic Afar consumers rather than taking for granted the conventional market thought

In practical terms, considering the nature and dynamics of the demand among ethnic Afar consumers for locally produced date palm fruit as well as its practical implications for ethnic Afar agricultural entrepreneurship and business development, the following intervention points have been suggested. Firstly, the importance of socio-economic optimality has to be recognized, and the stakeholders should have a clear understanding about both the desirable and the undesirable consequences of the shift from being subsistence-oriented to commercial-oriented by considering the most possible scenarios. Secondly, the market actors who are involved in the market chain that includes ethnic Afar entrepreneurs should develop advertising campaigns by recognizing and understanding the indigenous wisdom that ethnic Afar consumers possess about the symbolic, medical/nutritional, and functional values of the date. Thirdly, the practitioners, for instance, ethnic Afar entrepreneurs who want to expand their date business by entering the date agro-processing/food marketing have an opportunity to segment the ethnic Afar consumers on the basis of the purpose for which they consume the date palm fruit (benefit sought). Fourthly, the Regional government along with its development partners should promote the cooperatives of handicraft/commodity producers using the by-products of the date palm. Fifthly, the higher education institutions should launch new programs by developing tailor-made curriculum in

the area of date palm at different degree level and produce specialists who have the willingness and interest to work in the area and/or to become agricultural entrepreneurs in date and date-related businesses in the years to come. In doing this, the establishment of social business incubation centers will serve as an engine for economic and social change (Ozor, 2013). Additionally, it is essential to bring sustainable consumption as well as a considerable transformative opportunity space that empowers ethnic Afar agricultural (date palm) entrepreneurship and business development.

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Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report

Data Availability Statement

The corresponding author will make available the data that supports the findings of the study up on the request

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