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Revisiting the socio-economic implications of local-level political competition in Harena, Northern Ethiopia

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In Harena, Northern Ethiopia, local-level political competition for the post of metehadaderi (governor) had twofold impacts. On one hand, it played a role in ensuring the right of every person to participate in the political process, usually exercised by supporting one of the village contenders. On the other hand, it was a cause for social and economic conflict within the community. In other words, it brought winners and losers. The process and outcome of political competition was particularly influenced by wealth or economic capacity and it led to social disruption and an open clash as well among the members of the village. The finding of this study demonstrates that a political contestant used to divide the people into 'core supporters' and 'opponents'. Thereby, he tended to work accordingly, after being assumed the village administration. Moreover, the taking-over of political power by a new local governor or metehadaderi and his decision on the access to available resource such as the nature of land distribution and the social interaction could affect the community. By using data largely drawn from Mekelle Tourism bureau, this paper aims to illustrate the nature and process of local-level political competition, legitimacy and its implications for intra-village contacts.

Key words: Conflict, leadership, competition, legitimacy, land tenure.

INTRODUCTION

In Harena, *metehadaderi* was routinely named after a complex political process, in which it affects the intra-village relations and solidarities. In the village, a governor could not administer without supporters. It is generally believed that leaders acquired assistances in large part by doing favors for their supporters, at least at the local level. The political competitor is said to have more supporters basically by pledging to execute political power on their favor. In other words, issues that highly affect the livelihood and social interaction of the community would have to rise during the competitions. In the present study, two political competitors were found in Harena with varying interest and determinations. The first competitor had, inter alia, exerted to retain the chiguraf Goses land tenure system in the village, while the other determined to change it into a resti system. This and other complex and daunting issues, impelled the villagers to be carved up into two conflicting groups. It also aggravates the existing economic and social polarities within the community.

In Harena, a governor obtained reputation, honor and legitimacy by attending church and enthusiastically

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participating in village projects. Helping in the rebuilding of the local church and plowing of the field dedicated to the church's support were needed. In other words, it was by putting the village demands above one's own interest, that is, to mean above one's own interests with regard to other roles which one possesses. In this traditional community, the ecclesiastical office was not only a spiritual center, but it had also socio-political and economic influences on the farming community. The local competitors, therefore, often preferred to get vigorously engaged in the local church activities as tax paying members and as adherents of the patron saint. This is not to say, however, that the church legitimized the village leaders but rather it worked to gain support among the villagers (Abraha 2017b).

It seems indispensable to scrutinize how political competitors assumed the office of headmanship and legitimacy in Harena. On one hand, a contestant made an effort to associate himself with any of the rulers of the village or with any of the *balabat* 'noblemen'[1] of the village. At the same time, he is expected to boost his land possession, often through litigation or through bribing the local land distributers. Indeed, land had substantial socio-economic and political factor. In this respect, *resti* could be important. Increasing one's holdings of *resti*, mainly by winning in the court was not only a rightful means but also enhanced the contestant's reputation, both as a 'good court fighter' and as defender of the poor who had deprived of their rights by others. In brief, land was not only a basic source of wealth, but also bestowed political legitimacy. Winning and losing of land cases in the court was, therefore, a strong entailment for political competitors in the village.[2]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is carried out based on the qualitative research approach. Pertinent published and unpublished materials have been consulted, interpreted and cross-checked. In addition, a good number of informants who involved in the political competitions and residents have been interviewed and the oral information they given have been properly examined. Since the author himself is from the area under investigation, he has used his own knowledge and observation to analyze and disclose the underlying issues of local-level leadership and its impact on the social and economic life of the traditional community of Harena. Finally, the data analysis is carried out through interpretation, description of meanings, views and precipitations of the members of local elders of the study area. The collected data were critically and meticulously analyzed through narrative and document analysis approach.

POLITICAL COMPETITION AND SOCIAL DISRUPTION

As previously indicated, the process of political competition and taking-over of political power in Harena had repercussions on the accumulation of wealth as well as social interaction of the community. In village, leaders were not exclusively designated by district governors or any other local notables. Rather, they required to have supporter at grassroots level.[3] The post was sometimes assumed after a heated debate among the contestants. This was sometimes affected directly or indirectly the life of the community. In this regard, the competitors were tended to use every opportunity to weaken their rivals, in which it includes attacking of the rival properties or by bringing them into land litigation. Obviously, such case was disparaging in the courts which brought a severe impact on the litigants. The loser of land cases would have compelled to compensate the winner for the expense of the court proceedings and it was at the same as to the 'deprivation of one's reputations.' During the court proceedings also known as *mugut*, the winner would have obtained something invaluable beyond securing a new plot of lands. Hence, the winner had enhanced his reputation as *Tomagati* or *Mugutegn*, which implies a splendid court 'fighter'.[4]

Further, political process was routinely provoked the competition over the scare resources. This was partly owing to the active engagement of the contestants in the land litigation. For example, they may back their respective supports both morally and financially. Consequently, it was routinely imperiled the day to day contacts within or outside the village. Bauer, who observed the process of the selection of village governor in Enderta of northern Tigray, pointed out that the competition for office of village headmanship was destructive and it had affected the social and economic life of the community. The move to assume the office by individual competitors had severe repercussions at the village level since every households tended to take one side in the disputes. In addition, the contestant would have to influence the outcome of certain village deliberations in favor of his supporters. He was at least required 'something' from his supporter in return. It is within the context of such cases that political competition became apparent (Abraha, 2012).

Leaders' ability to influence a decision was largely dependent on the resources they could bring to the

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[1]In this study, I have used the term 'noble' and 'big man / woman' interchangeably. In Harena, the issue of leadership and legitimacy was more complex since competitors often demand support both from the people as well as from individuals who claimed a noble birth. The nobles even tend to assign their own loyal nominee as village headman.
[2]*Ibid.*

[3]Interview: Alem Habtu and Mahari Teklay, 23 November 2017, Mekelle.
[4]Interview: Foten Baraki, Le'ul Gebre-Silasie, 12 November 2017, Harena, Tigray.

competition. These resources were partly dependent on the leaders own performance as household heads, that is to say, on how much money they could make for use. It was also partly dependent on the amount of resource that their supporters willing to put into the competition. In fact, supporter's willing to deliver their resources was based on two important factors (Abraha, 2012). First, it depended on their own concern and assessment of the competitors' possibility of winning. Second, it was based on the constant intimidation as well as their concern of its inevitable effects to the community at large.   The supporters' assessment of the possibility of a competitor's winning on the issue was largely based his resources and his past accomplishments. To this end, leaders stage performances, as Bauer has precisely pointed out, in the form of 'confrontations' designed to demonstrate to their supporters and assessment of the accounts of their resources.[5]

It can be roughly categorized a competitor's support into two basics groups: core supporters and following. The core supporters are morally committed to the contestant and are attached to him through complex relationships. Followers by contrast are transactionally attached to the contestant and are connected to him by a single strand relationship. The researcher presumes that there are enough empirical examples of 'morally' committed, single stranded followers and apparently only 'transactionally' committed multiplex attached supporters available to us to make it profitable to separate the type of commitment from the type of relationship. The researcher will, therefore, consider 'core supporter' to mean supporters tied to the contestant through multiple ties and 'following' refers to supporters connected to the contestant through a single link. The type of commitment and support will be regarded as problematic and complex in the village.[6]

The ability of a contestant or a leader to settle supporters around him, making them into neighbors, was paramount in creating effective core supporters. Seen retrospectively, an informant recount, the failure of a governor to buildup areas to do this was a reason in the decay of old wards. Persons wishing to signify their support occasionally come and act as neighbors even though they live too far away to be considered neighbors.[7] At feast, for example, they would have to invite contestant or *metehadaderi* to express their determination and support. Then, everyone can see who and how many were attended in the feast. It can be said that *gorobabti* which in turn, refers to neighbors, often support different political contestants. In other words, if

one is going to support one's neighbor, then his/her neighbor will urge to alter his attachment and decides to support someone else. This was perhaps due to the existence of conflicting interest over the meager resources of the village among the residents. Then it was relatively difficult to establish amicable relations among the neighbors.[8]

It was mostly through *mahber*, a religious self-help institution, which village neighbors used to address their quarrels thereby eased cross-village interactions. Writers have proved that *mahber* has long played and continue to play a substantial role in the course of conflict preservation, management, and solidarity in the traditional community of northern Ethiopia (Abraha 2017b). This is perhaps reflected in the members' preference to set up *mahber* with their neighbors. It has long been known that members of the same family bound to different *mahbers* and offsprings mostly replace their parents thereby ensuring the continuity of the already laid down social affiliation. It offers social identity for individuals who could not otherwise have a relationship with one another particularly by virtue of kinship. The first possible reason for non-kinship tendency of *mahber* is to deal with the relationships among the farming community on the limited resources within or outside the village. [9]

In the village, the nature and process of local-level political competition was more complex and ambiguous than what is already known. As noted earlier, the ways in which the competitors gain support were through manipulations. From the individual actor's point of view, there was little encouragement for them to demonstrate support for other than personal reasons, beyond being constrained from showing support their neighbors' enemies. As one might expect, under these circumstances, support was revealed in subtle and often negative ways. Individuals, for example, could show support for governors within their own ward simply by visiting them.[10] On the other hand, they could reveal their antagonism by refusing to visit their home or by excluding them in their social affairs. Confrontation may take the form of inviting supporters to one's house so that one's opponent may hear who comes or the form of giving a feast so that one's opponent may hear who came to act as 'neighbors'.

Interestingly, local competitors also claimed power either through genealogical ties to the ruling class or through individual performance in the court. The latter refers to the ability of a competitor to attract followers. For example, a person who knows how to fight in the court, a point at which all contestants were vulnerable, could be among the first claimant of the village leadership. Those who exposed to modern schooling are said to have

[5]For details on leaders ability to gain support, see Bauer D, 'Land, Leadership and Legitimacy among the Inderta Tigray of Ethiopia', (PhD Dissertation, University of Rochester, 1973), pp. 267-69.
[6]Interview, Abay Hagos, Teki'an Lilay, and Mehrey Teku'e, 12 September 2017, Mekelle.
[7]*Ibid*.

[8]Interview, Mehrey Teku'e, Abadi Enqay, and Gebre-Silassie, 23 September 2017, Harena.
[9]*Ibid*.
[10]*Ibid*.

claimed the office of headmanship. In the dispute over the village leadership, others appeared to claim through hereditary right. In this regard, two opposing positions were articulated in the village.[11] The first, taken mainly by the older people and prominent members of the clergy, supported the hereditary claimant in the local-level political contest in the village. They claimed that Harena, as part of Enderta district, it was 'county of landlords' and advocated a continuation of hereditary rights. The second position, taken mainly by younger people, opined that efficiency should be the principal factor, and that it was the 'learned' that will administer the village communities. Further, the articulation of these opposing positions was itself a source of concern and discussion within the village (John, 1997).

It was at this particular period of time that the people were perplexed by several incongruous issues. This took place in the last years of Emperor Haile Silassie or in the early period of the Military Government. Few of the village residents was said to have supported the old system of administration, while others overtly criticized it. In the past, it was the district governor who appointed the village headman. Through time, however, their authority to name a headman had dropped.[12] This was partly to deal with the popular outrage on the preceding leaders. There was allegation that the district governors solely appointed their own nominees heedlessly of the majority's interest. It was at this juncture that the governor of Enderta *Awraja*, who was responsible for the appointment Harena's headman, was challenged by the people to name his own nominee to the village. For a while, the position of the first *metehadaderi* of the village was not filled. Then the people came to put forward individuals for the position at the meeting in the village yard. They largely propose those who would have to work in their favor. Accordingly, eight nominees were picked up by the villagers for the post. Both the individuals and the nominees tried to the best of their ability to gain support by investing all necessary resources.[13]

The then headman, who claimed by birth, was faced strong opposition from other competitor who came from the neighboring district, Agame. Informants claimed that economic status and attachment to the aristocrats were not the sole criteria to win the competition. Obviously, *dejach* Hagos, the preceding governor of Haren was chosen due to his attachment to one of the district high official. In other words, by genealogically associating himself to the then governor of Tigray, *ras* Seyum, he designated to the post. However, as previously indicated, the villagers openly opposed the nominee. After a prolonged discussion in the village, they agreed to discuss with another lower aristocrat of the district. Then

a group of *shimagletat* (elders), not less than fifteen, went to the district governor to have a new village *metehadader*. After fifteen days, the district governor assigned an individual proposed by the elders. Ironically, the new *metehadaderi* was claimed noble birth.[14]

Some refuted the new headman as the preference of the few individuals. Hence, it brought a serious blow to the social-welfare of the community. Thereby, competitors attacked the resource of their alleged antagonists using their political positions they assumed. For example, when the village *metehadaderi* order by the district governor to collect agricultural tax form the people under his suzerainty, some of the functionaries[15] were failed to accomplish their duties. The new *metehadaderi* compelled to call and send the *aqeyti* (armed retainers) to expedite the tax collection on time. Paradoxically, this was an indication of the failure of the village *metehadaderi*[16] to coordinate and govern the community. In addition, it cost headman as it obliged to pay the aqeyti to pay for their service.[17]

On the other hand, the village *metehadaderi* used his position to make several attacks on people he considered as his opponents. For example, he levying a fine of E$ 1.00 on each household in the upper ward each time he found any of his crops eaten by animals. This was not only a source of quarrels but also brought into question his rivals ability to protect his ward members. Thus the headmen appeared to use his authority to wane his opponents. In fact, the confrontation and disagreements was sometimes used to scale the degree of his opponent's power and ability to win as well as to determine the alleged supporters of each opposing group. It also maintained power balance among the conflicting groups.[18]

Furthermore, political competitors were tried to change the existing land tenure system in favor of their respective supporters. The continued reduction of land plots compelled the community to divide and to take up different ideas on the nature of land distribution in Harena. In this regard, the 'first' settlers were sought to change from the *chiguraf Goses* to *resti* system. While in *chiguraf goses* land distributed based residency, in *resti* it was based on inheritance. Anyhow, the difference on the land tenure system was manipulated by the competitors. In other words, the political competitors promised to change the system in favor of their respective supporters.[19] Informants said that some members of the

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[11]Interview: Kiros Baraki and Lilay Teka, 10 September 2017, Harena.
[12]Interview: Kiros Baraki and Lilay Teka, 10 September 2017, Harena.
[13]*Ibid*.

[14]The overall description is based on the primary observation and interviews that took place on Monday, May 31, 2011, in Harena.
[15]Interview: Hishe Fitsum and Lilay Weres, 6 September 2017, Harena.
[16]Village headman and village manager are two different posts and often assumed by different individual. In Harena the first post was by *Qegnat* Demsu, while the latter hold by *Diacon* Kahsu in the period under discussion.
[17]Abraha, *Land Tenure…*, p. 68. ; Bauer, *Land, Leadership…*, p.255.
[18]The whole analysis is based on the information collected from respondents on 7 September 2017, in Harena.
[19]*Ibid*.

village who left it, in search of off-farming works in Mekelle, tended to support the change of land tenure. The land distributors, also known as Harayo, with the patronage of the village *metehadaderi* commenced to redistribute the land of out-going individuals to new comers. When they returned they fought the case at court. They were supported by one recently arrived political competitor.[20]

A protracted debate on the nature of land tenure was conducted among the farming community of Harena. It was held with the present of the district governor and other court officials. In a debate at the court, the both political competitors had provided moral and financial support to enable their supporters to litigate the matter up to provincial courts. Finally, those who left Harena for work won the case able to return their land. The *metehadaderi* was then order to give back their *resti* land to the claimants. Since Harena was a *chiguraf Goses* village, the order would entail changing the land holding system from a residency based into hereditary one, *resti* system.[21] When the order was brought to the headman, who would be called upon to carry it out, he would have two options. First, he would have to organize with the village manager in an effort to fight the order. Second, he would have to attempt to put it into effect. Finally, he preferred the latter and in the process brought on a challenge which his opponents could not overlook and survive (Abraha, 2017a).

Then, the political competitors were manipulated the land tenure system in order to attract supporters. The now *metehadaderi* of Harena was required the return to *Resti* system, while his rival who deemed to come from neighboring village was called for the continuation of *chigurag goses*. The change had several advantages for those who claimed to be *Deki-abata*, first settlers. In this regard, there was a raising demand for some kind of restriction on new claims for land. Some of the *metehadaderi* supporters will benefit most by the change.

This will not only strengthen his support, but also weakened his rival competitor.[22] Those who would be benefited and those who would be lose by the change, cross-cut the traditional lines of support including ward boundaries. Importantly, some notables in other villages who could trace descent from Harena's founding ancestors might be counted on to support the change, because as *risti* they might be able to claim a share, whereas under *chiguraf gose* system they would have to be resident to claim a share.[23]

Under the *risti* system, those who manage to trace descent through a variety of lines could able to gain a large plot of land. All informants expressed the opinion

that the change to *resti* would bring bad news to the immigrant settlers. As a result, the then *metehaaderi* who was successfully established genealogical ties with the founding fathers of Harena, seemed to have a special privilege, while his rival would became a loser. Henceforth, they recruited followers into their own camps.[24] The village residents were said to have supported or opposed the contestants based on their residency in the village. Harena's genealogical charter favors persons in some descent lines over persons in other descent lines. The founder of Harena is said to have three sons: Asimo, Ze-Mariam and Zera-Yohaness. If Harena became *risti*, all of the lay land belonging to the village would first be divided into three parts corresponding to these three ancestors. In fact, genealogical information was complex as it has social and economic implication. Nonetheless, few of the village residents' descended from Za-Mariam and Zera-Yohanes, the majority are said to have descended from Asimo.[25]

As already mentioned, the village residents divided into groups. For understandable reasons, the support and opposition of the change of the land tenure system was depending on: 1, the amount of land they had already gained under the *chiguraf goses* land tenure system, 2, the branching within the portion of the genealogy through which they trace descent and 3, their estimate of the behavior of persons not living in Harena, but able to trace descent from Harena's founding fathers. In this regard, the anterior residents were favored the change to *resti* system, while many of the immigrant settlers were vehemently opposed.[26] The new incomers particularly from Agame district were remained in Harena for a long period of time. But the change would have a far-reaching impact on their economic privilege in the village. The *resti* rules only favored individuals capable of tracing or associating with any of the 'founding fathers' of the village. Therefore, those who considered as *sidetegna* or immigrants will be deprived their share of land.[27]

The complexity of the genealogies at the lower levels became devastating, partly due to the number of people involved. As well as due to the fact that after the six generation exogamy limits some individuals may be tracing descendent from more than one of the major ancestors. No single individual was, therefore, identified all sections of the genealogy with precision. Due to the presence of individuals living outside Harena who may claim land in a *resti* system, many persons were not firmly committed to one side or the other. According to informants, nonetheless, the incomers are said to have

[20]Abraha, *Land Tenure…*, p. 54.
[21]Interview: Haftu Kiros and Kiflom Baraki, 17 September 2017, Harena.
[22]Interview: Haftu Kiros and Kiflom Baraki, 17 September 2017, Harena.
[23]*Ibid*.

[24]Interview: Haftu Kiros and Kiflom Baraki, 17 September 2017, Harena.
[25]Bauer, *Land, Leadership…*, p. 260.
[26]Interview: *Memhir* Hatu Belay and *Qeshi* Teferi Hagos, 7 September 2017, Harena.
[27]*Ibid*.

supported the retention of *chiguraf gose*,[28] while the anterior resident vehemently opposed it. At this time, therefore, two groups were articulated, in which it was taken by the competitors. The biggest danger to the immigrants were came from the fact that nearly all priests and deacons supported the change, since they would retain the glebe land they already held for their service of the church, and any *risti* land they perceived would represent a gain. It was at this time that the contestant, who came from the Agame district, came to loss supporters (Bauer, 1973).

Thus in order to assume the office, the immigrant contestant had attempted to prevent the change into the *resti* system. This competitor could not count on all of his followers because some of them saw the change as a way to regain the status of the head of an independent household.[29] His core was split, his ward was split and the persons tied to him on a transactional basis were split. Of all those who favored a change to *resti* 'first settler', a total of fifty, twenty were from his own ward. By contrast, all those who publically preferred the change of *chiguraf goses* into *resti* were from his ward. In other words, his ward was strongly split.[30] Fifteen priests and deacons favored the change, and only three opposed it. The other two were come from Agame district with no local genealogical ties and who happen to be dependents of immigrant competitor. In fact, only one of the persons favoring the retention of *chiguraf goses* would have been able to claim a significant amount of *resti* land according informants' estimates. With the exception of few individuals, immigrant supporters on this issue were either immigrant Agames without genealogical ties in Harena (Abraha, 2012).

Conclusion

The nature of village leadership in Tigary has always retained distinct features thereby it has given various interpretations. In Harena, a small village northeast of Mekelle, political competitors commonly utilized their reputation, financial resources and kinship ties to win over their rivals that led to social and economic polarities among the village residents. In the local level political election, the competitors compelled to have supporters.
To gain support among the village residents, the political competitors for the post of the village *metehadaderi* was used the system of land tenure as instrument to weaken or strengthen their position. While the then *metehadaderi* fought establish a *resti* system, his stood against him.

The allegedly new comers required to apply *chiguraf goses* land tenure system. It was a debate to change from lineage-based land tenure system into a land-share land tenure system. In *resti*, land distributed through lineage ties. While in *chiguraf goses* it was equally distributed to all members, regardless of their genealogical ties to the founding fathers. In short, the local level political competition was not merely affected the social interactions, but also influenced the economic or resource distribution in the village.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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[28]Interview: *Memhir* Hatu Belay and *Qeshi* Teferi Hagos, 7 September 2017, Harena.
[29]Interview: *Memhir* Hatu Belay and *Qeshi* Teferi Hagos, 7 September 2017, Harena.
[30]Interview: *Memhir* Hatu Belay and *Qeshi* Teferi Hagos, 7 September 2017, Harena.