

# Ethnic Politics and the Questions of Participatory Development in Siltie Zone: Some Preliminary Research Hypotheses

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## 1. The Research Context

### 1.1 Introduction

This report contains the results of the first phase of my PhD Project, which generally aims to explore the implications of the current Ethiopian political experiment in relation to the question of ethnicity and participatory development by examining the case of Siltie Zone<sup>2</sup> (one of the autonomous administrations within the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' State of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia).

In the contemporary political history of Africa, the Ethiopian experiment can be considered as an attempt to practice alternative political projects in a post-modern context in which issues of ethnicity, rights and development figure prominently. Often times the central states of many Africa countries are appropriated by dominant groups. These dominant groups define the national discourse in a manner that excludes a number of "minority" groups. What is new, if one looks into the political experiment in Ethiopia, is that against, so to speak, an "African tradition" of hegemonic regimes of "representation" and centralized and unitary state apparatus, the current political actors in the country officially claimed and designed a political program to "reverse" the tradition. Moreover, the program is aimed at establishing a social and political order that prevents conflict and promotes peace and development. By providing a constitutional provision and

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<sup>2</sup>The term "Siltie" is used locally to refer to the ethnic group (officially recognised as a Nationality) as well as the political administrative unit, which consists of six lower level local units called **Wereda** namely, Silti, Dalocha, Lanfero, Sankura and Azernet Berberie. The formal definition and construction of the ethnic boundary differentiating the "Siltie" from the neighbouring groups such as the Guragie is still an ongoing process which I witnessed during the fieldwork.

introducing new polices and practices, the promise of the present political initiative is to accommodate the historically suppressed groups in such a way that “self-government” and participatory development can be achieved in the new Ethiopian Nation.

This political experiment, which is largely organized and led by EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front) government, can be referred to as Formal Ethnicism. A number of writers use the designation “Ethnic Federalism<sup>3</sup>” to characterize the institutional political framework of the current political experience in Ethiopia. I prefer the term ‘Formal Ethnicism’ to refer to the political ideology as well as praxis in which ethno-linguistic groups are formally identified, territorially fixed and institutionally legitimised. This legitimisation facilitates their political administration through parties that are organized along ethno-linguistic lines.

Recently there is a growing interest, among foreign and local scholars, of exploring and assessing the impact, the Ethiopian experiment has brought in specific local contexts. For example, in his study of the Gambela case Deere claims that “despite a promising start (formal and symbolic empowerment) the political blessing has turned out to be a curse for the majority of ordinary men and women who phenomenologically experienced the federal experiment as escalation of conflict” (2004:9) What is interesting, here, is that different scholars have come up with differing and sometimes contradictory conceptions. The researcher is of the opinion that the Formal Ethnicism of the EPRDF government may have such varying implications in specific local contexts in the country that explorations of such contexts rather than grand narratives may allow one to raise and discuss some concrete aspects of the present conjuncture and future trajectories of democracy and development in Ethiopia.

## 1.2 Point of Departure

Why Siltie? This is a question that may arise when one ponders over the selection of the research problem. Initially my interest regarding “Siltie” stems from two major reasons. First, in the history of Ethiopian political development there is no evidence, which indicates the assertion of an ethnic identity called “Siltie”. Consequently, in a way the “Siltie” as an ethnic entity of collective self-identification (constituting the different local groups) has become a phenomenon,

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<sup>3</sup>Even the designation “Federalism” has been contentious and disputed by some who claim that since it “can be seen as a result of and is maintained by coercion from above” “the Ethiopian polity should not be defined as genuinely Federal” (Lovise 2002: 97)

in the national discourse of collective right and participatory development only after the coming into power of EPRDF government<sup>4</sup>. Effectively after the 2001 referendum in which the ethnic boundary and identity of a group of people, who formerly identified with the “Gurage”, were officially defined and legitimised as an independent autonomous nationality-group called Siltie.

The historical evidence seems to indicate that these people were historically represented in what can be referred to as “segmentary political systems”. Within these systems internal conflicts and co-operations among varying “small groups” characterised the very pattern of the socio-historical dynamics in the region. Even though the role that Islam has historically played in mobilising a common identity should be explored further, it can be argued that there is no evidence that buttresses the claim that the category “Siltie” has ever represented a system of socio-political organisation attributed to a “tribe”. In this sense, the “Siltie” as a form of social ordering should also be seen in relation to other factors related to the internal political developments in the country as well as in relation to external global processes.

Second, the case of the Siltie is interesting not only because the category itself is related to the current discourse of ethnic politics but also because the actors of such discourse claim that the case of the Siltie indicates the success of their political program implemented through out the country. Hence, it has been stated in an EPRDF publication “The rest of the Gurage people needed to be reassured that by raising the question of identity, the Siltie people were not negating their historical and cultural ties fostered over many centuries. The Siltie people were asserting their constitutional right to recognition of their nationality. The exercise of this constitutional right shows the maturity and strength of our democracy.” (www.waltainfo.com, December 24/2001, translated from the bi-monthly bulletin of the EPRDF “Tehaddso”)

The fact that the issue of the “Siltie” is very much connected to the current political developments in the country and that it is used as an example of the success of the ‘Formal Ethnicism’ of the incumbent government have led me to examine the academic and political significance of this socio-political phenomena.

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<sup>4</sup>Markakis, for instance, claimed that “They [the Siltie] share linguistic and religious attributes, but these had never been asserted as the basis of distinct ethnic identity.” According to Markakis “the assertion of a Siltie identity coincides with the politicization of ethnicity in the process of reconstructing the Ethiopian Polity in the early 1990s” (1998: 141).

## 2. The Preliminary Fieldwork

### 2.1 The Research Area

This research report is based on the preliminary fieldwork I have carried out from mid-February until the end of June 2004. The fieldwork is conducted in the Silti Wereda. The specific research site consists of two Kebele<sup>5</sup> locally known as Welia Sidist and Arat Ber Mukerie. Even though I have considered a number of factors while selecting Siltie as my research area, its being adjacent to the neighbouring Gurage Zone, its having the greatest number of population in the Siltie Zone and the fact that it contains the historically oldest rural towns such as Kibet are some of the primary considerations for my choice.

Villages in the two Kebele can loosely be defined as consisting of groups of related patrilineal households in which territoriality roughly corresponds with unilineal descent groups, where a village mostly consists of a group of households which trace their origin through a male line. Nevertheless, in a number of cases a village can include people of different descents. It is not uncommon to find a household alien to a patrilineal group of a village. Such households have stories related to the previous regime's policies and practices that include resettlement programs and land redistribution practices, in addition to marriages and other demographic factors.

The people of the two Kebele (like the rest of the Siltie people in the six Wereda) are mainly Muslims, even though there are some orthodox Christians especially in Welia Sidist, who either belong to the local people (and trace their origin to the Amhara settlers historically called the Nefetgnas) or do not identify themselves with the locals and came to the area due to employment or market opportunities. There are also a very few Protestant Christians, especially in Welia Sidist whose adherents are largely outsiders and a few local converts. Nevertheless, unlike other places in the region (even compared to the neighbouring Guraghe) Protestantism is only a sprouting phenomenon in the area. Rather "Localized Islam", as will be discussed later, provides the major and defining identity repertoire of the people.

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<sup>5</sup> The terms Wereda and Kebele represent formal administrative units and offices as well as boundaries with a limit of certain number of heads of households and population size. Hence while the Kebele represents a lower level unit, with, for example, around 600 household heads as in the case of Welia Sidist, the Wereda include many Kebele such as 34 Kebele as in the case of Silti Wereda.

## 2.2 The Initial Experience

My first stay was in Welia Sidist, which is not too far from the rural town of Kibet. Coming to a place for the first time with issues of ethnic politics, I was met with suspicion and distrust. In fact, being a non-novice ethnographer, I was not disquieted by the initial reactions of the locals. The fact that I do not speak Siltigna had already made me an obvious stranger; and so introducing myself and explaining my purpose was an initial challenge. Nevertheless, I didn't find it good to hide my identity for long, while at the same time expecting the locals to accept me in their everyday life environment.

What is interesting here is that before explaining myself I was already defined and categorized by some people in certain terms. For example, some people wanted me to present myself in ethnic terms. Some others interacted with me as if I was a central government emissary who came for control or other duties constructed in such terms. While this experience in itself has helped me to raise further points regarding the way identity processes and social relationships are constructed, I have introduced myself fairly without being gullible to explain every facet of my purpose and method. Generally speaking two factors can be mentioned here that facilitated progressing with the fieldwork, namely, bilingualism (speaking of Amharic and Siltigna) and the social experiences of Khat (an essentially every day social phenomenon among the locals). Both served as entering points by creating social situations that gradually invite trust and dissipate suspicion.

Within the small town of Kibet it is not uncommon to find people who are able to speak Amharic. The regular Thursday Market is for instance, a multi-ethnic context in the sense that traders from neighbouring areas usually come and use Amharic during communication. Moreover, since Amharic is the working language of the local administration, it is not difficult to communicate with the local government offices and to read official texts. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Amharic is widely used by the people. A real contrast in this regard is the Butajera town in neighbouring Gurage Zone. Contrary to Butajera, the local language is the main language of everyday life communication in Kibet. It is also used as medium of instruction in schools throughout the zone. So in a number of contexts I have to rely on interpreters to translate local texts. It should be noted here that Amharic is less known among peasants, especially among the rural Siltie women. Whether it is because of factors related to the prevailing gender relations or whether it was related to the power relation at different levels and complexities, rural Silti women in my research site speak less (or no) Amharic than their men counterparts.

Another factor that served the same purpose was Khat. Khat is a stimulant plant grown almost in every peasant household (also called 'Celastrus edulis') and

its young buds and fresh leaves are chewed for stimulation purposes. Chewing Khat is both a private and a social engagement that takes place in different social situations including public as well as private contexts. Hence, it is a ubiquitous phenomenon among people of Welia Sidist, whether one is a young person or an elder, a man or a woman, a farmer or a town dweller. In addition, it is also significant in other spheres such as the economy. For example, Khat sales constitute one source of income in a peasant's household economy. While a further investigation will reveal the symbolic and other significance of Khat in a wider scope it has created, at this initial stage, I would only like to note the opportunity it gave me to introduce and familiarize myself with the local community.

A point worthy of mention here is the positive approach of the local officials. As one of my purposes was exploring the extent to which participatory development is the orientation and practice of the development initiative in the area, I had to seek cooperation from the main actors or institutions that assume power and responsibility on the matter. In this regard the office of the Zonal Bureau of Rural Development had been helpful in facilitating easy communication and interaction. Indeed, it was due to their encouraging move that I was able to get along with the DAs ("Development Agents") who are individuals employed by the Silti Wereda Bureau of Rural Development to enhance the productive capacity of the peasants through what is claimed to be "technical" support or "extension services". For the same reason I also established good relation with Kebele personnel without much problem and challenges. Later on thanks to the DAs and Kebele council members of Welia Sidist I was allowed to follow up the everyday chores of the peasants.

### **2.3 The Method of Inquiry and Focus of the Research**

The method of inquiry utilized in the fieldwork is largely a non-quantitative form of inquiry that aims to explore dominant social patterns and virtual experiences using case studies, event analyses, key informant interviews and group discussions. The research largely focuses on exploring social interaction as a privileged empirical "pathway" into the world of constructed social realities in which discourse<sup>6</sup> plays a significant role. This approach presupposes a model of social life

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<sup>6</sup>The term "discourse" is used here in the sense Foucault uses it. Foucault uses the term differently from what is commonly known as discourse analysis. He uses "discourse" to "analyze diverse configurations, assumptions, categories, logics, claims and modes of articulations" (Miller, 1997: 32). As defined by Foucault "discourses" "refers to ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning.

according to which action is chosen consciously and more or less strategically. The social arenas identified for this purpose, at this stage of my research, include lower level social institutions and recurrent interpersonal relations, such as peasant-DA or/and peasant-Kebele encounters, every day life social institutions as well as indigenous religious practices.

The everyday peasant<sup>7</sup>-DA (also Kebele or Wereda officials) encounter was one of my focuses of research because I considered it as a relevant context to explore the implication of Ethnic Politics on issues of development practices. Such interaction manifested itself in different forms and levels. In some cases it can be at a group level in the form of mobilization of peasants by Kebele or Wereda officials for different development endeavours that includes water harvesting, school construction, soil conservation, etc...as well as public gatherings and meetings on land and other crucial issues of peasants. In other cases, it can be an every day encounter at individual level in the form of “technical advice” or extension services, and dealing with matters related to a peasant’s social, political and legal concerns. Generally speaking, however, I have taken the encounters as empirical contexts in which an interface between a state and its citizens is constructed and I have documented cases and stories from the two Kebele.

Such inquiry is based on the premise that these days there is a “growing gap ...between ordinary people, especially the poor, and the institution which affect their lives, especially government”(Gaventa, 2001, 1). The Formal Ethnicism of the EPRDF government, while, on the one hand, it is a political initiative that allows expression of differences in the country, it is also considered by its adherents as a development strategy that claims to integrate indigenous realities at the local level with the aim of reducing or eliminating such gaps. The field work therefore focuses on articulating a preliminary research hypothesis whether the frequent encounter between DAs and peasants in the two Kebele indicate the materialization of a new relationship between the state and its citizens in which there is no significant gap between the policies and practices of the government on the one hand and the flow of every day life of the peasants on the other.

Another focus aims to formulate a research hypothesis regarding the localized religious experiences in which everyday life social values and practices are reproduced through indigenous forms of representations. What is interesting here is that Islam in Welia Sidist and Arat Ber Mukerie has a localized feature that

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They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (Weedon in Pinkus 1987: 108).

<sup>7</sup>The category “peasant” is not taken here to represent a homogeneous interest and, when deconstructed, it should be qualified to include various positions.

includes indigenous values and practices that are alien to scriptural Islam. The religious practices of the region have combined the so-called 'tradition' (often times referred to as pre-or non-Islamic rituals and beliefs) with that of scriptural Islam. Some examples that express this localized form include the practice of valuing indigenous "saints", as in Alkesso Mewled, Assano Mewled, etc. and the celebration of rituals, such as Liqa and Warie, which are unknown to the adherents of the so called Official Islam. In addition to significantly constituting the identity repertoires of the local people, such indigenous values and practices seem to contribute to the maintenance of peaceful social order in which a global religious phenomenon is localized within the social fabric of the people.

These arenas are identified because one of the claims of ethnic politics is accommodating local values and practices to create a harmonious socio-political order in which local forms of representations and signifying practices (Hall 2000) are given free reign without being outlawed by a dominant and alien ruling ideology.

### **3. First Phase Results: Three Preliminary Hypotheses**

#### **3.1 Ethnic Politics and the De-localization of Islam**

The usual view, which is mostly held among students of Ethiopian Studies,<sup>8</sup> is that , since the mid-1970s (especially since 1991) Ethiopian Muslims are increasingly gaining more rights and more socio-political and economic space compared with their earlier political experiences. Even though such assessment is generally true, looking into the case of Silti, one can argue that Formal Ethnicism seems to have resulted in a contradictory political process of revivalism and "de-localization" of Islam at the same time.

In fact, during its early stage, ethnic politics among the Guragie, where the Siltie were originally categorized and identified with, had purposely encouraged and resulted in the revival of indigenous religious values and promotion of local languages. Hence, in addition to the introduction of local language as a medium of instruction, many of the local religious practices that had been suppressed or denied freedom of expression during the socialist oriented regime of the pre-1974 government now flourished because they are given legitimacy and recognition under the ideology of Formal Ethnicism.

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<sup>8</sup>J. Abbink, for instance argues that since 1991 Ethiopian Muslims do have more rights and more breathing space, compared with earlier periods (1998: 122).



Nevertheless, such revivalism seemed to have gradually been threatened by a growing process of what I call de-localization of Islam in which local indigenous values and practices are outmoded and interdicted as illegitimate practices in the eyes of the local ethnic entrepreneurs<sup>9</sup>, who redefine and assert their self-image in the national discourse of Ethnic Politics and global Islam. Literarily speaking the term de-localization of Islam means the emerging trends of disengaging, or to use the more appropriate word, “purifying” Islam (from its localized features) to attain the status of the “Scripture Islam” as opposed to what E. Gellner referred to as “folk Islam” (1981: 114).

Contrary to the official claims of the government, which was imbued with an emancipatory aura, localized religious values and practices are currently relegated (rather than being recognized and integrated) in their significance and in some cases there is a conscious effort, which includes an official act to eradicate them as inappropriate practices. Such a move is compatible with the argument that “Too often what are taken as authentic or correct forms of religion are the representations of priestly elites, interested in what their religion ought to be, rather than how it is actually lived by the majority of its adherents” (Bowie, F. 2000). Whether de-localization of Islam itself has a far wider significance is a point that needs to be explored further. Nevertheless, it seems that Formal Ethnicism, as it is implemented in Siltie, seems to have a subtle effect of outlawing local religious values and practices while at the same time it also encourages the revivalism of Islam. The researcher hypothesizes that there are two major reasons for the outlawing of local values and practices.

Firstly, it can be hypothesised that the incompatibility between the essence of Formal Ethnicism on the one hand and the essential characteristics of the local indigenous values and practices on the other could lead to the relegation of the latter. While Formal Ethnicism essentially promotes exclusion and ethnic discreteness, the ideology and practice of local religious values transcend linguistic and ethnic boundedness. This means as a dominating discourse while Formal Ethnicism in Siltie can be said to “rule in” ethnic boundedness, as an acceptable

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<sup>9</sup>By “Ethnic entrepreneurs” I mean those who consciously manipulate kinship and cultural symbols to attain political and economic ends, namely those who, using ethnicity, pursue politics in the current political development of the country. In the case of Siltie this category covers different persons such as religious leaders, local politicians, government employees, merchants or petty-traders, teachers, high school graduates or dropouts...etc. Some of them may be appropriated or co-opted by Formal Ethnicism. Nevertheless others are independent ethnic entrepreneurs who have less to do with the EPRDF interest.

and legitimate order, it has also “ruled out<sup>10</sup>” or is de-legitimising crosscutting practices that transcend ethnic boundedness. This can be empirically corroborated by analysing most localized Islamic values embedded in the popular religious rituals and practices such as Warie, Liqa and Alekkesie.

The second reason has to do with the institutions of modernity. Following the conception of Barth (1969) who considers ethnicity as a situational variable that acquires political significance in the competition for occupational niches and resources, I argue that de-localization of Islam in Siltie should be seen in relation to the modernization process.

Following Barth, Mozaffar, for example argues, “As economic, social and political changes associated with modernization expands the ecological space, as well as the range of occupational niches and productive resources in it, social actors adjust their identities and affiliations upwards to conform to the expanding ecology and compete for the new opportunities available in it. They do so by redefining the ascriptive bases of their previously local and exclusive identities into more inclusive combinations of physiognomic, cultural and behavioural markers to define more encompassing identities”(1995:33). Similarly, it can be argued that the current political changes in Ethiopia seem to have created different opportunities, and ethnic entrepreneurs in the area are adjusting their images to conform to the expanding ecology and compete for the new opportunities available in it by ascribing to a more encompassing identity i.e., scriptural Islam.

It is this strive towards modernity and resources that led to the seemingly contradictory process of the outlawing of local indigenous values and practices on the one hand and the revivalism of scriptural Islam on the other. What is interesting here is that despite the fact that de-localization is not the intended outcome of the politics of EPRDF government (at least in theory) it is still a phenomenon in the area only because, the researcher hypothesizes, it is playing an instrumental role in protecting ethnic ideology and the normalization of its realm of self-evidence. In this case de-localization of Islam is not simply manifested as practices of disengaging the “true” religion from the “false” local practices, it is also contributing to the creation and maintenance of an intended ethnic boundary being consistent to Formal Ethnicism.

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<sup>10</sup>This analysis is compatible with Foucault’s notion of discourse according to which “Just as a discourse ‘rules in’ certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it “rules out” limits and restricts other ways of talking, or conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it” (Hall, 2000, 44).

### **3.2 The Question of Siltie identity seemed to have a historical and political significance**

At this point it would be important to inquire the ideological significance of Siltie ethnicity. Does this mean ethnic politics has no social and historical significance among the Siltie? How can for instance one explain the assertion of Siltie identity by the majority people, who choose to identify themselves as Siltie? My hypothesis is that even though Formal Ethnicism in Siltie has in fact resulted in a contradictory process of the revivalism as well as the de-localization of "Islam" at the same time, there are historical and political reasons that explain the resurgence of Siltie ethnicity.

Granted that ethnic distinctions in Ethiopia have always existed in the past in different patterns and configurations, one can argue that the present assertion of Siltie ethnicity should partly be attributed to the suppression of local identities during the mono-nationalist trends of the past Ethiopian regimes, if not to the persistence of social inequalities and absence of democratic governance on the one hand and the increasing value of such political practices in the contemporary global order on the other. The case of Siltie should also be seen in relation to what N. Fraser referred to as the emergent global discourses of right where there is a "shift in the grammar of political claims-making from claims of social equality to claims of group difference" that defines the "post socialist condition" globally (1997:2).

Moreover, the significance of the current ethnic politics should also be seen in relation to what Triulzi refers to as (following Kopytoff's conception of "frontier society" which is "a marked ideology of cultural and ethnic self appraisal vis-à-vis its surrounding neighbours"), "frontier situation" that explains the historical survival of Ethiopian polity. According to this argument "the 'frontiers' of the Christian State [historic Abyssinia] are seen as the outer limits of the civilized world, the boundaries within which people interact according to God's Law, beyond which lies the domain of the unlawful, the uncivilized, the unfaithful..." (Triuliz 1994:237). Hence people's name (ethnonyms) like "Gurage", "Shanqella", "Weyto" are created in the frontier situation as perceived on the other side of the frontier (eteronyma). In this process "Culturally, the social 'other' could become part of the collective 'self' only through assimilation and a political practice, which has been variously defined as one of "tributary obeisance" and submission" (Ibid). The current Formal Ethnicism therefore seems to be redressing such past experiences by deconstructing what has been defined as "greater Ethiopia".

In this regard in a context like Ethiopia where there are no established democracies, as we know in the West, the notion of ethnicity<sup>11</sup> can be employed as a means of analysing and better understanding the particular ways in which the questions of different rights are articulated. This will include consideration of large-scale processes of political competition, domination and resistance, which, in the present day, are most often played out with references to the more globalising discourses of the post-modern state. The subsequent stages of the research process will uncover such wider scale processes to give the argument a full intent.

The practical question will then be to explore the extent to which ethnicity leads to local empowerment in which power is negotiated. My usage of the term empowerment is very much related to Foucault's account of power and its notion of "governmentality" (Foucault in Pinkus, 1996). Foucault's notion of governmentality relates to the ways in which subjectivity is constituted within a constellation of powers and the way people are implicated in continuously and permanently governing themselves as an effect of those powers. It is my conviction that the Ethiopian experiment will really be taken as a genuine alternative project to the extent it achieves self-government in the Foucauldian sense.

Such notion is very much different from the traditional political significance of the idea of government, which refers to state intervention. Contrary to the common conception of government, this post modern conception of state considers government as power exercise that does not identify with a negative prohibiting, or violating or dominating force but rather with a productive force that creates or produces opportunities for the acting subjects. In this sense the notion of empowerment can properly be understood as a process that leads to participatory development (Quaghebeur, K and Masschelein 2003: 6). Does Formal Ethnicism lead to participatory development?

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<sup>11</sup> In my research I use "ethnicity" to refer to a locally reproduced social and political construct. There are two conceptions I adopt in my project. First, following the approach developed by Barth (1969) and latter by Eriksen (2001) and Jenkins (1994), I refer to the term to mean a local and enduring reproduction of social differences, which in itself systematically structure social relationships. Second, following Abner Cohen (1974) by ethnicity I also refer to the conscious manipulation of kinship and cultural symbols by political entrepreneurs seeking political and economic gains. This includes the treatment of ethnicity as an expression of group interests competing for an increased share of scarce resources. In none of my usage, however, the term refers to an actual political and socio-economic unit characterising "tribe".

### **3.3 The pattern of state-peasant relationship seemed to remain structurally unchanged**

Analysing the peasant-state relationship during the Derg regime, especially in relation to land management, Dessalegn for instance, identifies two main features, which he characterizes as Interventionism and Statism. "The first assumed that frequent intervention of rural agents are necessary to impose discipline and uniformity, and to insure success in development activity." While "the second was grounded on the notion that the state was the chief actor, thinker, planner, and the main provider of all benefits. It was common, for example, for agents to frequently remind their (often captive) peasant audiences that it was the revolutionary Derg that gave them the land they are farming"(1994:1).

Based on this preliminary fieldwork, the researcher hypothesizes that peasant-state relationship in rural Siltie remained to be hierarchical and non-participatory. If participatory development, as the mainstream literature indicates, refers to the involvement by local populations in the creation, content and conduct of a program or policy to change their lives, if it demands a belief that citizens can be trusted to shape their own future, if it means that development initiatives should use local decision making and capacities to steer and define the nature of the initiatives, then the peasant-state relationship in the two Kebele does not indicate the existence of a participatory approach as claimed by the actors of the Formal Ethnicism of the EPRDF government.

There are a number of reasons that substantiate this hypothesis. First, rather than promoting self-government, the discourse of development in Siltie is dominated by the perspective of those who are not peasants themselves (including politicians and local elites). Hence, peasants have little or no saying on various issues that affect their lives. The peasant-DA encounter and relationships in the two Kebele, especially concerning rural town expansion, school constructions, water harvesting and agricultural extension services which are the main activities in the area include a top-down approach in which the state agents at the Kebele and Wereda level are not responsive to the needs and interest of peasants, but remain to be ethnic entrepreneurs loyal to their superiors (both at regional and national level). Is what is defined as development nothing more than an apparatus of control and surveillance?

In fact "development" is conceived and practiced by the DAs or Kebele or Wereda Rural Development officials as a technocratic process to be administered and planned by the state rather than negotiated with, and contested by, the peasants. As such, it is perceived not as a 'process' of empowerment, but as a contingent phenomenon, which leads to concrete 'outcomes' that demand obligation and

sanctions. Contrary to this the adherents of participatory development approaches<sup>12</sup> argue that participation "...emphasizes 'listening to the people', understanding 'the reasoning behind local knowledge', 'strengthening local organizational capacity' and developing 'alternative strategies from below' (Long: 1994).

Indeed, many of the DA-Peasant encounters in public arenas in which peasants are mobilized to participate in "development" activities such as social conservation bunds or school or small bridge constructions are ersatz participation which can be interpreted as what Goffman calls 'front stages', a place in which performances are enacted in order to make an impression in public life. This means that they cannot allow performance to be sincere or authentic since they are devoid of the 'back stage' places where "private" performances "not intended for public consumption" take place. The distinction between the two stages, the researcher hypothesizes, has a far wider significance to explore the gap between the need and interest of the peasants on the one hand and the rural policy and implementation of the government on the other.

Secondly, there are no independent rural institutions in the two Kebele that represent the concerns and interest of the peasants beyond those, which are defined by the local politicians who themselves are dependent on the regional and central government uniformities and discipline. In fact, there are recently introduced grass root level structures such as "Yemeto Mikerbet", a council consisting of 100 members mainly peasants from different Gots (sub-Kebele). In theory such councils mean voices of peasants from each Kebele in which prioritised needs and interests are articulated so that decision making at Wereda level will consult them for development planning. Nevertheless, as I have explored in the two Kebele, the councils are powerless and unrecognised structures that exist ostensibly without any real influence and significance. Indeed rather than being independent decision makers such grass root level institutions seem to be objects of the state's disciplining and control.

Thirdly, even though local social institutions like Sera and Idir have significant influence on every day life of the peasants, they are either not integrated into initiatives that affect the lives of the peasants or are simply assigned subordinate roles such as collecting contributions or levy ransom on peasants.

It should be noted here that the argument is not that there are no new schools constructed now than before, for example. The argument rather is that despite the

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<sup>12</sup> Narayan, for instance argues, "Poor people call for access to opportunities, decent wages, strong organizations of their own and a better and more active state. They call for systematic change. They want more government, not less- government on which they have influence and with which they can partner in different ways. They look to government to provide services fundamental to their being", (2000: 266).

rhetoric of Formal Ethnicism both at regional and National levels, the very logic of the development pattern that had been maintained during the previous regimes (as a form of “Interventionism” and “Statism”) remains largely the same. Hence, rather than promoting ‘self-government’ which means changing the prevailing scenario among poor people, the researcher argues, the discourse of development as it is practiced in the current peasant-state relationship seems to remain structurally unchanged.

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