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Clothes and Ethnic Identity:

(Re)Constructing Identity through Cultural Clothes as Ethnic Markers
The Case of Siltie Nationality of Southern Ethiopia

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Thesis submitted to the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in Indigenous Studies
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Clothes and Ethnic Identity

**(Re)Constructing Identity through Cultural Clothes as Ethnic Markers:
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Dedication to
My Parents
Mohammed Ahmed/Siltie
Shemege Nasir

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Abstract

Clothes and Ethnic Identity: (Re)Constructing Identity through Cultural Clothes as Ethnic Markers. The Case of Siltie Nationality of Southern Ethiopia is a project which investigates the new trends of “creating” costumes among ethnic groups in Ethiopia, with a focus on the interface between cultural costumes and ethnic identity. The project uses the Siltie people as its case. I am attracted to this issue because of my personal observation of this trend among the ethnic groups in my locality. Following the 1995 ethnic federalism arrangement, many nations and nationalities of Ethiopia started to develop and promote their language for education, administration, legal purposes and so on. Moreover, they began to (re)write their histories, and promote their “traditional” costumes. Along the lines of promoting their costumes, the nationalities have started to identify the color, symbols and signs associated with their ‘distinctive’ cultures. The attempt to find symbolic representations, in some case, resulted in producing cultural costumes with “new” signs, symbols and colors which have never been used on their costume.

The Siltie people are one of the ethnic groups who got a new ‘cultural’ costume following this trend. Hence, the main objective of the research is, to trace the changes and continuity in the ‘cultural’ dressing of the community and examine the incentives for creating “new” costumes. The research examines the links between the newly designed costume and the Siltie people’s culture, history and religion. Knowing people’s reflection and reaction regarding the ‘newly invented’ costume was a main objective of this project. I gathered extensive qualitative data through interviews, focus group discussions and observation and used available secondary resources and other readings.

The intensification in the (re)production of cultural markers in general and clothes in particular in contemporary Ethiopia is strongly linked to the post-1991 constitutional developments in the country. The current politics in Siltie regarding clothing cannot be separated from its long-term quest for ethnic recognition, which in turn is seen as a way to get back to self-administration, enjoying, protecting and promoting one's own cultural values and heritages. Though the costume is elitists’ drive project, it is getting acceptance. If the promotion of the costume continues and keeps its momentum, it is expected that it would be a part and parcel the people’s culture and serve as an identity marker of the group underlining an “Us” and “Them” distinction.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Siltie, Clothes, Ethnic Group, Identity, Representation

Lists of Abbreviations

EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

GPDF: Gurage Peoples' Democratic Front

GPRDM: Gurage Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Movement

SAMWGPOD: The Silti, Azernet-Bereber/Alicho, Melga/Mesqan, Wolene/Wuriro and Gedebano Peoples' Democratic Organization

SAMWGDPM: The Silti, Azernet-Bereber/Alicho, Melga/Mesqan, Wolene/Wuriro and Gedebano Peoples' Democratic Movement

SNNPRS: The Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State

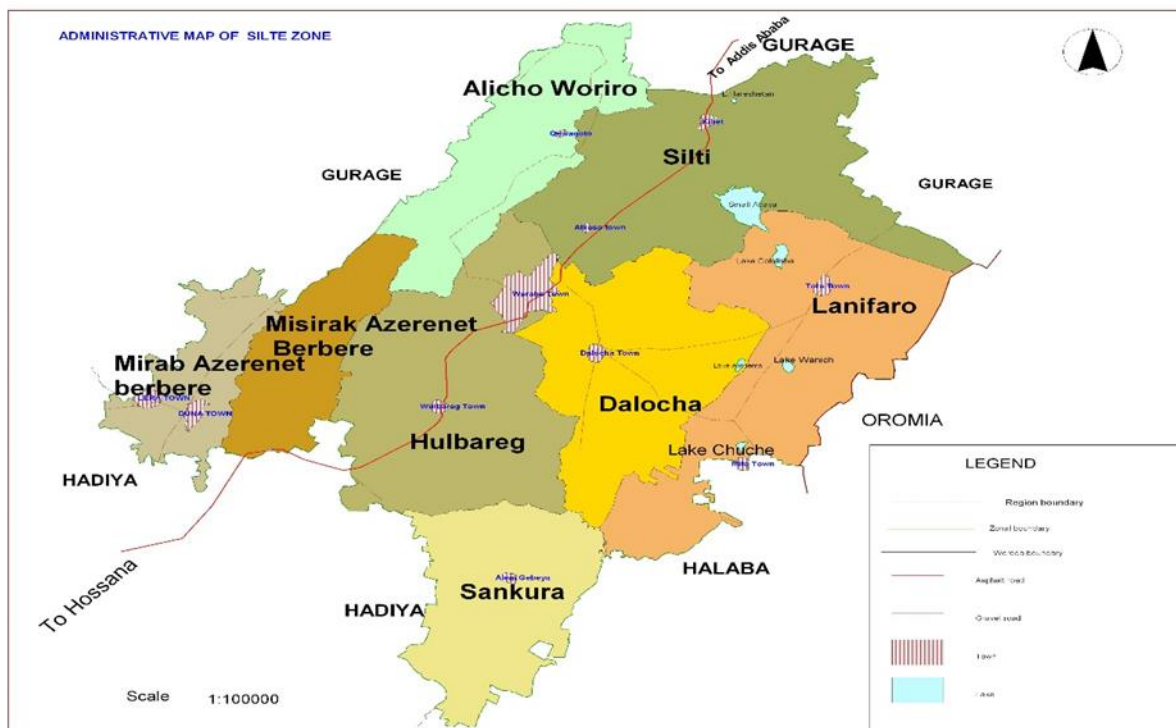
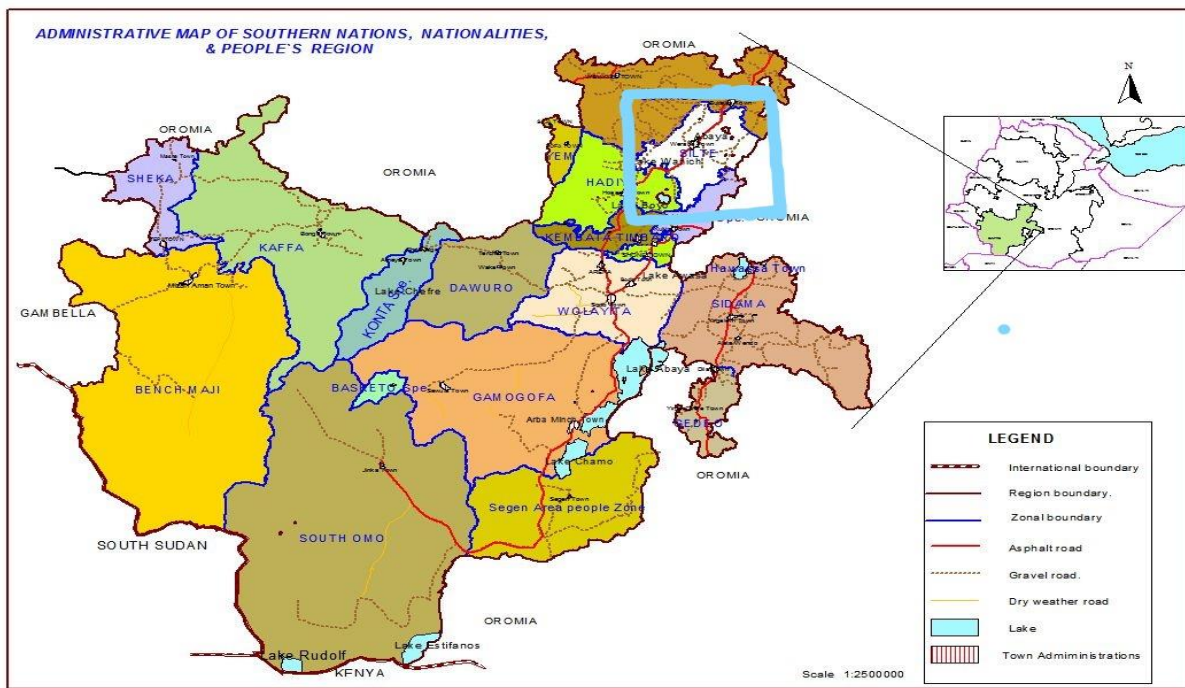
SPUDP: The Siltie People Democratic Union Party

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Chapter One

1. Introduction

Clothes and Ethnic Identity: the Case of Siltie Nationality of Southern Ethiopia is a project which investigates the new trends of “inventing” new costumes among ethnic groups in Ethiopia in representing their ethnicity and examines the interface between costumes and ethnic identity. The project uses the Siltie people of Southern Ethiopia as its case.

1.1 Background

“What is this fake Nationalism? Is it not simply Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy? Ask anybody what Ethiopian culture is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian language is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian music is? Ask anybody what the "national dress" is? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigre!!” Mokonnen quoted in (Balsvik, 1985, p. 277).

This question was asked a half century ago by one of the 1960s Addis Ababa University student and political activist called Walelign Mokonnen. His questions challenged the rhetoric of the then Ethiopian nationalism. Ethiopia is a multinational and multiethnic country and has more than eighty ethnic groups. Some people have referred the country as a “museum of People” while others consider it “a prison of nations” (Gebissa, 2008, p. 336). These two groups in fact had/still have a point to argue on. Their argument is based on the political participation, economic benefit and cultural representation of the ethnic groups. In general it might be possible to put it as a “nationality question”.

Before the establishment of the current federal administrative system in 1991, Ethiopia has been through two strong pro-unitary government systems - the feudal rule under Haile Sellassie (1930 to 1974) and the communist Derg under Mengistu Haylemariyam (1974 to 1991). It was a big challenge to raise the issues of ethnic identity under these two regimes. The Emperor in his rule institutionalized the country into one people, one history, one culture, one religious state though more than eighty ethnic groups existed in reality (Haylesellase, 1997). In this regard, the Amhara culture and the Amharic language together with the Orthodox Christian religion were promoted through various channels as a ‘high culture’, ‘God-given language’ and state religion. This movement and practice not only marginalized the other cultures, languages and traditional belief systems of the other ethnic groups but also resulted in the demise of some culture (Taddese, 1993).

In fact, the Haile Sellassie policy had a lot of critics and oppositions. Mokonnen (quoted above) was one of the 1960s student activists and critics, who wrote one of the first articles on the nationality question, and brought the case to the public. In his article Mokonnen raised the question of nationalities and considered the Haile Sellassie I government's definition of Ethiopianism as "Fake Nationalism" (Zewde, 2014; Taddese, 1993). He argued that the feudal-monarchy system of the Emperor imposed the Amhara and Tigre-Amhara religion, language, and culture upon other ethnic groups. The remaining ethnic groups had been pushed aside in the national representations.

With the downfall of the feudal system, a new regime came into power. A military regime locally named the Derg. The Derg regime assumed power with a brand new motto of "Ethiopia First", designed to promote a very strong unitary and centralized government system along the socialist ideology. Under the cover of "Ethiopia First", the military government worked hard to maintain the old status quo of the feudal system in regard to cultural, linguistics and overall nationality identity questions. In 1991, that is, after seventeen years in power and consistent wars, the Derg regime was forced to give up the power to the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) formed from four nationalist groups. After taking over the power, the front established a federal republic with new administrative structures based on linguistic and ethnic lines to try to provide responses to the quests that toppled the previous regimes, and to try to exercise the "self-administration" system by empowering every ethnic group to self-rule.

The 1991 political change of Ethiopia can be viewed as a 180 degree shift from a unitary system to a self-rule federal administrative system. It was a transition from a single culture to a multinational and diversified system. This change is "...a landmark in the history of the country as far as ethnic question is concerned...because...for the first time the government policy formally recognized ethnicity as a fundamental instrument to 'protect the rights of ethnic groups and as a remedy to past injustices'" (Regassa, 2010, p. 5).

Following this perspective, I am interested in investigating cultural issues currently happening in the country. Among other core changes, promoting and publicizing one's ethnicity through costumes are vital ones. In the process ethnic groups get a chance to promote and magnify their "old" cultural costumes and even some others go farther and produced a "new" brand of costumes to represent their ethnic identity. I consider one of Mokonnen's questions which asks, "...Ask anybody what the 'national dress [of Ethiopia]' is?" - Mokonnen quoted in (Balsvik, 1985, p. 277) - as my point of departure for this research. Hence, in this research, I have tried

to see what new happenings and new realities are coming out concerning cultural dress among ethnic groups post-1991 and I am interested in uncovering the items of clothing and decoration which have been made by these groups to locate their position in the national cultural representation.

These days it is common to see “newly” constructed cultural costumes among a number of ethnic groups in Ethiopia. I have taken the Siltie people as my case study. They are among the ethnic groups which have passed through the changing political scenario in Ethiopia described above. And they are also among the groups which are able to produce “new cultural costumes” after 1991 to represent their ethnic identity. In this research I try to see the reasons and justification behind these new development, and the process and public responses to the newly designed costumes.

1.2 Statement of the Problem and research questions

The pre-1991 Ethiopia and post-1991 Ethiopia represented very different ruling systems; an evolution from a strong unitary rule to a federal “self-administration” system. The post-1991 Ethiopian federal system gives recognition to “all” ethnic groups of the country and “shares” the political power with them which they were denied under the earlier regimes. The implementation of self-administration is in the center of the political, economic and social changes. With regard to culture, the new constitution clearly gives the power to every ethnic group in order to develop, preserve and promote their own culture (Article 5, 39 and 91 of the Ethiopian Constitution 1995).

Following the constitutional recognition, many nations and nationalities of the country started to develop and promote their language for education, administration, legal purposes and so on. Moreover, they began to (re)write their histories, and promote their “traditional” costumes. Along the lines of promoting their costumes, the nationalities have started to identify the color, symbols and signs associated with their “distinctive” cultures. Symbolic representations resulted in new trends of producing cultural clothes in association with the important signs, symbols and colors of their specific cultural groups. This proliferation of material culture in Ethiopia at the moment easily catches the interest of various individuals, like me, to investigate the associations of specific clothes with some symbols, signs and colors of particular ethnic groups. What is more, in some cases, the representation of material culture through signs and symbols happen to be a source of contention for some neighboring and historically related ethnic groups. In this regard the two neighboring ethnic groups in Southern Ethiopia – the Wolaita and the Gamo – had/has been contested in using similar cultural dress as their ethnic

marker and the case had been discussed in SNNPRS administration. In this project, I do not study cases of the later type. Rather, my intention is to investigate the total changes in the designs and styles of cultural costumes. The Siltie people are among the groups that are coming up with “new” costumes with new signs, symbols and colors to represent their ethnic group.

The reasons to choose this ethnic group are as follows: The first point is the Siltie people’s struggle for their ethnic identity recognition in the post-1991 Ethiopia. The Siltie, for a long time, had been considered as Gurage which is one of the largest ethnic neighbors of the Siltie. And in the newly established federal system, the Siltie people had been denied self-administration and labeled to be in the Gurage zone administration. The Silties struggled for their ethnic recognition and struggled to get their identity back which was over shadowed by and mixed with the Gurage identity. It was in 2001 that the Siltie got self-administration through referendum. Since then the Siltie are in the process of promoting their unique identity. They had built a Siltie cultural museum, established a Siltie development association, designed new cultural costumes, individuals wrote books on their history, they have a yearly symposium day to discuss the history, language and culture, a number of Siltigns music has been released, recently the language also has become the working language in the Siltie administrative Zone and so on. These situations attracted me to pick the Silte as a case for my study. Hence, this thesis will explain some of this process.

Secondly, my personal experience as someone who has grown up in current Ethiopia has directed my emphasis to the ethnic ideology. As someone who is part of an ethnic group who voted for their ethnic recognition, I have been curious to understand the political, social and cultural changes around me. Born from a family who has Siltie heritage has given me the chance and the exposure to see the cultures of the groups. In other words, I am quite familiar with the ways in which they design and make clothes, and the ways of dressing. However, recently the Siltie have come up with new designs which I have not seen since my childhood. And I started to ask myself and others about the evolution of the new ones. The responses that I got from some people have attracted me to take the issues seriously and carry out a research project. To that end, I am interested to try to seek answers for the following **research questions**:

1. Where did the idea of new designing come from and why?
2. What are the factors behind these developments?
3. What was/is the reaction or attitude of the public regarding this new identity representation?

4. Who does the designing for them? What was the role of the public in the designing?
5. Do these cultural costumes (especially the color, signs and symbols) have historical, cultural or religious meanings or attachment to these groups?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to investigate and analyze the new trend of (re)construction identity through cultural costumes among the Siltie ethnic groups of southern Ethiopia.

This study has the following specific objectives:

1. To see changes and continuities in the cultural costumes of the Siltie ethnic group.
2. To examine the reason/factors behind these new developments which push or pull the group to pick new kinds of costumes.
3. To mark the attitude or to see the reaction of the larger community regarding these newly invented cultural costumes.
4. To identify and examine the vantage point between these newly designed cultural costumes and their historical, cultural, religious or other connection to these specific ethnic groups that they stand for or represents.

1.4 Methods and Methodology

In my research I have looked for how people interpret and understand the signs, symbols and colors of their cultural costumes, how they define some items as cultural costumes and how this connects to their identity. I was also eager to see how people relate such meaning to the material culture (in this case the cultural costumes – I limited myself to costumes because of the fact that it is the cultural costumes that are under serious change in my observation). To get as much information as possible regarding these issues, the research required me to look at the case within the social context of the people under the study. Hence, the research was conducted in the natural setting of the community and I was able meet the community face to face. In other words, the interpretive research paradigm, which considers reality as socially constructed and knowledge as subjective (Chilisa, 2012), has been followed to see the different interpretation and understanding of the community regarding the issue under investigation. Ethnography was the main method I used to interact with my field work. As Hammersely and Atkinson define it, ethnography is a method or set of methods where the ethnographer or researcher overtly or covertly takes part in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching, listening,

asking questions, collecting available data to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the researcher - cited in (Walsh, 2012). In fact I did not implement the classical kind of ethnography method because of time and financial limit but I was successful in going in to the study area and staying at the communities setting for observation, interview and focus group discussion.

1.4.1 Data collection methods

Primary data collection methods

The general approach to the research was a qualitative one since the research sought information on the attitude, interpretation and perceptions of the targeted community on the issue under investigation. To this end, I used different primary data collection methods like non-participant observation, interviews, and focus group discussion. I made a number of direct observations to collect data at the following arenas: people's day to day life focusing on their way of dressing, and public spaces like markets and cultural events in order to see the distribution and availability of these new costumes. In my field time I visited and observed six markets in six different towns (Dalocha, Sankura, Kibet, Worabe, Kakoto and Tora). I based my stay at the town of Worabe (the Administrative town of Siltie Zone) and from there I traveled from 12 to 20 kilometer to visit the markets. I was also able to participate and observe different religious and cultural events, public spaces and government gatherings. In this observation my target was to see how much these "new" clothes spread across the community and to see for what purpose they have been used by the people. I have also collected photos which give important information to my project.

Interview was one of the most important tool by which I gathered data from important figures of the communities and individuals who had a role in the process of designing the cultural costumes of these two communities. I managed to have a conversation with government cultural office administrators/officials, community elders and other key informants – here when I say key informants I am referring to individuals such as the designing committees who were directly involved in the whole designing process of the costume. I also had many informal discussions with different individuals. Informants were selected based on their knowledge about the issue under discussion and based on their participation in the designing process of these "new" cultural costumes. The project committee for the Siltie Costume development was my main information source concerning the Siltie case.

I had strong ambition to have a focus group discussion but it did not work out as I expected. I had a plan to gather elders, traditional /religious leaders, knowledgeable women, and youths.

During my field visit the political tempo of the country was high, hence, I could not managed to implement the focused group discussion as I planned but I was able to conduct a couple of small group discussions.

In my analysis, in order to protect my research participant's safety I designate names instead of their real names. I gave individual descriptions which relate to their profession for those research participants who I quote most and those who had/have a direct contact with my research issue and were directly or indirectly involved in the process of designing the "new" Siltie costume. For others with whom I had informal discussion or those research participants who do not have a direct role in the issue under investigation, I preferred to put the informant's circumstance and the setting while interviewing. Here under I listed my research participants:

"The Politician" is a person who was one of the important figures in the whole process of the costume designing. He was one of the political leaders during the whole process.

"The Committee" is one of members of the designing committee. He was part of the committee from the inception to the end.

"The Cultural Officer" is currently working as a cultural officer at the Siltie Zone Culture, Tourism and communication office.

"The Musician" is one of the known musicians of the Siltie. He had participated in different stages in which arranged individuals were invited to comment on the "Newly" designed costume. He is one of the individuals who was involved in the production and marketing of the costumes.

"The Dancer" is/was an artist (had been dancer at Zone's music band) and he was one of the individuals who pushed the idea of having new costumes.

Secondary Data

For complete information, secondary data, which is relevant to the study, gathered from the valuable literature sources dealing with material culture. These include books, journals, study reports and documentation relevant to the research. The documents have been used to describe, analyze and understand the cases. The most useful materials turned out to be the proceedings of the yearly symposium on the Siltie history, culture and language and two of them specifically have a study on the Siltie costume. The proceedings of the yearly symposium (2009, 2010, 2011 and 2014) have a number of pictures which I used as my discussion and it helped me a lot in showing the changes on dressing especially among the artists (dancers and musicians of the

Siltie Zone) and politicians. Hayder and Kedir's articles on the Siltie cultural costume and on the development and process of the "newly" designed Siltie costume gives a general picture on how ethnic groups are responding to the current ethnic politics in Ethiopia. My thesis benefited greatly from these proceedings. To build the setting and history of the Siltie community I consulted Kairedin Tezera's book in which he tried to navigate the history the Siltie people from the 9th century. Zerihun Woldeselassie's PhD dissertation on the eastern Gurage communities was very helpful to understand and conceptualize the issue of Siltie ethnicity. I also consulted the draft cultural policy of Ethiopia and the profile history of the South Nations, Nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia (SNNPR). The profile history would give a brief history of the fifty six ethnic groups of the SNNPR in which Siltie belongs administratively.

In my stay at the field and data collection I encountered a couple of challenges. The main one was that some informants were reluctant to comment and discuss on issues which they considered political. Hence, I had to go a long way to explain that my questions did not have political motive. The political atmosphere of the country while I was in the field was not good, hence, it was not easy at that time to have strong conversations and to some extent to gather focused group discussion. Materials concerning the ethnic groups with respect to dressing culture was also limited.

1.5 Study area description

This research is targeted at one ethnic group from southern Ethiopia - the Siltie. In this section I briefly describe these communities. The Siltie people is found in the Siltie zone which is one of the fourteen zones which established the Southern People Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS). The zone is organized into eight *Woredas* (districts) and one city administration. Worabe town is the center for zonal administration and located 172 kilometer from Addis Ababa (the capital of Ethiopia) to the south. According to 2007 census, the population of Siltie people is estimated to be more than a million. The Siltie people share boundaries with Gurage, Halaba, Hadya, Arsi-Oromo and Mareko. They speak a language called Siltigna which is linguistically categorized under the Semitic family. The economic life of the Silite people depend on agriculture but they are also one of the ethnic groups which are found scattered all over Ethiopia for business or trading (Tezera, 2012).

1.6 Reflexivity and Ethical issues

Conducting research in one's own community was not as easy as I expected. The roles as a researcher and a community member might overlap. In my research case I might be an insider and/or outsider in different contexts. For the Silite people I could be an insider since I belong

to this ethnic group but I might become an outsider to the same group if I contact relatives and families for research purposes, since my role as researcher might confused them with my role as a family member. I had a chance to stay a few days in my grandmother's house and I had a chance to have an informal conversation with my grandmothers' neighbor about my work and got some data. I was their guest but at the same time I was a researcher. People from the neighborhood came to visit me and at the same time I showed them the pictures that I prepared for my field purpose to open a discussion point. And they gave me valuable information.

Though I have a heritage from the Siltie group, at some point people also saw me as an outsider because of my poor Siltie accent. The issue of personal bias and reflexivity has to be treated as just as crucially as accuracy of data. By repeating interactions with informants, keeping an open mind, identifying our personal bias (Why are we doing research? What is the impact of research on the community under study?), empathy, identifying key choices, and using small informal conversations within the framework of participant observation, the researchers can put aside their personal bias (Smith L. , 2012). The question of insider and outsider has become the main concern if one wants to conduct research on indigenous peoples; it's seen as a landmark between indigenous and non-indigenous. Who are you? Questions of 'representatively to and your positions from where do you speak or do you research?', 'What is your relationship to and your positions towards the community or field that you are studying?', (Olsen, 2016, p. 32). Smith (2012) notes the need for caution in the context of insider perspective and she advise to be ethical and respectful, reflexive and critical of one's community.

While I was trying to answer some of the above Olsen's question I was totally stuck on the first one. Defining myself was a tough one. The Siltie-Gurage ethnic issue was one of the first challenges of the Ethiopian ethnic federalism. I was a high school boy when the Siltie-Gurage case was solved through a referendum in 2001 but it was not clear to me why all those ups and downs were needed. I was born and grew up in a small town called Koshe which is a political capital of the Mareko People, one of the neighbors of the Siltie people. And I grew up identifying myself ethnically as a Siltie. In my locality it was easy and normal to identify one's ethnic heritage. For instance to put the case in context, in my small town most people know my father's full name as Mohammed Siltie, in spite of the fact that his legal or document name is Mohammed Ahmed. People attached the name Siltie to my father because he is from another place that the hosting community call it "Genda"¹/'Siltie". In fact people attached his ethnic

¹ Genda is a name used by the Marekos – one of the neighbors of the Siltie - to refer to the Siltie people

heritage as a nick name because the presence of other Mohammeds in his circle (Mohammed Somali and Mohammed Wolene; Somali and Wolene attached with them to refer to the ethnic groups from which they belong). Hence, in my locality everybody assumes that my surname is Siltie and also that is why I never doubted to embracing my Siltie heritage.

When I read about debate on ethnicity and related theories; when I come across the political history of the Siltie-Gurage case; and when I try to analyze and understand the current ethnic politics in my country, I feel that the concepts become more complex in academic analysis than I expected. In my locality where I grew up being ascribed to an ethnic heritage that you accept has not been a problem. I have/had friends who have an ethnic heritage different from mine but we never bothered about that. However, I see changes in ethnic relation since the 1991 political change which centered ethnicity as its core and the source of political and economic power. Since then, I see that the “us” and “them” line getting harder and harder. This political fact is part of the context for this thesis.

After high school I joined University and graduated with a BA in Geography with a minor in History. Then I did my MA in Ethiopian Studies, specializing in Museology and it is this program which helped me to read more on Ethiopia issues especially its history. It was my interest in material culture that attracted me to study the issue of “clothes and ethnic identity”. In fact, I do not have a background in the issue of identity in general and ethnic identity in particular which are widely debated concept in the social sciences. However, I have benefited from some of the courses in the Indigenous Studies Master’s program to understand these issues. Hence with my interest in material culture, history and politics of Ethiopia and together with my reading on ethnicity, I dare to write my thesis on cultural clothes and their ethnic representation and meaning.

In my research context, in Ethiopia, to gain access to certain places, institutions, administrations and people, support letters are necessary. Obtaining such support letters can entail trickling down the administrative channel and working through the top-down articulation of central, regional, and local administrations. They are a core condition to being identified as a legitimate researcher in the field. Once I become legitimate to be in the field, it is my duty to get consent from my individual informants before collecting any data. Accordingly I followed the recommended procedures to get access to the field and to contact my informants. I used my university’s support letter to access all the possible informants and offices in order to get what I want. In all of my data collection sessions, I explained to my informants and others who are concerned about the objective of my work.

However, before I conclude the ethical issue I want to share my encounter with an old guy in my hotel at Worabe where I stayed during my field work. I was drinking coffee and waiting for a motor bike to go to the Zone cultural office when two guys came in and sat next to me. They were speaking the Siltigna language which is the language of the group I am writing about. And I decided to make informal talk about my research topic.

Me: Can I talk to you for a minute?

The guy stared at me and asked, “Who are you? What are you doing?”

I start to explain myself and what I was doing.

The suspicion got real and the guy asked me if I have a permission from the Zone office.

I explained that I got permission from the office.

The old guy was not an easy one and said “if you have a contact from the office then why are you talking to random people? Why don’t you get the real people, who are well aware of the Siltie culture, from the office?”

I told him that the office already gave me those individuals who are involved in the design and critics of the costume and explained to him that talking with random people that I met was part of my method to get a public idea.

After such conversation he explained why he was interrogating me like this. The guy was a director of one the Siltie Zone public office. He said to me that “If you interview the wrong person about people culture you may end up writing the wrong thing about that group and that is why I asked you a lot of questions”.

Then we agreed on his general comments and he consented to discuss on my issue-about the newly designed cultural costume of the Siltie. In fact this old guy’s questions helped me to be more cautious while I was in my field and as well as in my reading

1.7 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is structured in five chapters. The first chapter gives a general introduction and background regarding the issue under investigation. It also presents the historical account concerning nationality questions under the feudal, the communist and the Ethnical arranged federal Ethiopian. Methodology and reflexivity are also discussed in chapter one.

The second chapter gives a discussion on three points; first it presents the debate on ethnicity and how social scientists looks upon ethnicity. The two extreme opposing viewpoints on the nature of ethnicity – instrumentalist and primordial – are discussed together with other middle ground opinion. The chapter also tries to conceptualize the case under investigation using these approaches. The second part gives a reflection on why I chose the phrase ethnic group instead

of indigenous group/people referring to my research groups. The third discussion point in this chapter is about the communication; the use of concepts such as the concept of language, signs, symbol. The connection between language, signs and message and their interconnected relation in understanding one's culture has been briefed here.

Chapter three gives the historical account of the Siltie people and presents the important historical happenings which determined their current realities. The chapter specifically looks at the Siltie-Gurage debates for identity recognition.

The field data presentation and the analysis are put together in chapter four of the study. The interview, field photos and the field observations are presented on different topics. Chapter four also gives a detailed account of the implementation of a governmental decree/recommendation to express and celebrate diversity. The last chapter - chapter five – concludes the main themes of the thesis, emphasizing the political and constitutional grounds which gave the ethnic groups power. The conclusion gives a picture of why the new costume needs to be produced and the pushing forces on the process comes on in the conclusion.

Chapter Two

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Debates on Ethnicity

Politicians and academics (historians, social scientists) have predicted that ethnicity or sentiment to ethnic identity would fade away by the forces of assimilation, modernization and globalization. However, ethnicity and allegiance to ethnic identity has been growing stronger over time in most countries contrary to the prediction. Nowadays, ethnicity has become the central issue at the social and political arena and the concept has passed into the everyday discourse in academia (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996; Zdzislaw, 1993; Jenkins, 2008). In fact, it was in the 1960s that the theoretical debate on ethnicity became important topic in the academia; the concept, definition, characteristic, contents of ethnic groups, ethnic identity and issue related with ethnicity were/and are themes of the debates (Banks, 1996). Fredrik Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) and his new approach to the study of ethnic groups is seen as a great contribution in the debate and study of ethnicity. Barth's emphasis on studying boundaries between ethnic groups rather than focusing on the contents, cultural elements, and ethnic marker such as dress, food, language etc. seen by the anthropologist as his main contribution on the existing debate (Banks, 1996; Jenkins, 2008).

The two important approaches in the study of ethnicity are the primordial and the instrumentalist (constructionist) approaches. These two approaches are known for their very polarized stands concerning ethnicity. The primordialist approach considers ethnicity an inborn aspect of human identity and described it as a group self-identification and/or ascription by others to be belonging to a certain ethnic group on the basis of common primordial traits such as kinship, language, culture, customs and sometimes religion (Banks, 1996). Jenkins (2008, p. 46) says that "the ideology of primordialism naturalizes ethnic groups and justifies chauvinistic ethnic sentiment". In contrast to this, "the instrumentalist position...would hold that ethnicity is an artifact, created by individuals or groups to bring together a group of people for some common purpose" (Banks, 1996, p. 39). This approach (the social construction approach at its extreme) considers ethnicity as something which one can change and put on or off based on the existing situation. Circumstance and environment, political advantage and/or material self-interest could be seen as the driving force to ascribe ethnic identity that fits the moment (Jenkins, 2008). Banks (1996:47) has summarized the polarized themes and theories of ethnicity as that:

the content of ethnic identity versus its boundary; the primordial gut feeling of an identity versus its instrumentalist expression; the individual versus the group; ethnicity as an all-inclusive general theory versus ethnicity as a limited approach to particular problems (Banks, 1996, p. 47).

The debate on ethnicity is still an ongoing process and different people are looking for alternative ideas, which negotiate the above-mentioned polarized stands. Richard Jenkin's "basic social anthropology model of ethnicity" could be a good example and in his model Jenkins tried to gain middle ground between the primordial and the social constructionist (Jenkins, 2008, p. 14).

Regassa (2010) argues that the concept of ethnicity in Africa in general and particularly in Ethiopia expresses the two extreme approaches, instrumental and primordial, and they characterize the concepts in different contexts. Regassa summarized the case as follows "[an] attachment to common background, traditions, customs, religious practices, and language affinities is a strongly cohesive forces among ethnic groups in Africa. At the same time, it is the assumed or 'real' primordial group characters that ethnic entrepreneurs (politicians, religious advocates, traditional group leaders) use for their intended enterprises" (Regassa, 2010, p. 90).

With regard to my research issue, it would be interesting to see the long political process that the Siltie people had been through to get political recognition under the Ethiopian Federalism structure. Since 1991 to 2001, the Siltie ethnic group had been designated as Gurage which is the largest and historical neighbor of the Siltie. It was in the 2001 referendum that the Siltie decided that they are not Gurage and got recognition from the federal administration (I discuss this issue in chapter three). It is very surprising to see politicians, who were against the Siltie recognition, representing the Siltie people after the referendum. 'In Ethiopia political elites used markers of ethnicity such as language, history, tradition, and common memory of oppression in their pursuit for political mobilization' (Regassa, 2010, p. 90).

My thesis which is going to study clothes as an ethnic marker has a lot to do with both the social constructionist and the primordial theories, and I may circulate between them in order to understand my case better.

2.2 Ethnicity or Indigeneity

Before proceeding to other topics I would like to reflect on why I used ethnic groups rather than Indigenous groups/people to identify my research groups, despite the fact that I am a student of Indigenous studies. As Regassa (2007) notes “If ethnicity and ethnic questions are among the most contested and contestable concepts in academic as well as political discourse in Africa, Indigenusness can be fairly labeled as an even more contested, complex and inconveniently sidelined concept” (Regassa, 2010). The history of the indigenous movement shows from its inception in the late the 1960s that the movement has been facing a number of challenges, though the magnitude varies across continents (Minde, 2008). Defining the term “indigenous” and labeling “who is indigenous? Or who is not?” and even accepting the whole notion of “indignity” was/still is a big challenge to many states especially in Africa and Asia. For instance, there is a claim among African leaders that “all Africans are indigenous” (Saugestad, 2001, p. 53), and to refrain back from the debate they claims that ‘[indigeneity] is a distinction that does not apply to the African continent’ (ibid). The leader’s resistance also emerges from “fear of institutionalizing what happens to be “hierarchy of citizenship” (Tucker-Mahl 2008:23) by recognizing the indigenous people as if they were “special right-bearing subjects” (ibid) cited in (Feyissa & Zeleke, 2015, p. 119).

As Feyissa and Zeleke discusses, the discourse on indignity in Ethiopia is also not far from contention. The government of Ethiopia has strongly resisted the concept primarily “...in reference to the unique federal political order that it has established – a political order which has instituted cultural pluralism allowing ethnic groups the right to self-determination including secession” (Feyissa & Zeleke, 2015, p. 119). The 1995 Ethiopian constitution categorized the ethnic groups of the country into three generic terms, “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples”. The constitution explains that:

A “Nation, Nationalities or People” for the purpose of this constitution is a group of people who have or share large measure of a common cultural or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in common or related identities, a common psychological make-up and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly continuous territory (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, 1995; Tourism, 2014) - Article 39:5

In current Ethiopia, these are the three terms that pop-up in the most in the academic and political debates. Especially the constitutions’ article 39 grants not only self-determination to

ethnic groups but it go so far as to grant members the right to secession (Article 39:1) if the members feel ill-treated under the federation. Hence, the Ethiopian government, unlike other African governments, is resisting the discourse of indigenous people by bringing forward these alternative labels, “Nation, Nationality and Peoples” (Feyissa & Zeleke, 2015) and it also believes that “...as whatever cause might be served under the indigenous label could also be served through any of the three constitutionally recognized terms” (Feyissa & Zeleke, 2015, p. 119). The government recognizes the existence of historical injustice, the ethnic minorities-majority scenario and the marginalization of some groups. However, they believe that all the listed problems got constitutional answers under the “Nation, Nationality, and People”. And the redressing also follows the same line.

Regarding the community which I am writing about, they struggled for ten years to get ethnic recognition –the question of indignity was never on the table as far as my reading is concerned - and they were categorized as one of the “Nationalities” of the country. This is main reason why I prefer to stick with the current labeling – the Nation, Nationality and Peoples - which the people chose to use and is common in Ethiopian academy. However, the questions ‘who is nation?’, ‘who is nationality?’ and ‘who is people?’ are still out there in the Ethiopian politics, since there is a difficulty to make a clear line between the three labeling. The Siltie is an ethnic group, by self-definition and according to core academic teachings discussed above and based on the explanation on article 39:5 of the Ethiopian constitution. Article 39:5’s explanation concerning the generic terms “Nation. Nationality and People” go more or less in line with the primordial concepts of ethnicity. In fact it is true that “all indigenous groups are ethnic groups but all ethnic groups are not indigenous” (Proff. S. Saugestad, personal communication, n.d.). Hence, in this broad spectrum I preferred to use ‘ethnic group’ - which is relatively more accommodative and less contested labeling in an Ethiopian context.

2.3 Signs, Symbols, and representations

In order to understand how signs and symbols works with identity and culture; we need to have some understanding of how language functions in its general approach. Language uses signs and symbols in order to make understandable communication. Objects in the real world, concepts or mental representation of the real world and signs are the basic things in this process of language communication. ‘The relation between ‘things’, concepts and signs lies at the hearts of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call “representation”’ (Hall, 1997, p. 19). In fact, signs and symbols need to pass a long process before they become marker of identity of any culture. The process starts by serving

as a signifier to 'something', followed by meaningful production and then the exchange of meaning among a community. People who have relatively the same conceptual map in their mind would interpret signs and symbols more or less in a similar way. At this stage people consider each other belonging to the same group and believe to have a shared culture (Hall, 1997). Hence, in order to communicate the shared conceptual map/mental representation, it needs to be translated into common language; written, spoken, sound or visual images. The general medium which facilitates the correlation between the images, sounds and words are signs (Hall, 1997).

In language sounds, words, images, clothes, gestures etc. function as a sign and symbol but their meaning depends on the community in which they are serving; they signify and transmit the meaning as well. In other words "signs stands for or represent our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to 'read', decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way that...[the community does]" (Hall, 1997, p. 5).

Stuart Hall gives a clear explanation on how our communication could be affected by the degree of symmetry of message producers and receivers. Unequal power in the encoding and decoding process could affect the message flow from producers and receivers especially where the codes of encoding (meaning for the producer) and decoding (meaning for the receiver) are asymmetric. Stuart Hall (1993) says:

The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degree of symmetry - that is, the degree of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange - depend on the degree of symmetry/asymmetry (relationship of equivalence) established between the positions of the 'personification' of encoder-producer and decoder-receiver...what are called 'distortion' or 'misunderstanding' arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange... (Hall, 1993, p. 131) emphasis on the original.

Classification into "we" and "they" and the categorization of "us" and "them" are the results of the mental process of quest for self and the construction of boundaries between one's own group and that of the other. The mental process involves the representation of signs and symbols in language and their meaning and interpretation in culture. And it is through these signs and

symbols that human beings are able to send and receive messages, to communicate and establish a relationship between people that eventually result in different human groupings and cultural construction (Zdzislaw, 1993; Hall, 1997). Zdzislaw (1993, p. 5) elaborates that “[i]dentity is formed in action or rather interaction, in the process of exchange of messages which we send, receive and interpretation until a general, relatively coherent image is achieved. In all such interactions both the identity of one’s self and one’s group, and of a partner are formed, defined and expressed...” In order to understand the identity construction and the signs and the symbols’ roles in the process; understanding the concepts of sending, receiving and interpreting a message are very important. In the process of messaging, the signs and the symbols could be or are at the center of communication. Being in one group means having the key for the signs and the symbols, which indirectly facilitate and make the communication easy.

The concepts and the ideas, which I have discussed above, will serve as a point of departure for my thesis. Hence, the debate on ethnicity and the concept of signs and symbols in the (re)construction of identity will be my central point in my research discussion. Especially, the social constructionist approach will be helpful in understanding how the signs and symbols (in my case items of clothing) are important in the construction of meaning which at some point serve as a base for expressing one’s identity.

Chapter Three

3. The historical context of the Siltie² People/Nationality

3.1 Siltie's people and their Origin

According to Tezera (2012), the history, culture and social life of Siltie people compared to other ethnic groups in Ethiopia have not been studied much. The group has passed through many ups and downs to get recognition of the status as an ethnic group. The 1991 political change, which established a political structure based on ethnicity marked the beginning of the struggle for identity recognition among the Siltie. It took them ten years to get the status of distinct ethnic group. A vote was cast in 2001; the question which asked to the voters was whether they were “Siltie” or “Bet-Gurage” and in the referendum 99.9% of voters decided that they are Siltie, not Gurage (Smith L. , 2007). In this chapter I will try to shed some light on the history of the Siltie people in general and their relationship with the Gurage in particular.

3.1.1 Who are the Silties?

In the mainstream history of Ethiopia the Siltie ethnic group has not been represented or misrepresented since they have been considered for a long time as a sub clan of the Gurage.

In the narratives in Siltie oral history there are two dominant stories which consider the 16th century as their base. In fact, the 16th century was a significant historical time in the Ethiopian history in general and for the Siltie people in particular. The great Oromo movement or expansion and the Imam Ahmed War (1527-1543) were the main events which had a major impact on the then political, economic and social life of Ethiopia (Tezera, 2012) and the Siltie people had their own oral history regarding that time. According to this history, the founding fathers of the present Siltie people travelled from eastern Ethiopia. Some stories say from the Middle East (some say from Saudi Arabia and others say from Iraq) came to Ethiopia crossing the Eden Gulf and lived for centuries around in eastern Ethiopia around Harar (SNNPRS Council of Nationalities, 2016). In this expedition there were about fourteen important public figures whose names are still remembered. Hajji Aliye Omer was the core one and also the oral

² Siltie, stands for a group of people who in the past in the academic referred to as Eastern Gurage, in fact it was in 2001 that it was chosen to do so. There are different communities within it. It comprises Silti, Alichu-Wuriro, Azernet Berebere, Melga communities who speak the same language, which named after it, called “Siltigna”. The Siltie people are found in the south-central Ethiopia.

story believes that the ethnonym Siltie was named after his son “Gan Siltie” (Mohammed, unpub; Tezera, 2012).

In another story people consider Siltie as the remnants of the Imam Ahmed or famously known in Ethiopia history as “Ahmed Gragn”. This version of the oral history associate Silties people with the Imam Ahmed war (1527-1543) which he had with the Ethiopian highland Christian state (Mohammed, unpub). In this war the Imam was successful in defeating the then Christian king and he was able to control large part of Ethiopia; the east, central, southwest to some extent north. By taking this historical fact as a base, the oral history in the Siltie area has developed its own narration about their origin. In this story Hajji Aliye and others are considered as part of the military expansion and religious leaders of Ahmed Gragn who were assigned to control the Siltie area. However, when the Imam lost his power and retreated to his base in eastern Ethiopia, those who had control of the Siltie area were cut off from the Imams’ leadership and preferred to stay in the Siltie area. By having a marriage relationship with indigenous people of the area, in the long run, they have resulted in today’s Siltie identity (Mohammed, unpub).

According to (Tezera, 2012), within the present Siltie ethnic group there are a number of clans and sub clans who trace their lineage from the 16th century Hajji Aliye and his groups; and there are also another clan groups that trace their lineage from groups of people called “Žera” or “Abzana”, who are said to have been there while the Hajji Aliye expedition team reached the Siltie area. They welcomed and hosted the Hajji Aliye team. In the local language the “Žera” or the “Abzana” community are referred as “*Yeafer Seb*” which literally mean “people of the soil” or “people of the land”. In the academic language we may define such groups as Indigenous people. Hence, these indigenous people are placed in Siltie oral history and they are part of the living memory of the community.

Today’s Siltie identity is linked to the strong works of Hajji Aliye and his leadership that gave a ground for the establishment of indigenous/local political institution with the *Garad*³ system. This system of administration has sustained till the late 1880s and is considered a corner stone of Siltie identity. Henceforth, the Siltie people strongly associate their nationality with Hajji Aliye’s memory (Mohammed, unpub; Tezera, 2012).

³ *Garad* was an equivalent term for leader that widely used in the medial Islamic sultanates of Ethiopia (Braukamper, 2004)

3.1.2 Siltie Vs Gurage Identity Politics

The Siltie People's request for recognition of a distinct ethnic identity was solved in 2001. This political development was driven by two extreme opposing positions. The first group claimed that Siltie is a distinct ethnic group and strongly argued that they are not Gurage. The other group campaigned for the idea that Siltie is "*Bete Gurage*" or sub part of Gurage known at the time as "Siltie-Gurage". In the recent published books and articles concerning this case; some historians and anthropologists have legitimized the Siltie peoples' questions and saw it as the extension of a century old quest for identity (Tezera, 2012; Smith L. , 2007). But there are others who see the Siltie case and the Siltie ethnicity as the product of the post 1991 ethnic federalism of the country and in its extreme case they consider the Siltie ethnic group as the invention of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In this regard, Woldeselassie (2015a) has a strong argument.

The post-1991 Siltie identity claim in which a number of Eastern-Gurage-speaking population are constructed as a single identity group, representing one of the many nationality groups of the Ethiopian federal state system, is a new form of ethnicity that began to fundamentally transform existing clan- and locality- based ethnicities and alliance within the wider national and regional contexts. Such identity formation does not represent a continuity or revivalism of an already existing Siltie-Versus- non Siltie category or boundary since there had never been one before (Woldeselassie, 2015a, p. 4).

In order to get a clear picture of the issue of Siltie-Gurage, it is helpful to look at their relation and location. Geographically these people have been neighbors and have been living side by side for centuries. They share long boundaries even in the current political administrative system and they have strong socio-cultural relation as well as blood (Tezera, 2012).

In the previous stories, the Silties claimed their origin from the eastern part of Ethiopia. On the contrary, the Gurage groups claimed their origin from a place called "Gura" in the present day Eretria. The ethnonym Gurage is also named after this place - Gura. In the local language "*ge*" meaning country or land, hence, the people refereed themselves as "Gurage" to express their origin which means "People from Gura" (SNNPRS Council of Nationalities, 2016; Shack, 1966). Another researcher by the name Hudson has a different interpretation of the term Gurage. "... 'Gurage' is a name given by the Amharas, for several hundred years, to the various Semitic languages at the southern periphery" (Hudson, 1994:693) cited in (Woldeselassie,

2015b, p. 130). Braukamper (2004) argues that the term Gurage was non-existent or unknown to the area before the sixteenth century and before the coming of the people from the northern Christian highland of Ethiopia.

The term Gurage, as it can be traced, changed in the course of time. In the early sixteenth century it referred to an ethnic group which was still is partly “pagan” and hostile to the Christian emperor...It was only in the later periods that the name “Gurage” was also extended to... the Semitic Hadiyya [Siltie] (Braukamper, 2004, pp. 51-52).

It is a clear fact that these peoples, Siltie and Gurage, have long years of historical contacts which lead others to conclude that they are one and the same. But the real state imposed impact was observed during Emperor Menilek II’s expansion policy of the 1880s.

Emperor Menilek is by many considered the architect of the modern Ethiopian state, and played a great role in demarcating the current boundaries of Ethiopia. It was he who gave the present shape and size to Ethiopia through his successive expansions to the south, the east and southwest of Ethiopia. He incorporated different kingdoms while he was in expansion and “[i]n the process, the Ethiopia of today was born, its shape consecrated by the boundary agreements made after the Battle of Adwa in 1896 with the adjoining colonial powers” (Zewde, 1991, p. 60).

Menilek’s expansion has had a great impact on the socio-economic life of the conquered and “[t]he northern socio-economic order was introduced into the southern highlanders during Menilek’s conquests of the region in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and super imposed on the pre-agrarian system about which very little is known” (Tiruneh, 1993, p. 8). In this regard the land tenure system which totally favored the ruling classes, royal families and warlords of the kings, had great impact on the socio-economic and political life of the subdued groups during the expansion. The fate of the Siltie people was not different from the rest of the groups who were incorporated by the Menilek’s expansion. In the late 1880s the Silties’ indigenous governance institution fell and the people subjugated to the Meniliks rule. It was after this historical incident that the identity of the Siltie groups started to blur and began to be twist to the neighbor ethnonym-Gurage. Markakis pointed out two reasons why the Siltie people are considered Gurage by others; “one was conquest and subjugation by alien power, and the need of the conquerors for clear and expedient principles to guide the administration of the subjects. Another was the necessity of subject people to adjust to the loss of independence and

to the socio-economic exigencies this entailed” (Markakis, 1998, p. 131). Smith (2007, p. 578) states that ‘the subjugation and exploitation under the emperor Menilek united the Siltie with Gurage neighbors. They saw themselves as the same because of this mistreatment’.

In the new political administration of post-1880s, after the conquest of Gurageland and the nearby community, Gurageland got a district status (local equivalent is “*Awraja*”). And then *Awraja* divided into Woredas (sub-districts), but while drawing the boundaries of these sub-districts, no attention was given to the clan, linguistic or religious boundaries or none of them put these things into consideration. “The congregation of most of Gurage into a single administrative unit was the first stroke in the process of fashioning a single Gurage ethnic identity” (Markakis, 1998, p. 132). Markakis consider this state decision as a baseline for the development of a pan-Gurage ethnic identity which, in later days, over shadowed others around it. The successive governments of the state of Ethiopia had the same policy and practice while arranging the political administrative structure until 1991.

In addition to the state’s role in designating the name Gurage to the Siltie people, the academic works also had its contribution in this regard. Linguistic and anthropological studies on the region were powerful instruments in the tagging process. The William Shack (1966) work on Gurage, the first in its kind, clearly consider the Silte as the sub clans of the Gurage ethnic group. However, Smith challenged the Shacks’ conclusion and states that “...the Gurage were understood as a loose collection of related clans, and subsumed the identity of ethnic groups which distinct in certain ways, and some of which had little interaction with others’ (Smith L. , 2007, p. 576). The genealogy, religion, language, territory, history etc are some of the issues which primordial view believe for ethnic formation. However, “...[i]n the case of Gurage, there is no correlation between any of them, so neither single nor in combination could they serve to anchor an identity for the Gurage as an “ethnic” group” (Markakis, 1998, p. 144).

Religion has a big role in defining the Siltie people’s identity and they strongly associate themselves with the introduction and expansion of Islam from eastern Ethiopia (Hussien unp). That is why ‘[t]raditionally, the Silte-speakers identified themselves simply as “Muslims”, and if asked what language they speak, were likely to answer “Islamic”’ (Markakis, 1998, p. 131). In my field work I also encountered an old lady who still referred to her language as “Yuslam af” or “Islamic” though the name of the Siltie language had been changed to Siltigna in 2001.

In the Ethiopian language classification, linguists categorized the Semitic speaker groups of southern Ethiopia as Gurage speakers. And then the Gurage speakers of the Semitic families

were categorized into three: the East (the Siltie), the west (the Sebat Bet) and the north (Kistane) Gurage speaking. It was from this classification that the generic term “Eastern Gurage” came and has been used to refer to the Siltie groups in academic works (Woldeselassie, 2015b). Its impact in intermixing the Siltie and Gurage identity sustained long until reassessments was done on the languages. The reassessment of the relationship between the languages and dialects of Gurage languages shows that ‘Eastern Gurage [Siltigna] language is more divergent from western and northern Gurage languages...’ Hudson 1994:692 cited in (Smith L. , 2007, p. 577) and ‘...[they are] related with Harari, Amharic, Argoba, while the rest of the Gurage languages are considered the main branches of the southern Ethiopia languages...’ (Hetzone, 1973:11 cited in (Tezera, 2012, p. 31). In this regard ‘[t]he history of linguistic and ethnographic contributions to the construction of a pan- Gurage identity [which includes the Silties] is only part of the story’ (Smith 2007:577).

3.1.3 The Birth of the Siltie Nationalism

As I have discussed in the previous section the Eastern Gurage speaking group includes sub groups which have strong linguistic, cultural and religious ties. The group is comprised of the Silti, Ulbarag, Azernet Berbere, Alichu Wuriro, Wolen-Gedebano, and Zay. Except for the Wolen-Gedebano and Zay community, the other Eastern Gurage speaking communities has transformed to the contemporary Siltie ethnic group (Woldeselassie, 2015b).

The downfall of the Derg⁴ and EPRDF’s (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front) access to power completely changed the political atmosphere of Ethiopia. Within a short period of time, ethnicity became the playing card of political organization and a lot of ethnic based political organization flourished in the country (Markakis, 1998). It was at this political and historical moment that the Siltie and Gurage relation started to be filtered in the new political tool called “ethnicity”. This was a big challenge for both groups. Like other ethnic groups the petty bourgeois among the Gurage speaking people gathered to establish an ethnic based political organization called GPDF (Gurage Peoples’ Democratic Front). At the beginning many of the Eastern Gurage speaking group (also some Silties), especially urban dwellers were comfortable with using the name Gurage. A main reason for the Siltie groups’ involvement in GPDF were: the Siltie people have been confused about their identity because, for long time, they did not have a political institution which pulled together the administratively dispersed people to one center (Mohammed, unpub). Another reason was that in the circle of the political

⁴ A local name for the communist government of Ethiopia which ruled the country from 1974 to 1991.

elites, the name Siltie was unknown and rather they used the name Gurage. Though the urban dwellers were able to establish brotherhood among the Gurage speaking people, there were little links to the rural parts, as the three Gurage speaking people were culturally and linguistically enclaved entities. GPRDM (Gurage Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Movement), a government affiliated party was also established in the same year.

From the Eastern Gurage speaking group, it was the Azernet- Berbere group in Addis Ababa who first questioned the Siltie's role in the establishment the GPDM which represent all Gurage and they pushed their questions to "...be recognized as a "nationality" distinct from other Gurage speakers" (Woldeselassie, 2015a, p. 13). Separated political parties emerged from Eastern Gurage speaking groups. SAMWGPOD was one of the parties which came to the political stage to represent the Eastern Gurage groups. The name was coined by picking the first letters from sub-clans of Eastern Gurage Speaking groups: Silti, Azernet-Berbere, Alichu, Melga/Meskan, Wolene/Wuriro and Gedebano People Democratic Organization. Other parties followed. Some parties campaigned for a Pan-Gurage identity which considered Siltie people as a sub-group under Gurage and others campaigned to be separate from the pan-Gurage identity and work for a "new" identity recognition. While the case get hotter and hotter, the party that represented the different clans with the very lose name SAMWGPMO changed at some point in the struggle to SAMWGDM – The Siltie, Azernet-Berbere/Alichu, Melga/Meskan, Wolene/Wuriro, and Gedebano Democratic Peoples' Movement) and was forced to come up with a new Pan-Siltie name which could represent them as a single ethnonym. Then, in 1993 the leaders and activist of the SAMWGDM had a meeting and reached an agreement to use as a single ethnonym "Siltie" as their common name and decided "Siltigna" to be the name for their language. And the party SAMWGDM transformed to SPDUP (the Siltie People Democratic Union Party). "This was a big step in the making of the case for a separate identity: a claim of a population now with its own ethnonym and language, both of which were the most important factors in the eyes of the EPRDF in the legitimization of an ethnic-based party" (Woldeselassie, 2015a, p. 16)

A number of meetings and debates were organized between the separatist and unionist camps to answer the question "who is Siltie?" before the April 2001 referendum. However, the most important one was the August 1997 meeting, a three day conference at Butajira town. The Butajira conference also arranged voting to decide whether the Silties are Gurage or not. The voters were representatives from 189 *Kebeles* (the smallest administrative structure in Ethiopia) and each had five representatives with a total number of 945. The voting result showed 781

considered that Siltie as a “Bete Gurage”, which means sub part of Gurage, 149 kept silent and the rest 18 member resigned themselves from the voting process. Then the Gurage People Revolutionary Democratic Movement (GPDM) concluded the case based on the voting result. However, SPDUP which was the leading party of the separatist group refused the outcome and submitted complaint to higher governmental office on the whole process including the Butajira conference. The case took another four years to be solved. SPDUP also believed that the voting was rigid by the governing party of the Gurage Zone (district) which had the backing of the EPRDF (Mohammed, unpub). Smith considered the Silties voting for identity as a unique experience and writes that ‘voting for an ethnic identity is one of the most dramatic modern experiments in injecting direct political competition into what has traditionally been regarded as a social or cultural matter’ (Smith L. , 2007, p. 566)

As time went, the Siltie and Gurage case got much public attention. The case went beyond the separatist and unionist groups. It involved the then government higher officials and other opposition to take sides.

In the beginning of the movement, the EPRDF was against the notion of separate entities, however, when they observed the reaction of common people and when they saw how nationality questions were deep rooted in rural people, the government changed its position. Finally, the government reversed the 1997’s Butajira conference decision and arranged another referendum with a direct voting. The referendum was conducted in April 2001. The new result showed that 99% of the voters (416, 481 voters, out of 421,188) voted for a separate Siltie identity. Smith (2007) has summarized the Siltie referendum as:

An interesting test of some critical assumption of procedural and institutional models of linguistic and ethnic injustice, the question of ethnic identity was central, and was subjected to political contestation through a process of meetings, petitions to government entities, constitutional interpretation, and eventually, a referendum. Critically, it was a peaceful process, remarkable in light of the tensions surrounding ethnicity, and language in the country” (Smith L. , 2012, p. 585).

A few months after the Siltie got the recognition from the government, a new administrative Zone (District) by the name Siltie Zone was established; and it became one of the administrative Zones of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State. Side by side, the elites of the Siltie groups started to strengthen the ethnic identity by producing different cultural things such as writing their common history. Woldelessie, in his study of the Eastern Gurage groups, has mentioned a number of practices with the purpose of “constructing new Siltie

identity”. “There is now a collective endeavor to construct Siltie ethnicity through *political, social, aesthetics, and moral discourses using history, “tradition”, dance, music, clothing, food, artefacts, ‘culture’ shows, ‘cultural’ centers, and media and other collective and ethnic based social actions and organization*” (Woldeselassie, 2015b, p. 8) emphasis added. The empirical data and the discussion which I am going to present in the next chapter is about one of the ‘cultural’ expressions of Siltie listed by Woldeselassie as ideas to build the Siltiehood or Pan-Siltie.

Chapter Four

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

In this chapter, I shall discuss my field data. In this presentation I return to my research questions which basically asks questions like: why is/was the idea of designing new costumes necessary to the Siltie People and where did the idea come from? I also ask what the driving factors for this development are and the role and reaction of the public regarding the newly designed cultural costumes. I also attempted to see whether there is a connection between these newly designed costumes - especially the signs, colors and symbols - with the history, culture or religion of the Siltie. These questions have also been addressed in my field and library work.

4.1. Dressing Culture among the Siltie

For written sources about the dressing culture of the Siltie people I have relied on the works of Hayder and Kedir (2010) who were the main figures in the process of designing and producing the “newly” Siltie Cultural attire. However, in order not to be too dependent on their work I tried to cross check their data in my field work. In their survey Hayder and Kedir has categorized the evolution of the Siltie dressing culture generally in two time periods - the leather and the textile eras.

In the old days, the Siltie people used to dress in leather clothes which they produced out of cattle, goat and sheep skins. The people used to practice their indigenous/local knowledge to make the skin smooth and comfortable to their body. In preparation process of skin butter was one of the importance substances. They had a small knife called ‘*Megelel*’ to cut and do design, and for tanning (Hayder and Kedir, 2010). There were a number of clothing types which were made using the locally prepared skin⁵. According to the information gathered by Hayder and Kedir (2010) the type of clothes/attires mentioned here not only had importance in covering the body but they were also used as an expression of one’s social, cultural and economic status within the community. For instance *Qeta*⁶ had been used to mark the difference between the married and unmarried woman (Picture 2); the way it was decorated and the ornament on it would tell a lot. Unmarried women’s *Qeta* was expected to be decorated and beautified with different ornaments like Shell (ዛጎል/በለሳይ) and buttons (ቁልፍ). But when a women got married

⁵*Qeta*(ቁጣ), *Zuriea* (ዙሪዳ), *Yenewir lennd* (የነውረለንድ) tiger skin, *Habir lennd* (ሀብርለንድ) Lion skin, *Fiya* (ፈያ/ፈላ), *Koke* (ኮኬ) *Sho’ga lend* (ሾጋልንድ) *Gumer lend* (ጉምረልንድ) *Tem lend* (ጤምልንድ), *Qototo* (ቆጣጣ) and *Kelot* (ክሎት) were some of the kinds remembered by the elders.

⁶ A hand-made leather clothing used to cover below the waist by the Siltie woman

she would remove the decoration on her *Qeta*, thus it was used to show that the social status changed from girlhood to housewife.

Yenewir lennd (tiger skin) and *Hubir lennd* (lion skin) were kind of attires which were used by individuals who kill “tigers” or “lions”, and such individuals were believed to be brave heroes and warriors in the community. *Tem lennd* was a kind of attire allowed for specific individuals, chosen by the community based on their service to the community: being heroic and brave.

Qototo (ቆጦጦ) was a kind of leather/skin made clothes which showed a low economic status. It was made of poorly prepared cattle skin and was not as smooth as it was possible to make it, because of the cost incurred for the process or because of the laziness of the producer. In one of my focus group discussions, participants agreed with Hayder and Kedirs’s findings that those people who used to put on *Qototo* were those who had economic difficulty or those individuals who do not want to exert required energy to prepare the quality leather. In some cases, *Qototo* used to show one’s poverty (Abdela & Keri, 2010).

However, Hayder and Kedie (2010), do not give a specific transition period when leather/skin clothing to textile costumes has happened. The transition⁷ probably started in the late 19th or early 20th century and the leather has gradually disappeared from the scene. In my informal group discussion with guests in my grandma’s house (Alicho, 22/07/2016), one of my participants who is about sixty five years old remembered that in his childhood he used to wear ‘*Lennd*’ - a kind of clothes made out of sheep skin. Hayder and Kedie (2010), has proposed three possible reasons for the transition from leather skin to textile. The first reason is a religious one. It is known that most of the Siltie people are followers of Islam and that the change or transition from skin leather to textile has to do with people’s inclination to Islamic practice which requires the body to be covered. The second reason for the transition from leather skin to textile, is an order from the government that dictated people to stop wearing skin anymore. Elders mentioned that there were a kind of declaration in markets and other public place to notify to the public about the change. The third reason might be publics’ positive reaction to the textile cloths which came to the local market by traders. In fact before the arrival of the machine made textile to the area, the community used to produce their own hand made textiles out of cotton using their indigenous/local technique of weaving.

⁷ Regarding the transition from leather to textile the mentioned timing might serve as a land mark the domination one on another.



Picture 1. Zuria A picture taken from Siltie Culture Center (photo by the researcher).



Picture 2: Siltie Girl's old day way of dressing (Siltie Zone Culture, 2010, p. 95)

4.2 Introduction of New Material

The new textiles introduction led to many changes in dressing culture and following this change different kind of clothes⁸ also appeared. Two of them, *Gabi* and *Buluko* are among the clothing types which are still actively used. They have been important gifts that bridegrooms were expected to give to the bride's family such as her father, mother, uncles, and aunt. A few years back *Shamma (Machine)* had been the most common gift that the brides in the Siltie community used to get from their bridegroom (*The Committee*, 10th of July 2016). The *Shamma* was a common kind of fabric in the Siltie and the neighboring communities such as *Mareko*, *Haddia* and some parts of *Gurage*.



Picture 3. Siltie Girls on a stage to showing their dressing style (Siltie Zone Culture, 2010, p. 91)

Picture 3 above shows dresses called *Shamma (Machine)* with different colors. The girls in the picture were participants in a cultural symposium in 2009 in Worabe and they are showing their dresses and other attire to an audience from different parts of the Siltie community. Except the girl second from the right in the picture, the rest of the girls are dressed *Shamma* which is imported from abroad. They make it a part of their culture by adding different ornaments with their special hair style and also the local dressmakers role is also important in keeping the fashion of the day. However, the girl second from the right is dressed in “*Dir Bedir*”, one of the handmade cloths, by weavers. It is also called “*Tibebe/ Ye Habesh Kemis*” which is considered by many as part of northern Ethiopian culture. The picture clearly shows the recent change on

⁸*Tibiko* (ጥብቆ/እጅ ጠባብ) *Gilmad* ገልማድ *Boge* (ቦጌ) *Sinawure* (ሲናውራ) *Gabi* (ጋቢ) *Buluko* (ቡሉኮ) *Shashi* (ሻሽ) *Shamma* (ሻማ/ማሽን).

the dressing representation of the Siltie (I shall present some pictures of the same stage in later years). These days it is not as common to see *Shamma (Machine)* as it was before.

Before the spread of ready-made cloths, if someone wanted to have a *Shamma* costume he/she had to buy the fabric by the meters and give to a dressmaker. And the dressmakers would produce/make the dress according to the fashion of the day or the style of the time. The dressmakers took into consideration the age of the user and the dressing code of the people. For instance for youth, clothes are more decorated. Elderly women (granny), mothers and young girls have a different way of applying their *Shasi* or headdress/veil. Hair style in combination with dressing would help to communicate the social status of somebody in the community. For instance when the Siltie girls come to adolescence, they would use a hair style called *Sijja*. This style change has a clear message that they are no longer children, which also means they are ready for marriage. Hence, though this tradition is declining due to religious reasons on some occasions, girls still use ornaments and put on attire which shows their age transition (Siltie Zone Culture, 2014). In my field observation I confirmed that the practice of the *Sijja* hair style is on the verge of demise, nowadays most of the young girls prefer to cover their hair to fulfill their religious obligation. One of my research participant (*The Cultural Officer, 27th June 2016*) told me that even for zonal cultural shows, girls are not interested to present themselves before the public without a veil and some men also do not feel happy to see a girl without a headdress or veil.

In general the Siltie have “their” own way of dressing for different events such as for weddings, holidays or other important activities. As the Siltie Zone Culture and Communication Office yearly book (2014:7) states, today it is hard, to find some of the above mentioned fabric in the market and in public use. They have been replaced with “modern” styles (Siltie Zone Culture, 2014). Since the Siltie people are a part of the globalized world, the dressing culture has been in a constant change, as access for goods is easier than before. Hayder and Kedir’s (2010) survey claims that there is a uniform and “distinct” way of dressing among the Siltie. But it lacks explanation or justification because of the similarity of Silties’ dressing with the neighboring ethnic groups.

So far I have not come across historical records or research finding which show that the Siltie has a kind of cloth which was uniformly used across the Siltie groups. However, recently, there has been attempts to design a special kind of cultural clothes which is unique only to the Siltie people and it has new signs, colors and symbols to represent the identity of the Siltie ethnicity.

The current Siltie cultural clothes is defined as a clothes which is made of cotton or other threads with the three specific colors⁹: Red ocher, broken white and black, and decorated with the sign and symbols which are adopted from the house decorating culture of the people (Siltie Zone Culture, 2014). In the next parts I will discuss this “newly” designed Siltie cultural costume in general and the process in its production, its cultural and historical link to the Siltie. I will assess its importance, the motives and the driving reasons behind its production, and look at its current status in particular.

4.3 Political Recognition and a move to Strong Siltie Identity

As mentioned in chapter one, the 1991 political change in Ethiopia paved the way for constitutional recognition for the diversity of culture and for the implementation of “self-administration”, which is the center or core of the political, economic and social changes. In regard to culture, the new constitution clearly gives the power to every ethnic group to develop, preserve and promote their own culture (Article 5, 39 and 91 of the current Ethiopian Constitution).

The Constitution further provides that they[the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia] can develop and preserve their cultures, languages and histories, be proud of their identity, enjoy equal opportunity for development and exercise their fundamental rights as citizens” (Tourism M. o., 2014, p. 5)

And following this recognition one can observe a boom in Ethiopia with regard to culture: implementation of local language as a medium of instruction, as a medium for office, in the media and in courts; some ethnic groups start to promote their cultural clothing, write their history, a number of music has been produced with local language and so on. The Siltie ethnic group goes along with these processes and changes.

Hence, in order to publicize this newly established Zonal administration and the newly pick ethnonym, the political administration took a number of social-cultural, economic and political initiatives. For instance, the Siltie Development Association engaged in economic and cultural projects such as the building of schools and health center, sponsored the production of Siltie musicians and other cultural events.

To mention some other examples, Abdulfeta Huldar wrote a book on the history of Siltie and their contribution to Ethiopia and Keyredin Tezera wrote a general book on the Siltie history, culture and language. A number of Siltigna music and songs have been released individually or

⁹ Here after I will call these “Siltie colors” while referring the combined colors

with institutional support, the Siltie Development Association has been established, the yearly symposium on the Siltie history, culture and language with its side line activities like ‘culture shows’ and dancing; and the use of Siltiegna language as an official working language in the Siltie administrative areas. The move to have a single cultural dress, described in this chapter is one among the many activities initiated.

In my field visit I had a chance to see the effort at the Zone administration with regard to culture. The Zone has built a cultural museum which intends to preserve and display the Siltie material culture. This includes previous/old and contemporary “cultural” items that have been collected from different Woredas (districts) of the Zone, and the museum is also serving as an interaction center for communities from these different districts. In addition, along with the administrative structure, every Woredas (districts) have their own culture office which works on the culture such as language, heritage, music, clothing etc around their community. These offices are among the government administrative structure which has direct access to the common people on the ground. Hence, their role is significant in implementing the policies of the country in general and the Zonal cultural programs in particular.

4.4 Why have a “new” Costume?

Before proceeding to my specific issue, which is the clothes, I would like to comment on one of the important events of the Siltie Zone: A yearly symposium by the title “The Siltie Nationality: History, Culture and Language”. In the next paragraph I will explain why the symposium is important for the development of the Siltie culture in general and the development of the new clothes in particular.

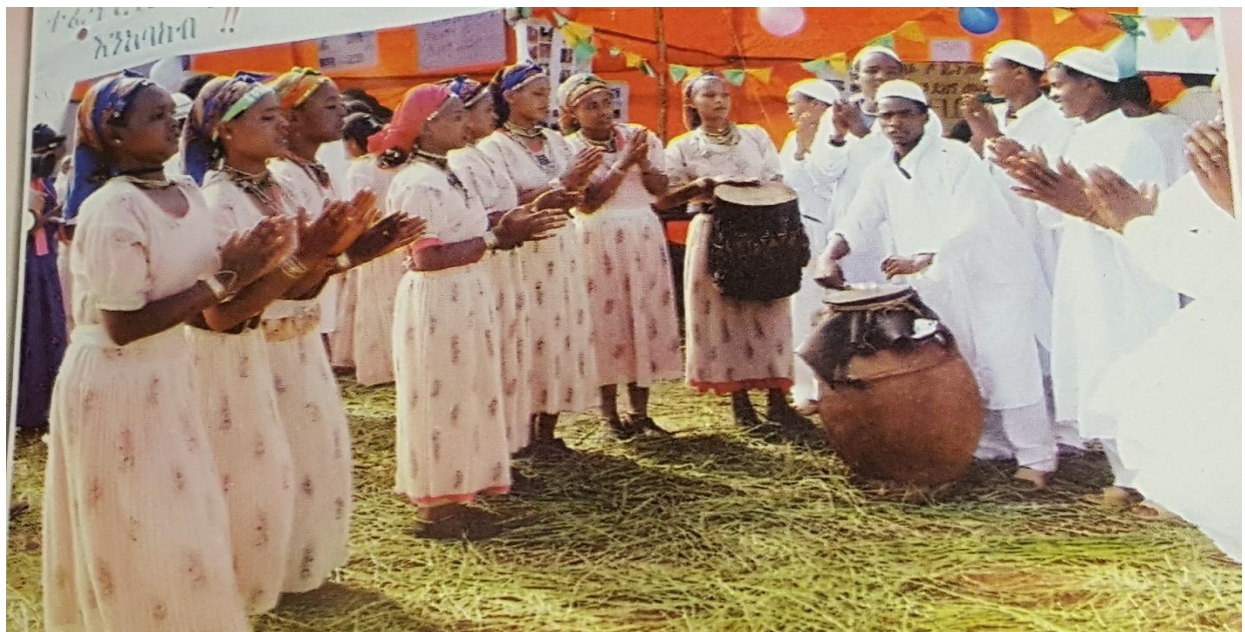
This Symposium has been used as a stage to discuss socio-cultural, political and development issues with regard to Siltie people. The communities from those Woredas (districts) use this platform to align their Siltie identity with the other *Woredas*. The Symposium is a meeting place for the elders, academic, politicians or anyone who is interested in Siltie matters. Community representatives (Elders) are always a part of the symposium and cultural delegates from all *Woredas* would be invited to present their way of dancing, singing, folk playing cultural festival etc. This year (2016) was the 11th session, and I have been able to attend the 2013 and the 2014 sessions. From my participation on the symposium and my assessment of the proceedings of various years, I would argue that this yearly symposium has a great impact in strengthening the previously loose congregation of the different Siltie communities. From the symposium proceeding one can see year after year development in research works on the history, culture and language in a way that present all the Siltie communities as one and single.

I would emphasize this yearly symposium as one of the cultural events that helped to fortify the Siltie identity, in general and for the development of the idea of producing new Siltie cultural costumes in particular. It was in one of the papers presented in 2009 that a suggestion was forwarded to have designed a marker of “distinct” cultural clothes of the Siltie (Hayder and Kedir 2010:56). Below I have some pictures of dancing groups which clearly shows the changes in their dressing since the suggestion to have new clothes had been forwarded. In the first two pictures from 2009 and 2010 symposiums (*see pic. 4 and 5*) the girls are wearing the commonly found dress, the *Shamma*. The boys use Pakistani kind of dressing (*see Pic. 5*). In the first and the second symposiums, 2007 and 2008 respectively, the dressing culture was not that much different. In the year 2010, newly designed cultural costumes were presented to the public (*see pic. 6*). In this picture we see different individuals with different dresses. In fact all the dresses were presented for participants in a forum which was organized for critique and comment on the newly preparing cultural costume. In its first stage, the costume design committee gave much emphasis on the adult’s clothes. However, nowadays business people are making the costumes for different age levels and they are addressing a broad range of users.

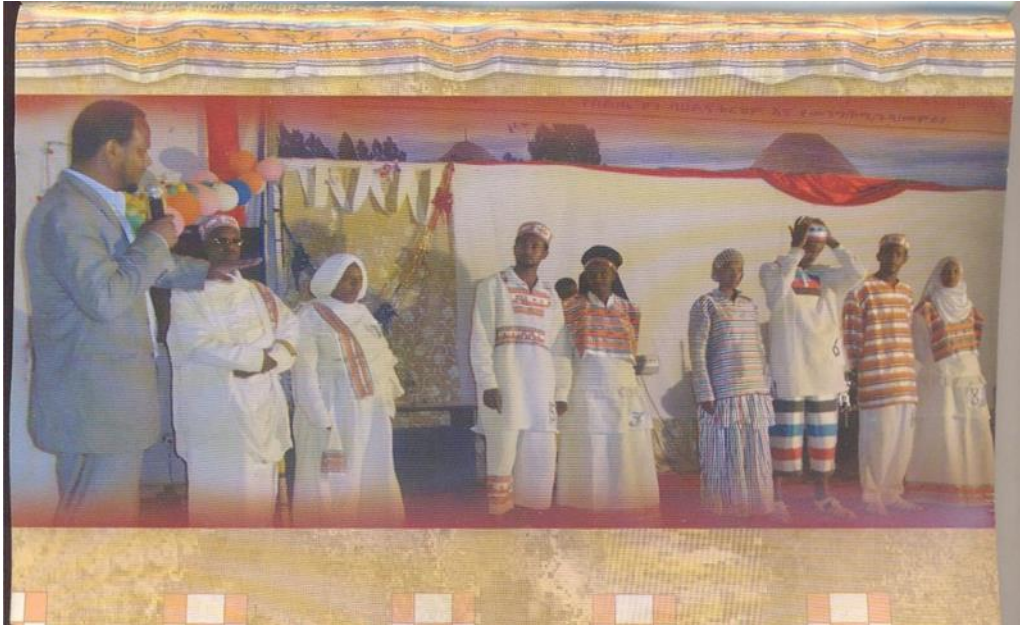
Later on in the 2011 symposium, the newly designed costume came to public use around the government offices; at the 2011 and 2012 symposiums, representatives of the cultural dancing teams came to the gathering, some with the old clothing and others with the newly designed one (*see pic.6 and 7*). But since the 2013 symposium, all representatives of the cultural dancing teams from all the Woredas has shifted their dressing to the newly designed one (*see pic. 8*). The following range of pictures would tell us how the dressing representation of the Siltie has been changing from local specific diversity to an office designed uniform kind of culture. The change was particularly successfully implemented for people who were representatives of the Siltie cultural delegate such as musicians and dancers and politicians. It was through these groups that the new costume was introduced to the public.



Pic. 4. Ladies with Shamma clothing performing Siltie folk dancing (Siltie Zone Culture, 2009)



Pic. 5 Cultural representative of one of the Siltie district in 2009 (Siltie Zone Culture, 2010)



Pic.6. Presentation of new Siltie cultural clothes on the first alternatives (Siltie Zone Culture, 2010, p. 104)



Pic. 7. New Siltie cloth presented at 2012 symposium (from Siltie Symposium proceedings, 2013:78)



Pic. 8 2013's Symposium participant with the newly designed costumes (Siltie Zone Culture, 2014, p. 86).

4.4.1 Competing interest in the shared customs

If we see the trends in representing or presenting one's ethnic group with its "pure" and "distinctive" material cultural in post-1991 Ethiopia, with its political shift from a strong centralized country to an ethnic federalism, one can understand how and why the Siltie people came to design a uniform cultural costume as a distinct entity from its neighbor. Post-1991 Ethiopia has provided a political atmosphere in which the "we" and "them" scenario and the ethnic groups have been in a rush to line up demarcations; "Traditional" clothing or Cultural costumes have been main tools in marking of those boundaries. There has been a rush and competition among neighboring ethnic groups in appropriating cultural expressions shared commonly among the neighboring communities.

This competition has been seen in different parts of the country. As an example of this scenario, I will use a hat (*see pic 9* from one of the Siltie Zone Snkura Markets) which is common among the Siltie in the *Sankura Worada* and two other neighboring ethnic groups, namely *Halaba* and *Kembata*. The hat can be seen as one piece of cultural material that connects the neighboring ethnic groups. As I heard from a guy who sells these hats, the *Kembatas* are the main producers of the hat for the market. They also get the raw materials, which are used to make the hat from the Halabas' and other neighbors.



Pic. 9. Hat from Snkura market of Siltie Zone (photo: by the researcher)

But I also heard that there is a tradition of making this hat in lowland area of Siltie and around *Halaba*. On some occasions the *Silties* presented this hat as their ethnic marker, the *Kamabats* did the same and the *Halabas* too. Today, anyone who has access to the television can easily associate the hat with the *Halabas*’; because it was the *Halabas* who first publicize it in their music clips. In fact it is one of the markers of the *Halaba* community together with other elements of their costumes. However, the hat is also commonly used by the *Silties* in the *Snkura Worada*. In my discussion with my research participants (*the Politician and the Committee*) about the hat choice; research *the Politician* said that;

There was a demand from some groups of Siltie that the hat had to be part of the newly prepared costume. But, since the Halaba’s had already made it popular it would be difficult to revert that reality to claim that hat. Though the Silties around Snkura shared it with the Halaba. So we decided to work on the one in which we would be successful and we managed to produce the new one (the Politician, 25th.June 2016)

The *Committee* member also remembers that different discussion regarding this hat when he was a member of committee for the newly designed Siltie costume. He remembered that some groups from the Siltie community had an interest and had demanded to the hat to be part of the new costume. As he said people from the *Kola* (lowlands) area like *Snkura* and *Daloch* (which are hot climate areas) demanded that this hat be a part of the Siltie costume, which by then was under process.

Especially for Snkura and Dalocha, this hat was their first choice but with an intensive discussion we turned down their claim by saying that “This hat is not ours. We just appropriate it from our neighbors” and then we moved to the new project (The Committee, 10th July 2016).

These kinds of hats (displayed on above photo) are today mainly recognized as “Halaba’s” ethnic identity marker. While I was visited the *Snkura* market I met a man in his fifties who wore the “Halaba hat”. I had also put on the “Halaba hat” and a scarf with a Siltie color. We started talking, just standing on the road to the market. I told him about why I was at *Snkura* and a few things about my background. And he did the same, and also mentioned that he is ethnically from the Siltie group. Then I raised a question about his hat. He said:

As you know, the climate is hot around here [Sankura area] so the hat is very suitable, especially for the farmers, to protect from the hot sun. We used to make it and still use it; but now it is taken away from us.”

From our discussion it seems that the guy was aware of the fact that the representation value of the hat was taken away from them and labeled as “others”. However, he uses the hat in his regular life since the hat is well designed to fit the climate of the area. At some point the guy raised a question regarding the Scarf which I had around my neck.

The man: *Where did you get this scarf?*

I said I got it from Siltie Zone, in Worabe town while I was a participant in one cultural event.

Then I asked him: *“whom does this scarf belong to?”*

The guy with excitement replied that: *“Ow! It is ours. It has hat, trouser, coat, etc. I struggled for ten years for this. Now it has got the place and it is practical.”*

From my discussion with this person I understood that the guy was happy to see this newly designed costume to represent Siltie and he also seemed to understand that the hat on his head is no longer used to express his ethnic identity, but is an object with which to protect him from the hot midday sun.

Besides this, there are other forms of the hat (*see picture 10 below*) which basically represents Islamic identity in general and the known religious personality called *Ye Qatibare Shayk* (Qatibare’s Islamic teacher and his *muride* (disciples) in particular). However, in the recent Siltie-Gurage identity development, this hat seems to be having a different interpretation. According to Woldesselassie (2015), there are different *Wali* (Islamic Saints) venerating practice among the Eastern Gurage (the Siltie) and other neighboring Islamic communities. There are also known religious personalities across these areas; *Ye Qatibare Shayk* (Qatibare’s Islamic teacher) is one of among them. These religious personalities and *Wali* venerating

practices were the cross cutting ties among the Islamic community from different clan or linguistic groups in the area.

It is common to see this hat mainly in Gurage and Siltie areas but specifically in areas where the *Qatibare Shayk* resided. And to be a *muride* (disciple) has no limitation whichever clan or ethnic background the disciple belongs. The hat does not have ethnic representation but rather religious representation and the respected local *wali* (*Islamic saint*). However, according to one of the informants (*the Committee member*), there was an interest from some sections of the Siltie community of *Azerenet Berbere* area that this *Qatibare Shayk* hat should be a part of the newly designed costume.

Regarding the hat, we had an intense debate and discussion at Azernet Berebere on whether to include the Qatibare Skayk hat in the newly designed Siltie costume or not. In the discussion we came to an agreement that the hat is not only “ours” but shared with all the neighbor peoples. That means it cannot be the “distinct” Siltie identity marker. Hence we moved to the construction of the new one (The Committee member 10th July 2016).

The marks on this hat has five decorated circles: one on the top and four on its side. And these five decorated circles are put there to represent the five pillars of Islam.



Picture 10. “*Ye Qatibare hat*” (Photo by Ababu Reshid)



Picture 11. *The newly designed Siltie hat (photo by the researcher)*

After repeated discussion, debates, comments and critiques on picking a hat that could be a part of the new designing Siltie costume, the hat that the designing committee submitted and got approval from the Siltie Zone administration was the one in picture 11 above. Among the newly designed costumes, the hat is the one that could be seen in people's day to day use, though it is also limited to a specific group. The hat has five stars with eight pointed angles. According to the designing committee definition, the five stars which are found circling the hat stand for the five pillars of Islam. And the eight points on the star represents the eight gates of heaven (*Jenna*). One of my informants (*The Politician*) told me that there is a belief in the Siltie community which says:

“As long as I do my practice to pray five times (Salah); I would not miss one of the eight gates of paradise/heaven” (the Politician).

There is no doubt that this new hat has represented religious identity like that of many Islamic hats, however, the application of the Siltie color by the designers was an attempt to give a second interpretation. The designing committee gave due emphasis to the social aspect for the fact that in the Siltie ethnic group of the Islamic religion is seen as a core cultural value and found interwoven with their tradition. In my field work I came across individuals who shared with me their experience and understanding of the new Siltie hat.

One day in Worabe I met a young an eighteen year boy who had put on the Siltie hat. I stopped him and started to talk. And he said he came from Addis Ababa for a family visit and was rushing to catch a bus. I asked him about the hat on his head, he said to me that:

This hat is an expression of my Islamic identity as well as my Siltie ethnicity, since it holds the two in one I am happy to have it. Though it is new and a recent development because of its attachment with our house decoration tradition, I easily felt the Siltiehood in it.

I am also told by an elderly persons, who participated on the critiques and comment session, that how his hat (which is part of the new costume) used in one occasion to identify their ethnic heritage. He was in Saudi Arabia to practice one of the Islamic duties, a pilgrimage to Haji. And he said:

When we go to Hajj [in Saudi Arabia] we use our Ethiopian flag to show our Ethiopian identity.

And the guy continued to tell me of the hat incident.

There were many Ethiopians at the Hajj area and one day I saw two guys coming in my direction and they just started to speak to me in my language [which is Siltigna] then I asked them how they figured out that I am a Siltie. And they said it is because of the hat you have on your head. I was surprised. In fact, that hat was the new Siltie hat.

Because of its high cost, so far the hat is limited to a small circle of people like politicians who have access to the government office gift and those who can afford it. In comparison to other hat, the price for this hat is four or five times more than other kinds of hats available in the local markets. Hence, it is not touchable to most people. With regard to religious minorities within this ethnic group, one of my informants (*the Politician*) said that:

For those who follow other religions; the hat might not fit with their ideology but they still could use the rest of the costume – the suit, the scarf, the shirts, the *Gabi* etc. since there is no dressing rule which make the use of hat a must (*the Politician* 25th of June 2016).

4.4.2 The urge to be “different”

The information that the designing committee of the ‘new’ Siltie costume gathered from local political leaders and individuals, shows the type of stress that these political and cultural elites in the newly established Siltie Zone had been through. As they stated it, because of the absence of a cultural costumes which distinguishes the Siltie people from others, they said “they had been in a big challenge in representing the Silties in different national and regional gatherings

or stages” (Hayder and Kedir, 2011: 73). In my discussion with one of the artists (*the Dancer*) who had been in the men’s dancing group of the Siltie cultural team, he mentioned to me how much stress they have been in to represent the Siltie ethnicity in costume. He remembered the days when he and his colleagues had been through as follow:-

I used to be a dancer and a musician in the Siltie Zone cultural music band. I had a chance to represent the Siltie people in different cultural stages such as Nations and Nationalities and people’s day. Every ethnic group appears in such occasions dressing in a costume which is distinct to them. As a representative of Siltie our ladies team used to dress Shamma and Shinshin (see pic 4) which were imported from China but they made them more beautiful by adding some local decorations. But the men’s team did not have such an option; hence, we chose to use just the white color of Pakistani dressing (see pic. 5). When the media covered such programs they did not give time to us [the men’s dancing team] and moved to the ladies part and then to other ethnic groups who have special dressing. The Pakistani cloth had not been quite impressive enough to catch the attention of the media. This situation left us with a question in our mind. Since then we started to debate with the Zone administration. We questioned “What are our markers which differ us from others?” and we stressed that we lack things which we can claim as ours while others promote their costume. Then in a little while the Zone funded research on Siltie costumes and started a project which intended to design new Siltie cultural clothes (The Dancer, 3rd of July 2016)¹⁰

In other words, the political elites and others in the Siltie community had been in a rush to cope with the post-1991 political culture in which every ethnic groups is striving to represent their groups with its “distinct” way of dressing. Emphasizing the ‘difference’ and abandoning similarities or shared cultures has been seen as common practice recently. I interviewed two individuals who were important figures (*The Politician and The Committee*) in the production of the “new” Siltie costume, who rationalized that “*the justification behind the construction of this new costume was due to an urge and need to have a ‘distinguished’ costume that differ them from others*”. In fact, both of them mentioned to me that much similarity exists between the Siltie communities and the neighboring ethnic groups with regard to dressing.

In the national media celebrating diversity is a core value, hence, the media produced different documentaries about the culture – the way of life, dancing, dressing, marriage and etc. - ethnic groups in Ethiopia and the national gathering days such as Nations, Nationalities and Peoples day have full coverage. In all these circumstances, the groups strive to present themselves with as much ‘distinction’ as possible from others. This was/still is a situation that ethnic groups are working to solve.

¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqVy_KXQ4o0 this youtube clip shows the ladies dancing team wearing the *Shemma* and the mens team with the Pakistani Shalwar-Kameez kind of costume.

With regard to the motivation in having this “new” costume, I will try to sum up in three general and interconnected reasons. The first reason has to do with the federalism structure and its recognition of ethnic groups. The post-1991 constitution of Ethiopia let the ethnic groups promote their culture such as language, way of dressing and others cultural traits; and following this fact a trend of promoting and magnifying ethnic identity through signs, symbol and colors on costumes has become a fashion in the country. Since it became a tradition among the ethnic groups, the Siltie elites have also joined that trend and encouraged the production of new signs, colors and symbol. The Siltie people joined the federal system ten years later than the others and by then some other ethnic groups had been far ahead in developing aspects of cultural representation.

The second reason was aligned with an effort in removing the dressing similarities between the Siltie and the neighboring community. In fact there is a dressing similarity between the Siltie and their neighboring ethnic groups. So in order to be “distinct” from “others” they decided to produce a brand new costume. I asked one of my research participants (*The Committee*), who was a part of the designing committee, why they need to have new costume and his response fits well with this second reasoning. He said:

*“Producing or crafting this clothes means designing a new identity marker which represents the Silties and, at the same time, distinguishes them from their neighbors”.*¹¹ (*The Committee 10th July 2016*)

In fact, the Politician claim that the Siltie costume is not a total invention but it is an effort to make the mixed dressing among the Siltie community more uniform. It was an effort to build up new identity markers on the already existing one. On different occasions and different events (in the aftermath of recognition) the Siltie people have represented themselves with a range of different means. Once they used *Shamma* (see the girls in pic 4 and 5 above), a kind of cloth which they share with their neighbors. At another times, the cultural representatives had been seen using Hallaba’s hat while promoting the Siltie’s way of dressing. At some events the cultural music band dancers (especially the males) had to use white dress which is similar to the Pakistani’s *Shalwar-Kameez* (see boys in picture.5). Hence, in order to avoid these intermixes and confusion, after long discussions and negotiation among political elites and others in the Siltie community, they managed to produce a new one (see picture 7, 8 and 11).

¹¹“ይህን አልባስ ስንሰራ አዲስ ብሄረሰቡን የሚወክል ከጎረቤቶቹ የሚለየውን መለያ እንደማዘጋጀት ነው”

The third motivation might emerged from the need to have a costume which is more suitable to the religious values. The people's strong attachment to the Islamic religion calls on the need to make an adjustment on existing clothing, especially women's costumes, so as to make them more suitable for their religious practice. In doing so, the designing committee went far in to suggesting a special kind of veil to replace the hair styles which had importance in serving as a cultural communication. For instance, there was an attempt to make a replica of the *Sijja* hair style which one could put on the head as a veil. Some individuals said that they wanted the design of the headdress to be suitable to "*Salah*" or Islamic praying.

With regard to the motive behind the construction of this new costume one of my research participants (*The Musician*) gave me other reason related to the opportunity that led to producing the new costumes. He considered the application of those local colors, signs and symbols on the new costume an opportunity since the costume was bringing local art to the public. He told me that he participated in different stages which were organized for comment and critic on the newly designed costume. His assessment on the driving motive in producing the new costume is as follows:

The 1991 political change gave the people a right to represent themselves as they wish. And they also expressed this right in different ways among them; clothing is one. Hence, when a trend of promoting one's ethnic identity through costume became the practice of the time, the Siltie groups also joined that trend. Consequently, the process gave an opportunity for the local arts [the colors and signs on the local huts] to be known to the public.

The Siltie people once used leather skin clothes such as Faye, Qeta, Folisa and then changed to locally produced textiles. As time went on, the Siltie culture got exposed to machine textile products such as Shamma, Shinshin etc but these costumes are not distinct only to the Siltie. They cannot be an ethnic marker to the Siltie because they are also commonly used in the neighboring communities. Hence, the time demanded a unique kind of cloth. In fact we commented to the designing committee to give due emphasis to the religious aspects of the Siltie people while designing the new costumes. To conclude, I accepted the new clothes with joy and I consider it a development on our culture, an art product which came to reality in response to the question of the time (the Musician, 12th July 2016).

In my field work time I observed that there were a couple of opportunities which came out of the construction of the Siltie costume in addition its political representation. As the above informant said it helped the promotion of local art to the wider public; and at its best, it is a process of transforming one traditional practice into another. From the house decoration to a design for a costume. As this traditional house decoration practice was declining following a gradual substitution of the hut to different kinds of housing (such as corrugated iron roof

houses). Eventually it might have disappeared from the culture of the community, hence, transforming this local art to the costume design can be seen as preserving a cultural trait of the Siltie community. The construction of this new costume also created a job opportunity for designers, producers, and business men.

One of my informants (*the Politician*) assessed the current developments, following the 1991 political change to ethnic federalism, to be very positive and optimistic. He explained the current federal policy in comparison with the past unitary one. To quote his words:

Federal government means self-administration and it also means living together with others voluntarily. Peaceful coexistence with others. It gives recognition to nations and peoples. When identity is suppressed and when it levels the inferior; it is difficult. Such a situation, let alone one's costume, causes the loss of the whole existence of a community. Hence, creating uniform and unitary community or letting one community be swallowed by other community does not mean development. It is not possible to create such community. In general, to be oneself and an attempt to stick in one's identity should not be considered a secession from other (the Politician 25th June 2016)

In my visit to *Dalocha* I met one University graduate and I asked his assessment on the current trends around the cultural issues especially about the cultural clothes. He was well aware of the existence of a multiple of ethnic groups in Ethiopia and at the same time he seemed worried about the general picture that Ethiopia has today. In his expression I see his fear of the ethnic federalism. Here is his assessment:

What is happening in Ethiopia today regarding language and cultural dressing; everyone is shouting for his ethnic group. This situation may leave "Ethiopiawint" ("Ethiopianism") in question. Even though Ethiopia is a country where many different nations and nationalities reside, as a country I do not see a common marker which promote "Ethiopiawinet" or "Ethiopianism" these days. Even sometimes I feel that the country might be disintegrating.

In fact the above two conflicting quotes are political stances in today's Ethiopian political debates. If we look through the political parties or the general debate on Ethiopian politics; the advocators of ethnic federalism consider the *Ethiopiansts* assimilators and a group who do not want to celebrate diversity. On the other hand the *Ethiopiansts camp* considers the ethnic political arrangement as a threat to Ethiopian unity. As that of the 1960s debates of students movement. Also today, numbers of debates have been going on whether there is a single nation identity called Ethiopianism or not. Ethno-Politicians are questioning whether the existing "Ethiopianism" identity accommodates the more than eighty ethnic group of the country. In fact, nowadays ethno-politicians including the EPRDF (the current ruling party), as that of the

1960s student activist (like Waliligni Mokonnen), still suspect that Ethiopianism and its advocates are advocates of the Amhara/Tigre cultural supremacy. The current constitution, which gives ethnic recognition based on mainly the primordial element of identity such as language, related culture, shared past/memory and common origin, also could be seen as one of the challenges for those who are advocating the existence of a single and furnished Ethiopianism. However, with regard to ethnic identity, if we look at the case of Siltie, one can easily understand that ethnic belonging is not limited to primordial ties. When politics is involved it may go far beyond and may involve political manipulation; one's ethnic recognition may fall in the hands of the powerful. Voting for one's ethnic identity shows how the "nationality questions" are complicated in Ethiopia.

4.5 The "New" Siltie costume and its construction

The project to design the Siltie cultural costume was followed by the formal recognition of the Siltie people as a distinct ethnic entity. The confusion while representing themselves in different stages triggered a question on how to represent the Siltie community as a single people. Hence, the Siltie Zone administration established a committee of five members and gave them the task to design and craft a cultural costume which represents the whole Siltie communities. The committee was composed of individuals from different academic backgrounds: a Journalist, an artist, a painter and designers (from Addis Ababa University Art and design School), and a cultural officer; and out of the five individuals four of them were from the Siltie ethnic group (*The Politician*).

The objective of the committee was to design and produce a "new" cultural costume with ultimate goal of making this product to be the one among the other cultural traits of the Siltie people. After conducting a survey on the Siltie culture and after sharing experience with other communities which already had designed a cultural costume, the committee presented its suggestion. As one of the members informed me, before they reached their final version they had to pass through a number of workshops to get comments and critiques from other Siltie groups: elders, officers, politicians, artist etc. and accordingly the clothes also had to pass through a number versions based on the comments and critiques. I also had a chance to see about seven kinds of the hats with different colors and symbols which shows an evolution in the hat. The final version which the committee submitted was the one which is shown above in the picture 11. The main contents of the new costume is color; white, black and red ochre colors. So the question is where did these colors come from? The following section discusses this issue.

According to one of my informants whom I met during field day at *Worabe* who demonstrated with the above question gave us good information. He was an elderly guy who had a chance to comment on and critique the newly designed costumes and he gave me his assessed on the new costume:

The cultural costume came to reality in the right time, to strengthen the Siltie-hood. The Siltie culture had been challenged to death. Even though the costume is a recent development, the designers did not create something new. They crafted the costume out of long time accumulated practice and culture of the Siltie. It is the people's tradition of house decoration [see pic. 12] and the color and sign of their choice that has changed in to the color of the new costume. Nothing new but they revived the one which was forgotten. The Siltie people are reviving and promoting their culture, among one of them is the costume.

4.5.1 Where do these colors, signs and symbols come from?

As I mentioned earlier the committee went through about nine stages of critiques before they came up with their final version of the costume. The committee used different data collection tools to get the necessary information. They had check list question to see the color preference of the people, they conducted interviews on issues related to Siltie people's history and tradition of dressing and the committee also had an observation in the living culture of the people (Hayder & etal, 2011, *The Politician and the Committee*). In picture 6 above, one can see the first alternative models of dressing to represent the Siltie people. However, critiques and comments from other participants helped the committee to pick one from the given alternatives and let them codify and furnish the chosen one.

4.5.2 The colors

Regarding the colors chosen, I have many similar explanations about their significance in the cultural scenario of the Siltie community. The colors are common to see in houses (mainly huts) in different districts of the Zone. I also confirmed this fact during my field trip. Why did these colors become important or what is the special about them?

Two of my interviewees (*the Politician* and *the Cultural officer*) told me that the project of designing a new costume emerged from an interest in having a uniform culture among the Siltie, hence, one of the jobs for the committee was to find something which is common, more or less ,in the wider public. And the committee also mentioned in their report that the most important thing that caught their attention during their field observation was the existence of the local way of decorating one's house (*see pic 12 and 14*) and the presence of similarity and patterns in the decoration techniques, material used and the cultural significance.



P 12 A Siltie girl decorating a family house (Photo by Husieny)



Pic 13 Siltie cultural Representatives at Nations, Nationalities and people day (photo by the researcher)

The Muslims in Ethiopia officially celebrate *Eid-al-Adha* (commonly known as *Arefa*), *Eid-fitar* (locally called *Fichi* - literally the festivals of the breaking of the fast of Ramadan) and *Moulid*. In the Siltie community, which are Muslim dominant, these three religious holy days have a special place and they are intertwined with the socio-cultural life of the community. Especially for the *Eid-al-Adha*¹² (*Arefa*) celebration, the preparation starts early and in this holiday the family members have a clear labor division (*The Committee*). The mothers are expected to make ready the ingredients needed for the holiday's special food. The young boys are needed for heavy jobs like preparing fire woods, which they mostly do with neighboring

¹²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yf2DN3QBH4s> the video is about Eid-al adha (Arefa) and we can see the labor division and also we can see how music clips are used to introduce the new designed Siltie costume.

friends. The fathers are responsible for fattening a bull or finding and buying a well fed bull/ox for slaughter on the festivity day. Hence, to execute a religious¹³ order, slaughtering a bull/sheep/goat is common.

The other thing that is widely visible in the locality during *Arefa* is the decoration of one's house. This role is left for young girls, and, if there is no young girl to do so the mothers would decorate their house. Girls usually use the locally prepared ink called "*Nazo*" and "*Berbero*", which are a kind of soil found in some areas of the Siltie Zone. The local name *Nazo* stands for the color of red ocher and *Berbero* stands for the broken white. To draw the black parts, the girls use charcoal, these days they use the inner black powder of a cellular battery. When the *Arefa* comes, these soils would be available at the local markets or in some cases the girls would dig out the soils by themselves from the fields. Every year during the *Arefa*, the girls were expected to decorate the inside and outside of their house. In my field visit I had been in a couple of markets to find this soil but my timing was not right. I talked to an old lady who was selling another kind of salt soil locally called *bolet* which is used by the local community to wash very dirty cloths and to feed their cattle. This woman confirmed to me that *Nazo* and *Berbero* are seasonal products that are available during *Arefa* and *Fiche* holidays because people need them only occasionally.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Siltie people are one of the communities in Ethiopia that is dispersed all over the country. They have a strong tradition of traveling to other areas for work, especially the males. Hence, *Arefa* is as a holiday for family union and visits. Everybody who is far from family would return to the Siltie land. Especially people who are living far from their birth places and far from their family, *Arefa* is their opportunity to meet friends, families and relatives. It is a huge festivity and a very extended one. Bachelors would look for a mate. It is also a wedding time for those who have already finished the arrangements. The Committee member said:

If you see a house well decorated with the Nazo and Berbero, you could guess that there is a girl inside with the right age for marriage. But these days the practice is declining. (The Committee membe 10th of July 2016)

¹³The Eid-al-adha festival is the main Islamic festivity celebrated for two reasons. The first one is in commemoration of the Prophet Abraham's obedience to God and his sacrifice; the second one is the steadfastness of the Prophet Abraham's son, Ishmael.

In fact it is common to find a house decorated with this colors in the highland areas and some parts of lowlands

The other festivity in which the people decorate their house is small: *Fiche (Shewal)*. This festivity is an extension of the main *Fiche* or *Eid-al-Fiter* (literally the festivals of the breaking of the thirty days fast of Ramadan). In the main *Fiche* festival, people mostly stick to their houses with family and neighbors. However, during the small *Fich (Shewal)* (a six day fasting after the Ramadan month) which mostly starts immediately in the next day of the main *Fiche* and complete with in a week, it is common to visit families especially parents. *Hence*, to make the house attractive, girls beautify their house with the *Nazo*, *Berbero* and charcoal (see pic 11 and 14).

4.5.3 The signs and Symbols

When we look at the decorations on the newly designed Siltie costume, we see that the colors patterns are also adopted from the house decorating custom of the community. Squares, rectangles and triangles are the commonly found signs on the decorated walls of the hut and in some cases also flowers. Decorating the house is mainly the ladies job. The Siltie costume designing committee and the designers took these signs and symbols from the local house decorating tradition and appropriated it to the costume. In my field visit I saw many decorated houses. The ladies I talked with about the decoration said it did not have any special meaning except beautifying their house. However, the costume designing committee not only used the colors and the signs on the huts but they gave them their own interpretation¹⁴.



¹⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXEzZlrzb50> in this short clip one can see one of the Ethiopian national Television programs broadcasting about the newly designed Siltie Costume.

Picture 14 A hut decorated with the ‘Siltie colors’ (photo by the researcher)

4.6 Encoding and Decoding: Communication, Dissemination and Consumption

The designing committee of the Siltie costume appropriated the signs and the symbols from local huts and assigned them to represent something different from their original local purpose. The square and rectangle signs on the huts were used as a masculine identifier and the flowers and tree branches were used to show the feminine. Hence fabric printed with square and rectangle signs with the Siltie color (the combination of red ocher, the white and the black) stands for men’s clothing and clothes with the flower print on it indicate that it is for women. These are assigned by the committee to give gender to the costumes. In my field trip I found out that more promotion was done about the colors than the signs. The colors are emblems as one can see them in everywhere in the Siltie Zone and they have been painted on the wall of schools, privet shops, government offices etc. All these efforts have been done and are still done to introduce and to promote these new Siltie costume and to make an association between the costume and the Siltie ethnicity.

As Stuart Hall explained, understanding a culture has a lot to do with good communication. In order to understand one’s culture one needs to have the mental map/mental representation of that community. Sounds, words, images, clothes, gestures etc function as a sign and symbol but their meaning depends on a community in which they are serving; they signify and transmit a meaning as well (Hall, 1997, p. 5). Likewise, the newly designed Siltie costume is constructed to signify the Siltie ethnicity which means it is serving as sign which stands for the idea of Siltie ethnicity. Below I will present some of my field observation on the effort of the administration of the Zone to put the colors and the symbol of the newly designed Siltie costume on the mental representation of the Siltie community and others.

In my field trip I had been in different towns of the Siltie Zone; one thing I found in common in them was the painting of many walls and fences in the main roads of the towns with the ‘Siltie color’ – the red ocher, the broken white and the black. It seemed the work of a campaign to promote the costume colors and symbols and to make the association between them and the Siltie Ethnicity.

The pictures (*pic 15, 16, 17 and 18*) show how the privet and public properties have been used to promote the color and the symbols of the newly designed Siltie costume. The pictures respectively show: Pic 15: the school main gate at *Alkeso*, Pic 16: the cultural institution fence

at Worabe, Pic 17: the Ethiopian Commercial Bank at *Snkura*, and Pic 18: privet house at *Alkeso*. In fact the decoration of one of the largest comprehensive hospital in *Worabe* is also painted with those colors (Appendix A). As the Cultural Officer told me, decorating public offices with the “Siltie color” whether by painting them directly or by furnishing the offices with materials which have those colors is one of the strategies that is underway to inculcate the colors into the public mind. For instance, there are office curtains and sofa-dress, which are made of textiles with the ‘Siltie Color’.

Pictures 15, 16, 17, and 18 respectively



Next to the governmental gathering, I can argue that, the most actively used method to promote this new costume is the Siltigna music clips¹⁵. I dare to say that almost all the Siltigna language music, which was produced after the new costume, has widely used the newly designed costume in their choreography. The Siltie Zone administration supports and sponsors music production in their language and they encourage famous singers of other language to sing in the Siltie

¹⁵ The video clips which I attached here are only just to give my reader a clue. There are a number of video clips so that it is not manageable to attach many. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5FZdVI-nbM>

language or about the Siltie in order to reach the wider Ethiopian public¹⁶. In fact, the music clips played a pivotal role in promoting the new costume. However, this situation in some context led to a “wrong” association between the musician and the costume. According to Hall, ‘signs stand for or represent our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to ‘read’, decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way that...[the community do]’ (Hall, 1997, p. 5). As Hall noted, if the encoders and decoders fail to assign relatively the same meaning to a sign, it means that the message the encoders intended to transfer might be distorted by the decoding time. In my field trip, I came across individuals who consider the new Siltie costumes only for the musicians, government officials and for the rich person because it is these peoples who have a wide access to the costumes. Since the costumes can be observed mostly around the offices, some people in the Siltie community end up interpreting it differently than the meaning intended.

During in my field trip in *Alicho Wuriro Worada*, I had a chance to meet a group of people in my grandmothers’ house, specifically with school children, youngsters and old individuals. They came to the house to visit us (my mother and I) and we started to talk about the newly designed Siltie costume. I showed them some pictures and asked them what they knew about it. For the elderly ones, it was difficult to identify and associate them with Siltie. However, some the school children labeled them as artists dressing and the others school children specifically said it is “It is the Silties’ cultural dress”.

In fact, in my Dalocha field work I met with a fourteen year old girl who decorated the family house (*see pic. 14*) with those three colors. I showed and asked her if she recognized the photo of the newly Siltie costume. She recognized the pictures but her interpretation also was based on her observation and experience of the costume. She literally said:

“It is a dressing worn at the inauguration of a school, bridges and clinics” and added that *“it is also a dressing worn by the government officials”*.

In fact it is easy to understand why some people develop a different interpretation; at the Zones administrative ceremonies or events such as inaugurations of infrastructure, symposiums,

¹⁶ Such videos have a number of significances, in one hand they promote the language, promote the “newly” designed costume to the large community and they also are very significant in cross cultural interaction. The main singers in these two clips are from other language speaking communities. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzDicRTuYTI>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfZsO3sJ5_A,

meetings etc that one can see a wider usage/consumption of the costume. At such events¹⁷ the higher officials, invited dignitaries, famous personalities will be presented these newly designed costumes as a gift. The costume which are worn at such events, except for the cultural dancers and few others, are mostly designed in a different way than the types that were standardized by the designing committee. Mostly the male dignitaries are presented with a “western” kind of suit which is decorated and colored with the ‘Siltie colors’ and the signs and symbols. For the female dignitaries, they will be given a kind of cloth which is more or less similar to the “*Habesha Tibebe*”¹⁸.

In fact, “*Habesha Tibebe*” dressing was among the issues that had been mentioned by Waleligni Mokonnen’s 1960s article questioning the then Ethiopianism. Mokonnen accused *Habesha Tibebe* a dominant cultural representation in the 1960s Ethiopia. Currently, the Ethiopian designers of “*Habesha Tibebe*” are crossing this ethnic and religious boundary by presenting “*Habesha Tibebe*” with colors and signs that the ethnic groups associated with them (see pic 20).

According to my personal observation in most cases, the “*Habesha Tibebe*” would have a sign of a cross on them. The entrepreneur who was involved in the commodification of these newly designed Siltie costume; appropriate the style (the general appearance) from the “*Habesha Tibebe*” and combined it with the “Siltie Color” (see pic 20 and appendix B). Since most of the Silties communities are Muslims, in order to cross the religious barrier, the entrepreneur placed a flower instead of the cross sign and added a veil for head covering which is mostly considered a marker of Islamic identity. The contrasts between picture 19 and picture 20 below would give a clear picture in understanding the happenings regarding cultural dressing. Currently these styles (the Suit and the “*Habesha kemis*” with the Siltie Color) are becoming a fashion in different occasions such as weddings and in some cultural gatherings. However, access to the costume for many local common people is very limited, as the prices are very expensive. It was from this experience that some individuals labeled the new Siltie costume as “Rich persons’, artists’ and/or political officials’ dressing”.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKr1aRQoYVc> the clip is a program that the national television station broadcasted from Worabe, Siltie Zone.

¹⁸ *Habesha Tibebe* is a kind of cultural costume that is mostly made of cotton by waivers. It is a kind of costume which is considered a national dressing of Ethiopia but dominantly used in the central and northern Ethiopian culture. *Habesha Kemis* is one type of *Habesha Tibebe* prepared for the woman. In fact the word *Habesha* at its face value stands for Ethiopian.

I want to end my discussion by showing how the ethnic federation - with its number of limitation - gave power to every ethnic group with regard to culture. Every ethnic group has autonomy to their culture¹⁹. They can use their language as a medium of instruction at school, they can use their language in courts, in offices etc. Dressing culture also is not different; they have the right to preserve, promote and publicize in accordance with the law. Today I see an attempt in every corner of the country, every group is trying to present a national cultural representation discourse as per the groups wish and interest. For instance, when the Prime Minister (Appendix C) or other higher officials paid a visit, these days, it is common for the hosting community to present their cultural clothes as a gift for the guests.



Pic 19. *Habesha kemis* (source; photo from ethiopianclothing.net)²⁰ Pic 20 A new Siltie Dress

¹⁹ The federal government is the one which allocate budget to finance every sectors activities. Then hierarchically it goes down to regional, Zonal and Woreda (Districts) levels. In most cases these administrative structures have been organized based on their ethno-linguistic line.

²⁰ <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/31103053652136345/> accessed 02/05/2017 8:00 PM

To see a Prime Minister wearing a costume of a minority groups would say a lot. Such events are among some of the techniques that the Siltie Zone administration has been exploiting to promote its new costume. It would magnify and would send powerful messages that associate the sign (the newly designed costume) and the Siltie ethnicity.

Presenting the costume does not only cover politicians, it also involves popular musicians, film actors, known personalities (One of the world`s richest people and known philanthropist Bill Gate was one who got this costume gift- see appendix D), and businessmen/women who happen to be a guest of the Zone administration.

Even though the plan to have a new costume is an elite-driven idea, the idea is getting momentum on the ground especially around the political circle. With all the above-specified techniques, the costume is reaching more people. The role of mass media like national television, the music videos, direct or indirect involvement of known personalities, the allocation of budget for cultural development and promotion and the existence of cultural governmental office from federal to local grassroots levels, all are a fertile ground for this newly developed costume in a way to be sign of Siltie ethnicity. However, the wide disparity between the local common people and the costume is still there, even though, the costume has been used to represent these peoples in a number of national events. Unless the distance between the mass and the costume was reduced, the representation issue would only be a paradox until the asymmetry between encoders and decoders was fixed in some way. As Hall (1993) stressed when “lack of equivalence” on the communication between encoders (in the Siltie case the Costume designing committee) and decoders (the wider community which assumed to be represented by the costume and others) occurs, “distortion” and “misunderstanding” on the intended messages will be the expected consequence (Hall, 1993, p. 131) This mean is that the Siltie Zone Administration have a lot to do to fix the misunderstandings and the distortions across the common people of the Siltie community to whom the costume designed for represent.

When we have a generation who respects, embraces all culture and celebrates diversity, some of the 1960`s nationality questions would get an answer and they might not be a question to a generation to come.

Chapter Five

5. Concluding Remarks

The root of the ethnic federalism in Ethiopia can be traced back to 1960's ideology of the Ethiopian student movement that politicized ethnicity in the country, which had been a taboo and threat for national identity in pre-1991 regimes. However, the intensification in the reproduction of cultural markers in general and clothes in particular in contemporary Ethiopia is strongly linked to the post-1991 constitutional developments, which arrange the country along ethnic lines. The current 'identity politics' in Siltie cannot be seen in separation from its long-term quest for ethnic recognition, which is seen as a way to get more self-administration, and enjoying, protecting and promoting one's own cultural values and heritages. The 1995 constitution has granted nations, nationalities, and peoples of the country the right to self-administration by taking language as the major criteria. However, the self-contradictory nature of the Ethiopian ethnic federalism (constitutionally written but often not locally implemented) left the Siltie ethnic group to struggle for ten years for recognition of its ethnic distinctiveness. After getting recognition, the move at the Siltie zone administration was promoting Siltiehood among its diverse community. Hence, cultural markers like dressings were seen as important to work on towards a single and solid Siltie ethnicity. Having a new costume meant then that having a new "us" and "them" dichotomy with the neighboring ethnic groups. Unless much consideration was put on such moves, in such competitive and self-centered environments, the shared cultural elements valued among neighboring ethnic groups would be limited or banished at all.

Accordingly, the construction of the "new" cultural costume of the Silte cannot be seen in separation from this macro-political situation of the country. In fact the costume is a construction because the idea comes more from local political elites than from the local community. Along this line, three inter-connected points that assure the construction of the "new" costume can be raised. First, the root cause for the new costumes as stated in the thesis is found in the "confusion" that faced local political administrators and ethnic based artists while attempting to represent the Siltie people through its "unique" cultural dress in inter-ethnic gatherings. Secondly, such "confusion" from above led to the establishment of the committee members, who are accountable for the zonal administration, with the role of constructing the new costume for the community they assume to represent. Thirdly, the new costume has never been worn by local communities, it is the local political members and the local artists who first used the "new" costume and served as a bridge in transferring the clothing to local communities.

However, this does not mean that local communities are not in favor of the “new” costume. Reports show that some local community members have started to use them because it is the fashion of the day to wear costumes which have ethnic ties. Moreover, young members of the community grew up looking on the “we” and “other” centered ethnic federalism responded positively to the new costume.

In general, the construction of these new costumes and the attempt to represent all the Siltie community is an extension and part of the strengthening of the Siltie ethnicity which got political recognition in 2010. In fact, there is no special reason for having a single and unified way of dressing among the Siltie community. It is from the political elite’s interest and the demands from the current politics of the country – in which every ethnic group is rushing to have its own “distinct” appearance – which brought this costume into reality. Nonetheless, as a part of other practices such as writing a common history and developing the language, this costume has a probability to be among the common cultural traits of the Siltie ethnicity.

The most important question regarding the new costume is "Does such re-production of cultural clothes negatively affect the co-existence among the Silte with its neighbors?" From the empirical evidence, I argue that federalism which is based on ethnicity (ethnic federalism) and the associated promotion of one's own cultural aspects is currently not a detriment for democratic cooperation with the neighboring community. There have been problems when minor differences in tangible and intangible cultural heritages were manipulated by political elites and ethnic entrepreneurs to propagate differences at the expense of shared tangible and intangible cultural values. This is because such minor differences have potential of being manipulated by local elites who often benefited more from ethnic dichotomies than commonalities.

In the whole process of making this new costume, the committee goes back and forth between getting the “Authentic” and “Invention”. Basically, most of the design of the new costume is derived from the old and living dressing culture of the people and the names given to them; *IjeTebab*, *Sinawure*, *Gabi*, *Koffiya*, *Zuria* and *Shashiare* are a direct copy of the old one. What is new is that the application of the three colors and the sign from the traditional house decoration and making them part of the new costume. It is a construction of new culture, if we look at the change and continuity of the clothes but it can also be seen as a transformation of one cultural practice to another level.

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Appendixes



Worabe Hospital (Photo by the researcher)



Habesha Kemis with the ‘Siltie colors’



Ethiopian Prime Minister dressed in the new Siltie costume at Worabe town



Bill Gates dressing in a suit decorated with the ‘Siltie colors’²¹

²¹ The Prime Minister, the *Habesha Kemis* and Gates’s pictures are a snapshot from a youtube clip https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MB07JzN_YSI&t=633s which is about a young business man and musician who engaged in the design and production of the new Siltie costumes.