

## MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE NATION-STATE AND ETHNICITY IN MODERN ETHIOPIA: A STUDY ON THE HISTORY OF THE SILTE PEOPLE

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**ABSTRACT** This paper attempts to explain some aspects of the shifting relationship between the state system and ethnicity in modern Ethiopia through a study of the history of the Silte people. Traditionally, the Silte are a Muslim people sharing perceived genealogical ties. In the early 20th century, the people started to engage in coffee trading between Sidama and Addis Abeba. It was when their trade activity was caught up in the realm of state polity that they obtained the identity of the Gurage, an ethnic group that played a significant role in the national economy. At the turn of the century, the people engaged in the politics of identity under the federal system introduced by EPRDF, the ruling party of Ethiopia. Again, it was when the movement was captured by party ideology that Silte Nationality was firmly established.

Ethnic identity is often created in the divergence between people's activities to make their own living and the state ideology. The endeavor empowering ethnicity in such a context often places the people in a dilemma – they are compelled to choose to practice the state ideology in a faithful manner or to remain in the “wilderness” of local conflict over resources and identity.

**Key Words:** Ethnicity; Nation-State; Empowerment; Civil society; Ethiopia.

### EMPOWERING THE PEOPLE IN AFRICA

The arbitrary rule of state elites and ethnic antagonism are often considered as the major sources of sufferings of African people. Currently, the introduction of a strong civil society is proposed by researchers and by the donor community as the right way to “reinvent” African states.<sup>(1)</sup> Since civil society in Africa is regarded as “generally underdeveloped” (Bratton, 1994: 52), the donor community, with the aim of poverty alleviation, is increasing its investment in NGOs and civic organizations in African countries, including Ethiopia.

Although NGOs have started to display a significant impact by their development activities, the concern is that donors may feel tired of subsidizing them, just as they cut down the aid to African states since the end of the cold war.<sup>(2)</sup> Moreover, it is a challenge for the donor-led civil society to create its own constituencies among the people whom it is trying to empower. Kasfir (1998: 7) argues that the civil society in Africa has only a shallow base in its own society, and therefore proper representation of ethnic movements is more important because democracy means “the opportunity for universal citizen participation”.

The government of Ethiopia has accepted – rather reluctantly – to consider civil society as one of the eligible partners of its development program

(MOFED, 2002). However, it is ethnicity, and not civil society, that occupies the center of the political and economic ideology of the country's ruling party, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Leaders of the party believe that the only way to prevent Ethiopia from breaking up is full recognition of the rights of ethnic groups – or “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” according to their political terminology.<sup>(3)</sup> Article 39 of the Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) provides that all the nationalities of the country have an “unconditional” right to self-determination. Administrative units in Ethiopia were radically reorganized along ethnic lines.

However, the endeavor of “empowering ethnicity” (Markakis, 1998: 139) aroused argument. Lincoln (2000) claims that the “use of ethnicity at the national level as a criterion for territorial reorganization reinforces the likelihood of tension” and that “ethnic arithmetic has a point of marginal return beyond which it begins to harm the system.” Another criticism by Abbink is that the current Constitution of Ethiopia “has tried to reify, to freeze something which is by nature fluid and shifting”, that is, “ethnic identity” (Abbink, 1997: 172).

I am not going to try in this brief paper to examine if ethnic federalism is appropriate as an administrative system, but I would like to explore some aspects of the shifting relationship between state and ethnicity in modern Ethiopian society by examining the history of the Silte people.

## THE ISSUE OF SILTE IDENTITY

### I. Gurage Zone

The current federal system supposes that each group of people shall constitute an administrative unit which is politically represented by an ethnic party. Gurage Zone is one of such administrative units which falls under the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (Southern Region), one of the nine regional states of the FDRE.

The split of Silte Zone from Gurage officially took place in July 2001 (Fig.1). The issue of Silte identity captured attention because the Gurage were believed to be a people of solidarity and diligence. Shack (1966: 37) noted that Gurage culture is essentially uniform, apart from the varied forms of language and religion. Fecadu (1969) attributes the success of Gurage activities to their strong social orientation and to their respect for the material aspects of modernization. In short, the Gurage seemed the last people to be involved in the politics of ethnicity.

It was widely accepted (at least until the split of Silte) that the Gurage consisted of three major groups of people – Sebat Bet, Soddo Kistane and Silte. These groups share a common set of artifacts, technology and mode of production as a people of “ensete culture complex” of southeastern Ethiopia (Shack, 1966: 1-3, 37). Their geographical proximity also led to extensive intermarriage between the groups.



Fig. 1. Gurage Zone

Even so, the diversity between these groups is impressive. While the Silte are a Muslim people, the Soddo Kistane have been followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity for centuries. The Sebat Bet used to follow the indigenous religion represented by “*Waq*”, and converted to Islam and Christianity during the 20th century. Although all of their languages are classified as Semitic, the variation between them is great to the extent that they have to use Amharic as the *lingua franca* among themselves.

Besides, the boundary of Gurage identity tends to be unclear. The Soddo Jida, for example, are closely related to the Soddo Kistane of the Gurage, but they chose to be Oromo when ethnic federalism was introduced to Ethiopia (Markakis, 1998: 140-141). To make things more complicated, there are isolated minority groups in the Gurage Zone such as the Maraqa and the Qabena, whose languages are closer to those of the Cushtic-speaking peoples<sup>(4)</sup> outside the Gurage Zone. The boundary of the Gurage Zone was drawn on such a complication of identities.

## II. The History and the Identity of “Islam”

The Silte are a Muslim people sharing perceived genealogical ties. After the political and economic incorporation of their homeland into the Modern Ethiopian State in the late 19th century, they have emerged as part of the

Gurage who are recognized as the most industrious ethnic group among the Ethiopian nationals. Finally, under the federal state system, they were recognized by the ruling party as the “Silte Nationality” which is totally distinct from the Gurage.

It is believed that the origin of the Silte dates back to the 16th century, when Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim (or “Ahmad Gran” in the context of Abyssinian history) conducted a massive military expedition against Christian Abyssinia. According to the Silte oral tradition, a religious leader called Hajj Aliye who was born in Harar followed the expedition until he was asked to settle in a place called Umnan. He married with local women, and his last son called Gan-Silte is believed to be the ancestor of the Silte.

As I explain later, the Silte in its traditional sense (as descendants of Gan-Silte) constitute only part of the present day Silte Nationality. There are neighboring units of Muslim people who share the same language and the similar historical narratives about the Islamic expedition. They are Azernet Berbere, Malga, Alichu Wuriro and Walane Gadabano, and the traditional word to address the people of these five units (including Silte) is “Islaam”. This word may simply mean “Muslim” in the local language, but more specifically, it means the people who speak “*Islamgna*” (or “*Silteгна*”) the language shared by the Silte and their neighbors.

According to Husein Mohammed,<sup>(5)</sup> one of the distinguished inheritors of Silte collective knowledge, all the five units of “Islaam” should be considered equal within the context of their political tradition, and there was no clear answer why “Silte” turned out to represent all those groups. However, he said, some mythological prestige was attached to the Silte, the descendants of Gan-Silte. Hajj Aliye, as the significant local saint, is believed to have performed miracles before his death. The legend goes that his *baraka* (benediction) was transmitted when his vomit was given to Gan-Silte.<sup>(6)</sup> It is also said that Gan-Silte was given his father’s spear with the words of blessing so that he could be the leader of warfare to obtain land. Warfare over land and water was common practice between the Silte and the surrounding groups (Sebat Bet, Kistane and Arsi Oromo) before the end of 19th century.

## FORMATION OF MODERN ETHIOPIAN STATE AND ETHNIC GURAGE

### I. Silte and Coffee Trade in Sidama

Historical settings for the Silte and the neighboring people changed drastically after the Southern Conquest by Menelik II. The homeland of the Silte was also put under the authority of the Ethiopian Empire in 1888 soon after the alliance of Qabena, Sebat Bet and the Silte (Islaam) was defeated by Ras Gobena, one of Menelik’s generals.

*Neftegna* or armed northern (mostly Amhara) settlers built towns throughout

the newly conquered South to exercise administrative and economic control over the people. Ironically, this change enabled the Silte to expand the geographical and economic sphere of their livelihood. Since the presence of *neftegna* provided security of travel across the southern part of Ethiopia, the Silte started to build their own commercial network connecting Addis Abeba and towns in the South. Many Silte men and women departed from their homeland in search of fertile land and trade opportunities. Among their destinations was a town called Dande, which was located on a ridge of hills in Sidama Province (*Awraja*), or the present-day Sidama Zone. I conducted interviews in Sidama with elders of Silte, Sidama and Amhara origin. They recounted that several Silte pioneers started to visit Dande in the early 20th century.<sup>(7)</sup>

By the 1930's, the Silte were playing important roles in Sidama coffee markets and established the trade route up to Addis Abeba. Dande town in those days had two quarters (*sefer*) and two marketplaces (*gebeya*) that were connected by a stone-paved passage. One of the quarters between the local administration office (*tsifat bet*) and the church (*Kidus Giyorgis Bete Kristiyan*) was *Neftegna Sefer* which was occupied mainly by Christian Amhara settlers. On the other hand, the Merchant Quarter (*Negade Sefer*) around the mosque was occupied by the Silte and other Muslim immigrants from Wello and Jimma. Between those quarters was Dande's main marketplace, *YeNadew Gebeya*, which was named after a local administrator.

On market days, Silte women used to sit in the marketplace with scales in front of them to purchase coffee from "native"<sup>(8)</sup> farmers. There were also Silte



Fig. 2. Coffee Trade Route during 1930's

men who brought coffee to the market from rural villages where they purchased coffee from farmers. Such traders were called *sebsabi*. Coffee collected locally by women and *sebsabi* traders was resold to *asmachi* traders who brought the coffee to Addis Abeba. In addition, *delala* or brokers, used to prowl around the market in the hope of making a deal by breaking into the transactions.

Sidama coffee was transported to Addis Abeba on the backs of mules until highways were constructed during the period of the Italian occupation (1936-41). According to Silte elders, caravans departed from Dande town, marched through some Sidama rural centers where they were joined by fellow merchants and their mules, then went down to the lowland which is home to pastoralists. The caravan was armed with guns since its relationship with pastoralists was generally hostile. The caravan proceeded through the home villages of the Silte (present day Silte Zone), and finally reached Addis Abeba after more than a month's journey (Fig. 2). At the destination of *asmachi* traders their coffee was usually brought into the storehouses of a foreign trading company, A. Besse and Co. (Ethiopia) Ltd., which was known as "*Bis Kampani*" to Ethiopians. It was one of the major *laki* or exporters of Ethiopian coffee at the time. Sherif (1985) reports that many of the foremen and casual laborers who worked for the storehouses of *Bis Kampani* were also Silte men who migrated to Addis Abeba.

During the 1930's the Silte traders played leading roles in the local markets of Sidama and on the trade route to Addis Abeba (and they also shared a marginal role in the export business). The process resulted in a clear division of labor between the Sidama "natives" who engaged in coffee production and the Silte who engaged predominantly in the coffee trade. One of the Silte elders who lives in Sidama recalls that time as "*yetigab zemen*" or the days of satisfaction, when the children were brought up with "honey and butter" and even a head of goat was "unworthy" for their common dinner.<sup>(9)</sup> The prosperity was, of course, achieved largely at the cost of the "native" Sidama peasants.

## II. Gurage and the National Economy of Ethiopia

The establishment of the Sidama coffee trade route did not only contribute to the prosperity of Silte traders. Coffee, as the major export item, also had significance in the context of the national economy of the modern state of Ethiopia in its formative years (McClellan, 1986). The author of *Evidences of Silte National Identity* (a book written in Amharic and published after the split of Silte Zone) advocates that the Silte people made a valuable contribution through their commercial activities "in relieving the country from commercial and economic dependency". And he admits, at the same time, that the achievement "is known to the Ethiopian people and its history in the name of Gurage" (Abdulfetah, 2002: 89).

There is evidence that the Silte once shared the Gurage identity with the other groups such as Sebat Bet and Soddo Kistane. In 1955, the Gurage Exhibition was organized as part of an international exposition held in Addis Abeba to celebrate Emperor Haile Selasse's Silver Jubilee. The exhibition was prepared

by the elders and educated youth from various groups of the Gurage, including those from the Silte. The brochure issued by the Gurage Exhibition Committee claims that “the root of the Gurage tribe is one”, although they later took different names. It also claims that “the Gurage people contribute much to the central market of Ethiopia by bringing in all sorts of merchandise such as coffee ...etc” (Gurage Exhibition Committee, 1955: 8, 13).

The significance of being Gurage in 20th century Ethiopian society is illustrated most adequately by Bahru (2002: 197), who wrote that “the expatriate domination of trade met a serious challenge from a class of national traders... most notably the Gurage traders. Their displacement of Yemenite Arabs, who had earlier dominated retail trade, remains a remarkable example of national enterprise”.

“National traders” in this context should not simply mean the traders who have Ethiopian citizenship. They were the people of diligence who contributed to building the solid national economy which was expected to enable Ethiopia to emerge as a strong nation-state. Being a Gurage in those days did not necessarily mean that he/she belonged to a group that shared genealogical, linguistic or cultural ties in the strict sense. The Gurage could be understood as something actually reifying the image of the economic aspect of “prospective citizens” of Ethiopia as a nation-state.

The first written Constitution of Ethiopia, which was proclaimed in 1931, declared that “[a]ll the natives of Ethiopia, subjects of the Empire, form together the Ethiopian nation”.<sup>(10)</sup> It was the strong belief of Ethiopian elites of the time that the state needed a unitary nation so that it could survive in rivalry with external threats. Fecadu (1973: 2) noted that the “basic concern of social development in African states is national integration”, and that “African modern elites have wished the instant death of tribal differences”. He also expressed his views that the Gurage might play a leading role towards national integration (Fecadu, 1969).

There was little incentive in those days for the Silte or the people of “Islam” to claim their own identity as something separate from the Gurage. Being traders who were deeply committed to the national economy of Ethiopia, they were recognized as the Gurage, and not as “Islam”, a people who emerged from the 16th century military expedition that nearly ruined the Abyssinian Empire.

## ETHNIC FEDERALISM AND THE SILTE POLITICAL MOVEMENT

### I. Coffee Trade and the Sidama Nationality

There is a well-known Amharic saying which states that “there is no place (in Ethiopia) not yet reached by the Gurage and Land Rovers”. Such a statement implicitly assumes that the Gurage’s entitlement to conduct trade in every corner of the country would not be challenged. The historical basis for such an

assumption – building of the nation-state and its national economy – was lost under the current Federal Constitution.

Article 43 of the Federal Constitution ensures the right to sustainable development for all the “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” of the country. The EPRDF advocates that equal participation of all the nationalities of Ethiopia is the only way to galvanize people to economic development.<sup>(11)</sup> The party’s ideology is represented by the words “*abiyotawi demokrasi*” or revolutionary democracy, and those ethnic groups politically mobilized to its goal are considered as the revolutionary democratic forces. For the EPRDF, “nationalities” are the key forces to promote its development strategy.

Under the polity of ethnic federalism it is justified that the production and trade of coffee in Sidama shall serve, above all things, for the benefit of the Sidama people. They are now recognized as the Sidama Nationality, whose political interests are represented by their own party, the Sidama People’s Democratic Organization (SPDO). The SPDO is the ruling party of Sidama Zone, one of the administrative units that constitute the FDRE. On the other hand, the hike in coffee prices during the mid-1990’s gave birth to a band of wealthy coffee traders of Sidama origin. Faced by the deterioration of the global coffee market in the consequent years, they formed the Sidama Coffee Traders Society to share information on coffee prices and to stabilize their profit. At the same time, the Cooperatives Office of the Southern Region supports the activities of the Sidama Coffee Producers Cooperatives Union which is established by Sidama farmers.

Such a situation sharply contrasts with the status of the Sidama during the imperial era when their occupation was virtually confined to being farmers and when they were addressed as “natives” by the settlers and traders. And through the same process of federalization, the historical conjugation of the Gurage with the state economy was eroded considerably both in theory and in practice.

## II. The Political Movement of Silte

The historical setting that supported modern Gurage identity was lost, and the identity is now exposed to the internal diversity of their own society and to the politics of the nationalities. It was soon after the EPRDF assumed power in Addis Abeba, that the Silte Azarnet Malga Walane Gadabano Peoples’ Democratic Party was established in 1992. Its name was a simple apposition of some traditional groups that used to share traditional “Islam” identity. It was their belief that the Gurage Zone administration neglected the development needs of the Silte people, and their aim was to seek for recognition of their own identity through negotiation with the EPRDF.

The party changed its name to the Silte People’s Democratic Unity Party (SPDUP) as the movement went into direct confrontation with the Gurage People’s Revolutionary Democratic Movement (GPRDM), the ruling party of Gurage Zone. Silte politicians published a monthly paper titled “*Sojat*” (meaning “dawn” in their own language) to illuminate the cultural and historical iden-

tity of the Silte. On the other hand, the Gurage ruling party published a book titled “*Gogot*” (alliance) to advocate the idea of unitary Gurage Nationality. “*Gogot*” claimed that the Silte could be considered as part of Gurage based on cultural similarity as explained by Shack (1966) and on the fact of extensive intermarriage between Silte and the other groups of the Gurage. The Silte advocates retorted by pointing out that their language (*Silteigna*) was very different from that of Sebat Bet and of Soddo Kistane, and that they had a unique history that was not shared by the Gurage.

### III. The Intervention of the EPRDF

The EPRDF saw the Silte political movement as local strife to be kept down, at least during its initial stage. The party explains in its periodical brochure, “*Tehadso*”, explains that the Silte nationalism was “mishandled” by the EPRDF because the party feared that “it might lead to the break-up of the Gurage people”.<sup>(12)</sup>

A conference was arranged in September 1997 at Butajira to discuss the issue of Silte identity, and 961 speakers of *Silteigna* were elected as representatives to the conference. After three days of argument, they voted to determine if the Silte is part of the Gurage or not. Of 927 votes, 781 were for the unity of Gurage, and 146 abstained. None of the votes supported the Silte identity. The SPDUP announced that it would not accept the outcome of the conference, because the election of the representatives was “undemocratic”. The chairman of the Gurage ruling party declared that the idea of Silte as an independent nationality had no historical background.<sup>(13)</sup> Consequently, the Silte political party split into two and their movement seemed largely disrupted.

But the EPRDF later reviewed its policy towards the Silte political movement. It recognized that there was a strong and growing nationalism among the Silte, and admitted that the party's commitment to the unity of Gurage was ‘undemocratic’.<sup>(14)</sup> Based on a recommendation by the House of Federation, the referendum over Silte identity was carried out in March 2001. The National Electoral Board announced that 416,481 votes, out of 421,188 were for independence of the Silte.<sup>(15)</sup>

Prior to the referendum, another conference was arranged by the EPRDF to pave the way for the establishment of Silte Zone through consolidation of the Silte political movement. The reunion of Silte political parties and the establishment of the Silte People's Democratic Organization (SPDO) was decided at the conference. When the Silte Zone was set up, the SPDO became its ruling party.

The Silte political movement started as local strife within the Gurage Zone over their own identity. The politics of identity led to the establishment of Silte Nationality after it was embraced by the EPRDF. The split of the Gurage and the formation of the Silte Nationality do not simply mean to the EPRDF that the party has another minority group to deal with. While the identity of Gurage is one of the legacies of “past” Ethiopia, the Silte Nationality was born to join the “democratic forces” of the EPRDF. The formation of Silte identity means

that the party's political ideology has established another strong foothold in the South.

## CONCLUSION

The identity of the Silte experienced drastic shifts following the changes of state polity in modern Ethiopia. In the early 20th century, the people of "Islaam" started to engage in coffee trade between Sidama and Addis Abeba. It was when their trade activity was caught up in the realm of the national economy that they obtained identity as the Gurage. At the turn of the century, the people were engaged in the politics of identity under the federal system. Again, it was after the movement was embraced by the ideology of the EPRDF that Silte Nationality was firmly established.

Ethnic identity is often created in the divergence between the people's activities to make their own living and the state ideology. And the relationship between the people and the modern state often puts the former in a dilemma. The people are forced to choose to practice the state ideology in a faithful manner or to remain in the "wilderness" of local conflict over resources and identity.

## NOTES

- (1) Young admits that the civil society is an elusive concept, but believes that the quest for it will lead to reinvention of the states in Africa (Young, 1994: 48). For the official policy of the donor community towards the civil society in Africa, see World Bank (2000) and OECD (2001).
- (2) With the notable exception of the Government of Japan which increased its assistance for Africa – but mainly in the hope of obtaining support for its aspiration to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.
- (3) See "Bedemkirasiyawi andinet afetsetsam lay yetaye gidiletoch", *Reporter Metsihet*, Sene 1993EC, Vol. 4, No. 37, pp. 10-13.
- (4) Peoples such as Hadiya, Alaba and Kambata who speak Highland East Cushitic languages.
- (5) The following information is based on my interview with Husein Mohammed. He is the co-author of Silte dictionary (Gut, E. & Husein Mohammed, 1997, *Silte-Amharic-English Dictionary*, Addis Abeba University Press) and his work on Silte proverbs is awaiting an opportunity for publication.
- (6) Note that transmission of *baraka* through indirect contact is common belief among some Muslim peoples.
- (7) None of my informants was able to provide the precise year of arrival of the first Silte man, but their stories indicate that the first batch of migrants to Sidama appeared in the years around 1910.
- (8) "Natives" (*nebar hizib*) was the term used by Amhara settlers and Silte traders to address the Sidama people.
- (9) Quoted are the words of Mohammed Hamza, who gave me extensive recollections of coffee trading during the 1930's.

- (10) I am referring to the text of “The Written Constitution of 1931” in Howard (1956: 187-196).
- (11) See *Tehadso*, Vol. 1 Nos. 2 and 3, pp. 5-9.
- (12) See *Tehadso*, Special Issue No. 2, p. 10.
- (13) See *The Ethiopian Herald*, 1, 2, 5 and 13 August 1997.
- (14) See *Tehadso*, Special Issue No. 2, pp. 9-11.
- (15) See *The Ethiopian Herald*, 20 May 2001.

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