Identity at Risk: The Case of Zay Community on the Islands of Lake Ziway

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Article History: Received: June 12, 2017; Revised: November 20, 2017; Accepted: November 27, 2017

Abstract: Identity is a dynamic concept that changes following the changes in the social and physical environments. It is one of the things that people value. The study examines the challenges and risks posed to the identity of Zay community of Lake Ziway islands. For this study, descriptive cross-sectional qualitative research design was used and a thematic approach to data analysis was employed. Data were gathered using key informant interview, in-depth interview, focus group discussions, and non-participatory observation. Data were sorted out, categorized, and analyzed thematically. The findings of the study revealed that the identity of Zay community is presently at a greater risk of extinction as an ethnic group due to socio-economic, environmental, and political factors. It was discovered that continued migration of Zay community members to the nearby and faraway places mainly for economic survival, among others, takes the lion’s share in endangering their identity. Migration exposed them to intermixing with other ethnic groups, particularly the Oromo. Those who left home due to migration to other places were not only influenced by others’ cultures but also in turn influenced those left behind at home. Migration of its members in large number contributed not only to the diminishing number of Zay community on the islands but also to the erosion of its culture and traditions. To save the identity of the community from gradual extinction, the study suggests the need for social, economic, cultural, and environmental protection and legal recognition for the community by all concerned stakeholders.

Keywords: Culture; Identity; Migration; Risk; Zay community
1. Introduction
This study deals with the challenges and risks posed to the identity of Zay community living on the islands of Lake Ziway. According to CSA (2007), there are eighty five ethnic groups that are officially recognized. The fact, however, is that Ethiopia is a home of more than this number of ethnic groups having their own separate identity though not officially recognized. These ethnic groups differ from each other in terms of the size of their population and the territory they occupy. The ethnic-based federalism in Ethiopian is assumed to have room to accommodate both ethnic majorities and minorities. However, given a large number of ethnic groups and the way they have been treated, the country has not been able to properly address the concerns of the ethnic majorities let alone the minorities. As one of the minority ethnic groups in Ethiopia, Zay community has been given little or no attention by the government which has exposed the community to various socio-cultural risks. The need to survive both socially and economically has also been forcing the community to migrate to the nearby mainland abandoning their original habitats (the islands). This has led to intermingling with the surrounding Oromo both socially, culturally, economically and biologically.

Identity is one of the most catchy and salient words. It has a strong association with ethnicity and used by people as a means of differentiating themselves from others. In its broader sense, identity answers the question ‘who or what a group is?’ From a sociological point of view, identity emerges from the social constructs not from the individual biological being. Hence, identity is about social categories and relationships. The categorical aspect of identities dictates that identity is about the location of people in a social space. Besides, the relational aspect of social identity indicates the fact that identities are limited: ‘we are what we are not’. People can possess multiple identities at a time like ethnic identity, national identity, religious identity, cultural identity, professional identity, etc. However, social identities such as ethnic identity and national identity are believed to be long lasting than other types of identities. They are termed ‘primary identities’ (Demmers, 2017).

The social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979) claims that people define their identities in reference to social groups and this kind of definition helps to protect and strengthen their self-identity. Hence, group or collective identity emerges out of the dichotomy “in-group” and “out-group”. The theory further discusses the processes of change or stability from the perspective of disadvantaged social groups and the various strategies available to such groups.

Joseph (2015) pointed out discrimination, exploitation, alienation, and deprivation as potential causes of an identity problem. The scholar argued that the problem starts when people develop the feeling that they are not recognized, accepted, valued, and their indigenous values, habits, and practices are blocked and are deprived of something that they are entitled to. Inability to meet daily/basic needs also makes people become stressed and compromise their social identity. Identity problems can occur both in the majority and minority communities. However, minority

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1 Also called Hara Dambal or Laaqii Dambal in Afaan Oromoo
communities are more likely to face identity related challenges than majority communities due to the fear of losing something they have been enjoying for a long period of time. Garg (2007, as cited in Joseph, 2015), also mentioned that ethnic minorities with poor socio-economic development are more likely to suffer identity problems than ethnic groups that are socio-economically well-off.

Similarly, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report (2010) stated that ethnic minorities are entitled with the right to protection of their cultural, religious or linguistic identity. It also emphasized the key importance of ensuring identity rights for minorities in managing diversity and creating stability. The report further stressed assimilation policies are likely to cause extinction of minority identity whereas integration allows minority identity to grow independently while becoming part of the dominant identity. The following are taken as signs of potential assimilation policies: failure to recognize/denial of the presence of minorities, blocking the cultural practices of minorities, and strong promotion of one dominant cultural or religious identity in the name of ‘nation-building’. The report also mentioned the key role education plays in the protection of minority identity. Minorities’ access to education, the medium of communication in education and the cultural content of education are important issues to be considered when one thinks of education for minorities.

On the other hand, in their study conducted on the cultural identity crisis of the Blang people, Chunai, Li Qin, and Yinzhu (2012) mentioned that the changes in the ecology gradually forced the Blang people to shift their means of livelihood from hunting and gathering to farming. When agricultural production was unable to meet the needs of some members of the community, the new generation (almost 2/3) moved to cities in search of a better job and pay, though unintentionally socialized with another culture. Like UNDP (2010), they mentioned the crucial role that education plays in preserving and disseminating the cultural identity of a society and bringing change as well. However, in their study, the authors identified that the function of school education in terms of transmitting cultural heritage and diffusing knowledge was less as minority students were found to have neither good command of modern knowledge nor learn their traditional cultural knowledge. In addition, they pointed out the serious impact that ‘subjective consciousness’ (self-expression) has on the cultural identity of an ethnic group with smaller population. Due to their narrow cultural circle and limited capacity to preserve their heritage, they usually develop a feeling of being lost and gradually lose their self-expression. Hence, they lose confidence in their own culture and aspire for the mainstream culture. Besides, Hui (2012; cited in Chunai et al., 2012), indicated the contemporary rapid decline of cultural identity of the minority.

Bassi (2014) pointed out ethnic minorities in Ethiopia are facing serious challenges due to the unmet promises stipulated in the constitution. Many of them are not politically represented and consulted on issues pertaining to them. Hence, they are exposed to threat.

Currently, Zay community is facing various challenges that are exposing its identity to risk. These challenges and their consequences have not been thoroughly identified
and evaluated so far. Some of the existing studies on the community have not focused on the identity at risk. For instance, Meyer (2006) emphasized on the linguistic aspect of Zay while giving less attention to the risk posed to the community’s identity. Similarly, a study conducted by W/Michael (2008) stressed on communication gap due to linguistic plurality among family members of Zay. Doda (2008) also studied the Zay emphasizing fishery crisis using ethnographic approach. Moreover, Vinson, Abbink, and Luning (2012) wrote about Zay within the broader ethnographic context of the community without focusing on the issue of identity independently. Generally, these studies lack a specific focus on the identity issues of the community. Hence, the current reality on the ground demands a critical sociological inquiry into the identity challenges being encountered by Zay community.

The aim of this study, therefore, is to assess the factors or challenges that are putting the identity of Zay community at risk, identify some indicators of the risks, and come up with possible recommendations on how to maintain the identity of the community.

2. Research Methods
2.1. Description of the Study Area
The islands of Lake Ziway are where Zay community has been living for long. The lake is located alongside Baatuu/Ziway town in Oromiya National Regional State at about 160 Km south of Addis Ababa (Regassa, 1990). The lake has five islands of which three are located in the Arsii zone and two are in the East Shawaa zone of Oromiya region. Dabra Tseyon (Tulluu Guddoo), Aysut (Dhaddacha) and Famat (Fundurro) islands are located in Arsii zone while Galila and Dabra Sina islands are in East Shawaa zone. Dabra Tseyon is the largest island. Except Dabra Sina (inhabited in the past by Zay community but currently unoccupied), the remaining four islands are still inhabited by Zay community. Currently, Aysut is the most populated island followed by Dabra Tseyon, Famat, and Galila (currently inhabited by one household/person only). According to interviewees of this study, the islands have no predatory beasts, and domestic animals live and sleep comfortably outside (mostly in forests) day and night. Unlike other islands, Dabra Tseyon has many hot springs that are being used for bathing by the Islanders and the mainlanders. Moreover, Knutsson (1969) and Edeto (1988) indicated all the islands have astonishing indigenous stone terraces built by ancient Zay to reduce soil erosion and shortage of farm land.

The community has access to education. Dabra Tseyon and Aysut have primary schools from grade 1 to 6. The residents of Famat Island go to schools located in Aysut or nearby mainland. The medium of instruction on both islands is Afaan Oromoo. The inhabitants of the islands lead a subsistence life based on fishing and small farming. Besides, Knutsson (1969) mentioned that the community has a long-established trade and cultural relationships with the surrounding Oromo community. Galila and Dabra Sina islands were inhabited in the long past but gradually the residents moved to the nearby mainland (Boccesaa village and Baatuu/Ziway town). Besides, those who moved from the three islands in the Arsii zone are living
in the adjacent mainland such as Maqii town, Baatuu/Ziway town, Maqadalaa, Heeraraa, Bashiiraa, Qorkee Adii, Matoo Arbaa, Qaraaruu Shubii, etc. villages. The community has its own distinct language named Zayigna. It is spoken by all the Islanders and elders in the mainland, with lesser degree by Zay youth in the mainland. Zay community follows Orthodox Christianity and every island has its own church. Even though a census has not been taken for the community so far by the government of Ethiopia, according to key informants, the total number of households on the islands is currently around 450. As Henze (1973) and Vinson et al. (2012) mentioned, Zay are found in the nearby towns and villages on the mainland in large number, though almost all are mixed with different ethnic groups (mostly the Oromo) through marriage and other ties. Doda (2008) also stated the majority of Zay community lives on the mainland in east Shawaa and Arsii zones of Oromiya region.

Figure 1: Geographic distribution of Zay community
Source: Meyer (2006)

2.2. Research Design
As part of the overall strategy of the study, qualitative cross-sectional descriptive research design was used to assess the identity condition of the community under
study, employing qualitative research method. According to Creswell (2003), this type of research design is helpful to get deep insight about the beliefs, attitudes, and shared values and institutions of a social group in its natural setting.

2.3. Sources of Data
In order to collect the necessary data for the study, both primary and secondary sources were consulted carefully. Accordingly, primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews and non-participatory observation. Secondary data were obtained through exhaustive reviews of published and unpublished written sources.

2.4. Sampling Technique and Sample Size
From the two most populated islands (Aysut/Dhadacha and Dabra Tseyon/Tulluu Guddoo), Dabra Tseyon was selected by lot as both exist in similar socio-economic and environmental conditions. From the mainland, Baatuu/Ziway town, Bocceessa village, and Maqii town and its environs were included in the sample. These areas were selected purposefully due to the fact that they are inhabited by a large number of Zay community and believed to represent the remaining mainland the community lives in.

Accordingly, for an in-depth interview, seven information-rich interviewees from each of the four aforementioned selected sites (totally 28) were contacted using snowball sampling technique. In each of the selected sites, one FGD was conducted with members of the community having similar socio-demographic characteristics. Participants of each FGD varied from six to ten. One key informant interviewee from each area was selected on the basis of his/her firsthand knowledge about the community. Besides, non-participatory observation was conducted to observe the social, economic, and environmental conditions/situations of the community employing observation checklist. In addition to the notes written down, some interviews and FGDs were tape-recorded.

2.5. Method of Data Analysis
After verbatim transcription of the data obtained from interviews, FGDs and non-participatory observations, careful thematic analysis was made to gain in-depth understanding about the current identity condition of the community under study.

3. Results and Discussion
This section presents the results of the study along with the findings and discussions concerning the existing identity condition of Zay community based on the themes emerged from the data analysis.

3.1. Factors Putting the Identity of Zay Community at Risk
3.1.1. Lack of legal recognition as an ethnic group
According to Slimane (2003), some ethnic groups living in various parts of Africa are victimized by policies of assimilation into dominant groups or cultures. Due to this, these ethnic groups are of the view that they are disadvantaged as a result of the
absence of appropriate legal recognition. They do not have access to political power and administration of public issues on their own. Hence, the very existence of the identity of minorities in Africa is at risk given the intention of states to place them under the leadership of the major ethnic groups. Similarly, Minority Rights Group International (2003), in its report to the European Commission, emphasized the importance of legal and constitutional reforms along with representation and involvement of minorities in legislative organs to strengthen minority governance structures. It added that this effort becomes real when the presence and rights of the minority are recognized and included in the legislative systems. Furthermore, the constitution of Ethiopia grants ethnic groups the right to speak and develop their own language; express, develop and promote their culture; and preserve their history (Article 39 (2)).

Despite the above literature, however, the study revealed the presence of noticeable political influence on Zay community. All respondents emphasized that Zay community has lived in the area for centuries, but its identity has not been recognized constitutionally/legally yet. A key informant in Baatuu/Ziway town stated:

The constitution of Ethiopia clearly articulates that all nations, nationalities, and peoples have the right to be recognized, speak and learn in their language, and develop their culture. However, Zay community is denied of these and other fundamental rights, especially the right to be recognized as a distinct ethnic group.

In addition, some key and in-depth interview respondents in Baatuu/Ziway town indicated that local administrators do not allow them to conduct meetings about issues relating to identity of Zay community. They either arrange meetings in individuals’ private houses or on one of the nearby islands on Lake Ziway.

Similarly, a key informant in Maqii town put:

It is so sad to see the current status of Zay vis-à-vis the constitution. Our community has its own language, culture, and shared psychological makeup but we are not recognized. We have been living in this area [the islands] for centuries. Oromiya is our home: we have no other place. However, we are ignored and forgotten. The issue needs political willingness and commitment by administrators of the region.

Zay community was not included in the population and housing census carried out by the government of Ethiopia in 1984, 1994, and 2007. Even though the enumerators’ manual has a space to fill in ethnic group, there is no code assigned for Zay. Here, it could be easily inferred that Zay community has not been recognized as a distinct ethnic group.

Related to this, a key informant on Dabra Tseyon Island strongly asserted that:

Identity is so precious; it is not something we can easily dismiss or ignore. However, Zay community has been ignored for decades. For instance, whenever there is population and housing census, people come to count us, but the name of the community is not in the list. So they just categorize us into ‘other ethnic groups’. For me, this is a complete denial of our existence.

According to FGD discussants and majority of the in-depth interviewees, the political influence on Zay community is not from the surrounding ordinary Oromo people but from administrators/officials working at federal, regional and local levels. In connection with this, a key informant pointed out “we do not have problem with the common people of the Oromo community. However, officials at different levels
are not willing to recognize Zay community and its language, though they are aware of our presence.” Even though the community has frequently requested for recognition and representation, no solution has been given to date. Related to this, Vinson et al. (2012) mentioned that the community presented its request of representation to the House of Federation in 1987, 1998, 2001, 2002, and 2004. With neither positive nor negative response, the House of Federation mentioned the need to study the area to decide whether representation or a liyu woreda (special district) status could be allowed for Zay community or not. Besides, the House of Federation sent a letter to the Oromiya National Regional State to look for a solution, which, in fact, resulted in nothing.

In relation to the above, a key informant sadly stated:

Despite we fulfill the requirements for recognition and frequently apply to the concerned bodies, no solution has been obtained so far. Our request for recognition started some 15-20 years ago but the majority of officials at various levels are not willing. Some ten years back, a group of volunteers from Zay members presented (again) a request for recognition and representation to the House of Federation which, later on, was forwarded to the Oromiya National Regional State for further inquiry and prompt response. The regional government, however, took a very long time without giving any response. Following the frequent request by the representatives of the community, the region decided to investigate even the existence of the community itself and established a committee for the same. Around 2013/14, the committee confirmed that Zay community exists both on the islands and neighboring mainland having its own language, culture and collective sentiment. Despite this fact, no response has been given by the regional government. After a very long time of silence, the regional government established another (new) investigation committee for the second time. Like the previous committee, the new committee also came up with the same finding. As usual, no response was given by the regional government. However, while our request for recognition is pending, selected members of the community have participated in Ethiopian nation, nationalities, and people’s day celebrated in Dire Dawa. This was the first and the last for Zay community as it did not participate in the subsequent celebrations. Generally, both the regional and federal governments are silent on our issue.

As key informants indicated, the community had also a political organization named Zay People’s Democratic Organization (ZPDO). This organization, however, could not survive the unwelcoming pressure from the regional government and internal skirmishes. Some influential members left the organization unprotected due to the absence of conducive political environment. Overall, it could be said that the Zay has been experiencing serious political challenges and its identity is at potential risk.

3.1.2. The absence of opportunity to learn primary school education in a mother tongue

The constitution of Ethiopia in its Article 5 (1), states “All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition”. Related to this, in its Article 39 (2), the constitution stipulates that “Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history”. Internationally as well, Minority Rights Group International (2003) put emphasis on the need to address education
needs from a minority rights perspective. Among other issues, it underlined that minorities should attend primary education in their mother tongues with curricula showing their cultures. This helps to make sure that minorities are integrated.

It is possible to infer from these pieces of documents that education in a mother tongue is a key issue for communities in developing and preserving their languages and cultures. In contrary to this, the study, however, revealed that the children of Zay community have never attended primary education in their mother tongue (Zayigna) to date. For instance, during the Imperial and the Derg regimes, Zay children on the islands used to attend primary education in Amharic language. After the downfall of the Derg regime, they were forced to attend primary education in Afaan Oromoo. For the majority of in-depth interviewees and FGD discussants, both Zayigna and Afaan Oromoo are equally important languages: the former for the preservation of the community’s identity and the later for cultural integration with neighboring Oromo community. However, it was pointed out that it became a challenge for their children as they speak Zayigna at home and must switch to Afaan Oromoo at school. To help the children have a better understanding of what they learn and maintain the identity of the community, the majority of the respondents suggested Zayigna be used as a medium of instruction in primary school with Afaan Oromoo and Amharic as subjects. If this is not possible for various reasons, Amharic was preferred by some respondents to be used as a medium of instruction with Afaan Oromoo and Zayigna as subjects. This is due to the fact that the Zay are Orthodox Christians and have access to learn Amharic language easily in the church. Regarding this, an in-depth interviewee on Dabra Tseyon Island stated:

We do not need anything extraordinary, we need just rightful recognition. Our children are not getting a proper education as they are not learning either in their mother tongue or in a language they prefer. They are confused as all their parents do not speak Afaan Oromoo at home, though some parents communicate in Afaan Oromoo when they are in the mainland for shopping and other purposes. This also became a challenge for teachers in helping the students understand the subject and contributed to poor quality education and performance of students. The teachers [assigned by the Oromiyaa regional government] do not speak or understand Zayigna. Hence, our children should attend primary school in Zayigna or Amharic along with Afaan Oromoo as a subject.

All respondents strongly pinpointed out that the community should be saved from cultural extinction. Related to this, an in-depth interviewee expressed:

I do not think there will be a problem to the regional government if our children learn in their mother tongue. If this community disappears culturally, it would be bad history. I feel recognizing and protecting this community would be an asset for the country in general and the regional government in particular.

On the other hand, some respondents among mainland Zay emphasized the importance of attending primary education in Afaan Oromoo with Zayigna as a subject. They indicated that this would have a dual purpose: getting a job in Oromiyaa region and maintaining the identity of the community.

By and large, there is a serious concern in the community about the regional and federal governments’ reluctance to recognize Zay identity. Nonetheless, the study indicated that majority of respondents have a positive attitude toward the simultaneous use of Zayigna as a medium of instruction along with Afaan Oromoo.
and Amharic as subjects. However, some others preferred their children to attend school in Afaan Oromoo along with Zayigna as a subject or Amharic as a medium of instruction along with Zayigna and Afaan Oromoo as subjects. The finding of the study is almost in line with Vinson, et al. (2012: 113) in which they indicated that “There is a desire among many Zay that their children have the opportunity to learn in Zay along with Oromo[o] and Amharic”. Besides, Jordan, Netzley, and Mohammed (2011: 5) stated “Zay people believed Oromo[o] and Zay to be equally important languages to pass along to their children.”

3.1.3. Merged administration
According to respondents, during the imperial period, Zay had a self-rule system called Balabbat (local administrator appointed by the imperial dynasty) that was responsible for overseeing all the islands and the mainland around Lake Ziway. With the overthrow of the imperial regime by the Derg, the Balabbat administrative system was replaced by the so-called kebele administration (the lowest administrative unit under a district) where elected chairpersons from the community administered the islands with each island having the status of a kebele. Even after the fall of the Derg in 1991, Zay continued to exercise self-rule until the 1995 general election. However, after this election, authorities decided to merge the Zay and the surrounding Oromo community administrations. Accordingly, Aysut Island was merged with Heeraraa administration, and Famat and Dabra Tseyon Islands with Bashirraa administration in the Arsii zone of Oromiyaa region. Gelila and Dabra Sina islands were combined with Bocceessaa (where most of the residents on these two islands settled) in the east Shawaa zone. In this new administration, the Oromo held the chairperson position of the kebele while the Zay assumed the vice-chairperson position. As respondents indicated, most of the time, the kebeles vice-chairpersons are nominal as they are not decision makers on major issues pertaining to their respective islands. As a key informant stated, “practically, the vice-chairpersons on the islands do not have power. They are just messengers/bridge between the island community and the mainland administration. We do not finish all our cases on the islands.” As there is no actually functioning administrative structure on the islands, it is clear to understand that the Islanders are expected to cross the lake every time and visit the administration in the mainland when they are in need of administrative services. This is another serious challenge the community is facing.

Thus, the finding shows the presence of some sort of political influence and the problem of good governance on Zay community. In sum, it can be argued that the federal government in general and the regional government in particular seem to prefer systematic assimilation of Zay community into the mainstream Oromo community through language and merge of the islands’ administration with the mainland. Complementing this finding, Dovidio, Gaertner, Pearson, and Riek (2005) stated that while assimilation is a cultural ideal chosen by members of the majority group, integration (with its core principle of multiculturalism) is preferred by members of a minority group.
The residents of Gelila and Dabra Sina islands have already moved to the nearby mainland and joined the local administration. Similarly, Zay community members who moved (long before) from Dabra Tseyon, Aysut, and Famat islands to the nearby mainland such as Baatuu/Ziway, Maqii, and Asallaa towns, and Maqadalaa, Heeraraa and Bashiiraa villages, etc have joined the administrative structure already established by the local government in their respective destination areas.

3.1.4. Migration to the nearby mainland
Migration is another contributing factor for the identity of Zay community to be at risk. The community members are still migrating to the nearby towns and their surrounding due to various causes. The major causes are discussed and interpreted as follow.

3.1.4.1. Shortage of farm land and decreased productivity of the islands
As FGD discussants and in-depth interviewees indicated, by the time the islands were densely populated, cultivable land was a major problem. As a result, a large number of Zay community members migrated to the nearby mainland in search of farmland. This migration continues to date with varying degrees. In fact, the reason for the existing migration is not shortage of farmland as such but extremely decreased productivity of the land and other resources on the islands. In connection with this, an in-depth interviewee mentioned:

Life on the islands is full of challenges. Particularly, farming becomes tough when you get old. You cannot climb and go over the hills as you want. The productivity of land is also not as it was before: it has been decreasing from time to time due to environmental degradation and a shortage of rain. Sometimes, we get food aid from the government. In a very worst case, we sell our cattle and buy food and other consumables. When our children finish their primary education, they go to Ziway or Maqii to further their education. This also brings another economic challenge for us. Hence, it is better to look for other options outside the islands than suffering here.

Besides, FGD discussants from Dabra Tseyon indicated that there was a wild beast locally named *Golja* (Warthog) that damages their crops and forces them to stay outside their home day and night looking after their crops. This could be another cause of migration before. In support of this point, an in-depth interviewee at Dabra Tseyon stated:

In the past, the island had forest and fertile land. However, today we do not have dense forest and the land is also less productive due to erosion. It is very sad that no one takes care of the soil and the forest. Besides, long ago, there was *Golja* that used to damage our crops. But it disappeared due to natural causes and hunting.

Hence, the beast [in the past] and the decreased productivity of the land [currently] have contribution in the migration of the community members to the mainland.

Based on the above responses, it is possible to infer that shortage of farmland in the past and extremely decreased productivity of land in recent times coupled with the damages caused by wild beast have contributed their parts for the migration of a large number of the community’s members to the nearby mainland. Today, one can find large number of Zay community members living in Maqadalaa and Waldayaa areas
(near Maqii town), Bocceessa (near Baatuu/Ziway town), Asallaa town, Heeraraa and Bashiir areas.

In addition, an in-depth interviewee in Baatuu/Ziway town stated:

Historically, Zay community has migrated to different places in Oromiyaa region. For instance, there is Laaqqii [Zay] ethnic group around Arsii Nageellee. The name ‘Laaqqii’ (paddler), which is considered as derogatory or not liked by the islanders (particularly Dabra Tseyon), was given by the surrounding Oromo to Zay community referring to their paddling activity on the lake. In Arsii Nageellee, Zay are named after their clan’s name as Laaqqii Woyyoo, Laaqqii Warree, Laaqqii Haroressaa, and Laaqqii Shaallaa.

According to this in-depth interviewee, since all clans of the community speak Afaan Oromoo and practice the culture of Oromo, they are generally named as Laaqqii Oromoo. Currently, there are attempts to reconnect the Laaqqii Oromoo with Zay community living in Bocceessa. In support of this finding, Henze (1973) and Doffana (2001) indicated the presence of people on the island in Lake Lagano called ‘Tulluu Laaqqii’ [mountain of Laaqqii]. They have socio-cultural and historical similarity with Zay on the islands of Lake Ziway. It seems that Zay migration to the nearby areas of the Oromo has contributed to the gradual erosion of Zay identity as the migrants have been exposed to other cultures and traditions.

3.1.4.2. Dwindling fish (particularly Qoroso) resource

As in-depth interviewees and FGD discussants from Debre Tseyon Island pointed out, the community is engaged in fishing (besides small farming) and is still the main source of income. However, overfishing (indiscriminate fishing), illegal fishing, irrigation activities from different directions of the lake, the introduction of new species of fish locally termed as Ambaza (Catfish) that consumes the most demanded fish type known as Qoroso (Tilapia) and encroaches foods and grasses used by Qoroso as shelter, and overall disturbance of the lake’s ecology have resulted in the near extinction of Qoroso fish resource in the lake. In addition to Catfish, the government recently released another type of fish named Jape (Barbo). The interviewees mentioned that the fishes other than Qoroso have less market demand. In relation to the problems encountered by the lake, an in-depth interviewee clearly stated:

Our community was blessed with resources of Lake Ziway for centuries. Besides eating, the fat from fish was used as an oil to get light during night time and cook different kinds of foods. It had also medicinal values. However, currently this resource does not exist due to both manmade and natural causes. Today, we are suffering a lot and some have left the islands.

Moreover, respondents of in-depth interview and FGD participants in the mainland asserted that the fish resource of Lake Ziway was also negatively affected by the chemical released from Share Flower Company built/established very close to the shore of the lake. As 71 years old in-depth interviewee expressed:

When I saw fishes dying and floating on the shorelines of the lake, I felt as if I lost many of my relatives. It is so sad. This situation was worse particularly in the past few years since the establishment of Share Flower Company in this area.

Besides, all the respondents expressed their worries about the fate of Lake Ziway given its exposure to various risks. Its volume is decreasing tremendously mainly due
to over irrigation and siltation among others. If these conditions continue unabated, the lake is likely to disappear in the long run. This could further endanger Zay identity on the islands.

According to Minority Rights Group International (2003), states should review environmental conditions to make sure that minorities are not in danger. From the above results, however, it could be inferred that resource related challenge is one of the causes for migration of the community to the nearby mainland in search of alternative means of livelihood. This possibly indicates the fact that the government has not given due attention to the community and the environment they live in, particularly the lake.

3.1.4.3. Lack of basic social services

Taking health care as an example, Minority Rights Group International (2003) emphasizes on minorities’ right to access to health care at their disposal without discrimination. Zay community (the Islanders), however, lack many of the basic services. As the respondents mentioned and the personal observation of the researchers showed, except the primary schools established on Dabra Tseyon and Aysut islands, the community has no access to other basic social services like healthcare, clean drinking water, safe transportation, etc. In this regard, one key informant precisely stated:

Living on the islands is demanding. We have no basic social services including health care service, even for emergency cases. Pregnant women, children, and the elderly do not get immediate health treatment. There is no clean drinking water.

We are forgotten by the government. God is the only hope we have.

In-depth interview respondents and FGD participants on the island almost unanimously stated that mostly women give birth at home with a higher risk of complications. In order to get health service and secondary education for their children among others, the community has to cross the lake and this is an awful risk to take. Though there are engine boats introduced by private business men, paddler boats (canoes) made of papyrus trees are still used to cross the lake to and fro for different social and economic activities as engine boats are not easily accessible due to their unaffordable fare. It was also raised that the quality of primary education on the islands has already been extremely deteriorating. Hence, it can be said that the community’s lack of basic social services is one significant factor for the community members to leave the islands for the mainland and get influenced by the culture of the mainstream community. This could be another threat to the identity of the community in the long run.

3.1.4.4. Absence of alternative job opportunity

The study revealed that particularly the youth (those with less education) and the newly married ones have been moving to nearby towns and rural areas in search of job. The observations made also revealed this very fact. The island seems to be dominated by children and aged ones than the productive age group (the youth). In support of this, an in-depth interviewee of 73 years old replied abruptly “What do the youth do here with us? The island is for children and the aged ones like me. There is
no job on the islands that fits their interest. Let them go out and help themselves and us.” Besides, it was uncovered that the educated members of the community had to join another culture in different places in the mainland as a result of job. In the course of life, some of them have been assimilated into the cultures of others. As the FGD discussants and in-depth interviewees stated, the community members living in various places in the mainland visit their parents on the islands at intervals, particularly during important social events. Here, it is possible to infer that there exists a strong social bond between the Islanders and the mainlanders Zay.

3.1.4.5. Social network with previous Zay migrants and non-Zay mainlanders

In addition to the aforementioned factors, some in-depth interviewees and FGD discussants indicated that some members of the community have migrated to the nearby mainland because of the information they got from their friends or relatives and non-Zay living there. It was emphasized that this kind of migration is particularly common among the young generation and the newly married ones. As an in-depth interviewee stated:

Since conditions are relatively convenient in towns, many youths and newly married ones do not want to live on the islands. Even now, many of them are living in towns while their parents are on the islands. I have a worry that if this trend continues, the islands may be left with very few households only with aged people and children in the future.

Generally, it suffices here to state that Zay community members have been forced to migrate to the nearby mainland primarily due to socio-economic factors. From this, it is plausible to infer that the migrants’ chance of getting assimilated into or influenced by the way of life of other ethnic groups in their destination areas is high. Hence, this may ultimately have an influence on their identity through time.

3.1.5. Poor socialization of children/youth

Nearly all respondents indicated that children (the youth) are not properly socialized with their culture and language mainly in the mainland. In these areas, the children are aware that they are of Zay origin but many of them do not know Zay history and culture and speak Zayigna, except for very few. While Afaan Oromoo is a mother tongue for Zay children especially in the villages, Amharic is mostly spoken by those in the urban areas. Overall, many children and youths speak both of these languages. From this, one can infer that the children and their parents are influenced by the mainstream culture. This is also consistent with the research findings by Chunai et al. (2012) in which they identified that due to the impact of the mainstream culture, most of the Blang minority ethnic group youth failed to speak their native language and started taking up the culture of the mainstream society than their own.

However, the failure in socializing children and youth in Zay culture is not only the problem of Zay who have migrated to the surrounding mainland but also those who are still home, on the islands. Though they are better compared to the mainlanders, today’s Islanders are not making every effort to socialize the children and the youth to the home culture in a proper manner. As respondents from Debra Tseyon Island emphasized, the indigenous culture of the community is not properly known and
The young generation. They indicated that elders and parents are not practicing their roles properly in transferring the culture to their children. As one respondent clearly stated, “The young generation does not know the culture very well. This is mostly due to our own weakness. The elders give less attention to teaching and transferring the culture to the youth.” From these respondents’ responses, it is not difficult to recognize the fact that the community is not active in transmitting its culture. If left overlooked, this would endanger the identity of the community in the future. The other factor for poor socialization of children and the youth, according to informants, is the migration of the youth to the nearby mainland for further schooling (after completing grade 6th on the islands) and to find an alternative job. There, they are exposed to the urban lifestyle and develop less interest in their culture.

3.2. Some Indicators of Risk Posed to the Identity of Zay Community

This sub-section presents some of the indicators that signal the risk posed to the identity of Zay.

3.2.1. Frequency of speaking Zayigna

During the field visit, the researchers had the opportunity to meet various members of Zay community at public venues and occasions such as transportation, market, at homes of some Zay members, and social events like funeral and marriage ceremonies. Even though elders and parents speak Zayigna in almost all of the study areas, the study revealed that the language is rarely spoken especially among children and youth of migrant parents living in the mainland. They either speak Afaan Oromoo or Amharic or both. Though elders and parents know Zayigna, they use it occasionally and when they discuss some private matters. Unlike the villagers, the majority of elders living in urban areas usually speak Amharic, followed by Afaan Oromoo or Zayigna or both. This was also evident during a funeral ceremony (in Baatuu/Ziway town) that brought together both the Islanders and the mainlanders Zay. During this funeral, while most of the mainlanders were found to use either Afaan Oromoo or Amharic or both (with some speaking Zayigna), the majority of the Islanders were observed using Zayigna. In the mainland, generally, many children do not speak Zayigna, with some only listening to it. This indicates that the degree of speaking Zayigna by the young generation in the mainland is less. Unlike the mainlanders, however, Zayigna is commonly spoken by the Islanders regardless of age difference.

Besides, during this funeral, it was observed that when mainlanders communicate with the Islanders either in Afaan Oromoo or Amharic or Zayigna (occasionally), the Islanders mostly respond to the mainlanders in Zayigna, with some responding in Afaan Oromoo or Amharic. Here, it could be understood that the Islanders listen to Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, whereas the mainlanders listen to Zayigna but not fluent in it. This also indicates that the languages of the mainstream community have a greater influence on the mainlanders than the Islanders. It can also be said that majority of Zay community members living in the mainland speak three languages:
Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and Zayigna (mostly the elders). Here, it could be inferred that the language of the community is at risk of death in the mainland as it is being spoken mainly by the elders but not commonly by the new generation.

Generally, the study indicated that the frequency of speaking Zayigna among the mainlanders is found to be lesser than the Islanders. This is a major problem particularly among the young people in the mainland. Hence, it can be said that if the number of speakers of the language continues to decrease, the probability of the language to survive (especially in the mainland) would be very less. In connection with this, Jordan et al. (2011) confirmed in their sociolinguistic survey that Zayigna is spoken less frequently by the young generation.

3.2.2. Cultural influence

An attempt has also been made to assess whether or not there is difference between Islanders and mainlanders Zay in terms of cultural influence from the mainland non-Zay community. Though there is a great deal of similarity between the Islanders and mainlanders Zay in social and cultural events, the study has shown the presence of some differences in terms of concluding marriage. Unlike the Islanders, the majority of the mainlanders Zay, especially the villagers, are largely influenced by the marriage culture of the surrounding Oromo community. In relation to this, an in-depth interviewee stated:

We lived in this area for quite long period of time. We are mixed with the Oromo community through marriage and other ties like adoption. Through time, we came to adopt some of the Oromo marriage cultures while still struggling to keep the fundamentals of our previous culture. Now, we are both Zay and Oromo.

FGD discussants and in-depth interviewee respondents of the mainland almost uniformly pointed out that if both spouses are of Zay origin, marriage is mostly celebrated as per the marriage culture of Zay, in fact with a slight difference from the Islanders. However, if one of them is of Oromo origin, marriage is usually concluded according to the Oromo marriage culture. Unlike the community living in the villages, those living in urban areas have a scattered settlement and tend to be influenced by the way of life of urbanites. Though there is a slight change/deterioration in recent times, the study revealed that the overall cultural milieu (particularly marriage culture) of the Islanders Zay is preserved relatively better than that of the mainlanders Zay.

Based on the above result, it is possible to argue that the influence of the surrounding Oromo culture largely on the mainlanders Zay is greater, with little influence on the Islanders. This could lead to the integration of the mainlanders Zay into the Oromo culture through time. The same could be explained by Yinger (1985) that, following acculturation, ethnic groups are gradually assimilated into the mainstream society through economic, political and social integration.

Though this is the case especially in the mainland, one thing, however, needs to be noted here. When the mainlanders Zay mostly practice the culture of their respective surrounding community, it does not mean that they have completely forgotten their cultural values. Since there is interaction with the Islanders during important social events, the core values connected to the culture still exist, though mixed with the
mainstream culture. This also indicates that the mainlanders Zay are of people with a dual social identity. This finding is in line with the “bi-cultural” or “two-dimensional model” of assimilation and acculturation discussed by Padilla et al. (1980; cited in Porter and Washington, 1993). The model argues that individuals can have a different identity with the receiving culture and their culture of origin. According to this model, each culture exits independently. In such kind of condition, individuals may have varying degrees of obedience to, and social interactions with, the members of the two groups. Hence, individuals can be accommodated into the host culture and yet maintain the culture of origin. Besides, Brewer et al. (1987), and Deschamps and Doise (1978), cited in Dovidio et al., 2005, and Demmers (2017) added that human beings have multiple, dynamic and context-based identities as a result of membership in various social groups.

3.2.3. Xenocentric feeling and claim of another identity among some Zay youth and adults
According to some respondents, some youth and adults (especially in the mainland) are not interested in speaking Zayigna. They even do not want to disclose themselves as Zay probably due to xenocentric feeling (low self-image) caused by different factors. They believe it makes them feel inferior before others and there is no benefit from speaking Zayigna. Related to this, a youth in Ziway/Baatuu stated “I know I am Zay but I do not think our language helps us cross a river. I am a bit afraid of speaking it particularly before people who are not Zay.” Though this is the case among the youth, majority of respondents almost unanimously indicated that the youth know that they are Zay by origin though they do not want to express it.

Contrary to this, some in-depth interviewees and key informants indicated that there are certain individuals/adults in the adjacent mainland (especially Bocceessaa and Maqadalaaa villages) and faraway places who have denied their Zay identity and started claiming the identity of other ethnic groups, mostly Oromo. As one key informant precisely described:

Some individuals whose parents are Zay origin are trying to change their identity. Some say “we are Oromo”. Some others say “we are Tigre” and still others say “we are Gurage or Silte”, etc. However, Zay is neither Oromo nor Tigre nor Gurage or Silte, though Zay language has some similarities with these ethnic groups’ language. Zay is just Zay: a combination of different ethnic groups in history but having its own language and culture.

In support of this key informant, Meyer (2006: 3) mentioned that “…Zay do not consider themselves as Gurage but as Zay.” Vinson et al. (2012) also stated that “Zay are the result of many ethnic groups coming to together…the Areñ, Silt’e, Oromo, Gurage, Tigray, and other groups in the area.”

Generally, coupled with poor socialization of youth by elders and parents, it could be inferred that lack of legal/constititutional recognition and the presence of influences from the surrounding mainstream cultures seem to result in xenocentric feeling and new identity claim by some individuals mostly living in the mainland.
3.2.4. Limited effort made by Zay intellectuals to promote and preserve Zay identity

Almost all respondents asserted that the majority of educated Zay community members living and working in different places in Ethiopia and abroad do not play the roles expected of them in the quest for recognition and effort to saving the language and culture of the community from loss. An in-depth interviewee expressed “We have many Zay intellectuals working in different offices/organizations and educational institutions. However, most of them are less concerned about their community.” In a more similar fashion, a key informant from the mainland stated “I feel that Zay intellectuals lack strong linkage among themselves. Besides, most of them are not willing even to make a little financial contribution to facilitate issues pertaining to the community”. Here, it could be deduced that educated Zay members seem to lack strong linkage among themselves.

Overall, the study revealed that the identity of Zay community has been at risk of extinction due to socio-economic, environmental, and political challenges. Despite this, however, it was identified that the community members have a strong sense of belongingness to their Zay identity. In support of the same finding, Vinson et al. (2012) indicated the presence of strong Zay sentiments.

4. Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to assess the challenges and risks posed to the identity of Zay community and suggest the way forward to protect the identity of the community. Overall, the study revealed that the identity of Zay community continued to be at risk due to economic, social, environmental and political factors. Of these, socio-economic and environmental factors seem to take the lion’s share followed by a political factor. It was uncovered that the existing migration of the community from their home base to the nearby and faraway places for economic survival is the major risk to Zay identity. This migration is largely triggered by socio-economic and environmental challenges they faced on the islands and some social ties they had with previous Zay migrants and mainstream community on the mainland.

With regards to indicators of risk posed to the identity of the community, the study found out that, though the community members have a strong sense of belongingness to their Zay identity, the frequency of speaking Zayigna and practicing Zay culture in the mainland is lesser than that of the islands. Moreover, it was identified that there are some differences of cultural influence and practices between the Islanders and the mainlanders Zay. Unlike the Islanders, the mainlanders were found to be highly influenced by cultures of the mainstream community. The results of the study have shown that children of the mainland Zay have little exposure to Zay language and culture, and some youth and adults have started developing low self-esteem toward Zay identity and claiming another identity.

To sum up, the study revealed that the identity of Zay community is at a greater risk at present time given the escalating challenges posed to it and the indicators thereof.
5. Recommendations
Owing to the results of the study, the researchers believe that there must be protection for the identity of Zay community as this would benefit not only the community but also the regional and federal governments by creating the opportunity to attract tourists to the islands. It would be also important if the community establishes its own cultural museum at a convenient place. Hence, proper policies regarding ethnic minorities (like Zay in this case) are indeed key issues. To reduce the migration of Zay community members, the government, in collaboration with the surrounding community, needs to engage in conservation works and take corrective measures on activities that endanger Lake Ziway and its ecosystem. The government should also organize awareness creation programs for the community regarding environmental conservation. The chemical pollution by Share Flower Company and other irrigation firms around the lake and the amount of water taken by both need to be monitored by the government in order to protect the lake and the community. Furthermore, basic social services like health care and clean drinking water should be provided by concerned government bodies. For emergency health care, especially for pregnant women, provision of water ambulances or ambulance boats by the government would be helpful.

The survival of ethnic groups can be ensured through safeguarding minority rights. In this regard, recognition becomes the major step forward to understand the importance of minority rights in an endeavor toward positive nation building (Slimane, 2003). Besides, Xiaodong (2005; cited in Chunai et al., 2012) has suggested recognition (among others) as one of the seven principles to be adhered to in the reconstruction of ethnic cultural identity. However, in the case of Zay community, it is identified that the lack of legal recognition is one of the challenges putting its identity at risk. Hence, given the presence of its own language, culture, geographic proximity, similar psychological makeup, and living in the area (mainly on the islands) for centuries, recognition by the government (regional and federal) is of great importance for Zay community to survive extinction.

Regarding medium of instruction, it could help a lot in preserving the identity of the community if primary school education is given using Zayigna along with Afaan Oromoo and Amharic as subjects. If this is not possible for various reasons, the other option could be learning in either Afaan Oromoo or Amharic with Zayigna as a subject. This, in fact, requires further study and discussion among the community members.

As far as administrative structure is concerned, the researchers suggest that Zay community on the islands needs to administer itself. Doing this would reduce administrative hassles faced by the community and ensure good governance.

Last, but not least, a lot needs to be done by the Zay intellectuals and to preserve the language and culture of the community. Particularly, Zay intellectuals need to have primarily a strong and meaningful linkage among themselves. Besides, they are expected to create awareness among elders and parents (both on the islands and the mainland) to teach their children the language and culture of the community. This
plays an irreplaceable role in transmitting the language and culture of the community across generations and thereby saving its identity from extinction in the long run.

6. Acknowledgments
The researchers are indebted to the respondents who devoted their precious time to provide valuable information for the study. In addition, our gratitude goes to individuals who facilitated conditions for the data collection.

7. References


