Continuity and Change in Egalitarian Governance Among the Sidama of Southern Ethiopia

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Abstract
The Sidama are one of the indigenous peoples of Ethiopia. They have developed their socio-political institutions and ethos on the basis of indigenous; egalitarian, democratic, customary moral codes with predictable mechanisms of enforcement. This article tries to investigate the continuity and change associated with indigenous egalitarian governance of the Sidama in light with its compatibility with emergent structures of formal governance. The study used one of the emancipatory methodologies –Indigenous Research Framework. Findings of this study revealed that the pattern of governance in Sidama has shifted from "*egalitarian to hierarchical governance*" over the last 125 years. This transformation is attributed to three sets of forces. First, the incorporating forces since the arrival of Basha Aboye in 1890s and the attendant government structures have strained the old order; second, large scale proselytism from 1940s to date has completely undermined the traditional foundations of the egalitarian governance system; and third, the interaction between the first and the second sets of forces has created a 'peripheral state' whereby indigenous system of governance took a back seat while a predator state with a leviathan proportion became a norm in Sidama for a century. In sum, it is the opinion of this paper that to forge a system of government based on consensus and legitimacy, there is a need for a conversation of narratives between the two tales of governance in Ethiopia: 'the organic old' and 'the imported new' systems.
Keywords: indigenous, egalitarian, governance, emancipatory methodology, proselytism

1. INTRODUCTION
Various forms of indigenous ways of knowing have been time-tested and the world can no longer dismiss these ways as non-scientific. Indigenous knowledge of governance (IKG) in particular, had become amongst thinkers and celebrated by many of its advocates as "the single largest knowledge resource not yet mobilized in the development enterprise" (Paul Richard, in Warren *et al*, 1995:476). Broadly speaking, most of the indigenous peoples' traditional institutions of governance across African states are more democratic and more egalitarian in their ethos and practice than the modern African states' legal institutions in multiple dimensions. However, in most parts of African countries including Ethiopia indigenous institutions of governance are functioning informally along side of modern governance systems (Zelalem, 2012:1). Further to this disconnect, few scholars have considered the importance of indigenous knowledge of governance in enhancing public participation, good governance and constitute pluralistic society in Ethiopian context (Bahru and Pausewang, 2002).

However, though there are anecdotal evidences in relation to the benefits of indigenous egalitarian governance systems, both conceptually and practically as that which promotes harmony among people, very few studies were made in Ethiopia analyzing the benefits of traditional egalitarian and social justice narratives and their relevance in today's Ethiopia. In this line, Jon Abinik (1997:162) stated that "there are as yet few studies of how such structures articulate with the modern structures put in place under the Derg or under the new regime."

Therefore, this study is about traditional local governance among one of the nations of southern Ethiopia-Sidama. It tries to explore the continuity and change of the indigenous local governance systems and their relevance to the current socio-political realities of the Sidama.

2.   A CURSORY LOOK THROUGH THE POLITICAL-HISTORIOGRAPHY AND EGALITARIAN LIVELIHOOD OF THE SIDAMA
Sidama people like other nations in Ethiopia conceive the modern government administrative structure from their historical experience of conquest and subsequent alienation in the past (Aadland, 2002). Here below, a brief political- historiography of the Sidama within the context of the modern Ethiopian nation state is made in the upcoming paragraphs.

The pre-conquest Sidama society had its own land holding system based on egalitarian ethos until it was replaced by feudalism (Aadland, 2002). Each member of the Sidama society was entitled to land ownership where private ownership of land was buttressed by communal land earmarked for grazing and other collective purposes. Agriculture is the main stay of Sidama economy and society. Land is the most important asset to which the people have intense attachment. The different internal movements of the people witnessed over many centuries were in search of hospitable and fertile land. Since then, using anachronistic and labor intensive production techniques, Sidamas are still practicing mixed horticulture and cattle herding.

It is no exaggeration if one suggests, in the process of their incorporation into the Ethiopian Empire state;

the Sidamas have been put in a state of cultural ethnocide. As a result of their encounter, the Sidama, along with other ethnic groups of the south, were culturally degraded, looked down and humiliated for the very "sin" of speaking their own language, aspiring to live by their own tradition, discriminated against for bearing names that could tell of their identity. They were forced to adopt the dominant Orthodox Christianity as a religion and culture to the detriment of their own traditional values and practices which were denigrated. As will be discussed in the upcoming pages, the effect of mass proselytisms on the local culture might have been as strong if not stronger (Wolassa, 2016:277). Economically, they were exploited and led to varying degrees of disownment. Their most fertile lands were appropriated and allocated to the settlers with arms, the Sidama were reduced to colonial tenants in their own land.

3. EGALITARIAN GOVERNANCE: DEFINITION AND INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE SIDAMA

The purpose of this section is to define and characterize the relationship between "*governance*", "*egalitarianism*" and "*egalitarian governance*". *Governance*: Etymologically has its root in the word 'governor' and 'steersman'. It is about guiding. It connotes the process through which an organization or society steers itself. It presupposes an agent or purposeful organization in charge where there is the achievement of a balance between governing actors (Paquet, 1999:3). What naturally follow from governance are the alternative modes of governance either in the form of traditional structures of authority or in a range of public authorities. In this regard the different dimensions and modes of governance are summarized below. The table was adopted from Piquet (1999:4) where he made his argument based on the works of Beck Jorgensen. To make sense to the topic at hand and to better understand the indigenous governance epistemology of the Sidama, the last mode of governance is included.

Modes of governance	Role of governor	Role of citizens	Control forms	Normative bases
Hierarchical	Implementation	Subject	rules	Will of the people
Autonomous	Safe guarding of rights and values	Protected	Peer group control	Standards
Negotiated	Mediator	Member of interest group	negotiation	Consensus
Responsive	Listening	Client	dialogue	Service
Self-governing	Setting framework	Co-producer	Self-regulation	Self-development
Egalitarian	One among the equals	Owners	Social sanctions	A game without a master

Figure 1: Different modes of governance (Source: Piquet, 1999:4)

Governance by its nature (whether it is traditional or modern) "as a mode of social coordination refers to a pattern of relationship that is likely to *emerge* rather than be *crafted* and that is providing to a variable extent the stakeholders with an opportunity to share information and to partake collectively in the process of steering and learning of the organization" (ibid:4). As shown in the table, the role of citizens and leaders range from hierarchical governance to egalitarian governance where the monopoly power of the governor disappears and everyone take part in the dialogue and bring forward each bit of knowledge and wisdom which has a bearing on the issue. Viewed in this lens the governance process in Sidama was more or less 'a game without a master' where techniques of social control revolved around the 'dynamics of clanship' with the absence of hierarchical system headed by a sovereign.

Egalitarianism: Ascribes to the rudimentary principle of equality. It is a belief in human equality especially with respect to social, political, and economic affairs. Egalitarianism also requires that the goods, benefits, or burdens of society need to be distributed equally. Equality does not mean that all persons are equal in their talent or possession, but that each individual has an equal claim to life, liberty, and self-determination (Baker and *et al.* 2012).

To shine light on the Sidamas egalitarian ethos and principles; with a few notable exceptions, Sidamas do not exhibit marked forms of hierarchy in ranking, inherited titles, chiefly etiquette, and so forth (Hammer 2002; Wolassa 2016). Although a total categorization of each and every aspect of the cultural life of the Sidamas as egalitarian could make generalization impossible, an important feature of most indigenous institutions (like the *Luwa, Seera*, and others) adherence to egalitarian values that see power dependent on networks of exchange and personal reputation built up over time. This aspect of social organization is associated with consensus-style decision-making *(Affini)* rather than reliance on positions of authority or elite status.

It is the basic argument of this study that the pattern of governance in Sidama since the late 19th century has shifted from '*Egalitarian* to *hierarchical governance'*. The wars that led to the creation of the Ethiopian empire-state and the historical dynamics that defined its subsequent evolution resulted in national domination by one or

two ethnic groups over the multitude of others (Merera 2002). Donald Levine (1972) in his book, **Greater Ethiopia:** *The evolution of Multi-ethnic State*, based on Hegelian dialectics expressed his narratives as the Amhara Thesis and the Oromo Antithesis, where he described the Oromos as solidaristic, egalitarian, socially-accommodating while the Amharas as individualistic, hierarchical and competitive. His wish was to see a multinational country that has synthesized the socio-cultural systems of the country's two major ethno-linguistic communities, the Amhara and the Oromo. By stretching further Levine's portrait, the same 'egalitarian solidaristic' narrative resonates to many Southern Cushitic people including the Sidamas as they share similar political gerontocracy and systems of governance similar with the Oromos. Therefore, it warrants to argue that the 'egalitarian solidaristic' Sidama are subjected to 'hierarchical individualistic' Abyssinian culture of the North. The broad features of the discontinuity experienced in the Sidama pattern of governance in the last 125 years, and the transformation in the egalitarian creed, social rules and mechanisms at work raise a concern in the face of existing and eminent threats from rapid processes of social change and erosion of ancestral values.

Suffice to mention here, evidences from the field and related literatures reaffirmed the absence in representation and contribution of traditional governance systems in the government machinery while there is still fidelity to the egalitarian ethos of those institutions among the Sidamas. And also, reaffirmed the assertion that, the age-old governance philosophy of the Sidama has greatly shifted from '*egalitarian to hierarchical governance*'. The difference between the prior and latter governance systems in Sidama is that, in the prior periods it is consensus based, more communitarian, non-centralized, egalitarian governance system versus anti-democratic, centralized, homogenizing and hierarchical mode of governance in the post- 20th century Sidama. As indicated above, there is a clean break between these two systems of governance. In addition, as observed by Øyvind Aadland (2002:29) the century old domination, control and marginalization made "the indigenous structures became nostalgic and rather mythological, out of touch with the reality of present day challenges, as a result of being neglected."

Indigenous Egalitarian Governance in this regard is to mean organic social systems which are not hierarchical, stratified and class based comprising all the structures, systems, and processes that have evolved in the course of the history and development of communities to govern them. The old order of egalitarian governance in this context is a system where principles governing dispute settlements, changing norms, rational communication and preservation of moral order are based on consensus, civility and deliberation. These are distinct from formal national governance authorities, which are creations of the modern state.

Though the different egalitarian institutions, ethos and principles will be discussed in the later part of this paper, it worth to state that the social organization in Sidama is changing because of the education, political changes, and contacts with different people from other regions and religions. This phenomenon also affected their cherished values, such as the rule of *Halaale* (truth), the '*republican*' government of elders (Lewis, in Abbinik, 1997:162), the dialogical and consensus based method of problem solving (*Affino*), and the fear (respect) of *Magano* (God).

These cultural and social heritages are undergoing through structural changes and fractured continuities. They are not relics from static past but dynamic socio-political systems. To mention some of these institutions: Social welfare institutions that serve as a community cooperation in times of death, accident and other ceremonies –called *jirte*; rotating labor pooling system for farming-*Dee*; producer's cooperatives-*Kotta*; Women only institution- *Yakka*; Cultural, religious and belief system institutions are some of the major ones (SZCTGCD 2012; Wolassa 2016). In addition, for generations' Sidamas are known to practice age-grade system called *luwa* where the youth transition to adulthood and show their mental and physical readiness to take part in the defense activity of the society. Here below, a skin-depth discussion is made in relation to the foundational epistemology, principles and ethos of the Sidamas.

3.1 HALALE: TRUE WAY OF LIFE

Halaale is founded in the traditional cosmology of the Sidama and the process of 'mediated consensus' called *Affini(o)* (meaning did you hear and did you agree; is a fundamental reciprocity-a working social contract- based on the belief that there is a common interest that binds them). Though, in-depth studies on Sidama folklore and critical discourse analysis yet to be done, preliminary observations show that *Affini* is a dia-logic '*mediated*' consensus not a '*forced*' consensus as Aadland (2002:39) claims it to be. Therefore, the role *Affini* played and still plays in restorative and reparative justice, peace consolidation, structural and direct prevention of conflict is the embodiment of egalitarian living based on civility and deliberation. That being said, *Affini* is a profound functionalist democratic practice by design which needs to transition from fringe state to political mainstream.

3.2 SEERA: AS EGALITARIAN SOCIAL COVENANT AND LIVING DEMOCRATIC VALUE

Aadland (2002: 29) stated that "the Sidama people have their concept of *Seera*, which gives them a feeling of identity, a strong commitment, and a culturally defined ability to debate conflicts and create consensus. This could be a strong asset for building democracy". In general, *Seera* is an egalitarian social covenant and a living

democratic value which has the potential to enhance popular democracy. *Seera* is not a utopian concept. Rather, a fundamental bedrock and social codex where it governs the political, social and cultural administration. It is not also a written procedure but "individuals abide by it because of the fear of breaking the *halaale* and being referred to God, by the elders, consequently" (Hammer 2002; in Wolassa 2016:262).

4. ANALYSIS OF THE TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE OF THE SIDAMA AND THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF EGALITARIAN SOCIETY

Today, inequality is a pervasive element of our life (Baker and *etal*. 2004). However, traditional societies like the Sidamas lived in an egalitarian social system before the introduction of a modern nation state. As noted earlier, the birth of a modern nation state in Ethiopia was violent, hierarchical and deeply characterized by discontent and instability.

Traditional governance of the Sidama people is not hierarchical, stratified and class based social system but 'egalitarian solidaristic' based on civility, deliberation and egalitarian ethos. Wolassa (2016:291) concur with the above assertion: "before annexation into the Ethiopian empire in 1890s, the Sidama society had an egalitarian political system." John Baker (2014) and his colleagues at the equality studies center argued that there are five dimensions to egalitarian societies: (1) Equality of respect and recognition; (2) Equality of resources; (3) Equality of love, care and solidarity; (4) Equality of power relation, and; (5) Equality of working and learning. Though some of these dimensions are not relevant to analyze traditional societies like the Sidama, but these issues are considered to be pillar principles contemporary egalitarians are concerned with. These pillar dimensions of egalitarian societies are based on neo-liberal and post-modern social organizations, but they could be soft indicators to analyze the traditional egalitarian philosophy of the Sidama. Still, judging based on the above parameters, most of the social structures and institutions in Sidama fall into these dimensions. In the interest of making the key principles and dimensions discussed above relevant to egalitarian practices of Sidama people, it is critical to understand the social structures and institutions that existed/existing by analyzing their dispensations of egalitarian principles and practices.

In general, Markos Tekle (2014:114) categorized the traditional social organization and institutions of Sidama into three crucial dimensions: first, the political gerontocracy called *Luwa*. Second, the traditional religion called *Budu Amano* and third, the traditional socio-political institutions, which are charged with the task of regulating the overall socio-cultural and political life of the community.
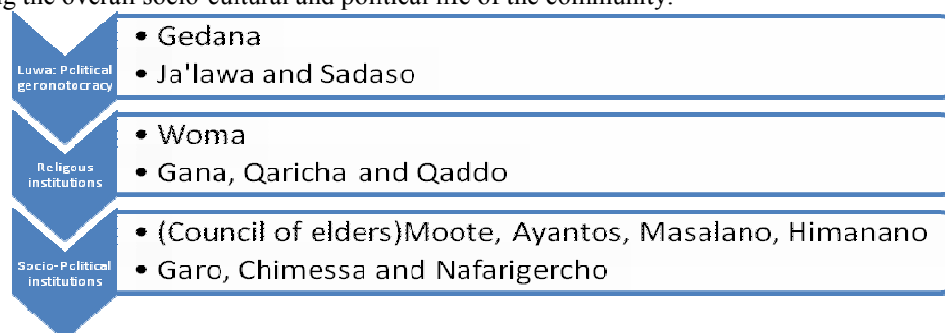

Figure 2: Structure of Sidama Indigenous Institutions (source: Markos 2014:114)

4.1 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

As it is shown in the previous sections, the traditional governance system of the Sidama is not hierarchical, stratified and class based social system. A cursory look at the nature and character of traditional governance systems does not concur with the *modus operandi* of the modern nation states. As a result, the significance of indigenous institutions is dwindling, if not disappearing due to among others, the expansion of proselytism in tandem with urbanization and ever expanding government bureaucracy. In relation to religion, today 90% of the Sidama people are believed to be protestant Christians (Wolassa, 2016). Due to conflicting interpretation of culture from vintage point of the canons of Christianity, majority of the traditional governance epistemology of the Sidama are fast losing their value. There is no debate in regard to the value of these institutions and how best these values be utilized without religious contradictions. This incompatibility thesis is also quite common in the daily maxims of both among the religious leaders and traditional cultural adherents. Therefore, there is a tendency to out rightly reject each and every dispensation of the cultural ethos and traditional belief systems. There is also a bad reading of the traditional system as an out of date and archaic mode of governance by losing sight the bigger picture it played and still plays in promoting dependable governance at the grass-root level.

The modern bureaucracy, on the other hand, instead of taking traditional governance system of the Sidama as complimentary institution, it perceived it as competitive institution. But, these egalitarian institutions with all their weaknesses are legitimate political realities in Sidama. The strategic constructive role these institutions play

need to be looked into to enhance government credibility and participatory democracy by taking the core values and principles of these time tested egalitarian ethos.

In addition, evidences from the field and related literatures justified that "the integration of tradition with modern democracy has failed completely… The dualism of modernity and traditionalism in the Sidama community is at the core of this problem." (Aadland 2002:35). This similar incompatibility thesis portrayed by Aadland could be the case due to the inability or unwillingness of the political elites in Sidama to understand the interplay between the two modes of governance.

4.2 "THE COMPATIBLE MODEL"

It worth to note from the outset, this model is a model in evolution with a strong premise but with a little writing. It can also be taken as 'acceptance and commitment model' (to borrow from medical sciences lexicon). This model is at ontological and conceptual level and therefore it can be considered as a homegrown model with not much practical experiences to be emulated from elsewhere. However, the belief in this model is resolute from evidences shown in the body of this paper. It is momentous to think out of the box and search for a structural shift in the governance regime of the country. In the interest of reconciling tranquility and modernity, there is a need for taking the positive elements of the traditional philosophies of governance and construct it with the dominant patterns of democratic administration. This paradigm is believed to have two advantages: First, it reduces the overreliance of the growing *claimant politics* (citizens defining the state in terms of claims they could make on it- assist the needy, provide public goods etc) with *civic politics*. Second, it creates the notion of multiple loyalties and accountabilities instead of focusing on the rigid linear top-down Westminster model of governance (Piquet, 1999).

Moving beyond the societal undercurrent and the *cliché* of '*the angelic community and demonic government*' narrative, there is also a need for a working compatible model between the state and society. Culture as a totality of human experience has two sides, where the bad ones disappear through societal scrutiny while the good ones need to be reinvigorated and put to use based on civility and deliberation. On the other hand, political elites as the functional arm of the government are the by-products of these communities with all the different ideological twist and turns witnessed over several decades. Although leaders are quick to take credit for addressing economic and governance constraints and the public often quick to blame them for failures, leaders rarely bring economic or administrative success alone. Piecing together the traditional governance and modern state connection, this model is hoped to digest the lessons of history and plan for the future. It is also part of the ultimate search for the golden mean between the traditional institutions and the government; and work on a new social contract between the two tales of governance. Shining light on the positive contribution of the traditional institutions Jon Abinik (1997:162) observed that, "agro-pastoralist societies and their traditional institutions in Ethiopia are '*acephalous*'-more democratic, non-centralized societies without a strong executive power and characterized by more structural equality in collective decision-making."

Therefore, there are two dimensions of the compatible model: The first dimension of compatibility is the re-mix of polities between traditional religion and modern Christianity. There is a summarily dismissal of traditional religion as demonic. "Nonetheless, rejection of all old value systems of the society is what some define as Christianity. This represents a key social contradiction between modernity and tradition."(Wolassa, 2016:445). Then, the first step in this regard is to start the dialogue between traditional religion adherents and modern religious leaders. For example, in this line the Catholic Church in its modest attempt to harmonize tranquility and modernity, it has a very good working relation with ethnic and indigenous political structures which can be emulated with different religious settings.

The second dimension of compatibility is the need for institutional framework between the traditional governance systems and the modern nation-state. Though there is a lot that need to be done in detailing this paradigm in evolution, it is imperative to note that, there is a conceptual bad reading and disconnect between these two entities that need to be rectified. In this regard, Jon Abinik (1997:174) expounded that "If one looks at the possibility of grounding the federal-democratic order in new administrative structures, there are points ---in political tradition of the Sidama and the pastoral peoples of the south and west, with which connections can be made, as they have these strong elements of a political culture of egalitarian consensus-building which cuts across 'ethnic boundaries'."

CONCLUSION

In sum, democratic egalitarian governance structures in Sidama are in a perennial contest between the Weberian model of state building and the indigenous epistemology of governance. Further to this disconnect, so far, a cursory look into the political history of Sidama since the late 19th c showed the normative basis of the Weberian model of nation-state is not neither understood by the general public nor articulated by the political elites. The conceptual parallax between state and government understood as one and the same in Ethiopia in general. The political posture in this critical parallax seems to be in a state of *cul-de-sac* (dead end). The antidote to this is to

work on a new 'compatible' model taking on the establishment, defeating the conventional wisdom and educating the general public in relation to the actual division between state and government. Therefore, the dialogue between ethnic based customary governance models and the modern state political structures should not be a blind agreement but more of an enlightened choice and 'a happy marriage' to see a devolved egalitarian nation state of equals.

Existing literatures reviewed showed that, the incorporation and the subsequent modernization process of the state through new judiciary and bureaucratic institutions; large-scale proselytism of the people; and the process of urbanization, are the major factors for the transformation in the traditional institutions (Markos, 2014; Wolassa, 2016; Hammer, 2002). However, despite their dwindling significance sizable members of the community still adhere to these systems of governance in their day-to-day lives.

The paper concludes: The pattern of governance in Sidama has shifted from "egalitarian to hierarchical governance' over the last 125 years. The shift has been systemic if relentless, and the new is engraved on the ashes (grave yards) of traditional institutions, so that old forms often dying and leaving the space to the new emergent forces. This transformation is attributed to three sets of forces. First, the incorporating forces since the arrival of Basha Aboye in 1890s and the attendant government structures have strained the old order; second, large scale proselytism from 1940s to date has completely undermined the traditional foundations of egalitarian governance systems; and third, the interaction between the first and the second sets of forces has created a 'peripheral state' whereby indigenous system of governance took a back seat while a predator state with a leviathan proportion became a norm in Sidama.

The incorporation of the Sidama into the Ethiopian empire state deprived the institutions independent control over its internal and external relations. However, the declining role of these egalitarian governance systems among the Sidama did not result in a complete demise of the whole system but fractured it seriously. The Sidama have come a long way to experience the making and unmaking of different governance systems throughout their history within Ethiopia. That being said, generations of Sidamas have witnessed changes in their social order and institutions, which they borne the costs of institutional breakdown both in human life and property terms. Therefore, there is a need for re-making and rapprochement to tap into the lost frontiers of traditional governance of the Sidama which are believed to go a long way to see an egalitarian nation state of equals.

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