

# A Historical Analysis of Minority Rights in Ethiopia: The Case of Negede Weyto Community

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## Abstract

The Negede Weyto community lives by the shores of Lake Tana in the Amhara regional state of Ethiopia. It is one of the autonomous minority groups in Ethiopia known for its valuable handcraft skills since the foundation of Gondar as the political and administrative capital of the Christian Highland Kingdom (1636). Regardless, the community has lost its autonomous status and became subject to different forms of marginalization and social exclusion in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This article examines the various factors, actors, and circumstances that accounted for the social exclusion and marginalization of the Negede Weyto group. Based on a critical analysis of relevant primary and secondary sources of data, this article argues that the social and economic life of the Negede Weyto community is influenced by the social exclusion that continued even in the context of a minority-friendly constitution of post-1991 Ethiopia.

**Keywords:** *occupational caste, marginalization, minority group, exclusion, Negede Weyto*

## Introduction

The objective of establishing an ethnically egalitarian nation-state in 1991 is said to redress the past injustices committed against ethnic societies, to celebrate ethnic diversity in the country, and to protect ethnic minorities (Aseffa 2017). In light of this, both the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the regional states' constitutions stipulated the equal rights of minorities and incorporated the notion into other legal and policy frameworks. However, there have been disparities in implementing the constitutionally granted minority rights across the country. For instance, the Oromia regional constitution does not bestow the right to self-determination to minority groups in

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its territories comprising the Amhara, Gedo, and Gurage communities (Van der Beken 2010). Meanwhile, the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) is among the regional states where minorities are recognized and politically represented. Minority ethnic groups in the region such as the Awi, Wag Himira, the Oromo, and the Argoba are granted self-determination in their special zones and districts. Regardless of such rights, there are minority groups in the region that seek protection and empowerment (Van der Beken 2007). The Negede Weyto is one of these minority groups residing on the shores of Lake Tana.<sup>208</sup> The largest group of the Negede Weyto community lives in *kebele* 16, *kebele* 11, and *kebele* 13 of Bahir Dar town, the administrative and commercial center of the regional state. Some of the community members inhabit rural districts located adjacent to the north and northwest shores of Lake Tana<sup>209</sup>.

The seashore and its wetland are the livelihood sources of the community. Traditional fishing, carving grinding mills from lava stone, transportation service<sup>210</sup>, and selling firewood are sources of income to the wider Negede Weyto group (Dessalegn 2013). Few members of the community work in governmental and non-governmental institutions as guards and salaried daily labourers. Weyto women often earn income by making and selling baskets *Mosab* and *Agelgil*<sup>211</sup> from *Dengel*, papyrus reeds, often used for utilitarian purposes among locals and as souvenirs for tourists (Dessalegn 2013; Ajala 2008). *Dengel* is also used to build huts and *Tankwas* (papyrus reed boats) that Negede Weyto use for sea transportation and fishing; the community earned fame as makers and propeller of papyrus reed boats. However, regardless of their socio- economic contribution, Negede Weyto are reported to have been facing social exclusion and marginalization.

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208 According to the 1994 national census of Ethiopia, the population size of the Negede Weyto community was 1,677 (Dessalegn 2013:118; Darmon, 2010). The latest national census did not include data about the community. The Negede Weyto community speaks Amharic. The majority of them are followers of Islam, while few community members practice traditional religion.

209 Bahir Dar is divided into 9 sub-cities and 17 *kebeles*. Zege, Meshenti, and Tisabay are currently part of Bahirdar Special Zone.

210 They use small handmade boats called tankwas, made from papyrus reeds to provide service.

211 *Agelgil* is a basket made of grass and coated with leather. *Agelgil* is culturally used to pack food for people working in the agricultural field or for travelers (Dessalegn 2013:118).

This article, thus, examines the present condition and social standing of the Negede Weyto by exploring their position within the historical perspective. Empirical data presented in this article is collected through key informant interviews and non-participant observation. In-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected informants coming from different walks of life; religious leaders, local elders, and community members in Bahir Dar city and Zege *kebele*, which is currently part of Bahir Dar city administration. Relevant secondary sources were consulted to support the primary sources.

### **Conceptual Framework: Reflecting on Social Exclusion and Marginalization**

The concepts of exclusion and marginalization are interrelated notions. The academic debate on the conceptualization of social exclusion accentuates the need to pay attention to different but interrelated levels of exclusion. Exclusion is often associated with denying access to resources and opportunities available for society to enjoy a quality life. It also refers to segregation from accessing goods and services, and deprivation from meaningful participation in social, economic, and political life (Farnicka 2016). Silver describes social exclusion as “a multidimensional process of progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normal, normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live” (2007:15).

Social exclusion faced by an individual or a group is correlated in four dimensions: relative or absolute material deprivation, insufficient access to social rights, lack of normative integration and limited social participation in the society within which they are living (Jehoel-Gijsbers and Vrooman 2007). Factors contributing to social exclusion are multifaceted. Individual risk factors such as age, gender, race, and identity are among issues often mentioned as grounds for social exclusion. Furthermore, demographic, economic, social, legal, and policy matters are stated as structural factors that create inequalities among groups (Vrooman and Hoff 2013).

Marginalization, on the other hand, is a process of relegating, banishing out, or excluding some group from the benefits or opportunities of the mainstream society (Khan, Seema, Combaz and McAslan 2015). Access to benefits can be limited or absent for the marginalized group as a result of persisting historical and cultural reasons or depending

on the choice of the dominant group, which controls resources and political power (Khan et.al. 2015). Marginalization eventually leaves minority groups in a disadvantageous situation by downgrading them to an undesired social and economic condition. The social structures that represent the values of the dominant group often marginalize a minority group under the pretext of protecting the culture of the majority from 'deviance' (Galtung 1990:292). Scholars describe marginalization as structural violence that can destruct and prohibit members of a minority group from realizing valuable life goals (Dwivedi et.al. 2007; Galtung 1990). Marginalization and structural violence also prevent individual members of minority groups from meeting the basic human needs and rights essential for their wellbeing and survival. Therefore, individuals ought to be free from marginalization and social exclusion to meet their basic needs (Galtung 1990).

### **Accounts on Early History of the Negede Weyto**

Historical accounts relate the origin of the Negede Weyto to the Agaw (Awi) ethnic group (Teclehaymanot 1983). Zerihun (2010) shares the view that the origin of the Negede Weyto is from the indigenous Agaw people referring to the ethno historical and ethnographic evidence. Nevertheless, oral accounts from community elders show that the Negede Weyto migrated from Northern Africa, specifically from Egypt, following the course of the Nile River. Elders further use the settlement pattern of the community along the river and Lake Tana, which is the source of the Blue Nile River, as evidence to support their claim. On the other hand, there is a myth within the majority Amhara that portrays Negede Weyto as an autochthonous people who emerged from the lake and surrounding woodland even though the group claim to be the first inhabitants of the shores of Lake Tana (Zerihun 2010). According to Zerihun, the Agaw, Falasha and the Negede Weyto are described in historical accounts as the earliest inhabitants of the Lake Tana region. However, there is no adequate evidence as to when the Negede Weyto community began to live in the region. Historical sources on the territorial incorporation and Christian evangelization of the Lake Tana area, which took place during the reign of King Amde Tsion (1314-1344) and King Yisaq (1413-1430), do not provide evidence (Daniel 2011; Kinfe-Rigeb 1975). Early travelers accounts, however, discussed about 'people of the sea', which could be taken as an indication to the presence of the Negede Weyto surrounding Lake Tana and its wetlands (Daniel et.al. 2011). The Lake

and its shores have been providing the community with abundant resources for fishing, papyrus cultivation, and hunting aquatic and terrestrial animals. Members of the Negede Weyto community used to hunt crocodile and hippopotamus for food and use the hide to make shields, whips and strap (Teclhaymanot 1983; Bruce 1790:402-403). Hunting was also a prestigious activity that marks a rite of passage for young men of the community to start their own family (Gedef 2014).

Until the introduction of motorboats in the 1930s, *Tankwa* was the only means of transportation across Lake Tana (Teclhaymanot 1983). The reed boats were highly demanded by long-distance traders to transport coffee and other commodities from Zege to Delgie islands on Lake Tana (Teclhaymanot 1983). Literature shows that Negede Weyto's occupation of reed boat making relieved them from enslavement and displacement (Seletene 2012; Abdusamad 1997; Chessman 1936). The skills in making and providing utensils also impressed the *Balabat*<sup>212</sup> and his wife in Bahir Dar to grant the Negede Woyto the right to freely reside in the area (Seletene 2012:83).

The majority of Negede Weyto community follow Islam while others practice traditional preserve religion "*the Abinas*", the spirit of Abay, which they regard as the source of life. The spirit of *Abinas* is believed to reside in the abode of Lake Tana and Abay River. When the center of the Christian kingdom shifted to the Lake Tana region in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, King Susyeneous (1603-1632) attempted to convert the Negede Weyto to Christianity (Alemu 2005:157). Nonetheless, conversion did not happen until late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ibid). The Negede Weyto were rather converted to Islam at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century following the Borumeda religious conference in 1878 when Emperor Yohanis IV (1872-1889) ordered citizens to embrace Christianity. It is believed that Sufi sheiks from Wollo who fled the imposition of Christianity by the King converted the community to Islam willingly (Zerihun 2010; Abdusamad 2000). However, the converted were not strictly following the tenets of Islam as stated in the Quran (Taye 1922). James Bruce, the Scottish traveler who visited Lake Tana in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, recorded that the Negede Weyto were described by the locals as 'untouchable pagans' (Bruce 1790:402-403).

Up until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Negede Weyto led a life of an egalitarian community, being self-sufficient and economically and politically autonomous by the shore of Lake Tana including the

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212 The Amharic term *Balabat* refers to nobleman.

present-day Kunzila, Bahir Dar Zuria, Gonder Zuria, Fogera, Dembia, Alafa Takusa, and Achefer *woreda*.

### **From Autonomy to Marginalization (1901-1941)**

For the Negede Weyto, the period following the battle of Adwa (1896) marked the end of their autonomous status with the subsequent intensification of exploitation and marginalization. The appointment of Ras Hailu as the governor of Gojjam (1901-1932) led to economic exploitation through imposition of high tax and corvée labour (Freeman 2003; Gamst 1979; Bairu 1973). The local administration appointed by the rulers of Gojjam encouraged enslavement and free labour service within the society. Minority groups in and around Lake Tana region of North-West Ethiopia were arranged based on their status and occupation as “Muslims, Qimant, Falasha, Wayto and the Gumuz slaves” (Abdusamad 2000:165).

Among other kinds of taxes, the Negede Weyto were forced to pay ‘*ye’amora giber*’, a tax for hunting birds. Local officials with titles of *Assadagne* and *Negadras* were appointed to facilitate systematic tax collection from the Negede Weyto. The *Assadagne* was the officer in charge of regulating hunting while the *Negadras* is initially a title given to tax collector from traders who were also in charge of community affairs, including litigations, and representatives of the provincial governor. The authority of the *Negadras* was transferred every-four-year to the new appointee of the governor (Geremew 2018:9; Techlehaimanot 1983).

It was during the Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941, the *Residenza*, a new institutional administration intended to support minority groups was established and introduced modern town administration and private land ownership structure. However, the new administration system was not to the advantage of the Negede Weyto, as the urbanization process in the area affected the lives of the group (Seletene 2012; Abebe 2010).

Introduction of motorboats by the Italians made the commercial significance of the *Tankwa* less important, although the community continued to use *Tankwas* as means of transportation and traditional fishing. The introduction of modern rifles and better weapons intensified hippopotamus hunting, which used to be performed as adventurous hunting among the wider population unlike the

subsistence hunting that the Negede Weyto were accustomed. The establishment and expansion of Bahir Dar town during the Italian occupation created job opportunities for members of the Negede Weyto to engage in labour demanding activities in the construction sector such as masonry (McCann and Blanc 2016; Taye 1963). All these affected their traditional life style forcing them to adapt to the new situation. Male members of the community were also selling fuel wood and charcoal side by side to producing stone mills (*Wofcho*) as a means of survival while the Negede Weyto women were engaged in basketry as their main occupation (Seltene 2012; Ajala 2008).

Post-Italian occupation, the Negede Weyto community adopted agriculture utilizing the farmland they obtained through sharecropping agreement with the local *Balabat*. In some cases, they could get plots of farmland from the *Balabat* in exchange for the labour services they provide. The biggest challenge to the Negede Weyto group was to own oxen for ploughing, which made farming unrewarding task (Abebe 2010; Simons 1960).

The increased interaction of the Negede Weyto with the surrounding communities during the post-Italian occupation resulted in economic interdependence and cooperation, the adoption of Amharic language and the incorporation of traditional practices such as circumcision and drinking *Tella*, a local alcoholic drink. Regardless of such integration into the mainstream Amhara tradition, Negede Weyto were marginalized and socially excluded by other communities (Zerihun 2010). According to one of the key informants of this study, the exclusion, at times, involve physical distancing and avoidance.<sup>213</sup> Another informant added, “the *Balabat* did not treat them [the Negede Weyto] as human beings”.<sup>214</sup>

There are different factors contributing to the marginalization and exclusion of the Negede Weyto. One of the commonly mentioned factors during the fieldwork was their livelihood and dietary habit. The Negede Weyto are often considered as being ‘impure’ for eating hippopotamus meat and for not following the food culture of the wider society. As indicated by informants, the group got its name ‘Weyto’ as a result of their dietary habit; the word Weyto is derived from the Amharic term *Wehyto* or *Wacho*, which means “one who eats

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213 Interview with Amare Tadese, Bahir Dar, February 17 2020.

214 Interview with Abdella Hassen, Bahir Dar, April 05 2020. See also (Terjen and Gedef 2013:128)

everything". According to Rava, the naming of the community further indicates that the group is stereotypically labelled as 'polluting sub-humans' for their eating habit.

*A common myth about the Weyto tells of a 'fall from grace'. It states that their ancestor was one of four brothers who was cursed and excluded by his siblings because he killed and ate a hippopotamus, thus consuming impure meat that was prohibited by God (Rava 1913:80 cited in Corlett 1974:136-7).*

Furthermore, lack of strict devotion to Islamic practices contributed to the social exclusion of the Negede Weyto (Gedef 2014). However, primary data collected for this study supports the assertion of Gedef that members of the community believe the reason to their marginalization is material poverty (2014:218).<sup>215</sup>

### **Land Reform and Equality Under the Derg (1974-1991)**

Following the fall of the Imperial dynasty in 1974, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), also known as the Derg, came to power and carried out several reforms. Among these was the introduction of radical land reform that abolished the land tenure system granting peasants and tenants the right to land-use (Proclamation No. 31/1975). The lowest political-administrative unit, the *kebele*, was established with legal empowerment to enforce these reforms (Daniel 2012).

The Derg reform empowered the Negede Weyto and further changed the pejorative name 'Weyto' to "Negede Weyto"; a term perceived to be less prerogative.<sup>216</sup> However, the effort did not bear much fruit in realizing equal recognition and participation of the community. Neither their way of life nor their relation with the wider society showed a significant change. Frederick Gamst claimed there was a pronounced social distancing between the Amhara and the Negede Weyto. The traditional economic activities of the community (i.e. reed boat construction, fishing, basket making, curving millstone, and employment in less paying jobs) continued being the source of livelihood (Gedef 2014). Some members of the community organized

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215 Interview with Amare Tadese, Bahir Dar, February 17 2020

216 The term *Negede* itself used to refer to tribe (Leslaw 1976).

themselves to form fishing cooperatives using motorboats equipped with modern nylon gillnets and extended their fishing area from the shore to the deeper parts of the lake. However, the majority of fishers, who were unable to join cooperatives, confined themselves in the shallow parts of the lake where they could only catch a very small number and low-quality fish. Often, their catch was enough merely for domestic consumption and meeting their daily needs. To date, the Negede Weyto use ineffective traditional fishing method to exploit the rich fishery resources. According to informants, this is accounted to lack of cooperation among community members and the absence of support from government agents to provide business start-up loans and grants.<sup>217</sup> Informants highlighted that even when the relationships between the Amhara and Negede Weyto communities looks to have been improving, some aspects of social exclusion and discrimination made collaboration in cooperative businesses impossible.

### **Intensified Marginalization in times of the EPRDF (1991 up to present)**

In July 1991, after the demise of the military socialist government, the country adopted a new Constitution that declared the establishment of a federal system with nine regional states as founding members (Van der Beken 2007). The Constitution stipulates that the sovereignty of the state is vested in nations, nationalities, and peoples [ethnic groups] of Ethiopia.<sup>218</sup> The Constitution further provides each ethnic group the right to self-administration and fair representation both at federal and regional levels (Article 39(3)). By implication, the Constitution gives special attention to the equality and protection of the rights of ethnic groups and minorities.

Yet the social and economic challenges of the Negede Weyto continue even after the introduction of the federal system. The construction of Chara Chara Dam around Lake Tana in 1995 reduced the hydrological cycle of the river and the water level of the lake was affected significantly. This development project was undertaken by the federal government to regulate the outflow of water from Lake Tana and use the water for irrigation farming and hydroelectric power generation at Tana Beles dam. The socio-economic impact assessment of the project sidelined the interest of the Negede Weyto and their historical

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217 Interview with Abdella Hassen, Bahir Dar, April 05 2020

218 Article 8(1) of the Constitution.

attachment with the lake. The regulation of water flow has also affected the shore side leading to the drying out of vegetation including the papyrus, which is one of the key raw materials the Negede Weyto use to sustain their lives (Dessalegn 2013; Ayalew et.al. 2008).

With the exception of the forest in Zege peninsula in the southwest side of the lake and some pockets of forests around churches, the shores of the lake were affected by the project (Dessalegn 2013; Ayalew et.al. 2008). The amount of untreated waste and silt flooding to the lake made the shallow inner surface to swell up into a small hill.<sup>219</sup> This polluted the shallow part of the lake where fish usually spawns and breeds but also the hill-like inner structures block fish movement during breeding seasons, impacting the productivity of the Negede Weyto traditional fishers who are accustomed to fishing on the shallow part of the lake along the shores. Further, local government officials gave out the wetland to the youth as farm plots (McCartney et.al. 2008:18). The Negede Weyto expressed their concern and fear that recession farms around Lake Tana would endanger their lives.

Another challenge the Negede Weyto are currently facing include displacement. As stated by informants, whenever the town grows and expands, the Negede Weyto are often displaced and pushed further to the remote and shanty areas. Community members living in the outskirts of Bahir Dar also struggle to have permanent residential land. Settlement pattern of the community is temporary because of continuous displacement by the ongoing “none participatory” development activities.

Study informants further accentuated that the community is excluded from political representation and leadership positions at all levels of the government structure. Even when the community assimilated to certain Amhara culture, previous forms of social exclusion against the Negede Weyto still remain intact.<sup>220</sup>

Informants confirmed that the community abandoned some practices and habits, such as their dietary habit, to gain acceptance among neighboring communities. Religion is another source of discrimination for the Negede Weyto. Although the majority of the community are

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219 Interview with Abdella Hassen, Bahir Dar, April 05 2020

220 Interview with Amare Tadese, Bahir Dar, February 17 2020; interview with Abdella Hassen, Bahir Dar, April 05 2020.

Muslims, other Muslims from neighboring Amhara communities do not consider them as such. More so, the Amhara Muslims do not recognize the Negede Weyto village-Mosque in Bahir Dar as a proper place for prayers (Zerihun 2010). Accordingly, the Negede Weyto are not allowed to worship in the Grand Mosque, and to dine together with other Muslims. Zerihun explained the level of religious exclusion by other Muslims extends to prohibiting intermarriage with the Negede Weyto (2010). Informants of the study emphasize that the religious exclusion by other Muslims is related to the practice of saint veneration that the Negede Weyto practice against the conventional practice of Islam. The Negede Weyto venerate Sheikh Nurhussien of Bale whom the group consider as their patron saint, known locally as Sheikh Abinaz.

Exclusion of the Negede Weyto is also evident in service provision (Dessalegn et.al. 2013; Ajala 2011). Though unemployment is a common problem in the region, the Negede Weyto are further disadvantaged because of lack of education and access to basic social services. Regardless of the previous discrimination the community has been facing, the government has not provided any affirmative action to empower the Negede Weyto and work towards improving their status.

Indeed, it is irrefutable that since the Derge period, economic and social interaction between the surrounding Amhara communities and the Negede Weyto has improved slightly; there is now better economic interdependence and economic relation. In rural areas, the Negede Weyto and Amhara farmers cooperate and work in the form of *Debo* or *Wonfel*.<sup>221</sup> In Bahir Dar town, the Negede Weyto sell firewood, papyrus stalk for fences, and baskets to the surrounding community. Few extended the relationship to the level of intermarriage.<sup>222</sup>

At the federal level, the EPRDF government took several measures to protect the rights of minorities by introducing ethnic and linguistic based federalism and enforcing minority friendly Constitution. Nonetheless, the Negede Weyto has not benefited from measures undertaken to empower and protect minority group

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221 *Debo* or *Wonfel* is cooperative work in which a group of farmers work one's farming job in one day and the farmer who receives free labour would pay back to each of those who assist him in other days.

222 Interview with Abdella Hassen, Bahir Dar, April 05 2020; Interview with Kalkidan A, *kebele* 16, February 18 2020.

rights. This is mainly attributed to the categorization of the Negede Weyto as occupational group and not as a minority ethnic group.

Minority group status and recognition is expressed in terms of both ethnicity and occupation. In the literature, the Negede Weyto is described as an occupational caste and an ethnic minority. Occupational minorities are groups who are despised, excluded, and marginalized by the wider society due to their occupation, inherited through generations. In this regard, some scholars argue that occupational caste exists when society is organized in a caste system, ascribed at birth. Freeman (2003:256) discusses the conceptual confusion and lack of clarity on categorization as follows:

*It is not possible to correlate craftwork with stigmatization in general because most farmers carry out some form of craftwork alongside their farming. House building, thatching and rope-making are just some of the crafts done by farmers. Furthermore, it is not possible simply to distinguish despised crafts from those that are not despised, because this varies enormously throughout the area. In Gurage, for example, woodwork is carried out by a despised minority group, whereas in most other areas woodwork can be done by anyone. Weaving is carried out by a despised group in Kafa, but is a respected occupation for any man in Gamo. It is also impossible to correlate a type of craft with a particular named marginalized group. ... Neither is it possible to correlate the type or degree of stigmatization of different artisan groups with the type of craft they practice. Smiths have a relatively high status in some societies, such as Gurage and Shekacho, and yet are the most feared and marginalized in other societies, such as Malo and Oyda. ... Attempts to correlate the type or degree of stigmatization of artisan groups with the form of the majority society have also failed.*

However, occupation as identity in Northwest Ethiopia is not only passed down through generations but also socially constructed (Quirin 1998; Teshale 1995). From this point of view, the Negede Weyto life as occupational minority is socially constructed.

## Conclusion

A historical analysis of the Negede Weyto indicates the autonomous status of the community as an egalitarian occupational group. The study found out that the community had no or limited involvement in politics during the 19<sup>th</sup> century feudal society exposing them to marginalization and social exclusion.

Even though, the severity and magnitude of social exclusion and marginalization varies across political regimes, this study emphasizes the Negede Weyto has been subjected to exclusion and ostracization for centuries. The factors accounting to the exclusion range from structural factors such as access to basic social services to societal level factors related to social stereotyping. It should be noted that the community has been marginalized mostly for its cultural and religious values. Such aspects of exclusion involve being deprived of the basic rights to exercise one's religion. The Negede Weyto has for long been deprived of access to economic and political opportunities and political recognition both at regional and federal levels. Regardless of the promotion of rights of ethnic groups and minorities under the legal framework of the country, this article alludes that attention should be given to the quest of Negede Weyto for freedom from discrimination, equal participation and access to public services and resources.

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