

# **Sidama diaspora identity formation and forced flight\***

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## **1. Introduction**

The Sidama diaspora refers to people of Sidama descent who live outside Sidama-Ethiopia. The majority of Sidama diaspora members have been forced to leave their homeland due to political repression with few exceptions who migrated in search of better opportunities. Yet nearly all of them face the condition of exile or what Edward Said calls “being somebody away from the place that he was born and belonged to” (Said 2001). In the words of Greg Gow, the diaspora experience can be dystopic: “loss, anguish, divided loyalties and the longing for cohesion and community feature in the lives of displaced people. In the host country, experiences of discrimination, exclusion and invisibility negatively constitute diaspora consciousness” (Gow 2004:304).

The essay explores the experiences of the Sidama diaspora based on personal experience, observation and discussion with Sidamas. It compares and constrasts the cultures of exile of other comparative diaspora groups such as the Oromos, Somalis, Palestinians and Iranians.

The essay starts by describing the contested territories of history and identity, nation and homeland. It then examines the flight and forced migration of Sidamas followed by analysis of the creation of the Sidama diaspora, their settlements, and their cultural projects. It finally concludes with findings that relate to broader themes and comparative cultures of exile. Since no study has been done on Sidama diaspora, this is an original attempt, and as such generalisations and conclusions are tentative and open to further research.

## **2. Who are Sidamas?**

The Sidamaland is situated in north-eastern Africa (Ethiopia) where there is deep contest and conflict over identity, including the population size. The Sidama population is estimated to be over 5 million; and they are one of the major Kushtic speaking people in Ethiopia, a country of over 70 million. The Sidama people believe to belong to Sidama country, or the Sidamaland.

The Sidama are a persecuted ethno-national group; their condition resembles that of the Oromos in Ethiopia who “are perhaps the most recent, least known and most disadvantaged immigrant group.” Gow (2004:302). The Sidama have all the necessary components of a nation: a land, a unique culture, language, history, and a people with common descent. In this sense, they are a nation and a people without state. Like Palestinians, Sidamas lacked a political roof of their own or autonomous political decision making and face discrimination and violation of human rights.

The Sidama nation, its people including its diaspora, its history and culture are scarcely known. Sidama studies were virtually non-existent even for academic purposes for two reasons. First, the introduction of education and the emergence of enlightened nationalists were late in comparison to other regions in Ethiopia. Secondly, the Ethiopian historiography had no room for the development of non-Abyssinian (mainly Amhara and Tigrean) cultures. Worse still, it had circumvented and undermined their knowledge production by isolating the Sidama from the world for more than a century, although recently its children scattered around the world are bringing their experiences to bear and their presence felt.

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National identity is hotly contested in Ethiopia resulting in competing claims, counter-claims and persistent struggle. The official Ethiopianist discourse projects the authenticity and historicity of Ethiopian nation to three thousand years. The myth of descent from the so-called Solomonic dynasty is frequently mentioned to build an image of national continuity and a unique civilisation (Zewde 2002).

On the other hand, Sidama and Oromo scholars (e.g. Holcomb and Ibssa 1990, Hameso and Hassen 2006) draw distinction between modern Ethiopia and the historic Abyssinia (Amharas and Tigreans). The Sidamaland had fallen under the formerly Abyssinian and later Ethiopian rule since 1893. This came about after the war of conquest undertaken by Emperor Menelik II of Shawa, Central Ethiopia. The system that emerged was based on “physical appropriation of land and the pursuit of cultural hegemony” (Gow 2004:303) of Orthodox Christian kingdom of Abyssinia. The same system resulted in the decimation and forced displacement of millions of Oromos, Sidamas and others who resisted the conquest.

The subsequent nation-building project was pursued through the policy of assimilation and homogenization, mainly into Amhara culture. Successive attempts to homogenise the Ethiopian nation along Amharic culture and language meant that languages such as the Sidama were relegated or suppressed alongside the political importance of the peoples speaking them. The social and political subordination of Sidama people caused their economic dispossession and inevitable resistance. Resistance to apartheid style discriminatory political framework took the form of national liberation struggles and the formation of several liberation fronts in different parts of Ethiopia including Eritrea, Tigray, Afar, Oromo, Sidama and Ogaden who waged wars with centrist and unitarist regimes in Addis Ababa. The prevalence of domination and repression created a multitude of diasporas.

### 3. The Forced Flight of Sidamas

Large scale forced displacement in sizeable numbers in manners comparable to Palestinians, Somalis or even Oromos is not the case for Sidamas. Yet, the history of conquest, subjugation, violation of human rights and cultural suppression meant that conflicts and liberation struggles led to forced displacement of Sidamas from their homeland.

The majority of Sidamas who are involved in transnational flight constitute of refugees and asylum seekers, followed by increasing number of voluntary migrants to the West under voluntary resettlement schemes such as the U.S. Lottery DV programmes. Labour migration is unheard of from Sidama until recent times. Indeed, unlike Somali communities who are reported to have “a strong culture of migration” (Horst 2006:1), transnational border crossing and labour migration of Sidamas have been limited. Yet, due to a combination of reasons including rights violation and economic deprivation, Sidamas are undertaking costly flights to different destinations.

Historically, the first wave of migration from Sidama took place in 1977 following the clampdown of political dissidents by the military Derg which took power in 1974 and led by col. Mengistu Hailemariam. The destination was Somalia and the number of involved persons is estimated to be over ten thousand comprising, mainly of peasants with a handful of educated persons as leaders. The group formed the Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM). After receiving military training in Somalia, many of them had returned to Sidama as freedom fighters conducting armed struggle in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Led from Somalia, the struggle was short-lived and came to end in 1982. The Barre regime supported the SLM and later the refugees by offering them training, equipment and land. Initially, the movement laid the basis for written Sidama language literacy in the refugee camps. Moreover, pamphlets and

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Sidama language radio broadcast propaganda work started in the early 1980s followed by the creation of popular music.

The second wave of Sidama refugees, took place after the change of regime in Ethiopia in 1991. This round of flight was precipitated by local and regional factors. Locally, cautious optimism prevailed among Sidamas who believed that the regime led by the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (the TPLF, the key rebel movement in the overthrow of the Derg regime) will lead to the resolution of their predicament; but this was not meant to be and many fled TPLF-instigated persecution later. On the regional level, the fall of the Siad Barre regime in Somalia in 1990 was followed by turmoil and civil war and the disintegration of the Somalian state. Then hundreds of Sidamas returned to Ethiopia in 1991 when the SLM joined the newly formed Transitional Government. Others, who integrated into Somali society and were given farmlands, remained in Somalia while others fled to Kenya's refugee camps such as Kakuma. For Sidama refugees in such refugee camps, resettlement in the safe third country had become the most desired option. Through the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Kenya, the governments of Norway, USA, Canada and Australia received many refugees for resettlement.

While Sudan has been the main route or destination of Ethiopian refugees, very few Sidama refugees or migrants travelled to or through Sudan. Even those who did in the late 1970s travelled back to Kenya and eventually resettled in the U.S. The most common route of Sidama refugee flow has been south of the border (either into Kenya or Somalia) rather than the north (either Sudan or Egypt – most refugees from Ethiopia who did go north have been and are Ethiopians from the North and West).

In the UK, there were a handful of Sidamas in the 1980s but this changed in the 1990s. Following the second wave of refugee flows, stated above, a new breed of people arrived in the UK mostly through regular channels of migration. In the U.S. and Canada, the Sidama diaspora consist of a combination of former refugees from Somalia and voluntary migrants through the Green Card Lottery or Diversity Immigrant Visa Programme followed by family reunions and sponsorship. In Italy, there are fewer than 100 Sidama migrants, mostly women who took up religious path to migration (they migrated through Catholic Church and seminary training but decided to remain there). Some applied for asylum while others remained irregular and engaged in low-skill, low-paid jobs. Yet most are supportive of their relatives in Sidama. Other European countries in which Sidamas reside include Germany, Norway, and Ireland.

Despite the lack of structured study into the varied background of Sidama diaspora, anecdotal evidence and personal observation show that most refugees faced similar predicament at one time or another: uprooting, and deprivation. According to Mekuria Bulcha (2006:40), “uprooting is more than a physical absence from home. It is a predicament which concerns the inner balance of the individual. In other words, it involves an emotional crisis caused by the individual's separation from his/her natural physical and social environment and a psychological problem of adjusting to the new one.” In addition, forced migrants in particular face the problem of discontinuity which constitutes multiple disruptions of life-goals including marriage, family life, careers and education.

## **4. The Development of Written Narratives**

Most Sidama refugees descend from rural communities where social relations are closely knit and life is based on strong sense of solidarity and interdependence. These values and worldviews accompany them to the destinations that host them.

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## **Literacy and communication among the diaspora**

In oral cultures such as that of Sidama, an important medium of communication is the word of mouth. It also means that oral and visual communication methods are more popular among people with limited literacy and access to print media. For those who have the skills to use modern information technology, internet is the most important source of information of news and developments about the homeland. Most of the people this writer has contact with, deploy Internet to search for information or they rely on electronic communication. Telephony is the other major medium communication. It is effective means of transnational network building and maintaining links with relatives and friends in the homeland.

The Sidama language was developed in written form in 1991, following the decision by the Transitional Government which consisted of Oromo and Sidama political leaders who were later forced out of government in 1992. The role of individuals such as Mr Ibsa Gutama who was the then Minister of Education and a member of the Oromo Liberation Front was vital in this decision. The written Sidama uses Latin alphabet in contrast to Giiz or Ethiopic scripts used for Amharic and other Semetic languages.

## **Expression of longing through music and scholarship**

The development of Sidama music outside Sidama had started with refugees in Somalia. The most famous singer who later returned to Sidama in 1991 was Adunya Dumo. Much of his music is informed by exile experience in Somalia in the 1980s and it is filled with expressions of loneliness, uncertainty, uprootedness, nostalgia and desire to return to the homeland. In his music, he refers to Sidamaland as a motherland, mother, innocent, and love. A significant degree of idealisation of homeland is evident in his songs. Upon his return, Adunya was received with great enthusiasm and as a hero. When relations with the Ethiopian regime and the political movement he was associated soured, Adunya encountered conflict with the political and social environment. He then retreated to life of alcohol abuse and unemployment. Adunya's story is similar to the Palestinian youth who returned to occupied homeland and felt disillusioned though in recent times some countries such as the UK have restricted the latter.

In the Sidama diaspora, some people listen to Adunya's music to express their longing for homeland. The imported music audios, and video cassettes are played on social events such as marriage ceremonies and political rallies. Some people buy foods items or import prepared food from home. There are also many Sidamas with no immediate desire to return yet still keep the collective memory by producing scholarly works on Sidama, writing about its history and informing the wider world about the Sidama people. Indeed, Sidama diaspora intellectuals participate in various community projects including the production of knowledge through literature. In co-operation with like-minded other diaspora scholars, the Sidama scholars write articles, participate in international conferences and events. They conduct nationalist discourse by word of mouth and by written texts (i.e. books, essays, newsletters and internet discussion groups). Websites such as the Sidama Online ([www.sidama.org](http://www.sidama.org)) and the Sidama Concern ([www.sidamaconcern.com](http://www.sidamaconcern.com)) are the products of such initiatives. The aims of The Sidama Concern, for example, are:

- To collate, analyse and disseminate information of relevance to the Sidama of North East Africa;
- To serve as a means of communication between Sidamas and the outside world in manners that can be progressively useful to Sidama people at home and in diaspora;
- To promote dialogue on the causes of justice, peace, democracy and development; and,

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- To create awareness about freedom of expression and human rights issues in this part of Africa.

In this regard, Edward Said is right when he wrote: “Much of exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. It is not surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelists, chess players, political activists and intellectuals” (Said 2000:181).

## **Political mobilisation**

Sidama forced migrants recall human rights violations in the form of political persecution, war, forced resettlement and villagization. In the 1970s and 1980s, they faced brutal repression by Ethiopian military regime with the support of the former Soviet Union. Since 1991, they have faced equally brutal suppression by the Tigrayan-dominated Ethiopia government which is supported by financial backing from the Western countries. The ongoing political problems forced many a diaspora to participate in politics, by leading and guiding as well as mobilising local and international support for the Sidama cause both in the diaspora and in Sidama.

The significant event that caused widespread uproar was the Looqe massacre of 24 May 2002. The massacre of about 100 Sidama civilians by Ethiopian government forces caused indignation not only among the Sidamas but also among the international community. The most active members of the Sidama diaspora collected signatures, contacted the UK government and canvassed for support from UK national and European Union parliamentarians. Repression and rights violations still continue even after the May 2005 elections of Ethiopia.

While such tragedies bring people together, the Sidama diaspora, like other diasporas, entertain diverse political outlooks. This resulted in different loyalties and minor discrepancies in approaches. Competition and political rivalry among groups and along regional lines have negatively impacted on the cause, not least among members of the diaspora communities. Yet all groups and supporters believe in the shared problem of suppression and violation of human rights by Ethiopian regimes.

## **Gender, social networks and community formations**

Most Sidama women migrate to join their husbands. The customary Sidama tradition offers certain rights including the control of family subsistence, especially dairy products. Women used to be represented in the traditional council of wise people (womu songo). However, like other societies, Sidama too is patriarchal society and women do not inherit land which is owned by the Ethiopian state anyway.

In the diaspora, men are often the breadwinners of families. It is not very common to have single parent families in Sidama, there are a few single parent families among Sidama diaspora. Family breakdown is rare, but it exists.

There are some harmful practices including female circumcision which takes place when a woman marries a man. The health hazards associated with such a practice is increasingly publicised and many an educated people have or are abandoning the practice.

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In a communal society like that of the Sidama, the social networks including relations and friends support community members. Individual remittances and community activities directed at improving the lives of kin and kith in the homeland are common. This is despite the fact that many diaspora members are preoccupied with basic daily living while others managed to enable themselves to create knowledge about Sidamaland and give meaning to their own situation.

The formation and running of community organisations has not been quite successful as political rivalries and conflicts permeate social and community life. People who know each other, but divided along political lines find it less controversial and the least risky to pursue religious path than political causes. Thus churches attract more followers than political demonstrations.

## **5. Integration and Myth of Return**

One of the achievements of the Derg regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s has been the expansion of mass literacy programmes to large sections of Ethiopia. The literacy campaign has impact on peoples of the periphery of Ethiopian politics, mainly in the rural areas. Yet such basic literacy is no feat for literacy and numeracy levels required in the West for well meaning integration in societies that host these people. As the result they remain unemployed and dependent on social welfare benefits. Some adults, especially women who lacked formal schooling, engage in irregular labour market often at low wages sometimes below minimum wages. English is their second or the third language.

Sidama diasporas in London and other parts of the world exhibit different levels of integration to host societies. Many, who came to UK with higher education degrees, have proceeded to do post-graduate studies to bolster their life chances. It is also the case that most of the migrants to UK are either educated and leaders or members of Sidama political movements; most arrive as single men and joined by their families later. Many took part in paid and unpaid work. Still there are many who are not in gainful employment.

Young generations pass through the mainstream education system, and some aspire for a university education. But older generations find integration difficult. Those who are over 60 years old, wish their stay to be short and temporary. Their adaptation and integration is hard to achieve due to language and cultural barriers not to mention problems of job skills and lack of access to opportunities. They constantly feel estranged and seek information and contact with the homeland. As the result, they often get involved in politics.

Despite generational and gender issues, most Sidamas in exile left behind families, social networks and cultural resources. Deprived of these vital resources, they have to struggle to forge new identities and relations in a foreign, sometimes hostile social and political environment. In the new environment, they attained physical security and safety being away from harms way at the cost of loss of family and community social security of the homeland.

The diaspora who live in the West enjoy the rights denied at home including freedom of expression, association, and organization for the first time. They make use of human agency and enabled themselves articulating the cause, not only of their own but also of those left behind and left without voice. Through this agency, diaspora members of concerned groups created community, political, and scholarly organizations to openly define and defend their individual and collective interests and the Sidama national interest in foreign lands. The diaspora also helped the Sidama people build bridges that connect them to the global community. In the era of globalization they use developments in communication technologies to forge close linkages among themselves on the global level.

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## Conclusions

The Horn of Africa has been ravaged by conflict and violence since the 1970s and the 1980s. Deteriorating life conditions associated with famine and political upheaval and civil war led to forced displacement of people in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan. Ethiopia in particular is a complex arena of conflict, wars and deprivation.

The widely accepted narration through stories and tales by the Sidama elders and scholars about their experience and historical memory within Ethiopia is one of repression and discrimination. Yet the Ethiopian official discourse does not address the problem save concealing it by selectively memorising events and course of actions that justify its line of choice. National identity is hotly contested and led to conflicts and wars causing forced migration and the formation of Sidama diaspora. More significantly, government repression and violence forced thousands to abandon their homes to escape conscription, starvation and death by seeking refuge elsewhere. They are now scattered around the globe, particularly in Africa, Europe, Australia and North America. As the result, the base of the Sidama diaspora community is expanding both in number and diversity.

The flight routes and destinations of refugees are predicated largely not on their choice but the geographic and historical proximity of host countries. Countries such as the US, Canada, Australia and Norway had established procedures to identify and receive refugees from camps recognised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Other factors include: contacts, relations, income, and information people have of host countries. It is notable that such information is often meagre, less comprehensive and at times inaccurate.

On becoming part of the Sidama diaspora, some refugees, asylums seekers and migrants take part in political or human rights activism. Others form community organisations supporting relatives and friends in the homeland through remittances. Musicians and intellectuals played a great role in the imagination of nationhood, studying the roots of Sidama people, its homeland, observing and announcing national tragedies and enforcing the sense of national obligation.

In sum, the role of Sidama diaspora has increased in the era of globalization which is characterized by developments in information, communication and transportation technologies that have reduced the relevance of physical boundaries. By developing cultural iconography, campaigning for human rights, and advocating for change or political progress, the Sidama intellectuals have played a great role at times giving voice to the voiceless, the invisible and the oppressed. Yet a lot remains to be done to develop literature, art, music and other cultural productions.

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