

The revenge of TPLF/EPRDF against the Sidamas: Sowing the seeds of famine and hidden agendas.

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Although the nation has avoided famine for the past century, the Sidama of north east Africa has been under green famine since 1999. Green famine is the nick name for political famine. Political famine is firstly characterized by deliberately creating famine as political weapon to punish those people who do not co-operate with or resist unacceptable policy of politically dominant group in the state in which they live. Secondly, failure of politically and socio-economically dominant group to prevent famine at appropriate time or before it claims lives.

In the horn of Africa, Ethiopia is made to be almost synonymous with famine by successive Abyssinian regimes. Emperor Haile Silassie followed the policy of hiding famine in northern Ethiopia. Colonel Mengistu of the derg used famine to extract humanitarian aid from other governments and non governmental Organizations to invest that aid on war front. Brutal tyrannical regime of Meles Zenawi is following the policy of sowing famine in those areas relatively self -sufficient and traditionally feeding those people who lives in famine prone zones, because simply they have resisted Tigrean domination in Ethiopian empire, and demanded self-determination based on the constitution made by TPLF (Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front) and TPLF made surrogate parties commonly known as PDOS (Peoples Democratic Organizations) that mushroomed after 1991 in every nations and nationalities of Ethiopian empire.

This writer has found evidence that the Sidama famine since 1999 has been used as political weapon by TPLF to punish Sidama as a nation simply for its demand to exercise its right of self- determination. I (the writer) strongly argue that the green famine in Sidama since 1999 and its causes and consequences are deliberate genocidal policies followed by TPLF regime.

I. The Sidamas and the Sidama-land.

Due to lack of genuine census, the actual figure of the Sidama population is not known. The Sidama population is estimated at 4.5 million. This estimate is based on the sample survey carried out in November 1995, by the Sidama Development Programme, SDP. The US State department adopted the 1995 population estimate of 55 million for the entire Ethiopia, of which Sidamas is 8 percent (about 4.4) million.

The Sidama-land covers an area of about 16,000 square kilometres. A significant parts of this territory lies at 4,500-10,000 feet, consisting of highlands, midlands and low lands that are located in the Great East African Rift Valley. Highlands exhibits a high level of rain fall, while the contrary is the case of the low lands despite several under developed water sources. In terms of geographic disposition, the Sidama-land is full of a variety of landscape types; lakes, big rivers and climate zones. There major rivers mostly flowing from eastern highland to the west, and a few lakes in and around the Sidama. 96% of the Sidama people live in the rural area. This is because most of towns and cities in the Sidama-land have been evolved from garrison or military camp of Abyssinians, to town hood from the time of conquest and colonization in 1890s.

Therefore, indigenous Sidamas regard towns and cities in their land as the camp of enemy, during colonial conquest and the place they were robbed, brutalised and imprisoned after and during the occupation. Except those very few educated Sidamas who are hesitatingly becoming servants and allies of Abyssinian colonial administrative machinery when few opportunities of job available, most of the Sidamas forced to live in rural areas.

The diversity of natural environment means that the Sidama is an "ever-green" land possessing all varieties of tropical vegetation. Sidama-land is rich in resources exploitable via agriculture, mining, tourism, industry and other modern service sectors. It produces a number of food stuffs including fruits and vegetables cereals and cash crops. Weese (banana like plant) is a source of stable food waasa. The coffee is the main export product.

The economic welfare of the majority of the Sidama people depends on agriculture. The territory has remained almost entirely rain fed, lacking proper investment or suitable land use policy. Despite the availability of plenty of rivers and some lakes, successive Abyssinian regimes prevented the development of irrigation.

II. Survival in the face of drought and demographic pressure.

There are varieties of reasons given for the occurrences of famine in the world. For instance, climate induced famine, demographic pressure, and political famine. Climatically, no matter how severe the drought situation in a given area, the consequent possibility of famine depends on the people's capabilities and level of political and socio-economic vulnerability. For instance, famines are not common occurrences in other areas of Middle East, even though these have the same climatic aridity more than Ethiopia. Because their political and socio-economic conditions are different.

Although climatically induced factors such as drought, floods, dampness can create food shortages, this food scarcity may negatively affect households, access to food, it is possible to identify a number of mechanisms and strategies via which affected house holds manage to survive tremendous difficulties. To escape starvation many agrarian communities gather wild food, utilize commons, borrow, share resources with relatives, send children to live with relatives dwelling outside drought prone areas and draw on social obligations of reciprocity during periods when food is scarce. Therefore, drought is not something that unexpectedly seizes the vulnerable groups of society. However, these early-awareness strategies and survival mechanisms of drought prone communities will be exhausted if the drought is prolonged for several years, since these communities use up their existing resources until the last moment to prevent people from dying. While it appears true that climatic change results in food shortages, if the decline in the food provision remains constant over a long period of time without any active interventions being undertaken against the consequences of drought, famine will be recurrent.

The second theoretical approach emphasises the connection between demographic pressure and famine, a position associated with Malthus and his adherents. Malthus's theory of demographic dynamics and their relation to famine can be generalized as 'too many mouths and too little food equals famine.' Population growth may contribute to pressure on available economic resources and opportunities in a society

characterized by stagnant economic growth. This, however, is not sufficient to explain the causes of famine, unless it is in conjunction with other factors and processes that accelerate the deterioration of the capacity of a given society to resist vulnerability to famine. Therefore, both drought and demographic pressure alone do not automatically lead to famine unless oppressive political system has pushed a society into vulnerability zone, or else that society lacks socio-economic and institutional capacities to cope with famine's encroachment. I shall attempt to substantiate this argument by drawing on experience I have gained while living in the Sidama of horn of Africa.

The Sidama-land is regarded by outsiders as an island surrounded by areas under threat of drought and recurrent food insecurity. Arne Tolo, explaining the Sidama's survival surrounded by drought "The drought -famines of early 1970s and early 1983/4 did not hit Sidama. Compared to other areas of Ethiopia, Sidama has enjoyed a relatively stable dietary situation." Tolo (1998:22).

It is possible to substantiate what Tolo writes. If my understanding is correct that famine is the last stage in the process of socio-economic deterioration leading to the disruption of access to food by vulnerable groups in a society facing threats from both natural and man- made forces, then famine did not occur in the Sidama until 1999. This however does not mean that the Sidama has never faced drought or occasional food insecurity.

Being the Sidama citizen, living and working among this nation has helped me to understand why those recurrent droughts were not regarded, either by the Sidamas or by successive Abyssinian regimes as bringing famine that it was beyond the capacity of its victims to address. The problem was not the absence of suffering from severe drought, but the absence of mutual trust between successive Abyssinian governments and the Sidama. This distrust damaged the latter's expectations that they would be assisted during times of crisis by the former. This mentality forced Sidama communities that were affected by drought to depend completely on kinship reciprocity rather than government food relief. In addition to this, the Sidama highlands, with their unbroken traditional ethics of mutual assistance (owing to the Sidama's conservative nature) having relative economic strength and self sufficiency are ready to share with their low land communities. Therefore, the lowland communities affected by successive droughts did not look for outside grain aid either from government or non governmental organizations.

Secondly, successive Abyssinian governments have had a deliberate intention of punishing these low land communities as they were suspected of sheltering the army of the Sidama Liberation struggles what requires further explanation here is not the absence of drought and consequent food insecurity, but how the Sidama such difficult times and their coping strategies. In the following section I attempt to show few of Sidama's capacities to avoid famine until 1999.

III. The role of Sidama's organic social welfare in combating famine.

Organic social welfare refers to those methods of mutual assistance that are inherent in a given society during crises. Such welfare represents a sustainable and long-lasting system, woven into the social fabric of the people. It is the mechanism through which people's entitlement to food is assured during various crises. In this section I shall

attempt to show the organic social practices and institutions that enhanced the ethic of co-operation and mutual assistance among the Sidama. And I shall attempt to substantiate or else challenge what the literature says or does not say about the role of organic social practices and institutions in preventing the encroachment of famine.

Famine is one of the abnormalities and crises faced by vulnerable groups in society. If intervention by external body during such crises does not materialize, the degree of suffering and survival of these vulnerable groups depend on the ethic of co-operation operative in the society to which they belong and the strategies against the threat of famine, (Becker 1986:73; Fox 1975:82; Sahlines 1965:141,148, Scott 1976:2,4,5,9,27). I shall discuss communal food consumption, and those forms of reciprocity and sharing among the Sidama that prevented drought being converted in to famine for centuries.

The term sharing is associated with the ethics of co-operation and assistance aimed at mitigating crises and abnormal occurrences that goes beyond the capacities of the victims. In the words of Dessalgn Rahmato " The spirit of cooperation, of sharing assets, resources and services and reciprocal support shown in the rural community during food shortages plays a vital role in peasant survival strategies" (Ramato 1991:30)

Sharing habits that are deeply rooted during normal times as a way of life can be extended and intensified during the times of crises. In Sidama, such habits may originate in the very practice of the communal consumption of food. Whenever a meal is served, the members of household may be grouped together in a circle or row, according to their age and sex. Children of both sexes may be grouped together. The father, as the head of family, and young boys eat together. While the mother and young girls also eat together. In each group, every member takes from the same plate (Xilte, saffe, gawate, Hookkicho) and drinks milk from the same cup (qooncho, finiincho). If some one outside the house hold arrives while the meal is being served, he or she will join the group in the position according with his or her age and sex.

The second example that helps to elaborate the way of sharing to explain how the communal entitlement for cooked food among the Sidama is associated with the time food is served. Every morning there is a coffee ceremony, in which mature members of neighbouring households join together for coffee ceremony, in which the mature members of neighbouring households join together for coffee (Buna) and light food (bunururse). In this ceremony each household calls on other, depending on the proximity of their houses, regardless of the wealth status, religion, clan of the individuals. Everyone attending the ceremony takes light food from the same plate known as gabate or saffe, which is passed round by a child from a host household.

In the evening, every mature male is expected to pass time with a family headed by reputable male or female elder, to chat and exchange information (odoo) and ideas about issues of different kinds. This occasion is called waare. This visit to an elder always concludes with a dinner that provides opportunities for those who might face food shortage back at their home to have access to food.

Using the same plate and cup means, for Sidama, first of all enhancing access to food for those who might be facing a food shortage for those who do not have enough food in their home, eating from the same plate and drinking from the same cup enables

them first of all to get through hard time. Secondly it is highly associated with the notion of the covenant that binds people together in normal and abnormal times. For host family food is exchanged for honour and reputation. That family can be regarded as a patron and guardian of the poor. Actually there is competition among those who are wealthy for honour and patron-hood. This competition plays vital role in combating food insecurity and encroachment of famine for those who do not have enough.

Sidama women always keep prepared foods (boqicho) for unexpected hungry outsiders. The ethics of caring for those who are hungry is deeply inscribed in every day discourse in the Sidama language itself. For outsider guests the very words of greeting they may give a host are highly linked to the question of food availability. If it is morning, he or she will call those inside and say "Ayiide! Maygallo?" meaning 'what is left over from the night? If it is evening, the outsider will say "Ayiide mayhonso?" The host will respond to the greetings saying 'wo'mino, meaning plenty, abundant or 'our house is full of food' and then the guest will be invited to enter and share what is available. Based on what I have observed in Sidama, I can say that even the most solidarity and co-operative community can still suffer famine if external forces (natural or man-made) such as drought, war, the pursuit of profit at the expense of community, bad governance lack of democracy are serious enough.

During periods of crises and abnormality, this spirit of sharing is extended in a more consolidated and organized ways. The Sidama people have various systems of interventions for various types of crises and abnormalities faced by individuals and groups of individuals. To mention a few of them, Kayiisha, foocho, Aewo, jirte (olliimma) Dartu manna adha, Xiwammoha owaata, seera, are few of Sidama's organic social institutions to combat crises and abnormalities faced by fellow human beings. It would be possible to write plenty of political and economic institutions that enabled Sidamas to avoid famine until 1999. Due to shortage of time and space I highlighted on the above social institutions.

IV. The role of TPLF regime in sowing the seeds of famine in Sidama Land

The Sidama lost their independence after colonial conquest and occupation by northern Abyssinians from 1890s. But the nation retained nominal regional autonomy. As a result of TPLF's arrangement they have lost even this and now accountable to Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional state, SNNPRS, losing their direct contact with Ethiopian Central government. During the period of Regional autonomy those in Power in Sidamo province were not ethnically Sidamas. Except few allies who served the Abyssinian interest and exploited their fellow Sidamas. Despite a population estimated 4.5 million the Sidama has now denied regional state hood and fare power sharing and to administer themselves.

Regional autonomy was proposed for the Sidama in 1992. This was denied by TPLF which opted instead for establishing the SNNPR by forcefully merging more than 45 nations in 1994. That became another administrative layer between the Sidama and central government of Ethiopia. The loss of Sidama's constitutional right to self determination, as a nation which is still suffers began here in its relation with TPLF. This is the second insult of TPLF on Sidama who pushed the then leaders of Sidama struggle who were co-authors of transitional charter by threat of killing. For instance

the December 8, 1991 shooting on the leaders of the Sidama struggle who narrowly escaped death and after eight left wounded.

The loss of regional autonomy and regional statehood resented not only by Sidama public, and the then leaders of the national liberation struggle but also the leaders of Sidama people's Democratic Organization (SPDO) created by the TPLF, who refused to sign the approval of constitution that deprived the Sidama of regional statehood. Those leaders were subjected to harassment of various kinds, and imprisonment. Vice chairman- of SPDO and the president of the Sidama Zone administration council, Mr Tufa Doyicha and secretary of the council Mr Elyas Tiros were removed from their position and sentenced to imprisonment in January 1995 for their refusal to sign the constitution that violated Sidama's right to self determination.

It was decided the official language of the newly established SNNPRS would be Amharic. This was contrary to the spirit of their own constitution which is symbolically kept to deceive the global community. And it would hinder the development of other vernacular languages and cultures. This in turn ignores the right of non-Amharic speakers to access government job. This paved the way the Amharas and Amharic speaking people's domination in government offices. Thus the old unitary structure was being perpetuated by the leadership of Tigreans and bureaucratic support of Amharas. Sidamas were forced not only to stop their demands for self-determination, but also suffered retaliation from Amhara bureaucrats hiding in the government offices.

Economically, Sidama's vulnerability to famine in 1990s and to date was the result of many TPLF policies and economic reforms. The implementation of their policies followed by the weakening of genetic diversity of traditional seeds benefited the bio-tech companies and those companies involved in the distribution of bio-tech products owned by TPLF, such as selected seeds, chemical fertilizers and related chemicals. This resulted in a weakening of the traditional system of seed exchange. Village- level seed banks were being replenished with commercial hybrids and genetically modified seeds. Markets for farm inputs including fertilizer and seeds were given to the TPLF's trading companies, like Guna, Dinsho, Wondo etc. Pioneer Hybrid International entered into lucrative partnership with TPLF seed Enterprise.

The Sidama smallholders were persuaded to sow genetically modified seeds and to use artificial fertilizer by TPLF cadres, who were rushing to popularise the use of artificial fertilizer and genetically modified seeds and to look market for TPLF companies. Actually no body told those small holders they would be expected to pay back the cost of inputs that they were being distributed with. For the first two years, impressed by huge yields harvested from genetically modified seeds, they abandoned traditionally seed for GM. For the Sidama smallholders it was free distribution an incentive for abandoning for their traditional and indigenous seeds. However, in the next year the same small holders were hunted by extension workers, political authorities in respective Peasant Associations accompanied by Police, for their failure to pay back hidden debt. Some of them were forced to sell their only cow if they did not have a cow; they had to sell their land to those with money (secretly as it is illegal to do so officially). Finally most of them became landless and homeless and destitute. They finally forced to live fertilizer and GM seed. It is hard to be back to traditional seed. And, it is hard even to find it. Those who kept traditional seed despite the harassment of TPLF cadres start to sell them for other small holders. The problem was

there was very low yield from the traditional seed as the soil was "spoiled" by the GM and its inputs.

From the end of 1995 Sidama smallholders started to face harvest failure wheat particularly in the highland of Hula, Harbagona and Shabdino highlands. At the same time symptoms of hunger that were unusual in the history of the Sidama began to be seen. In 1996 I started to observe in Awassa city homeless families from neighbouring peasant associations who had recently left their homes in Awassa Zuria districts adjacent to Awassa city such as Gamaxo gale, Chaffasine Finchewa and Jarra Gallacha. These families were begging in the Sidama Language in front of churches.

This was hitherto unknown phenomenon for the rural Sidama's who perceive the urban dwellers as their enemy and the city as the camp of enemy built on the land from which they had been evicted. More over, in Awassa they were victimized as Sidama whenever they came to the market and were often robed imprisoned for not good reason. Finally it is strange to see Sidama, who often have to beg to eat what is in front of them, begging in Public Square their historical enemies. Starvation forced them to ignore the historical enemy. I counted 67 homeless families sleeping at the night under plastic sheets in the dirty park just at the gate of unfinished building of St.Gabriel church which belongs virtually for Abyssinians. No one responded to those symptoms until it claimed hundreds of thousands in 1999.

This vulnerability to famine is not the result of crop failure and the decline in food availability but it is the cumulative effect of deterioration organic Socio-economic institutions that by themselves prevented in the Sidama. Those Sidama institutions have suffered not only devastating recurrent wars and political instability, but also from the imposition of new and unsustainable socio-economic policies.

Now-a-days more than thousands of Sidamas fired from government jobs without having any alternative source of income. Those Sidamas are the patron and guardian of five to 32 families and extended families. In this case it is not the individual alone that suffers but his dependants as well. There are thousands of Sidamas sufferings in various prisons of SNNPRS. Among those prisoners, there are those who are subjected to torture and mis-handlings. In order to substantiate my argument I would like to name a few with their dependants. Argaw Haile/Mariam is one of three Sidamas died in Prison recently deprived of their rights to medical access. According the report I got from the prisoners who are imprisoned with out any trials simply they were suspected as supporters of liberation struggle for two years.

	Name	Age	Profession	Dependants
1	Argata Gunsu	63	Farmer	25
2	Tongola Torba	48	Arooressa district Government council chairman	30
3	Isyas Sibu	34	Sidama Development Programm employee	11
4	Duguna Dukamo	33	Deputy Speaker of house of house Sidama zone government	15
5	Leggesse wansamo	28	28 Director of rural development in Arooressa district	9
6	Matwos Qanafa	27	Student with family	5
7	Matewos Shimalo	36	Finance Ministry employee	9
8	Qalbessa Agaro	30	Student with family	6
9	Berhanu Dukamo	41	Education Bureau employee	9
10	walelign Haxiso	30	Driver	8
11	Haxxiya Waare	43	Head teacher	15
12	Sarmiso Samuel	32	Head teacher	6
13	Bolka Dureesa	30	Businessman	7
14	Kebede Kayima	35	Head teacher	8
15	Tumato Tumbulo	32	Head teacher	8
16	Teshome Getahun	34	Rural Dev. Bureau employee	8
17	Taddesse Buro	29	Student with family	10
18	Abera Nu'ura	29	Soldier	7
19	Shalammo Jireessa	29	Student with family	6
20	Yohannis Qunaasa	28	Businessman	5
21	Tamiru Tessema	30	Awassa district finance ministry employee	12
22	Takkele Qixxesa	33	Finance ministry employee	8
23	Solomon Shamana	44	teacher	10
24	Meskele Tumato	28	Sidama Development Programme employee	4
25	Xilahun Xitamo	30	Driver	6
26	Eshetu Qami'so	40	Driver	7
27	Mesfin Qixxessa	37	Business Man	20
28	Adoola Utaala	54	Business man	28
29	Kassa Addiso	50	farmer	32
30	Lensamo Lalimo	45	farmer	14
31	Qetsele Tseggaye	36	Director of the office of Zonal security guards	12
32	Abayneh Ashango	32	Commander of armed forces at Dale districts	10
33	Menkir Haile Mikael	40	Agriculture office employee	12

These are the very few whom I manage to name and to have their details.

Besides personal mis-treatments and tortures their dependants are suffering from famine. In addition to this there are thousands who fled and fleeing the country and their home and living in unidentified addresses or disappeared.

Recently, the TPLF/EPRDF's regime concentrated on displacing and resettling twenty to thirty thousands Sidamas away from their home and lands. This is; to minimize the number of the Sidamas to destroy and devastate the Sidama identity and nationalism, to create fake southern identity, to resettle northerners in the Sidama-land so that they keep controlling political and socio-economic upper hand, to block the numbers of

Sidamas who are increasingly joining the struggle for national liberation are few of hidden agendas of TPLF regime to destroy the Sidama as a nation. I will concentrate on those hidden agendas next time.

B. Daye, January 3, 2004