"Stop Dragging Me! I Am Not Your Object!": Exploring the Lived Experiences of Blind People, the Role of Disabled People's Organizations, and the Politics of the State in Ethiopia

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Abstract

In 2009, the government of Ethiopia introduced one of the most contentious Civil Society Proclamation (CSP-No 621/2009). The law strategically excluded civil society organizations (CSOs) from five specific politically sensitive areas among which the promotion of the rights of disabled people is the one. The government's intention was to keep away those influential international CSOs and local CSOs with more than 10 percent of their budget from foreign funding agencies, from engaging in the politics of the state. However, the unintended consequence victimized local disabled people's organizations (DPOs). As a result, DPOs' representation, as well as the participation of disabled people, seems to be at risk.

Based on 26 semi-structured interviews and five-months ethnographic research, conducted among the blind community in three urban areas and one semi-rural village in Ethiopia, this thesis develops two main arguments. First, the participation and positionality (exclusion) of disabled people, particularly those who live in the urban areas, is not only implicitly (re)produced and shaped by the state and non-state actors but also consumed by the government to restore and maintain the hegemony of the state. Second, there is a significant gap between the socially-constructed and mainstream (theoretical) understanding of disability which guides the intervention, and the lived experiences (empirical) of disability.

By analyzing these two main arguments, I conclude that the politics of the state and the fact that the socially constructed understanding of disability guides the disability intervention are the determinant factors of the marginalization of disabled people in Ethiopia.

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አመሰግናለሁ!!

To

Tiruwork Gebresilassie (my mom and hero), who bears the unbearable multiple agonies of life due to her son's disability.

Moges Kifle (my late elder brother), who came to this world, had lived for 18 years and left unnoticed due to his disability.

All those who are from all corners of the world and have had passed through a similar situation.

Acronyms

AAU - Addis Ababa University

CBM - Christian Blind Mission

CSA - Charities and Societies Agency

CSOs - Civil Society Organizations

CSP - Civil Society Proclamation

DPOs - Disabled People's Organizations

ENAB - Ethiopian National Association of the Blind

ENAD - Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf

EPRDF - Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

MoLSA - Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs

NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations

NPAPD - National Plan of Action of Persons with Disabilities

PwDs - Persons with Disabilities

UNCRPD - United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

WB – World Bank

WHO – World Health Organization

Contents

Chapter One - Introduction

The government of Ethiopia adopted a Civil Society Proclamation (CSP) in 2009, which targeted foreign-funded influential rights-based civil society organizations (CSOs) to stay away from the country's political space. However, the unintended consequence of this law victimized disabled people's organizations (DPOs) and they face corporate role and identity confusion and this, in turn, affects the participation of disabled people. I conducted this ethnographic study specifically among the blind community in Ethiopia and this thesis presents their lived experience, in-group/out-group social interactions, and relationships with their organization - the Ethiopian National Association of the Blind (ENAB) - the most senior DPOs in the country, regarding this law and the overall politics of the state. By exploring the social life of blind people, I attempt to understand what social processes shape the mainstream perception of disability and the way the larger society views and accommodates disabled people. Furthermore, I want to shed light upon the unnoticed social life of blind people in Ethiopia and uncovers the veracities behind the scene of the contentious politics of the state and non-state actors.

This thesis has two main arguments. First, the government (through its Proclamation and narratives) indirectly shapes the social participation and positionality of disabled people, particularly those who live in the urban areas; and their social positionality (exclusion) is not only implicitly (re)produced or regulated by the government but also consumed to maintain and restore its hegemony when it is needed. Second, there is a significant gap between the socially constructed (theoretical) understanding of disability, which guides the intervention, and the lived experiences (empirical) of disability. By highlighting these two arguments, the study concludes the politics of the state and the fact that the socially constructed or the mainstream understanding of disability guides

the disability intervention are the determinant factors of the marginalization of disabled people in Ethiopia.

1.1 Research contribution and positionality

According to Kumar (2016), disabled people are often labeled as "others" and marginalized from people who are considered as non-disabled. Social anthropologists have a particular interest in studying the culture and social life of others' and how different societies perceive "otherness" (Reid-Cunningham, 2009). Gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, nationality, and religion are some of the identity groups which have been given more attention than (dis)ability by the academia and even though, I argue, it is no less a stereotype than the above-mentioned identity otherness. Since the (dis)ability "otherness" is studied by few anthropologists so far, there is a scarcity of anthropological studies in this regard (Kumar, 2016). This paucity in research, coupled with my personal experience[1] and prior exposure to the disability movement in Ethiopia motivated me to conduct this ethnographic study.

By highlighting concepts of marginalization, structure, and agency, this ethnographic research delivers a twofold contribution. First, it sheds light on anthropological understanding of disability marginalization and the politics of the state and non-state actors based one the contemporary political and social context of Ethiopia. Secondly, it offers a different insight than the usual on the notion of disability and disability marginalization which reflects the lived experiences of disabled people that could be useful to practitioners.

[1] My late elder brother was a disabled person with cerebral palsy. His disability type was and still is mysterious for the whole family in which nobody wants to talk about it. And hence we were unable to provide him the necessary care and support. I have seven siblings, yet as I am a boy and younger child of the family, I had to spend considerable time with him so as to help my mother engage in her daily activities. Though he passed away, 30 years ago, at the age of 18 when I was only 12, I still remember the pain and marginalization my mother and he had experienced. Later on, this experience coupled with my educational background has led me to join the disability movement.

The following three sections introduce and describe the place where most of my ethnography is conducted, my research questions and the methodology I applied to address them and reach my conclusion. Overall, this paper is divided into four chapters. The first chapter discusses the related literature and conceptual frameworks of the topic of the study. My ethnography work is presented in chapters two and three in which I discuss the urban and rural social life of blind people respectively. The last chapter presents the perceptions of actors of DPOs (particularly of ENAB) regarding the 2009 CSP and politics of the Ethiopian state. In the final section, I conclude my thesis by summarizing my findings and highlighting my arguments.

1.2 "Mobility" - a place of freedom

Siddist Kilo is one of the neighborhoods in the capital city of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, where the head office of the ENAB is located. *Siddist Kilo* and its bordering neighborhood - *Shiro Meda* - are not only known for being densely inhabited by blind people, but also for a very diverse population of different ethnic groups coming from all corners of the country. Many of the blind people living in these areas earn their living engaging in a wide range of activities from begging on the streets to esteemed professions. For me, this geographical settlement of blind people represents their position in the social ladder of the mainstream society that is situated between "us" and the "others". They live together within the larger society, and yet disconnected by a hazy line of segregation.

The large compound of ENAB contains not only one of the oldest buildings in the city that serves as its office, but also a wide area of safe and enjoyable space for the free mobility of blind people. They just call it "Mobility"[2] since it offers them the highest mobility freedom than any places in the city. There are also some sections within the compound for the provision of services such as cafeteria and shower with reasonable prices subsidized by the ENAB. The huge gate of Mobility is

[2] They use the English word "Mobility" as it is without translating it into their local language.

always open from 7 am to 8 pm for members and they enjoy in-door games such as dominos and cards, and access to a free internet connection. Usually from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm, the compound becomes full of members (maybe up to 200 individuals in my estimation). The demographic, social and economic status of members' that get together at Mobility daily is so diverse that one can meet blind people having various professional and educational backgrounds.

In my observation and in most, if not all, conversations, I had with members in the Mobility, their strong belongingness and attachment with the communal life in this compound are seen clearly. I was able to see how much they enjoy being in this "special" place. One of my informants whom I met at Mobility (a 25 years-old blind student who studies law at Addis Ababa University) told me about her experience.

> Mobility is a very special place for me; it is like my home and you know how comfortable one could be being at home. I have an attachment with blind people who regularly come here. We are like a family. I do not have any blood relatives in Addis Ababa to be with or get any kind of support from. When I am at Mobility, I just feel like I have everything, and I am valued. (Interview, February 4, 2019)

Low, an American anthropologist whose study focuses on anthropology of space and place, explains how geographical spaces are transformed into socially constructed spaces through "social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting" that "convey symbolic meaning" (Low, 2009, p.24). Drawing from Low's argument, I would say Mobility is not only a geographical space, but also a place in which social actions and collective memories are embedded in. Here, blind people are comfortable to do everything they choose to do; they are free to run, play, walk, rest, study, read, eat, and perform different rituals either individually or collectively. Some of them even have their small business such as selling ornaments, shoes, white canes, Braille paper, and other

assistive devices, even though it is not encouraged to trade because ENAB has a store in the compound that sells such assistive devices with the lowest price.

Mobility has also served as a social glue for blind people who are marginalized from mainstream society to come together and stand as a society. The warm vibe in the Mobility reaches its peak from 5 pm to 6 pm when a lot of members arrive and make different small sub-groups and do their own personal activities. Some play in-door games, some discuss common issues, some hug each other and chat while walking around, some call names of their friends out loud to identify their location or the name of the item which they want to trade, some youngsters play 'catch me if you can' and run everywhere, some search for a relatively quiet area at the corner of the office buildings and read their Braille, some couples and lovers share their emotional support in the garden and talk passionately to each other. These lively and very diverse scenes which happen every day can attest to what Edward, an activist who writes a lot about civil society and social transformation, argues: as social creatures, people join social groups to reduce their stress and problems or to find more meaning and fulfillment in life or simply to have some fun (2009).

1.3 Research Question

The main research question of this thesis is - how do the state politics determines and (re)produces the agency and positionality of disabled people in Ethiopia? As a way of addressing this inquiry, the study asks some specific questions such as how do the social structures & practices of non-state actors inform the marginalization of disabled people? How do disabled people identify themselves and their role regarding the narratives, practices of the state (and also CSOs/DPOs) and specifically the 2009 CSP? How do they perceive and react to contemporary politics and the role of their representative DPOs? How do they conceptualize the "disability rights", and how do they relate this concept to their daily lives?

1.4 Methodology

This thesis is highly dependent on my ethnography during which I applied semi-structured interviews, and participatory and non-participatory observations to collect my data. I traveled to Ethiopia two times and spent almost five months in two different spells. My first fieldwork was from mid of June to the mid of September 2018 and the second one from early January to late February 2019. Most of my fieldwork in the first trip was concentrated on mapping the overall networks of the disability rights movement in the country, contacting and establishing an affiliation with target CSOs/DPOs, identifying respondents and key informant individuals and conducting semi-structured interviews.

All organizational and individual research participants were selected using a purposive sampling method based on their roles, responsibilities, and experience in the disability area. This is because purposive sampling helps to access relevant sources that could provide an input that would otherwise be unlikely to be obtained from other sources (Patton, 2002). In this regard, the key informants selected for this study, both organizational and individuals, demonstrate valuable knowledge, experience and have a direct or indirect connection with the topic under the study. For example, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA), is the focal sector governmental body established by the state to ensure the inclusion of disability in the country and the Charities and Societies Agency (CSA) is the state authority to govern all CSOs in the country.

Before I started my fieldwork and during, I was in the field, I attempted to understand the mainstream perception toward disability (blindness) by watching recently produced movies from YouTube, stage performances presented by disabled people for the general public in annual celebrations of disability day, public speech of renowned blind people and higher government officials. Besides, I reviewed the National Plan of Action of Persons with Disabilities (2012 to 2021)

prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of Ethiopia (MoLSA). I have also watched documentaries that show the history and contribution of ENAB in the course of time.

I did 26 semi-structured formal interviews (15 of them during the first and the remaining 11 in my second spell)[3] to learn about their disability perception, interpretation of the 2009 CSP, the social positionality of disabled people and their in-group and out-group interaction. I got in touch with all the research participants, except the six sighted individuals, through the connection I have established with the ENAB head office. I prepared three different categories of tailored questions based on respondents' status and experiences[4]. These individual interviews enable me to see the big picture and get contextual meanings. During all my interviews, I was careful to consider sensitive issues while asking questions about their personal experiences. I also maintained a professional distance and refrained from showing my opinion not to influence them. The average interview duration was nearly one hour and, with the consent of the participants, was tape-recorded. I also took side-notes to capture deep emotions during the interviews, which supplemented the tape-recorded data. All the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Amharic[5] and translated into English.

The first spell of my fieldwork was helpful not only because I was able to collect basic insights and preliminary data from those semi-structured interviews, but also it helped me to understand on which specific disability types and DPO I should focus on and conduct a more in-depth and sensible ethnography in my second spell. This approach helped me to refrain from a tendency to generalize CSOs/DPOs in which, as Fisher (1997) observes, the assumption that CSOs are "doing good" might lead to a wrong generalization about them. He criticizes such generalized

3 This includes 2 government-employed professionals, 4 leaders, and professionals of DPOs/CSOs, 14 blind and 6 sighted people

4 For leaders and employee of the government, CSO/DPOs, for blind people and for sighted people

5 Amharic is the working language of the Federal Government and it is one of the most widely spoken languages in Ethiopia.

representation of CSOs since it might not give us their realistic assessment that recognizes both their problems and potentials. To avoid such a flaw, he recommends an ethnographic approach and critically studying individual performance. Therefore, based on the data I already obtained from my first fieldwork, I decided to focus on the blind community and ENAB considering some convincing factors, such as the extent of representation (greater number of members), seniority in terms of establishment, and a greater number of branch offices (ENAB, 2015; CSA 2010).

In the second spell of my fieldwork, I immersed myself in the social life of blind people to experience their social life. I did this participatory and non-participatory observations in two small towns, Adama and Debre Markos, but mainly engaged with the blind community in the capital city, Addis Ababa. While I was in Debre Markos, I was able to travel to Amanuel, a semi-rural village 25 km from Debre Markos to attend the monthly meeting of blind villagers and have conversations with various age and gender groups who participated in the meeting. I also visited two households in the village in which blind members are engaged in small scale income generating activities.

In Addis Ababa, I concentrated on *Shiro Meda* and *Siddist Kilo,* since as I mentioned earlier, many blind people live and work in these two neighborhoods. Particularly, in the "Mobility", I could observe and participate in several informal gatherings of blind people and I was able to build good relationships with my key informants and some non-disabled residents who live around. I had a regular coffee chat session with my key informants in the small-sized traditional coffee houses, which are built adjacent to the fence of ENAB's compound. I had lunchtime informal conversations with leaders and professionals of ENAB (both blind and sighted staffs) in a small cafeteria near to their office. Luckily, I also had opportunities to be invited to the homes of two of my blind key informants (who have sighted wives) for the Ethiopian Christmas and Epiphany holidays. I also spent some days with two blind high school students who support themselves by doing petty trades on the main streets of *Siddist Kilo*.

When my fieldwork came to end, I thought about all these get-togethers, daily communications, talking and having shared their thoughts and emotions, and traditional meals from a big common plate (which Ethiopians believe it creates long-lasting friendship). And, I realized the extent to which I, myself, have developed a sense of belongingness to this community.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

2.1 States and CSOs

2.1.1 The roles and relationship of states and CSOs

The basic logic of the concept of civil society and the roles of CSOs are associated with the two contending ideologies, the liberal and Marxist (Lewis, 2002). Tocqueville, a liberal scholar, argued the role of civil society smooths the democratization process and facilitates the creation of democratic citizens (Tocqueville, 1835). On the other hand, Gramsci, a Marxist scholar, asserts the importance of the roles of civil societies to strengthen or challenge governments (Gramsci, 1971). Unlike their contradicting ideologies, both perspectives share similar stance regarding the contribution of civil societies' in guiding governments toward democracy.

However, as Edward (2009) argues since CSOs in Africa are financially dependent on foreign funding agencies, they seem to be ineffective in influencing the leadership of the states. Their financial dependence on foreign funding agencies has also other implications from the perspective of those states, such as Ethiopia, which considers CSOs agents of external intervention on internal affairs. The 2009 CSP appears to be the state's instrument to avoid such external interventions perceived by the government. According to Tadele (2015), after the adoption of the 2009 CSP, the advocacy and influencing role of CSOs has significantly reduced since more than 85 percent of CSOs were forced to be registered in the non-advocate ("Ethiopian Residence") category [6].

The attitude of states toward CSOs could be influenced by various factors, but according to Edwards (2009) and Fisher (1997), it is primarily informed by two views of CSOs – the radical and the neo-liberal. The radical's interpretation characterizes CSOs as challengers of political order through illegitimate discourses, while the neo-liberal view perceives CSOs as social service providers

6 This topic (categorization of CSOs by the 2009 CSP) will be discussed in detail in next sections.

without making any direct profit in the form of money. Hence, based on these interpretations, their relationship could be either confrontational or collaboration depending on how both entities organize themselves and their strategic approach to public discourses (Fisher 1997; Nkosi 2012).

Fisher has also mentioned a crucial point that helps to understand what lies behind the relationship between international development agencies and CSOs. He explains that international development agencies and organizations support CSOs based on their "neoliberal economics" and "liberal democracy values". The proponents of these values use CSOs to guide the social dynamics and create a market-oriented society. And this, in turn, would facilitate the democratization process which is the requirements for the successful implementation of the neoliberal economic policies (Fisher, 1997). Fisher's argument makes sense in the Ethiopian case since, at the time of the introduction of the 2009 CSP, the government criticized and "rejected neoliberal approaches to development" (Jay, 2019, p.2).

On the other hand, Pedraza-Farina (2013) notes that states utilize their "authorized power" both to facilitate the performance of CSOs as well as threaten their existence. According to Lewis (2013), if there is any overlap in discursive activities, the relationship between governments and CSOs would be cooperation while challenging official discourses might result in a confrontational relationship. Lewis has also mentioned that the contemporary authoritarian states have become expert at restricting those CSOs which challenge the legitimate discourse and hence are perceived as threats of political stability. In such situations, CSOs might be allowed to function, but their range of discursive activities is constrained through the medium of legal restrictions. Njoku (2016) remarks that most of the time the failure of CSOs in developing countries has been traced to ideological differences, a radicalization of CSOs or the domination of authoritarian regimes.

The points asserted by the above -mentioned scholars (Pedraza-Farina, Lewis, and Njoku) attested what has been happening between the government of Ethiopia and CSOs especially after

the 2005 national election. The government was highly agitated by the role of CSOs especially during the 2005 national election in which the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), had almost lost the vote for the first time[7]. The government criticized the "intervention" of CSOs in general and targeted some influential ones (Teshome-Bahiru, 2009)[8]. Four years later, the 2009 CSP was introduced that marginalized many CSOs from the political sphere through restricting participation in five specific politically sensitive issues[9]. Besides, this Proclamation allows the government to establish a government sector office called the Ethiopian Charities and Societies Agency that controls the financial transaction and activities of CSOs (CSP, 2009, Art 14:5).

Based on the Code of Conduct for NGOs in Ethiopia (1998), CSOs are "formal and informal groups and associations that are not of the public and business sectors" (p.3). This document has also considered non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as part of CSOs and define them as "voluntary, not-for-profit, non-self-serving, non-governmental, non-partisan and independent organization or association involved in the promotion of social justice and development." (p.3). Tadele (2015) observes that both local and international NGOs in Ethiopia play a significant role to ensure transparent and accountable governance. Tadele's observation is confirmed by Teshome-Bahiru (2009) that appreciate what they achieve in providing basic social needs in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Besides the provision of basic need, their political

7 The specific role of CSOs is mentioned in the following section.

8 According to Teshome-Bahiru (2009), Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA) and Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRC) are the two most influential CSOs targeted by the government.

9 The five restricted issues are - The advancement of capacity building on the basis of the country's long-term development directions; the advancement of human and democratic rights; the promotion of equality of nations, nationalities and peoples and that of gender and religion; **the promotion of the rights of the disabled** and children's rights; the promotion of conflict resolution or reconciliation; the promotion of the efficiency of the justice and law enforcement services.

involvement had been encouraging in the late 1990s (Clark, 2000). However, their role in the 2005 election caused a serious contention (Teshome-Bahiru, 2009).

2.1.2 The 2005 election and the role of CSOs

The May 2005 national election is remembered by many Ethiopians (including myself) for three main incidences associated with it. First, it was the most successful and competitive multi-party election that the country has ever experienced. Second, the ruling party (EPRDF) almost lost the vote for the first time. And third, the bloody violence following the announcement of the election result. Many, including the government itself, believe that the role of CSOs (by raising the awareness of the general people) took the big stake for this unexpected result that had shocked the government. Teshome-Bahiru (2009) cited the Carter Center and mentions that 630,000 voters got civic education and "civil society organizations contributed greatly to the electoral process by organizing public forums, conducting voter education training, and deploying domestic observers" (p. 1602).

Despite the positive developments of the pre-election period and the election day, the post-election period hosted widespread violence in Addis Ababa, since people were suspicious of the election results that announced the victory of the ruling party. Leaders of the opposition parties, journalists, and activists were arrested as the government labeled them as facilitators of the violence (Amnesty, 2006) and CSOs actors were perceived as the supporter of opposition parties (Teshome-Bahiru, 2009). Moreover, CSOs became targeted by the government as threatening entities because of their role in the election process which was financed by foreign funding agencies (Terefe, 2014).

In February 2009 (just a year before the then-upcoming 2010 national election), the government came up with the 2009 CSP that confirmed its skeptical attitude towards CSOs (Seifu, 2011). The Proclamation restricts CSOs whose foreign funding is more than 10% of their total budget from those mentioned five sort activities (see footnote on page 12) including the "promotion

of the rights of the disabled" in which this paper focuses. The law was considered as the result of the government's resentment of the perceived role of CSOs in the country's political agenda particularly during the 2005 national election (Edwards, 2009).

The government disregard the contribution of CSOs in any advocacy issues such as human right, good governance and democracy in which only citizens and local mass-based organizations are allowed to engage (Hailegebriel, 2010). A few months after the introduction of the 2009 CSP, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who was in power at the time, was asked why for the government wanted to introduce the 2009 CSP which excluded foreign CSOs from political issues.

> We thought that was essential for our own health. But for development activities we have of course sought assistance from abroad and we are now asking foreign NGOs to continue to participate in economic, social and environmental development. We are not restricting foreign NGOs in these areas. (PM Meles Zenawi, 2009)[10]

However, the 2009 CSP faced strong criticism from different local and international communities claiming it would have a devastating impact on the promotion and protection of the rights of the marginalized population (Yeshanew, 2012). Dr. Beyene Petros, a renowned opposition political party leader, observed that the Proclamation gives the government extensive power over CSOs and it is "consciously designed to undermine and restrict the role of civil society" (VOA, 2009, p.10). Subsequently, a significant number of local and international NGOs were forced to close their offices due to the financial and operational constraints, resulting from this Proclamation (Amnesty, 2012). By doing so, as it is been noted by Hailegebriel (2010), Girma (2018) and Brechenmacher (2017), the government was able to exclude significant number of CSOs from

[10] https://www.ft.com/content/dc04c378-5f62-11de-93d1-00144feabdc0

advocacy activities claiming to advocate for the rights of citizens is not the job of outsiders, but it is the responsibility of only the government and Ethiopian citizens.

The adoption of the 2009 CSP affected the disabled people's organizations (DPOs) too, as they are primarily advocators of their deprived members and rely on foreign funding. DPOs have been appeared to be caught up in the political trap of the government that was set to target influential CSOs.

2.2 Disability and inclusion/exclusion

2.2.1 The theoretical and historical account of disability

The concept of disability evolves from victimization and marginalization to inclusion and recognition of rights through different stages such as the charity, medical, social and the contemporary rights-based approach (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Rimmerman, 2013). Since there is no universally agreed single definition of disability, this paper tends to understand the concept from two perspectives. The first one is the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) as it is widely used and accepted international legal document; and the second one is a view many anthropologists tend to understand disability. The UNCRPD defines disability as the "interaction between a person with impairment and attitudinal, social, and environmental barriers" (UNCRPD, 2006, Art. 2). On the other hand, by referring some scholars, Reid-Cunningham (2009) writes anthropologists' tendency to understand disability as a "socially construct: It depends very little on the degree of functional loss or impairment; rather it is defined by social standards for normative bodies, behaviours, and role fulfillment" (p.107).

Even though the history of disability shows that disabled people lived on the margin of society, they were more excluded in the industrial society than in the pre-industrial society because of the assumption that they could not fit into the mechanized production system (Rimmerman, 2013). Scholars such as Oliver (1990) and Finkelstein (1980) confirm Rimmerman's reflection that

disability takes a specific form of personal tragedy and this perception achieved ideological hegemony in industrial capitalism (Barnes and Mercer, 2010).

According to Finkelstein, disability has passed three historical stages in which the first stage is the pre-industrial agrarian society. Disabled people were at the bottom of the social ladder in the agrarian society but less excluded from economic participation compared to their participation in the subsequent stage, the industrial capitalism. The level of disability exclusion increased because of the mechanization of the means of production and a perception that considered them as unable to fit the workforce system. Gradually, this social assumption facilitates the proliferation of disability centers and schools, caregiver professionals and organizations. The third stage is the contemporary struggle to re-integrate them back into the mainstream society. The last three decades have witnessed the rise of internationalization of the issues of disability. There has been significant growth of anti-discrimination legislation in many countries and the growing focus on disability by international organizations such as the United Nations. However, the disability re-integration actions in developing countries are highly dependent on the financial support of international funding agencies (Barnes & Mercer, 2010).

The disability intervention in Ethiopia is not different from what Barnes and Mercer argue regarding its dependence on the aid of foreign organizations.

2.2.2 The disability discourse in Ethiopia

The issue of disability in Ethiopia was constitutionally recognized, for the first time, in the 1995 (Constitution, Art. 41:5)[11]. This recognition has not only helped the disability movement to progress but also creates a conducive environment for the establishment of several disability-based

11 Constitution, art. 41:5 - The State shall, within available means, allocate resources to provide rehabilitation and assistance to the **physically and mentally disabled**, the aged, and to children who are left without parents or guardian.

CSOs and DPOs (Yeshanew, 2012). However, Wakene (2011) underlines the disability movement has achieved less compared to those African countries having a similar socio-economic status to Ethiopia. For example, considering MoLSA as a source, SIDA (2014) mentions 95% of disabled people have no access to basic services such as education and health. This underachievement, according to Wakene, could be related to various factors such as lack of skilled professionals in the disability movement, resource constraints and limited knowledge about the concept of disability itself. Besides, he also believes the 2009 CSP has unsettled the movement at its infant stage.

Even though there is no reliable national data about the prevalence of disabled people in the country, based on 2007 (most recent) population and housing census report, the number of disabled people is 805,492 which is only 1% of the total population at the time (CSA, 2010). However, SIDA (2014) mentioned the 2011 WHO and WB report shows the number of disabled people in Ethiopia is 15 million which comprises 17.6% of the total population. This huge numerical disparity shows either the prevalence of disability is overly magnified by international agencies or belittled by state agencies for a number of reasons including lack of resource and skilled professionals in the field, particularly during the population census. In my view, this disparity indicates how disabled people are unfairly recognized and represented in mainstream society.

Bearing my observation in the field into consideration, I am more convinced that despite their significant number, disabled people appeared to be out of the sight of the general public. What I observed, in the first week of my fieldwork (first spell), could support what I am trying to argue here. While I was standing at a taxi station waiting for those blue and white minibus taxis which take me to the head office of ENAB, I accidentally met one of my high school friends. It had been such a long time since we met last. We gave big hugs to each other, remembered our old memories and laughed at everything including our physical changes. He asked me where I was going, and I told him not only the place but also why I was going there. Even though he knows the neighborhood -

Siddist Kilo - where the head office of ENAB is found, he did not have any idea about the existence of ENAB or where exactly ENAB is in the neighborhood he "knows very well". He smiled and said "I see … I know this neighborhood very well, but I had no idea blind people have their own association there. I was always wondering why I see many blind people around there [*Siddist Kilo*]. Now it gives me sense".

I tried to make fun from the coincidence that his personal inquiry was answered unexpectedly as a by-product of my research process. Yet his opinion offered me an important insight in which up until that moment, I did not think of the prevalence of blind people around *Siddist Kilo,* (and the next neighborhood, *Shiro Meda*) is more when compared to other neighborhoods of Addis Ababa particularly of the city center (in my observation). Later, I found out, with the help of my key informants, that my friend is right. Not only of ENAB but also the presence of Addis Ababa University (AAU), the country's most senior university and hosts many blind students, in this neighborhood (very near to ENAB), are the main attracting factor for blind people to be comfortable being around. Since they have established their social territory within these densely populated neighborhoods of the city (*Siddist Kilo* and *Shiro Meda)*, they are hardly publicly visible in other parts of the city as if there are no or very few blind people.

2.2.3 Disability as a construct and social inclusion/exclusion

Ingstand & White (1995), senior anthropologists who have done extensive research on disability, notes that the legal and social identities of disabled people, is constructed by formal institutions, specialized services, and programs often supported by governments or CSOs. However, Taylor (2004), a disabled writer, argues that disability doesn't always appear as it has been constructed. Based on her own experience, she writes that disabled people are "viewed with sympathy as victims of "bad luck" who will simply have to accept disadvantage as their lot in life, not as an identity group that is systematically discriminated against" (Taylor, 2004, p.7). The finding

of this study has also confirmed a significant gap between the socially constructed meaning of disability and the lived experiences of disability in Ethiopia. In the next chapters, I will show this gap with a shred of empirical evidences that were collected from my fieldwork. But for the moment, I just would like to argue that this gap is one of the main sources of disability exclusion since the socially construct meaning of disability guides the disability intervention. The way disability is constructed hardly accommodates the experience of disabled people, even though they have their own way of life beyond their constructed identities by the mainstream society.

On the other hand, Wendell (1996) explains about how issues of the contemporary society classified into "public" and "private" and disability is one of those human issues which have been categorized under the private realm. This categorization, according to Wendell, is revealed in the practice where the experiences and interests of disabled people are missed from the mainstream way of life. While I was in the field, I came across to some incidents that confirm Wendell's explanation in which the structural and institutional boundaries that exclude blind people and push them to the private space. These boundaries which block disabled people not to enter into the public space, particularly in the urban areas, reminded me what Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist and philosopher, argues in his book called 'Modernity and Ambivalence'. Bauman explains how such boundaries are (re)produced in the modern society and creates "otherness" which leads to "exclusionary practices" (1991). In the next chapter, I will present a specific empirical evidence, related to the bank service for blind people in Ethiopia, which fits this theory.

Regarding the disability exclusion, Rimmerman (2013) argues that traditional prejudice of disability needs to be considered to understand disability exclusion and it persists. Goffman (1963), in his account of stigma, explains that excluded people strive to deconstruct their socially constructed identities in order be included in the mainstream society. However, Rimmerman (2013) has offered a wider perspective than Goffman's singular view on the reaction of stigmatized people.

He forwards three different modes of reactions that help them to cope with the exclusionary attitudes and practices. However, neither of them (Goffman and Rimmerman) provide the context in which their theory works. I am saying this because the I believe the reaction of people who are excluded is dependent on a number of external factors such as urban-rural dichotomy.

Among the three modes of reactions that Rimmerman offers, the first one is sticking to their own group in which they can maintain their sense of self-esteem. The second one is suppressing their perceived "poor" sides and amplifying the "good" ones. Third, they develop a negative attitude towards those who stigmatize them (Rimmerman, 2013). During my fieldwork with the marginalized blind community, I encountered similar coping behaviors mentioned by Goffman and Rimmerman except for the third possibility of developing 'negative attitude' towards the others who stigmatize them. Based on my observation, the blind people especially those who live in the urban areas tend to stick to their group not only to keep their 'sense of self-esteem' but mainly to reduce their insecurity and vulnerability.

The mainstream society in Ethiopia, tend to perceive disabled people through their socially constructed identity (theoretical) which, I argue, intensifies the social boundary between non-disabled and disabled people and leads to the marginalization of disabled people. The lived experiences of blind people, I observed in my fieldwork, tell us a different story which is rarely if ever told. Instead of the mere perception of disability based on a quantified data in which might ignore their state of personhood, the following chapter, based on my ethnographic observation, shows their social realities.

Chapter Three - When Politics Consumes the Positionality of Disabled People

3.1 Has a new day arrive for blind people?

After being away for almost a year, my longest period living abroad, I traveled back to my country Ethiopia in June 2018 to conduct the first phase of my fieldwork during my summer break. I felt a bit of an outsider and was surprised to experience some minor reverse-culture shock in the first few days. This was not only because I had returned home after a while, but also since there were numerous unusual social events and vibes due to the ongoing political reform in the country. Following the unexpected resignation of the Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018, with a justification "to end years of unrest and political upheavals", the ruling party appointed a new Prime Minister in April 2018. Since then, the country has been through a massive political change, and according to Ahmed Soliman, an expert in East African politics, "these changes are unprecedented" (Soliman, 2018, p.1)[12].

I phoned to Sultan, a 36-years-old man with partial blindness, who is the director of ENAB to make an appointment and discuss on my plan to conduct my research sticking with the ENAB. We knew each other while I was involving (to some extent) in the disability rights movement four years ago. He has been leading the Association since 2012 and he was a teacher in blind boarding school before joining ENAB as a director. Our appointment was at the head office of ENAB, Mobility, a place of freedom in which many blind people from different parts of the country come to meet and enjoy each other's company.

Throughout my fieldwork, being in Mobility was one of my enjoyable experiences. Observing the various and lively social interactions performed by blind people, made me feel I was in the right place to conduct my ethnography. What makes an anthropology student who is

12 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/08/abiy-ahmed-upending-ethiopian-politics

conducting his fieldwork happier than being in such a place that looks like a big social laboratory room and be able to observe how people interact? Not only what is observed exactly in the Mobility but also the usual social incidence in the surrounding district within *Siddist Kilo* in which the social interactions among blind people themselves and with sighted residents was fascinating for me. There were only finger-counting days that I did not show up to this place during my fieldwork.

"How do you see the current flood of changes in Ethiopia? I hope you were able to follow up the news about Ethiopia while you were in Budapest!" This was Sultan's first question, in a smiling face, after we greeted each other. His question was also the one that I was thinking to ask him. I mean I wanted to know how the ongoing political change is perceived by the leaders of ENAB and its blind community.

"Yes, I do… but you know when you are physically far from home you are always feeling like you miss something important. What do these "flood of changes" bring for ENAB and its members?" I tried to keep the flow and jollity of our conversation by using his own expression while I was presenting my question. He smiled and showed me the chair to take my seat before he answered me.

"The man [the new Prime Minister] is such a great person! I am surprised he knows the situation of blind people very well. Have you heard his public speech in the USA? I still cannot believe he mentioned our cause!!" Sultan laughed lightly. He was so happy and appeared to be convinced that better days have arrived finally. Not only Sultan but also many Ethiopians have become happy with the leadership of the current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed though he was newly appointed, and the country is still in so many social and political problems. Indeed, there are also people who criticize the massive appreciation he has been receiving claiming it is too early to evaluate his leadership.

What the new Prime Minister (PM) did right after he was appointed was launching a campaign called "One Dollar Per Day"[13], a call for the Ethiopian diaspora community to "take their part in the nation-building process". Since the majority of the Ethiopian diaspora community was not happy with the government (particularly in the last three years before he came to power), many diasporas were trying to show their disappointment by avoiding using bank services to send money to their families back home. Their action significantly affected the country's economy which is dependent on remittance and this, in turn, exacerbate the political instability and forced the former PM to resign. Towett writes that the economy of the country was "in a dire state of foreign exchange crises for last few years" and the "situation promoted Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to plea to the Ethiopian diaspora to salvage the country by sending hard currencies back home" (Towett, 2019, p.1)[14]

The speech that Sultan referred to me was one of the PM's public speeches that he made in the USA with Muslim Ethiopian community as one of his reconciliation programs with the disappointed diaspora community through this campaign. At the end of his speech, the PM mentioned the cause of blind people in Ethiopia as follows (I translated his closing remark word-for-word).

> … I've begged you to help me by donating one dollar per day [the audience cheered out to show support]...The one dollar that I've begged you... (moment of silent) … among the blind people in Ethiopia… (moment of silent) … until now we are able to educate only four percent of them…(moment of silent)... Don't help me but educate these helpless blind people. Thank you! [the audience cheered out and applauded to show support] (PM Abiy Ahmed, July 27, 2018)[15]

13 https://youtu.be/KVHNtzERE9I
14 https://weetracker.com/2019/04/01/remittance-earning-ethiopia/
15 https://youtu.be/nR0tZreEljg

In his easy, the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1971) advances his theory of ideology in which he discusses the repressive state apparatus (RSA) and ideological state apparatuses (ISA). According to Althusser, both the RSA and ISA are tools to use to maintain the hegemony of the ruling class[16]. Their only difference is the way they function to deliver its objectives; RSA uses coercive power while ISA utilizes ideology. ISA includes schools, media, churches, politics and the likes in which most of them are considered as part of civil society. My reason to describe Althusser's ideological theory here is that I want to conceptualize how PM's consumed the positionality of the blind people for political gain and promote the government's burning agenda (shortage of foreign exchange) and hence attempt to restore the hegemony of the state by seeking remittance from millions of Ethiopians living abroad.

On the other hand, the PM's speech reveals how blind people in particular and disabled people, in general, are portrayed by the state and the mainstream society as "helpless". Did not the government know disabled people (and their association by implication) are "helpless" and need to be supported when the 2009 CSP was adopted? Did not the government know when DPOs like ENAB suffered financially and became unable to administer its boarding school because of the 2009 CSP? Where was the government when DPOs were trapped by the 2009 CSP and became weak and incapable to support their "helpless" and marginalized members? And what makes now the PM delivers a message in a public speech unexpectedly about blind people's deprivation? These questions, which happened during my field research came to be the most important to understand the politics of the state with regard to the topic of this study.

Sultan was impressed and happy not only because the PM mentioned the issue of blind people but also with his statistical description of the blind people participation in education (the PM

16 Althusser talks about the dominance of "ruling class", but I use his theory and substitute the "state" itself in the place of the "ruling class". This is because I believe his theory can fit and accommodate the "state" since states use their "authorized power" to maintain their privileged position.

admitted the government is "able to educate only four percent" of blind people). Sultan was convinced by the speech of the PM and his verbal and body language announce that better times are on the way for blind people. I wish that is the case. However, what I understand from the speech of the PM is how the mainstream society determines the value and positionality of disabled people (by asserting as they are "helpless") and their determined value and positionality is not only consumed by the politics of the state but also (re)produced implicitly through such exclusionary discourses. The socially constructed understanding of disability (as "helpless") narrated by the political and social elites guides the disability inclusion intervention even though it deviates from the reality of the lived experiences of disabled people in Ethiopia.

Nine years after the introduction of the 2009 CSP, The PM made a public speech on a different issue but regardless of the agenda, he promoted the comping by using positionality of blind people (exclusion from education) and "begged" the diaspora community to help the "helpless" blind people by sending money to the Diaspora Trust Fund Advisory Council which is founded by himself (DTF, 2018)[17]? Is it because finally, the government understands how severely they are excluded? Or is it because the pressure from the disability movement gets stronger? My findings do not show either of these two as the reasons.

3.2 The "Helpless" portrayal of blind people

There are number of annual events organized and presented by the collaboration of DPOs and concerned government sector offices in which disabled people participate and show their potential (ability) to the general public. The main objective of such events is to show that they can do what non-disabled people do and hence to disprove the mainstream assumption of disability, the

[17] https://onedollarforethiopia.org/pm-abiy-ahmed-formed-ethiopian-diaspora-trust-fund-advisory-council/

social construct that associates bodily impairment with functional inability. The struggle of disabled people to show their ability (and hence their value) to join the mainstream society starts at this point. The question is; should they do what non-disabled people do to prove they are valuable (ability)? My key informant, Biniyam who is blind, and a musician does not think so. He is a leader of ENAB's Music band known as *Wegagan*[18]. He sings and can play guitar, drum, and piano. He leads the *Wegagan* music band (all its members are blind) in many different public shows for the last 15 years. He told me that he only wants people to think of his talent without relating it to his blindness either in a positive or negative way:

> I don't want people to appreciate or criticize my skill considering my blindness as it has nothing to do with my skill. Most of the time when I perform, people came to me and say, 'We admire you so much because it must be difficult to play the instrument since you are blind'. I may be rude, but I can't stop myself asking them back 'Then why don't you play it if it is not difficult for a sighted person?'. I don't think impairment is the real reason that makes the difference between being "able' and 'unable' to do something. I think what matters most is the level of determination and commitment; which means it depends on the personality of individuals. What makes me even sadder is that those disability 'activists' and organizations who are obsessed in searching for any sort of ability in us [disable people] and then take it [their ability] as evidence to convince others [non-disabled] that disabled people are capable of doing what non-disabled people can do. (Interview with Biniyam, February 4, 2019)

Most of the awareness programs of DPOs are concentrated on building the image of disabled people as they can do what non-disabled people do. When they get the opportunity to prove this for the general public, they show their disabled members' ability to do what is assumed to be done only by non-disabled people. This might be linked with the cultural orientation of the

[18] The meaning is "Sunrise" in Amharic language.

society to normality where ableism and physical appearance are the standard criteria for doing or achieving what people aspire to accomplish. This collective thinking is most of the time reinforced by DPOs themselves, media, and the government, either implicitly or explicitly. This would be like drawing the picture of disability on the canvas of the mainstream society which hardly represents the real images of disabled people. This gives people, both non-disabled and disabled people themselves, different understanding disability and therefore it would solidify the theoretical disability perception instead of creating awareness to the empirical meaning of disability based on the lived experiences of disability.

Barnes and Mercer argue that the experiences of disabled people to "assimilate" into the mainstream society are "oppressive". It is not assimilation but recognition of differences that can emancipate people from any form of domination. If the disability inclusion applies to ensure inclusion through assimilation, it might not be as much success as it is expected to be (2010). Their argument is confirmed by the reflection of Biniyam that this approach (assimilation) makes them busy engaging in deconstructing their social construct identity. This is similar to what Lila Abu-Lughod, an American anthropologist, argues that "homogeneity" as one of the "most problematic connotation of culture" in her essay, Writing Against Culture (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p.154). What I draw from my observation, the reflection of my informants and the theoretical explanation of these scholars is that the intervention of disability in Ethiopia tends to be striving more to ensure similarity rather than equality. It ignores the essence of human variation and pushing disabled people to "assimilate" into the mainstream society. This approach, in turn, makes people fail to consider the interest of disabled people to be identified as a valued person regardless of their (dis)ability.

The portrayal of blind people, particularly in the urban area, seems to be ironical that many sighted people (including my sighted research participants) think blind people are "helpless", highly dependent on sighted people (sub-human). On the other hand, there is a general belief that they

have higher memory skill and are more critical than a regular person (super-human). This perception is also reflected by the local movies; for example, in the movies entitled "*Timechi Endehu*" (2018)[19] and "*Sene Selasa*" (2017)[20], the two leading actors are blind men, and both are portrayed as intellectually smart but physically "helpless". In both ways, they are not portrayed as an ordinary human being or regular persons; rather, their social construct identity dominates their actual one and the difference is visible.

3.3 "Stop dragging me! I am not your object!"

Let us come back to *Shiro Meda* and *Siddist Kilo* neighborhoods. Here, the reaction of sighted residents, while watching blind people do anything (such as walking alone using their white cane) differ from other neighborhoods of Addis Ababa. I did not see blind people who live in these neighborhoods called or referred by any disability-related nicknames that magnify their impairment. Their personhood is recognized like any other residents and this social recognition and the friendly attitude of the community offers them comfort. The visibility of the social boundary between sighted and blind people, which is clearly seen in other parts of the city, feds up here within the social bond of the community influenced by the prevalence of blind people. It is a typical incidence to see sighted people look indifferent and show no sympathy if they watch a blind walk alone on the streets. Unlike in *Shiro Meda* and *Siddist Kilo*, in other neighborhoods of the city, people's reaction to a similar scene (blind people walking alone) is not similar. They are more caring and show some kind of gesture that they want to treat with sympathy or admiration.

As far as my understanding, the mainstream society has associated disability (blindness) with a biological misfortune. But the way many blind people in these neighborhoods understand their blindness is different from the assumption of the mainstream society. Most of my blind participants

[19] https://youtu.be/UdEHC92ElxA
[20] https://youtu.be/SoYi3aLbr2I

reflect their perception that their blindness is not as imagined by the mainstream society. In most cases, they tend to see their impairment and the notion of disability separately and they hardly consider their impairment as a source of every little negative happening in their lives. Because of this discordant perception, many blind people are not comfortable with the sympathetic thinking of sighted people and this feeling, in turn, creates confusion on sighted people.

The story of Teddy, a 29 years-old man who lives in Adama shows the perceived disparity between sighted and blind people. Teddy told me that he has decided not to give a hand to help any disabled people in general and blind ones in particular. This is because once upon a time he was insulted by a blind person whom Teddy attempted to help him cross a street with heavy traffic. Though the incident happened some years ago, Teddy remembers what the blind man said to him, word-for-word, when he was trying to guide him by holding his arm - "Stop dragging me! I am not your object!" (Interview with Teddy on February 1, 2019).

Teddy wanted to help the blind man, but unfortunately, his help was not considered as a "help" by the blind man due to their perception disparity. Teddy's experience shows that every "help" of the provider might not be considered as "help" by the receiver. It depends on the situations and the (dis)parity of their perception of the two actors. What happened between Teddy and that blind man was a perception disparity which is the reflection of two different realms - the theoretical and the empirical understanding of disability. For me, Teddy's action to help the blind man symbolizes the disability intervention in Ethiopia which is guided based on the socially constructed understanding of disability. Teddy had two choices; to understand the blind's man perception and change his action or stick to his perception and avoid such interaction with disabled people. He decided to stop helping blind people anymore (ends up with marginalization). Similarly, the disability intervention has two main option; to understand the lived experiences of disabled people (empirical) and change the intervention or stick to the mainstream understanding of disability

(theoretical) and attempt to create inclusive society in which practically it seems to create a fertile ground for the marginalization of disabled people in Ethiopia.

My sighted research participants whom I had both formal interviews and informal conversations have also reflected such kind of mainstream perception that considers blind people are highly vulnerable and need to be under the control of others (sighted people). I think the mainstream thought toward blindness mixed two different issues - lack of sight with lack of physical functions. The mainstream assumption is that blind people are also functionally impaired (and "helpless") because of their visual impairments. Are they? The empirical findings of this study do not confirm this mainstream assumption.

3.4 The "Blind Electrician"

Abebe is a 24-years-old blind who came to Addis Ababa five years ago from Amhara region searching for a better life. He is a high school student and lives alone in his single room house in *Shiro Meda*. He supports himself by doing different income generating activities mainly using his technical skills of woodwork, metal work, and electricity. But his main reason to move to Addis Ababa was to achieve his career aspiration to be a good electrician which is assumed to be one of the least commonly preferred professions by blind people. People in his neighborhood know his skill in electricity and call him when they need his professional help. I was fascinated by his unique experience and couldn't wait to talk to him when I heard about his story from Sultan for the first time. I met him and talk for more than two hours in his temporarily plastic workshop on the street. I found him very friendly, and I enjoyed our conversation. He told me the reaction of sighted people towards his unusual skill in a humorous way.

> Many people know me here in *Shiro Meda*. But sometimes, people who do not know me in person, call on my cell phone to fix their electrical problem in their house. And when I reach to their house and tell them I am the one whom they called; they

> get so confused and remain speechless. I understand them; some are willing to accept and allow me to fix the problem even though they are so surprised and in a big doubt of my skill. However, many people consider me as I am joking. However, when they realize I am not joking they say "No way … how come a blind man can be an electrician? I cannot let you face such a risk. Thank you for coming". (Interview with Abebe, January 16, 2019)

Three years ago, his story was aired in one of the FM[21] radio stations in Addis Ababa and many people were surprised. Soon he became known with his new nickname, the "Blind Electrician", as he has been called by many people after the radio program. In my view, the reluctance of the mainstream society to recognize him as an electrician is revealed in his nickname. I asked Abebe if that radio program helps him change the attitude and doubts of people on his skill. His short response was expressive of the big picture:

> Many people were and still are surprised, and yet are hesitant to accept me as an electrician. They call me the "Blind Electrician" and they prefer talking about my courage and motivation which is not bad. But I just want to do the job and I want people to consider me just as electrician instead of an extraordinary person. (Interview with Abebe, January 16, 2019)

What I heard from him at the end of our conversation led me to one of those incidents which made a huge impact on my thesis. While I was about to finish my interview, he asked me if I have a few minutes. I was eager to hear what I can do for him. He told me he wanted to withdraw some money from his Bank. It did not take so long to know what he wanted me to do for him, but I just asked him to get his confirmation.

"Ok, so you want me to accompany you? Is that the favor?"

[21] https://youtu.be/_1NuOzHmWqw

"No that is not"

I remained silent for a moment to conceal my mixed emotions; eagerness to know what he wanted and humiliation to assume he needed my guidance.

"Ok … tell me"

"I want you to be my witness"

"What do you mean? … I do not get you"

He explained the whole process of what blind people must do in order to withdraw their own money from their saving bank account. They can deposit their money by themselves (without taking a witness with them), but they need to take a sighted person as a witness to withdraw what they have deposited in the bank. "Why do they do this?" I asked him. He managed a weak smile and said, "Because they don't trust us". Unfortunately, I noticed that his smile was way far from the usual one that comes from joy. It was more of a smile that sends a message of being powerless, useless, hopeless and unwanted. Maybe this was one of the moments that I was challenged to control my emotion as a person who feels a human pain and a trained researcher who needs to focus on his duty. Both of us kept quiet for a few seconds; I was struggling to manage my own situation and at the same time trying to imagine what he was thinking.

While we were waiting for our turn to withdraw his money, I started to talk with the bank teller and slowly I asked him (politely) what is the logic behind their policy regarding blind people. Abebe did not hear me asking this question because he was sitting on the guest couch a few yards away from us. It seems my question was the easiest question that the teller has ever been asked in his life. He quitted counting a bundle of banknotes (using his two hands) for a moment just to glance at me and check if I am really mean it. Then, he simply said, "It is normal". This is how they are serving blind people for a long time and they believe it is the safest way to protect the bank and their blind customers. And he told me every bank in Addis Ababa follows the same procedure and that is

why it is "normal". I would say, this structural marginalization of disability shows how the mainstream assumption is deep-rooted in the hegemonic practices of social and economic institutions commonly regarded as "normal".

In my view, Abebe's (in)ability to withdraw his money is an imposed and fabricated by the mainstream assumption[22]. Apart from their social marginalization, Abebe's story shows the extent to which blind people are structurally marginalized from the service of such economic institutions which are expected to serve all equally. This was one of the many stories and incidents that was appeared to me in my fieldwork which reminded me what Bauman argues in his book, Modernity and Ambivalence, how boundaries are (re)produced in the modern society and creates otherness which leads to exclusionary practices (1991).

3.5 The secret language

Three days after I arrived at Addis Ababa for my second phase fieldwork in early January 2019, I was going to meet Sultan in person. We met several times during my first fieldwork in the summer of 2018, but this was our first meeting in my second field trip. Our appointment was at Mobility, as usual at 5:30 pm. I arrived one hour earlier and entered the compound by greeting the two guards standing at the gate. Unless and otherwise one is a member or an employee of the ENAB or have a special permission, it is not allowed to enter in to this compound especially after 4:30 pm. Placing myself under the shadow of one of the big trees in the compound near to the corner of a store building, I started to observe and read my personal note to refresh my memory concerning my to-do lists and the topic that I should discuss with Sultan. Slowly the number of members in the compound got increased and the compound became like a small market place.

[22] I find Abebe's story as one of the most descriptive scenarios that shows the disability situation in Ethiopia and hence, I would like to send my humble request to my readers to mention his case in the coming sections of this paper for more than once.

Suddenly I heard people shouting – "Fighting! ... Fighting!" - some yards away from my left. Two members were holding each other's neck and trying to pull down one another. When I got closer to them, I saw one of the fighters' nose was bleeding. Members started yelling to get attention and help from someone to stop the fight. I looked around and I found myself as the only sighted person in the crowd and hence felt a responsibility to intervene. I just followed my instinct and jumped into the fight to separate the two fighters who gripped each other's body so firmly. While I was trying to separate them, I got a strong punch on my face by one of the fighters and it made my attempt to stop them more difficult. It was like a heavy punch that made everything spun over me. But I kept trying to stop the fight because they were hurting each other badly. Luckily, the two guards came running towards us and settled the clash immediately.

"Are you okay?" one of the guards asked me.

"Yes, I am fine" I lied them because I did not want to be the focus of the crowd.

"Are you sure you are fine?"

"Yes, I am. Thank you" I tried to smile to cover my pain, but the guards seemed to be upset and did not believe me.

"I am so sorry for the inconvenience sir. You should not have intervened by yourself. You could have called us. Anyways, let us know if you need any help." I thanked both of them for their concern.

While the guards and I conversed, the whole crowd was listening to our conversation with full attention. The chaos and shouts just before a few minutes turned into such an absolute calmness and silence. I realized that most of the members were surprised to learn that there was a stranger who is sighted, and this person was hurt in the middle of the fight. "Who is he?" "Is he a sighted person?" "How did he get here?" They murmured with a kind of suspicion and confusion. Suddenly

they switched their Amharic language and started talking to each other in a different language that I did not understand. I even could not identify in which local language they were talking.

"He is a visitor here and currently working with the head office" one of the guards explained.

"I am waiting for Mr. Sultan. I have an appointment with him here at 5:30" I added.

Their doubt disappeared slowly after they heard the name "Sultan" and get the confirmation from the guards. Some of them became friendly shortly and they started to talk to me. One of them was called Asnake, a 40-years old studio technician at ENAB, who became my key informant later. He is one of those influential members in the social life of Mobility. Though his huge body coupled with his dressing style and the way he talks makes his look bossy-like, it did not take me long to learn how humble and sociable he is. He told me about the cause of the fight and how difficult it was for him to stop the fight. He did all his best to convince me not to blame them for what happened to me. He called out the name of the two individuals who fought and told them to come to us. It seems like an order, but the two guys were happy to come to where we were and to apologize me. I confirmed to them that I am ok and there is nothing to worry about.

Though they had already started talking in Amharic, I remained curious to know about the language they were talking a few minutes ago. How come all of them could be speaking the same language, unless they are from the same ethnic group, which is highly unlikely. "Pardon my ignorance, can I ask you which local language you were talking before?" I forwarded my question to Asnake who was sitting beside me. They all laughed loudly at me and I became more confused. They were hesitant to tell me but gradually Asnake explained to me that it is the secret language of blind people. Later, Sultan told me that there is a rumor that the language is created by one blind man (now he is retired) while he was a student at boarding school, using Amharic letters but reads in a different sound. I have tried to find out the trend among blind people in other countries, but so far, I could not get any information.

Many blind people in Ethiopia, especially those who spent their elementary school in boarding schools can speak the secret language. They use it whenever they need to talk secretly in the presence of sighted people among them. There is a consensus among blind people not to teach this language to sighted people. During my entire fieldwork, I realized that their consensus is very strong, and they do not even want to talk about it with any sighted person. It helps them as a coping mechanism when they feel insecurity with their interaction with sighted people. Unlike other languages, even names can be translated in their language[23]. This enables them to be safe since no outsider can understand even whom they are talking about. So secretive and protective!

There were times (even after we became good friends) that they tended to talk with their language and ignoring my presence. It was another dimension of exclusion that I hardly thought of it before. My assumption was that they are excluded by the mainstream society but that is not the only case. They also exclude the mainstream society at some points and at some level. As Ingstad argues, this scene shows disabled people have their own "common cultural identity that includes having common language cohesive social community, acculturation at an early age, and pride and identity in segregation from others" (Ingstad, 1995, p. 17).

That fighting day was one of those remarkable days in my fieldwork for two reasons. First, I got a big momentum to immerse myself into the circle of my study groups quickly yet in a natural way. I was happy the incidence accelerated my pace in establishing a friendship with them. Second, I have come to learn that they use their own language as a coping mechanism to stand as a society and sustain their existence. Besides, I got evidence that disproves the mainstream assumption that detaches some human actions (in this case, fighting) from the lives of blind people. Many sighted people (including myself) can hardly imagine physical fighting between two blind persons because of

23 For example, they told me my first name - Tilahun - is translated into Chimalugn (Ti-Chi, la-ma, hun-lugn)

the widespread assumption (As discussed in stories of Teddy and Abebe, there is higher tendency of associating visual impairment with functional impairment).

After a fruitful discussion with Sultan, I met one of my good friends while I was a student at AAU. He asked me what happened to my face. I told him about the fighting and his response reflects the mainstream assumption about blind people. He was shocked to hear about a physical fight between two blind persons.

"Really? I can't imagine it. How …hum…do they fight … like us?".

His reaction made me eager to know more about how he perceives disability in general and blind people in particular. Especially his word "like us" captivated my mine; maybe I am a bit obsessed with the issues of "us" and "others". It was not in my plan to interview him or discuss about this issue. I think this is the beauty of ethnography, I mean an ethnographer could find the answer of his research question in the field from the least expected subject or object he met. It was a good opportunity to hear from my friend more disability and understand his perception in which his assumption most probably could be shared by the mainstream society.

The next chapter will present the social life of blind people in one rural village in Ethiopia which is somehow different from what I experienced in Addis Ababa or the two other urban areas (Adama and Debre Markos).

Chapter Four – Social Capital of Blind People in East Gojjam

During my discussion with Sultan, I told him about my interest to visit one of ENAB's branch offices in the rural areas. I had already planned to observe the lives of blind people in rural areas and to have a conversation with some of them if possible. He showed me some hesitation to agree with my idea but was willing to facilitate my trip to East Gojjam zone in Amhara region. He was in doubt that my plan to visit the lives of blind people in the rural parts would not be any different from what I had already observed in Addis Ababa. He said, "You can imagine to what extent their challenge could be more serious in rural areas than here". But I decided to find out how they manage their situation and how disability is perceived by the larger rural community and blind people themselves. My plan was to stay eight days (from 22 to 30 January 2019) in Debre Markos, the capital of East Gojjam and the nearby semi-rural village called Amanuel which is 25 km from Debre Markos.

On Tuesday 22nd of January, early in the morning, I took a public bus to Debre Markos 300 km from Addis Ababa to visit one of the 32 branch offices of ENAB which also offers as hostel service for young blind students. On my trip to this town, in the old bus, I came to share a seat with a young man called Lema who was born and raised in Debre Markos. I introduced myself and we started talking about different topics. I hardly know Debre Markos even though this was not my first visit. So, it was a good opportunity to get to know someone who is local and knows the town in detail. In the middle of our talk, I asked him if he knows where ENAB's branch office (the hostel) is in the town. He smiled with my seemingly naïve question and told me that everyone in the town knows where the hostel is found.

> The hostel is not far from the center of the town. It is one of the town's known institution. There are many youth blind students who come to Debre Markos from different rural neighboring areas to continue their school residing in this hostel. I know not only the hostel but also many of these blind students who live there. Most

> of them are smart in school and their memory skill is amazing. But there are also naughty boys whom even sighted residents of the town are afraid of socializing with them. Sometimes I see sighted people, including me, are confused about how to socialize with them. They are too obsessed with the 'rights' issue I think, and this makes me feel uneasy when I am with them. (Lema, January 22, 2019)

I was happy with his answer that he managed to bring my agenda on the table without any delay. We discussed disability, blind people, and similar issues all the way to Debre Markos (almost all day), even in our lunch break. His reflection made me think of the 'disability rights' issue could be one potential factor for the weak relationship between sighted and blind people. His comment reminded me of the reaction of many non-disabled people including my six sighted research participants who reported their discomfort while they interact with disabled people. Drawing from my findings, I see their feelings could emanate from two potential sources. First, non-disabled people seem to be too careful (unnaturally) not to offend disabled people with their words and actions unintentionally. Second, they are uncertain about the dynamics of the issues regarding "disability rights" and this could make them worried about being judged or even legal action might be taken by disabled people[24]. Thus, they prefer to refrain from interacting or staying away from disabled people as much as possible to avoid any possible legal risk.

In the morning, based on our appointment I met Kasahun, ENAB's branch coordinator for Debre Markos office. Kasahun, a 32-years man (sighted), was born and raised in Debre Markos and works for ENAB since 2013. While I was visiting the hostel, he told me that the hostel has a

[24] Following the recent internationalization of disability and global disability rights movement, number of laws are introduced in Ethiopia (will be mentioned on next chapter) which promote the rights of disabled people. One of the many changing issues of disability in Ethiopia is "wording" to describe disability and disabled people. Many "words" which used to be applied to describe disability are now considered legally offensive. At the same time, many people who are not well aware of such issues might not be able to communicate smoothly using the newly introduced disability "words". And many non-disabled people highly associate and interpret "disability rights" with avoiding the previous "words" from their speech, which is partly true.

capacity to host up to 200 blind students at a time but because of financial constraints, they are now struggling to serve only 80 students. The blind students (aged between 14 -18 as formulated by the ENAB's by-law) in the hostel get free accommodation and meal service.

4.1 *Kess* Molla

On the next day, Kassahun and I went to Amanuel, the nearby rural village where a number of blind members live, to attend their monthly meeting. ENAB owned nearly one-hectare land which includes lots of huge and aged threes and one very old house in Amanuel. Even though this old house is the property of ENAB, it serves as a home for one partially sighted woman, in her fifties, and has three kids. Kasahun told me that she is living in this house for free since she is a member of ENAB and more importantly serves as a guard to keep the property of the ENAB[25]. There are five long wooden couches near the house which serves as seats for members when they get together. They had their monthly meeting on the day of my visit and one of my aims was to attend this meeting and have an individual conversation with some of them after their meeting.

I was surprised to learn the fact that the representative of these blind villagers is a sighted person. This person is also a priest who has great respect in the local society. Despite the by-law of ENAB, how a sighted person in Amanuel could be representative of blind members? I asked Kasahun if he knows anything about it, but Kasahun does not have the exact answer. He reflected his thought in the following way:

> Maybe it is because he has a very long and good relationship with blind people in rural villages. His support in reaching those blind people is valuable. I have no idea how we could have reached to our members without his help. He serves us as a bridge to connect with our members. Sometimes when I talk to him about the by-law of the association, he tends to identify himself as he is a partial blind due to his

[25] The property Kassahun referred to me is - one very old single room house on the way to fall down, five long wooden couches, the land and the trees on the land.

> age. But I know he can see well… (with a smiling face) … and I also know he doesn't want to be excluded from the blind community because he is a sighted person. (Kasahun, January 23, 2019)

What makes this person (from the mainstream society) interested to be part of the blind community while he is a sighted person? This is not something that could be seen in the urban areas that I have been so far (in Addis Ababa or Adama or even in Debre Markos). It might not be surprising to see either partially or totally blind people, in urban areas, attempt to deconstruct their socially constructed identity in order to be included in the mainstream society. But this incidence seems to be a bit contradictory with the common assumption of disability exclusion and inclusion. I wanted to know if he has ever felt any sort of exclusion as being a sighted person and member of the blind community (like I felt while I was in the Mobility at some point)?

Rimmerman explains that disabled people, most of the time, are caught between two streams of feelings in disclosing their disability status; a need for special accommodation and fear of being stigmatized. They disclose their disability to be eligible for disability accommodation and benefits whereas they tend to conceal their disability to avoid the stigma attached to disability (2013). Contrary to Rimmerman's argument, does the performance of this priest show the possibility that non-disabled people could also conceal their ability for some reason and tend to identify themselves with disability ignoring the stigma attached with it? During their meeting, I tried to follow their discussion attentively, but at the same time, I was also thinking about the unusual performance of the priest.

The meeting was conducted open air in the grassy field and because of the heavy sun, many of the participants use their old and big umbrellas. Their main agenda was how they can effectively use the money they took from ENAB as a loan to advance their small-scale income-generating

activities. Kasahun led the meeting while the representative priest had a facilitation role. After they finished their two hours discussion at 3 pm, Kasahun introduced me to the priest and he left us there to allow us to talk freely for a while. The priest's name is Molla and the villagers call him *Kess*[26] Molla; so, throughout our conversations, I just called him exactly as the villagers call him - *Kess* Molla.

When I told him that my late grandfather (my mother's father) was also a priest, he smiled and happily started to search for his small Holy Cross in his shirt's pocket to bless me. He was very glad I belong to his religion and surprised because I am proudly speaking about it. He stretched his hand holding his Cross towards my face and I bent down to touch the Cross with my forehead and lips to get the blessing. This is a very common religious practice in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. *Kess* Molla was pleased and felt proud that I came from a family that values his religious status since the role of a priest is getting disregarded currently in urban areas where he thought I came from. I also felt good that I have something in common with him that made him communicate with me very easily.

Kess Molla is in his late sixties' and a respected person by the rural villagers not only because he is a priest but also, because he can write and read Amharic. His ability (reading and writing) is essential for the smooth communication between the head office of ENAB and these members in the periphery. This is one of the contributing factors that make him the leader of the blind villagers despite the by-law of the Association which denies sighted people to be a member. He does not seem to be only a member of ENAB, but also a significant contributor for their Association. Though he is busy with his regular church duties and other social issues, he hardly misses a day

26 It means "Priest" in Amharic and sometimes it serves as a prefix. However, the most common prefix given to a priest in Amharic language is "Aba".

without visiting and having friendly conversation with his blind villagers unless it is beyond his capacity. He proudly told me that they are old friends and knew each other very well.

Throughout our conversation, he did not use phrases that signify "otherness" or portrayed the blind villagers as "helpless" or "extraordinary" people. He mostly used the word "we" when he talked about blind villagers and their issues. When Kasahun told me that *Kess* Molla has a tendency of identifying himself as a "partially blind", I was asking myself what the logic behind his unusual tendency is. However, after talking to *Kess* Molla, I am convinced that his self-identification as a partially blind person emanates from his strong social bond and sense of belongingness to the blind villagers. His strong emotional attachment with their common land and relationship with blind villagers reminds me of my blind key informants' emotional attachment with Mobility and the social life in the compound of ENAB's head office.

Inspired by my own story of feeling a little bit of exclusion while I was with blind people in Mobility, I was tempted to ask him if he has ever experienced such a similar feeling. But considering his strong attachment with the blind villagers coupled with the fact that there is no such secret language here, I just skipped asking him just not to confuse him with my naive question. Rather, I relied on my observation which informs my perception as he is a person who strives for the wellbeing of the Association and the participation of the local blind people using his limited agency. The striking fact is that, unlike many 'disability rights activists' and 'representatives' in the urban area, he does not have any idea about 'disability rights and inclusion/exclusion' discourse.

"I am impressed with your contribution and role here." I said to *Kess* Molla at the end of our conversation while we were walking toward the group of blind villagers (who were waiting for him) few yards away from us. He smiled with a feeling of satisfaction. Encouraged by my positive feedback, he told me about the recently solved long process they had been through to rescue their

land (where the meeting is held). The municipality needed the land for development (agricultural investment) and was about to lease it for investors. But after a lengthy bureaucratic process (in his words – deadly struggle), they were able to retain their land, at least for the time being. *Kess* Molla told me this story with great passion and courage. I saw his personal commitment and dedication to keep the values and belongings of his traditional community, a community that is hardly touched by modernity, globalization and capitalism yet. However, I am not sure to how far his limited agency could take him as he is against a powerful economic and political system which influenced the entire structure of our world. Bearing in mind the fact that his struggle is against capitalism's unlimited hunger for expansion of space in which David Harvey (2001)[27] talks about in his essay Globalization and the Spatial Fix, I do not see any possibility for him to overcome the battle. But *kess* Molla is hopeful of the future; he envisions the future as the blind villagers farming their land and improve the quality of their lives. I did not want to show him a fraction of my incredulity to him and ruin his hope, because what matters most for a person to live today is a hope for tomorrow, I believe.

> We [blind villagers] have owned this place for the last 30 years. We planted all these trees (he pointed out to the huge trees around us). It has been our land for all these years. If they [the municipality] demand to farm on this land, then it should be us who farm it. Why not? (*Kess* Molla, January 23, 2019)

He believes blind villagers themselves can farm the land if they are demanded to do so. But regarding the scale of production, there is a huge difference between his understanding of a farm (micro) and the state's (capitalist's) understanding of farm (macro). I am not sure how aware he is about the macro level mechanized capitalist production system in the contemporary post-industrial capitalism in which disabled people are assumed to be unfitted for economic participation (Rimmerman, 2013). What I observed in this rural village challenged my previous assumption that

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the exclusion of disabled people is mainly derived from the value and norms of traditional societies. Yet, the social life and interaction of blind people and non-disabled people, in these rural areas, do not confirm my presumption. I reconsider Finkelstein's historical stages of disability in which in the first stage of pre-industrial agrarian society, disabled people were less excluded from economic participation in the agrarian society than in the industrial capitalism (Barnes and Mercer, 2010).

4.2 The "Holy Hand"

Considering Finkelstein's historical account of disability stages, means of production (agrarian and industrial) is a crucial factor that makes the difference in the course of time. Keeping this in mind, it makes sense that the social and economic participation of blind people in Amanuel and the nearby rural villages is stronger than in Addis Ababa or in other urban areas. As I mentioned in the previous section, the blind villagers meeting agenda was to discuss how they can efficiently use the loan they took for their various income-generating activities. And this is one of the major differences between the way of life blind people lead in a rural and urban area in which it is informed by the mode of production. I visited two households which are engaged in home-based income generating activities.

The first household was led by a 38 years-old blind family man named Siyum who supports his family by sheep-fattening and selling business. He keeps 15 to 20 sheep at a time in his compound and he has spent most of his time taking care of these sheep. There are three big selling events (big holidays) in a year that the price of sheep gets very high. Siyum has a skill when he buys sheep from farmers; he identifies which sheep would be profitable and good for his business just by touching the body of the sheep. He buys young sheep from farmers when the price gets lower at ordinary time. Then he feeds and fatten them for some months and then sell them when the price gets higher at holidays.

His sighted wife and two sons, 16 and 13, are there for him whenever he needs their support. They accompany him, especially when he takes his sheep to sell in a busy market day in Debre Markos. He has also regular customers who own hotels in Debre Markos and come to his house to buy his sheep. His neighbors mock him as he has a "Holy Hand" that any sheep touched by his hand will get fat soon and be healthy. When I ask him about his "Holy Hand" mockery, he smiled and told me he enjoys feeding his sheep from his hand and he said, "I think they [his sheep] love it too". While I was talking to him, he was feeding them, and I saw how he enjoys the feeling of their lips touching his palm while they search for food and collect it from his hand.

It is true, Siyum could not see his sheep because of his blindness, but the way he is connected with them using his other sense of organs is very deeper than many sighted people can think of. Indeed, this deep connection is also one his sources of joy. He pays attention to them through all his body. He hears not only their formal voice but also each and every little sound they create during their movement. He enjoys holding them and moving his hands on their furry body. He told me that whenever he is away from his home for a few days, the first thing he misses is their smell. In fact, his hand is recognized by the villagers as "Holy" since it is visible, and they could see it easily; but his hand is only the representative of all his invisible sense organs that make him the most successful shepherd of the village.

4.3 The "Healing Drink"

In the other household, I met a 47-year-old blind woman called Yeshi who has a sighted farmer husband and three children. Yeshi sells a home-made *areqe*[28] at their house together with her two daughters. Their house serves as both as a private and public space as it is not only the living place of this family, but also a small bar in which blind and sighted villagers meet to chill out.

28 *Areqe* is a homemade, traditional, and strong liquor. It is identical with the Hungarian Palinka.

Making and selling *areqe* is a familiar commercial practice among women rural villagers in Ethiopia. However, in this village, Yeshi is the only blind woman who makes and sells *areqe*. Many local people prefer Yeshi's *areqe* and get together at her place since it is believed she has a unique skill in making quality *areqe*. On the other hand, blind people in the village come to her house not only for her "special" *areqe* but also for the comfort they get from their shared status. As Kasahun told me, most of the time, there are at least five or six individuals, either blind or sighted, at Yeshi's house.

When Kasahun and I arrived at Yeshi's house, in the late afternoon, five sighted and two blind men were already there talking and drinking *areqe*. When we enter into the house, they all offered us very warm greetings by standing from their seat. Kasahun requested them to take their seats respectfully and introduced me to all of them. I met Yeshi in the previous day members' meeting and we had a very short conversation. So, I just directly went to the corner of the house where she sat in a big traditional and old wooden chair to greet and shake her hand. She recognized me quickly and asked me how I was doing. Right after we took our seats, one of Yeshi's daughters brought two small cups of *areqe* for Kasahun and me without our order. I don't usually drink alcohol, especially in the daytime because it easily triggers my migraine. Kasahun took one of those two cups but I refused to take the other cup explaining that I am not feeling healthy enough to drink *areqe*.

"This is not ordinary *areqe* my brother! It is Yeshi's medicine! It heals a wounded body and broken spirit. You better drink it!" It was one of the sighted persons who encourage me to take the drink. He smiled while all the other customers in the house laughed loudly.

"Please you guys, don't force this gentleman; he is a city man. They don't like homemade *areqe*… rather they like whiskey" Yeshi replied for the first speaker, with a smile, before I say anything. I took Yeshi's reply not as entertaining and friendly only but also as a serious message that

signified me as the "other". I changed my mind immediately because I did not want to act or do anything that amplified my "otherness". "Ok then, I will drink. I didn't know it is like a medicine" I said boldly and everyone in the house burst into laughter. I think they never expected such kind of response from me.

We stayed for three hours and I was mostly listening to them discussing different topics as Kasahun was actively participating in the discussion. I observed their huge respect for Kasahun through their tendency to take every single opinion of him seriously and as a reference of fact. The two things that captivate me most in the small but lively house were; first, the way those sighted customers appreciate and respect Yeshi as a person (and her skill). Regardless of her blindness, Yeshi's skill is identified with a positive remark (medicine) that makes her feel valuable among the local people. I imagined Yeshi in the position of Abebe (the "Blind Electrician") in Addis Ababa and tried to figure out her possible nickname given by the society - maybe, the "Blind *Areqe* Maker"?? I am not sure, but I guess the optimistic attitude of those five people (customers) about her personality and skill reflects the villagers' perception of her as well. The second thing is the way blind and sighted people (customers) interact smoothly, friendly and equally.

On my way to Addis Ababa, completing my eight days stay in East Gojjam, I started to read my field notes and reflect. What lies behind the successfulness of that man with a "Holy Hand" and the woman who makes *areqe,* the "Medicine Drink", regardless of their impairment? And what lies behind the challenges of the "Blind Electrician" who struggles to be a successful electrician? I observe, it is not their visual impairment that makes the main difference; apart from the mode of production, it is the social capital in the one hand, and the structural, and societal challenges on the other hand. I also reflect on the limited role and agency of the sighted priest in this village and the role of the government and all actors (state and non-state) engaging in the disability intervention in

the urban areas of Ethiopia. And, I started to doubt the effectiveness of the widely accepted intervention approach based on socially constructed understanding of disability and practiced by the state and non-state actors (in urban areas).

Most, if not all of the villages, in this rural area do not have any clue about the discourse of 'disability rights and inclusion', which is commonly heard in Addis Ababa, yet the social boundary which leads to exclusionary practices (Bauman, 1991) is not as visible as it is in urbanized areas. Undeniably, it is near to impossible to generalize or idealize the disability inclusion in the rural area over the exclusionary tendency of urban areas depending on my study which is bounded by a limited place and time frame. However, despite its scope, I believe it could serve as a foundation to a broader research and exploration on the disability marginalization issue. At least, personally I become influenced to critically re-examine my own presumption and at the same time inspired to dig more about this issue in future.

The following chapter will get back to Addis Ababa and highlights how the government, by using legal action, determines the role, identity, and structure of DPOs in favor of its political interest regardless of their representation of marginalized disabled people. As a result, how DPOs become a political victim of the state due to their financial dependence on foreign funding.

Chapter Five – Role and Identity Confusion

Marginalized people in any society tend to establish their own associations based on their shared values and mutual support to cope with any possible marginalization, such as economic, political and social (Lewis 2013). Ingstand and White (1995) specifically mention DPOs to illustrate such kind of association in which their main purposes are advocating for their marginalized members. Even though, advocacy is the intrinsic role of DPOs, Ingstand and White remark that, in developing countries, DPOs tend to prioritize rehabilitation over advocacy activities. However, the situation of DPOs in Ethiopia is, somehow, different than what these scholars argue. Especially in the last ten years, because of the 2009 CSP, DPOs lost their inherent roles and faced identity confusion.

Even though, the current Constitution of Ethiopia (1995) entitles "every person has the right to freedom of association for any cause or purpose" (Art. 31), this entitlement seems to be ignored by the 2009 CSP which restricts citizen's rights of association for the purpose of advocacy considering sources of funding as a determinant factor. As discussed in chapter two, Lewis (2013) observes how states are becoming more expert at restricting CSOs and his claim reaffirms the situation in Ethiopia. Many CSOs in Ethiopia engage in the areas of good governance, democracy, and human rights, and all DPOs in the advocacy (disability rights), in which these areas are identified by the government as politically sensitive. Therefore, the government keep an eye on them as their perceived role is threatening for the political order especially after the 2005 national election. They are allowed to function, but their range of activities is restricted if their financial sources are foreign funding agencies.

The following section introduces the most senior DPO in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian National Association of the Blind (ENAB) which serves as a case for this study, as it is one of the many CSO/DPOs affected by the 2009 CSP.

5.1 The Ethiopian National Association of the Blinds (ENAB)

ENAB was founded by 29 blind and one sighted person in January 1960 to promote the full participation and equal opportunity of blind people in Ethiopia. Since its establishment, the association has been engaged in advocacy and promotion of the cause of blind people. The period from 1960 to 1974 is regarded as the golden era of the Association since ENAB enjoyed significant support from a number of volunteers including Emperor Haile Selassie I who served as the honorable guardian of the Association. The Emperor's involvement had inspired other royal family members and high-ranking officials to become members of the advisory board of ENAB. The 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s marked the organizational development of ENAB in terms of structure and leadership. A number of branch offices were opened in different towns of the country and established its women, teachers, and elderly people's wings. Besides, it was also at this time that ENAB gained a strategic partner organization called Christian Blind Mission (CBM). The financial support from CBM enabled ENAB administered handicraft enterprises and engaged in two other major activities that were considered as signs of its unique identity (ENAB, 2015).

The first one was administering two blind boarding schools located in Bako town within Oromia region and in Wolayta town within the Southern region. These boarding schools helped thousands of blind children access elementary educational opportunities. The second one was the production of educational Braille books which were distributed to high schools, colleges, and universities. Besides, ENAB was able to prepare books in audio format using its own studio that was built by the financial assistance from CBM. Consequently, a large number of cassettes recorded audio books had been prepared and distributed to members (ENAB, 2015).

Today, even though this studio exists in the "Mobility", according to Asnake, my key informant (and the studio technician at ENAB), the studio is almost not functional because of budget constraints, partly due to the 2009 CSP.

5.2 The 2009 CSP's categories of CSOs and the dilemma of ENAB

The 2009 CSP creates three kinds of categorizations of CSOs based on their funding resources. Those categories are; the "Ethiopian", "Ethiopian Residents" and "Foreign" (CSP 2009, Art. 2). The two categories – the "Ethiopian" and the "Foreign"- are equivalent to the usual identification of organizations as "local" and "international" respectively. However, the newly created category – the "Ethiopian Residents" - is the one which is eccentric and intended to alienate and target those "local" CSOs by giving them a foreign identity or internationalized their status so that to deny them citizenry rights such as engaging in advocacy activities. The Proclamation explains that even though a given CSO is established under the Ethiopian law and all its employees are Ethiopian citizens, that is not enough to be identified as "Ethiopian" organization unless it also generates funding from local sources. After creating such corporate categories in which the possibility of being an Ethiopian organization is very minimal, then the law makes being "Ethiopian" as a requirement to engage in advocacy activities.

Following the 2009 CSP, when the government called for all CSOs to re-register according to the Proclamation, ENAB found itself in a dilemma. Either to withdraw from its advocacy role and become a non-advocate organization or lose the financial support that it gains from foreign sources at the expense of its advocacy endeavors in which ENAB associates its identity. Sultan, the director of ENAB remembers the situation as follows:

> It was hard to decide because whatever decision you make, it has its own adverse effect. But at least we had to survive, and hence we decided to be "Ethiopian Residents" [non-advocate]. After we re-registered as an "Ethiopian Residents" organization, we had been automatically tagged with a "foreigner" status and told by the government we no longer can engage in any advocacy activities. We couldn't imagine ourselves as a foreigner (he smiles) …because all of us [both employees and members of the Association] are Ethiopians. It is really confusing to consider ENAB as a foreign organization. (Interview with Sultan, June 19, 2018)

As a result, ENAB was forced to change its legal status and expected to redefine its legal identity as "Ethiopian Residents" organization which is equivalent to "foreign organization". And hence, ENAB had been forced to stay away from advocacy activities. This restriction, either directly or indirectly overshadowed the ENAB's representation and the rights of full participation of its members. This political decision affects the relationship between ENAB and its members. After four years of its disappearance from its intrinsic role, an intense objection from members was raised against ENAB for its inability to defend their rights (at least theoretically). This objection coupled with the growing hostile attitude of the government towards "non-Ethiopian" organizations, made ENAB changed its status again and acquired its previous identity - "Ethiopian" - to retain its fundamental essence and initial objectives.

This decision obviously endangered the capacity of ENAB as it is currently suffering from the dramatic decline of financial aid from foreign donors. While I was at Debre Markos branch office, I observed the situation of the hostel (in which the hosting capacity lowers by more than half percent - from 200 to 80 students)[29]. Besides, because of financial constraints, ENAB became unable to administer one of its boarding schools (Bako blind school) and hence forced to handed over the school to the government.

5.3 Who benefits? Who loses? Who is victimized?

The government recognizes mass-based local organizations as producers of social service for those unreachable citizens and hence they are considered as the state's political capital (Hailegebriel, 2010). As discussed in the second chapter, the government undermined the role of "foreign" funded CSOs and promotes the discourse that the development of the country could only be ensured by the local mass-based organizations in which, by definition, this includes DPOs. However, DPOs were

[29] See page 41

confused between two roles, being local and foreigner at the same time, or between the government's perception as "state's political capital" and "threats for the political order". DPOs criticize the action of the government as the 2009 CSP left them without any pragmatic alternative to continue their advocacy role. One of my interlocutor (anonymous) who is a senior member and employee of ENAB for more than ten years reflects about the situation.

> It [the 2009 CSP] is clearly part of politics between the government and influential CSOs, and so sad to see politics comes first as the issue of humanity is secondary. The government is protecting its own hegemony and ignoring the wellbeing of citizens who are deprived of basic human rights and social services. (Anonymous interview, on June 21, 2018).

On the other hand, Tamiru, a supervisor at the CSA, defended the government by mentioning number proclamations introduced by the government in the last 10 years which promote disability inclusion[30]. Besides, Tamiru argues the 2009 CSP should not have been as contentious as it is since its objective is reasonable and easy to understand.

> To ensure "rights" one need to strive using own effort, time, energy, and money. It is not something achievable or deliverable using someone else's money with instruction. CSOs' priorities are mostly informed by the interest of their foreign financial providers in order to secure their budget. And this trend has a negative consequence on the democratization and development of the country. (Interview with Tamiru, June 25, 2018)

30 Proclamation No. 568/2008: Right to Employment of Persons with Disability Proclamation
Proclamation No. 515/2007: Federal Civil Servants Proclamation
Proclamation No. 624/2009: Ethiopian Building Code

From the above reflections of the government and a DPO representative, and the whole observable situation, one can draw that the 2009 CSP was a political trap. This trap was set by the government to strategically excluded civil society organizations (CSOs) from involving the state's sensitive political issues[31]. These sensitive issues, which are basically neo-liberalist values, are highly promoted by foreign funding agencies. As discussed in chapter two, Fisher (1997) notes that international funding agencies financed CSOs based on their "liberal democracy values", and they use CSOs as a means to shape societies based on these values. The intention of the government was to keep away those "neo-liberalist" influential CSOs, which were able to push its powerful position to just a bit more than a complete "looser" in the 2005 national election.

The 2009 CSP was the backfire shot by the government to counter-attack those "neo-liberalist" CSOs. But the unintended consequence, highly victimized grass-root DPOs, and consequently, overshadowed the representation and participation of disabled people.

5.4 - The UNCRPD and the 2009 CSP

One of those positive actions of the government mentioned by Tamiru and also acknowledged by many disability actors as well, is Ethiopia's ratification of the UNCRPD in 2010. This is because the Convention obliges the signatory states to implement the universal standards provided in the document while DPOs and other CSOs working on disability monitor the implementation (UNCRPD, 2006, Art. 33). Samarasan (2014), an international disability activist, argues that this mandate gives DPOs more power and they use the Convention as an instrument and a platform to demand their rights and inclusion.

[31] See the five sensitive areas identified by the 2009 CSP on foot note on page 12

As Samarasan argues, because of the UNCRPD, while I was in the fieldwork, I saw some attempts of the government to raise the public awareness of disability through national media, enhance the physical accessibility (Building code) and information by establishing six information communication and technology centers in Addis Ababa. The centers are designed to accommodate blind people's special needs[32]. However, bearing the magnitude of the disabled people and their diversity of needs, what has been done so far by the government is not significant and the focus is limited within the capital city.

The UNCRPD was one of those commonly raised talking-points in my regular informal conversations with my key informants. Despite the government's attempt to implement the provisions of the Convention, some of my informants are skeptical the Convention for two reasons. Their first claim is that the Convention could not be effectively practiced because of the 2009 CSP. Debebe, a 43-year-old blind professional who works for Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD) as a project officer, is one of those people who doubt the commitment of the Convention to see its provisions implemented in the developing countries such as Ethiopia, in which there are many unfavorable conditions including the 2009 CSP.

> The Convention encourages DPOs to engage in advocacy activities and this is one of its main objectives. However, the government restricts DPOs from advocacy role due to their financial sources. This mismatch should be solved first if both of them [the government and the UN] are truly committed to ensuring disability rights and inclusion. (Interview with Debebe, July 16, 2018)

Debebe firmly questions the genuineness and commitment of the government and UN beyond their "superficial" disability rights and inclusion discourse which is only taking disability to

[32] The centers are equipped with adaptive technology items such as JAWS (Job Access for Windows and Speech software)

international politics. However, Yetnebersh Nigussie[33], a very well-known lawyer and iconic disability rights activist (she is also blind) in Ethiopia, believes the "government is trying to put in place systems and policies to promote the rights of PwDs [Persons with Disabilities], but there is no real enforcement. What is needed is a strong and vibrant voice for PwDs, not just advocacy groups" (VOA, 2014, p.8)[34].

Their second argument is that the even if the Convention is important for all disabled people, but it is more important to some individuals, DPOs, CSOs and the government itself. Indeed, the Convention has raised the awareness and bargaining power of local DPOs, and this could be taken as a positive impact. Yet, it serves as an income generating tool through different invisible ways, such as funding and creating more job opportunities to some beneficiaries more than it helps the general disabled population. Their argument could be more sensible for someone who reviews the government's initial report to the UNCRPD Committee about the implementation of the Convention. The report covers the first activities done by the government in the first two years of the Convention.

> ...96,064 persons with disabilities had access to information on the Convention...over the last two years in seminars and workshops. … . Over 1000 DPO leaders received trainings on the content of the treaty... over the last two years. In its effort to disseminate information on the Convention in appropriate format, the commission got the treaty transcribed into Braille. Forty-nine copies have already been circulated among blind people. … the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission regional office published 500 T-shirts on which the Convention purposes are written. … 1,568 leaders of women's federations received similar seminars … (Initial reports of States parties -Ethiopia, 2013, p. 13)[35]

33 https://www.light-for-the-world.org/who-yetnebersh-nigussie

34 ttps://www.voanews.com/a/disabilities-advocate-ethiopian-convention-rights-un-ny-blind-/1937861.html

35 https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/058/41/PDF/G1505841.pdf?OpenElement

Based on the report, only within the first two years, a lot of work was done, which is good, and it is easy to guess the amount of the cash flow to get the job done. Even though, I have doubts regarding the quality and amount of the job, and fairness of the proportionality of activities; for example, the gap between "96,064 persons with disabilities had access to information" or "over than 1000 DPO leaders received trainings" and "Forty-nine copies [Braille] have already been circulated among blind people", I am not too critical on it. Because those mentioned activities might be good options and worthy to spend as much as it takes as long as it helps to raise the awareness of the society about disability inclusion. However, after seven years of such a disability inclusion awareness campaign, it is unseemly to see a blind individual not being able to withdraw his own money from a bank only because he is blind, and this practice is perceived as "normal" and widely accepted.

5.5 Post-fieldwork

Late February 2019, after completing my field work and when I was about to start writing my thesis, I heard the news that the government replaced the 2009 CSP by a new Proclamation in which the categorization of CSOs based on their source of funding is no longer in action. Following this news, the government has been praised by many local and international organizations for replacing the 2009 "repressive" law with an "encouraging" one. The new law is believed to create an enabling environment for local and international CSOs so that they can be able to rebuild the civil society (Freedom House, 2019). It is good to be hopeful, but it is also good to be critical. Why now? What makes the government changes its law now? Why did it take nine years for the government to break its silence and admit the 2009 CSP is problematic and need to be changed?

Well, I am only hopeful the new Proclamation might remove the confrontation between the government and CSOs as far as they both are not going to cross each other's "red line". This is because, as my observation and study finding shows, their confrontation seems to emanate more

from their self-protection motives than a pure concern for the inclusion of marginalized people. The new law, at least theoretically, confirms their mutual benefits; avoids the financial challenge of CSOs and creates a positive image for the reformed government. However, considering the findings of this study, it would be naive to be optimistic that new Proclamation will bring radical positive changes in the lives of marginalized disabled people in particular, and the deprived population in general. What one of my informants told me, while we are talking about the impact of the 2009 CSP on the lives of disabled people, could illustrate my argument better.

> The lives of disabled people, before and after the 2009 CSP, was the same and most probably will be the same in the future too, unless and otherwise we [disabled people] are considered as one of them [non-disabled people], like persons with dignity, not only as persons with "disabilities". They [the state and non-state actors] fight over our issues with each other just for the sake of their own existence. (Anonymous interview, June 21, 2018

Conclusion

This ethnographic study digs into the lived experiences (empirical) of blind people which has been buried in two graves: the social construct of disability (theoretical) and the politics of the state and non-state actors in Ethiopia. The study used one of the most contentious laws of the country, the 2009 CSP, as an entry point to go through and explore the contemporary politics of Ethiopia regarding CSOs, the role of DPOs and look into the social life of blind people to understand what lies behind the firmness of the disability exclusion.

One of the two main arguments of this thesis is that the government (through the 2009 CSP and its disability discourse) indirectly shapes the social positionality and participation of disabled people particularly those who live in the urban areas. Besides, their positionality (exclusion) is not only implicitly (re)produced or shaped by the state and non-state actors, but also could be consumed by the government to maintain and restore the hegemony of the state. Apart from all other stories presented in this thesis such as the practices of non-state actors (denial of full service by bankers for blind people), the PM's public speech (page 24) shows how the positionality of disabled people (level of exclusion) is (re)produce (labeling them as "helpless") and consumed (as a bargaining tool to gain foreign exchange) by the state politics.

On the other hand, my second argument which emerges from this ethnographic study, is that the disability exclusion is guided based on the mainstream theoretical assumption (personal tragedy) which is reinforced by the narratives of the state ("helplessness") and exclusionary practices of formal economic institutions (the bank services), and DPOs themselves (adopting assimilation approach). In order to create a disability inclusive society (based on the mainstream understanding of disability), significant amount of intervention has been done by the government and CSOs/DPOs so far, yet the expected "inclusion" has not arrived. No one can tell when it will come,

or at least it is coming. Who is to be blamed for the delay? Who benefits from the delay? Who loses and who is victimized? Indeed, to answer these questions effectively, it requires a much further and deeper exploration than what I did in my five months study. However, from my personal observation and study finding, I would argue that the politics of the state plays the lion share in determining, (re)producing and consuming the positionality of disabled people in Ethiopia.

Thus, I would not be surprised if the "desired" disability inclusion is/will be delayed as long as its delay benefits the most powerful structure in the country – the state. I think Samarasan (2014) should consider her statement that UNCRPD gives DPOs more power and they use it as an instrument to ask for their rights and inclusion. I would say, maybe her claim does not work always, or at least, not in every situation. I conclude that the politics of the state and the fact that the socially constructed understanding of disability guides the disability intervention are the determinant factors of the marginalization of disabled people in Ethiopia.

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