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**The Question of Structural Violence on the Saho people of Eritrea, in spite  
of their important role during the Eritrean Struggle for Independence**

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## **Foreword**

This thesis is written as a completion to the Master of Peace and Conflict Transformation at the University of Tromsø, Norway. The research focuses on structural violence against the Saho people of Eritrea, a cultural minority group. There is very little information about the Saho people in general and about structural violence on the Saho people in particular. Moreover, under the contemporary despotic government of Eritrea, minority voices become unheard and even forbidden. Their suffering as well has become unrecognized. From these perspectives and as a member of the population being studied, the topic was initiated and selected by myself. The main intention of the research is to hopefully give a reader deeper insight and understanding about the overall situation, mainly the question of structural violence, on the Saho people under the current regime of Eritrea.

The full scope of the research is the Saho people therefore it has mainly relied on understandings and narrations of the Saho people. As a true revealing task, the research has chosen to link a human rights and justice perspective to the topic, in line with the research field. Since the current situation of the Saho people are products of pre independence historic processes, as a background, pre independence history of the Saho people has been covered.

Fieldwork was conducted June and July of 2014. From January to the end of May 2015, I have been occupied in writing. Writing this type of project was my first experience. Thus, it was not without considerable challenges. My knowledge of academic writing was limited. However, all I have gained in the end is valuable and interesting knowledge and experiences. I am extremely thankful to my supervisor Randi Rønning Balsvik, for her valuable insights and directions from the very beginning, which gave me necessary guidance to complete the research. I am very much satisfied with the work I have achieved.

The thesis has six chapters. The first deals with a general introduction of the Saho people and their social organization, the background of the study, the research problem, objectives and questions. The second chapter focuses on the methodological approach of the research. The third chapter deals with theories of structural violence and at the end, reflection on the current situation of the Saho people. The fourth chapter highlights on pre independence history of the Saho people, which have two sections: it highlights the historic injustice and discrimination against the Saho people and the historic role of the Saho people, collectively and individually, in the Eritrean struggle for independence. The fifth chapter presents and analysis the obtained data mainly in the field and in related documents. The sixth chapter is about summary and conclusion of the research.

## **Abstract**

The thesis focuses on discovering incidents of the structural violence on the Saho of Eritrea under the Eritrean PFDJ government. It is mainly stressed on the government policies, especially language and land and how the policies undermined the democratic rights of the Saho people. At the same time, it attempts to shed light on the subsequent suppressive attitudes of the government and its overall impacts on the Saho people and the consequences. To meet the objectives, the study relied on an in-depth interviewing of the Saho refugees in Ethiopia. Sixteen qualitative interviewing was conducted. The related documents were also used. As a conceptual framework for analysis, the study uses theories of the structural violence. The thesis also referred to the approaches of minority rights endorsed by the international and UN organizations.

The research findings are largely qualitative anecdotal evidence in type mainly from the perspectives of the Saho people. According to the findings frustrations are commonly observed among all Saho informants because of the marginalization and government negligence. The Saho see themselves as subordinated and poorly represented in decision making processes in matters that affect their very interest and livelihood. As a result, most of them entirely dissociate themselves from the government. The Saho people's attitude towards the government's language (mother tongue education) and land policy was in general negative. Forcible imposition of mother tongue education and its ineffective role, lack of consultation and participation of the Saho elites in the affairs concerned to them, discriminations involved in land allocation process, negligence of the pastoral Saho and forced government relocation programs are among the discovered incidents of the structural violence. It was also accompanied with further suppression and intimidation.

Comparing to their highland neighboring Tigrigna ethnic group, the Saho are the most marginalized society. The long-term effects of government's maltreatment, as the findings indicate, are extreme poverty and unequal survival chances between the Saho and their immediate neighboring highland group. Higher illiteracy, morbidity and unemployment rate is commonly seen among the Saho. Moreover, several Saho families found themselves in a hard position to cope with difficult situation. As a result, migration, family disintegration, intergenerational welfare dependency, humiliation, undermining of their wellbeing and self-esteem were among the impacts. Many were lured by the government to military and others enticed to accept government programs. The Saho people in remote areas are extremely vulnerable and suffering groups in this case. The situation is heading to further worse. As a

consequence of all, finally, the situations transformed to violent conflict between the government and the Saho people displayed obviously since 2008/2009.

At the end the study suggests recommendations how to overcome the structural violence against the Saho people in particular and making Eritrea just, egalitarian and an inclusive for every Eritrean citizens in general.

### **Key Words**

The Saho people, Eritrean government, structural violence, language and land policy, minority rights, marginalization, suppression.

## **Acknowledgement**

First and foremost I would like to praise the Almighty Allah for his grace and giving me patience and courage that helped me to complete this study.

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## **Abbreviations**

BMA	British Military Administration
CCPR:	The Covenants on Civil on Political Rights
ELF:	Eritrean Liberation front
ELM:	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLF:	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EriTV	Eritrean Television
IPs	Indigenous Peoples
MFHE	Mahber Fiqri Hager Ertra
ML	Moslem League
MTE:	Mother Tongue Education
PFDJ:	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PLF	Popular Liberation Front
SPDM:	Saho People's Democratic Movement
TPLF:	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

**Map 1: The Saho of Eritrea**



**NB:** There are several Saho villages and people outside the concrete border shown in green color on the map.

Source: <http://www.allsaho.com/page/5/>

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1. The Saho People and their Social Organization**

The Saho is a cultural minority group living in the east African country Eritrea. They belong to the widely spoken Cushitic speech families of east Africa, which includes Oromo, Afar and Somali. The word Saho refers to both people and language. The Saho are predominantly a pastoral-nomadic society (Lewis, 1969:11:74). Combination of agriculture, bee-keeping in the highland and fishing at the coastal areas are also practiced to some extent.

Eritrea is a country of 6.3 million people (World Bank, 2013), with nine recognized cultural groups. The Saho constitute the third largest group<sup>1</sup> in Eritrea preceded by Tigrigna (50%) and Tigre (31.4%). The demographic number of the Saho people still remains unclear. It has, for a long time, been considered between 8.25% and 5% of the total Eritrean population (Mohammad, 2013: 103). According to the government use, the Saho constitute 5% of total Eritrean population. However, demographic distribution of Eritrea most of the time has either been politicized as exaggerating one size while underestimating the size of other or misguided by lack of adequate knowledge (Bereketeab, 2010:10).

The majority of the Saho people inhabit the Eritrean territory. Among the six regions<sup>2</sup> of Eritrea, the Saho are scattered in four regions: Southern Region, Northern Red Sea Region, Gash-Barka Region and the Central Region. In all these regions, they are minorities. Across the border of Eritrea, there are also Saho speaking groups in Ethiopia, the Irob, Hazo and Dasamo clans. There are also significant numbers of Saho live as refugees in the Sudan, Djibouti and the Middle-Eastern countries (Lewis, 1969:174; Mohammad, 2013:102).

Most often, the highland Eritrea incorrectly referred to only one ethno-religious group, which is Tigrigna majority group. This ignores, although a minority, the existence of the Saho people in the area. For example, according to Gebre-Medhin, (1998), the Saho constitute 40% of the most densely populated region of Akele Guzay.

Towns and sub-towns in Eritrea inhabited mainly by the Saho people are Adi-Keih, Senafe, Tsorona, Ginda, Massawa, Nefasit, Mai-habar, Forro, Irafaile, Badda, Mai-Habar Maishigle and Galluj.

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<sup>1</sup> Total population of the Saho speakers is 223,800. Among this number 191,000 live in Eritrea and the rest in Ethiopia. <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/ssy> (2006). This number is, I guess, didn't include the Saho people living in Sudan mainly refugee camps, Middle East and other parts of the world.

<sup>2</sup> Italian colonial rule, divided Eritrea into eight administrative regions. From the eight, the highland Eritrea was made up of three regions: Akele-Guzay, Hamasien and Seraie. In 1996, Eritrean government reshaped the regions into six administrative regions.

The Saho are a typical tribal society, organized into ten semi-autonomous tribes<sup>3</sup>, six of whom are big tribes. Each tribe is made up of sub-tribes and each sub-tribe again subdivided into numerous clans and families. All the Saho tribes share a common language, culture, historic external threat but they are mostly different in origin (Mohammad, 2013:105). Tribe or clan has great importance among the Saho people, either in personal or tribal meaning. It signifies personal descent, privilege and identity. Collectively the tribe provides a social and ideological base of solidarity and integrity among tribes especially during external feuds and competition with neighbouring ethnic groups. Each tribe led by a tribal leader known as, *Redanto*, and he enjoys much respect and obedience from his subjects. He is moreover, a resort in time of conflict and consultation concerning familial and tribal issues. He is either democratically elected or in some tribes in succession from father to son. Such tribal traditions are still maintained, even among those living in urban areas (ibid: 57).

The Saho tribes of Eritrea, with exceptions of a few Christians<sup>4</sup>, are predominantly Moslems. Islam as a powerful monitoring force within the Saho people, it doesn't only represent faith but a social system and provides a source of order, regulation and morality of social life. Traditions that contrast religious rules have little chance to sustain. Significantly, Islam has had political connotation among the Saho people as well. Historically, Islam is known to be a unifying and organizing factor among the scattered and decentralized Saho tribes by abandoning their old way of life. This had a significant role to ensure peace among the tribes and on the other hand, improved their ability to face external threats (ibid; 165).

## **2. Background of the study**

Today's Eritrean territory which is delineated in 1890 by Italian colonial rule, fell under different external influence, starting from Ottoman Empire (1555-1865), Egyptian (1865-1869), Italian (1869-1941), British Military Administration (1941-1952), and Ethiopian colonization (1952-1991). Without exception of opposition of small scale to external threat, an organized opposition of Eritreans as one political nation were orchestrated beginning 1941, which is then transformed to violent armed struggle by first Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1961. In 1970/1 Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) split up from ELF. EPLF finally appeared as victorious over ELF and finalized armed struggle in 1991 liberating the country from Ethiopian domination.

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<sup>3</sup> The ten semi-autonomous tribes of the Saho are Minifere, Hazo, Asaorta, Taro'a, Malhina Mi'in Bara, Dabri-Meela, Irob, Idda, Iddefer and Hassabat-'Are.

<sup>4</sup> The Irob tribes are entirely known as a Christian section of the Saho (Mohammad, 2013).

The questions of structural violence against the Saho people have been influenced by different historic causes through the long historic periods. The Saho people have been affected badly because of their distinctive geographic locations, their ethno-religious difference and political positions. The periods, pre-independence and post-independence, were marked by discrimination, marginalization, ethnic cleansing, forced displacement and emigrations perpetrated against the Saho people. All this together, progressively disempowered the Saho people politically as well as socioeconomically.

### **2.1 Pre-Independence Period**

The geographic location inhabited by the Saho people (see the map) was an important intermediate trade zone that joins the Abyssinian kingdom to the outside world via the Red Sea. This was unfortunately exposed the Saho people to persistent raids of the Abyssinian rulers starting from 4<sup>th</sup> century until late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Saho were involved in protracted conflicts with Abyssinian hegemony in defence of their territory which was ultimately made destructive impacts on their population size and livelihood. Through these periods, the Saho people have kept bitter memories of raids, abduction, killing, looting and displacement. There are records of several Saho tribes which had historically an extended presence in the highland Eritrea either effaced out or decimated. Finally they were forced to abandon ancestral arable lands to mostly inhospitable mountainous and arid areas where they live at present. The Abyssinians' expansion towards the Saho territories was known to have economic and religious motives (Mohammad 2013:102).

In 1884, Eritrea became an Italian colony. The Saho people were therefore relieved from Abyssinians' incursions and persecutions. The coming of Italian colonial rule, according to Tekeste and Tronvoll, (2000:7) brought rapid and significant industrial developments and urbanization in Eritrea. However, the development process was unevenly distributed and concentrated at the central part of the country. The settlers of central highland, particularly the Tigrigna people of Eritrea, were privileged highly as a result. The Saho people and region were least benefited from the changes in terms of infrastructural and socio-economic aspects which, among others, promoted today's structural violence against the Saho people. The legacy of the Italian period in general was a widened civilization level between two immediate neighbours, the Tigrigna and Saho people (Mohammad 2013).

Next to an end of the Italians in Eritrea 1941, Ethiopian claim to incorporate Eritrea, based on historic attachment of Eritrean highland territory with Ethiopia and religio-cultural similarities, came into scene. Thereafter, the Eritrean people were divided between pro union

with Ethiopia and pro independence of Eritrea. Because of the historic adversaries and fear of future marginalization under the Christian dominated Ethiopian empire, Eritrean Muslim community predominantly and the Saho people entirely, were against union with Ethiopia (Ruth, 1996:65). During subsequent periods of political uprising (1941-1961), the Saho people, collectively and individually, were among the active proponents of Eritrean independence. This was triggered anger of the Ethiopian emperor towards Eritrean Muslim community in general and Saho people in particular (Mohammad, 2013:80).

In many historic cases, colonial powers usually utilized perceptions that, there were distinct ethnic or religious groups within a colony, may be on affinity bases, that should be supported or privileged as part of their 'divide and rule' strategies. Under such circumstances therefore, suppressing some identities, while privileging others, was justified (Kymilicka, 2007:262). Ethiopian emperors similarly, to achieve its colonial ambition, employed similar policy among Eritrea population. Ethno-religious similarities and historic antagonism between Muslim minorities of the highland, mainly the Saho tribes and the highland Tigrigna, was manipulated by the Ethiopian emperor (Ruth, 1995:83).

Because of the Saho people's unswerving political position that was contradictory to Ethiopian ambition and the subsequent strong affiliation and support to national armed struggle, mainly ELF in the 1960s, the Saho people were subjected to physical elimination. Beginning 1966 up to 1975, ethnic cleansing, arbitrary expulsion from ancestral land, coercive assimilation to adopt the religion and language of majority, socio-economic discrimination and denial of political rights were among the crimes committed against the Saho people. It was committed mostly by a militia, known as Commandos, from neighbouring highland Tigrigna, mobilized mostly based on historic enmity. Several people were killed, villages burned, livestock drove away and displaced forcibly from their land. Such historic incident left behind bitter memory and generated a kind of discomfort between the Saho and some groups of Tigrigna people<sup>5</sup> (Mohammad 2013:289).

ELF and EPLF were two contending rivals and were involved in bitter mutual wars (Ruth, 1995:115). It was perceived that while dominant force in the ELF was of Arabic-Islamic socio-cultural background, EPLF was of Tigrigna-Christian socio-cultural backdrop (Bereketeab, 2010:2). However, both ELF and EPLF were not free of ethno-religious propensity. In 1981, EPLF, joined by Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), wiped out

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<sup>5</sup> It has to be noted that, the crimes committed by Tigrigna militias (Commandos) against the Saho does not generalize the whole Tigrigna. Several people from Tigrigna were condemned the barbaric acts and even stood rescuing and supporting the Saho victims (Mohammad 2013).

ELF from the Eritrean battle ground. The Saho people, from very beginning, had a very influential role and participation in ELF thus, the defeat of ELF was hard for them to accept. Although, it was not like in ELF, the Saho people also had relatively important role in EPLF. On the other side, EPLF also enjoyed enormous popularity and support from the vast majority of the Tigrigna people. The post-independence policy of EPLF government therefore clearly reflects the interest of Tigrigna people over other nationalities. Today, the core decision and high rank military compositions and ministerial positions in the government have been unfairly dominated by the Tigrigna elites (Mohammad, 2013:161).

## **2.2 Post-Independence Period**

A thirty year-long liberation war against Ethiopian domination came to an end in 1991. EPLF was received much respect from majority of Eritrean people for ending such a hard struggle. Eritrean people strongly hoped for a better and peaceful future. However, all the optimism as well as charisma of EPLF, displayed in the early 1990s, gradually vanished. Most promises made during the struggle and early periods of independence didn't come into actual fact. In 1994, EPLF proclaimed itself as the only ruling party by changing its name to People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Especially since 2001, the regime turned to absolute one-man rule, to become one of the world's enduring dictatorships, unimpeded by law. As a result the country has rated among one of the worst states of the world with shocking human rights violation records, political and religious persecutions and sharp economic failure, in a death spiral (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:7).

Wherever there is a tyrant regime, more or less, the situation affects an entire population. However, the historically disadvantaged groups are the most vulnerable groups (Galtung, 1969:179). In the Eritrean context, the reality is that the highland majority group have maintained hegemony over minority groups throughout history. As they overwhelmingly live in towns, they gained relative education during British and Italian colonial rule and this coupled with the systematic exclusion of other ethno-religious groups from work places by the Emperor Hailelessels's regime, they inherited control over public services including employment in public offices. This hegemony has increased ever since independence with huge detrimental effects over minority groups. Under the current despotic governance minority groups, including the Saho, remain helplessly stifled. They have no say in government policies that affect their survival and interest while within certain areas, the Eritrean government's policies reflect a socio-historical and cultural bias that favours majority group (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:136; Mohammad, 2013). Kymlicka, (1995), argues that

most often states use to speak majority language and represents majority culture. Such situations render suitable ground for unjust extension of domination structures and make the majority group less affected by difficult situations compared to minority groups.

Historically, circumstances give different opportunities to people differently (Kymlicka, 1995:109). When institutions of society are seen to favour certain groups over others, in addition to pervasive inequalities, it detrimentally affects disadvantaged group's initial chances in life (Rawls, 1999:7). Cultural minorities are most often found themselves in such disadvantaged position. Consequently they treated unfairly in the cultural market-place and political recognition as viability of their societal cultures may be undermined by economic and political decisions made by majority group. Shortly, they could be outbid and outvoted on both economic and political spheres, respectively. On this account, support and external protections for least advantaged groups is justifiable (Kymlicka, 1995:109).

The Saho people have become victims of historic injustice and discriminations. Correcting such historic wrong would have been one of the primary duties of Post-independence government. Sadly it never happened so. The promises made for every nationality in the process of independence struggle have been broken. No affirmative action was taken by the government. In general, according to Tronvoll and Mekonnen, (2014:131), the legal protection of cultural and minority rights in Eritrea is inadequate. No specific act or proclamation is drafted with the aim to protect minorities or their cultural traditions.

Post independence EPLF government planned to restructure the demographic and social fabric of the Eritrean society in accordance with its political ideology. Accordingly, introduced new policies regarding, among others, language, land, and national service. Essentially, policy makers should proactively consult<sup>6</sup>, especially members of concerned minority groups, in certain issues, that could affect their interest and livelihood (Wheatley, 2003:523). In the case of Eritrea, this is absent in general. The policies were prepared mainly by elites from majority ethnic group, without proper consultation or participations of minority population. The Saho people were arguably opposed to some of the government policies. As the conflict between the Saho people and the government soared, led to further suppression and terror against the Saho people. Starting from 1993, mainly community and religious leaders were targeted arbitrarily by the regime security agents (Mohammad, 2013: 311). The research's main focus is then, on language and land policies and its general impacts.

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<sup>6</sup> *Importance of consultation on minorities' issues has reflected in the UN declaration (2007), Article 2(3).*

The government language policy, particularly mother tongue education (MTE) has sparked public controversy within divided populations as supporters and opponents of the policy. The division were derived mainly from politics of power relation as opposition came strongly from Muslim communities (including Saho) and supported by Christian Tigrigna, and Christian sections of Bilen and Kunama ethnic groups (Bereketeab, 2010:3).

The case of MTE policy in regard to the Saho people gives reason to real denial of rights. From the beginning, the policy of mother tongue education was opposed by a very majority of the Saho people. The arguments were MTE does not meet their need and interest, it is imposed forcibly without the will of and consultation with the Saho people and it is a half-hearted policy and thus poor in its practical application. In fact it is also, according to Tronvoll and Mekonnen, (2014:138), used neither in the government offices nor public areas. It is just been as a tool for systematic marginalization and polarization of the minority groups. Mohammad, (2013:74) states that Saho MTE was pushed forward to ensure Tigrigna language domination over other languages, as the mother tongue is not even used as a medium of communication at the local administrative level, where the Saho people constitute local majority. Those who master Tigrigna language are highly privileged and benefited from government opportunities. According to my opinion, as I used to work in the Eritrean Ministry of Education, curriculum department in the Saho panel (2004-2009), there is no genuine government work on it and it is meant to illiterate or downgrades the Saho people by depriving them standard education and eventually makes them non-responsive to their rights.

According to the government MTE policy, in addition to ensuring equality and diversity of all Eritrean languages, aims to maintain and develop the culture of its speakers (Naty, 2000:276). However, the way government treats cultures of minority groups contradicts the policy and the concept. There is an obvious government intervention in cultural affairs of all minority groups, including the Saho, which is inconsistent with the international norms<sup>7</sup> as well. The Saho people have no or little chance to enjoy and organize their cultural activities independent from government control and censorship of PFDJ regime<sup>8</sup>. Minorities only display their culture during festivities and national days as a show off to the external world, how minorities are represented. (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:137; Mohammad, 2013:76). Majority language or culture has pervasive nature over

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<sup>7</sup> Mattias, (2014:6), state that, in a moral and legal obligations, minority groups shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture and government should not intervene unnecessarily. Unless it is in violation of minority rights according to UN Declaration 2007, Article 11.

<sup>8</sup> Cultural affairs department of PFDJ apply strict control and censorship over every cultural activity of every national group.

minority cultures (Kymlicka, 1995). There is no active measure to protect minority cultures from the government. Oppositely, the government activity encourages developing and diffusing Tigrigna language and culture systematically into minority groups (Mohammad, 2013:76).

Similarly, land policy of the government was another topic of controversy. In 1994, the Eritrean government proclaimed new land reform policy which under the proclamation it declared 'all land belongs to the state'. Through the declaration the government technically took over control of land distribution, and mediation in land disputes an issue which had been under the responsibility of local community leaders before (Kibreab, 2009:40). The land policy in general caused forced displacement, discrimination and negligence of pastoral Saho.

Among the malign activities in connection to land policy, in 2009, the government has initiated a new attempt to re-locate Saho people from their original habitat in the highland to the western lowlands. It was claiming that resettling the Saho people to more fertile lands from their home areas which are less productive agriculturally. This massive relocation programs, however in addition to being involuntary, has many negative impacts on the Saho people at large. According to state media Several Saho families were permanently moved to Gash-Barka region. There are political drives behind the program (Mohammad, 2013:323). According to Saho people, the massive displacement has political drives rather than sincerity. Land signifies identity, culture and history of specific group of people (Galvin, et. al, 2009:183). Any forced removal or relocation of minority from their heartland is a threat to their very existence as a society and is in violation to international law<sup>9</sup> (Julian, 2011:51).

As part of land policy, the government of Eritrea also designed a macro development policy which favoured agricultural society while obviously disregarding pastoralism, which is the main subsistence pattern of the Saho people (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:137). With deteriorated global climate, added to government negligence, the Saho people lost their adaptability and exposed to more difficult situations. Extreme poverty was the main outcome.

Concerning land policy again, government's settlement-land allocation is also among the widely deplored issues by the Saho people. The land allocation manipulated for political goals and involved evident discrimination against the Saho people.

I want to be clear that the aim of the research is neither to deny nor undermine the suffering of others nor to vilify any particular ethnic or religious group as responsible for the suffering of the Saho people. Structural violence by its very meaning, is an outcome of a long

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<sup>9</sup> See UN General Assembly Resolution 61/295, 2007 or UN Declaration (2007) Article 10.

historic process driven by various forces that do not hold responsible any individual or groups as perpetrator but the feudal structures or institutions of the society (Galtung, 1996) and what counts as significant is that structural violence varies for different people living in different time and places (Rowson, 2012:39). Therefore, the research aims to discover the forms of structural violence distinctively experienced by the Saho people.

### **3. Research Problem**

The study seeks to bring focus to the perspectives of the Saho people on the post independence situation under the EPLF/PFDJ government of Eritrea. The formulation of research problems stems from widely perceived collective narratives of the Saho people, literature references and the researcher's personal experience as a member of the population being studied. The proposed research primarily highlights the historic process and how it influenced the present situation of the Saho people in relation to their overall socio-economic and political situation.

The main focus of the research is to discover distinctive forms of structural violence experienced by the Saho people in the post independence Eritrea. It specifically focuses on government policies and how the politicization of the policies undermines the need and interest of the Saho people and moreover, how the government's policies impact the life of the Saho people. The study, furthermore, aims to provide an insight on the outcomes of the ongoing policies and how do the Saho people cope with overall implications. The descriptions in the study are drawn heavily from the perspectives of the Saho people.

The study, as truth revealing work, intended to deal with the issue from the perspectives of justice. Finally it aims to recommend points could enable to overcome the structural violence against the Saho people and making Eritrea into a just, egalitarian and an inclusive country for all citizens.

### **4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research will be guided by the following questions.

- What happened to the Saho people in particular under the current regime?
- What are the collective narratives of the Saho people about their current situation?
- What are the things the Saho people persistently complain about?
- How do the government policies impact upon the Saho people?
- How do the Saho people cope with the ongoing situations?

## **5. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Among the main objectives are:

- To assess existing situation of the Saho people, as ethnic and a cultural minority.
- To identify forces that promoted the structural violence against of the Saho people.
- To examine the ongoing grievances and opinions of the Saho people towards government policies.
- To examine the impacts of government policies on the livelihood of the Saho people.
- To provide information, and valuable knowledge about the Saho people. Furthermore it aims at reducing scarcity of reading material about the Saho people.

## **6. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Saho people have rich cultural and historic heritages. Unfortunately it has not been discovered and documented good enough. The existing written materials about the Saho people are scarce. They are mostly provided by non-Saho scholars and do not deal adequately overall aspects of the Saho people. The focus is mostly on linguistic and cultural aspects of the Saho people. (eg, Lewise, I.M. (1969); Trevaskis, G.K. 1977; Longrigg, S.H. 1974; Conti Rosini (1904, 1910, 1913); Alberto Pollera (1935).

Several Eritrean and non Eritrean scholars have been engaged in studying the Eritrean peoples' post independence situations in general. Their works have mostly referred to minority cases in general, including the Saho (e.g, Hirt, Nicole (2009, 2010); Redie, Bereketeab, (2010); Tekeste and Tronvell, (2000); Gaim Kibreab (2009, 2008); Ruth Iyob (1995); Welde-Yesus Ammar (1992); Jordan Gebre-Medhin (1989)).

The problematic political situation of the Saho people in particular, since independence 1991, has not been discussed yet either by Eritrean scholars and/or not even motivated by the government. However, this was broken interestingly as a book which deals with the overall aspects of the Saho people have recently been written by an Eritrean Saho scholar, Professor Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad (2013). The book is entitled "*The Saho of Eritrea, Ethnic Identity and National Consciousness*". It discusses widely about the Saho people before and after independence. I have used the book as a major reference in my research. In addition to this, Mohammad has produced several articles and translated versions related to the Saho people in English and German.

## **7. MOTIVES**

The primary motive for undertaking the research involves personal curiosity. Because of scarcity of research material about the Saho people and as a native member, inspired to fulfil my interests by contributing something beneficial to the knowledge of the Saho. Secondly, when I was in Eritrea, as part of my academic duty and professional role, I have tried to discover some cultural and linguistic aspects of the Saho people. Writing about political issues in Eritrea is sensitive and risky unless it is intended to appreciate the government policies. For that reason, in the gained opportunity, I am determined to increase knowledge about the Saho people from all perspectives, including political. As a third motivation, I consider that addressing situations on behalf of disadvantaged people as a noble duty. Hence, the research dedicated to the truth revealing task, which partially satisfies my desire to see justice done for the Saho people in particular and for the Eritrean people in general.

## Chapter Two: Methodology Approach

This chapter focuses on methodological issues, mainly the study area, informants and informant sampling techniques. It reflects upon integrated qualitative data collection techniques: in-depth interviewing, participant observation and document analysis. It also looks at the role of language, an insider-outsider status and reflections on issues in the field. Finally it discusses how research ethical and safety considerations are maintained.

### 1. Study Area

In 1998, the so called, border war broke out between two neighbouring countries, Ethiopia and Eritrea. After the actual war came to an end in 2000, thousands of Eritreans, among them the Saho, sought refuge in Ethiopia, fleeing persecution in their homeland. According to UNHCR (2015)<sup>10</sup> report, there are 131,660 Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. Secondly, the two hostile countries were involved in a war of attrition by harbouring and supporting proxy warriors of each other<sup>11</sup>. Ethiopia, therefore became a safe place for both Eritrean refugees and opposition movements, among them Saho People's Democratic Movement (SPDM). For these reasons, I chose Ethiopia as an ideal research place where fresh stories and experience can be found.

Eritrean refugees have been encamped in the northern part of Ethiopia, in the Tigray region. The camps are namely, Shimelba, Adi Harish, Hintsats, Mai Aini, and one more camp in the Afar region. The SPDM has a head office in Adigrat town and a branch in Addis Ababa city. The chiefly selected sites were Shimelba<sup>12</sup> refugee camp, Adigrat and Addis Ababa city. To accurately describe the targeted people, research has to involve firsthand witnessed things in the field (Denscombe, 2003:86). The main purpose behind the fieldwork was, thus, to get first hand impression and information from the native Saho in general and more interestingly, to observe informant's situation in the ground (Brewer & Hunter 2006:59). The field study was conducted from June 1 2014 up to July 15 2014.

### 2. Access to the field

Prior to departure for the proposed fieldwork, I was less worried about possibilities of access to research site and informants. Therefore, I determined a sample of subjects, measurement techniques and established and followed a schedule of interview and

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e483986.html>

<sup>11</sup> Tekeste, Negash and Kjetil, Tronvoll (2000) *Brothers at War, Making sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War* ; p:84-96

<sup>12</sup> Shimelba refugee camp is the first established and largest camp located in the northern Ethiopia, Tigray region.

observation that specifies when, where, for whom and by whom particular variables to be measured (Brewer & Hunter 2006:59).

Access to the field implies to the site and informants. From the second day of my arrival to Ethiopia, I started searching for permission to the refugee camp from the concerned authorities. Unfortunately, the process for permission to the refugee camps was very complicated. Later, I came to know through Eritrean friends in Addis Ababa that the situations in the camps have changed. In 2013, because of the deteriorated situation in the camp, deadly clashes happened between outraged Eritrean refugees and Ethiopian security men. As such news leaked out to international medias, security issues in the camps became so tightened. Since then, refugee camps have become inaccessible to any outsiders, especially for journalists and researchers. Secondly, the ongoing hostile relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, being an Eritrean citizen, might be another reason. Despite all efforts done, ultimately, I was officially denied permission from the authority to any refugee camps.

During my visits to the Ethiopian ministry of foreign affair to obtain permission, I was introduced to some scholars who intended to visit Eritrean refugee camps as well. They were an Eritrean, PhD professor, Chairman of the Sociology Department from Chapman University of United States and an Italian student researcher. They were also denied permission to the camps, according their information.

Thankfully, because of my prior knowledge to personalities in the Saho opposition group SPDM, things turned out easy. As SPDM member have maintained an excellent relationship with the Ethiopian security apparatus, through their cooperation, finally, I managed to enter the Shimelba refugee camp. I travelled northward from Addis Ababa, first to the town of Adigrat (866.9 km), where the SPDM main office located. After two days stay in Adigrat, I approached to western Tigray to Shimelba refugee camp (nearly 200 km). Although I managed to conduct an interview with two housewives in the camp, however, the tight security measures in the camp did not allow me to do my job with freedom. After having stayed in the camp for two days, I selected other more informants and agreed to interview them in the town of Adigrat. With the cooperation from the SPDM members the selected informants from the camp managed to attend an interview in the town, Adi-girat. I covered all their expenses. Similarly, access to almost all informants was mostly facilitated by a kind collaboration and recommendation of the SPDM members.

### **3. Informants**

Research informants are an aggregate of individuals drawn from a defined population that conform to some designated set of criteria and meant to provide relevant information that is assumed to represent the defined population (Blaike, 2010:172). The informants were largely drawn from the Saho people. The Saho refugees were the main targets. The whole group of informants includes knowledgeable people, politicians, story tellers, victims with personal stories and eye witnesses. A small proportion from the Tigrigna, majority ethnic group in Eritrea, was also used as informants.

Totally sixteen people were interviewed. Out of sixteen four were female. In general five from SPDM (politicians), two teachers, one student, two knowledgeable history tellers, two victims, two eye witnesses and two house wives.

The diversity and large number of informants desirably meant to enrich the expected information. Fortunately all informants of the refugees I met were fresh refugees after 2000, of different age, gender and classes. The last ten years, relationship between the Eritrean and Sudanese governments has become more cordial. Consequently, as the two countries security collaboration became more consolidated some Eritrean refugees, mainly politicians, who lived in Sudan for decades out of fear moved to Ethiopia. I managed to meet with some of this segment. Similarly, a sizeable Eritrean Saho population lives in Diasporas, mainly in Europe and the Middle East. I contacted with some of them by telephone and Skype.

### **4. Informant Sampling**

Sampling is a selection of elements supposed to represent the entire population. The selection of informants is a very critical aspect of research as the findings may apply more generally to a larger population of similar objects (Brewer& Hunter, 2006:80). In a nutshell, a sample is a *model of the population* (Keeter 2005:140). The main reason behind sampling is to alleviate problematic constraints of time and cost. But the critical question ahead is on how precisely we can obtain (or generalize) the appropriate sample from the population we are interested in (ibid). With exception of rare situations, it is unlikely to achieve perfect sampling from any population at all. Yet, sampling demands an accurate and careful selection (Blaike 2010:172). By studying a few properly sampled units, rather than entire population, one can manipulate additional resources like documents which in turn enrich the validity and precision of the research (Brewer& Hunter 2006:80).

Two general approaches of sampling are presented; probability (or random) sampling<sup>13</sup> and non-probability sampling<sup>14</sup>. In order to get more ideal sampling, it is preferable to mix the two sampling approaches at once, as they tend to facilitate each other (Keeter 2005:140).

Both sampling methods were employed, in an integrative way. But, non-probability purposive sampling was utilized largely. The reason for this attached to the Brewer & Hunter (2006:90) conception that, purposive sampling relies on the researcher's prior theoretical and empirical understanding of the universe with respect to the issue under study. Therefore, purposive sampling often attempts to include particular categories or subgroups of the population that represent theoretically a meaningful variation. Accordingly, appropriate informants were selected purposefully according to their perceived experience, knowledge, language and education. The sampling task was performed so easily. This was because of my membership to the population being studied and my prior knowledge to the subject matter.

Probability sampling method was also carried out in addition. Accordingly, some of the informants were selected randomly putting aside their special attributes.

## **5. Data Collection**

The study mostly employed a qualitative data collection method. Qualitative method is a method of inquiry which involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data through observing what people do and say (David & D. Sutton, 2004:35). It is significantly interested in the point of view of the studied individuals, the detailed elucidation of context, the sensitivity to the process which can be attributed to the roots of social science and on the idea of causality (Bryman 2003:58-59). Qualitative data collection method conventionally embodies an interview (unstructured or semi structured), participant observation, oral/life histories and document analysis (Blaike 2010:205). Although an-in-depth interviewing was chiefly used, all the four techniques were employed which is meant significantly to explore opinions, experience, feelings and knowledge of sampled participants in depth. Altogether, it

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<sup>13</sup> Probability sampling method is essentially blind to people's attributes and allows each person in the population to have an equal chance to participate and findings are more likely to reflect properly the whole population (Blaike, 2010:172-3).

<sup>14</sup> In non-probability sampling, participants are selected purposefully. It is more convenient, less time consuming and less costly but it faces shortages in generalizing the entire population. It is interestingly preferable for gathering in-depth data from a relatively small number of cases and suitably be conducted with individuals or focus groups chosen purposefully to explore the facts deeply from the population of interest (Keeter, 2005:155).

is meant to construct the research within particular historical, socio-economic and political contexts of the Saho people.

### **5.1 In-depth Interviews**

The main objective of data collection process is to gather an in-depth understanding of informant's behaviour, and the reasons that governs such behaviour. Moreover, it was employed with the aim of producing a picture of the interviewee as a person with their own way of understanding the research theme. An in-depth interviewing, as the main part of data collection process, was generally performed with individual victims, eye witness, knowledgeable persons, politicians, teachers and students. It was conducted into two different forms: face-to-face personal interview and group-focused interview.

Face-to-face personal interview was employed largely. Interestingly, conducting face-to-face personal interview is more ideal and effective and is more likely to solicit cooperation than any other kinds such as group interview, telephone interviewer or via mail or e-mail. On the other hand, the relationship that a face-to-face interviewer can establish with correspondent is stronger and can obtain a longer and more flexible time of interview and significantly, the respondents are relatively more serious and attentive (Keeter, 2005:154).

In a social research, individual victims or witnesses usually interviewed in order to recount their personal life experience, share their perceptions about the process they were involved in and the changes they have noticed. This is what Blaike called *oral/life history* interviewing (2010:207). I have conducted face-to-face personal in-depth interview with great importance in life history approach, which is focused on particularly sensitive part of their life. It was performed with two direct victims of the regime.

Face-to-face personal interview also included eye witnesses of certain events and mainly connected to massacre committed against the Saho people in 2009. The eye witnesses were one from the Saho, a direct victim and eyewitness and another one is from the Tigrigna people who were at the place during the massacre. I also succeeded to have a formal conversation with one junior former regime officer who has defected and lives in Ethiopia.

Similarly, intensive face-to-face personal interviewing was also conducted with knowledgeable people, politicians, teachers and students.

I have also adopted *group focused in-depth interviews* in different circumstances. It was a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive environment (Blaike 2010:207). The interview held with two SPDM members in Addis Ababa and two in Adi-grat town. While such an interview, deep discussion

and interaction in a free mood were involved. Very interestingly, respondents supported, provoked, and inspired each other through memorizing and recounting information further, deeper and wider. Similarly, a group focused interview was conducted with some refugees in the Shemelba refugee camp but in a different mode. Because of security reasons, the interview was conducted in informal non-directive conversational and discussion mode. Here the interviewees did not even know that an interview is taking place. It was meant to avoid any risk that may come from security apparatus in the highly securitized camp (Gray, 2004:217).

A telephonic and Skype interview was an additional way used. Despite considerable restrictions, telephone interview has an advantage over other modes in terms of speed, cost and quality control (Gary, 2004:232). But it is problematic to have a prolonged interview on telephone and the absence of visual and emotional communication. I used this mode with some Eritrean Saho in diaspora, mainly in Europe and the Middle-East who could enrich my information (Keeter 2005:157).

## **5.2 Participant Observation**

Side by side to interviewing, observation was another task of data processing. By participant observation we mean, apart from covert electronic surveillance, there are some areas of social life which can be studied naturalistically only by the researcher becoming a member of closed social group (Gomm 2004:22). Observation involves systematic viewing of people's actions, recording and interpretation of their behaviour (ibid: 226).

Sharing particular social characteristics (e.g. gender, age, and ethnicity) or previous experiences to the targeted population is so crucial in order the researcher to observe and understand the situation more effectively. In my case, being a native Saho speaker was a remarkable advantage. My observation is not limited to the field study, as I do share many experiences and observations with the people being studied over a long period of a time (Denscobme 2003:84). Therefore, I became easily immersed into the research setting as a researcher to undertake covert observation. It was so effective to produce a picture of their real life (Blaike 2010:206). My observation task was undeclared and unknown to participants, as they may change their behaviour after they knew observation was taking place (Gray, 2004:239). In a general sense, it was conducted in a comfortable manner which reflected positively and helped me to discover their experiences, feeling and understandings easily and sensibly (Gomm 2004:226).

### **5.3 Document Analysis**

Documents are a highly important source of data in qualitative research methods (Blaike 2010:207). Although there is scarcity in written documents about the Saho people, analysing available document of interest have benn part of data collection techniques.

## **6. Reflections and Challenges**

### **6.1 Language**

My familiarity with language of the targeted population had a remarkable advantage and was supportive in multiple ways (Gray, 2004:223). With all informants, we use to spoke the same language, the Saho, with no difficulties. Tigrigna and Arabic were also additionally used according to the situations. No translator or interpreter was needed during the whole interaction time which helped to use my time economically. Moreover, I managed to befriend myself and build trust and confidence with participants so quickly. Not only this, it also inspired a comfortable atmosphere between me and informants. Outside the specified interview time, I had flexible time for an extra conversation with several informants in connection with my research topic, which cannot be achieved by an outsider researcher. Importantly, the interaction and obtained data was direct and clearer (Sonya & Jennifer 2009:55). Language, in general was an important factor that rendered me an insider status.

### **6.2 Being an insider researcher**

An insider researcher refers to a researcher who conducts a research within a population he belongs to and at the same time shares identity, culture, language, experience and characteristics to the people being under study (Sonya & Jennifer 2009:58). Researcher's characteristic or membership factors in the group or area being studied is relevant as the researcher plays such a direct and intimate role in both data collection and analysis (Gomm, 2004:154). As a native Saho speaker, I have a strong membership to the population being studied. It primarily helped me to obtain access into the group rapidly, added to trust and openness of the participants. Subsequently, participants felt secure to communicate and share their experience, because of their assumption of oneness.

Nevertheless, one does not have to be a member of the group being studied just to appreciate or adequately represent the experience of the participants. But to be open, authentic, deeply interested in the experience of participants and committed to accurately representing their experience is important (Sonya & Jennifer 2009:55). In spite of an insider

feeling, I remained vigilant by assuming myself as a stranger to the phenomenon being studied as there might be some subcultures I could not know or understand.

For me, being an inside researcher, was not merely an advantage, but vital to gain respect and special collaboration. All the Saho participants were humble and willing to share their knowledge and time. Definitely, some cultures would find, for instance, interviewing women in private by outsider as totally unacceptable. The Saho are a traditional and religious society. In addition to cultural and linguistic membership, I have also an intimate knowledge and understanding about cultural values and norms as well as religious regulations of the Saho people. Therefore, because of the all given membership and defined knowledge i was able to overcome such barriers and accomplish the task (Gray, 2004:229). My prior knowledge to some of the past experiences and history also contributed to discover further in-depth information and understand their feeling and opinions more precisely. Informants were so serious and truthful. No exaggeration was seen for the sake of attention (ibid: 228).

I am very grateful to the SPDM members and people whom I knew them before I went to field for their kind cooperation and dedication. They stood with me from the very beginning without swerving in finding appropriate informants and information. Without their help very little could be accomplished. All these come because of my strong membership.

Being an insider researcher however is not problem-free at all. In my observation, some participants simply ignored to share some information from the perceptions that I already knew it all and thus there is no need to share (Gomm, 2004:155). Secondly, talking about an insider researcher raises issues of being biased and emotional. Maximum attention and precautions was made to control such unwanted biasness and being emotional. Simultaneously, objectivity of the informant's responses and feeling was maintained (Gray, 2004:174). Being an insider on the other side restricted my freedom in some aspects from describing or including issues which is seemingly sensitive.

Moreover, there were circumstances that made me feel an outsider, for instance, in the case of certain individual stories and incidents. The similar case was while interviewing female informants. Generally, I was not exclusively insider to the population being studied.

### **6.3 Reflections on Certain Issues**

Participant observation is most closely associated to ethnographic methodology (Gray, 2004:241), which is significantly about describing people from social, cultural and psychological aspects and importantly understanding things from the point of view of those being studied. As a member of this portion of population being studied, I share many

experiences and knowledge (Denscombe, 2003: 85). From this point, making sense of what is observed during fieldwork seems interesting.

Prior to interviewing, as a background, I briefed informants about my research project and objective behind the findings (Gomm 2004:304). Despite rare cases of drifting away from the theme, it was generally helpful in making informants stick to the theme (Gray, 2004:217). Nevertheless, at the interviewing, some informants, mainly women and uneducated in general, were quite blind to see and/or unable to explain the suffering they are experiencing. They simply explain the plight they are in with divine rule and fail to associate it with human-caused problems. Some of them obviously lack narration skill and the ability to identify root causes of their contemporary suffering.

Because of the corrupted administration and irresponsible staff in the refugee camp, the situation in the camp is heartbreaking. People cannot even get monthly food ration properly. In addition, there are no opportunities for job, education, integration to local population. Mobility outside the camp is only by permission under serious excuses, if given, only for few days. Those who have support from families abroad can make their way out of the camps to countries where they can find a better life. Otherwise, it is so difficult to leave the camp. Most of the Saho, have no such chances, according to informants. The options they have is either to return back to their homeland and face a brutal regime, or go through the miserable life of the camp. I understood that some informants hoping my project could solve some of their problems, showed extreme enthusiasm to give what information they have. As I read out from one informant 'We fled from misery to misery, nothing has changed in our life'. Generally, from all their stories, one can learn a great deal about the suffering the Saho people have been subjected to.

In qualitative social research, phenomenology is an approach that focuses on how life is experienced directly by those being studied. Among others, it deals with the ways how people interpret events and literally, make sense of their personal experiences and views. It involves quite fundamental things like personal torture, death of loved ones or the awareness of being different from others (Denscombe, 2003:97). In addition, for credibility matter, among other techniques, embedding individual biography or case studies in the larger matrix of culture, history, and political economy is important (Farmer, 2010:336). Against the background of generalized suffering, the specific stories of victims have been written down in my case studies. The stories are about two Saho sufferers in particular. The sad stories of one, who missed his father and mother another one who experienced indefinite confinement for years without a definite charge. There are political questions behind stories that cause their

suffering. The personal stories of these young men are therefore not merely model of suffering and powerlessness particular to them. But, the stories are largely emblematic to the Saho people and adequately reveal the situation of the Saho people in general.

Some cultures and religions sometime make barriers in interviewing the opposite sex (Gray, 2004:229). Out of four interviewed female, one was a teacher in mother tongue education, another one was an ex-fighter in the ELF and the rest two were housewives. Tradition and religion has a strong impact on the Saho female population. The participation of women in any gathering with men, outside their immediate family, is culturally taboo and so unusual. So interviewing women, mainly housewives, was a little bit challenging. Initially the selected females and their immediate families were hesitant about my request for interviewing. Again another challenge was created as they expressed their discomfort to be interviewed in a separate room privately and instead insisted to be in the presence of their family and husband. They refused also either to record their voices or take any photo. Thankfully, with the help of personalities from SPDM, finally we agreed for private interviewing but without picturing and recording. The interview with the teacher and ex-fighter was less different and challenging, than those with the housewives.

Ethiopia has become a safe place for the Saho refugees without any fear of risk. Thus almost all informants were so open and free to express their feeling and talk about their stories back home. But some of the informants have family members back home. They were unwilling to be interviewed neither by an insider nor an outsider, unless they knew the background and real identity of the interviewer. Therefore, because of the trust vested on me, I was able to overcome such informants' hesitation.

## **7. Validity and reliability**

The term validity refers to "*a relationship of accuracy between the responses and the reality the responses were intended to capture*" (Gomm 2004:152). Qualitative research most often relies primarily on multiple informants and methods of data gathering. Therefore, this is coupled with the researcher's efforts to cross-check their findings within the same study ensures the strength of the research validity (Ambert et al. 1995: 885).

Validity of any research can be impeached for variety of reasons. It comes into sight (1) when respondents do not know the right answer (or misunderstood) but answer the question on the bases of *co-operation bias*, (2) give inaccurate answer which they think it is accurate on the bases of *self serve bias*, (3) deliberately give inaccurate answer emotionally

on the bases of *social desirability bias*, unwilling to give the right answer or misinterpret the question as it was intended (Gomm, 2004:152)

The data was collected under multiple methods from varied informants focusing upon particular question being investigated. Therefore, among other advantages behind, it is manipulated to ensure validity inference at its best. The obtained data examined by cross-check procedure, which is at the end proved to be quite supporting each other. I found most of the personal stories and understandings of informants shared and quite similar (Brewer& Hunter 2006:65). To ensure validity, as a second measure, I took all possible measures and exerted efforts to eliminate misunderstandings the informants could possibly have. As all-important duty, prior to interviewing, I used to explain to the informants clearly what the research is about and objectives behind the findings (Gomm, 2004:153). Moreover, my participant observation task was undeclared to participants as they may change their behaviour after they knew observation was taking place, which could threaten validity of the findings (Gray, 2004:239).

Reliability refers to the consistency of approach. Suppose, while we conduct an interview, we use to interview some respondents privately and others in public in the hearing of friends or families. This obviously can bring about conflicting results and considerable amount of unreliability to the research (Gomm, 2004:153). One of the main driving force behind interview design is to ensure validity and reliability (Gray, 2004:218), therefore. I administered all modes of data gathering to all participants uniformly. All interviews were designed identical and conducted privately with the same questions being asked to each respondent. Similarly group focused interview conducted in the same way (ibid).

## **8. Ethical and Safety Considerations**

Research ethics refers to the rules which are morally approved conduct for individuals involved in a research world. It is based in a moral and political belief which is external to research itself and is communal discipline rather than individual, which is upheld by communities of researchers who police each other's conduct and thus commit themselves to such communal ethics (Gomm 2004:298). Protecting informants while doing research, mainly in a conflict situation, is therefore researchers' ethical obligation. The researcher must have to think over and avoid the perception "we can leave, they cannot". My primary concern was therefore to keep respondents safe by not causing any harm to them (Bøås and et al. 2006:75-76).

Keeping in mind that there are highly sensitive and distress causing topics, I made clear explanations and informants become mindful with the objectives behind the research and findings. Free consent was obtained without trying to influence them. Informants also understood that they are free to skip questions that are upsetting them or unwilling to answer (Keeter 2005:160-161).

I was highly considerate whether the question being asked and their present situation pose any risk to the participants. Thankfully, since all the participants were refugees, my questions had nothing to do with the hosting country, Ethiopia. They were, at the beginning assured of the confidentiality of their responses and not to cause any harm upon them or their families back home. In fact most of the informants have family members back home and they openly expressed their fear of that issue. Therefore information that could connect informants with the interview was kept hidden and some were deleted, except information and addresses that may be needed for a while so that interviews can be verified. Their responses were seriously kept confidential. Respondent's identity, significantly names, also remained anonymous. Some interviewees, particularly victims, expressed their willingness to cooperate and have no objection if their recorded voices be accessible to anyone (Blaike 2010:31).

From the very beginning of the research, I was determined to produce an honest and transparent research work. Moreover, doing something good while in research is among benign research ethics. Improving informants' emotional state, moral encouragement, improving their knowledge, enhancing their ability to take charge of their own lives were among the ethics I stood for (Gomm 2004:299).

For my personal safety, during the field work, I kept telephone numbers of family members in Ethiopia and at the second day of my arrival in Ethiopia, I reported myself to the Norwegian embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. My familiarity with the Ethiopian language, culture and working environment once more was a significant contributor to secure my safety as well.

## Chapter Three: Theories of Structural Violence

This chapter attempts to highlight on theoretical basis of structural violence. Further discover the theories, causal factors and impacts of structural violence. Taking together, it attempts to reflect the effects of the structural violence on the Saho people. However, how broadly we can understand the concepts of peace and violence becomes helpful in this matter. Therefore, the chapter begins with a brief discussion of peace and violence concepts.

### 5. Operational Definition of Peace and Violence

Peace is something desired and dignified by every person and culture. People are attracted by the very term peace and hence political organisations as well as individual politicians alike use the word as a slogan in the struggle to realise their goals. However, peace has often been incorrectly associated with the "absence of violence". Even though the absence of peace is recognizable, nevertheless, peace is beyond the mere absence of violence, subtle and uneasy to define (Webel, 2010:7). Brunk, (2012:16) defines peace as a situation in which individuals or groups are enabled to achieve goals together which they could not have reached separately, without harming each other's capacity for growth. Similarly, according to Webel, peace is both a means of personal and collective ethical transformation and an aspiration to cleanse the planet of human-inflicted destructions (2010:7). In overall sense, peace is a linchpin of social harmony<sup>15</sup> and social equity<sup>16</sup> (Galtung, (2012:24).

Scholars, most notably Johan Galtung, have proposed important distinctions of peace: as *Negative peace* and *Positive peace*. The distinctions made have been based on the absence or presence of different kinds of violence. Before delving into analysis of the distinctions, shedding light on types of violence is important.

Traditionally, violence is defined as intentional use of physical force against oneself, another person, a group or community that results in physical or psychological harm, injury, death, maldevelopment or deprivation (Barash & Webel, 2002:7). Violence is, according to Galtung (2007:16) most often a product of unresolved or untransformed conflict as an effect of incompatible or opposite interest, needs, goals or means in a daily phenomenon. People conceive conflict as something that must be avoided at all costs. However, conflict is not a bad thing at all. It could significantly build many good things in human relation if it is

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<sup>15</sup> Social harmony is, according Galtung, suffering the suffering of others and enjoying the joy of others.

<sup>16</sup> Social equity is, according to Galtung, equal share of political power (political justice) and resources (economic equity).

handled constructively. But, when people are not very good at handling a specific conflict, it is susceptible to be transmitted to violent conflict, efforts to harm the opposite side (Galtung, 1996:179; Brunk, 2012:19).

According to victim-perpetrator relationship, violence divided into three sub-types such as *Self-directed violence*<sup>17</sup>, *Interpersonal violence*<sup>18</sup> and *Collective violence*. Collective violence, which is the main concern of the study, refers to violence committed by or to a larger group of individuals in a social, political and economic drives<sup>19</sup>.

## 6. Spotlight on Violence Typology

In the studies of peace and conflict, three types of collective violence have been evolved: *Direct violence*, *Cultural violence* and *Structural violence*. The three types of violence commonly involve harm that affects human potential negatively. Noting to their relationships and interactions, therefore, will be a useful way to to elucidate the concept of structural violence and understand the contexts in which structural violence occurs.

*Direct violence* is an intended visible act of individuals in a verbal or physical manner. It involves four identifiable elements; perpetrator, action, physical or psychological harm resulted from an action and victim, who suffers from the harm (Galtung, 1969:169).

Traditionally, many people's understanding of violence is limited to direct violence. Brunk, (2012:16) states that there are usually invisible, subtle and inconspicuous dimensions of violence in which people can harm each other psychologically, socially and economically even though they are not actually or directly engaged in acts of violence. Galtung, (1969:170), denotes to this dimension of violence as *indirect violence*. Indirect violence has two dimensions: *Cultural violence* and *structural Violence*.

By *cultural violence*, we mean those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence, such as religion, language, ideology, and arts which are used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. It is a prevailing attitudes and beliefs that we have been taught since childhood and that surround us in daily life about power and necessity of violence (Galtung, 1996:197).

The term *structural violence* is mainly attributed to the influential peace researcher, Johan Galtung, (1996:208), which refers to a form of violence where some social structure or

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<sup>17</sup> Self-directed violence refers to a violence in which the perpetrator and the victim are the same individual and is subdivided into *self-abuse* and *suicide*.

<sup>18</sup> Interpersonal violence refers to violence between individuals, and is subdivided into *family and intimate partner violence* and *community violence*.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.who.int/violenceprevention/approach/definition/en/>

institutions<sup>20</sup> impose harm on people by denying them due rights or preventing them from meeting their needs. Barash & Webel, (2002:7), also states that society or social institutions usually commit violence against its members when it forcibly stunts their needs and undermine their well-being whether because of religion, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual preference or some other social reasons. It has usually, effects of human suffering and mal-development in socio-economic and political structures (Farmer, 2010:293).

Referring back to the understanding of peace, negative peace indicates the absence of direct violence; a condition in which no active forms of violent human conflict is taking place (Barash & Webel, 2002:6) and the genuine peace indicates beyond the mere absence of direct violence, to the absence of both direct and indirect (structural) violence (Galtung: 1969:168). According to Carl's definition, ref: Brunk, (2012:16), Positive peace denotes to the presence of state of affairs that is beneficial for all the parties in a relationship. It indicates to the simultaneous presence of many desirable states of mind and society; such as harmony, justice and equity (Webel, 2010:7), and would consist of verbal and physical kindness, good to the body, mind and spirit of self and other; addressed to all basic needs, survival, well-being, freedom and identity. Love is the epitome of this: a union of bodies, minds and spirits (Galtung, 1996:32). Furthermore, it refers to a social condition in which exploitation is minimized or eliminated, and in which there is neither overt violence nor the more subtle phenomenon of underlying *structural violence* (Barash & Webel, 2002:6).

The only ideal peace is then, structural positive peace, which is concerned on achieving goals of social justice (Brunk, 2012:17). Although there is no eternity to any kind of peace, structural positive peace is something attainable according to Galtung, (2012:24).

### **3. Systematic Violence Cross-breeding**

The three types of violence are known to be highly interdependent and intertwined. Culture preaches, teaches and admonishes into seeing exploitation and repression as normal and natural or in opposite, into not seeing them at all<sup>21</sup>. As a consequence, violence erupts out between groups, as efforts of oppressed come forth to use direct violence in order to get out of the structural iron cage, seeking justice or get even revenge. On the other side, counter-

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<sup>20</sup> Social institutions understood as interwoven relationship patterns that functions across an entire society which includes [education](#), [health care](#), [social security](#), [labour rights](#), as well as a broader system of [public services](#). Its aims are to ensure [fair distribution of wealth](#), [opportunity](#) and no gross [inequality of outcome](#) (Rawls,1999:6).

<sup>21</sup> Moreover, spiritual culture promotes windows of freedom. (Handbook of peace and Conflict studies (eds.) Charles Webel & Johan Galtug, 2010 p:16)

violence efforts emerge by a group having goals to remain as having most power or access by keeping the cage intact and sucking the structure through repression (Galtung, 1996:200).

Direct violence inflicts harm not only on the human body but also on the minds and the spirit. As a result, all combinations of the direct violence leave behind traumas that may carry violence overtime and reinforces cultural and structural violence. Conversely, direct violence, physical or verbal, does not come out from nowhere but its roots are cultural and structural (ibid: 31; 199).

In due long course, structural violence create collective trauma combined to frustration, hopelessness and deprivation syndromes among the oppressed societies. All the sediments eventually stimulate the oppressed one to direct violence. Meanwhile, apathetic top dogs most often have a vested interest in maintaining governability and stability as an uncompromising alternative to trouble. As a reaction to the situation, a major form of cultural violence indulged in by top dog's ruling elites is to blame the victims of structural violence, the oppressed, who used to cast the first stone to end their misery and branding them as 'aggressors' which turns to fuel further violence (Galtung, 1969:179; Galtung, 1996: 200).

Despite the symmetries, among the three types of violence, there are basic differences in their time relation. While direct violence is an event, structural violence is a process with ups and downs and cultural violence is an invariant, a permanent remaining essentially the same for long periods, given the slow transformations of basic culture. The casual flow, therefore develops from cultural via structural to direct violence and vice versa. Generally, the assumption defines "violence breeds violence" (Galtung, 1996:199).

#### **4. Structural Violence**

Structural violence is regrettably widespread but often unacknowledged. It has impacts much harder to identify as it tends to be latent, subtle and insidious with harmful effects that erodes humanistic values and impoverish human lives (Brunk, 2012:16). The lethal effects of structural violence operate continuously, rather than sporadically (Gilligan, 1999:192). It is, by nature, appears to be unintended, hence under conditions of structural violence, many people who behave as good citizens, and who think of themselves as peace-loving, may participate in settings within which individuals may do enormous amounts of harm to other human beings without ever intending to do so, just performing their regular duties in the structure (Galtung, 1969:170).

Theories of structural violence in general, examine how socioeconomic, political and cultural structures result in the occurrence of avoidable social inequality and human suffering. The archetypical structural violence largely linked to the absence of *social justice*, where the prevailing societal framework characterized by economic exploitations and political repression imposes invisible barriers that perpetuate the suffering of certain groups of people (Barash & Webel, 2002:9; Farmer, 2010). Lack of social justice likewise, refers to an insult to basic human needs; survival needs, wellbeing needs, identity meaning needs and freedom needs. Negations to human needs; morbidity, death, poverty, exploitation, alienation, penetration, segmentation, repression, marginalization and fragmentation, altogether therefore, create social injustice and human degradation (Galtung, 1996:197).

Economic exploitation<sup>22</sup> and political repression<sup>23</sup> are found to be supported by structural penetration, segmentation, fragmentation and marginalization (Galtung, 1996:31). The structurally built-in exploitation and oppression<sup>24</sup> is then reinforced by four different functions. Through *penetration*, implanting the top dogs inside the underdogs, combined with *segmentation*, giving the underdogs only a very partial view of what goes on, and through *marginalization*, keeping the underdogs on the outside, combined with *fragmentation*, keeping the underdogs away from each other (ibid: 199).

Alienation is another form of structural violence. It can be defined in terms of *socialization*: de-socializing away from own culture and re-socializing into another culture and language. The subjected group is either forced or influenced systematically to express the dominant culture and language, homogenization (Galtung, 1996:197). When a citizen cannot or is incapable to enjoy opportunities or services because he cannot speak or read the language in use, he is structurally alienated and harmed, as a result of structural barriers<sup>25</sup>. Moreover de-socialization, according to Farmer, (2010:295), involves erasing history and political economy and any notions of deep culture and cosmology of targeted group.

Structural violence which is built up into the exploitative and repressive structures tends to shows up uneven resource distribution plus unequal power holding and consequently unequal life chance. As when resource and power distributions are obviously skewed,

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<sup>22</sup> The exploitations marked in a form of unequal advantage between groups that is built into the very social, political and economic systems that govern societies or states (Galtung, 1996:198).

<sup>23</sup> According to Iris Young ref: kymlicka, (1995:145), political oppression display unequal power share in a form of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and random violence and harassment motivated by group hatred or fear.

<sup>24</sup> Conversely, structural positive peace would substitute freedom for repression and equity for exploitation, and then reinforce this with dialogue instead of penetration, integration instead segmentation, solidarity instead of fragmentation and participation instead of marginalization (Galtung, 1996:32).

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.structuralviolence.org/structural-violence/>

education and medical services are unevenly distributed to areas or groups as a result. Above all the decision making power over the distribution of resources is monopolized. The situation rolls together to aggravate the suffering of disadvantaged people, as the person's low income inverted low in education, low in health and low on power sharing (Galtung: 1969:171). The disadvantaged groups therefore can easily be outbid in economic and outvoted in political spheres which is ultimately challenges seriously their livelihood (Kymlicka, 1995:109). In the other words, situations of pervasive structural violence reveal lower groups at high risk, while upper groups are at very low risk or shielded from the risk (Farmer, 2010: 313). Politically, the structure deprives them chances to organize and bring their power to bear against the dominant group as voting powers, striking power, violent power, partly because they are atomized, disintegrated and partly intimidated by all the authority the top dogs present (Galtung, 1969:177; Farmer, 2010:293).

Structural violence is a by-product of long historic processes driven by political and socio-economic forces which finally tended to constrain individual agency<sup>26</sup> (Farmer, 2010:296; Rowson, 2012:11). By closer scrutiny, it trace back to historic direct violence, from which powerful top layer of victorious group emerged. The repressive structures then facilitate uneven use of opportunities and unjust political and social domination that levels up the victorious group. The structure leaves the loser, the oppressed, with few alternatives and plenty hardships in their livelihood (Galtung, 1969:178). The history may involve, if not all, massacre, genocide, ethnic cleansing, displacement, slavery and uneven development process ultimately, to formal acceptance of the way the world is today. This expression often precedes a call for impunity or for erasure of history under widespread apathy (Farmer, 2010:296) or in other respect, the situation is maintained by regular use or threat of direct violence, which often incites sufferers to employ violent resistance (Brunk, 2012:17).

The task of exploring structural violence is so complicated. Gilligan, (1999:191), argues that, "extreme poverty and discrimination characterizes the lives of people with violent behaviour or action. Hearing about their lives, and their families and friends, it truly invokes Gandhi's observation that *"the deadliest form of violence is poverty"*. Focusing merely on those relatively few men who commit what we define as violence, could distract us from examining and learning those structural causes of violence. Instead any approach to a theory of violence needs to include discovering the root causes in the social structure of

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<sup>26</sup> In the [social sciences](#), individual agency refers the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. By contrast, social [structures](#) are those factors of influence (such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, customs, etc.) that determine or limit an agent and his or her decisions (farmer, 2010:337).

society". Galtung, (1969) also states similarly, that structural violence is a difficult task to verify, and instead of looking at empirical data, it requires far deep understanding and analysis of social institutions of a specific society.

While certain kinds of suffering caused by direct violence, such as killing, maiming, siege, sanction, repression, detention, expulsion are readily observable, suffering promoted by structural violence is not. This may have different reasons, according to Farmer, (2010:336). Among the reasons (1) suffering of those who are remote whether because of geography or culture is usually less affecting, (2) the degree or knowledge of suffering is difficult to render pure facts or figures, (3) similarly, events of massive, public suffering defy quantitative analysis, (4) dynamics and distribution of suffering are still poorly understood and (5), explaining its distribution requires many efforts and resources. Moreover, Galtung, (1996) holds that there is frequent social ignorance to associate the suffering to the unjust social structure.

#### **4.1. Causal factors**

Structural violence against a specific group of a society is believed to have external and internal factors. Colonial rule or legacy, as external factor, is one of the significant forces that left behind an indelible trace on poor countries as to be known as an apex of structural violence (Rowson, 2012:45). Under 'divide and rule' administrations of colonial powers, ethnic or racial classifications mechanisms were employed. As a result, certain ethnic groups were privileged than others in social meaning. This has remained persistently firm in post-independence period, aggravating social inequalities and extreme repression, which at the end, deeply fuelled nascent ethnic rivalry (Farmer, 2010:339). Ethnic minorities are most often placed in the lower hierarchy, as a most affected (Gilligan, 1996:192).

The manifest of unequal social structure presupposes historic inter-ethnic (race or religious) conflicts which is another internal casual factor (Rowson, 2012:56). In between historic contenders, when the structure is threatened or seems so, those who are at the top, and the beneficiaries of the system as a temptation to preserve the status quo, stay so vigilant to protect their interests. In this sense, structural violence tightens in a form of political repression as well as economic exploitation (Galtung, 1969: 179).

There is an operative relationship between structural violence and development process. Development (economic, industrial or urbanization) is taken for granted as an alleviant to the suffering of structural violence. However referring back to the historic development process, development is not good for everyone, as it found to be stimulant (or aggravator) to the so called structural violence. Development in general affects some areas

positively while ignoring others. This unequal opportunity posed morally awful structural change that privileges one group at the cost of another. In such ways, it brings different social hierarchies; the losers and beneficiaries, oppressed and oppressor (Rowson, 2012:12, 45).

Political anarchy or instability added to latent feudal (unequal) social structure in the country can be a typical internal factor in causing, as well as aggravating situations victims of structural violence (Galtung, 1969:179). The situation particularly makes historically disadvantaged segments of society more susceptible to multiple suffering. The most affected sections by widespread structural violence in Haiti, for example, were the historically disaffected poor. The situation of poor people which had deep historic roots worsened because of political anarchy and social unrest of the country, especially under military rule that took power by coup in 1991 (Farmer, 2010:339).

Low socioeconomic assets tend to have a negative impact upon those who occupy low status within a society. The bottom classes often have limited access to share the quality of resources and opportunities like those of higher socioeconomic classes. As a result their chances to enjoy standard education and health services and other opportunities become limited which at the end affects negatively their equal political power sharing which is counted as a vital instrument for social progress (Farmer, 2010:338). Referring World Bank 2000, Rowson, (2012:40), defines socioeconomic assets as; human assets (capacity for basic labour, skills, and good health), natural assets (land and cattle), physical assets (infrastructure such as roads, schools, health centre), financial assets (savings and access to credit), social assets (networks, contacts and political influence over resources).

All the above mentioned casual factors of structural violence possess significant gender aspects (Rowson, 2012:42). Therefore, it is worth mentioning that women are easy targets, even multiple sufferers most often than men, of structural violence because of socio-cultural and economic forces (Farmer, 2010:338).

#### **4.2. Impact gaps behind the structural violence**

Social inequality and human suffering (poverty at most) are the main effects of pervasive structural violence.

Social inequality, as a prime outcome of structural violence, is a potential stimulant to poverty and violent conflict. Inequality denotes differences in terms of income, health and education service, ownership, access to power and other opportunities within society. Social inequality is easily observable but uneasy to measure. It is typified as (1) *unavoidable* which refers to inherited physical capacity linked to laziness or behavioural patterns (2) *avoidable*

(inequity), which is the main concern in the study of structural violence, resulted from social interaction to generate sharp differences in terms of income, literacy and life expectancy (Willott, 2012:24). It is moreover, shows up in differences between individuals in district or communities in a chain of interwoven unjust relationship. Most commonly, the disadvantaged groups experience extreme suffering built on low income (poverty), permanent and unwanted state of misery including malnutrition and illness, high mortality rate, lower life expectancy, burden of diseases, higher illiteracy rate, discrimination and prejudices (Gilligan, 1999:193; Galtung, 1996:198).

Poverty, as the biggest by-products of structural violence, found to be the world's greatest killer of poor people. It wields its destructive influence at every stage of human life, from the moment of conception to the grave. It significantly prevents individuals from achieving basic human needs, for example, access to proper education or health. The inability to receive proper education or healthcare creates higher illiteracy rate, unemployment or most deadly and painful diseases respectively. Moreover, the impacted poor individuals often are less well-positioned to attain better socio-economic opportunities or to be upwardly mobile (Farmer, 2010:344). Poverty doesn't merely imply lack of money. There are multitude socially undesired things at the heart of poverty such as indignity, humiliation, discrimination, powerlessness, dehumanization, dependency and physical damages (Rowson, 2012:43). It is so difficult to devise human suffering index<sup>27</sup> caused by more sustained and insidious assault on human dignity, as a result of extreme poverty which eventually cast down the poor to total welfare dependency, destitution, dehumanization, marginalization, institutionalized racism, polarization and many more painful experiences (Farmer, 2010:344).

Poverty imposes powerlessness upon poor that disable them from acting effectively for their needs and interest. It makes them lose power of bargaining in political and economic spheres, disempowered and finally gives up for demands of top dogs (Rowson, 2012:42). Moreover, attitudes of humiliation increase among top rungs against the vast mass of poor as well. Humiliation of the poor being accompanied with projects or policies which does not meet the need or interest, treatment in an infantilizing, superior manner, limiting options, disempowering in the name of development etc. (ibid: 43).

The horror of suffering resulted from structural violence, in general, is not only its immensity but faces of the anonymous victims who remained to have little voice in history (Farmer, 2010:328). Comparing to frequency of deaths from structural violence to those

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<sup>27</sup> Farmer, (2010:344) suggests depending on personal recounting in a deep analysis as so helpful to understand human suffering.

caused by major military and political violence, as very shockingly, even war cannot stand to compare with structural violence, which continues year after year. For instance, World War II took the life of an estimated 49 million military and civilian, Vietnam War (1954-1973) possibly two million. When compared, the deaths from 14 to 18 million a year are caused by structural violence, with nearly 100,000 deaths per year are caused by armed conflict (Gilligan, 1999:195). Globally, more than 2.5 million people live under less than 2 USD per day, 30 years life expectancy differences between those living in African and those in rich nations and 800 million people have no access to essential health service (Rowson, 2012:10).

Eventually, the pervasive situations of structural violence may breed deadly violent conflict, as frustrated, humiliated, hopeless poor sufferers of structural violence, to regain their dignity. Violent response could even harm the poor at worse. On the other side, it may contribute to the improvement of poor people's position in a society by giving way for rearrangements in social order. However, the poor people are exceedingly susceptible set of a larger society in general in any violent confrontation (Rowson, 2012:43; Galtung, 1969:178).

The Saho people, in contrast to their immediate neighbours, have a distinctive culture, territory and history and they desire to remain different, in some aspects, through maintaining such distinctive characteristics. From this point of view, it is natural for the Saho people to have needs and interests that may not necessarily be compatible to the interests and needs of other groups. The source of conflict of Saho-government and subsequent structural violence against the Saho people therefore develops from this concept, in addition to different historic causes driven by socio-economic and political characteristics.

Nowadays, Eritrean people are divided between support and opposition of the EPLF/PFDJ government. According to the government supporter (and some apathetic people of interest<sup>28</sup>), Eritrea is described as a united, harmonious and inclusive nation. For the oppositions group, it is an opposite world with much lawlessness, unjust domination, discrimination and unequal surviving chances. Not all the Tigrigna people but almost all the supporters of the regime are from the Tigrigna people. Hence, the regime's development policies mostly biased for the interest of majority Tigrigna group. As well as, the homogenizing policy of the government of Eritrea reflects the dominant group.

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<sup>28</sup> There is a third group which is apathetic, may include better-off, wants to enjoy and preserve their wealth but has no link to the regime. They link their interest with stability and governability of the situation.

Eritrean government created a new state which arguably solely served the interest of Tigrigna population. It empowered them through creating an environment in which only the dominant culture thrives at the cost of other cultures and languages of the nine ethnic minority groups. The identity and nationalism of Eritrea as a country equated with the culture and language of the Tigrigna people, effectively excluding other groups. The ruling elite's power is based on the loyalty of the dominant ethnic group while it fails to integrate the other ethnic groups into the structures of nation-state. Likewise, as majority ethnic consolidated their socio-economic and political control of the nation, the government policies engineered in favour of majority group, while on the other side found to have harmful effects over minority groups. The government is perceived to be a predominantly Tigrigna government as the language and political culture of the government stems from the Tigrigna group. This has led to a growing tension between the government and minority groups, including Saho people. The Saho people feel themselves excluded from the nation-state and many disassociate themselves from the nationhood (Tronvell and Mekonnen, 2014:136; Mohammad, 2013:66).

In addition to denial of political rights, and undesirable government policies, targeting community elites, usurpation of traditional political power and cultural imperialism were co-occurred against the Saho people. As overall effects, today, the life of the Saho people has been exacerbated awfully. According to Mohammad, (2013:295) and my personal observations, the Saho people found themselves in a hard position, facing difficulties in coping with the situation they are in. Inhospitable landscape, which they were pushed to decades ago, exacerbated with global climate change and sharp decrease in rainfall regime. Consequently, vegetation dried and the land can no longer support a livestock herding, which is their primary source of income. Moreover, it is laced to the discriminatory government policy the situation of the Saho people exacerbated more as it has spawned inequality and extreme poverty. The outcomes are high illiteracy rate, family disintegration, migration, high morbidity rate, unemployment, intergenerational welfare dependency, humiliations and undermine their wellbeing and self-esteem; all are constituents of structural violence.

The situation finally transformed to violent confrontations between the government and the Saho people. Today, the Saho people are responding to the government in different ways. The Saho People' Democratic Movement (SPDM) is an armed group established in 2009 which aspires justice for the Saho people. The government attempted to crackdown the opposition which is mainly supported by Ethiopian government. At the failed attempt, the

regime responded ruthlessly by committing a massacre, on September 24, 2009, in a place known as Diot, against unarmed civilians who have no involvement in the conflict<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Once in 2009, it was the main coverage in Eritrean social media in diaspora. I have also conducted an extended interview with (SPDM) members, direct victim and eye witnesses of the incident in my fieldwork.

## Chapter Four: Pre-independence Saho History

This chapter has two sections, the first section attempts to discuss pre-independence historic injustice against the Saho people and at the same time, it attempts to correlate the Saho people to the status given to indigenous people, drawing on scholarly arguments, mainly Will Kymlick's<sup>30</sup>. The second section highlights on the historic role of the Saho people, collectively and individually, during the Eritrean struggle for independence.

### 1. Historic Injustice against the Saho people

Minority groups have been categorized according to their distinctiveness. Kymlicka, (1995:11), defines a state, which contain two or more nations or cultures as a multinational or multicultural state. The smaller cultures within states form cultural minorities which are split into national minorities and ethnic groups. National minorities denote those previously self-governing, territorially concentrated cultures however incorporated into a larger single state either voluntarily or by conquest (colonization). On the other side, an ethnic group<sup>31</sup> implies a group of people who migrated from their birth place to places where they are not historically attached to; however, maintain some of their ethnic particularity.

Kymlicka, (2007:267) and some other scholars singled out indigenous people (IPs) from national minorities for the sake of special treatment in the international arena. So that the term IPs refers to descendants of the original non-European inhabitants of the new world and on the other hand the term national minority invented in Europe to refer to European groups whose homeland ended up being (or cut-off from their co-ethnics) incorporated into larger states in the process of European state formation. However, confining the definition of indigenous people, in a narrow conception, to the new world fundamentally faces moral and conceptual inconsistency as it ignores groups in Africa and Asia having considerable commonalities with indigenous groups of the new world<sup>32</sup>.

International law, concerning minority rights, has generic and targeted faces. Accordingly, claiming rights or not, depends on which side of the distinction any minority groups find themselves. In the case of IPs, Kymlicka, (2007) argues that, there are logical

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<sup>30</sup> Will Kymlicka, Canadian political philosopher well-known for his work on multiculturalism (wikipedia.org).

<sup>31</sup> In international minority rights, ethnic minority groups, namely immigrants and refugees, have limited rights in relation to national minorities, i.e. to enjoy and maintain their cultural distinctiveness.

<sup>32</sup> ILO Convention 107 of 1957 equated the status of indigenous people to geographically isolated people such as hill tribes or nomadic pastoralists in Africa and Asia on the bases of their less advancement and vulnerability to certain situations (Kymlicka, 2007:279).

reasons for distinguishing and giving priority for indigenous people over other cultural minorities in terms of special rights and protections in international law. The need primarily stems from moral and humanitarian concern to find appropriate means to remedy the historic injustice that took place in the process of colonization or conquest. Secondly, taking into account their vulnerability to cultural contempt, state imposed projects of assimilation and development which is altogether undermined their aboriginality, territoriality and their desire to remain collectively distinct.

It is worth noting that, there are scholarly and politically inspired disagreements on making distinction between IPs and national minorities. However, by shedding light on historic events and peculiarities of the Saho people and drawing an analogy with scholarly given arguments about IPs<sup>33</sup>, this section aims to match the Saho people to the given category of IPs. In studying structural violence, acquiring appropriate knowledge of the targeted groups' historic attachment to the territory where they live is interesting (Farmer, 2010:337).

The primary argument to distinguish IPs is *priority in time and historic attachment to distinctive territory* (Kymlicka, (2007:276). There are historic indications that the Saho speaking groups, a branch of the east Cushitic language family, were the first group to settle the central highlands and the Red sea coastal regions after being split from the southern East-Cushitic groups around 2000 B.C. Around 700 B.C., Semitic group (Tigrigna and Tigre), from the Arabian Peninsula arrived at the red sea coast and settled among the Saho and Afar, later they moved into the interior, where they established fixed villages in the highlands. Gradually they assimilated with indigenous population of the area (Sherman 1985:5; et al. ref: Mohammed, 2013:93). Many oral histories from the Saho people also indicate so.

The *brutality and disruptive* situations experienced by IPs during the conquest or incorporation is another distinguishing argument according to Kymlicka (ibid). The Saho people, because of their specific geographic location and ethno-religious difference suffered a lot at the hands of hegemonic Abyssinians<sup>34</sup>. The conflict was driven mainly from the Abyssinian's ambition to conquer the sea coast and secondly, to create an ideal ethno-religiously homogenous society and property (land) expropriation. Wars of the Saho people against Abyssinian rulers were defensive in nature. However, the protracted wars at the end resulted in the Saho people's sharp decimation, depopulation and weakness of their political economy. It was accompanied with influx of the Tigrigna speaking group from Tigray region, of Ethiopia to the areas formerly inhabited by the Saho people (Mohammed, 2013:155; 162).

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<sup>33</sup> The arguments are also endorsed by international organizations, for example ILO 1957 Convention.

<sup>34</sup> The word Abyssinia refers to the modern Ethiopia.

Among the bitter memories of Abyssinian rulers' brutality the Saho people recount is cut-off male genital organ and women breast, abduction of women and children. There are also old Saho tribes who had an extended presence in the highland areas, now only their names and history remained as they were ultimately decimated<sup>35</sup> or completely effaced out<sup>36</sup>.

The Saho rarely had close and harmonious relationship in history with their Christian-Tigrigna neighbours as well (Welde-Yesus, 1992:58). Religion in the particular historical period of the region has significant role as principle of social, political and economic order (Ruth, 1995:106). Within the conflicts, both with Abyssinian rulers and their neighbouring Christian-Tigrigna, religion had strong political connotation. For this reason, the Saho and their neighbouring Tigrigna focus more on their religious identification than their linguistic or ethnic affiliation<sup>37</sup> (Mohammed, 2013:56; 165).

*Distinctive vulnerability* to certain situations is another motive presented for distinguishing IPs (Kymlicka, 2007:280). In this case, Saho peoples' primitive mode of production and weaker political organization can be mentioned. Weigård, notes, most IPs, as a mode of production, found their livelihood from non-sedentary life. The concept of private landownership is unusual to them. Such characteristic encourages the neighbouring agricultural or industrial cultures to infringe on their traditional domains (2008:185).

The Italian advent in 1890 marked a break from Abyssinian ruler's incursion to the Saho territory. At the same time it introduced agricultural activities, to some extent, within the Saho people. However, historically the Saho people as a collection of pastoral-nomads enjoyed boundary-less freedom of movement after their animals within vast rangelands between central highlands and the coastal areas as playground. Their *mode of production* was in accordance to Locke's description of *state of nature*<sup>38</sup>. Hence, the Saho did not develop practices of private landownership<sup>39</sup> that left their lands uncultivated and vulnerable to external infringement. In contrast, the Semitic group, namely from Tigrigna, were more advanced than the indigenous Saho in practicing settled agricultural system and other daily

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<sup>35</sup> Among the decimated tribes of the Saho are Idda, kabotta, Asaboora, Balaw, Ba'agit, Iddefer and so on.

<sup>36</sup> Source: a Saho elder story teller Am Sulieman lives in UK. <http://www.allsaho.com/>

<sup>37</sup> In the highlands of Eritrea, both the Saho and Tigrigna people focus on religion as an identifying factor than ethnic or linguistic. According to the Tigrigna people, instead of Saho, they use to say *Aslamay* (sing) a Muslim, *Aslam* (pl.) Muslims. Similarly the Saho identify the Tigrigna people as *Amharto/Belento* (sing.) Christian, *Amhara/Belen* (pl.) (Christians) (Mohammad, 2013:79).

<sup>38</sup> According to Locke's description (1690), *state of nature* denotes to a natural world where societies live independently in a perfect freedom without political state in a kind of disorganized society with no delegated authority that functions spontaneously and practice traditional collective land use (Oskal, 2001:243).

<sup>39</sup> The Tigrigna saying indicates to this, which says, "*Aslamay adi ayblu, semay andi ayblu*" which means "A Muslim has no place, as sky has no pillars". Another similar saying says "*Aslamay adi ayblu, awdi ayblu*" which means, "A Muslim has neither a (permanent) place nor threshing-floor (or farmland)".

activities. As they found unfarmed lands and as long as there is sufficient land left of the same quality, they seized land which was under traditional use of the Saho people. The perpetuated encroachment of agricultural groups into their traditional domains gradually made the Saho surrender vast tracts of arable lands (Mohammed, 2013:93: 129).

The pre-colonial Saho were politically weak with no central organizing power and hierarchy compared to the centralized Abyssinian hegemonic *political society*<sup>40</sup>. The political organization of the Saho people was characterized by independent tribes who unite when required by situations. Such as in time of external threat, by selecting the bravest man as a leader but ignored to obtain an heir after the threat ended. In addition to this, their primitive war tactics and weapons did not equate to Abyssinian military hegemony<sup>41</sup>. All these laid them down in a weak defence position. Finally displaced and surrender their arable lands in exchange for inhospitable arid and mountainous places (ibid: 138).

As supportive indications, today there are some villages, places and rivers that still have maintained their original Saho names, even though they are inhabited by the Tigrigna people. Some villages and individuals from Tigrigna people, recount their Saho origin as well. There are also groups of Saho origin who shifted their identity and adopted a new religion, language and culture (Mohammed, 2013:92-101). According to my observation and informants, there are several Saho villages in the highland area scattered among the villages settled by the Tigrigna people. Similarly, there are some remnants of old Saho tribes who maintained their religion and language coexisting among Tigrigna groups in the same village.

Many Saho people have shifted their ethnic identity or acquired multiple identities according to political environment, changing socioeconomic (urbanization) and migration conditions towards Tigrigna, Tigrigna speaking *Jabarti* Muslims, Tigre as well as Afar. Outside Eritrea, those, mainly refugees since 1966 in Sudan and other parts of the world have already adopted culture, language and even took nationality of the hosted countries. Mostly the third and fourth generations, have no will to return back home.

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<sup>40</sup> According to Locke *Political Society* is a qualified society, under powerful king or advanced rules (Oskal, 2001:240).

<sup>41</sup> Comparing to advanced Abyssinians, the Saho were using primitive mode of defense by using landslides, stones carved into rounded shape (in Saho; marhaalo dhaa), spear, sword and bees (by opening beehive in arrival of an enemy). According to informant, there are remnants of carved stones at the peaks of mountains adjoining Shimezana plains that remind the Saho people's primitive mode of war against Abyssinian raids.

Kymlicka, (2007:267) defined IPs as less civilized to have retained pre-modern modes of life style and relegated to isolated and remote areas<sup>42</sup>. The development process during the Italian colonial period brought a huge civilization differences that left the Saho people least benefited. In contrast, their neighbouring Tigrigna advantaged significantly in terms of modern economic and socio-political structures. The disadvantaged situation of the Saho people exacerbated more during subsequent Ethiopian domination (1952-1991) (this topic will be discussed broadly in the following section) (Mohammed, 2013:62-69).

Far from focusing on external power, it is reasonable to group homeland groups as IPs, if they suffer from domination of their historic neighbour so as to gain greater visibility and protection. From this perspective, the category of IPs would extend in post-colonial states much more widely to encompass all historically subordinated homeland minorities that suffer from some combination of political exclusion, poverty or cultural vulnerability added to geographical isolation and low level of integration into the market (Kymlicka, 2007:279). Moreover, "Domination and colonization has not exclusively been practiced by white settlers and colonialists. In Africa, dominant groups have also after independence suppressed marginalized groups and it is this sort of present day internal suppression within African states that contemporary African indigenous movements seek to address<sup>43</sup>".

## **2. The role of the Saho people During the Eritrean Struggle for Independence**

### **2.1. Non-violent struggle (1941-1961)**

The Saho people's national identity and important role displayed during independence struggle has roots in their rebellion against Abyssinian rulers (Mohammed, 2013:79). The role of the Saho people in the Eritrean struggle for independence, in particular, can be traced to the advent of British Military Administration (BMA) in 1941, in succession of the Italians. While Eritrean question for immediate independence pending an international decision, complicated issues emerged. Some of the complications, according to Ruth, (1995:61), was linked to overriding geo-politic interests of Allied forces, an international consensus which favoured Ethiopian territorial claim, , lack of clear and united Eritrean nationalism among the Eritreans and Ethiopian claim and intervention in the internal Eritrean political arena.

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<sup>42</sup> In contradiction Kymlicka, (2007:28) the term indigenous people also apply to peasants in the highlands who have intensive contacts and trade with the larger settler societies. Similarly many indigenous people in North America have been involved in either settled agriculture or labour market for generations.

<sup>43</sup> *Report of the African Commission's Working Group on Indigenous Populations/Communities, African Commission on Human and People' Rights, 2005:92.*

On the granted liberal atmosphere by BMA (1941-1952), pro independence political parties began to flourish<sup>44</sup>. Adjacently, Ethiopian emperor's claim to incorporate Eritrea was in progress. The Ethiopian claim was emphasized on cultural and religious similarities and pre-colonial historic linkage particularly with the highland Eritrea (ibid: 62-65). As Ethiopian intervention goes further deep, the Eritrean people in general shattered into one side voicing Eritrean full independence and another side voicing unconditional Eritrean union with Ethiopia. The Ethiopian emperor by supporting pro-unionist, manipulated politicization of long-standing religious and regional rivalries among the inhabitants of Eritrea at the same time hinting to religious and kinship ties between Ethiopia and the Eritrean highland Christians. The Eritrean Coptic Church played a significant role in changing the equilibrium in favour of the pro-union elements, using the pulpit to convert people to support union with Ethiopia. As political division gradually began to transform into religious tensions between Muslims and Christians, BMA suggested the division of Eritrea on religion bases; highland Christian territory with Ethiopia and western Muslim part with Sudan. This angered Muslim minority groups in the highland, mainly the Saho and Muslim *Jabarti*. Following BMA proposal which remained undone, UN's investigation commission sent to Eritrea between Nov.1947 and Jan. 1948, found a divided people with slight majority favouring independence and the rest union with Ethiopia (Ruth, 1995:66; Mohammed, 2013:208).

The volatile positions of political parties, MFHG<sup>45</sup> and Eritrea for Eritreans<sup>46</sup> with the growing victory and threat of radical unionist backed by Ethiopian emperor heralded an unfortunate future for the Eritrean Muslim community, facing the threat of incorporation in Christian-dominated Ethiopia. In 1946 Eritrean Muslim representatives, established an organization known as *Al-Rabitha Al Islamiya* or the *Muslim League (ML)*<sup>47</sup>. The ML political objective was Eritrean Independence (or ten-year trusteeship under the British) and opposed any partition or any form of union of Eritrea with Ethiopia (Ruth, 1995:70).

The ML was broken down into two. One faction, included Tigre speaking Muslim clans in the western lowlands, felt more attached to communities in eastern Sudan. At this

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<sup>44</sup> The first Eritrean political organization found on May 5, 1941 *Mahber Fiqri Hager Ertra*<sup>44</sup> (MFHE), which was composed of diverse Eritrean groups with equally divided leadership between Christians and Muslims (Ruth, 1995).

<sup>45</sup> Latter overruled by Unionist elements.

<sup>46</sup> Eritrea for Eritreans (by Tigrigna: *Eretra n Eritreawyan*), founded in 1945 by Woldeab Woldemariam, later switched its political objectives to 'Tigray Tigrigni', an inclusion of Tigrigna speaking group of the highland Eritrea and Tigray province of Ethiopia. It was composed of Eritrean and Ethiopian Tigrayans (Ruth, 1995:66).

<sup>47</sup> Liberal Progressive Party (LPP) of Akele-guzay and Seraie region, founded in 1947, shared common political agenda with ML in their demand for independence. Its founders were from Christian highlanders. Both were opposed the Coptic Church's role in fomenting religious rivalry and political affairs (Ruth, 1995:73).

critical time, the Saho were among the leading Muslim forces opposing any arrangement of unification or partition of Eritrea. The Saho people perceived the divided loyalties of some Tigre (with Sudan) and Tigrigna groups (with Ethiopia) as a threat to their dignified survival. Combined to their negative historic experiences and suppressive attitudes of the Abyssinian rulers, they were faced with threat of subjection under future Christian dominated Ethiopian state. The unchanged stand makes the Saho among the few groups who manifested the image of an Eritrean nationalistic sentiment (Mohammed, 2013:80; Welde-Yesus, 1992:117).

The developments ensued Eritrean federation with Ethiopia in 1950 clearly substantiated the Ethiopian imperial ambition. Unionist party dominated the Eritrean assembly. An erosion of democratic values and Eritrean constitutional rights followed. The widening difference between the pro independence and the Unionist block on some critical issues, led to bitter arguments which underlined the existing religious and cultural divide between Moslems and Christians. Finally by 1962 the federal autonomy of Eritrea was over and Eritrea was annexed to Ethiopia coercively. Eritrean leaders and mainly the Moslem minority in the assembly felt affected by the changes, sent petition to the UN protesting against the violation of the constitution. They were also outraged and felt persecuted especially since there was no official protest from other members of the Assembly. The latest developments however, alienated Eritrea's Muslim population that would finally spearhead the armed resistance against Ethiopia's hegemonic domination (Ruth, 1995:84).

New leaders and strategies of resistance emerged to salvage Eritrea's future as a distinct political identity. In 1958 the first secular and clandestine movement, Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) established by five young Moslems. The founders of ELM in an attempt to overcome the already provoked religious hostility and its harmful effects began to attract recruits from the highland Christians. Although the ELM played very positively on many sides, however failed to deter Ethiopia's forced integration of Eritrea (ibid: 99).

Through all the period, the Saho people's political standpoint and unambiguous identity remained unchanged. They never acquired double identities they could shift depending on respective political situation and their personal interests, unlike many Eritreans who tried to find their way of survival to by adopting neighbouring nationalities. Former Saho former conscripts in Italian army and intellectuals who benefited from Middle Eastern educational and political developments were very active in the process. As a result of all, the Saho were suffered extremely at the hands of the Ethiopian army and their Eritrean agents. As a result, many of Saho families were displaced to western lowlands and as Jobs were granted according to loyalty to the Ethiopian Crown, many were lost their jobs in urban areas.

Several settled Saho families were also removed from main cities and towns, going back to their birth villages or to exile. All these added to the fear of future marginalization, the Saho became among the founding and active members of the ELM<sup>48</sup> (Mohammed, 2013:232-243).

## **2.2. Armed struggle: Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF)**

Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) established in July 1960 in Cairo, Egypt, by some Eritrean expatriate politicians and students. This marked the transformation of the struggle to an action-oriented movement. ELF leaders, from the beginning, strengthened their contact with the Arab regimes. These nations provided them with military and financial support and suitable ground for fundraising and recruitment. The ELF leader's choice of Arab support was a matter of necessity rather than a reflection of enduring Arab identity although the existence of a shared Islamic heritage and ideological orientation of ELF reflects Pan-Arabist influence, emphasizing the disenfranchisement of Eritrean Moslems (Ruth, 1995:109). Because of the belief on Ethiopian anti-Arab and anti-Islam slogans, the participation of the highland Christians in armed struggle at the initial period was very limited (Mohammed, 2013:251).

The adoption of Algerian independence war strategy by ELF in 1964, created four regional military divisions. Among the four, the third division was assigned to operate in the highland areas. As almost all its fighters were from the Saho ethnic group, it was known as Saho division. The Ethiopian emperor was intolerant for the extension of armed movements from lowlands to highland area which is (1) his main support base and (2) sensitivity of the area as an immediate border to the other regions of Ethiopia. The third division was thus, heavily targeted and was involved in intensive wars more than other divisions, with Ethiopian military and the Eritrean *Commandos*. Their fighters were much respected from the people for their braveness and courage in the battle, as certain songs indicate and were particularly nicknamed as "*Dabbaba al-Basharia*" in Arabic, which means "Human tank". With all the sacrifices, zone three were least supplied and ignored in terms of supplies from ELF supreme council<sup>49</sup> that finally made them dependants on the support of local rural population<sup>50</sup>.

With growing influence of ELF, the Ethiopian regime played ethno-religious cards manipulating historic antagonism between the Saho-Tigrigna and their ethno-religious difference. On that account, the Ethiopian regime and some Tigrigna elites founded counter-

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<sup>48</sup> For list of ELM members of Saho origin: see Mohammad, 2013(369-340).

<sup>49</sup> ELF, at the initial period lacked clear ideology and poorly structured. The supreme council of ELF was set up by three men each favour the rest three divisions, except division three, based on ethnic and regional affiliation.

<sup>50</sup> (Ruth, 1995:111; Mohammad, 2013:249-252; Welde-Yesus, 1992:65).

insurgent units, *Commandos*, from highland Tigrigna peasants to mobilize them against the ELF. The conflicts between ELF and *Commandos* were marked as an ethno-religious conflict. The Saho civilians in highland areas, mainly in Akele Guzay and Seraie regions were among the specifically targeted groups by *Commandos* units behind allegations of harbouring and supporting ELF insurgents (Mohammed, 2013:251-252). In view of this, Ruth, (1995:112), notes

"Christian villages were often subjected to pillage and cattle raids by ELF army to secure their supply of food that tended to engender significant animosity towards the ELF in the countryside. The Ethiopian authority utilized this discontent to create a specialized agency recruited from these disaffected areas to fight the rebels known as *Commandos* new anti-guerrilla division recruited primarily from Christian villages and trained by Israeli military advisors and flaming already volatile situation".

However as a price of opposition to Ethiopia and support of ELF, an organized massacre was committed against the Saho people. Although it is difficult to obtain accurate data, for the human casualty and property damage, according to confirmed information 62 villages in the Semhar region around Ginda and 70 villages in the Hazemo plain of Akele-Guzay all of which had been inhabited by the Saho people, were burned<sup>51</sup>. There are undocumented massacres in vast areas like Seraie and Gash-Barka<sup>52</sup> regions. Thousands from rural and urban areas were fled to Sudan and neighbouring countries from the early 1960s. After independence, the returning claim of these refugees from Sudan was turned down by the EPLF government (Mohammed, 2013:289).

The *Commandos* were highly trained militias from Tigrigna ethnic group. Some of them were having bigoted attitudes towards Moslem minorities and others were being exploited by their weak position. By the end of 1974-75, the *Commandos* were quite ignored from Ethiopian Crown. It is because, (1) the emperor weakened and ended up overthrown by the Derg, (2) the *Derg* policy towards Eritreans was not divisive like his predecessor emperor but arbitrarily to all. No one, either Ethiopian or post independence EPLF government, held the *Commandos* accountable legally for their committed crimes or tried reconciliation among the entire Eritrean population. On the contrary, the EPLF government was preoccupied with eliminating ex-freedom fighters. Similarly, some fighters of ELF in retaliation of *Commandos* actions, committed crimes against Christian villages, however, it was not

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<sup>51</sup> In my personal conversation with an old woman in 2011, in Sudan refugee camp called Wedehelw, in the village called Cha'aligade in Hazemo plains, before the massacre there were 72 households and all were either killed or fled to Sudan and the village was burned wholly. She is still living as refugee since 1968. The perpetrators were militias (*Commandos*) from neighbouring villages of Tigrigna.

<sup>52</sup> There were formerly migrated Saho groups from highland area during early 1950s and settled in Gash-Barka region, namely *Karakon*, in response to the hostility of Tigrigna highlanders supported by the Ethiopian regime.

comparable. Once, ELF by the leadership of Mohammed Abdu from Saho, executed ten of its fighters who retaliated against Tigrigna village<sup>53</sup>.

Meanwhile, latent conflict of the Saho main tribes, Tora'a and Assaurta, with Tigrigna groups in Akele-Guzay (Tsenadegle) and Seraie (Qohain) regions, respectively, were escalated. Although Taro'a and Tsenadegle tribes claim to have common ancestral origin, according to Saho elders' tale, they received different religious identity. Their conflict<sup>54</sup> originated in 1912 on the claim of pasture land, was exploited by the Ethiopians to mobilize the Christian Tsenadegle against the Muslim Saho population who opposed the union with Ethiopia. The conflict was among the most protracted conflict in the region. The Tsenadegle had upper hands in time of conflict, as they were backed by the Ethiopian regime. The Qohain and Assaurta tribe conflict also holds similar historic faces (Mohammed, 2013: 155).

According to informant<sup>55</sup> from the Taro'a tribe,

"... thankfully, we are in peace with our neighbours Tsenadegle, even so, the effects of the conflict still making us suffer. Before the conflict or when it calmed down, we and Tsenadegle were using *Segeneiti* town as a market place. As our relationship worsened we were deprived of the town. Because they had the upper hands as they were supported by the Ethiopian regime and many of them were recruited as *Commandos* and Ethiopian Army, some received higher military ranks. We used to sell our livestock and its products and bought daily necessities, send our children for schools, use hospitals and other government services in the town but we lost them all. We have been pushed further into the isolated mountains".

Because of growing ethnic, religious and regional factionalism within ELF, some faction in 1970 split out from ELF. Among the splinters, (PLF-1, PLF-2 and Ubel), PLF2 were highland Christian faction. The PLF I and Ubel, were Muslim factions, mainly from Semhar region and includes significant number from Saho. In 1971 the three groups merged to form EPLF, and latter became as a challenging force to the ELF. Ultimately, the PLF-2 group emerged as a dominant and power centre of the EPLF (Ruth, 1995:115).

By 1976-1980, clandestine reformist groups emerged among ELF fighters with a strong consciousness for reform and democratization of the ELF. They were all strong critics of ELF corrupt leadership and politics. The three groups were *Falul* or anarchists (as labelled by ELF), Eritrean Democratic Movements and *Yameen* known as *right wing* (Ruth, 1995:120). The third group *right wing (Yameen)*, all its initiative leaders were all from Saho. Within ethno-religiously and regionally fragmented ELF, beyond all these, they were neither

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<sup>53</sup> Source: Ex ELF higher cadre lives in UK.

<sup>54</sup> The historic conflict between Tor'a and Tsenadegle was originated in 1912 and heightened in 1945 and 1960s. It was resolved finally in 1996 in the historic event, by the initiation of Eritrean government.

<sup>55</sup> The interview was conducted in 28.06.2014 in Addis Ababa city, Tigray, Ethiopia. (Interviewee No. 9)

Islamist nor communist (ba'thist) or ethnic based movement. On May, 22 1978, on the attempt of defection from ELF, ten of them, all from Saho, were eliminated by an ambush prepared by the ELF. Among the ten were the founders of ELF and senior military commanders of ELF (Mohammed, 2013:262). Although all of them were from the Saho ethnic group, their political aim was nationalistic. They had also wide support within the ELF fighters. The incident was, among other reasons, remarkably contributed to the weakness of ELF. Finally in 1981 ELF swept away by the EPLF-TPLF joint military operation.

### **2.3 Important personalities of the Saho people**

Since Eritrea's emergence as a political entity during the colonial era and the armed struggle for independence and then the post- independence era; many Saho public figures shone and held influential positions in the country's political as well as social life. The reason for this seemingly impressive reality for a small minority to show such dynamism to impose itself on the national politics is the fact that Saho are arguably the only group that shared land with Christian highlanders whose majority members favoured Ethiopia's Unionist agenda, and religion with the overwhelmingly Muslim lowland people who favoured the independence agenda and this unique status gave them the advantage of serving as a bridge between the two groups.

This role was reinforced by the fact that the highlanders and the lowlanders lacked a common language of communication and the relative mastery of Tigrinya and Arabic language by the saho elites in those days of segregated Eritrean society in which its segments were alien to each other, due to lack of meaningful trade or any other interaction among them. In the highlands, the Saho traditionally see themselves as the guardians of Islam and hence there were prominent Saho religious scholars and leaders who evidently had an influential role in promoting the independence narrative within the Muslims of the country and helped build mutual confidence between the two religious groups of the same camp that favoured independence in the 1940s and in the decades long armed struggle that followed. Still today, the vast majority of mosques and Islamic centres in Eritrean highlands are being led by the scholars from Saho.

The Eritrean Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ibrahim Mukhtar (1909-1969)<sup>56</sup>, from the Saho, is one of the great icons in Eritrean history. His role as a senior consultant for *Muslim League* and outspoken advocate for Eritrean independence was commendable by the pro-

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<sup>56</sup> [http://www.academia.edu/2641447/Ibrahim\\_al-Mukhtar\\_Ahmad\\_Umar\\_2012](http://www.academia.edu/2641447/Ibrahim_al-Mukhtar_Ahmad_Umar_2012)

independence section of the Eritrean public. He consulted with the UN commissioner who was entrusted with the task of drafting a constitution for Eritrea. He had a great role in appeasement and mediation of Muslim-Christian sporadic conflicts together with Christian religious leaders. Similarly, Qadi Ali, Nasser Basha, Ali Bey and other tribal and community leaders were among the founding and well reputed individuals in the pro independence block.

### **2.3.1 Saho Personalities in ELF**

The Saho were among the founding and active members of ELM<sup>57</sup>. However, their role was profound in the ELF rather than any other faction. Among the prominent Saho personalities in the ELF are the following. Martyr Osman Saleh Sabbe, (founding member, Head of Foreign Mission. He is described as a sophisticated diplomat and main source of military and finance to ELF and latter EPLF), Martyr Saeed Hussien (founding member of ELF), Martyr Abdul-Karim Mohammad (and his deputy Mr. Tsadwa) leaders of third division acted in highland region between 1964-1969, Martyr Ahmed Jassir (Secretary General of the ELF-PLF I 1971), Mr. Mohammed Ahmed Abdu ( chairman of ELF (1969-1975), Martyr Ahmed Mahamad Nasser (the chairman of ELF General Command 1975 and remained in his position for decades. He was known for his tolerant democratic views) and Martyr Saeed Saleh. There are others as senior military ranks, brigadiers and deputy commanders, unit leaders, as well as administrative staff and mass organizers<sup>58</sup>.

The first women to join the Eritrean armed struggle in 1966 were from the Saho, in spite of social and cultural pressures. Their powerful motivation to join the armed struggle was the atrocities of the Ethiopian and *Commados* against the Saho people. They were five<sup>59</sup> to be known the first female fighters in the Eritrean history of armed struggle. The EPLF/PFDJ government have adopted culture of praising women's role in the armed struggle on every national and women's day. However none of these were either remembered fairly. Saho women who maintained their traditional roles were also involved in the resistance against Ethiopian occupation and supported the armed struggle in different ways such as feeding and nursing fighters, transmitting information, collecting money.

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<sup>57</sup> For the details about names and their active roles, refer to Mohammad, (2013:368-371).

<sup>58</sup> Source: former senior ELF cadre lives in UK and See Mohammad, (2013:245).

<sup>59</sup> Their names: Guma Omar, Rahma Ahmed Sulieman, Rahma Saleh, Rawda Ahmed and Sa'ada Abdalla. According to my knowledge Guma is still in Sudan refugee camp, Rahma is in Saudi Arabia, second Rahma passed away in Iraq, Rawda after long stay in Sudan refugee camp got resettlement program in Norway in 2011, and fifth not known where she is.

Many Saho civilian fell victims or captive while undertaking national duties. For example, in 1975, Ethiopian army eliminated 35 wealthy merchants of Saho origin<sup>60</sup> in Awsa, Ethiopia, alleged supporters of the ELF (Mohammed, 2013:259).

### **2.3.2 Saho personalities in EPLF**

The Saho collectively, male and female were equally participating in the EPLF like every Eritrean nationalities. There are prominent Saho personalities in EPLF as well. Among the founding member of EPLF and well-known military commanders of the Saho origin: Martyr Ibrahim Afa (EPLF's chief of staff from 1975 up to his mysterious death 1985. He is described as one of the distinguished military leaders who led the Eritrean People's Liberation Army to victory at many wars), Martyr Mahmoud Sherif, (worked at different position and notably as Minister of local Government and vice president in independent Eritrea. He was among the reformist group G15 in 2001 and ended up captive), Mr. Mohammed Ali Omaro (captive), Martyr Ali Ibrihim, Sheikh Adem, Mr. Idris Omar (Beriray), Martyr Dali (mysterious death), Martyr Ali Hinna, General Saleh Huruy (captive since 1992), Mr. Abdellah Adem and all of them were founding members of EPLF<sup>61</sup>. Late Sunabarra Damman businessman and known financial supporter of EPLF, died at the age of 80s, after having been released from captivity in 2009. Martyr Ali Mohammed (Yassina) was the first who initiated music school in EPLF and trained and produced many EPLF musicians<sup>62</sup>.

As indicated above, the Saho are an autochthonous people of the country Eritrea. Therefore they deserve to enjoy equal rights and justice at large, like every Eritrean national groups. Secondly, taking into consideration the historic injustice committed against the Saho people and as a culturally vulnerable minority group, they entitle special support and protections from the government of Eritrea. The Saho, though small minority group, have played important patriotic role in the Eritrean struggle for independence. Their engagement in the struggle initially was from an aspiration of independent Eritrea which is truly democratic, just and inclusive. Eritrean government, in addition to this, has to treat the Saho people fairly as it promised for every Eritrean nationality during the armed struggle for independence.

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<sup>60</sup> For the names of victims see Mohammad, (2013:372).

<sup>61</sup> For further details see: Mohammad, (2013:275)

<sup>62</sup> For the details about names and their active roles, refer to Mohammad, (2013:368-376).

## Chapter Five: Data Presentation and Analysis

This chapter presents and discusses the obtained data. The data are categorized into different sections. It begins with the notes to how the government-Saho conflict began to escalate. Thereafter, it discusses the government policy, mainly language and land, and how the politicization of the policies undermines the need and interest of the Saho people. Further it examines the subsequent patterns of suppression and intimidation. Finally it looks at the overall impacts of the government policies on the Saho people and its consequences.

### 1. A note to the initial stage of the Government-Saho Conflict

The third world states' decolonization process was mostly achieved by the operations launched by people's liberation movements over the last half century. The liberation struggle was successful in achieving formal sovereignty which aspired to achieve self-determination externally<sup>63</sup>, however while in the process, there was much less talk about achieving self-determination internally<sup>64</sup>. Unfortunately, with the end of the decolonization process, hypocrisies abound with regard to self-determination process internally, as the national liberation movements, after fighting to achieve their own self-determination from the outside, and attaining power and setting themselves as states, have often resorted to force to prevent self-determination from developing internally and tended to establish oppressive dictatorial regimes. They were mostly failed in making the state itself a truly multiethnic and multicultural political community (Archibugi, 2003:494).

Nationalism in Eritrea, as in the case of many African countries, arose as a pattern of resistance and protest against colonial domination, notably Ethiopian. On the granted liberal political atmosphere under BMA, political parties began to appear on the scene which introduced significant step in the Eritrean nationalism. The subsequent period, which brought Ethiopian direct intervention, strengthened further Eritrean nationalism with growing sense of unity among various ethnic groups and liberation front mainly ELM, ELF and EPLF in protesting the hegemony of Ethiopian rule. All of the liberation movements had their own

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<sup>63</sup> External self-determination concerns the right of all people to free themselves from all colonial, foreign or racist domination and/or concerns the international status of people to constitute itself a nation-state, to integrate in to or to federate with an existing state (Archibugi, 2003:494-502).

<sup>64</sup> Internal self-determination denotes to right of people (of state or once they have achieved statehood) to freely choose their own economic, political and social system without appeals or pressure. It is not necessarily to have their own state (Archibugi, 2003:494-502).

significant role in flourishing a sense of *Eritreanness* among Eritrean people (Mohammad, 2013:82).

However, the victorious EPLF, although successful in winning the ideological struggle and realized the participation of all Eritrean ethnic groups, its post independence period looks different, fostering chauvinistic nationalism favouring one section of the society and its values over the rest. The EPLF/PFDJ government reversed its policy to fulfil the promises it made to the Eritrean population during the armed struggle in regard to equality, participation and development. Its pledge that the future Eritrean state would never face ethnic, religious and regional divisions has failed as well. Its homogenizing policy that reflects the dominant group have led to a growing tension between the dominant group and minority groups. The ruling elites suppresses sub-national units and interest groups in the name of national unity and development by centralizing the decision-making process from top to down and by dominating the citizens and controlling the resources of the nation (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:144; Mohammad, 2013:82).

The Eritrean situation under the EPLF government is therefore not different from other states who failed to achieve egalitarian and inclusive systems. Following Eritrean independence 1991, the EPLF government planned to restructure the demographic and social fabric of the Eritrean society in accordance with its political ideology, thus, introduced new policies concerning, among others, land, language, national service and restructuring existing regional administrative regions. The policies were mostly met with opposition from the Saho community leaders as it contradicts their interests and rights (Mohammad, 2013:311).

According to the interview with the Saho opposition leaders<sup>65</sup>, friction of the Saho people with government began to develop from the early period of independence over issues of new government policies such as national service, language, mainly mother tongue education and later land. According to the Eritrean government, every Eritrean citizen, male and female over 18 years old has a duty of national service which includes six months military training and giving one year service either in army or other government sectors. The conflict began in the case of female participation in military training. Saho community leaders, in almost all areas of the Saho, expressed their restrictions and unwillingness regarding participation of female in the so called military training.

It is impossible to mention all the stories, events, changes and experiences displayed in all places of the Saho. Therefore, I have selected *Senafe* town as a typical representative

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<sup>65</sup> Source: interviewee no. 1, 2, & 3 (look table-1)

site in my discussion. I am convinced that almost all the stories and changes discussed about/in *Senafe* are fairly representative. *Senafe* is a market town in southern region of Eritrea. The town and its surroundings are inhabited both by the Saho and Tigriña people.

For example in *Senafe* town, there was strong opposition to female participation in the military training. The Saho community leader's opposition was based on the following arguments. The primary argument originates from religious and traditional standpoints. The Saho people are predominantly adherents of Islam, thus their traditional society strictly abide both Islamic and traditional rules. From this point, they have restrictions on their female society members to travel not away from their family without any guardian either her husband or an immediate family member. As a second point, during the armed struggle many Saho females who joined the army, either married or became pregnant illegally by a man from another religious or ethnic group, which is contradicting to Islamic and Saho traditional norms. Because of high risk of sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancy against women, that could bring shame on family and community, Saho community leaders insisted in their opposition saying "we have given our male and female children in time of need during independence struggle without hesitation however time is now different after we got our independence. Since we are not facing any threat, we don't see it is necessary to allow our women to join the army. But we don't oppose any Saho girl or parents who wish to do so" this excludes female and parents who wished to send their girls. There were some personalities from Tigriña who supported the argument as well (interviewee no. 1, 2, & 9)<sup>66</sup>

Another conflicting issue was about mother tongue education. It might be affected by the already fuelled distrust among the government and Saho elders over issues of female national service, thus the large majority of the Saho people were against MTE policy from the beginning. Most of the intellectuals were suspicious about effectiveness and usefulness of MTE and many were interpreting it as a tool of marginalization and oppression against the Saho people. MTE was already begun in some areas without any prior and formal consultation with the Saho community elders. However the community was divided between the large majority as opponents and the supporters or silent people. The opponents used to express the MTE program as, in Saho language "*Laatin yaanam, lat eya yaanam kinni*" which means "Latin<sup>67</sup> means to be relegated down". It is worth mentioning that the Saho

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<sup>66</sup> Look table-1 at the back.

<sup>67</sup> As mother tongue education of the Saho and other minority groups, is written in Latin words, the name Latin adopted usually for mother tongue education instead.

children in elementary level were learning either in Tigrigna or Arabic in places where schools available (interviewee no. 1, 2, & 3).

The situation worsened as the government began to respond against the vocal Saho opponents brutally and enforce the policy further ahead. For instance in Senafe town the tension between the government and Saho elders heightened, especially between the government assigned governor of the town and some of his proponents and the Saho elders on the other side, that involved exchanges of verbal insults and threat mainly from the governor of the city. The insults from the governor was aggressive and targeting the community as a whole (interviewee no. 3 & 9).

The government began to take serious measures against the vocal opponents, mainly community elders. In connection with this, on December 24, 1995 one of the shocking incidents happened in Senafe town. At midnight the regime soldiers stormed houses of those who were alleged as community leaders and three of them were abducted at night. While in the operation, the wife of one of the abductees was gunned down in her house by regime soldiers. The three abductees were Ex-ELF freedom fighters<sup>68</sup>. Similar abductions were also conducted in other places of Saho. It is almost twenty years; they are still languishing in government prisons. From that day intimidation, discriminations and suppression further tightened, mainly against the community and religious leaders (Interviewee no. 1, 2 & 12).

The government new land policy which was drafted in 1994 has also involved the same conflicting issues. However, its conflict appeared later than the issues of national service and language policy. Language and land policy will be the main focus of discussion.

Before that I want to present international human-rights-based approaches to the protection of minority group. Accordingly, articles of the UN Declaration (2007)<sup>69</sup> will be referred to the following discussion. The articles were inspired and prepared for special protections and rights of particularly vulnerable national minority groups, mainly indigenous people, from the point of moral and humanitarian concern.

*Article 2:* Indigenous peoples and individuals are free and equal to all other peoples and individuals and have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights i.e. the right not to be discriminated against.

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<sup>68</sup> Their names are Yousuf Ibrahim, Mohammad Bani and Ibrahim Omar, all ex-ELF freedom fighters.

<sup>69</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 61/295, 2007.

[http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)

*Article 19:* States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.

*Article 18* Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.

*Article 11:* Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs.

*Article 10* Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return.

## **2. Language Policy: Mother Tongue Education (MTE)**

The politics of language have become one of the fundamental causes of political conflict throughout the world. The conflict circled at decisions about which language should be chosen as an official, schooling or public service language (Kymlicka, 1995). No doubt that Mother tongue education is principally an inherent right of every individual linguistic group if desired so. However, what should come first in terms of ethnic right or the right of a state to impose educational policies and medium of instruction has become another contesting topic. The conflict between the Saho people and the government originates from this point of view. Do the Saho people have a right to choose whatever language as a medium of instruction in elementary schools or is the right to impose vested only in the government.

According to Kymlicka, (1995:80), liberalism grants people a very wide freedom and rights of choice in terms of how they lead their lives, and what is the conception of a good life. Although people can make a mistake or imprudent decisions, this cannot be an excuse for the intervention of government to protect such a mistake. Because people's belief about the good life is fallible and revisable if they are not worthy, is widely endorsed in the liberal tradition. However, in case of government intervention, governments may not be trustworthy and even some individuals may have idiosyncratic needs, which are difficult for even a well-intentioned government to take into account. Controversial conceptions of the good may lead

to civil strife. Moreover, lives do not get better by being led from the outside, while not endorsed by the targeted society.

International law, in recognition of minority interests and preferences, through deliberative model conceives democracy as a free association of equal citizens who engage in a rational discussion on political issues, presenting options and seeking consensus on what is to be done i.e. equality, participation (inclusion) and consensus. Therefore, governments or decision makers have to create opportunities of consultation and/or equal and non coercive participation effectively to members of minority groups in decisions that can affect their interest and livelihood (Wheatley, 2003:523).

From to the points I got to understand from the interviewees<sup>70</sup>, regardless of the benefits of MTE, the decisions made about MTE was against the will of the Saho people as it was rejected by the largest portion of the Saho people from the beginning. It could have been determined simply by allowing the Saho elites to participate or be consulted in the decision making process to choose their own language policy on a democratic basis. Maintaining the Saho language and developing it should be left to the choices of the Saho people and be respected. However, the decision primarily lacked any popular participation from the Saho people and was imposed forcibly without formal consultation to the Saho population. Any state intervention and preventing any individual group from meeting its need is unfairly rejecting some people's choices.

Nevertheless, it is worth exploring the promises and perils of the MTE policy.

## **2.1. The Promises of the Saho MTE**

Eritrean education system is divided into three levels: elementary (1-5), middle (6-7) and secondary (8-11). Whereas at elementary level the medium of instruction is mother tongue, middle and secondary is English. Mother tongue education started in the Saho region roughly in 1992-1993.

From the early stage of independence, the Eritrean government as part of its emphasis on unity in diversity declared that every nationality has the right to its own language or any other language of its choice in primary school. Therefore, within advocacy of the equality of all languages, as a democratic right of every nationality and to enhance the learning capacities of children at primary schools, the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction was promoted (Bereketeab, 2010:21; Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:138) According to

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<sup>70</sup> (Interviewees no. 1, 2, 6 & 7)

proponent of MTE, Alexander Naty, adopting MTE, in addition to ensuring equality of all Eritrean languages, it has an important role in preserving and developing culture and language of its speakers. Moreover, beside the fairness principle, aesthetic of linguistic diversity must be appreciated in order to diminish domination of entire monotony (2000:277).

Cultures influence each other as there is no meaningful border between them. The majority culture then would have pervasive incentive to destroy the societal culture of a national minority (Kymlicka, 1995:111). In fact, it is questionable that, as the Saho are immediate neighbours to the dominant group, their language and culture at large, could be in danger. It is therefore, introducing MTE in public schooling is so important for the Saho culture and language to survive. It is certainly providing what is probably important form of support needed for the Saho people, since it guarantees the passing on of the language and its associated traditions and conventions to the next generation. Refusing to provide public schooling in a minority language is almost inevitably condemning that language to ever-increasing marginalization (ibid). Though these promises are in place, what should come first and foremost (and be respected) is the Saho people's desire.

Supporters of the policy, mainly former students of EPLF revolutionary school, claim that the Saho language and culture has been preserved and developed, since MTE introduced. What have been achieved, according to them, are some old Saho folklores, poems, history, proverbs have been collected and restored by the Eritrean ministry of education. It is also worth mentioning that the Saho dictionary (Saho-English-Italian) has also produced by an Italian scholars. However, it has to be noted that, out of this, there are several Saho individuals did similar jobs by their own initiations before and after MTE started.

## **2.2. The Perils of the Saho MTE**

From very beginning, a very big majority of the Saho intellectuals opposed the MTE program for different reasons and warned that it could have serious consequences in the future. Among such reasons were MTE intended for marginalization and distancing the Saho people from opportunities and as a mechanism used to ensure the domination of Tigriña language and culture. Moreover, they argue MTE is poor in its practical application. Marginalization of the Arabic language is also another concern.

### 2.2.1. Marginalization and Polarization

Tronvoll and Mekonnen, (2014:138) states that the MTE program was opposed by almost all minority groups, including Saho, claiming that the policy was adopted in order to sustain the marginalization of minority groups since they would not be fluent in the dominant language of the state, Tigrigna and furthermore, pointing to the risks of discriminations against the minority students in admission to institutions of higher education and job opportunities in the civil services, since fluency of the Tigrigna language is indispensable.

I shall use here personal stories and experiences of former teachers in the Saho MTE. They are interviewees No. 6, 7 & 17. Their stories and experiences were quite comparable. So that, I refer to the interviewee No.6, whose anonymous name is Nasser. According to Nasser, "... there was an intensive campaign for the MTE from the government. It was in 1997 while I was studying 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Senafe town, officers from the Eritrean ministry of education came to the school and gathered all Saho students. First they told that, as relatively talented Saho students you have moral responsibility and obligations to serve your people in the government project of mother tongue education. In regard to this, government have made for you exemptions and promises such as (1) exemption from national (military) service (2) equal salary with all teachers of Tigrigna schools (3) anyone who passed national secondary school leaving examination, will be allowed to join the university".

Many of the students were encouraged because of the promises entered. Accordingly, students who passed from grade 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> were given a chance to study one year in Asmara Teachers Training Institute (TTI). The selection criteria were grade achievements thus, students with higher grades were given priority and those with lower grades were not. Moreover, at that time elementary teachers salaries were raised from 450 to 910 Nakfa<sup>71</sup> and secondly, staying one year in Asmara; studying in the college was another inspiring issue to many students to accept the deal. Finally, almost all the students were accepted the deal and studied one year at the teachers training institute (TTI) in Asmara (interviewee 6 & 17).

However, after the completion of one year of study, the government broke all the entered promises. Firstly, those who scored enough grades and were supposed to join the University of Asmara were refused the chance. Secondly, as the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) escalated, all of the students were taken to Sawa military camp, for military training, and as a general government rule, the Saho MTE teachers conscripted to the national service

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<sup>71</sup> Nakfa (NKF) is Eritrean national currency.

and their salaries were reduced from 910<sup>72</sup> Nakfa to 45 Nakfa for six months and then 450 NKF, as part of the national service and continued to be this low for the years to come.

Nothing was delivered from the promises they pledged for them. In fact, all the promises were just hollow incentives to accept the government plan. Otherwise it would be compulsory to accept because it was made compulsory in the Afar minority group. They were publicly told that they will not join the University even if they got good grades, under excuses of their unquestionable duty to teach their people.

One of the perils of MTE is that most top students who had lifelong ambitions and thus worked hard hoping to join higher education in their past school life, all their dreams were thwarted. Many of the students who scored good grades refused chances to higher education. And others reduced their efforts already because of the promises. While on the other side, their classmates and friends mainly from Tigrigna ethnic group mostly joined the University of Asmara and other higher education institutions having studied well. Countless Saho students, many of them were brilliant enough, were drifted away from their life-long ambitions of attaining higher education. In this way, the promises of mother tongue education turned out to be a set-up by the government to hinder the Saho students from attaining higher education and thereby disadvantaged them in the labour market vis-à-vis Tigrigna speakers.

### **2.2.2. Tigrigna Language Domination**

Practically, only Tigrigna, the language of the dominant group is used as a means of communication in the administration and in the private sector. Services in every sectors of government are accessible only by the Tigrigna language and no formal interpretation support is given. In addition to this, the ineffective role of the Saho language even in the local areas shaped by Saho majority, contributed to the insignificance of MTE. Moreover, mastering Tigrigna language, both speaking and writing, became a primary condition to the government apparatus and job opportunities as well as other privileges and benefits. Hence, both parents and students generated negative attitudes towards their mother tongue, while at the same time they embraced the Tigrigna language against their will, at the cost of their mother tongue.

Bereketeab, (2010:22), states that "... parents are aiming, by choosing a language they perceived is more marketable than their own, at the linguistic market where competitive and profitable legitimate linguistic competence is earned. What becomes appealing is that

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<sup>72</sup> The exchange rate for 910 NKF in \$US at that time (1997) was nearly 110 \$US.

adopting the language of formality or office in which mastering it may lead to a prestigious and profitable job in the public sphere. If it is another language than one's own then let it be"

As a response, some students quit studying and school dropouts increased dramatically. Moreover, some parents opted to send their children to towns where their children can find Tigrigna schools to avoid MTE, which understandably will not help them in their life. As it became noticeable and common, the government immediately set up committee from the villages to return the students through putting pressure on their parents and threatening for imminent consequences. As a second measure, the government formally informed all local schools teaching in Tigrigna in Senafe and its surrounding, not to enrol any students from the Saho ethnic group, as they have to attend their mother tongue schools (interviewees 6, 7 & 17).

Interviewee (17) narrates wondering, "We see some students who quit learning in their mother tongue roaming around aimlessly, but no measures were taken by the government to bring them back to schools, like it did with those who enrolled in Tigrigna schools in towns".

Tigrigna language became attractive as the only means of success both to the Saho students and parents. According to the interviewee (17), in a place called *Gollo* around Senafe, some students and their parents were asking teachers if they can help them learn Tigrigna even in exchange of some service. The need emanates from their desperate interest to equip themselves and their children with Tigrigna to access the essential services. Some teachers as per request took initiatives to teach them Tigrigna language in their spare time. However, as the news reached the sub-zone office of Ministry of Education, teachers were summoned to the office and threatened for their initiatives and given strict warning not to do the same thing in the future.

Moreover, inclusion of Tigrigna as a subject in the curriculum was the result of relentless pleading from parents and students. At the beginning their request was turned down by concerned government officials who stated different lame excuses. Sometimes they said that inclusion of Tigrigna as an extra course will be an additional burden on the children and sometime it is government policy and thus it is beyond their official mandate to do so. Those who are in key positions are either from Tigrigna ethnic group or former students of the revolutionary school of the EPLF known as *Beit Timhirt Sewra*-most of the them are brainwashed hard line supporters of any government policies.

Many of those who learned in mother tongue meet with challenges during interaction with people in public areas such as in gathering, employment, military areas, as they can't

speak the Tigrigna language which has become the medium of communication. They feel alien to their compatriots and their country's issues. Tigrigna language has become an expression of Eritrean identity. If someone, from minority groups, unable to speak Tigrigna language, the immediate question put on him or he/she has to answer is: "are you not Eritrean? Many Tigrigna speakers both intentionally or unintentionally insist on the questions and even perceive them as uncivilized or uneducated idiots. This is a clear by-product of how a social system was restructured by the regime through its language policy.

### **2.2.3. Double-standardization**

Regarding the quality of MTE, Dutcher (2003:4) underlines that although the use of MTE is necessary, but not sufficient for high quality education in relation to Tigrigna teaching schools. As stated by interviewee (17), the treatment of schools between Saho teaching and Tigrigna teaching is so different in terms of facilities, provision of books, teachers, and others. For example each student in Tigrigna teaching schools gets each book while in Saho teaching schools two or more students share a book. Moreover, teachers of MTE are identified as not like normal teachers but usually distinguished from other teachers as "*Latin teacher*" with undermining attitude from teachers of Tigrigna teaching schools. Similarly students who learned in Latin or mother tongue experience the same within society.

By 2005, the government planned to rearrange class levels in all schools in accordance to the students' ages. Consequently, all Eritrean students who don't fit their age to the school classes they are in were stopped as being over-aged. Finally, taken to the military training camp, *Sawa* forcibly or rounded up by government army. As in almost all Saho regions, schools were opened so late, the students hosted in the Saho teaching schools were found disqualified according to the new rearrangement, as they started schools at their late age. The Saho teaching schools hence affected so badly. Several Saho students were swept away from their schools. But the Tigrigna schools were less affected compared to the Saho, as schools opened decades ago and thus children joined schools at their early age. Saho elders as well as teachers implored the government to reconsider, but fruitless. Treating equally all people without consideration to their differential situations is contrary to justice. Justice in this sense, according to Kymlicka, (1995:109), would primarily require external support and protection by understanding to the differential situations of disadvantaged groups so as to redress historic wrongs.

In the Saho MTE, the system in which job and other opportunities awarded is according to political allegiance to the regime rather than meritocratic. Those who were

students of the former revolutionary school of EPLF or *Beit Timhirti Sewra* and members of the PFDJ party hold key positions in mother tongue education and have priority in job and are more trusted over others, regardless of whether they meet the necessary academic criteria. They are believed to apply any government orders from above without reluctance. Especially those who are well-educated and fail to prove support to the regime have no chance, neither to develop themselves nor to hold a good position.

In no wonder, the Eritrea's minister of Education from 1995 to 2006 was from the Saho. But he hadn't any effective role, rather a symbolic one. Every critical issue in the ministry were controlled and directed by the president's office and president's faithful individuals. It is mainly an Eritrean president's usual hypocritical tactic in order to absolve himself from any blame or responsibility.

#### **2.2.4. Cultural marginalization**

How the government of Eritrea used to treat cultures of minorities is quite inconsistent with the promises of language policy and to the international norm. The Saho people can only enjoy and develop their culture under the mercy and will of PFDJ regime (under strict control and censorship of cultural affairs dept.), while on the other side working intensively to develop and systematically disseminate Tigrigna language and culture into minorities. The government Medias and other institutions are highly occupied with providing Drama, comedies, magazines and other cultural shows in Tigrigna language. While on the other side no meaningful activities about the Saho language or culture. This made many Saho children to be attracted to the Tigrigna language and culture.

Many Saho, in opposition to the government control and intervention over their cultural issues, abandoned such activities supervised by the government. Today, watching on the government TV or festivities, singing or especially Saho dancing, performed by deliberately trained none Saho regime fanatics is common, as if no one in the saho can dance his own dance or to depict the fake social harmony that is realised, thanks to the regime's policies of equality and national unity. The goal behind this is trying to show participation of all cultural groups on equal footing while the contents of the music or how they use to dance is ridiculous to the native Saho.

Such things induced a feeling of inferiority to some Saho, mainly children and on the other side, to some Tigrigna as well as some foreigners, Tigrigna culture like Tigrigna language, became the identifying factor for Eritrean identity. This chauvinistic attitude

implies that the Saho those who can't understand Tigrigna culture (for instance dancing) and speak Tigrigna treated as aliens to the state.

According to interviewee (6, 7, & 17) indicates, today most of the teachers in MTE abandoned the job because of the mentioned pressures. Those who are still attached to the job are those who lacked income alternatives to support their families. Secondly, there are only two options for them; either to continue as a teacher or to join the army, thus many chose to stay in the position. The third option might be abandoning the country.

### **2.2.5. Marginalization of the Arabic language**

The Arabic language has socioeconomic, religious and political importance to the Saho people in particular and to the almost all Eritrean minority groups in general. Similarly it has also long history and influence in the Eritrean community. It is moreover an official Eritrean language beside to Tigrigna language. Despite all this, there is deliberate neglect of the Arabic language by the PFDJ government (Mohammad, 2013:74).

The policy of education both in Arabic and Tigrigna was promoted by BMA (Naty, 2001:273). The controversial debate in the 1950s between Eritrean Moslems and Christians ended in the agreement to let both Tigrigna and Arabic be Eritrean official languages. Arabic was the dominant language of communication in the first decade of the liberation struggle led by the ELF. However, with the massive joining of Tigrigna speaking highlanders in the armed struggle, the need for Tigrigna necessitated and as a result ELF afforded Arabic and Tigrigna the status of official languages of the organization. The EPLF although it adopted the same policy in theory its emphasis was on Tigrigna, Tigre and other minority languages rather than Arabic, as it was reflected in its many cultural activities and popular mobilization (Bereketeab, 2010:12-14). Generally speaking, the elite group of both ELF and EPLF had effects on determining either bipolarity or multi-polarity one against the other. EPLF is therefore, applying the policy in the post liberation Eritrean as well (ibid: 20).

The implementation of the language policy in independent Eritrea divided Eritreans into religious line rather than ethnic. Most Muslim communities, among them the Saho, chose the Arabic language instead of their ethnic language. While on the other side, Tigrigna and other Christian minorities in Tigre, Kunama and Bilen chose mother tongue education. Resistance to the MTE policy by Muslims is probably related to their attraction to the Arabic language as a major regional and international language. Secondly, Eritrean Muslims may turn to Arabic as a unifying strategy to challenge the political domination of the Tigrigna projected by the EPLF/PFDJ government (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:140-141). The role

of the Arabic language as a unifying factor among Eritrean Muslim ethnic groups during political uprising of 1941-1961, is also worth noting (Mohammad, 2013).

The Arabic language is widely spoken among the Saho adults (Lewis, 1969:176). So that embrace for Arabic language in elementary schools exceeds the Tigrigna language. The embrace stems from different interests and facts such as religious, political, historic, economic and regional and international importance. However, the systematic marginalization of the Arabic language increased the embrace of the Tigrigna language both by Saho parents and students.

The need for the Arabic language, therefore, originates primarily from religious facts. The Moslem Saho receives Islamic teaching and preaching in Arabic. Additionally, every Saho individual and child from his early age has to recite the Quran in Arabic. In most cases, even families prefer to send their children to learn the holy Quran before he starts the secular education. This has contributed to their familiarity and relative ability to speak, and read as well as write the Arabic language and venerate it as a religious language as well.

Secondly, Arabic language accentuates important part in the daily life of the Saho community. Marriage agreements, property inheritance, genealogy, conflict resolutions are all documented in the Arabic language. For instance as an important indication of their dependence on Arabic for centuries the "*Customary law of the Akeleguzay Muslim (The Saho)*"<sup>73</sup> " was written in Arabic in 1943 and translated and edited in English by the prominent Saho scholar Pro. Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad.

There are historic facts as well. The Saho people since long time have travelled to Arab speaking countries for socioeconomic and educational reasons and sometime their elites interacted with Arabs for political reasons. The returnees from these countries made significant impacts at home so as the need and practice of the Arabic language among the Saho people have been considerably advanced. Alongside this, the Saho people's deep involvement in the ELF also infused Arabic language and culture further within the society.

Because of these facts, almost every adult among the Saho can read, understand and speak (if not perfectly at all) Arabic language. Saho prefer to borrow words from the Arabic rather than any other language, thus, there are several vocabularies adopted from Arabic language. Using Arabic expressions and proverbs while in conversation is very common. Moreover, personal nomenclatures used in the Saho predominantly are Islamo-Arabic.

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<sup>73</sup> <http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/aethiopica/article/view/74>

Opposition to the Arabic language comes from the majority of the Christian-Tigrigna population. Many of them associate Arabic language and its introduction to Eritrea into the Islamic religion and some other hardliners dates it to the BMA period (1941-1941). However, there are evidences prove that the Arabic predates Islam in Eritrea. There are also ignored historic facts about the role of Arabic language in the spreading of Christianity in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Dr. *Jalaludeen*, an Eritrean scholar states that Arabic language had a significant role as a means of transferring Christian heritage in today's Eritrea and Ethiopia. Several Christian religious books, he mentioned, were also translated from Arabic into Geez language<sup>74</sup>.

The saho peoples' interest in the Arabic language is related to enjoy the advancement of the language as a widely spoken global and regional language. Secondly, as the Saho people still have maintained contact with the Arab world, its interest is associated to effects the language can render to its speaker in terms of economic and political benefits both in the internal Eritrea political power struggle or externally in their dealing with their Arab neighbours.

However, as Arabic is marginalized as a working language, the absence of schools which provide Arabic as a medium of instruction and the government's refusal to meet their request of education in Arabic, the Saho people's desire seem tactically shifted to the Tigrigna language in desperate search for means of access to social and economic services in the country. Some Saho families even send their children to neighbouring Arab countries to pursue their education in the Arabic language with which they have spiritual attachment and perceive to offer more socio-economic advantages for the future of their children.

Finally I want to note that, refusal of MTE education is not only in the Saho people, but rather parents in such countries as Nigeria, Tanzania, and Namibia for example prefer English to their own mother tongue as a medium of instruction of their children. The choice is primarily linked to the interest gained from English language in the time of globalization<sup>75</sup>.

### **3. Land Policy**

Eritrea is a heterogeneous society. The traditional land use and tenure system of every group of society is different accordingly. The Land tenure system generally in Eritrea is divided in communal, *diesa* (residence based communal ownership) in which land belongs to a village or district; is redistributed periodically on a rotational basis to members, and *risti* (family ownership) in which land is distributed to members of the founding lineage known as

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<sup>74</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7PSwWJeRfw>

<sup>75</sup> See Bereketgab, (2010:15)

*enda* (kindered). Every society belongs to a particular territory based on the principles of first occupation (Kibreab, 2009:39).

In Eritrea, land has been utilized for political ends by different powers that ruled the country. During the Abyssinian and latter Ethiopian imperial periods, lands of the Saho people, in Seraie and Akeleguzay regions, were confiscated as a method of collective punishment for their opposition to the Abyssinian/Ethiopian rule. The land was given to neighbouring Tigrigna and new immigrants from Tigray region of Ethiopia as a reward to their support and loyalty. Industrial development during Italian colonial period also encouraged landless immigrants from Tigray region to settle on highland areas which had been used by the Saho (Mohammed, 2013: 130-134).

In 1994, the Eritrean government, declared a new land policy. Under the declaration it was decided to vest the right of land ownership solely in the state. Accordingly, it granted the state unlimited power to expropriate, to allocate, transfer or lease land (Kibreab, 2009: 40). Prior to the land reform, land had been communal property and individuals enjoyed access to land only as members of a local community. The community possessed full authority to distribute and administer its land and was in charge of mediating conflicts among its members and between locals and inhabitants of the surrounding area. Moreover they had rights to protect their land from outsiders. Under the new policy, all these rights were deprived as the government technically took over control on issues related to land which had been under the responsibility of local community leaders before (Mohammad, 2013:304).

Kibreab, (2009:41) argues that, state landownership is not exceptional to the Eritrean state. It is common in many sub-Saharan African countries. But, in the case of Eritrea, except those who are affiliated to the ruling party, there is explicit absence of autonomous civil or political society bodies and freedom of expression. This means absence of popular participation. Such an atmosphere suited the ground for the government to exercise its political agendas by using land and favouring particular groups according to its will.

The new land policy primarily designed in favour of agriculturally settled society, Tigrigna perception of territoriality, while on the other side neglecting pastoral society. Mohammad, (2013:306) states that,

It is not surprising that the land reform policy was initiated, drafted and written by ethnic Tigrigna with peasantry background. These elites focus on the interest and land hunger of the *kebessa* (highland) peasants and their aim is to settle them in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas. Generally, the EPLF/PFDJ's strategy is directed at restructuring and changing the existing demography and social fabric of the Eritrean society according to their perception of nation-building [...] the treatment of land

issue is arbitrary and often follows short-lived strategy changes within the government which is dominated by the will and tempers of the president. The lack of lawful procedures often led to arbitrary decisions and gave the government a free hand to resettle people at will and to select locations for large projects without consulting the indigenous inhabitants, mainly in the eastern and western lowlands.

It is then found to have a detrimental impact on the livelihood of the Saho, as a pastoral and cultural minority group. The policy deprived the Saho people the right to administer their land as it caused the usurpation of traditional political power on their land. The government's concept that allowed every Eritrean citizen to choose any part of the country as a place of abode resulted in demographic change in the traditional Saho land by compelling them to be a voiceless and deprived minority. Land distribution which involved political and discriminatory issues also further exacerbated their situation through unduly favouring the Tigrigna majority. This altogether brought demographic changes that could threaten the future of the Saho people in their original places. Consequently, it deepened the distrust and tension of the Saho people towards the government. The impact in general was reflected, in the government *land allocation* system, *negligence of pastoral Saho society* and *forced relocation* of the Saho people from their ancestral land.

### **3.1. Land allocation**

The land policy which rendered unlimited power to the state was manipulated by the government as a means of gaining political control over the country and its citizens' socioeconomic, political and cultural life (Kibreab, 2009:44). This was clearly applied, among others, in the process of settlement land allocation.

With new rules, any Eritrean individual have a right to live anywhere and to have a land for settlement and agriculture. However, this failed to be genuinely practical on the ground. The policy behind the land allocation was clearly politicized and discriminatory and aimed at changing the demographic shapes of the places. Those who acquired land for settlement as well as agricultural use are dominantly, the regime sympathizers and well off people, mainly from the Tigrigna people. The Saho were unfairly treated in the process even in the lands they used to own for generations.

Here is summary of the interview<sup>76</sup> I conducted on the settlement land distribution.

"... We don't even see our real image in the state and we have not any feeling of the belongingness towards the state. We are an absolutely marginalized and discriminated

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<sup>76</sup> The interview was conducted with interviewees (1, 2, 3 & 9)

segment of the society compared to our neighbouring dominant group. The government's policy in land generally is threatening to our very existence as a people in our ancestral land". The settlement land allocation in Senafe town carried out in 1998-2002 epitomizes the severity of the problem. Senafe is a hometown of the Saho people. Even the name 'Senafe' is given after the native Saho sub-tribe of the area known as Senafe, (sub-tribe of Malhina Mi'in Bara). Unlike today, the Saho people had a dominant presence in the town for decades. When the government allocated residential plots then, out of over 400 plots, only about 40 were granted to the Saho, and all the rest was given to individuals from the Tigrigna ethnic group, further contributing to the demographic change. As an immediate effect, the number of Tigrigna population outnumbered hugely over the original Saho inhabitants in the town.

The government expropriated vast agricultural land in Senafe and redistributed it for settlement purposes. The overwhelming portion of the expropriated land belonged to the Saho and was used for agriculture. The distribution, according to the interviewee, was unfair and disproportional. The land was granted according to the government, mainly governor of the town's will. Among the granted, those who came from the border town *Zalambesa*, were in overwhelming majority, while on the other side applications from the Senafe sub-tribe and the Saho in general who used to live in the town for decades were rejected. At the distribution, even private lands fenced and used for farming near their houses by the Saho for decades was demolished and given to others without consent of the original users. It caused outrage among the Saho people in the town in general and Senafe sub-tribe in particular.

Later on, some of the Saho elders from the town went to Asmara, the capital city of Eritrean, to the head of state to complain against the government assigned governor for abusing his power and distributed the land according to his will and interest, which presumably involved bribe. The government responded by removing the governor from his post and reposting him to another town called *Adi-tekelezan* in the same position, as governor. Nothing was corrected after the removal of the governor. The measure taken raised another doubts among the Saho inhabitants of the town.

The interviewees finally insisted that "we are not talking and opposing out of hatred to any group but from the point of justice. We have lived live in the town with Tigrigna people in harmony and peace for generations. Though there is an ethno-religious difference among us, we share kinship, tribe and excellent relationships with almost all of them".

According to the perceptions of the interviewees, it has intention beyond the governor's act, that is, politically motivated act against the Saho people. The intention was calculated to suppress the number of the Saho inhabitants in the town and make them weaker

in power. Taking note of the Saho peoples' opposition to some government policies since independence, the Senafe town and people, like many Saho regions, were under strict surveillance of the government.

Prior to independence, the Saho elders used to have an important role in administering their local communities and land with the consultation and under supervision of the regional administration. However the PFDJ government abolished their position and replaced them by government-appointed administrators. Saho elders have not been consulted in issues directly related to the affairs of their community instead they have to follow the guidelines and directives of the regional administration (Mohammad, 2013:310).

The post independence government of Eritrea has never assigned a governor for the *Senafe* town from the Saho ethnic group in spite of their sizeable and original inhabitation of the town. It is worth noting that, The Ethiopian *Derg*<sup>77</sup> regime (1974-1991) was quite fair in this case, in spite of waging a relentless war against Eritrean freedom fighters. The Saho were administering all their territory by and for themselves. In consideration to the above points, the *Derg* regime appointed the governor for the Senafe town from the Saho ethnic group. The *Derg*, in general was introduced equality and freedom of all religious groups in Ethiopia<sup>78</sup>. In the case of the Saho people, traditional political power was maintained and traditional leaders were respected and allowed to practice their traditional role. Government intervention in their internal affairs was very limited. The *Derg* leader, Mengustu Hailemariam was nicknamed as Haji<sup>79</sup> Mahamed, due to his relative impartiality, equality and respect for freedom of religion of the Saho people in particular and Ethiopian Muslim community in general. To the Saho people, the *Derg* regime was comparatively better than the Ethiopian emperor and the present EPLF/PFDJ regimes.

### **3.2. The State's neglect of the pastoral Saho**

In addition to the land reform proclamation, the government of Eritrea designed a macro development policy which favoured agricultural life style over pastoral ones. As pastoralism was never mentioned as a potential area of growth and sustainable development, pastoral society was disregarded. The proclamation didn't also include special provisions

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<sup>77</sup> The *Derg* regime ruled Ethiopia, with Eritrea part of it, from 1974-1991. The *Derg* initially was a sort of military committee initiated to address the problem raised by Ethiopian army to the emperor, later took over power in Ethiopia, after a coup of 1974.

<sup>78</sup> Zewde, B. (2001)

<sup>79</sup> Haji is an Islamic title given to the one who performed pilgrimage to the Islamic Holy places of *Mecca* and *Medina*.

protecting rights of movement of herds of the lowland and highland groups who traditionally practice pastoral nomadism and mixed agro-pastoralism. It is worth noting that, the divergent interests between agro-pastoralists and agriculturalist might be read as a political discourse, displaying the contrasting political priorities of the ELF and EPLF respectively (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:137).

The Saho, are predominantly a pastoral society; some of them practice typical nomadic pastoralism, moving from place to place while others are settled pastoralists combining poor agricultural practices. Livestock and its associated products as the main source of income are important components of their livelihood. Because of seasonal differences the Saho move within rangelands stretched between central highlands and coastal areas in search of grassland suitable for pasturage. Climate is essential for their survival and their livestock. Unfortunately, the inhospitable and undeveloped landscape, which they were forcibly pushed to, coupled with global climate change led to decreased rainfall regime. As vegetation dried, availability of forage also affected. Therefore, the land cannot longer support livestock herding. These misfortunes added to government negligence exacerbated their vulnerability, heading to catastrophic outcomes.

Associated to climate variability, people can become vulnerable to higher risk. Vulnerability, as well as adaptability, to difficult situations is determined by various reasons. People in poor socio-economic conditions are at higher risk than people in advantaged conditions. When a difficult situation overwhelms human adaptability, vulnerability increases to worsen human suffering. Vulnerability of pastoral society according to Galvin et al. (2009:183) therefore, occurs due to variations in frequency or duration of climate changes, socioeconomic and political constraints and unfavourable government policy. All these create obstructions from responding adequately to vulnerable situations.

The government support to the socioeconomically misfortune Saho society, would significantly contribute in challenging the difficult situation. As the interview<sup>80</sup> shows, livestock, which is the main source of income, perished in droves due to the pervasive disease and drought. Once livestock diseases spreads as there is no government mechanism for combating it, the chance of their survival is very low. Government attention to the livestock is insignificant. As vegetation dried livestock products were reduced drastically as well. Unfortunately, climate variability added to government negligence, regenerated extreme

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<sup>80</sup> Interview conducted with interviewee No. 9, 15 & 16.

poverty. Eventually people were either forced to migrate to urban areas or to neighbouring countries' refugee camps to be aid dependents.

Most of the refugees I met when asked about the main reasons for fleeing their home land, tie it up to the challenging situations of extreme poverty rather than political persecutions. The drought caused by climate deterioration affected the life of most families miserably. Especially people in remote areas are most affected as government or NGOs support is totally non-existent. It has, in general, ulterior political motives, since there is deliberate negligence and discrimination against the pastoral Saho people.

### **3.3. Forced Relocation**

Land or territory is the most important belongings human beings can have. It signifies social identity, economic importance and livelihood at large (Galvin, et. al, 2009:183). The detachment of national minorities from their land jeopardizes their culture as well (Kymlicka, 1995:105). Detachment from the land constitutes a threat to the very existence of people as a whole. Any relocation of indigenous people without their will and consent marks a violation of the UN Declaration (2007) article 10 which clearly stipulates that "indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return".

The new episode attached to the land policy was an exercise of social engineering. According to the government, the old land tenure system was intrinsically divisive and created sectarian attitudes and multiple identities that could engender traits of intolerance, exclusion and bigotry; hence dismissal of the system was justified. The purpose further meant to foster national unity, integration and social cohesion among the Eritrean people. Eritrea belongs to all Eritreans equally without any distinction. Every Eritrean is free to settle, obtain, cultivable and residential land anywhere in the country. It was in general homogenizing Eritrean society (Kibreab, 2009:49).

Tronvoll and Mekonnen, (2014:130) argues that the Eritrean government's strong emphasis on national unity apparently works against the cultural and minority rights in the country. Under the cover of national unity and development, the ruling elites suppresses sub-national units by centralizing the decision-making process from top to down and by dominating the citizens and controlling the resources of the nation. The hidden agenda of the PFDJ regime towards the Saho seems to scatter them to different administrative regions and to gradually remove them from the highlands in order to weaken their identity as an ethnic group (Mohammad, 2013:311).

The worst effect of the new land policy was forcible relocation of the Saho people into the western lowlands of Eritrea. In 2009, the government initiated a new attempt to relocate Saho people from their original habitat in the highland. This massive resettlement programs from highlands to the western lowlands was vindicated to resettle the Saho population to more fertile lands from their home area. According to state media more than 1300 families from Senafe sub-zone, 553 families from Adi-keih sub-zone all of them were Saho relocated in western lowland, Gash-Barka region (Mohammad, 2013:323).

Prior to announcing the relocation program to the Saho people, the situation turned out abnormal. All kinds of aid which was supplying to the people, like food and other forms of help, were stopped. Transport of any amount of grain from place to place was forbidden. As a result, food and consumer goods became scarce and prices soared. People were strangled. The cost of living went higher and hunger became pervasive. The year 2009 was the worst year ever to the Saho people since independence. Concurrently, the regime spread the news about the relocation program through its agents and the incentives that people could get if they accept the program. Actually, the harsh living condition deliberately created by the government was a tactic to compel them into accepting the program as a choice of last resort to escape the unbearable living condition. When the government addressed the plan to the people, as many of the people were in a bad situation and hunger was hardly pervasive in many areas, many people had no choice other than accepting the plan. Forcible situation was also applied in some areas and everyone was coerced to sign not to return back. The government insisted that they have to move to more fertile, vast and productive place to avoid hunger and promised to provide financial and agricultural equipment supports upon arrival Gash-Barka, until they become able to help themselves (interviewees 10, 15, 16 &17).

The displaced Saho then met with difficulties upon arrival such as unwelcoming response of the locals, inhospitable weather conditions and others as a result of the government's unfulfilled promises. Since early independence the locals in western Eritrea, Gash-Barka, contest new settlement of highlanders, mainly from Tigrigna and Eritrean returnees from refugee camps of Sudan, to their domains and tension was high many times, from perceptions that new settlers could compete in utilization of resources and other fears of dominations (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:155). The new Saho who moved recently were also met with the same fate. They were unwelcomed by local populations, namely Kunama and Bani-Amer. Although the locals cannot show immediate response against the new Saho settlers, their resentment was obvious and hence the future is shadowy.

Another challenge was associated with climate condition. The weather in the western lowlands of Eritrea is generally hot. So it is very hard for the Saho, as highland people, to adapt to the weather, especially with poor economic conditions. The relocation process began in May and June of 2009, which are the hottest months in the western lowlands of Eritrea which shocked and despaired many of them. Children, women and the elderly were among the badly affected. The preparation of the government was poor and no prior protection was made by the government for such hot climate and the potential outbreak of diseases. The Gash-Barka region is known for tropical diseases like malaria. Many children and vulnerable elderly deceased and many others soon either crossed the border to Sudan or resettled themselves in other towns as they could not return back to their home place.

Mohammad (2013:324), states that the government's promises were broken. After their arrival, did not receive any support from government in form of food and money as promised but only plastic tents and small amounts of food, for which they can only survive for one month. Many were therefore exposed to diseases and hunger. Because of the hard life they met with, they were forced to send their children to the towns nearby for begging. More than 300 children died of diarrhoea and malaria shortly after their arrival.

The fate of most of these people is unknown yet. It is difficult to estimate the suffering of these people and death toll and to reach any conclusion because of lack of access to the place and people inside Eritrea. But according to my informants, most of them have neither returned back to their place because of fear of the government nor settled in the proposed areas. Many of them made their way to neighbouring countries and are living in refugee camps of Sudan, Ethiopia and in other places. I met some of them in Ethiopian refugee camp (interviewee No.15) during my fieldwork those who finally made their way to Ethiopia through Sudan. But huge numbers of them are encamped in Sudan.

#### **3.4. Is there justifiable reason?**

Indeed, various questions have been raised related to state's disregard of the Saho people and the relocation program. People tended to ask why the program targets only the Saho people and whether the government's pretexts are justifiable and so on.

On the relocation program, the pretext provided by the government was to resettle the people to more agriculturally productive and fertile land (Kibreab, 2009). It is true that in Eritrea land fertility varies from place to place and that the western lowland is a vast and fertile area. However, according to (interviewee 9, 11, 1 & 3) the Saho people have more than enough unexploited land which can be utilized for agriculture and livestock grazing. The

problem is not infertility, usefulness or lack of enough land. The problem is lack of attention from the previous and existing government as a result; no significant development and infrastructural activities were done. There are lot of things that can be done in the Saho area, which benefits the Saho people if the government works on it genuinely. Moreover the land of the western lowland is not as no man's land, it is owned land and those locals are not willing to see their land settled and taken by others.

Actually, Saho have no land hunger like other neighbouring ethnic groups. Although agriculture is limited, there are possibilities to introduce or expand it in many areas and would have a very positive effects on household food security and beyond that. Among Eritrean perennial and seasonal rivers that flow into the Red Sea, most of them pass through the areas inhabited by the Saho people. The rivers are, Indeli River, Haddas River, Aligade River, Comaile River, Ragali River. No dam has been constructed alongside these rivers in the Saho area and exploited properly for agriculture and potable water purpose. There are possibilities of vast irrigation potential in the areas explained above, if dams were constructed and people supported and encouraged by the government (interviewee 9, 11, 1 & 3).

There is a wide difference between the areas inhabited by the Saho and neighbouring Tigrigna people resulting from the governments' unfair attentions. For example, at the immediate neighbouring place to the Saho area, known as *Shimezana* there are several dams constructed, agriculture is much developed all by government aid and attention. The government of Eritrea is intensively involved in constructing dams to increase agricultural production in the highland areas inhabited by Tigrigna people. In October 21, 2010, Eritrea television (EriTV), broadcasted report of 138<sup>81</sup> dam construction in Zoba Debub (new administrative zones that compounds former Akeleguzay and Seraie and some parts of Hamsien). None of these dams were constructed in the Saho areas, according to informants.

Saho also have unexploited sea resources. There are significant numbers of Saho in coastal areas like Massawa, Zula, Afta, Forro, Irafaile who were mostly dependents on the sea for their livelihood. Mountains are also suitable for bee-keeping and irrigational farming. None of these areas were exploited by the government for the interest of the Saho people. Sometimes, the government excuses for transportation inconvenience as hampering to development activities. The government development and infrastructural activities in the Saho region are still insignificant. Some of the available roads around Senafe town and other

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<sup>81</sup> <http://www.eritrea-chat.com/tag/zoba-debub-138-dam-construction-report/?display=extract&filtre=views>

Saho areas, for example, were built during the Ethio-Eritrean boarder war (1998-2000) as part of the wider war effort, according to informants.

Land policy of the government also insisted on overcoming scattered locations of territories (Kibreab, 2009). The Saho traditionally live scattered in vast area in order to get enough grazing area for their livestock. Secondly each sub-tribe or families used to have its own separate villages. It would significant to create fixed villages from the scattered ones therefore, introducing agriculture extensively and provisions of health and education would be easy then. However, such policy did not implement in the Saho region. The Saho people have enough unexploited land to create fixed villages and irrigation potentials. According to informants, there are, for example, vast plains of *Ragali*, *Irafaile*, *Forro*, *Badda*, *Hazemo* and in Seraie region still unexploited.

### **3.5. The Saho people's view on the relocation program**

The Saho People have different interpretations of the government relocation program and I have summed up below the interpretation of the Saho informants.

Some informants associate the relocation program with the growing Saho people's rebellion against the regime. Because of the continuous government's oppression on the Saho people and targeting religious and community leaders, starting from 2008 some of the Saho who were in the regime army defected to rebel against the regime. There were reports of violent conflicts with the regime's army. Thus, many of the Saho people link the program with the growing Saho people's rebellion against the regime which is meant to weaken any possible future growth of the rebellion. The government were accusing the Saho people of standing against the government policies and harbouring opposition group.

Some others interpret it as a systematic ethnic cleansing of the Saho people from the highland of Eritrea.

And one more different interpretation is that the program was merely a cover-up for the larger land grabbing process of the Tigrigna ethnic group being carried out systematically in the western lowlands. Therefore, the Saho people were forced to the program to justify the process as being national in the interest of the all ethnic groups. It is worth mentioning that, the government of Eritrea since independence initiated a program to settle the Tigrigna ethnic group from the highland to the western lowland, operating vast agricultural activities using modern technologies. This triggered hatred of Tigrigna people from the locals and deadly conflicts, mainly with the Kunama and Tigre ethnic group, occurred as a result.

#### **4. Suppression and Terror**

The government's undesirable policies co-occurred with denial of political rights trembled outraged Saho people. The government responded with tightened suppression and further terror against the Saho people. Targeting community leaders, fragmentation, segmentations and penetration of the Saho community, infringement on religious and community rights were among the tools of suppression and intimidation applied.

##### **4.1. Targeting community leaders**

The Saho community and religious vocals were among the main critic of the government's mistreatment of the Saho people. As a result, they were primary targets of abduction and terror of the regime. Many of them were abducted, imprisoned and intimidated. For examples, according to Tronvoll and Mekonnen, (2014:109), on 13 and 14 August 2008, over 30 Saho community and religious leaders were reportedly arrested from Senafe town and surrounding villages. Similar abductions took place at the same time in other Saho places like Adi-Keih, Ginda, Forro, Asmara and other small villages. According to informal sources of the regime, the accusations made against many were related to instigating people against the government, having connection with opposition and terrorist groups. No formal charges have been made against them and they have never been given the right to defend themselves in the court of law. Most of them still remain behind bars without any legal due process (interviewees 1, 2, 9 & 11).

Kidnapping became common since 1994/5. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of those disappeared due to lack of sufficient information from independent sources. Many Saho intellectuals who returned from exile after independence, especially from the Middle East and mostly former ELF members were under strict surveillance of the regime security agents. Many of them reportedly disappeared upon their return. Sometimes arrest is arbitrary meant to terrorize people collectively. Some of those who were arbitrarily arrested were well known preachers of peace and coexistence. For example head of Moslem community in Senafe town and his deputy were among the abductees in 2008. They always promote peace and national interest among the inhabitants of Senafe town. Partly, thanks to their role, both Moslems and Christians, of the town have lived peacefully side by side for generations.

Most attention has been given in connection to the latest development of the Saho armed rebellion against the regime in 2009. Following the armed confrontation that took place in areas known as Diot, more than 150 students from the Foro sub-town and its

surroundings were taken away. Their whereabouts is not known until the day of the interview (interviewees 5 & 13)<sup>82</sup>.

#### **4.2. Fragmentation, Segmentation and Penetration of the Community**

Other serious approaches of suppression against the Saho people were through penetration, fragmentation and segmentation of the Saho tribal unity. The PFDJ regime exploiting some Saho individuals' financial need and maturity, recruited them for purpose of spying against their own population. The regime is so vigilant in selecting such a people. Those who were enlisted for the jobs were often poor and uneducated, mostly from remote areas. Spying for the government, especially against your own people is taboo and a shame among the Saho tribes as they don't have sense of belongingness to the state due to excessive marginalisation. As it is true to many traditional societies, any shame on an individual ultimately affects the tribe. This has been seen to affect a relationship of some Saho sub-tribes negatively. Those who are enlisted as spy tended to use the opportunity against the people or tribe from personal reasons.

Government's land allocation and relocation programs are largely aimed at bringing about demographic changes, and to penetrate as well as fragment the Saho people against their will. Relocation programs meant to disintegrate the Saho people into different areas and finally to weaken them as an ethnic group. Similarly, land allocation has also intended to settle the majority Tigigna ethnic group among the Saho people, in the areas where they may enjoy exclusive ownership, and ultimately dominate them.

#### **4.3. Infringement on religious and community affairs**

Infringement on religious and community affairs coupled with strict surveillance of the Saho people in gathering places are common. On 2008 in Senafe town, the regime disbanded the committee which was elected by people and served the people since the Derg time. The committee was respected by the people for its honesty, devotion and achievements. The regime, after arresting the committee members, among them the head and his vice, and posted in their place others who have no good religious background and experience (Mohammad, 2013:316). By and large, representatives of the people are appointed by the government regardless of their qualification and irrespective of the consent of the people.

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<sup>82</sup> Interviewee No. 5 was student in Eritrea who managed to escape after been rounded up and made his way to Ethiopia and is a member of SPDM who has a brother among the abductees. The interview was conducted (in audio record) in 24-27 June 2014 in Adigrat town, Tigray region, Ethiopia.

At the same year, teachers in religious school in towns like Senafe, Adi-keih, Ginda and Forro, were taken for military service, and the schools left empty and eventually closed for good (interviewees 9, 1, 2, & 5).

According to informants, encampment of military units within villages is another disputed issue. In post Ethio-Eritrean war many military units have been settled within local villages, in places like Soira, Badda, Forro, Ginda, and Hazemo. The Saho society strongly condemned military encampment within local villages as it is an encroachment on their privacy as a community and is contrary to their strongly held traditional and religious values, according to which women should be protected from external intruders. The mixing of women with outsiders is strictly forbidden, especially in the rural traditional Saho society.

## **5. The Impacts of the Government Policies**

In a nutshell, the overall effect of the government's policies on the Saho people is; severe poverty leading to unequal survival chance when compared to their fellow countrymen from other ethnic groups, especially Tigrigna.

### **5.1. Social Inequality**

Social inequality is uneven distribution of resources, opportunities, political power and privileges within a given society (Rawls, 1999:7). The social inequality in the Eritrean context has its roots in colonial periods. Inequality however widened further in the post-independence period. The so called social inequality reflected in unequal opportunities and unequal surviving chances drastically impaired the Saho people's success in the struggle for a better life. It is almost impossible to estimate the overall impacts the regime's policies on the Saho as it is difficult to obtain numerical data. However, personal anecdotal evidences and opinions of certain informants, mainly from the Saho, has been utilised in order to identify the impacts in the aspects of health, education, employment and landholding.

#### **5.1.1. Education**

The number of the Saho who joined higher education compared to neighbouring Tigrigna proportionally is very limited. Among the reasons, firstly, almost all schools in the Saho areas were opened late after independence and still the education quality is poor. Secondly, all schools in the Saho areas teach only up to elementary level. Thus, after completing elementary level, the students have to move either to boarding school located in *Decemhare* town or they have to continue in nearer places staying with their relatives or

independently renting houses. Most families, therefore, are unwilling to send their children, mainly girls, away to the boarding school or somewhere else to pursue their education. As a result most students, especially girls are forced to quit at elementary level. Those who moved to towns away from families are also less successful because of the various problems- especially financial. But, recently, according to informants, education level rose to secondary level in some areas like Soira, Qohaito and Lahazen (interviewees 6, 7 & 8).

Moreover, the growing negative attitudes towards MTE among the majority of the Saho people, most parents don't see a good future for their children in education. Hence neither parents nor students are paying the necessary attentions to education.

In addition, the Saho children have to challenge multiple troubles to reach higher education. The troubles may be financial, remoteness of areas, lack of good facilities in elementary schools and so on. With all the problems, there is no affirmative action for minority groups including the Saho in higher educational institutions of Eritrea. In 2004, the number of students at the University of Asmara was around 5000<sup>83</sup> students (www.nokut.no 2013). From this number the Saho students were, arguably less than twenty<sup>84</sup>.

### **5.1.2. Health Service**

Health service in the Saho rural areas is almost not obtainable. The available ones are few and far from the areas settled by the Saho people. The rural Saho are seriously hit by chronic disease as a result. In addition, poor infrastructure and other developments activities worsened the impacts. People still use donkeys, horses or camels as transport in their long travel to the towns where they can find hospitals. Many patients, especially pregnant women, suffer a lot in the journey and some even die before they make it to the hospital. Diseases, mortality of women in delivery and children is so prevalent due to lack of medicine and necessary care (interviewee 4, 15 & 16).

People, mainly in the rural areas still depend on traditional healing and medicines. Those who can afford it- by selling their livestock- buy medicines when they travel to town every two or more months. They use to buy considerable amount of medicine from pharmacies once at the same time in order to use for a long period of time. Most of the time, the medicine they buy is pain killers, anti-malaria, aspirin and others. Because of the quantity

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<sup>83</sup>[http://www.nokut.no/Documents/NOKUT/Artikkelbibliotek/Kunnskapsbasen/Rapporter/UA%202013/Gulliksen\\_Anne-Kari\\_Audensen\\_Erik\\_Report\\_on\\_recognition\\_of\\_higher\\_education\\_in\\_Eritrea\\_and\\_Ethiopia\\_2013-1.pdf](http://www.nokut.no/Documents/NOKUT/Artikkelbibliotek/Kunnskapsbasen/Rapporter/UA%202013/Gulliksen_Anne-Kari_Audensen_Erik_Report_on_recognition_of_higher_education_in_Eritrea_and_Ethiopia_2013-1.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> I was student in University of Asmara between 2000-2004. Because of our small number, all the Saho students in the university were knowing each other.

and lack of knowledge the medicines may expire. Added to this, because of misuse, the medicine worsens their situation and lead to long term illness.

I had an extended interview with an old Saho man, Sheikh Omar, aged 72, from the village known *Alha*. I met him on his way from Mekele city in Tigray Ethiopia, where he was escorting his son who was suffering from a mental condition. He has many complains about the government. According to him, "we are considered citizens in time of war; otherwise we are a disenfranchised and forgotten section of the society. Government services like health, education and treatment for our livestock in our areas are very poor ".

Death of women in childbirth and children is so alarming. According to the Sheikh, he has already reached the fourth wife. He married four in succession because of the death of first wife. The number of dead children always exceeds the number of surviving. It is a common story that people at his age, bereaved several times; marry more than three wives and see most of their children die one after another.

According to Sheikh during the independence struggle, when both ELF and EPLF were fighting against the Ethiopian regime they were using their places as the places were convenient to the guerilla fighters. At that time both factions were providing them with health and education services, partly to win their support.

### **5.1.3. Employment Opportunities**

The late opening of schools, the ineffective role of MTE and poor educational quality all together reflected negatively on the job opportunities of the Saho young generations. Moreover, lack of proper skills and proficiency of the Tigrigna language of those who moved to urban areas meet with problems to fit with urban life. It is unthinkable for them to find a job in the government sectors. As they were compounded in pastoral life, they are unable to create jobs on their own in urban areas as well. Thus, they mostly work as unskilled labourers, in low wage physically demanding jobs. Some of them make extra effort to learn Tigrigna or Arabic language to compete for jobs in the labour market.

### **5.1.4. Landholding Inequality**

Generally, low educational achievement and a disadvantaged economic position impeded many Saho in landholding opportunities in towns. Individual communication skills, mainly in Tigrigna and economic capacity are very important to acquire a plot of land from the government. Especially, rural Saho moved into towns are very unlucky in this matter.

## **5.2. Poverty**

Another serious outcome, in addition to inequality, is chronic poverty. The pastoral Saho groups especially in remote rural areas were dependent on their livestock for daily food, such as milk, meat and income generation to cover other necessities. Today, as a result of the climate change and drought, the livestock population declined sharply in many rural areas. Therefore, the rural Saho affected seriously as a result. Poverty limited their access to health, education, land, infrastructure and resources. Moreover poverty subjected them to exploitation as they lacked voices. Altogether, the chronic poverty drove many Saho families into external aid dependency, migration, accepting undesirable government projects, disproportionate military recruitment and the related humiliations and inhuman treatment.

### **5.2.1. External Aid Dependency**

According to informants, the dilemma of extreme drought, added to the rise of the prices of cereals in local markets and the decrease of livestock prices compelled them to be extremely aid dependent. The aid comes either from the government or family members and relatives residing in towns and abroad. The distribution of food aid from the government is so complicated and linked to military service and political allegiance. Those who refuse to give their children for military recruitment or families who have a member that fled the country or suspected of disloyalty have no chance to receive the aid. Any family whose member has fled the country is obliged to pay fifty thousand Nakfa<sup>85</sup> (Eritrean currency) to the government as a fine or face imprisonment of family-head.

The Saho like many African societies, are collectivist society. Thus, most of the Saho families in rural areas depend on remittance from family members or relatives abroad. If one of its members is abroad, he has the responsibility not only of his immediate family but an entire extended family who have been left back home. Their collectivist attitude now expands to needy families in far away villages.

### **5.2.2. Migration**

Migration is another worrisome outcome connected to poverty. With deteriorating economic situation, their struggle to cope up the difficult situation has increasingly become unbearable. To overcome the difficult situation, migration in individuals and families was taken among the possible option for survival. Several families abandoned their birth place moved to towns and neighboring countries in expect of better life. It is alarming in some

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<sup>85</sup> Its implementation started in 2003/4. At that time the exchange rate for 50,000 NKF was nearly 2000 \$US. Nowadays, as Eritrean currency has been devalued sharply thus it might be rated to \$US 1000.

areas because of mass migration. Currently, several Saho families live in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan. They are totally dependent on aid as they are mostly uneducated and lack necessary work skills.

According to the families I met in refugee camps in Ethiopia, they fled their country because of pandemic poverty and hunger. Although life in the camps is harsh, they appreciate their present life in the camps in comparison to their previous situation. In the camp at least they have the security of basic necessities like water and food. In 2004/5, the UNHCR in the Shimelba refugee camp proposed a resettlement program to a third country for both the refugees of Saho and Kunama ethnic groups. The program was initiated, as a group case, based on the two ethnic groups' weaker position and the persecutions they experienced in their homeland. However, the plan for the Saho was finally not implemented for different reasons, mainly oppositions raised against the program from other groups (interviewees 4, 5, & 15). In the case of Kunama, around 4000 people from the Kunama ethnic group were resettled in USA (Tronvoll and Mekonnen, 2014:160).

The impacts of migration on particular ethnic community are immense. Among others, culture, language and religion that constitute the identity of particular ethnic community come under threat. This is true with regard to the Saho people in general.

### **5.2.3. Accepting Military Recruitment**

The chronic poverty also made many Saho subject to exploitation as many young Saho desperately accepted military recruitment and other malevolent government projects such as relocation programs. With regard to recruitment, many young Saho conscripted into the army in order to overcome the difficult situation. There is special unit set up exclusively from the Saho but controlled and commanded by commanders from the Tigryna group. This unit is placed in the Ethio-Eritrean border areas from Badda up to Badme area. As a second task, the unit was deployed to spy against the opposition groups' activities and their alleged collaborators from the Saho in the Saho areas (interviewees 1, 2, 3 & 10).

Rural Saho were accused for collaborating with opposition groups based in Ethiopia. Thus, many Saho people have suffered persecution under this unit. According to the narration of Sheikh Omar, "... during Ethiopian colonial period both ELF and EPLF were using our places as a base. At that time we suffered at the hands of Ethiopian regime under accusations of collaboration and harboring opposition movements. Many of our people killed, imprisoned and abducted when they travelled to towns for their personal issues. Today those people, for whom we were victimized, are treating us worse than the Ethiopians. I knew Isayas

Afereweki, the current Eritrean president personally when he was the ELF, latter EPLF fighter acting in our areas at the beginning of 1970s. He seemed devoted and a good fighter unlike today".

#### **5.2.4 The most Vulnerable Group**

Within all the persecuted, women are the most suffering and vulnerable section of the Saho society. As the situation further deteriorated, the responsibility of women also became harder and harder. In a traditional Saho family, women are responsible for in-house activities such as raising children, cooking, collecting firewood and fetching water. With the frequent drought and decline of rainfall, the availability of firewood became inadequate. As well as, especially in high altitude, most water catchment areas dried up and were scarce. This makes the life of women so hard. Women have to travel long distances in search of water and firewood for domestic use. Years ago, they were fetching water not far from their houses as water was available everywhere. But nowadays women wake up early in the morning and travel long distances to fetch water, because of the water scarcity in their vicinity. Women fetch water by carrying gallons on their back and climb up and down mountains. Some lucky families use donkeys or camels (interviewees 15 & 16).

According to the Eritrean government argument, the country is in a no war, no peace state with neighboring Ethiopia. Thus, all males between 18 and 60 have to carry guns and join the national army for indefinite periods. They are allowed to visit their families once in six months if they are lucky. Unfortunately, responsibilities that normally belong to the male members of the family bulked upon female in addition to domestic responsibility. They have to perform physically hard works of men.

It is also worth noting that lack of proper health services and education affects more women sections of society. Malnutrition related to poverty is also among the causes of women's' high morbidity. Backward traditional practices, like circumcision are still in practice in many areas causing detrimental effects upon women when giving birth.

#### **5.3. The Ultimate Violent Reaction**

*'Where there's smoke, there's fire'* English Proverb.

Against all grievances of the regime, today the Saho install an important part of the Eritrean opposition movements. They are: Eritrean National Salvation Front and Harakat al-Islah Al-Islami (Islamic reformist movement), both based in neighboring country, Ethiopia.

With the growing concern of the government intervention on community affairs, disappearance of community notables and other suppressive attitudes of the regime, the

opposition turned out to more to violent reaction. Several violent confrontations have been reported between the regime and Saho civilians. For example, in 2006, when the regime soldiers raided the village known as Qohaito, to take females for military conscription, deadly violence took place between unarmed local Saho people and regime soldiers. Two people died and many were injured of the local Saho. Some regime soldiers were also injured.

In 2008, it was an evident turning point when nearly 12 regime soldiers, who are from Saho, defected from the regime army and harbored themselves in a mountainous area known as *Diot*. With failed attempts to capture them and on the other side, with their growing number day by day, the regime became more concerned. The conflict escalated more which resulted in casualties on both sides.

From June 2009, the Eritrean government opened an intensive operation, deploying huge numbers of the army escorted by helicopters. After long wars, finally, the opposition was crushed. In the operation, the regime used the special unit set up all from Saho at the frontline. As a result, casualties of the regime and opposition side were mostly from the Saho. The survivors from the Saho made their way to Ethiopia and established a movement known as The Saho People's Democratic Movement (SPDM), partly by the support of the Ethiopian government. Today they have become among the most challenging powers to the Eritrean regime on the ground (interviewees 5, 9 & 13).

The regime, after cleared away the armed Saho from the areas, committed a crime against unarmed civilians. The local Saho were accused of collaborating with the defectors. Afterwards, the regime under the motto "to kill the fish, drain the sea", removed all the people in the areas forcibly from their ancestral places. All their livestock were driven away by the regime soldiers and houses were burned as the regime didn't want them to return. Those who were captured in the war and their suspected supporters were also executed at the gathering of local people in a place known as *Robrobya* in order to spread terror among the people (interviewees 5 & 13).

I interviewed two eye witnesses for the incident. One is, Mr. Ogbay from the Tigigna and graduate of University of Asmara. He worked as a teacher in Eritrea before he left the country. He is now pursuing his education in Addis Ababa University. The second one is Mr. Musa from the Saho, he was a student in Eritrea before he left for Ethiopia and was at the place of the incidents as well as a victim. I am here thankful to both Mr. Ogbay and Musa for showing kind interest to share their testimony.

According to Mr. Ogbay "... It was summer break and I was in my village near the town of Segeneiti. It was unusual day that, helicopters were flying over the sky. Few days

later, we witnessed influx of people; men, women and children that swamped our surroundings. Most of them had fatigue and hunger. The locals provided them with food and for some, shelter. The regime people immediately warned the locals not to give them helping hand. It also spread the news, through its agents, as they are terrorist supporters and don't deserve any mercy and help. No shelter or foods were provided for them either from government or NGOs. Most of them ended up their journey near our surroundings stayed for nearly two months in exposed areas to sun and cold. Everyday they were burying their dead bodies. Soon they were forced to begging and it was everyday's scene. The Catholic Church in Segeneiti was in support of them at night undercover fearing of any government measures against them. Most of them were finally moved to main towns Segeneiti, Senafe, Adi-Keih, Asmara and Gash-Barka. What I saw was a clear humiliation and dehumanization against the Saho people".

The government made efforts lest not spread the news to the whole country and beyond that to foreign medias. It is very common to see most of these today begging in the main cities of Eritrea, mainly in Asmara near the big mosque, in huge number. People in Eritrea are less aware of the massacre committed against the Saho people in the mentioned areas and are also not aware what pushed them to the streets for begging. The regime in Eritrea is very secretive and vigilant to contain about the incident within the areas where the crime was committed (interviewees 13 & 14).

## 6. Case Study

The following are exemplary case studies of personal stories obtained through my interviews. It adequately reveals how the individual person in particular and the extended family at large was affected by the post independence regime of Eritrea.

Case study: 1

Ibrahim (interviewee no. 11) is in his early fifties. He was a well-known Saho legend since 1970s and was much respected person by his powerful patriotic songs. He joined the ELF in 1975. After, the ELF was wiped out in 1981, led to exile to continue the rest of his life. After a long stay in exile 1997 he returned back home. According to him, once in 2001, he was invited for an interview in Eritrean radio broadcasting in the Saho program. In the interview he made compliment to the role of ELF and Saho personalities in the Eritrean independence struggle. Many EPLF/PFDJ were not happy of such an interview.

Through time the unhappy fellows from the government linked a minor misunderstanding that took place between me and a member of PFDJ cultural affairs, to the interview I had. He was accused and threatened. In June 2002, two men from security apparatus took him from the street in Asmara. According to Ibrahim, he had no any relation with the accusations made against him. He spent nearly two and half years in jail. His family members knew about his whereabouts very late. Finally he was released in 2005.

Ibrahim is a father of five children and had a wife. After his release, unfortunately, he didn't meet his wife. She already had separated from him due to the hard life resulted by his arrest. She left for Arab countries searching for job. He endured responsibility of five children alone. He had no job or support from abroad. Finally, with all five children he was forced into exile to Sudan and to Ethiopia. After six years stay in the camp, as I came to know during the interview, he and his children will be leaving shortly under a UNHCR resettlement program to Canada. He is not happy though leaving to Canada at his late age. He is fed up with life in exile. However he accepted it for a good future of his children.

Ibrahim and his two brothers were all freedom fighters in ELF since the sixties and one of them martyred. He hoped to live in his country peacefully in freedom. He cries simply while recounting his personal stories and the current situation of the Saho people in general saying, "This is not what we fought for". My recording was interrupted several times. Indeed it was one of the heartbreaking moments seeing him crying. It shows how deeply he has been touched. He was tortured, abused physically, mentally and verbally in the regime prison. Overall, missing his wife, the suffering of his children and himself, all was painful for him.

## Case study: 2

Ahmadin (interviewee no. 12) is in his late twenties. I met him in Adigrat town on his military uniform as a member in SPDM. Ahmadin has a painful story as well. Midnight, December 24, 1995 in Senafe town, the government soldiers raided their home and his father was taken away. Ahmadin's mother in the attempt to defend her husband from the regime's soldiers was also shot dead at the place. At that time Ahmadin was nine years old. He was at the incident place watching his father yelling for help and his mother stretched down on the ground bleeding, calling her husband's name and seeking rescue for her life, at the same time. This left unendurable trauma on Ahmadin throughout his life, according to him.

Ahmadin's father was a former ELF freedom fighter and among the Saho vocals in Senafe town. At the same night two others were also vanished, all of them were former ELF freedom fighters as well.

The family had nine members including father and mother. They had very happy life. After the incident night, with no mother no father, the good life was changed all at once. No one was able to stay at home where they were brought up with joyful life but ended in the tragic killing of mother and the disappearance of father. Every one of the family tried to stay at home but unable to do so even for a night. All the four boys and three sisters abandoned the home one by one. Finally, no one is left in the house at all, according to Ahmadin.

Ahmadin recounts that the next morning of the incident some of the relatives went to the police station to talk with police about the incident. The police office replied "we have confirmed from the bullets we found at the place, the crime was committed by the opposition groups who sneaked into the town at night". Ahmadin asks "how come bullets of opposition differ from the governments' bullet?"

Ahmadin has been deeply traumatized by the incident. He quit education at elementary level as a result and finally found himself in Ethiopia as a refugee. He has chosen to stand on the line of Saho opposition group, ignoring the resettlement chance he got to a third country. Ahmadin can't explain his suffering by words; his only words are crying and breathing out deeply. He seeks justice for his parents and all the oppressed Saho people, as he said.

## **Chapter Six: Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter attempts to present a summary of the thesis and make some concluding remarks highlighting on the findings and incidents of the structural violence on the Saho people. At the end it presents recommendation on overcoming the structural violence on the Saho people in particular and all Eritrean cultural minority groups in general.

### **1. Summary**

The main objective of the research is to discover the incidents of structural violence against the Saho people of Eritrea under the PFDJ government of Eritrea. The research stressed on the government policies, especially language and land and how the policies undermined the democratic rights and interests of the Saho people. At the same time, it discusses the subsequent suppressive practices of the government in response to the Saho people's opposition to the undesirable policies. Finally, it attempts to answer how the government policies and actions influenced the livelihood of the Saho people in general.

By structural violence we mean violence perpetrated by social institutions or structures. They commit violence against its members when they forcibly stunt their due rights or needs, and thereby undermine their prosperity either because of religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual preference. Structural violence has usually effects of human suffering and mal-development in socio-economic and political structures which detrimentally affects a particularly targeted group.

The Saho are an indigenous cultural minority group. The word Saho refers to both the people and the language. The majority of the Saho people live within the territory of Eritrea, and they are a conservative as well as a tribal society. The Eritrean Saho overwhelmingly are Moslems, with few Christians. Islam has an important role in the daily life of the Saho people. Pastoralism is their main subsistence pattern.

Historically, the Saho people and territory have been targeted by Abyssinian rulers for centuries. As a result of the protracted raids from Abyssinian rulers they were progressively disempowered politically and economically as well as decimated and depopulated. The Saho and their territory were also the least benefited from the developments brought by the Italian colonizers in Eritrea.

In the pre Italian colonial period, the Saho people and territory became targets of Abyssinian rulers' raids for centuries. These historic suppressive attitudes of Abyssinian

rulers, and later Ethiopian emperors, against the Saho people, made them strong encounters of the Ethiopian domination in Eritrea which appeared into scene in the 1940s. They were strong advocates of independence and many of them emerged among the founding leaders of the country's national armed resistance movements. Especially their distinctive role and support of the ELF made them a target of persecution and physical elimination by the Ethiopian colonial regime. The Saho (and Saho personalities), though a small minority, have played an important role in the Eritrean struggle for independence.

However, the Saho people today are a systematically marginalized and impoverished minority group compared to their neighbouring Tigrigna ethnic group in terms of access to economy, education, public services and other opportunities. This is to some extent due to the Italian and British colonial rule which favoured the city dwelling Tigrigna in administration and other sectors and the subsequent discriminatory policies of the Ethiopian emperor which widened the development gap through building on the western colonial heritage to further deprive the Saho people from employment, education and other opportunities.

The two main liberation movements; ELF and EPLF were believed to have ethno-religious propensity. They periodically exploited ethno-religious tensions in order to support their respective clientele and win them to their cause. This in fact has mushroomed into the minds of the contemporary generation to create a divided society who sympathizes with each front on ethno-religious bases, rather than objective political differences. The saddest thing is that this has been reflected clearly in the post independence EPLF government policies. The regime's core decision makers are exclusively from the majority Tigrigna group.

The situation of the Saho people exacerbated more under the post-independence Eritrean government. It is revealed mainly on the unfavourable government policies and lack of protective legislation as a cultural minority that made them vulnerable group. Their important historic role is neglected as well.

## **2. Findings**

The findings of the research are mainly drawn from the fieldwork which was conducted in Ethiopia between June and July 2014. Informants were selected from the Saho refugees in Ethiopia. Face-to-face and group focused in-depth interviewing technique was employed largely. Totally, sixteen qualitative interviews were conducted. The research was meant to get a first hand impressions and information from the Saho people in general. Although limited, some previous written documents about the Saho people were also referred. The researcher's insider status to the population studied and his experiences was

among the remarkable features that contributed to the enrichment and facilitation of the research. Although numerical data was important to the study, inability to find them adequately was among the challenges.

The research findings are largely qualitative anecdotal evidence in type and chiefly compiled from the understandings and narrations of the Saho people. The findings of the research indicate that almost all of the Saho informants share similar feelings and understandings of the government treatment of the Saho people. Because of the marginalization and government negligence, frustrations are commonly observed among all Saho informants. The informants', mainly Saho, attitude towards the government's language and land policy, was in general negative.

Moreover, the findings indicate that the Saho see themselves as subordinated and poorly represented in decision making processes in matters that affect their very interest and livelihood. As a result, most of them entirely dissociate themselves from the government. The suffering resulted from the government's maltreatment of the Saho are displayed in the narrations of informants. Especially, the personal stories in the research perfectly epitomise the suffering of the Saho people in general.

### **3. Incidents of structural violence**

There are evident incidents of structural violence, according to the findings. Government policies were initially met with some opposition from the Saho elites. However, (1) the government's oppressive response which involved threatening, arbitrary arrest and involuntary disappearance of community leaders (2) the imposition of the MTE against the free will and consent of the Saho people (3) lack of consultation and participation of the Saho elites and (4) preventing people from meeting their needs is altogether a denial of their due democratic rights and is a gross violation of the Saho people rights.

The general opinions of the informants give the picture that the MTE was against the Saho people's interest and as ineffective. It is perceived as a tool of marginalization of the Saho and other ethnic groups, to realize the superiority of Tigrigna language over other Eritrean languages including the Arabic language. Many propose that the Saho language be taught as a single subject, insisting on the Arabic or Tigrigna language as a medium of education in elementary schools. In general the students', parents' and the community's' attitude to MTE were negative.

The land policy has also similar cases of undermining rights of the Saho people. With new government land policy, the Saho were deprived from the rights of using their own

lands. Moreover, land has been utilized by the government for political ends which had serious consequences of suppression and marginalization of the Saho people. In case of settlement land allocation, for example, most of the land was allocated discriminately to those are affiliated more to the regime.

In 2009 Eritrean government relocated the Saho people to the western lowlands. However, the program was unfair and unreasonable. It has more political motives. Ultimately, it has serious consequences on the people. Several families and villages were removed and disintegrated by the program forcibly. Any forcible displacement from their ancestral birth place denotes a gross human rights violation.

Negligence of the pastoral Saho in the government development programs is an indication of discrimination and mistreatment of the Saho people. Due to deteriorating climate change, the pastoral Saho were hit badly. Cycles of drought, the rangeland and water resources are diminished and livestock that are people's main assets were also affected badly. Added to this, lack of the would-be attention and support to the Saho from the government exposed them to further risk situations, notably migration, aid dependency and so on.

In connection to the government polices, suppression and intimidation of the Saho people's opposition were common. Targeting community vocals, infringement on religious and community affairs were among serious violations against the Saho community.

Moreover, there are insignificant government development activities in the Saho region. People in remote areas are extremely suffering as a result. Infrastructure, health and education provisions are still poor. Higher illiteracy, morbidity and unemployment rate is commonly seen among the Saho. This shows a clear inequality between the two cultural groups of the highlands'; the Saho and their neighboring Tigrigna.

Extreme poverty and unequal survival chances are the main outcomes. As a result, the Saho people found themselves in a hard position to cope with difficult situation. Several families were forced to migrate to towns, cross the border, family disintegration, many were lured by the government to military and others enticed to accept government programs, welfare dependency, discrimination, humiliations, and the undermining of their wellbeing and self-esteem. Destruction of cultural values and norms were also the main outcomes.

#### **4. Recommendations**

Taking into consideration all the historic wrongs and injustice perpetrated on the Saho people, moral and humanitarian obligations are vested on the Eritrean government towards the Saho cultural minority. The Eritrean government has moreover a legal obligations based on international law to protect and treat the Saho people in a just way. An ideal justice for the Saho people primarily begins through redressing historic wrongs, which put the Saho people in a systematic disadvantaged position. Therefore, an act of affirmative action which signifies support and external protection required.

Eritrea is a nation of diverse culture, religion and history. Accordingly, the needs and interests of every cultural group are divers. Therefore justice in this sense require an accommodation of their differential needs and interests not through identical treatment of cases, rather, according to Kymlicka (1995) through equal treatment for equal cases and unequal treatment for unequal cases.

Every Eritrean cultural group have participated and contributed in the Eritrean struggle for independence. The Eritrean government therefore has to keep the promises given during the armed struggle that emphasized the principles of non-discrimination and equality of every Eritrean nationalities based on race, religion, gender and ethnicity.

In every Eritrean family, there are rich family norms. The vulnerable members of a family, namely children, aged or sick people are much supported and protected in consideration to their weak position in a family. By understanding the existing situations of historically harmed cultural minorities, such a benign norm needs to be applied by government and society at large as well.

There is a wise Tigrigna saying "*lam bi hade gona aytsebihin'*" which roughly means a cow which is unwell from one side of its body, cannot be healthy at all or cannot survive longer. Therefore, it is true that a nation divided between privileged and frustrated groups can no longer attain or live in peace and prosperity. Already, there are three armed ethnic based oppositions groups in Eritrea, the Saho, Kunama and Afar. Their opposition is not without causes. Making a just, inclusive and egalitarian nation for every cultural group is vital for the prosperity and structural positive peace of Eritrea.

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**Table 1. List of the interviewees during the fieldwork in Ethiopia**

No.	Name	Occupation	Sex	Ethnic group	Date	Place
1	Mr. Saad (Rn)	SPDM Chairman	M	Saho	16-17/06/2014	Addis Ababa
2	Mr. Yousuf (Rn)	SPDM media & information head	M	Saho	16-17/06/2014	Addis Ababa
3	Mr. Saeed (Rn)	SPDM vice chairman	M	Saho	25/06/2014	Addigrat
4	Saleha (Psd)	Ex-liberation fighter	F	Saho	18/06/2014	Addis Ababa
5	Mr. Siraj (Rn)	SPDM member	M	Saho	27/06/2014	Adigrat
6	Nasser (Psd)	Teacher/refugee	M	Saho	28/06/2014	Adigrat
7	Zahra (Psd)	teacher	F	Saho	17/06/2014	Addis Ababa
8	Saeed (Psd)	Student/SPDM member	M	Saho	26/06/2014	Adigrat
9	Ahmad (Psd)	Knowledgeable	M	Saho	10/06/2014	Addis Ababa
10	SheikhOmar (Psd)	Knowledgeable elder	M	Saho	7/07/2014	Mekele
11	Ibrahim (Rn)	Victim	M	Saho	1-2/07/2014	Adigrat
12	Ahmadin (Rn)	Victim	M	Saho	3-4/07/2014	Adigrat
13	Mosa (Rn)	Eye witness	M	Saho	24/06/2014	Adigrat
14	Ogbay (Rn)	Eye witness	M	Tigrigna	12-13/07/2014	Addis Ababa
15	Roblee (Psd)	Housewife	F	Saho	21-22/06/2014	Shimelba
16	Hawa (Psd)	Housewife	F	Saho	21-22/06/2014	Shimelba

\*Psd=Pseudonym

\*Rn=Real name

**Table 2. List of the interviewee in Norway**

No.	Pseudonym	Occupation	Sex	Ethnic group	Date	Place
17	Shifa (Rn)	Teacher	M	Saho	10/01/2015	Troms

**NB.** In addition to the list, there are some Saho and Tigrigna informants I have contacted them for minor and/or complementary information.

## Some of the photos from the field



Saho Opposition member in Adigrat town- main office



Saho Opposition member in Adigrat town- main office



Sheikh Omar an elder from Saho (interviewee no. 10).

On the photo shown are his sick son, researcher and his second son.

Photo: in Mekele City



Mr. Ibrahim Idris (interviewee no. 11) and a victim mentioned in Case study: 1. Photo: in Adigrat



Mr. Ahmedin Yousuf a victim mentioned in case study: 2  
Photo: in Adigrat.

**NB.** The photos here are used as per consent obtained from the above informants.

