

# TIGRAY

## The Panarchy of War

- Book 2 -

EDITED BY

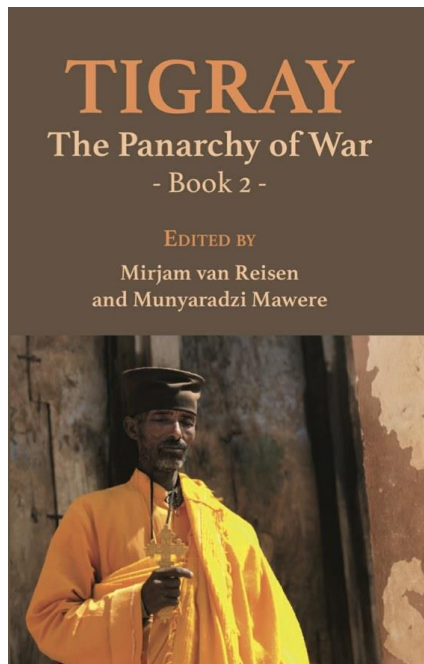
Mirjam van Reisen  
and Munyaradzi Mawere



# Tigray

## The Panarchy of War

Book 2



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**Tigray**  
**The Panarchy of War**  
Book 2

**Edited by**  
**Mirjam Van Reisen &**  
**Munyaradzi Mawere**



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The colour of the robe of the priest refers to hope of being in heaven after suffering. The picture was made in Tigray in 2020 and is depicted with consent given to its use.

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## **Disclaimer**

This research examines the perceptions of a specific community, namely the Tigray community, within a broader context like the Horn of Africa. The research acknowledges that social situations are dynamic and continually evolving. Therefore, the findings serve only as a snapshot and the authors refrain from making essentialist conclusions or generalisations beyond the study's scope. The ethnographer's perspective is subjective and may be open to debate. The research does not provide any certainties, from a legal or any other point of view.

The editors have verified the information presented to the best of their ability within the circumstances and make no claims as to absolute truthfulness. Publication is weighed on the basis of interest to understand the potential impacts of events (or perceptions of these events) on the situation. The editors recommend the reader to examine the most current information available through trustworthy channels and thus supplement the information provided in this work.

This study captures personal experiences from the Tigray region during the siege and communication blockade, without claiming to represent the only valid viewpoint. References to social groups should not be interpreted as statements about all individuals within those groups. The research is conducted without the intention of offending any individual, group, or community. We welcome immediate communication regarding any concerns related to respect or cultural integrity.

Great care has been taken to accurately represent the authors' research findings. The content of the chapters is the sole responsibility of the authors and editors. The authors welcome any additional information, feedback or claims of factual errors, which can be directed to: [mirjamvanreisen@gmail.com](mailto:mirjamvanreisen@gmail.com).

We dedicate this research to our beloved families – our sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and all our relatives. This work is also dedicated to every individual who tragically lost their life during this challenging time of war and pandemic. In the face of such profound loss, may we all find the strength to carry on.

We hold their memories in our hearts, and pray that their souls rest in eternal peace: ነብሶም ኣብ ዘለኣለማዊ ሰላም ይፅረፍ፡፡

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## Book 3

*Tigray. War in a Digital Black Hole.* (2024). Mirjam Van Reisen & Munyaradzi Mawere (eds).

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## Book 5

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## Book 6

*FAIR Data – FAIR Africa. The Africa Health Data Space.* (2025). Mirjam Van Reisen & Munyaradzi Mawere (eds).

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## Acknowledgements

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This book is the second of three books on the war in Tigray, which are the result of a five-year collaboration with the Research Network Globalisation, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC), which started in 2020. Dr Araya Abrha Medhanyie handled the organisation and coordination of the researchers engaged in this project. He has done a stellar job in extremely difficult circumstances to bring an interdisciplinary team together throughout the five years of this research programme. Dr Araya, as we call him, is always keeping himself available, connecting people, encouraging people, finding solutions for the many difficulties encountered, being available to keep spirits high under difficult circumstances and functioning as a clearing house. Dr Araya has the rare quality of being able to connect experienced and junior researchers and ensure that a good learning environment is created. He also makes sure the team members collaborate and offer mutual support. Due to his interest in interdisciplinary knowledge, he gives space for exploration and innovation. It is thanks to Dr Araya that such an excellent collection of diverse scholars has been engaged in this research. The honour for the realisation of these three books goes first and foremost to his dedication to realise this project.

Courage was needed for this project. We are very much indebted to the coordination offered by Berhe and the 'Sit Rep Team' for the Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa during the Tigray war. This was a difficult and demanding task; due to the siege, the Internet and communication block-out, and the disinformation, it required rigour. We thank Gebremedhin for interpreting some of the material. We also thank the friends, many whom are experts on the Horn, for generously sharing information and checking in on each other to make sure everyone would be alright.

Gebre Kidanu was the star coordinator of the collaboration on the training we established as a team in Mekelle during the war. She has done a wonderful job in motivating people, being sensitive to their needs, giving a listening ear, and bringing energy and hope. We are grateful for everything that she brought to make sure we stayed



together, and she has done a great service to the team, sharing with us the insights on trauma and healing gained as part of her PhD work.

Daniel Tesfa provided a lot of support to the team. He established a data base for information on the war that was verified and available for the use of all authors. He translated from Tigrinya and Amharic to English. He helped check sources across all the chapters. He also helped the editorial team to finalise the manuscripts of the three books as part of his PhD work. His work is fast, reliable and precise. We are very thankful for his availability, and tireless work, day and night.

Finally, we would like to thank the survivors of the Tigray war who told us their stories, often through pain and grief. Our heartfelt gratitude goes to all who talked to us, gave us advice and information, participated in interviews and focus group meetings, allowed us to make observations, and provided us with critical information and sources. It is easier to try and forget about this war. But in the name of humanity and in the name of justice, having encountered so much unnecessary death and suffering, we pray that the research presented here will contribute to upholding the principle of valuing life. The members of our research group have suffered great losses during this time. Despite this, we continued as a community to move forward, supporting each other where we could.

On behalf of the entire editorial team,

Mirjam Van Reisen, 1 October 2024

## Note on Content and Editorial Decisions

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*Mirjam Van Reisen & Munyaradzi Mawere*

πάντα ῥεῖ

*Everything flows (Heraclitus)*

The research presented in the three books, ‘Tigray’. ‘The Hysteresis of War’ (Book 1), ‘The Panarchy of War’ (Book 2) and ‘War in a Digital Black Hole’ (Book 3) (2024) is the result of a five-year interdisciplinary research programme, carried out from 2020 to 2024.

The research approach entailed an emphasis on ethnography, on research carried out in real life situations and on the ground. The purpose was to build up a systematic knowledge base that can be studied, corroborated, corrected and improved.

It is very difficult to write on the topic of war. It is personal, it is sensitive, it is hurtful and painful, it is emotional, and there are many contrasting views on the situation. In addition, the siege and communication blockade and Internet shutdown during the war created a digital black hole in Tigray. Therefore, there is an urgent need to document perspectives from within Tigray that are accessible to outside audiences. This research is an attempt to contribute to this.

To develop an in-depth understanding of the situation, there is a need to build trust, to engage, and to develop an in-depth understanding on the situation in real life, there is a need to have access, be present, be in the situation, speak the language, and be part of the culture. All of these are necessary for understanding and all of these give a particular viewpoint on the situation.

### **Ethnography**

This research used ethnography, as it allows us to be immersed in a situation, to participate in it for a moment, to reside in it for a short time, while also perceiving it as a ‘stranger’, an ‘outsider’, and to reflect on it. In-depth interviews are often used in ethnography to deduce understanding and meaning from a small description of a situation. This may also include small sample groups, autoethnography and long

interview methodology. Interviews allow the definition of a situation through the eyes of the participants.

This research should not be read as the one truth on the war in Tigray. It seeks to promote dialogue and ensure the participation of Tigrayans as an important stakeholder in the peace-building process, which hopefully continues to move forward. There are many contrasting viewpoints in a war, and we have only been able to capture insights from different angles. We have tried to bring the voice of the communities who have suffered so much in this war and have a stake in the future, which will be established on the shattered pieces of the war. We encourage everyone who is interested in the war to debate the content, and we motivate each reader to consider what it says and to feel free to disagree. We do not have a claim on a final truth.

We request the reader to make a distinction between the contribution of ethnography to the understanding of the war, which allows us greater freedom to document what was experienced in the war, what perceptions were there, what rationales were seen, and what causalities were entertained. This offers a particular scientific genre that allows us to explore new viewpoints and to document perspectives that have remained hidden and can be uncovered in this way.

We want to insist that for any legal determination, additional tools should be employed. In this book, Tefera provides a legal argument, but none of the other chapters in the three books should be read as legal arguments or as facts presented for that purpose.

While we would like to ask that the sentiments and feelings of the people sharing these harrowing accounts, which were collected first hand, be respected. We recognise there may be elements documented in a certain way, requiring further corroboration with other sources. We invite you to engage in a productive exchange to strengthen a common understanding where possible.

## **Translations**

The translations used in this research concern:

- Spoken conversations (interviews, focus group participants, fieldwork visits)
- Written text
- Media material, TV, videos
- Other

The spoken conversations were transcribed and translated under the guidance of the main researcher. For editorial purposes, small changes were made to make the translations more comprehensible to the reader. In doing so, care was taken to capture the spirit of the original spoken word and cognisant of the fact that a translation, if done literally, word-for-word, cannot achieve this.

Other material was translated under the responsibility of the main researchers, but they were asked to use a panel of judges for translation in some cases. The editorial team had access to the outcome of the review by the panel of judges.

There may always be some discussion on interpretation and translation between languages. We encourage debate on the meaning of what is presented, we do not claim that the selected representation is necessarily the only one, or even the best one. It was the interpretation of what was understood and available to all of us, when we published the book.

## **Language editing**

The researchers presented in the books are not born in areas in which English is a first language. We have published in English to share the results of our work. We have edited the chapters for understanding and easier reading, however, we have not polished the chapters to become something else. The editing takes into account the way of expressing in English by the authors.

In translating from Tigrinya or Amharic to English, many variants are possible. For instance, Aksum can be spelt as ‘Aksum’ or Axum’. We

have tried to create coherence across all of the chapters and books. There is no linguistic reasoning supporting the decisions.

For references to names, in Ethiopia and Eritrea, generally the first name is used as the main name, so for instance President Isayas Afwerki is referred as President Isayas. There are also different spellings of the names available. The editors have chosen a coherent use of the name, but no linguistic rule was used to make the decision.

## **Sources and use of proverbs**

The Tigrinya proverbs presented at the top of each chapter are not provided for their literal meaning. They are presented to offer a figurative association with the situation, allowing the reader some freedom to reflect on values, norms, fears and emotions from the place where these originate. Proverbs often have a long history and have moved and transformed across times and places and languages and should not be read as a direct commentary on the situation at hand. The translation from Tigrinya to English may also not be perfect.

There are two sources for the proverbs used in this research. The First is the article by Filip Busau (2020) *Comparative Analysis of Some Tigrinya Proverbs*, Proverbium 37. These are written in Tigrinya, the language spoken north and south of the Mereb in the highlands of Tigray and Eritrea. The article draws upon the work of the author on the topics of birth and death in Tigrinya proverbs. The translations are by the author with alterations where it was deemed necessary by Daniel Tesfa, B. G. Kahsay, and Gebru Kidanu.

The other source is the work of Tsigereda Teklu, Asmelash Weldemariam and Asmerom Gebreslassie, published by the Ethiopian Languages Academy under the then Ministry of Culture and Spots, published by Artistic Publishing in 1993 (GC).

## **Names and references**

With regards to names used in this topic, the following procedure was followed. In Tigrinya, people usually have three names, the name of

the grandfather, father and the given name. The references in this book use the reference name chosen by the author.

All the participants and sources have been anonymised and deidentified. This was necessary, to ensure the safety of all participants.

This research uses references to Tigrinya and Amharic sources, which are written in original script.

### **Use and re-use of data and verification of data**

For any use or re-use of any of the data and arguments presented in this research, we want to insist that it is the task and responsibility of anyone who wishes to (re-)use the data to understand the perspective from which the data is presented here and to seek triangulation with other sources on sensitive issues that may be contested.

We have been careful to verify the sources and participants. For future understanding and research, we believe it is important to document this data. However, we are aware that it is possible that viewpoints or facts may be disputed and we invite anyone to respectfully come forward with any grievances to help improve, correct or change what is presented and the interpretation of it.

The media material was presented for verification to a panel of judges. The judges were selected for their ability to understand the material and the context of this material being produced. In this way, the originality of speeches and other expressions was traced and verified. Where in on-line productions alterations were made by the publishers of the content, this has been identified. The author and editors have a database of material that was verified and used for this publication.

The editors are responsible for the content presented in these three books. We would like to receive any comments.

### **Symbols, expressions and generalisation**

The use of symbols and expressions in any part of this ethnography are not in any instance presented as a generalised statement to judge, accuse or demonise a person, a group of persons, or a people.

## **Ethical considerations**

The research ethics applied to this research adhere to the principles of: (i) authenticity; (ii) veracity; (iii) diversity; (iv) inclusiveness; (v) (self-)reflection; (vi) responsibility; (vii) providing credit to all who contributed; (viii) avoid claiming the work of others or exploiting contributions of others; (ix) ensure that there is no plagiarism (x) open dialogue; (xi) allow critical reflection; (xii) reliability; (xiii) respect for others; and (xiv) operate with cultural awareness.

The research was also guided by the principles of (i) informed consent and ongoing consent; (ii) do no harm; (iii) protect the privacy of participants by keeping personal information confidential; (iv) providing comprehensive information on the purpose of the research to participants; (v) voluntary participation of all participants; (vi) accurate reporting; (vii) transparency of disclosure of conflict of interests; (viii) treatment of all participants with respect and dignity; (ix) open communication; (x) minimise suffering, avoid (re)traumatisation and offer referral and support; (xi) personal and sensitive data-protection; (xii) adherence to the legal frameworks in the place where research is carried out; (xiii) adherence to international norms and standards; (xiv) clear documentation of all procedures; and (xv) reproducibility within the research scope and approach. The research should also be feasible and realistic in scope within the given timeframe and be realistic in its ambition.

Each part of this research was subjected to double blind peer review, the ethical committee of the Research Network GAIC, the ethical board of Tilburg University and Mekelle University, and, in specific instance, boards, as provided in each chapter.

## **Peer review**

Many of the researchers are members of the Research Network Globalisation, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC). Many of them are in peer-groups and discussed their work in the peer-groups, and presented their work in the on-line meetings. In this way, they were able to receive valuable comments on the studies performed. These also served to provide mutual support and encouragement.

We thank everyone who took the trouble to provide proposals for inclusion in the books. We regret there were some proposals that did not make it to final publications. The research team consisted of senior and junior researchers, and this may be clear from the work presented. The point of departure was that learning to do research is by doing, and by publishing and receiving comments. We invite anyone to provide comments to improve any work presented here.

The criteria for publishing was: (i) relevance of the topic to the research project; (ii) clarity on the methodology (iii) transparency on data obtained and used and on the process of their analysis; (iv) ability to improve the drafts based on comments received within given timelines; (v) ability to present and discuss the content with peers; (vi) editorial fit with the overall content of the three books and (vii) prove of authenticity of the contributions of all of the author(s). Every chapter is accompanied by an explanation of the contributions of each author to the chapter.

The double-blind peer-review was an anonymous review process. The authors of the chapters did not know who their reviewers were. The reviewers did not know who the authors were. The reviewers were asked to provide their opinion on the article in a form that was sent to them.

The double-peer reviewers also made comments in the text of the chapter, as comments and suggestions to improve the chapters and clarify the language. Their work is gratefully acknowledged. It provided an important step to select the chapters for publication.

All drafts of all the chapters have been saved in a database and are versionalised. The final decision to publish was with the editors.

## **Referencing**

The references are presented at the end of each chapter. The references to other chapters in the book are separately referenced, for easy findability, and to allow the chapters to be read in a stand-alone way.



## **Time references**

Ethiopia uses the Ethiopian Calendar (EC), which is identified in the text with EC in the specific cases that this calendar is used. Most of the years follow the Gregorian Calendar (GC). If no abbreviation is provided the GC calendar is used.

## **Warning about traumatic content**

Finally, the material presented in these three books may be hard to read. We have tried to balance honesty about what we heard on the situation, with what can be presented to a reader. Some of the elements we encountered were simply unimaginable. We have tried to be truthful, but also sensitive. The work was guided by Van Reisen et al., (2023), which sets out a methodology of an ethnographic research with exposure to trauma.

We encourage the reader to take care of your health and mental health and well-being and to seek support if that is needed. We thank you for picking up this book and for your interest.

## **Figures**

The figures in the books were converted to black and white to fit with formatting requirements. In some cases, this may make them less easy to read. The original pictures, in colour, can be found at the following link:

[https://raee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Figures\\_Tigray.-The-Panarchy-of-War-Volume-2-1.pdf](https://raee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Figures_Tigray.-The-Panarchy-of-War-Volume-2-1.pdf)

## References

- Busau, F. (2020). *Comparative Analysis of Some Tigrinya Proverbs*. Proverbium 37.
- Tsigereda Teklu, Asmelash Weldemariam, & Asmerom Gebreslassie. (1993). ምስላታት፡ የትግርኛ ምሳሌያዊ ንግግሮች፡፡ በናይ ኢትዮጵያ ቋንቋታት አካዳሚ ሚኒስቴር ጉዳይ ባህልን ስፖርትን፡፡ (*Proverbs: Tigrinya proverb speeches*). ሕታም 1985 EC, ኣዲስ አበባ፡ (Addis Adaba: Ethiopian Languages Academy under the then Ministry of Culture and Sport)
- Van Reisen, M., Smits, K., Wirtz, M., & Mikami, B. (2023). Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma. In: Van Reisen, M., Mawere M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (eds), *Enslaved Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, pp. 70-120. Chapter URL:  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367240496\\_Skin\\_in\\_the\\_Game\\_Methodology\\_of\\_an\\_Ethnographic\\_Research\\_with\\_Exposure\\_to\\_Trauma](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367240496_Skin_in_the_Game_Methodology_of_an_Ethnographic_Research_with_Exposure_to_Trauma)

This chapter is available at: <https://raee.eu/elementor-1706/>

## Acronyms

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AD	Anno Domini
AMC	Amhara Media Corporation
AMN	Addis Media Network
ARCCH	Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage
AU	African Union
BCE	Before Common Era or Before the Christian Era
CRSV	conflict-related sexual violence
EBC	Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation
EBF	Ethiopian Broadcasting Network
EDF	European Development Fund
EDF	Eritrean Defence Forces
EEAS	European Union's External Action Service
EEPA	European External Programme with Africa
ELF	Eritrea Liberation Front
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Force
EPA	Ethiopian Press Agency
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ESAT	Ethiopian Satellite Television
ETB	Ethiopian birr
EU	European Union
EUTF	EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa
FAFA	Financial and Administrative Agreement
FBC	Fana Broadcasting Corporate
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

FGD	focus group discussion
GBV	gender-based violence
GSTS	Global Society of Tigray Scholars and Professionals
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia
IDI	in-depth interviews
IDP	internally displaced person
KII	key informant interviews
MM	Merih Media
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OBN	Oromia Broadcasting Network
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PM	prime minister
SR	Situation Report
TDF	Tigray Defence Forces
TIPS	Tigray Institute of Policy Studies
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Movement
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

## Timeline of Key Events

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24 December 2017	Behind-the-scenes, diplomatic efforts to broker peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia in exchange for Ethiopian access to the Assab port and European Union (EU) roads from Eritrea to Ethiopia do not receive a positive reception in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray.
14 January 2018	President Isayas Afwerki of Eritrea announces the policy ‘Woyane, Game Over’, signalling a hardline stance against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).
15 February 2018	Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announces his resignation.
27 March 2018	Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is elected as the chairman of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition.
2 April 2018	PM Abiy is sworn in as Prime Minister by the Ethiopian Parliament.
15 June 2018	PM Abiy uses the term የቀን ጅቦች to describe TPLF or Tigrayans as ‘daylight hyenas’, a derogatory and dehumanizing label.
23 June 2018	A bombing at Meskel Square in Addis Ababa occurs during a rally for Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and chanting of “down, down Woyane”, indicating the accusation that the perpetrators are Tigrayan. The courts in Ethiopia do not find Tigrayans guilty of the bombing.
9 July 2018	Ethiopia and Eritrea sign the Peace Agreement in Asmara, ending two decades of hostility and restoring diplomatic relations. This agreement is seen as a significant step toward regional stability.

9 July 2018	PM Abiy visits the Assab Port in Eritrea.
14–16 July 2018	President Isayas visits military camps and installations in Ethiopia.
18 July 2018	PM Abiy visits the Eritrean military training camp Sawa. National service in Eritrea is indefinite and is widely regarded as a crime against humanity by the international community.
14 November 2018	The UN Security Council (UNSC) lifts sanctions against Eritrea (in place since 2009).
22 June 2019	Several high-ranking officials are assassinated in Ethiopia. General Seare Mekonen, the Chief of General Staff of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), is killed in Addis Ababa, along with Major-General Gezae Abera. Both General Seare Mekonen and Major-General Gezae Abera are Tigrayans. In Bahir Dar, the regional capital of Amhara, the regional president Ambachew Mekonnen and his advisor Ezez Wassie are also assassinated.
11 October 2019	PM Abiy is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
1 December 2019	The Prosperity Party (PP) is officially formed on 1 December 2019. The party is created by merging three of the four parties that make up the EPRDF coalition, along with five other regional parties. The TPLF, one of the founding members of the EPRDF, refuses to join the PP, which contributes to the escalating tensions between the federal government and the TPLF.
28 February 2019	The EU signs a road-building agreement with Eritrea to connect Eritrea's ports (Assab and Massawa) with neighbouring countries.

15 June 2020	The European Parliament holds a hearing on the EU road-building program with Eritrea, which is carried out with national service labour, widely seen as forced labour. The European Commission indicates a shift to a “no more roads approach”. The projects are stopped in the following year.
9 September 2020	Elections are organised by the TPLF in defiance of the federal government’s decision to postpone all elections in Ethiopia due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The elections heighten tensions between the Tigray regional government and the Ethiopian federal government, contributing to the subsequent conflict.
25 September 2020	The first irregular flight is identified in connection to pre-war military preparations from Addis to Asmara (flight ET8312, Tail ETALK and 20/10/2020 Tail ETAQQ).
3 November 2020	The Tigray War begins with Ethiopian federal forces, including Special Forces, being airlifted to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, marking the start of an intense military conflict.
4 November 2020	Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announces the Ethiopian government’s ‘Law and Order Operation’ in Tigray, aiming to remove the TPLF leadership, which had challenged federal authority.
November 2020	The Ethiopian government imposes a communications blackout on Tigray, cutting off telephone, Internet, and other forms of communication. This severely limits the flow of information and access to the region, making it difficult for humanitarian organisations and the international community to monitor the situation.

6–10 November 2020	The Mai Kadra massacre in Western Tigray occurs. The Ghent University Database ‘Every Casualty Counts’ attributes the killings to Ahhara Special Forces or Fano Militia, ENDF, and Tigray Defence Forces (TDF).
11 November 2020	TPLF President of the Tigray region, Debretsion Gebremichael, accuses Eritrea of being involved in the war in Tigray and of using heavy weaponry in Humera against Tigray civilians. Eritrean Foreign Affairs Minister, Osman Saleh, dismisses the claim.
November 2020	The Adigrat and Edagu Hamus Massacres are allegedly perpetrated by Eritrean and Ethiopian military troops.
13 November 2020	A massacre with indiscriminate killings takes place in Zalambessa allegedly perpetrated by the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), following shelling of the town.
24 November 2020	The UN Security Council holds its first closed-door discussion on the conflict in Tigray, but no official statement is issued due to disagreements among members, particularly regarding how to address the situation.
11 November 2020	The ‘Law and Order Operation’ is redefined as a ‘Law Enforcement and Existential Operation’, emphasizing the existential threat the Ethiopian government perceives from the TPLF.
November 2020	The Humera Massacre occurs with the ENDF, Amhara militias, and EDF implicated in the violence.
November 2020	The first wave of mass arrests of Tigrayans begins.



28 November 2020	The TPLF forces withdraw from Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region.
27–28 November 2020	An attack on Al-Nejashi Mosque, the oldest mosque in Africa, occurs.
28–29 November 2020	The Aksum massacre occurs. During this event, hundreds of civilians are reportedly killed by the EDF in the city of Aksum, Tigray, during the religious festival of Tsion Mariam, the feast of St. Mary of Zion. Aksum is a place of pilgrimage for the festival, as Ethiopian Orthodox Christians believe Aksum houses the Ark of the Covenant.
30 November 2020	The Dengelat Massacre occurs. The EDF attack civilians gathered for the religious festival of Tsion Mariam.
7 December 2020	The Ethiopian federal government appoints an interim administration for Tigray, led by Mulu Nega. This administration was intended to replace the TPLF leadership, which the federal government considered illegitimate.
January 2021	Closure of the Eritrean refugee camps in Tigray, Shemelba, and Hitsats after camps are attacked by the EDF and refugees are forcibly returned to Eritrea. In July 2021 the EDF enters Adi Harush and Mai Aini camps for Eritrean refugees.
10 February 2021	The Abi Addi massacre occurs, including mass killings by the ENDF and EDF.
10 March 2021	During a congressional hearing, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken states that acts of “ethnic cleansing” are taking place in Western Tigray. He specifically referred to reports of atrocities and the displacement of ethnic Tigrayans from the region by Amhara forces and allied troops of the ENDF. He calls for

	independent investigations to hold perpetrators accountable.
23 March 2021	Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed publicly acknowledges and thanks Eritrea for its military support during the conflict in a speech to the Ethiopian Parliament, confirming Eritrea's involvement in the war.
15 April 2021	The UNSC holds a session on the humanitarian crisis in Tigray.
20 April 2021	A chemical white phosphorus attack by the EDF against civilians is reported in the location of Adi Yieqoro, within Ahiferom Woreda in Tigray.
23 April 2021	Jeffrey Feltman is appointed as the US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. His appointment is part of the US government's increased diplomatic engagement in the region, particularly concerning the conflicts in Ethiopia, Sudan, and the broader Horn of Africa.
3 May 2021	The head of the Interim Administration by the Ethiopian federal government, Mulu Nega, is replaced with Abraha Desta.
June 2021	The blockade on humanitarian aid intensifies, with reports that Ethiopian federal forces and allied troops are preventing aid convoys from reaching Tigray. This exacerbates the already dire food and medical supply shortages in the region, contributing to a worsening humanitarian crisis.
15 June 2021	The European Union's special envoy to Ethiopia, Pekka Haavisto, who is also Finland's Foreign Minister, refers to the situation in Tigray as potentially amounting to "genocide"

	during a briefing to the EU Committee on Foreign Affairs.
22 June 2021	The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopts a resolution calling for an independent investigation into alleged human rights violations and abuses in the Tigray conflict. This resolution heightens international scrutiny of the conflict and increases calls for accountability for the atrocities committed by all parties involved.
June 2021	Operation Alula, launched by the TDF, begins. The operation is named after the famous Tigrayan general Alula Aba Nega and is part of a broader counter-offensive by the TDF against Ethiopian and allied forces. The operation aims to reclaim territory and defend key strategic areas in Tigray.
28 June 2021	The TDF recaptures Mekelle and regains control over parts of Tigray, but the siege and communication blockade by Ethiopia is maintained.
2 July 2021	The UNSC issues a first public statement on the Tigray war, expressing concern about the humanitarian situation.
25 July 2021	“We will not rest unless this enemy is stamped out. These people [Tigray people] are the enemy of the whole people of Ethiopia. They are the enemy of the Oromo, the enemy of Afar, and the enemy of Somali. We have to continue heroically struggling against the

	enemy,” <sup>1</sup> declares the former President of the Amhara region.
10 June 2021	The UN and other humanitarian organisations report that over 350,000 people are experiencing famine conditions, with millions more at risk due to the ongoing conflict, disruption of agriculture, and blockade of aid.
28 June 2021	The TDF recaptures control over the capital of Mekelle in Tigray.
July 2021	A second wave of mass arrests of Tigrayans in Addis Ababa begins in July 2021.
July 2021	The TDF initiates Operation Tigray Mothers reflecting a broad mobilisation effort to resist the advancing Ethiopian and Eritrean forces.
26 August 2021	Former Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, is appointed as the African Union (AU) High Representative for the Horn of Africa. His role is to mediate the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia and promote peace and stability in the region.
17 September 2021	President Joe Biden issues an Executive Order authorising broad sanctions against individuals and entities involved in the conflict, including Ethiopian and Eritrean officials, as well as those from Tigray. The order specifically targets those contributing to the conflict and obstructing humanitarian access. The sanctions include asset freezes and visa restrictions on individuals and entities seen as prolonging the conflict or obstructing peace efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Gebremichael, T. (2021, July 25). Amhara President: Tigrayans are Enemies of Ethiopia. *TGHAT*. <https://www.tghat.com/2021/07/25/amhara-president-tigrayans-are-enemies-of-ethiopia/> (Accessed on 18 October 2024).

October 2021	TDF Operation Tigray Sunrise starts. The TDF advances outside the Tigray region.
October 2021	The UN suspends its humanitarian flights to Tigray after an airstrike on Mekelle, the regional capital, endangers their operations. This suspension further restricts the delivery of humanitarian aid to the region.
7 November 2021	Obasanjo makes his first visit to Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region.
20 December 2021	Having advanced into the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar and coming within a few hundred kilometres of the capital, Addis Ababa, the TDF halt their offensive, leading to a temporary stalemate as both sides prepare for further operations or potential negotiations.
24 March 2022	The Ethiopian government declares a unilateral humanitarian ceasefire in Tigray.
August 2022	Coalition forces, including Ethiopian and Eritrean troops, resume a major offensive against the TDF, seeking to regain control over lost territories before peace talks.
August 2022	The resumption of hostilities leads to a tightening of the blockade. Tigray remains largely cut off from the rest of the country, with reports of increased starvation and lack of medical supplies.
27 September 2022	The Sheraro massacre occurs; the EDF reportedly kill dozens of civilians during an offensive in September 2022, as part of the renewed conflict before the Pretoria peace talks.
25 October 2022	The first round of formal peace talks starts in Pretoria, South Africa, facilitated by Obasanjo, and former President of Kenya, Uhuru

	Kenyatta, and former South African Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, representing the AU and the wider international community.
2 November 2022	The Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement is signed between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF, marking a formal agreement to end active hostilities and begin the process of peace-building.
3 November 2022	The Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement officially comes into force, leading to a significant reduction in active combat operations.
4–5 November 2022	The EDF perpetrates shelling of Adigrat, a town near the Eritrean border, in Tigray, leading to civilian casualties
January 2023	The EDF begin a partial withdrawal from Tigray, as part of the implementation of the peace agreement, although reports indicate that some forces remain in strategically important areas.
June 2023	Eritrea is reportedly still occupying Hoya Medeb, Semhal, May Hamato; parts of Ziban Guila and Erdi Jeganu in Egela Woreda; Endalgeda, Weratle, Alitena and Hagererekoma in Irob Woreda; Geter Badme, Badme Town, Gemhalo, Adi-Tsetser and some parts of Adeneyti and Lemlem in Tahtay Adyabo, as well as the whole Western Zone of Tigray.



## Introduction to this Book

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*Mirjam Van Reisen & Munyaradzi Mawere*

This book, ‘Tigray – the Panarchy of War’, focuses on the impact of the War in Tigray which took place from 2020 to 2022. When something shifts at one level, it influences change at all other levels. The argument builds on the first book, ‘Tigray – the Hysteresis of War’, which investigates the war in Tigray as a critical moment of a shift into a new situation. While the first book focuses on how the shift took place, and the critical junctures of it, the second book focuses on the impact of the shift on Tigray. The third book, ‘Tigray – War in a Digital Black Hole’, looks at how Tigray will re-emerge with resilience from this period of war, the reality of which was hidden from the world.

Throughout this book, the imagination of the social through the process of thought and communication emerges as a malleable and fluid, yet influential determinant of ‘states’ – states as a situation, a moment in time, seen from a particular standpoint through a particular meaning-making exchange. In the work published in this book, we throw some light on the power of what is hidden and what is concealed, the impact of the words in which reality is presented in social interaction, and the influence of disinformation on creating a new reality. In short, this book concerns itself with the power of what is imagined to be, with the productive capacity of language to determine what shapes meaning, connecting all the different levels of the social system.

The Chapter 1, by Van Reisen, Gebru Kidanu, Stocker and Duncan-Cassell, explores the relevance of gender theory in documenting war. It draws on Sirleaf and Rehn (2002) and Moi (1989). It emphasises the need for conceptual clarity, using the Tigray war as a context. The analysis highlights that gender often operates invisibly, reinforcing stereotypes that associate femininity with weakness and masculinity with dominance. The document underscores the importance of acknowledging gender dynamics, hierarchical structures, and everyone’s agency in war. It also emphasises the potential for women



to lead peace efforts, advocating for an imaginative approach to counteract dehumanisation and violence.

In Chapter 2, Tesfa, Van Reisen and Smits find that during the Tigray war a communication blackout and media censorship facilitated the denial of Eritrea's involvement. This allowed atrocities to go unreported and perpetrators to remain unpunished. Secret diplomacy played a key role in this concealment, as a 2017 deal offered Ethiopia access to Eritrea's Assab port in exchange for rehabilitating Eritrea's international image. The 2018 Peace Agreement followed soon afterwards, the details of which remain undisclosed. The agreement masked preparations for the war against Tigray. A disinformation campaign further obscured the conflict's reality, resulting in prolonged instability and impunity.

After the 2020–2022 war, 154 pieces of graffiti were discovered at the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum in Mekelle, Ethiopia. The museum, originally celebrating the Tigray People's Liberation Front's (TPLF) victory over the Derg regime, was ransacked and occupied by Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF). In Chapter 3, Tesfa and Van Reisen investigate the texts the Ethiopian soldiers left on the walls of the museum. Discourse analysis of 142 pieces of graffiti revealed that the term 'Woyane', once a positive term, was used derogatorily against the TPLF and Tigrayans, associating them with negative stereotypes and threats. This dehumanisation of the people of Tigray was used to justify the call for the eradication of the 'Woyane', indicating an intent to eliminate them.

Chapter 4, by Tesfa and Van Reisen, compared texts from leadership speeches with graffiti left by Ethiopian soldiers in Tigray. It found that sources of speeches by the leadership and graffiti left by Ethiopian soldiers shared similar themes of negative stereotyping and portraying Tigrayans as a threat, echoing incitements to genocide. The analysis revealed that soldiers adopted themes from public speeches by political, religious and economic figures as well as celebrities, which spread hatred and suggested the extermination of Tigrayans as a solution. This ethnographic research underscores how the performative nature of speech can incite violence, calling for further

investigation into potential genocidal acts stemming from these incitements.

The Tigray war featured deliberate and systematic destruction of cultural and religious heritage, worsened by an Internet blackout and limited media access, which hindered accountability. In Chapter 5, Kahsay, Gebreegziabher, Woldu and Van Reisen researched the devastation at sites like the Al-Njehasi mosque and St Mary of Zion Orthodox Church. The attacks on these sites were initially denied, as was Eritrean involvement in these attacks. This destruction aimed to undermine Tigray's identity and cultural significance. Key themes included deliberate destruction, the large scale of this destruction, the significant, yet unacknowledged, Eritrean involvement, the desecration of sites, and the deep community grief emerging from the destruction. The authors consider that the destruction of the heritage sites, sought to reshape regional power dynamics and erode Tigray's role as a cultural hub. This cultural relevance, based on historic pride, is central to an imagined situation, that influences its regional relevance.

In Chapter 6, entitled “‘Why is God Silent?': Damage and Destruction of Religious Heritage Sites in East Tigray”, Gebremariam and Abrha describe in detail the systematic destruction of religious and heritage sites and the killing of religious leaders. The authors argue that the destruction was systematic and deliberate. The analysis shows that Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) were systematically and deliberately engaged, alongside the ENDF and regional forces. This chapter looks at whether or not the cultural destruction was a deliberate attempt to commit genocide by undermining the religious, historic and cultural fabric of Tigray society. In this detailed and extensive field-study, Gebremariam and Abrha assess the impact of the 2020–2022 Tigray war on Eastern Tigray's cultural heritage. Significant archaeological sites and rock-hewn churches were severely damaged due to neglect and conflict. A survey of 181 sites, including churches and monasteries, reported extensive damage and the killing of 134 religious leaders. The conflict led to the destruction of religious buildings, archaeological sites, museums, and artefacts. Eritrean military involvement was noted in 28 of 36 major incidents, with assets reportedly transported to Eritrea. The siege and Internet

blackout in Tigray worsened the situation, underscoring the need for legal protection and accountability.

In Chapter 7, Kahsay, Shifare and Tefera examine the systematic destruction of cultural heritage in Tigray during the early months of the war. This chapter details the deliberate demolition of churches, mosques, monasteries, heritage sites, museums, and historical locations, including the destruction of holy books and manuscripts. The widespread damage involved looting, burning, and breaking of cultural assets, often accompanied by massacres, particularly targeting members of the clergy and religious leaders, resulting in significant civilian casualties. The ENDF, EDF, and Amhara Special Forces and militias were identified as perpetrators. Despite denials by Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders, evidence suggests heavy involvement by Eritrean soldiers. The Ethiopian government failed to protect cultural and religious assets, violating international laws. The study calls for accountability, compensation, and the return of looted items.

Ethnic conflicts often arise from historical and structural factors influencing distinct group identities. In Chapter 8, Kahsay highlights that in Ethiopia, accusations against Tigrayans, who, as a group, have been conflated with the TPLF, have led to tensions with other ethnic groups. In Eritrea, a perceived superiority over Tigrayans has resulted in harsh actions, influenced by a semi-racist attitude among elites, despite shared history and culture. The study highlights the universal nature of human rights, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Rome Statute, which outline crimes against humanity. The region's political narratives have caused confusion and fuelled atrocities, underscoring the need for enhanced human rights education in the Horn of Africa. This is necessary to improve the human rights culture, so that dignity and respect are perceived as relevant norms, both of which are part of the foundation of a culture shared in the region.

In Chapter 9, in a reflection on his visit to Tigray in 2023, Claes narrates a personal experience. He meets Mahlet, a hotel employee in Mekelle, who reflects on the generational cycle of violence in Tigray, expressing concern for her daughter's future amidst ongoing instability. This seems even more pertinent, as in October 2023,

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed highlighted the importance of securing sea access, considering Ethiopia's lack of direct access to a port since Eritrea's independence in 1993. Eritrea might exploit Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland to reignite conflict with Tigray, driven by Eritrean President Isayas' unfinished objective to neutralise the TPLF, including by eliminating the people of Tigray, leveraging perceived military vulnerabilities in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian military is currently stretched due to conflicts in Oromia and Amhara, amid complex regional dynamics involving Somalia, Egypt, and Sudan. While Claes is not interpreting the regional situation as such, the point that Claes makes is that the war in Tigray is unfinished, and that people of Tigray are concerned about the potential for an ongoing cycle of violence, due to which many young people are seeking a way out.

In Chapter 10, the final chapter of this book, Gebrewahd, Van Reisen and Tesfa examine the cycle of violence in Tigray. They argue that this stems from an historic lack of leadership associated with nation-building in both Ethiopia and Tigray. The TPLF shifted from seeking Tigrayan independence to promoting Ethiopianism under a federal system with regional autonomy. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's 'neo-pan Ethiopianist' vision of centralised governance challenged Tigray's autonomy, leading to the 2020–2022 war and the region's devastation. The authors find that the war in Tigray was rooted in a lack of clarity over sovereignty, as well as the absence of an independent democratic state capable of protecting its people. This chapter discredits the war as an internal Ethiopian conflict. The authors conclude that it was in fact a regional conflict that involved Eritrea in both its planning and execution. Eritrea warned Tigray that it was "Game over". Conversely, the experience of the war fuelled a desire for protection among the Tigray population, including aspirations for some form of statehood. Despite the significant damage to society caused by the war, Tigray sustained its governance, and the war revealed a need for stability through defined autonomy and regional collaboration. This experience has highlighted the possibility – or the necessity – for some form of a democratic state that can protect and support its people amid changing regional dynamics.



# Imagining a World without War: The Activation of Gender as a Critical Concept

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*Julia Duncan-Cassell*

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*It is the manner of speaking that breaks the mind.*

### Abstract

To what extent is a theory of gender relevant in documenting war? Departing from the work of Sirleaf and Rehn (2002), and following Moi (1989), this study reflects on the activation of gender in war. Demonstrating the need for conceptual clarity on gender in the documentation of war, the relevance of this is tested in the context of the Tigray war. For this, the semiotic landscape of images and texts from the war were analysed. The activation of gender in war often remains invisible, as a hidden operator, and the documentation of it may confirm stereotypes activating feminine images associated with weakness and masculine images associated with dominance. This chapter discusses the relevance of gender theory in understanding and documenting war. It emphasises the importance of recognising gender dynamics, noting that war often involves hierarchical structures that dehumanise and silence the ‘other,’ leading to dominance and suppression. It stresses the importance of recognising everyone’s agency in war and the potential for women to lead peace initiatives. An agentic, imaginative approach is needed to avoid aggravating the situation for those dehumanised in a violent situation.

**Key words:** gender, war, conflict, sexual violence, agency, peace-building, Tigray war, Ethiopia, Eritrea

*...a world that would realise the deepest desires of all the inhabitants of those lands to live together in freedom, non-violence, equality, and justice. This hope no doubt seems naive, even impossible, to many. Nevertheless, some of us must rather wildly hold to it, refusing to believe that the structures that now exist will exist forever. For this, we need our poets and our dreamers, the untamed fools, the kind who know how to organise.*

(Butler, 2023)

## **Introduction**

Remarkably, the first verb of the seminal book on how gender operates in war is: ‘imagine’. “It is hard to imagine a world without war”. This is the first sentence of the book: *Women, War and Peace* by Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, written in 2002, and this is still true. The stark realities of war and the impact of atrocities committed during war often do not leave a lot of space to consider how we imagine a world without war. The space to reflect on the mechanisms that operate war are often reduced to strategic, tactical, military and political domains, wrapped in cognitive perceptions of what is and not of what could be.

In the modern landscape of war, Rehn and Sirleaf provide a solid empirical description of the gender dynamics in war and peace. Hence, it is more striking that in their opening sentence, they draw immediate attention to the question of how we ‘imagine’ war and peace. Rehn and Sirleaf unearth how women are not embedded as active agents in the collective that constitutes war. Rehn and Sirleaf envisage documentation of war in which agency is attributed to all genders that are in the war situation. Their objective is, first, to give visibility to women in time of war.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the notions of gender and war is complicated by the activation of gender in war. During war, as during any part of life, one could say, people are not ‘in position’, but they are ‘in action’. The capacity to act, based on perception, is ‘agency’: the human ability to understand the world and act upon that understanding (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Agency is an ability that is mediated by language, through which we define what ‘is’, and

through language we present thought in a performative manner. This, Gee formulates in the question: “What practice (activity) or practices (activities) is this piece of language being used to enact?” (2011, p. 18). By ‘practice’ Gee refers to “a socially recognised and institutionally or culturally supported endeavour that usually involves sequencing or combining actions in certain specified ways” (Gee, 2011, p. 17). Gee recognises an agentic capacity to change action patterns, as humans possess the ability to think before we act, which is really the ability to imagine (Gee, 2011, p. 80).

Gender is a relevant construct to study the action of war through the representation of the actors in it. The term refers to the dynamics of power that are inherent in the contestation of space. While gender may be associated with the binary division of a male/female body, in the extreme situation that is war, gender may play out in the more radical extremes of gender duality. The binary division of the concept of ‘men’ and ‘women’, associated with its essential meaning as opposites, has an enhanced relevance in a war situation, where the idea of ‘male’ is linked to fighting, defending and protecting, while the idea of ‘female’ is associated with a vulnerable object to be protected. Being a ‘women’ is associated with being a victim of the violence resulting from the performance of war. This extends to sexual violence (Krystalli, 2020).<sup>2</sup> These meanings are performative.

However, the conceptualisation of gender roles, where women are undisputedly and only seen as the victims and men as the perpetrators, has limitations in explaining how gender operates in situations of war and conflict. Biological genders cross those lines. Women participate in war and situations of violence as commanders, soldiers, strategists, and negotiators. Men participate in war and

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<sup>2</sup> Krystalli (2020) has pinpointed gender-based victimisation as a dominant approach guiding action by the international community: “As is evident in the United Nations Security Council resolutions that constitute the Women Peace & Security agenda, and in the programmatic interventions that have stemmed from those resolutions, the construction of victimhood often relies on associations of vulnerability with femininity. In this context, ‘woman’ often becomes synonymous with ‘victim’, which can become synonymous with violation and lack of agency”. Shepherd (2020) proposes an alternative approach which attaches meaning to the inclusion of gendered notions in peace-building.



situations of war as victims of violence and war crimes, including sexual violence, which often goes undocumented and underreported, remaining invisible because of the shame it engenders in the victim. This is indicative of the observation that gender operates in war and situations of violence and that there is a need to better understand how and why.

Accordingly, the research question examined in this chapter is: *To what extent and how is a theory of gender relevant to document and analyse war?*

This chapter is a theoretical reflection aiming to help the work of researchers on documenting the Tigray war, which took place from November 2020 to November 2022.

### **Sexual violence in the Tigray war**

A recent article published in *The Guardian* discusses how rape was used as a weapon of war in Tigray many months after the Peace Agreement was negotiated (Johnson & Kassa, 2023). Johnson and Kassa (2023) report that incidences of sexual violence against women aged 8 to 69 were documented in medical records. In several articles, Human Rights Watch documents how women in Tigray were victims of the war (Human Rights Watch, 2021a). The reports describe women as “pleading with them [the soldiers]” or “conflict-related sexual violence on women and girls” (Human Rights Watch, 2021a; Human Rights Watch, 2021b; Varia, 2021). An article by Amnesty International says:

*It's clear that rape and sexual violence have been used as a weapon of war to inflict lasting physical and psychological damage on women and girls in Tigray. Hundreds have been subjected to brutal treatment aimed at degrading and dehumanizing them.*  
(Amnesty International, 2021)

The reports of the sexual violence perpetrated against women document cases from elderly women to young girls who were raped under often brutal circumstances (Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Kidanu & Tefera, 2024). A range of articles have cited the sexual violence that occurred in the Tigray conflict, with women as victims being at the centre of these stories. In the documentation of sexual violence allegedly perpetrated in the Tigray war, women were held in

servitude and brutally degraded, often with a public dimension to it so that it was consumed by an audience, with the perpetration of sexual assault to gain total control over women and their bodies (Kidanu *et al.*, 2024). A quick scan of the reporting on the war in Tigray shows that reports on the evolution of the war have generally followed gender-typical lines with women reported on in the context of being victims.

This raises two important questions. If these allegations of widespread violence against women are true, which in this chapter we do not doubt, why is this violence particularly perpetrated on women? Why are women sought out as the victims on whom violence is perpetrated in dehumanising and degrading ways? Secondly, why are the acts of violence perpetrated on women gaining more attention in the documentation than violence perpetrated on men and boys?

### **The gendered image of the victim versus the criminal in media**

Studying the gendered discourse in the media, Gregoriou and Ras (2018) explore the issue of violence in human trafficking. They find that women were overwhelmingly referred to as the victims and that the gendered association in the discourse, in turn, defined how human trafficking is defined, as a crime perpetrated specifically against women. In research on the representation of human trafficking for ransom in the context of migration in media, citing Gregoriou and Ras (2018), Vdovychenko (2019) concludes that the gendered definition of who can be victims of human trafficking has real-life consequences. She finds that: “As a result, the (male) smuggled migrant is criminalised, whilst the (female) trafficked migrant is assigned victim status” (Vdovychenko, 2019, p. 504). It may then be hypothesised that the invisibility of the gender politics underpinning the representation of biological women and men in situations of war and enslavement such as human trafficking, causes misrepresentation. In the war in Tigray, Eritrean refugees, many of whom were biologically male, were forcibly transported, recruited, and involuntarily deployed by the Eritrean military (Melicherova & Van Reisen, 2024). In other instances, Eritrean soldiers, biologically male, reported that they were told that they were being forcibly transported to the border of Tigray to work on farms (Smits & Wirtz, 2024), but

they were deceived and forced to participate as soldiers in the war in Tigray (Smits & Wirtz, 2024).

It follows that it should not be assumed that violence is only perpetrated on women and girls. The reports from Tigray include extrajudicial and mass killings of boys, young men and men in an apparent attempt to ensure that they would not join the war (Human Rights Watch, 2021a). However, while searching for studies about the Tigrayan conflict, almost any mention of victims is connected to the way in which women were victims of violence during the war.

## **Methodology**

The methodology used in this research is first of all reconsidering the use of ‘gender’ as a conceptual reference in the documentation of war. Secondly, a small case study is undertaken which identifies ‘gender’-references in the semiotic landscape of war, specifically the war in Tigray.

### ***Deconstruction***

In order to reflect on the way in which gender is activated in war, this chapter is loosely structured in reference to a text called “Feminist, Female, Feminine” by Toril Moi (1989), which creates a clear distinction between the feminist project, the concept of the female body and the concept of the feminine attributes. Moi explains, “there is no pure feminist or female space from which we can speak” (Moi, 1989, p. 118). Applying the thought process used in her text, we attempt in this chapter to reflect on how a theory of gender matters for the documentation of war. In this chapter, ‘gender’ is approached as a ‘travelling concept’ (Mieke Bal, 2002), assuming specific meaning in time and space.

Derrida (1997, 1967) developed a way of thinking on how to investigate concepts, which he called deconstruction. Deconstruction considers how the binaries of gender create a world of meaning. In trying to deconstruct the meaning behind the dominant discourse based on binary oppositions, the effect of this structure on the experience of gender can be explored. Butler (2006) provides a footnote to the potential limitations of any project of deconstruction,

noting that deconstruction always pairs with reconstruction: “Destruction is thus always restoration – that is, the destruction of a set of categories that introduce artificial divisions into an otherwise unified ontology” (Butler, 2006, p. 152). Actioning and imagining are two sides of the same coin.

In this chapter, a small deconstruction exercise is carried out to investigate the crossing of gender classifications in the Tigray war. This exploration is intended to put the attempt of a theoretical review to the test in terms of establishing the relevance of a theory on how gender is activated during war. By contrasting observations that demonstrate frictions in gender conceptualisations, the relevance of deconstruction is tested.

Tigray is a regional state in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. It was invaded in 2020 by military troops of the Ethiopian federal state and neighbouring country Eritrea, as well as militia from Amhara Regional State. For the small deconstruction exercise in this chapter, a desk study was executed on the discussion regarding the relevance of gender in the documentation of the war in Tigray. The images in a video containing stark and unusual gender images, which were identified by several persons as surprising and relevant in examining the gender dimensions of the war, were observed and interpreted by asking viewers what they saw.

### ***Exploring the semiotic landscape of images***

Conversations with resource persons were held on this question. A small explorative case study served to explore the relevance of awareness of the activation of gender-categories in the documentation of war. Ethnographic data was collected for a small case study. A corpus of 361 photographs of Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum was established, and duplicates and blurred images removed, consisting of pictures taken by one of the authors on 3 February 2020 and 292 pictures of graffiti left in the museum collected and verified by authors on 22–24 April 2024. A corpus of 83 photographs concerning the Emperor Yohannes Primary and Secondary School was obtained and cleaned to ensure the quality of the images (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). The data was captured on 27–28 December 2020 by the director and deputy

director and by two of the school teachers on 15–17 April 2021. The pictures were verified by the Tigray Education Bureau and cross checked with their pictures taken on 24 November 2023 of the graffiti left in the school. The pictures were verified by the authors on site on 24–25 March 2024. Graffiti with explicit sexualised content was selected for this study. Pictures of tattoos were taken and sent on 8 May 2024. Video material and pictures were collected from various sources as part of ongoing discussions on the topic, which included interviews, pictures and conversations within the context of discussing the material collected and reviewed.

## **Overcoming biological essentialism**

De Beauvoir (1949) said “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 273). The conceptualisation of De Beauvoir is often used as the basis of a differentiation between biological sex and social gender. Moon (2019) states that the moment we are born and identified as ‘boy’ or ‘girl’, we are becoming it and are socialised to conform to this identification. De Beauvoir (1949) identifies that the notion of socially-defined gender has both subtle and apparent power relations. Toril Moi, in her 1989 work, critiques biological essentialism as a limiting and reductive approach to understanding gender. In her feminist theoretical writing, she distinguishes between essentialism and social constructionism, aligning herself more with the latter, which views gender as shaped by cultural and social factors rather than innate biological traits.

Moi argues that essentialism reinforces patriarchal ideologies by insisting that biology determines fixed roles for men and women. In this framework, women are often portrayed as naturally passive, nurturing, or emotional, while men are seen as rational and dominant. These stereotypical traits, according to essentialists, are rooted in biology, but Moi critiques this as an oversimplification that ignores the complexities of individual experiences and historical context.

A key point in Moi’s argument is that biological essentialism limits the potential for social change because it treats gender differences as natural and immutable. By contrast, she emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of how gender is produced through

social practices, institutions, and power relations. This is part of her broader argument against totalizing theories of identity and her support for a more fluid, dynamic conception of gender.

To get a better grip on the aspect of power dynamics, Moi (1989) proposes that an alternative set of terms and definitions is necessary. Moi distinguishes between three terms that are all intricately related, yet not equivalent, but often perceived as such. These are 'feminism', 'female' and 'feminine'. While 'feminism' refers to a political term, and 'female' to a biological term, 'feminine' relates to a set of culturally defined characteristics (Moi, 1989).

The terms feminine, female and feminist have often been compared with and equated to each other, with the assumption that they are mutually determined. The implication that gender is connected to the biological features that an individual has, rather than being culturally embedded, is rejected by writers such as Oyěwùmí (1997). In her book, *The Invention of Women*, Oyěwùmí discusses her view of biological determinism, the way in which this term is rooted from a superior, western, colonisation-based discourse:

*... I argued that the biological determinism in much of Western thought stems from the application of biological explanations in accounting for social hierarchies. This in turn has led to the construction of the social world with biological building blocks. Thus the social and the biological are thoroughly intertwined. This worldview is manifested in male-dominant gender discourses, discourses in which female biological differences are used to explain female sociopolitical disadvantages. The conception of biology as being 'everywhere' makes it possible to use it as an explanation in any realm, whether it is directly implicated or not. Whether the question is why women should not vote or why they breast-feed babies, the explanation is one and the same: they are biologically predisposed.* (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 35)

The distinction between the biology of 'females' and the cultural phenomenon of 'femininity' is based on the binary opposite categories of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' and should be considered more broadly than its association with (biological) sex (Tyson, 2006; Brown, 1995):

*The difference between sex and gender posited by Anglo-American feminists does not exist. Patriarchy defines and controls the way we relate to sex (female) and gender (feminine) as if they were the same thing.* (Tyson, 2006, p. 103)

The definition of the construct of gender as having an absolute link to biological sex needs further investigation.

### **The performative of the ‘feminine’**

Butler (2006) writes that gender has become ‘troubled’. Butler agrees with Moi and others that the feminine and masculine have ‘performative’ meanings, which are reinforced not only by discourse but by the acts of people creating these gender norms. It is counterproductive that sex and gender have been distinguished as if the concept of biological sex exists naturally, without its social context in space and time (Moon, 2019). This feels futile, says Butler (2006), as every individual is born within the context of sex being related to gender. Thus, separating the two terms only creates an illusion that the sex and the gender are not related, when they are in fact culturally and socially marked, even if this is not due to any natural or inherent link. Butler says:

*If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (Butler, 2006, p. 10)*

Brown (1995, p. 201) refers to Karant and Ferguson (1986) in observing that a distinction between ‘femininity’ and ‘femaleness’ is drawn from the complexity of women’s experiences as subordinates (the site of production of ‘femininity’) and as caregivers (the site of production of ‘femaleness’). The categories are performative, they emerge from a social context and shape it. Butler points out that “as a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler, 2006, p. 4). This causes a serious problem for gender theory, says Moi:

*For if we now have deconstructed the female out of existence, the very foundations of gender theory (and the feminist project) have disappeared. (Moi, 1989, p. 128)*

Toril Moi suggests, if gender is deconstructed to the point where it loses its significance, the feminist project risks losing its foundation. The performative quality of gender underscores the observation that

female leadership does not automatically dismantle the patriarchal structures that sustain gender-based violence. Taking the example of Liberia, we observe that while the symbolic representation of women in leadership is crucial, only structural changes can address the root causes of gender-based violence. The high rates of gender-based violence highlight the need for comprehensive approaches that go beyond political representation. These approaches must involve legal reforms, community education, and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels of society. Addressing gender-based violence requires challenging the cultural and social norms that condone and perpetuate violence, as well as providing support systems for survivors.

If gender is performative in a social dynamic, which is always characterised by power and subordination, then creative imagination can route an escape. As the work of creating and redefining gender is never finished, for gender norms to hold in a changing society, they must be constantly repeated and adapted. This means that over a longer term, gender norms are intrinsically open to change. We can never get them exactly 'right', and if we stop doing them, or do them differently, we participate in changing their meaning. This opens possibilities for the concept of gender to change (Butler, 2006).

### **Hierarchy in binary opposites to signify 'what is'**

Moi (1989) draws on Julia Kristeva (1984) to analyse the construction of a symbolic order based on the terms femininity and masculinity, which are linked in that the meaning of one of the terms does not exist without the other and it is only through the feminine that the masculine can be constructed as such. It is only through the intangible illusion that one signifier is weaker than the other, that masculinity can acquire such tangible power. Spivak (2010) translating Derrida, an Algerian-French scholar, observes:

*It is this longing for a center, an authorizing pressure that spawns hierarchized [hierarchical] oppositions. The superior term belongs to presence and the logos; the inferior serves to define its status and marks a fall. (Spivak, 2010, p. xix)*

Discourse that links concepts in terms what 'they are' and what 'they are not' inescapably produces an understanding of the power



dynamics, which relate to the dominant centre of authorising thought, which governs the imagination of the concepts. “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other”, concluded de Beauvoir (1949, p. 16).

The limitation of defining as one uniform construct of ‘what is’ intrinsically requires hierarchy in thought processes. Given that all meaning cannot be derived from the mind of a single person, it travels across as a social enterprise to try and signify what is being referred to. Hence, a concept never corresponds fully with the ‘being’ it refers to and is a placeholder for what it is in view of what it is not. This signifying performance is both social and cultural.

Despite the different approaches to gender and feminism, the stark contrast between the ‘feminine’ and the ‘masculine’ is always prominent. Many scholars have noted the way in which femininity and masculinity have been set against one another in binary opposition. The masculine is associated with presence, rationality, logic, and strength while the feminine is associated with invisibility, emotion, the absence of logic and, hence, weakness.

### **Symbolic order of the gendered society**

Moi (1989) again draws on Julia Kristeva (1984) in finding that the symbolic order of current society is not just marginalising women, but marginalising femininity. It is through the association of women with the term ‘feminine’ and men with ‘masculine’ that women are constantly marginalised. Society ostracises ‘femininity’ as a whole, which means that men with feminine (or any alternative) traits or aspects are also be marginalised when they do not fulfil the imagined symbolic idea of what constitutes a masculine male. By associating the female with femininity, and all the terms that are affiliated to it, and the feminine to various ways of being, an identity is produced and replicated: “We remain glued to this idea that men are programmed to dominate, and therefore, certainly, the women are to be dominated”, states Lecoq (2021, p. 307).

If we apply this school of thought to the situation of war, the inability to defend and protect is demonstrated in each act of violence perpetrated by the other side and exerts who is the dominant party in the situation. In this way, 'women', who are identified as caretakers of what is vulnerable, are associated with the victims and subjected to the men involved in the war, who have been trained to exert power over others. Through the perpetration of sexual violence against women, the perpetrator is the conqueror acted out in a symbolic position of dominance.

The structure of the meaning is rearranged in the social process that takes place:

*Everything that "means" something (and in a singular way, scientific discourse itself in its "transparency") has the function of silencing. And what it silences returns to haunt it, in a minor but irreversible subversion of its discourse.* (Baudrillard & Hildredth, 1981, p. 68)

Hence, the engagement in discourse should not be regarded as a deterministic process, without any volition, as human agency is exercised in the process (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Whatever the case, within the documentation and reporting of war within the available discourse, an idea of a collective consensus emerges on the role of 'men' and 'women' in war, which is likely to reproduce the original binary dyads of meaning and their associations. These associations populate, recreate and enhance the singular discourse through which we understand what happens in the situation. The symbolic underlying nature of the violence that aims to establish dominance is arranged within a discourse, the meaning-production in particular time and space. In this discourse, exclusion and silencing are important factors.

### **Effeminisation of 'the other'**

Considering the totalitarian state, Arendt (1968) illuminates the perverse normalisation of total exclusion. This normalisation of the exclusion of the 'other' is so radical that, in Arendt's consideration, it does not require Arendt to apply a gender lens. While Arendt (1968) does not specifically address the question of gender, her contribution is the analysis of how power is maintained in a totalitarian state by the

normalisation of a fictitious world that replaces and supersedes any other reality at any cost. She finds that the ruler of a totalitarian state must realise the double task of establishing a 'fictitious world' of the revolutionary movement as "a tangible working reality of everyday life" and preventing "the new world from developing a new stability" (Arendt, 1968, p. 391). This almost absurd contradiction is necessary as the endless search for stabilisation will allow the institutions and regulations to balance the power of the totalitarian ruler.

Following the line of thought of Arendt, Guillaumin (1995) shows that 'gender' and 'race' both tend to be 'naturally' affixed to the body, as if they were generated within the natural body and not in its cultural conception. Juteau-Lee explains this as follows:

*The unquestioned acceptance of 'race' as a given biological or social category, Guillaumin writes in 1972, is based upon a mode of apprehension of reality shared by a whole culture. This way of apprehending the world, where 'race' constitutes a category of perception, is precisely what constitutes racism as an ideology. This perceptive and signifying system engenders the idea of 'race', leading to the categorization of human beings into discrete, endogenous, and empirically based categories; it is more diffuse than the theory which it precedes and makes possible. (Juteau-Lee, 1995)*

In the captivity of existence limited by biological constraints, the dominant can best escape this order and be free. The racial and sexual categories follow the socially constituted and naturalised identification, which are then justified by arbitrary markers. Hence, the establishment of social categories precedes the signifier and, because a social category exists, the signifier is operative.

Lugones (2007) explores the reach of the colonial/modern gender system "into the construction of collective authority, all aspects of the relation between capital and labour and the construction of knowledge" (Lugones, 2007, p. 206). She criticises some of the more known feminist writers for overlooking the intersectionality between gender and race, as well as sexuality and class, and especially how coloniality plays a significant role in the establishment of gender as a means of organising societies. Gender and race have, thus, been naturalised as something that is biological and inherent:

*The invention of race is a pivotal turn as it replaces the relations of superiority and inferiority established through domination. It reconceives humanity and human relations fictionally, in biological terms. (Lugones, 2007, p. 190)*

It is through the hegemony of Western knowledge that was spread in the colonies that these modes of power could be spread, naturalised and internalised. Lugones reflects on Oyěwùmí's work, which effectively shows how the gender system was imposed on Yoruba society as a means of organisation. The question at the centre of Oyěwùmí's work is whether Western patriarchy is 'valid' in studying gender relations in a transcultural setting. According to Lugones (2007):

*Oyěwùmí understands gender as introduced by the West as a tool of domination that designates two binarily opposed and hierarchical social categories where women are always defined in relation to men, the norm. (Lugones, 2007, p. 197)*

Through a gendered production of knowledge, such as the introduction of colonial thought-systems, a new image can be created of gender and race, which reshapes the identities of existing groups of people (Lugones, 2007). This is internalised and perpetuated further in society (Lugones, 2007)

Where is the space for change in this thought-structured design of the social world? This is in no way a predetermined situation, but the outcome of a social process, says Guillaumin (1995), and it becomes inescapable only in the structure of the thought process. Arendt and Foucault both locate change in the unstable network of practices, implying that where there is power, there is always resistance too. Just as there is no absolute centre of power, there is no absolute centre of resistance. Resistance is rather inherent within power relations and their dynamics; it is "the odd term in the relations of power" (Foucault, 1976 [2020: 96]).

While power relations permeate the whole body of society, they may be denser in some regions and less dense in others. In the dense setting of an entirely controlled situation, non-totalitarian social instances that are interpreted independently outside the totalitarian fiction are the greatest threat to the autocratic logic that is activated to shape the situation. The creation of constant instability provides the friction in which a daily non-totalitarian instance is repressed and

integrated in the dynamic of realisation of totalitarian power (Arendt, 1968: 392).

The placing of a particular group outside the order of things is critical for understanding the operation of categories in war. Within the order of constant instability that is normalised, the social construction of the 'other' is placed outside the natural order and associated with pathological characteristics. While Arendt does not specifically address this as a gender question, others have pointed to the effeminisation attributed to such categories of 'other', such as in Hitler's Third Reich in the case of Jews and homosexuals, who were seen as 'less' and 'ill' (Honkasalo, 2016), which is a constituent part of the fictitious distortion normalised in everyday life. This work highlights the activation of gender in the 'othering' of groups that are identified as the problem in the totalitarian project, and semantically associated with the lower label in the gender dichotomy, which functions as an underlying constituent of the symbolic order through which the social is imagined.

In effeminisation, the concept of the 'male' is taken as the dominant label. Effeminised beings are persons associated with characteristics and ways of behaving linked to femininity, as the lower extreme of the gender dichotomy and imagined as appropriate for the female body. In the dominant male-female dyad, effeminisation refers to the classification of a social group as lower than the dominant male.

### **The state as a gendered symbol of authority**

Reinforcing and controlling social gender attribution within a social structure, the state operates to enforce this, from a position of dominance, argues Brown (1995):

*Beneath the thin exterior of transformed reformed gender identity and concern for women, the state bears all the familiar elements of male dominance. Through its police and military, the state monopolises the institutionalised physical power of society.* (Brown, 1995, p. 202)

Brown (1995) illustrates that the state has specific structures and institutions that augment the way in which women can interact with specific parts of the state, including the police and military:

*Through its monopoly of political authority and discourse, the state mediates the discursive, semiotic and spatial terms of women's political practices. Thus while the state is neither hegemonic nor monolithic, it mediates or deploys almost all the powers shaping women's lives – physical, economic, sexual, reproductive, and political – powers wielded in previous epochs directly by men.* (Brown, 1995, p. 202)

It is through the state institutions, which shape and reshape the marginalised position that the feminine holds in society, that gender roles are internalised and reproduced across civil society, creating an inescapable echo that reflects these gendered ideas over and over. As a result, women belong even less. Women have become a national good through which to repopulate, says Lecoq (2021, p. 250). Beyond than just creating a gendered civil and political society, the State itself also has characterisations of gender that create the identity of the country as strong or weak. The idea of rationality as an underpinning of the State, associates it with the separation from an embodied existence in a masculine representation. The State itself, especially when conceived as powerful, is seen as having more masculine characteristics. It is through the idea of the State as a rational entity that is powerful and authoritative that the State receives its legitimatisation. A profound understanding of this, is required to escape it (Brown, 1995).

While the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Liberia's first female president in 2006 marked a historic milestone not only for Liberia but for the entire African continent, this is both a breakthrough and an inadequate achievement in relation to the observation that the state is associated with masculine authority. While, as Africa's first elected female head of state, Sirleaf's presidency was celebrated globally as a significant step towards gender equality and women's empowerment, and this was further reinforced with the election of Jewel Taylor as Vice President in 2018, recognition of women's leadership must be complemented by a shift in political and societal norms to result in a re-imagined, new and different world.

## Crossing gender classification in the Tigray war

The review of the conceptual framework to explain the activation of gender in war prompts us to seek the relevance of it for reporting on the Tigray war. The Tigrinya language acknowledges some fluidity of gender concepts in its language. A boy who has feminine characteristics is called *gual gualo* (ጎል ጎሎ) and a *wod-wodo* (ወድወዶ) is a girl who has masculine or boy-like characteristics or behaves ‘like a boy’. These are categories that present slightly outside the ‘natural’ order, as it is perceived by at least some of the young men asked about the meaning of these words:

R: *We don't know about the new appearance of the world nowadays. We live a natural life.* (Interview with D, male, Eritrean, between 25–35 years, interview by Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 17 September 2023)

The reference to ‘natural life’ expresses that Tigrinya-speaking people are not acting outside what is considered the norm – the normal state of humanity – and, therefore, are fully eligible to be part of the ‘in-group’ of human beings. This association with the ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ is even more relevant, given that discourse associated with Tigrayans, prior to and during the Tigray war, sought to dehumanise Tigrayans as an unworthy ‘out-group’ (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). The association with ‘natural life’ seems to also suggest an explanation that society conforms to what is regarded as ‘normal’.

As a result of the analysis on reporting on the Tigray war, five themes were identified: (i) silencing of gender dynamics in the war; (ii) effeminisation through sexual violence to depict the ‘abnormal’; (iii) symbolic ordering to reference the winner group; (iv) Operation Mothers of Tigray; and (v) the symbol of the ‘mother’ as source of peace-building authority.

### ***Silencing***

How is this repertoire of gender classifications activated in the Tigray war? Baldwin (2020) queries the relevance of a focus on gender in the analysis of the war in Tigray. “What has gender got to do with it?” Baldwin asks, when the war in Tigray started in November 2020. She answers the question herself: “A whole lot. Gender is the stage and

language of militarism in Ethiopia and is deeply entangled with the representation of Civil War memory throughout the country” (Baldwin, 2020). Baldwin recognises that women participated in the Tigray People’s Liberation Movement (TPLF) – and still do – as well as in other liberation movements in the region. Trying to come to grips with the gender dimension of the war, Baldwin (2021) wrote the following in a short post-script:

*In November 2020, a new war was launched on Tigray by the federal government of Ethiopia, rooted in the legacies of this civil war. The TPLF has once again become an underground guerrilla movement, drawing heavily on its liberation history. There are widespread reports of extreme and systematic abuse of women and girls in Tigray by state soldiers, including weaponised rape and sexual violence. The particular and remarkable place of women in Tigray’s history is certainly one reason why women are being deliberately targeted in this attack. As aid and communication lines to the region remain unstable and members of the TPLF are being sought out and arrested, veteran women’s testimonies are in danger of being lost in this new wave of violence against Tigray and those who played a part in its history. (Baldwin, 2020)*

Her observation speaks to the friction that emerges in the attempt to maintain control over the story by entertaining apparent contradictions in the fictitious story created as a contestation over space, which takes place in the meaning creation of power: “The particular and remarkable place of women in Tigray’s history is certainly one reason why women are being deliberately targeted in this attack” (Baldwin, 2020). This statement speaks to the process of dislocating the female as a source of power in the Tigray war as a normalisation of a new dominant order established through the Tigray war.

This normalisation happened, for instance, when Prime Minister Abiy made a public statement in the Ethiopian Parliament which could be understood as justifying the targeting of women through rape (23 March 2021).<sup>3</sup> This Tiktok video takes an excerpt of his original video

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<sup>3</sup> Tiktok video posted by: @MhretabMHB on Telegram and Tiktok: [https://www.tiktok.com/@mhretabbirhanu6/video/7387429018003344645?\\_d=secCgYIASAHKAESPgo8hoRR%2BqI5KES2YnJLyUZDJ8CnoWSpFWHEkx57MeZ2C0CqrkCvjZmFCr%2F%2FngCqGzVZL%2Fdo3qIy4mcf5oGgA%3D&](https://www.tiktok.com/@mhretabbirhanu6/video/7387429018003344645?_d=secCgYIASAHKAESPgo8hoRR%2BqI5KES2YnJLyUZDJ8CnoWSpFWHEkx57MeZ2C0CqrkCvjZmFCr%2F%2FngCqGzVZL%2Fdo3qIy4mcf5oGgA%3D&)



in which he states that the Northern Command (Ethiopian military units stationed in Tigray) were “not only attacked” but “humiliated” and that “the women were raped but the country was attacked by woyane [derogatory term for the Tigray population]”.<sup>4</sup>

The ‘natural’ order of women as victims of sexual violence in the war is also normalised in the propaganda from Eritrea, which states that in Tigray-culture rape is normal and predates the war (Madherom, 2022). The process of naturalising this order involves hierarchical institutional interpretation from above, silencing the experiences of women who survived sexual violence:

*In a leaked audio of UN representatives and chiefs of mission in Ethiopia, participants are heard sanitizing, rationalizing, and discrediting the voices of survivors of the genocidal rape in Tigray. The participants went further to discredit the testimonies of service providers by denying the fact that the safe house was raided. Alarming, a UN official participating in the meeting referred to the reports of CRSV as “media hype.” Former Minister of Ministry of Women, Children and Youth, Filsan Ahmed, disclosed in an open letter an instance when a UN representative remarked “the rapes are an exaggeration of the TPLF” when her office published a report documenting weaponized rape in Tigray by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers. (Mahderom, 2022)*

The framing and reduction of narratives that engage with gender in the Tigray war aggravated the silencing of Tigrayans, to the extent that their viewpoints were not heard (which was aggravated by the siege), not available and not relevant. This perpetuates the notion of

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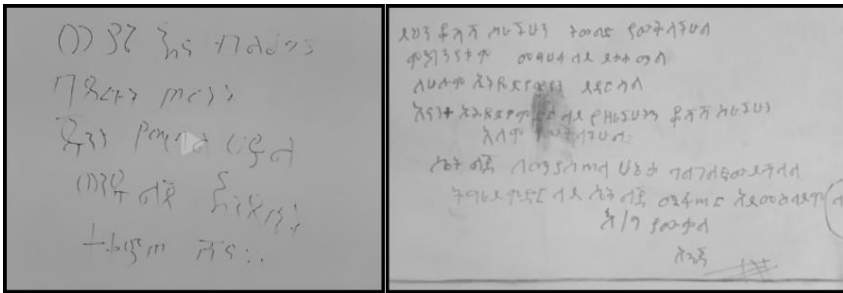
[r=1&checksum=a1cda6b8e68a6a84ece79e53d113555f0099b648fab02e21e3e4860909](https://www.facebook.com/DrZtseatSA1/posts/3768728319915113/) (20 July 2024).

<sup>4</sup> He appeared to say: “የነሱ ሴቶች ቢያንስ በወንድ ነው የተደፈሩት፤ የኛ ወታደሮች እኮ በሳንኛ ነው የተደፈሩት” (translated as: “Their women are lucky they are raped by males; our soldiers were raped with knives”) (<https://www.facebook.com/DrZtseatSA1/posts/3768728319915113/>, 2024). This was understood to justify the rape as a strategic tactic of war<sup>4</sup>, for instance: Takeaway from Abiy Ahmed’s parliament speech: “The ongoing act of Rape against Tigray women may be proportional to TPLF’s anticipatory action against the Northern Command” (@henokgabisa, 2021)

their lack of human agency to understand and represent the situation on own merit.

### ***Effeminisation in the war in Tigray by sexual violence***

Between Ethiopia and Eritrea, on the one hand, and Tigray, on the other hand, the ‘other’ is created as a discourse through derogatory terms such as ‘agame’, ‘Woyane’, and ‘junta’, in a gendered and racialised form, despite their ethnic and historic similarities (Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). Sexually explicit and degrading words and phrasing was connected in 11 instances of graffiti that link sex and sexuality to demean Tigrayans, referred as Woyane and junta, and referencing the TPLF (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024b). Graffiti taken from the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School and from the Martyr’s Commemoration Museum, show stark genderising messages. These two locations served as quarters for soldiers of the Ethiopian federal army. The graffiti was systematically collected and analysed (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a).



**Figure 1.1. Graffiti Emperor Yohannes School. Explicit sexualised content 1 (Tesfa, Van Reisen and Medhanyie, 2024)**

A graffiti (Figure 1.1.) text captured from the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024) in Amharic reads:

ይህን ቆሻሻ ስራችሁን ትውልድ ያውቅላችሁል

ምክንያቱም መጽሐፍ ላይ ይታተማል

ለሁሉም ኢትዮጵያውያን ይዳረሳል

እናንተ ኢትዮጵያ ምድር ላይ የዘራችሁትን ቆሻሻ ስራችሁ አለም የውቅላችሁል።  
 ሴት ልጅ በሚያስጠላ ሁኔታ ባልገልጸው ይሻላል  
 ትግራይ ምድር ላይ ሴት ልጅ የሚፈጠር አይመስለኝም  
 እ/ ግ ያዉቃል  
 አንጃ

This translates as:

*The generation will know this dirty work of yours  
 Because it is going to be published in book  
 It will be distributed to all Ethiopians  
 So that we will let the world know the dirty deeds that you saw on Ethiopia.  
 I don't want to mention women in a disgraceful way  
 But I think women will not be created in Tigray.  
 We will see with God's help. (Tesfa et al., 2024)*

Another graffiti found in the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School (Tesfa et al., 2024) and written in Amharic reads:

ወያኔና ብልጽግና ባደረጉት ጦርነት ጁንታ የሚባል ሀይል ወንድ ልጅ እንደ ሴት ተቀምጦ ሸና

Which translates as:

*In the war between Woyane and Prosperity Party, the Junta force was peeing while sitting as women. (Tesfa et al., 2024)*

Another graffiti in Amharic found in the school (Tesfa et al., 2024) reads:

ለማንኛውም እሄ ትምህርት ቤት ነው የs\*× ትምህርት ማስተማር የሸፍትና የ አዳር ቤት ነዉ  
 ምድረ 666 ወያኔ ትምህርት ቤት ከፈትኩ ብሎS\*× ቤት ከፈተ ይገርማልየወያኔ መጨረሻ  
 እሄ ነው ምድረ s\*× ቆሻሻ ሁላ ዜጋዝማስተማር ይልቅ ኮንደም ትሰበስባለህ አንተን ብሎ  
 መምህር s\*× ኮንደም ፊት አያትህ አንተም ትጠቀማለህ ወያኔ

This translates as:

*Is this a school, anyways? This is rather a sex education school where people spend the night. This is the land of 666, [this is a symbol that stands for condemned Satanism in the Ethiopian context]. It amazing that Woyane opened a sex education pretending it to be a school. This is Woyane's dead end. You, the garbage, collect condoms instead of schooling citizens. How on earth can you be considered as a teacher. You, like your grandfather, are used to condom. You're Weyane. (Tesfa et al., 2024)*

The following graffiti captured from the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a) written by soldiers in Amharic reads:

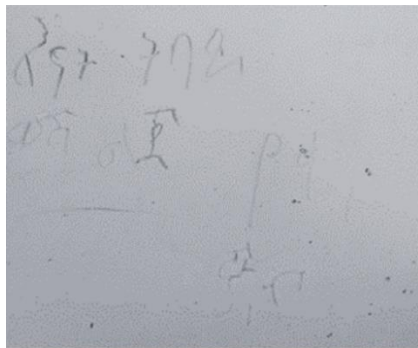
**እናት ትብዳ ውሻ ልጅ የቀን ጅብ**

Which translates as:

*Mother fu\*\* the bitch of dog daylight hyena. (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a)*

**እናት ትብዳ ውሻ ልጅ የቀን ጅብ፡**

*Mother fu\*\* the bitch of dog daylight hyena.*



**Figure 1.2. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: sexually explicit degrading texts**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

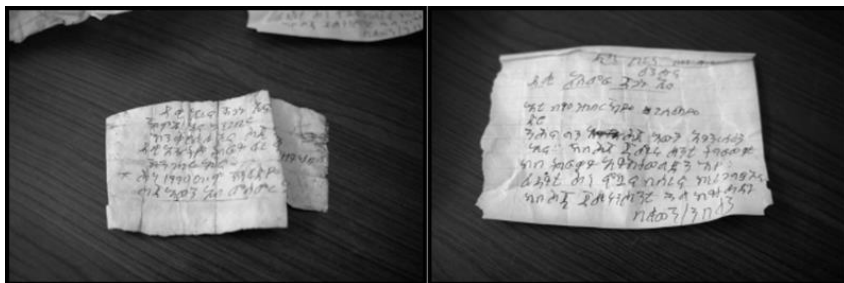
Another graffiti – among many with similar content, found in Amharic language written by soldiers deployed in the building (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a), reads:

**ወያኔ ሕይወት ቅጥህን ተብዳህ እስከመጨረሻ የማትረሳው ብደ!!**



*How on earth can you forget what you have done to us in 09. Even if you do forget it, we will not forget. From now onwards any Tigrayan will not give birth, will not have a baby from a Tigrayan.*

*We shall make sure you know and we will show you how unforgiving we are. So, don't leave any [Tigrayan] woman alive from now onwards: just kill them all. (Van Reisen et al., 2024; Gebru Kidanu & Tefera, 2024).*



**Figure 1.4. Message wrapped in plastic removed by doctors from the womb of a young female who was raped in the Tigray war**

(First published by

<https://x.com/XimenaBorrazas/status/179542778393570968>) (Retrieved from patient's file, saved under special protection) (Van Reisen et al., 2024; Kidanu & Tefera, 2024)

Together with the piece of paper wrapped in plastic, the doctors removed other objects, such as stones, which had been put in the young woman's womb. The text reads in no uncertain terms that the women in Tigray were identified in terms of their biological reproductive capacity and targeted to cause infertility so that the Tigray community will not be sustained.

How can we understand such texts? The friction between reality and fiction of the 'other' as 'unworthy' helps the assertion of totalitarian power over those subjected to it. This friction affirms that 'the impossible is possible', as a symbolic foundation for the magical attribution of power to underscore its heroic mission and to imagine the victorious reality that will result from the war – or at least that is imagined as such.

The performative nature of such language is self-evident by the observation that the message "Deki Erena ['we Eritreans'] are always

Heroes” (Figure 1.3) was forced into the woman’s womb. That type of act was not a single incident, but was widespread, particularly in the first phase of the war, as shown by the evidence on sexual violence reported in the European External Programme with Africa (EEPA) Situation Reports (almost daily reports on the war from 17 November 2020 till the end of 2022). The EEPA Situation Reports include 327 entries on sexual violence in Tigray during the period November 2020 to November 2022. Analysing these entries, per timeline, the majority of incidents were reported at the beginning of the war.

**Table 1.1. Types and timelines of sexual violence reported**

Criteria	January- June 2021	July- December 2021	January- June 2022	July- December 2022	January- June 2023
Sexual abuse	144	11	1	22	9
Rape	124	9	2	13	10
Victims of sexual violence needed or received treatment	40	1			3
Sexual violence as a weapon of war	34	9		5	3
Gang rape	29	3		2	1
Arbitrary execution and killing	27	1	1	9	4
Other forms of violence	27	4		4	
Physical abuse	26			2	2
Abduction	17	3	1	6	6

Criteria	January- June 2021	July- December 2021	January- June 2022	July- December 2022	January- June 2023
People forced to watch sexual violence	10	1			
Fear of stigma	9			1	
Violence against pregnant women and miscarriages	8	1		1	1
Forcing relatives to commit incest	6				
Cruelty	6	1		1	1
Sexual violence led to unwanted pregnancies and abortions	4				
Victims of sexual violence were forced to have sex in exchange for basic commodities	4				
Victims of sexual violence were threatened to not report	2				
Victims were held in sexual slavery	1	1			4



Criteria	January- June 2021	July- December 2021	January- June 2022	July- December 2022	January- June 2023
Victims were held incommunicado	1				
Human trafficking				1	
Type of sexual violence not indicated	50	1		4	1

The analysis shows that the sexual violence went in parallel with other crimes which confirms the conclusion by Kidanu & Tefera (2024) that such crimes are potentially atrocity crimes and committed with the intent to dehumanise or potentially commit genocide. Kidanu & Van Reisen (2024) found that members of the Eritrean military were the majority of perpetrators of the sexual violence reported, followed by Ethiopian military and other military. Tigray being under siege left many of these egregious incidents unreported or reported with delay. The analysis of the timeline shows the sexual violence perpetrated with impunity under the complete siege and communication blockade at the beginning of the war. These acts caused extreme fear, and disarray in Tigray (Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024).

The impact of the perpetration of sexual violence in Tigray, to establish the symbolic ordering of Tigray women as unworthy based on gender-specific norming, and to establish Tigrayans as of a lesser kind, is all the more powerful as there are strong common cultural roots between Tigray and the Tigrinya dominant ethnic population of Eritrea. Such similarity makes the Eritrean soldiers being among the perpetrators of the sexual violence significant from the position that

gender-based effeminisation has the potential effect of creating vulnerable out-groups:

*These attacks were directed against the Tigrayan people, an ethnic minority in Ethiopia, and took place in a climate of impunity precipitated by a war declared by the Ethiopian federal government. Women and girls, as well as boys and men in Tigray, have been subjected to rape, often perpetrated by groups of armed men. There have been numerous reports of sexual slavery, with women and girls held captive for days or weeks. Survivors have been told during the course of these attacks that the perpetrators seek to impregnate them, with the intent of eliminating the Tigrayan bloodline. Moreover, instances of extremely violent and brutal enforced sterilization by armed groups have been reported. (Mahderom, 2022)*

The involvement of the Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers in potential ethnic cleansing or genocide could create an out-group of Tigrayans, otherwise culturally close to the Eritrean and Ethiopian populations. This intent, to ‘other’ Tigrayans as lesser than Eritreans or other Ethiopians was further emphasised by statements made by leaders that sexual violence would have been part of Tigray culture, while denying the perpetration of the sexual violence by soldiers:

*Most dangerously, high-profile individuals, reporters, and government spokespeople have actively and deliberately spread disinformation about pre-war gender-based violence (GBV) in Tigray to minimize and justify the weaponized CRSV [conflict-related sexual violence] committed by the Ethiopian government and its allies. This line of argument contends that there was a “culture” of sexual violence in Tigray prior to the war, suggesting that the weaponized rape unleashed on the Tigrayan population is somehow more justifiable and less horrific as a result. The implications of this argument are clear: survivors and advocates should not raise alarm, demand justice, or request support because this is just a “normal” part of the life of Tigrayan women and girls. (Mahderom, 2022)*

Mahderom alleges that in a similar mode of disinformation an Eritrean leader of the Eritrean government based in Sweden shared information of a victim of sexual violence, who was falsely portrayed as a fighter, which she was not: “Officials such as the Head of Public Affairs of the Eritrean Embassy in Scandinavia, Sirak Bahlbi, shared doctored and false images claiming Mona Lisa was a

fighter”<sup>5</sup> (Mahderom, 2022). The incompleteness and incoherence of the discourses on the sexual violence that was perpetrated in the war creates the perfect confusion on which the totalitarian equilibrium thrives.

### ***Symbolic ordering to reference the winner***

The dissonance between the political empowerment of women and the everyday reality of violence and discrimination reflects a broader issue in gender theory: the distinction between symbolic and actual change. A good example is the persistent issue of gender-based violence in Liberia, which remains alarmingly high, with many women and girls experiencing various forms of abuse, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and harmful traditional practices, despite work at the leadership level and all levels to overcome this. Judith Butler’s concept of performativity can be applied to understand this situation. The performative nature of gender norms means that they are constantly reproduced through social and cultural practices. Despite the presence of female leaders, the deep-seated norms that perpetuate violence and discrimination against women continue to be enacted and reinforced at multiple levels of society. This needs persistent work as well as creativity.

The dissonance between empowerment and the persistence of gender-based violence equally emerges as a theme in the war in Tigray. ‘Game over, Woyane’ and ‘we won’ were important messages sent by the Eritrean soldiers as they were leaving the Tigray in 2023 (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a). How pertinent the analysis of women as actors in the Tigray war is shown by a video released by the Eritrea regime’s media, Merih Media (MM) (2023), which juxtaposes the victimhood of women in Tigray to demonstrations of masculinity by Eritrean women. The video shows (young) women, possibly even underage girls, in combat positions in the training camp Sawa.

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<sup>5</sup> The doctored material was shown on Twitter/X: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220925221332/https://twitter.com/sirakbahlbi/status/1367327732351270916?s=46&t=bHBHPQ0GoTTiveFPbYNX-Q> Mar 4, 2021 by @SirakBahlbi.

The video by MM (2023), was sent to the authors by several persons from the Eritrean community and we were curious to understand what they thought of the content. We, therefore, decided to ask them. A respondent immediately identified the purpose of showing the women as part of nationalistic propaganda in favour of Eritrea's participation in the war in Tigray:

*I: What is the purpose of this video?*

*R: Eritreanism....!!!*

*I: And why do they show so many women?*

*R: That means Eritrean women are shown as strongly willing to participate with the Eritrean Army and ready to defend their Enemy. You know their Enemy is America, Tigray and NATO. We are not lucky that our people are living in a dark area. PFDJ [People's Front for Democracy and Justice] (shaebya ሻዕብያ) [the Eritrean regime] is not a simple regime to create a dark place, I never see anything as cruel like PFDJ. (Interviewee MVR06, interview by Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 17 September 2023)*

Another person explains the video as follows:

*I: And why to show so many women?*

*R: Because they don't know right from wrong, underage women are the ones. They are putting them in front of the camera. They care about their political consumption. They are not people who can distinguish between right and wrong. (Interviewee MVR06, conversation with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 17 September 2023)*



**Figure 1.5. Women in military training, Eritrea**

Source: Merih Media (2023)



**Figure 1.6. Women in a military parade, Eritrea**

Source: Merih Media (2023)

The pictures demonstrate a clear position of nationalistic state domination presented in a military patriarchal order, with the women performing ‘masculine’ activities. These are portrayed with strong phallogentric symbolism, in which an image of strength is derived by association of symbols of masculinity.

This symbolic representation is ‘unseeing’ or denying the reality of Eritrean women, who suffer from sexual violence, enslavement, and inhumane treatment in the Sawa camp. The military training is part of indefinite forced conscription. Women can only escape it by

becoming pregnant, and many choose this as a way out, if they can. Many are forced to provide sexual services to high-ranking military and experience sexual violence (Van Reisen, Saba, & Smits, 2019). The lack of any correspondence of their lived reality of these women to what is shown in the propaganda film of women in Sawa camp can be described as a totalitarian fiction.

The propaganda video also constitutes a counterpoint to the stories of women being victims of sexual violence in Tigray, demonstrating the dominance of power specifically through a contestation of space constructed along genderised symbols. If the propaganda video, picturing the female Eritrean fighters in Sawa, is seen as an implicit coded response to the allegations of rape of Tigray women by Eritrean soldiers (among others), the contradiction of the Eritrean women in powerful military uniforms and the narrative of women of Tigray who are raped by soldiers (and by Tigrayan men as part of their ‘culture’) produces a perfect totalitarian symbolic order. The totalitarian leader has a justification for the war, to save Eritrea and the world from the ‘un-human Tigrayan people’.

The pictures of female fighters are not limited to women in Eritrea. It is building on a history of showing strength through female fighters. Prior to the war, the Tigray Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum boasted pictures of female fighters, including of Tigray women fighters, showing their strength together in the war against the then Derg regime.



**Figure 1.7. Photograph exposed in the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum, Mekelle, Tigray of the second Conference of Tigray Women Fighters Association (1980 EG)<sup>6</sup>**  
(Photograph by Van Reisen, 3 February 2020)

The relationship within families regarding decision to join the fighters was complicated, as expressed by this interviewee:

*This is Kibrom, a wounded fighter from Atsbi. His mom was also a fighter in the 17 years of struggle for liberation.*

*When the Tigray war started, his mom told him she prefers him to go fighting than he staying home and got killed by the enemy.*

*He did so.*

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<sup>6</sup> EG likely stands for Ethiopian Gregorian calendar. Ethiopia uses its own calendar system called the Ethiopian calendar, which is about 7–8 years behind the Gregorian calendar commonly used worldwide. In this case, "(1980 EG)" could refer to the year 1980 in the Ethiopian Gregorian calendar, which corresponds to 1987/1988 in the Gregorian calendar.

*Yes, many fighters have joined the struggle to defend their mothers and sisters, but mothers also tried to save their children from a vain death. They rather see their children go to war for a cause than stay home and killed in their homes.*

*It was an irony that the battlefield was safer in the eyes of the mothers for young men than their own homes. (Interview KGK01, interview by Kidanu, WhatsApp, 7 May 2024)*

Another interviewee projected a decision to join the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) as directly influenced by the sexual violence perpetrated on Tigray women.

*After hearing stories of women getting raped in different parts of Tigray, a friend of my little brother couldn't take it anymore. He decided to join TDF [Tigray Defence Forces], to protect his mother and sisters "before the enemies come knocking at their door". (Interview KGK02, conversation by Kidanu, WhatsApp, 7 May 2024)*

The symbolic ordering that drives the sense of imagined winners of the war is certainly activated by gender, and images of women as fighters are relevant to giving the appearance of strength.

## **Operation Tigray Mothers**

The humiliation through the systematic and sadistic rape and sexual violence of Tigray women in the war was deeply felt in Tigray society. The Operation Tigray Mothers (ወፍሪ አደጋት ጎግራይ-) lasted from 12 to 27 July 2021 and was initiated shortly after the TDF secured control of the regional capital, Mekelle. A Tigray Media House spokesperson, Dade Desta, stated on 12 July 2021:

*Operation Mothers!*

*The military operation to liberate Tigray's southern parts is named after Mothers of Tigray: the coinage gives a good feel as sweet as victory itself, ringing bell about untold excesses Tigrayan mothers had to endure at the hands of these barbaric forces. (@DadeDesta, 12:07/2021)*

According to a resource person: "Operation Mothers not only sought to highlight their suffering but also aimed to celebrate their resilience and tenacity in the face of adversity" (Information received by MVR03 by MvR, WhatsApp. 8 May 2024). The Code Name



Operation Tigray Mothers was widely recognised as being a response to the sexual violence perpetrated on women in Tigray, as an attack on Tigray as a whole: “Because they are the ones who produce the evil children. Women are to blame” for all the evil that, which, in this dehumanising logic, justified the attacks (with possible genocidal intent) against the women of Tigray (Resource MVR04, WhatsApp, 8 May 2024). Another resource person stated:

*It was named for the obvious honour of Tigrayan Mothers who bear most of the war’s burden in all aspects.*

*I believe there was some sense of avenging for the suffering of the mothers who were raped, killed and displaced as well.* (Interviewee KGK05, interview by Gebru Kidanu, WhatsApp, 7 May 2024)

The reason why the attacks on women were felt so profoundly is because these attacks on targeted the very foundation of society:

*1st level – obvious mothers are the givers and nurturers of life*

*2nd level – women, mothers are hold families together, and they hold communities together. They are the ones who visit the sick, and who attend to the multiple social needs of the family, the extended family, and the community. Welfare when you do not have welfare.*

*3rd – the life giving and affirming role is such that women do not butcher animals nor do they bury the dead. At burials, women are usually in line behind the men who do the actual burying.*

*Therefore a targeted attack on women, is an attack at the very fabric of society.* (Resource person MVR04, interview by Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 8 May 2024)

Following Operation Tigray Mothers, the attack on Tigray women went in an overdrive when Ethiopian government advisor Daniel Kibret wrote that all Tigrayan mothers were possessed by a “devil spirit”, which was published by the Ethiopian Press Agency, which is a government outlet.<sup>7</sup> A resource person explained the post as

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<sup>7</sup> Published on Twitter:  
(<https://twitter.com/yaddib/status/1473343437881503746?s=48&t=tdNle6Wzo0AqYsLUupnnQQ>) at 6:23 PM, · Dec 21, 2021 by @Yaddib.

follows: “The post refers to possession by an evil spirit who then perpetuates evil in the world” (Resource MVR04, WhatsApp, 8 May 2024) and “Evil spirits – devil, witches, they only produce evil people, weeds to be removed. The devil has to be exorcised” (Resource person MVR04, WhatsApp, interview by Van Reisen, 8 May 2024). These attacks are hardly veiled comments that could be interpreted as invoking or fuelling a discourse with genocidal intent.

During this period and in view of the physical and emotional attacks to break women as the backbone of society, there was a sense in Tigray that daughters, sisters, sons, brothers and partners fought hard to protect the women of Tigray. The operation, in honour of the mothers, passed the message that there was a force building to make sure that peace would be restored, and to remind mothers that they were not alone, their losses were not in vain and that in their name Tigray would win. The emotion was that the Tigray forces would protect, restore dignity and wipe the tears. Operation Tigray Mothers was felt to be one of the game changing operations in the Tigray war, in the name of mothers, and, therefore, it made a big mark on the war.

### ***The mother as the highest authority in war and peace***

Mothers are a reference point for gender in Tigray, where mothers are highly revered and respected:

*If you are called ‘mother’, it means you are caring, loving and you support unconditionally like a mother. A mother – or Ado – has a huge meaning in our culture. Adey, Adeway, Mama, Mami, Abshay are words used to address your mom in different parts of Tigray. (Interview MVR05, interview by Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 17 September 2023)*

The image of the ‘Mother’, as the highest authority, is endowed with powers of leadership, to call back the fighters and end war. Prash (2015) analyses how the image of mothers was constituted with the highest political agency to bring the gruesome civil war in Liberia to an end. She states that the “militant maternal protests positioned the activists as coherent political agents empowered by their literal and symbolic participation in Liberian performances of African motherhood” (Prash, 2015, p. 187). She adds that the success speaks

to the potential of militant maternal protests in countries where women are excluded from political involvement.

Many young people in Tigray have placed a tattoo in reverence to their mother:

*I joined to protect my mom and I love and missed her so much when I was away, I decided to get the tattoo because it kept me close to my mom and home. Many of my comrades have made similar decisions to get tattoos with names of their mothers. (Interviewee KGK07, WhatsApp, Conversation with Kidanu, 7 May 2024)*

Many members of the TDF mentioned that the reason for joining the army was because they saw their mothers and sisters being raped. And this was such a painful experience that they tattoo themselves with a reminder of why they were there, who they wanted to protect, and who would be waiting for them when they won. There are a lot of members of the TDF with tattoos on their bodies like ‘Mami love’, ‘Mama’, ‘Adey’, or ‘Alemey’ to symbolise their love for their mothers. Others have placed tattoos that carry their mother’s name. The tattoo in Figure 1.7 (right) reads ‘Aberash’, which is the name of the mother of the person with the tattoo.



**Figure 1.8. Tattoos placed on young people in Tigray**

(Photographs collected by Gebru Kidanu, 8 May 2024)

Associating ‘mother’ with ‘home’ reverts the order associating the state with masculine attributes. In many places, including in the Horn of Africa, being called ‘the mother of...’ is the highest sign of reverence and demonstrates the power that women have in the social order. The tattoo – printed in English because it is shorter than in Tigrinya, but also because of fear, according to the person who placed it: “they were also scared of being identified as Tigrinyans; of course, we were not going to go around telling people where we are from at

that time” (Interview KKG08, interview by Kidanu, WhatsApp, 7 May 2024).

The ascendancy of Sirleaf and Taylor as mothers of the nation to the highest political offices in Liberia can be seen as a powerful symbol of progress in a traditionally patriarchal society. Their leadership challenged the entrenched gender norms that have long relegated women to subordinate roles. Sirleaf’s presidency brought international attention to the capabilities and potential of female leaders in addressing national crises, such as the Ebola epidemic, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction (Sirleaf, 2014). However, despite these symbolic victories, the reality on the ground in Liberia tells a more complex story about gender equality and the status of women. The persistence of gender-based violence (GBV) in Liberia underscores the challenges that remain in translating symbolic leadership into substantive societal change.

The tattoos from Tigray honouring the mothers of Tigray, speak to the Ubuntu proverb ‘Without a Mother, there is no Home’, which prompts Van Stam (2014) to reflect on the mother as a most important authority in war and peace: “when mother is not in the village, there is no home”, he says, inviting us to investigate the image of the ‘Mother’ in the ‘home of peace’ (Van Stam, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Sirleaf and Rehn reflected on gender as a relevant aspect of war and peace. Hence, the questions: to what extent and how is a theory of gender relevant to document and analyse war, and which voices are represented, who can speak and on what, are important building elements of how war unfolds. The imagination of war is critical for the performative creation of it. Hierarchy, the domination of positions held, is a critical factor in what performative action determines the discourse of the war. The aggressor versus the defender situates on a spectrum of power or dominance, and so does the conqueror and the victim. During war, aggression can be directed at the total silencing of the other, which results in a dehumanising performance in which the ‘other’ symbolically ceases to exist. The cessation of existence as a human quality is enslavement, by which

body, mind, and space are colonised, with the aim to control movement, communication, and the determination of whose existence is recognised under what conditions. In gender-based sexual violence, the aggressor exercises physical force on the body of another person, thereby activating genderised conceptual categories.

The way in which ‘gender’ is activated in war, documented and talked about mirrors the real-world and shapes its reflection. The recognition of this is relevant to analyse war dynamics. Gender is activated to create positions of power in a war-society, in which the existence of some is contested as unworthy. The realisation that gender is not like the radical concepts of what constitutes ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ is essential to map out a road to peacebuilding that rebalances power. In a patriarchal (post-)colonial hierarchically structured world, in which nationalistic projects provide the basis for contestations of power and the justification of violence, ‘gender’ is not a neutral concept, but inevitably activates notions of dominance and suppression.

In this study five themes were identified as particularly relevant to the activation of gender in the Tigray war. These are: (i) silencing of gender dynamics in the war; (ii) effeminisation to depict the ‘abnormal’ (iii) symbolic ordering to reference the winner group; (iv) Operation Tigray Mothers and (v) the symbol of the ‘mother’ as source of peacebuilding authority. From the analysis it follows that to address gender in war, there must be a transformation in the symbolic order that redefines femininity and masculinity in more equitable terms. This involves challenging the binary opposites that position men as dominant and women as subordinate. Such a transformation requires sustained effort at all levels of society, including education, the media, and cultural practices.

The leadership of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2006–2018) and Jewel Taylor (2018–2024) after the civil war in Liberia represents significant progress in the struggle for the participation of women in Liberia, in Africa and globally. However, the persistent high rates of gender-based violence in the country indicate that symbolic victories must be complemented by substantive changes in societal norms and structures. Liberia’s experience underscores the complexity of

achieving gender equality in a context in which deep-seated cultural and social norms continue to perpetuate violence and discrimination against women. As Butler and other gender theorists suggest, the performative nature of gender means that norms are continually reproduced – but they can be challenged.

What women do, matters. How women do this, and whether this is similar to or different from what we imagine to be ‘feminine’, may have great variety. Relevant documentation of war can start with the recognition that everyone has agency in war to interpret and define it. When women become leaders for peace, and society searches the pathways to peace, the balance of power can be changed. In as much as each person in every community involved in the war is called to help bring about peace and to understand how war can be overcome, the agency of everyone to understand the world as belonging to all beings, and act upon that understanding, should be imagined.

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## **Authors’ contributions**

Luana Stocker wrote the first theoretical outline of this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen restructured the chapter and edited it. Luana Stocker edited all the subsequent versions. Gebru Kidanu edited several versions, and she was in charge of adding much of the empirical work of the chapter to test the theoretical argument. This empirical research was connected to the work carried out on sexual violence in the Tigray war. Julia Duncan-Cassell reviewed the last chapter, discussed it with others, and added text to clarify the arguments and to link the argument to the experiences in Liberia.

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### A Secret Deal to Conceal: The Eritrean Involvement in the Tigray War

*Daniel Tesfa, Mirjam Van Reisen & Kai Smits*

ሐሰት ድራር ሓደ ምሽት።

*A lie is a one-evening supper.*

#### Abstract

During the Tigray war, a communication blackout and media censorship allowed Ethiopian and Eritrean media to deny Eritrea's involvement in the war, leading to atrocities not being reported and enabling perpetrators to operate with impunity. How did secret diplomacy help conceal the Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war? This question is addressed by investigating the disinformation tactics used to enable the denial of Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war for the first five months of the war, as well as in the preparations for the war. The study revealed that through secret diplomacy, in 2017, Ethiopia received an offer from Eritrea to use the port of Assab in exchange for the 'rehabilitation' of Eritrea's reputation among the international community, towards the lifting of sanctions. This diplomatic effort led to a peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2018, of which the content remains undisclosed. The study shows that subsequently a disinformation campaign concealed Eritrea's involvement in the war and local journalists were intimidated to suppress reports of Eritrea's involvement and associated atrocities, contributing to the disinformation campaign, which obscured the true nature and extent of the conflict. This confusion left many atrocities unreported and the perpetrators unpunished. The blurring of peacebuilding efforts with the ongoing conflict resulted in prolonged instability and a lack of accountability for those responsible for the violence.

**Key words:** Tigray war, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Assab port, Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Agreement

## Introduction

Disinformation is among the top three most harmful changes in digital life that threaten public security (Pew Research Center, 2023). Disinformation, amplified by the innovation of communication technologies, enables manipulation in the global dissemination of content. According to Jackson (2018), disinformation is not only related to authoritarian propaganda, but also caused by longstanding vulnerabilities in human cognition, combined with the impact of new emerging information technologies used to pursue political gains at the expense of democratic political discourse. The ubiquitous access to communication technology enables global, regional, and local disinformation actors to use multiple communication channels to control, manipulate or hide information to achieve their goals. Disinformation creates fearful and disoriented cognition and post-truth conspiracy which Jackson identifies as “truth decay”. Disinformation causes the decline of public trust in the government, media, collective decisions, and the existing international order (Boulianne & Humprecht, 2023).

The Tigray war broke out on 3 November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023), followed by the declaration of Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia of a law enforcement operation on 4 November 2020, claiming an attack on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) as the reason. Eritrea was among the main actors in the war (ICHREE, 2023; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023; Melicherová *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024).

While the involvement of Eritrea and other regional actors made the Tigray war a regional war, the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea denied Eritrea’s participation and presence for five months (3 November 2020 to 24 March 2021). This situation changed when Prime Minister Abiy recognised Eritrea’s involvement while addressing the Ethiopian Parliament on 24 March 2021, thanking Eritrea for its support in the war (EEPA, 2020a; 2020b).

The framing and disinformation used during the war to conceal the presence of Eritrea has been scantily investigated. A few studies found that a myriad of framing, bias and disinformation tactics were used during the Tigray war (Wilmot *et al.*, 2021; Pohjonen, 2022). However,

existing studies focused on Twitter content and campaigns used by Ethiopian government supporters versus Tigrayans. This research explores the official frames and disinformation techniques used to conceal Eritrean involvement and atrocities and the (ongoing) presence of Eritrea in Tigray. This chapter investigates the secret diplomacy that helped conceal Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war, looked at through the disinformation tactics used to enable the denial of the Eritrean involvement for five months.

The research question is: *What were the disinformation tactics used by the Government of Ethiopia to conceal the involvement of the national Eritrean Army in the Tigray war?*

### **Framing, mis- and disinformation**

Framing describes the way in which an issue is characterised in news reports and media communication influences how a problem – or a situation – is understood by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The way political communication is framed impacts on how a problem is identified, what solutions are considered, and the consideration of reasons to support certain solutions (Gaechter & Porter, 2018).

The framing of a problem is critical for the shaping of a public agenda, which requires a shared understanding of the problematic conditions of a situation that is defined as needing to be changed (Kingdon, 1984). The framing of a situation creates an attribution regarding who or what is to blame, an articulation of an alternative set of arrangements, and the persuasion to act in concert to affect change (Benford & Snow, 2000). Snow and Benford (1988) coined the core framing tasks as diagnostic framing (problem identification and attributions), prognostic framing (proposed solution), and motivational framing (the intention behind the proposed solution).

Kingdon (1984) distinguishes three parallel streams that associate with the framing process. The three streams are: (i) the problem stream (which is where the problem is defined or framed); (ii) the policy stream (which is where a solution to a problem is defined or framed), and (iii) the political stream (which is where the saliency or importance of the problem is defined). The convergence of the three

streams determines what can potentially enter the public agenda. The mass media is important in public agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). These framing tasks aim to bring people together to a certain perspective through consensus mobilisation and action mobilisation (Klandermans, 1984).

Informing is a key aspect of creating frames. Informing relates to the content of the information that is disseminated (logos), by whom (ethos), when (kairos), and with what tone (pathos), which have a time-bound dimension, in which it matters who the messenger is (Stocker, 2024). Informing shapes the way we think about a situation. Mis- or disinforming is a tactic purposefully used to interfere with the process of informing to achieve a common consensus on a public agenda and undermines this consensus with deliberately incorrect information intended to establish a common threat:

*The distribution of false, misleading, or inaccurate information with the intent to deceive is an existential threat [...] -- distortion of information erodes trust in the socio-political institutions that are the fundamental fabric of democracy: legitimate news sources, scientists, experts, and even fellow citizens. As a result, it becomes difficult for society to come together within a shared reality; the common ground needed to function effectively as an economy and a nation.* (Bliss et al., 2020)

Such efforts can be analysed as a deliberate process to achieve an effect. The Disinformation Kill Chain Model is a conceptual framework that explains the nature, application, and chains of mis- and disinformation processes in the digital world (Peter *et al.*, 2019). Based on this framework, disinformation is understood as a coordinated effort by threat actors, amplifying the use of communications. The threat actor is the source of the disinformation campaign, which sets objectives that need to be translated into action, seeking either to maintain the status quo or to alter public opinion in a manipulative manner (Peter *et al.*, 2019). The following chart describes the conceptual flow of the Disinformation Kill Chain Model, which was theorised following experiments about the steps followed by state and non-state threat actors.



**Figure 2.1. Disinformation Kill Chain Model adopted from MITRE Corporation**

Source: Peter *et al.* (2019)

The first step in the Disinformation Kill Chain Model is reconnaissance, in which the threat actors analyse the target audience and how the disinformation content flows through the context of the target audience by identifying social fissures to exploit and designing campaign plans to be executed later (Peter *et al.*, 2019). Threat actors invest in building the infrastructure vital to the campaign, including sophisticated communication technologies, operational staff, social media platforms, websites, blogs, and other facilities (Peter *et al.*, 2019). Disinformation campaigns initiated by state actors also use information control mechanisms and diplomatic, propaganda and/or official messaging aiming to dominate the sphere of information (Peter *et al.*, 2019).

After building the necessary infrastructure the threat actor designs the disinformation content and launches the campaign by delivering the content to platforms for the initial disinformation seeding and mainstreaming. Two ways of building this content are observed: creating new disinformation content and distributing priority facts. While the first aims at initiating new disinformation, the second concerns the repurposing of information in multiple alternative perspectives on the issue, which will enable the threat actor to create an illusion on these facts to the audience (Peter *et al.*, 2019).

There are two kinds of collaborators with threat actors that facilitate the copying and the spreading of the disinformation. Witting agents, aware of the motives of the threat actor, multiply the content, assisted



by their media platforms, for seemingly authentic distribution (Peter *et al.*, 2019). The stage in which the information is copied is a form of ‘information laundering’, laying the groundwork for amplification by adding legitimacy to poorly sourced stories (Peter *et al.*, 2019). This content is picked up by unwitting agents, who are victims of the disinformation campaign, and who spread the disinformation to larger audience. The content is amplified by witting agents (quasi-legitimate journalists) and unwitting agents (‘useful idiots’), through which successful amplification results in the content being distributed, including by authentic voices, such as the mainstream media.

For the proposed disinformation frame to gain dominance in the narrative sphere, the threat actor and its collaborators use their communication apparatus to incite conflict, to strengthen the illusion of consensus by trolling comment sections of online posts, to avoid counternarratives by controlling information (and sources), and to deny or accuse the enemy of bringing the story out in a different way (Peter *et al.*, 2019). The threat actors evaluate the effect of their disinformation campaign based on the expressed behaviour of the targeted audience measured against the desired effect (Peter *et al.*, 2019).

Peter *et al.* (2019) stated that the identification of threat actors requires making three preliminary determinations; is the threat actor a nation-state? Is it backed by a nation-state? Is it independent of a nation-state? Is the threat actor based inside or outside the country? Are those collaborating with the threat actor witting or unwitting agents?

Although disinformation is generally a threat to democracy and to public safety, the effect can be manifested as severe when the threat actor is a government. This enables the tuning of its state structures as instruments of the disinformation campaign. This use of state apparatus enables the disinformation to reach audiences repeatedly. The information is from sources that are perceived to be legitimate bodies. This increases the persuasiveness of the message. Any leaders with dissenting views can be easily censored by the state apparatus. Members of the public whose perspectives deviate from the

campaign may also prefer to keep silent for their safety or the safety of their relatives.

The characteristics of state disinformation are explained by Ong and Cabañes (2019). The bipartisan top-down flow of media content, strong military surveillance of information, and direct censorship of online conversations are the dominant tactics used by states to plant fabricated narratives or to cover the facts happenings on the ground (Ong & Cabañes, 2019). The pro-government media will extensively re-use state information while the anti-establishment media organisations often practice an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship to avoid shutdowns by the state (Ong & Cabañes, 2019).

### Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to study the disinformation tactics used to conceal the involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war. The following data were collected: media reports, field visits, interviews, observations and document analysis. The timeframe was traced to the first interview in which the President of Eritrea publicly expressed himself in a deliberate way on the situation in Tigray, in January 2018.

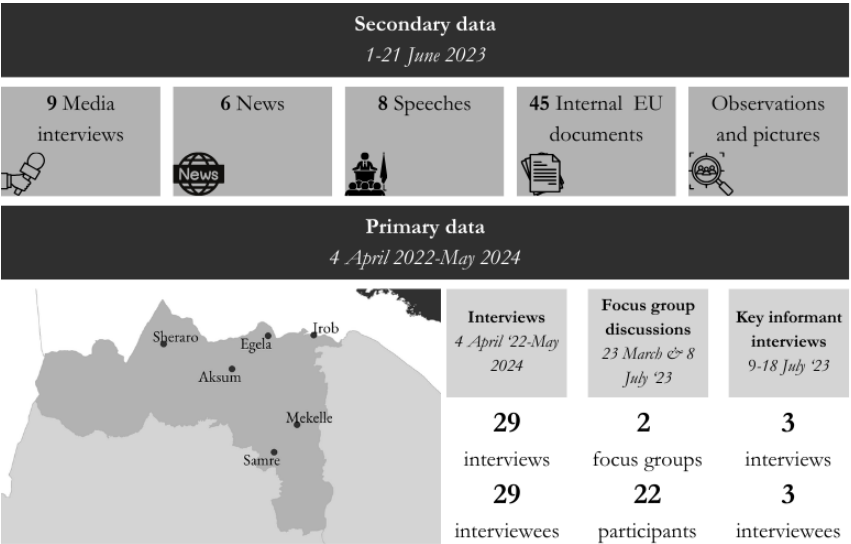


Figure 2.2. Data used and collected in the study

### ***Media data***

The media data were collected from official speeches, interviews, TV news, and Tweets. The Eritrean state owned ERI-TV YouTube page gives access to state media data. With the search term: ‘Isayas Afwerki’<sup>8</sup> the data in the YouTube search engine was explored. The result was 57 pieces of media content, which included interviews, speeches, and news-items. The research team purposively selected 7 media interviews, 7 speeches, and 3 news stories based on relevance.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, through other channels, 2 media interviews, 5 news, and 3 speeches were selected based on their relevance. A total of 8 speeches, 9 media interviews and 6 TV news items were selected. The media data was collected between 1 June 2023 and 14 April 2024. To complement the data, Tweets by government officials, news, and media-interviews on the Tigray war were included.

**Table 2.1. Types of media data used**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Type of media data selected</b>	<b>Source and justification for using the selected media data</b>
1	Speeches (n=8)	Speeches by Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki in Martyrs Day on 20 June 2018 [1], President Isayas Afwerki’s Visit to Gondar – Ethiopia [2], President Isayas Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s speeches in their counter visits to Ethiopia and Eritrea [3-6], President Isayas Afwerki’s Speech During Sawa 31st Graduation on 13 July 2018 [7] and Eritrean Independence Day on 24 May 2019 [8].
2	Media interviews (n=9)	Interviews that Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki conducted with ERI-TV on 14 January 2018 [1], 3 November 2018 [2], 1 August 2019 [3], 8

<sup>8</sup> The link gives access to the original search:

[https://www.youtube.com/@EriTV\\_EritreaOfficial/search?query=Isayas%20Afwerki%20Interview](https://www.youtube.com/@EriTV_EritreaOfficial/search?query=Isayas%20Afwerki%20Interview)

<sup>9</sup> Topics rated as relevant: (i) Ethiopia-Eritrea relations including reconciliation, (ii) opening of borders, (iii) Eritrean-Ethiopian alliance and (iv) the Tigray war.

No.	Type of media data selected	Source and justification for using the selected media data
3	TV news (n=6)	<p>February 2020 [4], 17 February 2021 [5], 8 January 2022 [6], and 18 February 2023 [7] as well as Ethiopia Minister of Democratisation, Zadi Abraha [8], Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister's, Daniel Kibret's interview about Eritrean involvement [9]. We have nine media interviews.</p> <p>ERi-TV news about President Isayas Afwerki's Seminar at the 8th National Festival of Eritrean Youth in Sawa [1], the opening of the Bure border on 11 September 2018 [2] as well as EBC [3] and ERi-TV news about President Isayas Afwerki's visit to Ethiopia on 14 October 2018 [4] as well as news about Eritrea's Foreign Minister, Osman Saleh Mohammed [5] and Ethiopia's Minister of Defence, Kenea Yadeta [6] denying the involvement of Eritrea. We have six news.</p>
4	Tweets and other media interviews	<p>Eritrea's Ministry of Information's, Minister of Information Yemane Gebremeskel, Tweets denying the involvement of Eritrea, Eritrea's Foreign Minister, Osman Saleh Mohammed, and Ethiopia's Minister of Defence, Kenea Yadeta, Ethiopia Minister of Democratisation, Zadi Abraha, Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret's, response on a media question about Eritrean involvement and Interim Administration Mayor of Mekelle's, Ataklti Hailelassie, confirmation that Eritrea is part of the Tigray war were purposively selected to examine the disinformation trends.</p>

No.	Type of media data selected	Source and justification for using the selected media data
5	Internal documents (n=45)	45 internal documents of the European Commission were analysed. The documents were received following a formal request for information.

### ***Field visits, interviews and observations***

Field visits were conducted, during which observations were made and interviews carried out. The interview formats employed were (i) in-depth interviews (IDIs), (ii) focus group discussions (FGDs), and (iii) key informant interviews (KIIs). The timeline of the field visits was: Aksum, 23 March 2023; Egela 8-9 July 2023; Sheraro 4–6 May 2023; Samre 11 June 2023; Mekelle 5–20 April 2022 and 2–3 April 2024; Irob on 18 June 2023, and Brussels 25 March 2024, 3 April 2024, 17 April 2024. Key informant interviews were conducted with interim local administration members who oversee providing information about the general overview of the situations, rather than individual stories, which was already addressed in the in-depth interviews. The key informant interviews were conducted with members of the interim government administrations in Tahtay Adyabo, Egela, and Irob woredas. Observations of the Aksum Massacre by one of the research team members and diary notes of his observations were also used in the research. Two focus group discussions were conducted in Aksum on 23 March 2023 and Egela 8 July 2023. In-depth interviews were conducted in Sheraro, Egela, Samre, Mekelle, and Belgium/the Netherlands.

**Table 2.2. Data collection tools per location**

Data collection tool	Place and number of people participated						
	<i>Egela</i>	<i>Sheraro</i>	<i>Aksu</i>	<i>Samre</i>	<i>Irob</i>	<i>Mekelle</i>	<i>Belgium/ Netherlands</i>
In-depth interview (n=29)	5	5*	-	6*	-	10	3
Focus group discussion (n=2FGD/n=2 participants)	1	-	1	-	-		
Key informant interview (n=3)	1	1	-	1	1		
Observation			X				

\* Denotes areas where under 18 children participated as respondents. Two in Sheraro, 15 and 17 years old as well as one 16-year-old in Samre participated as respondents with the consent of at-least either one of their available parents.

### ***Internal documents***

With regards to the internal documents from the European Commission, the following procedure was followed. The European Commission sent 45 documents in 2020 to a legal representative of the group Human Rights for Eritreans, who asked the researchers to analyse the information. The documentation was sent in response to a request for access to documents on the Eritrea Emergency Road Rehabilitation project funded by the European Union in Eritrea. The information was sent in three batches. The first two batches included improperly censored documents, which revealed further information. In addition to the documents sent by the EU, external documents were used to triangulate and add further information. These were analysed to ascertain the timeline of decisions.

### ***Data analysis***

A coding-labelling strategy was employed to analyse the data obtained from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. The data was first transcribed in Tigrinya, the language in which the interview and discussions were conducted. Then a summary of the translation to English was prepared on an Excel sheet for all the data obtained. A code was then assigned to the respondents based on the type of data collection tool.

The theme building process was reconsidered after brainstorming the transcribed data and again after the analysis of the data. The themes initially identified were then crosschecked against the data. Subthemes that contribute to the bigger themes were then identified. Finally, the data was analysed based on the coded themes and subthemes explained in the result section.

The research team collected the media data and selected speeches based on their relevance for the public agenda. Subsequently, the team conducted brainstorming reviews to understand the dominant frames reflected in the media content using thematic content analysis. After the third review of the media content, final thematic analysis was presented in paraphrasing and using quotes together with the results of the in-depth interviews and key informant interviews.

**Table 2.3. Content themes**

No.	Themes	Type of data used
1	Problem definition (diagnostic framing)	Media data, IDIs and FGDs
2	Consensus and action mobilisation	FGDs and IDIs
4	Motivational framing	IDIs and FGDs
5	Solution (prognostic framing)	KIIs, IDIs and FGDs
6	Disinformation tactics	Media data and IDIs
7	Censorship	IDIs
8	Denial	IDIs, FGDs, KIIs and media data

The internal documents were analysed and the timeline of events identified; these were triangulated with the other data. The notes from the observations and field visits were used to crosscheck the other information gathered and on incidents captured through autobiographic notes. Both authors kept a diary during the war on events and reports, both of which were used for cross checking interpretations made from material collected and analysed.

## Results and findings

The research aimed to explore the disinformation tactics used to conceal the involvement of the Eritrean Army in the Tigray war. Diagnostic, motivational, and prognostic frames of the media reports were compared with the actions of Eritrean soldiers during the Tigray war.

### ***14 January 2018: A warning: ‘Game over, Woyane’***

During an important speech on 14 January 2018, President Isayas laid the foundation of ‘the problem’, which he defined as the Tigray People’s Liberation Movement (TPLF) or ‘Woyane’.<sup>10</sup> In framing of the TPLF as a problem, he went back to the history of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) and the TPLF. The EPLF is the predecessor of the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), which has ruled Eritrea since 1994.

In his speech on 14 January 2018, President Isayas unequivocally identified the TPLF as the problem. In a series of statements, he explained why this is so. He argued that the TPLF had set up the organisation of the Ethiopian state based on ethnicity:

*[...] what the TPLF made was bringing ethnocentrism in organizational form.*  
(ERi-TV, 2018a, 1:09:48-1:11:05, translated from Tigrinya by authors)

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<sup>10</sup> The term ‘Woyane’ refers to the TPLF (and broadly to the people of Tigray), in relation to the victories against Emperor Selassie and the Derg regime. In Eritrea, the term ‘Woyane’ is changed into a derogatory and hostile term. In 2016 the slogan Down Down Woyane is introduced at an Oromo festival, as a hostile term towards the TPLF specifically and the people of Tigray in general.



President Isayas delegitimised the leadership of the TPLF (ERi-TV, 2020; 2018a):

*When we evaluate this trend after 25 years their attempt to divide and rule, Ethiopia could not able to step further. That is the reason that Ethiopians are now committed to dismantle the TPLF.* (ERi-TV, 2018a, 1:04:59-1:07:21, translated from Tigrinya by authors)

In this speech, Isayas also blamed the ‘Woyane’ for the problems that Eritrea has faced. He attributed the cause of the sanctions that the United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted on Eritrea in 2009 for alleged destabilisation of the region, arms trade, and other illegal practices to the ‘Woyane’:

*Woyane has this trend of fabricating information and accusing us as it did in 2009, which caused Eritrea to be sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council.* (ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:32:10-0:33:30, translated from Tigrinya by authors)

President Isayas said he would put a stop to this problem, introducing a new slogan: “Woyane, game over!” (ERi-TV, 2018a).

President Isayas stated that the rule of the TPLF leadership over Ethiopia was ‘finished’, referring to the 25-year period that TPLF had been leading Ethiopia. The TPLF leader Meles Zenawi become the Prime Minister of Ethiopia in 1991 following the defeat of the Derg regime. Isayas gave a clear warning to the TPLF and anyone identifying as Tigrayan:

*Woyane this game can never return. Game Over! You can buy some time, you may get good care until your time is up, but the 25 years are gone, enough is enough. The global scenario is facing changing dynamisms. Woyane’s attempt to divert the agenda through fabrications is never going to happen again.* (ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:21:54-0:27:24, translated by authors)

President Isayas then engaged the people of Ethiopia:

*Now the message to the people of Ethiopia ... is that this is the time that you need to say ‘enough is enough’. The losses for 25 years provide good lessons. This is the right time to say no for Woyane and its guardians.* (ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:21:54-0:27:24, translated by authors)

He took the slogan ‘enough is enough’ from an opposition campaign originally directed against the Eritrean regime and reinterpreted it to

support Ethiopians to bring an end to the ‘TPLF/Woyane’ regime.<sup>11</sup> He engaged with the Ethiopian agenda, as he defined it, and to justify this strong hostile scenario against the TPLF, he claimed the TPLF was supported by external agents:<sup>12</sup>

*Woyane betrayed the people of Eritrea who fought together in bitter days. Woyane collaborated with external forces to fight the very same people. That was an unforgivable one because it served as a foreign agent, working with external actors to dismantle Eritrea.* (ERi-TV, 2018a, 1:16:28-1:17:10, translated by authors)

The speech of January 2018 was forecasting events; in February 2018 Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned and in March 2018 Abiy was appointed as Ethiopia’s Prime Minister. Eritrean President Isayas continued to repeat the ‘Game over, Woyane’ slogan in the media (ERi-TV 2018b).

The narrative against the ‘Woyane’ was further developed by President Isayas in a seminar in the Eritrean military training camp Sawa where he discussed with the graduates of the military training the “political cleansing” of “the leftovers of Woyane” (ERi-TV, 2018c). In this speech, President Isayas used diagnostic framing – identifying the problem as the ‘TPLF’ and ‘Woyane’. He also used prognostic framing, which identifies the proposed solution, which he offered in the form of a campaign of ‘Game over, Woyane’. He also set out the intention behind the proposed solution, which is referred to as motivational framing, and he identifies it to be the right time for a solution, given the dynamic changes in “global scenarios”, such that “This is the right time to say no for Woyane and its guardians” (ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:21:54-0:27:24, translated by authors). For Eritrean audiences, the message was crystal clear: the ‘Woyane’ were the problem, the international winds were changing and, therefore, it was

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<sup>11</sup> The slogan ‘enough is enough’ was originally introduced by the Eritrean opposition movement Yakl (which means ‘enough’) in 2016; the slogan was subsequently taken over by Isayas to confront the opposition ‘enough is enough’, which would become the slogan for a global campaign led by Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2021 against foreign interference.

<sup>12</sup> A claim that in fact has been levied against Isayas himself, who has been regularly accused of having been supported by the CIA as leader of the EPLF (Aleme, 1993; ተስፋንኤል, 1982; Resoum, 2008; Horn of Africa Research and Knowledge Platform, ND).

time to end the TPLF (vaguely extended to mean all Tigrayans) in Ethiopia.

***Secret diplomacy on the future of the Assab port***

In 2009, the UN Security Council placed Eritrea under sanctions. President Isayas blamed the ‘Woyane’, the TPLF for this (ERi-TV, 2018a, 0:32:10-0:33:30). Seven years later, in 2016, the UN Security Council received a report from the UN Council on Human Rights by the UN Special Commission on Inquiry on Eritrea (2016), which determined that crimes against humanity had been committed in Eritrea.

The same year, 2016, the UN Security Council Monitoring Group documented “a significant evolution like the continuing military activities in and around Assab” (UN Monitoring Group, 2016, p. 10). The group noted that “the activities included the presence of non-Eritrean military personnel, new military equipment on the territory and the construction of new military infrastructure relating to air and naval capacity” (UN Monitoring Group, 2016, p. 10). It was indicated that the Assab port was used by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Eritrea for the training and transport of equipment and troops to Aden in the context of the conflict in Yemen (UN Monitoring Group, 2016, p. 12).

It is reported that an Israeli diplomat met Eritrean President Isayas in Asmara, and subsequently in Addis Ababa with President Hailemariam Desalegn of Ethiopia at the end of 2017, to discuss the future of the Assab port (Interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen). The meeting had been proposed by President Hailemariam Desalegn. Earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had visited Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn, focusing, among other things, on Ethiopian support for Israel’s request for observer status in the African Union as well as other regional matters (AA, 2016).

A one-person delegation travelled from Israel to Mekelle on 24 December 2017, to meet with high level officials in Mekelle (Interviewee IDI2701, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 3 April 2024, Antwerp). While the programme in Mekelle identified a proposal for research collaboration, the interviewees indicated that

the key substance of debate was on a political proposal for resetting relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, including the port of Assab (Interviewee IDI2701, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 3 April 2024, Antwerp; interviewee IDI2702, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen; interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen; interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 17 April 2024, Brussels and e-mails copied to author, dated Wed, Dec 20, 2017, 13:17).<sup>13</sup> Eritrea was to offer Ethiopia use of the port of Assab, in exchange a settlement of the border dispute in Badme; additionally, the European Union (EU) would help to build roads from Assab to Addis Ababa with a connection to Mekelle. This would allow the hostile situation between Eritrea and Ethiopia to positively evolve into active collaboration between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Both countries would gain economically (Interviewee IDI2701, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 3 April 2024, Antwerp; interviewee IDI2702, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen; interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 25 March 2024, Scheveningen; interviewee IDI2801, interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 17 April 2024, Brussels and e-mails copied to author, dated Wed, Dec 20, 2017, 13:17).

According to the three interviewees, the proposal was not well-received by the Tigray leadership. Three weeks later, on 14 January 2018, President Isayas gave his speech identifying the TPLF as a problem and presenting the slogan ‘Game over, Woyane’ in which he referenced that the geopolitical situation had been altered which, he said, made it “the right time” for the campaign against TPLF – and by extension, Tigrayans. This suggested that President Isayas was confident that the political momentum had moved in his favour.

The geopolitical circumstances had indeed changed. In 2012, Meles Zenawi, then Prime Minister of Ethiopia had passed away. He was

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<sup>13</sup> The meeting that took place in Mekelle was confirmed by three persons who were present in the meeting and the authors also received evidence of the meeting, including emails and the meeting programme.

succeeded by Hailemariam Desalegn from the Ethiopian regional state of South Nations Nationalities and People. President Isayas of Eritrea was also seriously ill in 2012, with repeated rumours that he had also died. This subsequently proved to be untrue.

In 2015, the UAE changed its use of the port in Djibouti to the Eritrean port of Assab, which offered Eritrea an opportunity to develop the port with the help of the UAE. The UAE signed a lease contract for 30 years.

With the Trump administration having come to power in the United States of America in 2016, the landscape evolved further, ultimately culminating in the Abraham Accords of 2020, improving collaboration between the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, sponsored by the United States (US). If there was a peace plan proposed to Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2017 to give Ethiopia access to the sea and unlock Eritrea from the sanctions that had severely isolated it, then this would certainly fit the description that Isayas gave in his January 2018 interview: the geopolitical winds had changed.

The proposal offered in 2017 by Israeli's diplomacy to Eritrea and Ethiopia was accompanied by offers of European support. After the secret peace deal was concluded in July 2018 with financial support offered by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to Eritrea and Ethiopia, the European Union offered road-building projects to Eritrea. A media message identified the plan to build up the port in Eritrea in collaboration with Ethiopia in July 2018:

*Eritrea has announced plans to capitalise on its recent peace treaty with Ethiopia by building a port to export potassium.* (Global Construction Review, 2018)

Planning for the EU-road building project in Eritrea started prior to the announcement in February 2019. With an initial EUR 20 million budget; this was later expanded with an additional EUR 60 million budget for subsequent phases. In the records sent by the EU to the authors in response to information requests, it can be ascertained that the earliest meetings with the implementing partner, the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), were between 25–30 November 2018. UNOPS is among the UN agencies under the Financial and Administrative Agreement (FAFA) with a special

arrangement, including a “pass-through arrangement”, where funds are mingled and given in trust to an agency.<sup>14</sup>

Around the same time, a high-level representative of the EU, Managing Director for Africa at the European Union’s External Action Service (EEAS). Koen Vervaeke, met with Senior Presidential Advisor, Yemane Gebreab (AfricaNews, 2019). Vervaeke Tweeted about this on 27 November 2018 (@koen\_vervaekeEU, 27 November 2018). The references to the EU in all its internal documentation refer to the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea as a reason for rapidly accelerating its support.

On 11 December 2018, the EU delegation in Asmara wrote a letter to Mr Hagos Ghebrehiewot, Head of Economic Affairs at the Red Sea Corporation,<sup>15</sup> which confirmed that a project action document for road building had been drafted, following a conversation between the EU, Hagos and Senior Presidential Advisor, Yemane Gebreab. The letter did not mention the date of the meeting. The letter was signed by Nicole Miller, Chargé d’Affaires.<sup>16</sup>

On 8 February 2019, Eritrean Press announced that EU Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, was visiting Eritrea for the launch of a EUR 20 million road building project (Eritrean Press, 2019). In the message, the project was connected to the recent peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and it indicates that this is the first phase of broader support to Eritrea to rehabilitate road connections between the Ethiopian border and Eritrean ports. Mimica met directly with Eritrean President Isayas. The same day, the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa also published information about

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<sup>14</sup> This modality is explained in a UN document (UNSDG, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> The name on the letter was censored, but the information could be recovered. The Red Sea Corporation has been described in reports by the UN Monitoring Group and associated with illegal international trade, under the control of the PFDJ. In 2015, the UN Monitoring Group investigated the Red Sea Corporation in relation to a vessel docked in Massawa port with weapons on the way to an arms exhibition in the UAE. In 2021, the Red Sea Corporation was put on the sanctions list of the US Treasury. For a detailed description, see Makeda Saba, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Idem.

the project, stating it was part of a “new dual track approach of strengthening political dialogue with Eritrea” (European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2019a). It specified that the focus of the project was connecting the Eritrean port of Massawa (not Assab). The road projects would connect Asmara to the border with Tigray.

As becomes apparent from the documentation received from the EU regarding the project, the action fiche for the project was approved on 31 January 2019. The e-mail between the EU and member states says that several countries raised concerns, particularly related to the people who would work on the road building project, especially those in the National Service. The poor remuneration and working conditions under the National Service conditions, which is indefinite, were referenced, which the UN had identified as a crime against humanity (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016).

The project was discussed in a meeting on 24 January 2019, in the presence of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom, as well as DEVCO and EEAS. The project was introduced as a key opportunity to “consolidate peace, open up economic integration and support Eritrea’s economic development” in the wake of the peace agreement of July 2018 (European Commission, 2019). The EU’s poorly censored minutes of the meeting revealed that the project should be implemented “rapidly, otherwise Eritrea would look elsewhere” (European Commission, 2019). The minutes explained that the project was in essence an “emergency procurement project”, which transfers funds from the European Development Fund (EDF) to the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), “to benefit from its emergency procedures”.

The documentation specified that the work on the roads was to be carried out by people in Eritrea’s permanent National Service, as there is “no way round this”. The minutes mentioned that the European Commission suggested using only demobilised workers, but in a part that was poorly censored by the EU, it could be read that “this was rejected, given the situation and [Eritrea’s] opposition to conditionality”. The Commission also claimed that labour laws in

Eritrea were broadly applied and that National Service workers received salary comparable to salaries in Ethiopia. The meeting minutes also mentioned cooperation with Ethiopia, including the Prime Minister, and it referred to a visit with the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, but does not include the date of this visit.

The meeting minutes mentioned that UNOPS, working with the Eritrean government, would implement the project. The Red Sea Trading Company had to be used for procurement, although international procurement would be done jointly, the minutes stated. The action fiche for the project tried to cover the EU's role by specifying that the delivery of the work and labour costs will be paid for solely by the Eritrean government (European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2019a, p.1).

The three main road sections that the action fiche mentioned as part of the rehabilitation were:

*Road section 1, Nefasit-Dekembhare-Senafe-Zelembesa, which is the main route down to Adigrat and Mekelle in Tigray. [...] Road Section 2: Dekembhare-Tera Imni-Mendefera-Adi Kula, which is the fastest route down to Adva and accessing Ambara. [...] Road Section 3: Mendefera-Barentu, which is planned to be connected after Tesseney towards the border with Sudan (and on to Kassala) and Ethiopia (from the border at Humera).* (European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2019a, p.2)

The action fiche stated that the government, the EU and UNOPS made a joint visit on road section one (date unknown) and that the work had already started. The fiche also mentioned that augmenting the capacities at Massawa port were being explored as a next step. "This is being explored with Gulf partners" (European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2019a, p.4).

The road building project faced criticism from the media and was the target of a court case by an Eritrean human rights foundation (Euractiv, 2020). It was heavily criticised in the European Parliament. In June 2020, the EU made it clear that it was taking a "no more roads" approach and had denied additional funding requested by Eritrea for road building (European Parliament, 2020). The funding was completely withdrawn in April 2021, as the EU cited a lack of interest from Eritrea and the presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray as



the main reasons (Devex, 2021). The EU stated that EUR 19 million had been disbursed.

In March 2019, during the French President's visit, a defence cooperation agreement was signed, establishing a legal framework for the deployment of French troops to Ethiopia and vice versa. Additionally, France committed to assisting in the reconstruction of Ethiopia's navy.

A defence cooperation agreement was signed in March 2019 during the French President's visit, providing a legal framework for sending French troops to Ethiopia and vice versa. Furthermore, France has undertaken to support the reconstruction of an Ethiopian navy.



France and Ethiopia - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs

**Figure 2.3. Screenshot Google Search (key words: 'France' 'support' 'Ethiopia' 'navy' '2019') performed on 8 September 2024<sup>17</sup>**

The purpose of the diplomacy, involving a range of international diplomatic efforts, was not revealed. It may explain that the statement of President Isayas, that the international winds had changed, as he said on 14 January 2018, encompassed more than a grain of truth.

### ***Secret diplomatic deals on peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia***

An analysis of the critical events that shifted the international momentum, shows critical decisions associated with the following aspirations towards a deal:

- Integration (discussed in various ways) of Eritrea and Ethiopia

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<sup>17</sup> url: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/ethiopia/france-and-ethiopia-65128/#:~:text=A%20defence%20cooperation%20agreement%20was,reconstruction%20of%20an%20Ethiopian%20navy>. On the search date the url was not or no longer available to open.

- Ethiopia's access to a port in Eritrea
- Removing the isolation of Eritrea, with external support to Eritrea and Ethiopia, in an alliance with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, the US, and the EU
- Providing support for the building of port, road, and naval infrastructure

There are three important observations to make on these aspirations. The first is that information any deals regarding these aspirations is scantily available, if at all, and that most deals seem to have been handled through silent diplomacy. The second observation is that all the elements came together around the idea of a peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia, supported by various incentives, with heavy emphasis on the port and road infrastructure. The third observation is that there was little if any, concern given to what this would mean for the Tigray region of Ethiopia, which shares a 1,000 km long border with Eritrea and which has a history of contention with Eritrea.

No information was made publicly available of the secret deal, if it existed. The content of the final Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, signed in July 2018, has also remained secret.

Immediately following the signing of the Peace Agreement, President Isayas hinted heavily at the prospect of Eritrea and Ethiopia being connected, without explicitly mentioning the issue of access to a port, in his speech made at the Ethiopian Presidential Palace, when he visited Ethiopia following the signing of the peace deal (FBC, 2018). A month after the Peace Agreement was signed in July 2018, Prime Minister Abiy and President Isayas visited the port of Assab in Eritrea, an indicator that access to the port was part of the agreement (Awate, 2018). The need for road reconstruction to make the port accessible was emphasised (Awate, 2018).

In a speech held on 14 July 2018, President Isayas built on the narrative that Eritrea and Ethiopia were 'one':

*The recurring peace and love between the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia is not new rather we are reinstating it as both people have common historical and cultural values intertwined as one. I as an individual not as a President, getting [leader] like Dr Abiy is not easy: the opportunity that the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia have in*

*common is tremendous. I have said this repeatedly; for anything that needs representation you will be representing us both [for Ethiopia and Eritrea]. You will be leading us ahead. It is neither for the sake of lip service nor to make him happy. I genuinely rely on you that the peace and friendship initiative of both people will be advanced to our development programs which the aspiration of the one people is not different than the other. For this to be achieved, Dr Abiy is here to lead us forward. He came to Asmara; we came to Addis Ababa and now to Hawassa this is only the beginning. As he [PM Abiy] mentioned it earlier, I will not need his permission to travel across every corner of Ethiopia. I don't need any permission from Dr Abiy to visit wherever I want. The same is true, he will not need my permission to go wherever he wants whether it is Massawa, Assab, Ombajer or Teseney. We can speak that this love, peace, and unity between both people is historical. But we lost it in due course; now we regained it. We are moving forward with assured leadership commitment. Although there is nothing above the people for the people to thrive, leadership is vital. In this occasion today, I announce to the people of Hawassa that I have handed over the entire authority and leadership role to him. I am confident that he will win. Congratulations to all of us. (President Isayas in Hawassa, EBC, 2018, 8:29-11:44, emphasis added)*

Four months after the signing of the Peace Agreement in July 2018, the UN sanctions against Eritrea were lifted, thanks to Ethiopian diplomacy. Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2019.

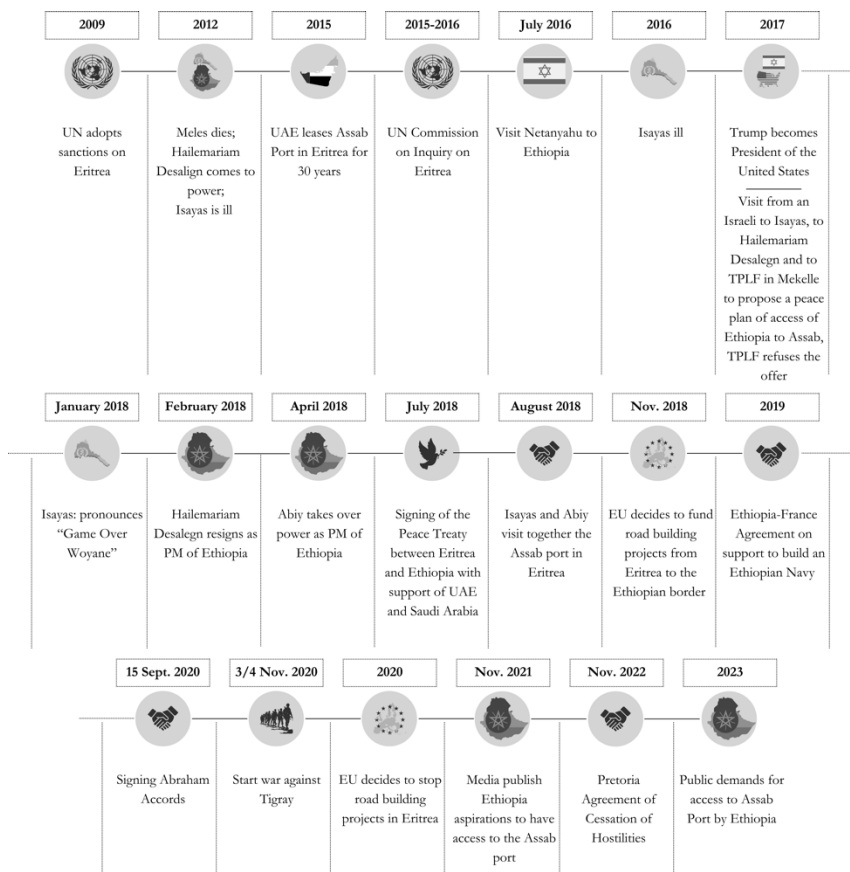
Eritrea was finally saved from isolation by the international community. Meanwhile, pressure on the Tigray region mounted (Gebreslassie & Van Reisen, 2024), resulting in the war in Tigray, which started on the eve of the American presidential elections on 3 November 2020, when all eyes were on the United States (ICHREE, 2023). At the same time, Eritrean soldiers entered Tigray (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024a). On 4 November, Prime Minister Abiy formally announced a law enforcement operation against Tigray. At the beginning of the war, Eritrean soldiers shelled Humera on 9 November 2020 (Human Rights Watch, 2021a) and massacred civilians in Zalambesa (13 November 2020) (Reuters, 2021). On 16 November the Tigray Central Command Spokesperson Getachew Reda stated on Twitter that the UAE had carried out a drone attack from Assab port on Tigray. Tigray regional President Debretsion announced that Eritrea was involved in the war. In retaliation, the

Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) fired missiles on Asmara (Parevicini, 2020).

The involvement of Eritrea in the war was denied by Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as international actors, such as the US, UN and African Union (AU). The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Chairperson of the African Union Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat delivered a joint press conference on 9 December 2020. Guterres said “There is no proof of Eritrean troops inside Ethiopia, where government forces are fighting rebels in the northernmost region of Tigray” (Xinhua, 2020). United States Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo during the Trump administration, which had lost the election in November 2020 (but were still in power until the following January 2021), said that the United States strongly condemned the attack carried out by the TPLF on the airport in Asmara, Eritrea, on 14 November 2020. It added that the US government appreciated “Eritrea’s restraint, which has helped prevent further spreading of the conflict” (US Embassy in Ethiopia, 2020).

The events as they unfolded, in any case, seem to reflect well with what President Isayas referred to as changing international circumstances: he could count on international support that had not been available since the 2009 UN sanctions. In contrast, the Tigray leadership could no longer count on the support of key international actors. For President Isayas, this was a time-bound window to change the public agenda.

It is noteworthy that following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities in 2022, the relations between President Isayas and Prime Minister Abiy soured, and that Prime Minister Abiy subsequently demanded access to the port of Assab. If it is true that the access to the port of Assab was part of the secret deal and secret Peace Agreement, it would explain why he made this claim so adamantly.



**Figure 2.4. Eritrea-Ethiopia relations since 2009**

### ***Disinformation tactics: Denial of Eritrean involvement in Tigray***

Africa News headline on 11 December 2020: “‘Complete lie’: Ethiopia denies Eritrean Army’s involvement in Tigray”. However, on the same day “Exclusive – U.S. says reports of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia’s Tigray are credible”, printed Reuters on 11 December 2020 (Stewart, 2020).

Eritrea’s involvement in the Tigray war was among the most seriously contested issues in the media narratives for months after the war began. Ethiopia and Eritrea both denied that Eritrea, and other external actors, were involved in the conflict, framing it as an internal conflict (EBC, 2020). Eritrea’s Foreign Affairs Minister, Osman

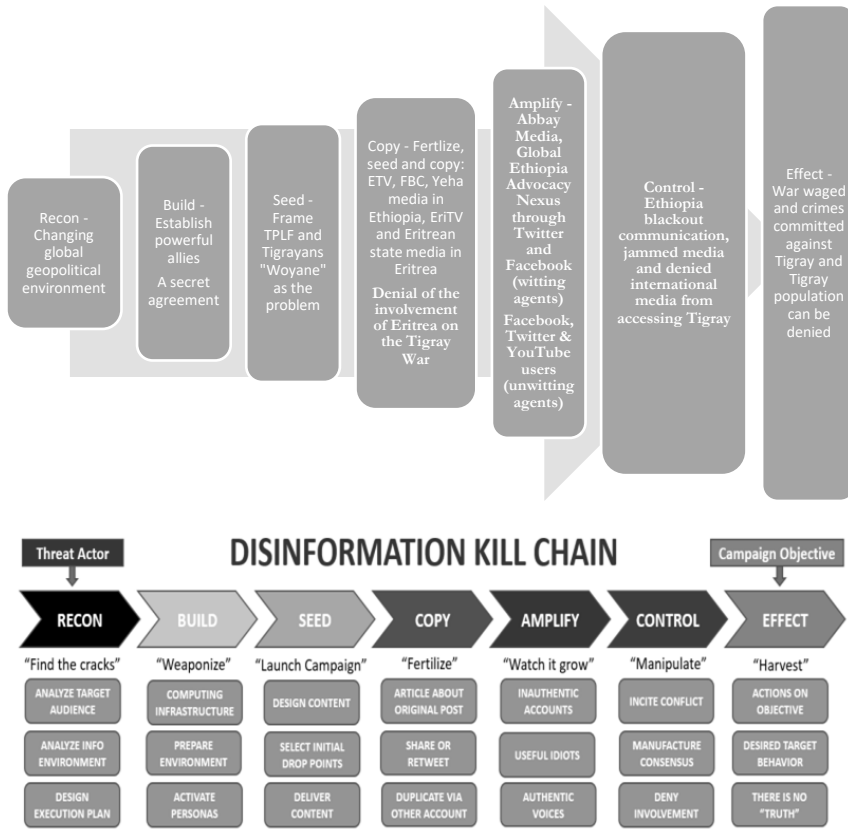
Saleh, vehemently denied the involvement of Eritrea. He was quoted as saying: “we are not part of the conflict” (Paravicini, 2020). The then Ethiopia Minister of Defence, Kenea Yadeta, stated that the claims raised by Tigray alleging Eritrea’s participation in the conflict was: “disinformation and fabrication” (Africa News, 2020).

Deutsche Welle’s Conflict Zone host Sarah Kelly confronted Ethiopia’s Minister of Democratisation, Zadig Abraha, on 16 December 2020, in relation to who was involved in the war. Zadig said:

*We are more than capable of dealing with the TPLF. It is an insult to our military establishment to say that we are depending on the help of the Eritrean Army. I can assure you 100% times, 1001% times, there are no Eritrean armies operating in Tigray right now.* (Kelly, 2020)

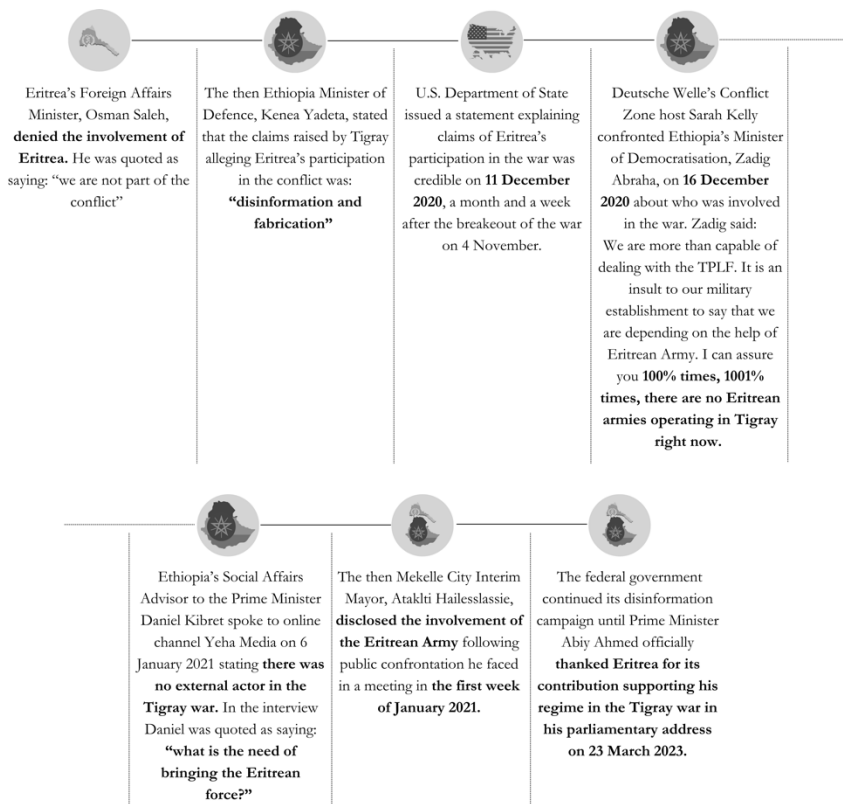
Ethiopia’s Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret, spoke to the online channel Yeha Media on 6 January 2021 claiming there was no external actor in the Tigray war. In the interview Daniel was quoted as saying: “what is the need of bringing the Eritrean force?”, saying that Ethiopia has enough capability to deal with its internal issue (Yeha Media 2021). The interview was televised through Abbay Media.

As a result, the involvement of Eritrea was obscured, at least for a month, until the US Department of State issued a statement explaining that Eritrea’s participation in the war was credible on 11 December 2020, a month and a week after the breakout of the war on 3 November. Even then, Eritrea and Ethiopia continued to deny the involvement of Eritrea, creating confusion and a situation in which no sense of ‘truth’ could be established.



**Figure 2.5. Disinformation kill chain used to conceal the involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war**

The then Mekelle City Interim Mayor, Ataklti Hailelassie, appointed by the Ethiopian government after the invasion, disclosed the involvement of the Eritrean Army following a public confrontation that he faced in a meeting in the first week of January 2021 (Fana, 2021). The federal Ethiopian government continued its disinformation campaign until Prime Minister Abiy officially thanked Eritrea for its contribution to supporting his regime in the Tigray war in his parliamentary address on 23 March 2023 (EBC, 2021b). Figure 2.5 shows the chain of disinformation used to obscure the involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray war.



**Figure 2.6. Denial of the Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war: timeline**

The threat actors for the disinformation campaigns denying the participation of Eritrea in the Tigray war up to 23 March 2021 were the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments with diplomatic support from the African Union Commission, the UN, and the US.

The witting agents that facilitated these disinformation campaigns were the state media in Ethiopia (including ETV (formerly EBC), Addis Media Network (AMN), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), and Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), as well as other ruling party affiliated Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC) and Walta Television. Private media like Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and Abbay Media, as well as diaspora-based sympathiser Global Ethiopia Advocacy Nexus and Eritrea state media channels and social media, spread these disinformation campaigns. Total communication



blackout, jamming of local media, obstructing the international media from accessing Tigray, censorship and intimidation of journalists allowed the Ethiopian media to keep framing the Tigray war as an internal conflict, denying the involvement of external actors. The YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter pages of the government and its supporters abroad contributed to the dissemination of the disinformation.

The Eritrean campaign emerged openly after the public announcement by PM Abiy of the involvement of Eritrea in the war. Figure 2.7 identifies seven dots of Eritrean accounts and seven dots of Ethiopian accounts, showing the overlap between them.

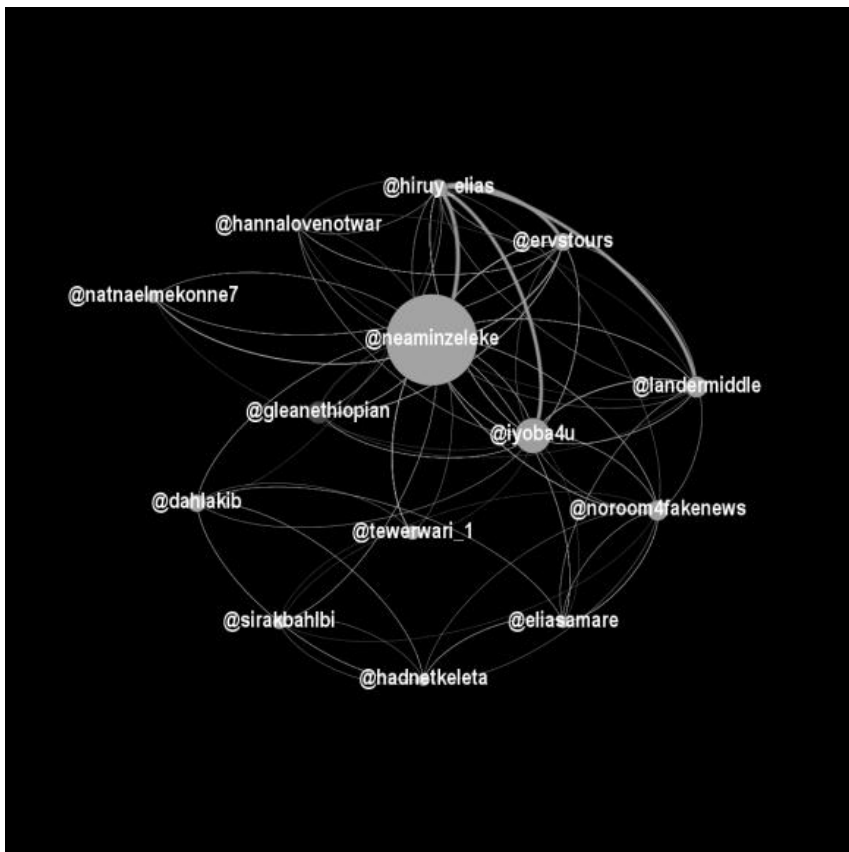


Figure 2.7. Influential Twitter accounts by Wilmot, C., Tveteraas, E., & Drew, A. (2021)

Many of the Eritrean accounts are prominent Eritrean government (PFDJ) accounts. Media in Eritrea cannot be considered independent from the government (Wilmot, C., Tveteraas, E., & Drew, A., 2021), August 20). The Ethiopian, Eritrean and Tigray diaspora were organised in information campaigns on social media to try and get messages across to international audiences.

As part of the disinformation campaign, journalists working in local media organisations administered by the interim government faced intimidation including persecution of journalists writing on the atrocities committed by the Eritrean Army, sexual violence and starvation in Tigray, and any reporting of the Eritrean involvement in the Tigray war (Al Jazeera, 2021; Reporters without Borders, 2021). Reporters Without Borders (2021) highlights the arbitrary detention of at least four journalists in Ethiopia. Among them is Kibrom Worku, head of news at Ahadu radio and TV, who was in police custody since 26 October 2021, despite a court order for his release on 12 November 2021. Eyasped Tesfaye, of the Ubuntu YouTube news channel, was arrested on 8 December 2021, while Mohammed Meaza, co-founder of the Roha news website, and Tamirat Negera, director of Terrara media outlet, have been detained since 10 December 2021. The police also raided Negera's home, confiscating his equipment, and his current location remains unknown. (Reporters without Borders, 2021). The Committee to Protect Journalists (2021) reported that unidentified armed men ransack home of Ethiopian journalist Lucy Kassa, to question her about her coverage of the Tigray war.

Since the onset of the civil war, dozens of journalists have been detained arbitrarily for extended periods, though many were released without charges. Media outlets faced significant challenges, with some being suspended or forced to reduce coverage of the war due to threats and harassment. For instance, the Awlo Media Center suspended operations in October. Additionally, Simon Marks, a New York Times journalist, was expelled from Ethiopia in May after losing his accreditation for alleged bias and spreading "fake news" (Reporters without Borders, 2021).

The unwitting agents were those who supported this disinformation campaign, being misinformed by the ruling government proponents,

joining in demonstrations organised by governments (such as the ‘No More’ campaign) and sharing disinformation content through their social media platforms. These disinformation campaigns were supported by bureaucratic approaches including imposing a total communication blackout in Tigray, jamming local media, and denying international media access to Tigray. The effect of these disinformation campaigns resulted in the denial of the engagement of Eritrea in the war and of the crimes allegedly committed. There was confusion, and little proof.

### ***Perception of events by the Tigrayan population under siege***

How did the population in Tigray perceive the events as they unfolded? An interviewee in Sheraro in Tigray with a Tigrayan person whose son was kidnapped by the Eritrean Army – who had still not returned at the time of the interview – spoke to the confusion around the Peace Agreement and what she perceived as the objective, to lift the UN sanctions on Eritrea. She said:

*We were grateful for the reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea; and equally for the Nobel Peace Prize Committee that earned Abiy Ahmed the Peace Prize in 2019. But the prize served as a face-saving symbol to lift the sanctions on Eritrea. It didn't wait beyond a year for the Tigray war to break.* (Interviewee SHIDI06, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 4 June 2023)

Another interviewee, who used to live in Gerhu Sirnay in the vicinity of Semhal in Egela woreda, which is still today under occupation by Eritrea, also discussed the Peace Agreement as follows:

*Both the signatories to the peace agreement didn't declare that their agreement was cut and short-lived for war, and erupted in the areas where it was claimed that issues were solved by the agreement. An agreement of peace that continues straight into war must be questioned: was it an agreement of war or peace?* (Interviewee GSIDI05, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023)

The focus group discussants also noted that the peace narratives served to mobilise support against the common enemy, Tigray, where the President of Eritrea, Isayas , officially uttered ‘Woyane...game over’, fuelling the spread hate speech against ethnic Tigrayans by supporters of the federal government of Ethiopia (Interviewee

AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

However, the respondents remembered that critical questions demanding the practicality of the peace process at the grassroots level were raised from Tigray (Interviewee SMIDI14, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). An in-depth interviewee with an internally displaced person (IDP) from Ziban Guila, a place in the vicinity of Egela, who used to live in Gerhu Sirnay, for his farmland was in the Cheare locality, which is still occupied by Eritrea, said:

*Four years into the peace process, Ethiopia has become a fragile state which was even listed among the top of the failed states in the world with high investment in military, hosting the bloodiest war since the world wars, resulting in gross human rights violations-which is what Eritrea had been through for years and still is. That means, the real goal of the so-called peace was the destabilisation of Ethiopia to the level of Eritrea, and not peace. (Interviewee GSIDI04, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023)*

According to the respondents the Ethio-Eritrea peace, facilitated the lifting of sanctions on Eritrea which resulted in the regeneration of the massive destabilisation role that Eritrea has played in the region – which the sanctions had aimed to prevent (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

### ***Witnesses report on Eritrea's participation in the war***

After the start of the war on 3 November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023), Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers killed, arrested, and tortured civilians in Aksum (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024). They looted public and private resources including Aksum University from 19–27 November 2020, according to the focus group discussants (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The Eritrean soldiers in Aksum separately continued looting money, jewellery and smart phones, searching house to house. The soldiers were raping adolescent girls as well as killing civilians (approximately 100 civilians were killed by shelling and indiscriminate killing including a university lecturer – most of whom were killed by the Eritrean Army) (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

One of the participants remembered:

*On 27 November 2020 in the midday, three trucks of EDF soldiers came to Aksum positioning themselves around Anbesa Lavajo (entry route from Adwa to Aksum), Negisa Hotel and St Mary Church respectively. The city was overwhelmed by their movement. (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)*

Another participant in the focus group discussion stated:

*As the following day was St Gabriel religious celebration day, many people already reached the St Mary Church of Aksum in the early morning; but sudden frequent clash exchange was heard from the hills in May Kobo, where Eritrean soldiers had trenched for a week already. Some of the people were targeted from the top of the hill while trying to rush to their house while others who kept silent in the compound of the church were also targeted later. (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)*

This participant herself witnessed the following:

*The bodies of above 25 people who wore a netsela, [a white cloth which Christians wear while going to church], laid down from the edge of the St Marry Church to her home around Sabean Hotel. The clash then continued until around 3:30 pm Local Time. Then after, the Eritrean soldiers went down to the houses nearing the hill through St Mikeal Church, Sabean Hotel and Daero Piasa. (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)*

One of the discussants who survived the Aksum Massacre stated:

*As the fighting was moderately slowed down, the Eritrean soldiers immediately began house to house search. I was frightened because I was hearing a sound of fire guns in the house they entered before ours. The sister of one of the victims opened the door as soon as they yelled: 'Agame [a slur for Tigrayan people used by Eritreans] open the house'. The oldest soldier, out of the three entered, ordered all men to lay down on the ground yelling 'we don't want to waste gun fire for Agame'. The two of them were counting the number of youth they shot. The oldest of them said 'I had 23; the second said I had 18 while the third responded 11'. Then the oldest one ordered the youngest soldier to shoot us all. (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)*

‘Agame’ is a derogatory term for Tigrayans, a term used by Eritreans when referring to people from Tigray they consider to be less worthy. A survivor of the massacre explained the situation:

*I was shot in my leg, while the other survivor on his hand; but the three others died immediately as they were shot repeatedly. A sister of the one who died grabbed the oldest soldier and begged them to kill her too while they were leaving the house. But he responded ‘you will give birth for us after we eradicate the Agame junta’.* (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

Another survivor who escaped by hiding on the roof of his house witnessed the massacre of six people, four of them were children under 18, including his son (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion with Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). He said:

*Searching every house in our compound one of the soldiers said ‘we came to slaughter every Agame’ ordering the youth to go out to the compound. The one who shot all of the men in the compound ordering them to lay on the ground, said ‘Agame, you locked us behind for 30 years, now it is our turn to drag you back 100 years if we couldn’t deracinate you all’ and he said ‘game over’.* (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The utterances of Eritrean soldiers that they intended “to bring Tigray back” fifty or hundred years “into time” was also communicated in witness reports from Adigrat (communication to Van Reisen, WhatsApp, audiotape, 16 January 2024).

One of the participants indicated that the Eritrean soldiers continued the house-to-house search on 29 November 2020 where they captured him and around two hundred other youths, ordering them to travel barefoot through the breakers of glass of the Brana Hotel which Eritrean soldiers had demolished using tanks (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The discussants also stated that they were denied a chance to bury the bodies of their children and relatives for three days (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). One woman said:

*Eritrean soldiers ordered that anyone who attempted to take bodies would be slaughtered. Around Sabeen Hotel alone I have counted 37 bodies. Then on the*

*third day, people began collecting bodies. But the vulture kettles were already popular around these days. The St Mary celebration then turned a funeral in which everyone cried for each other. Relentless to disinform, the Ethiopian media then reported Aksum dwellers celebrated St Mary of Zion Day.* (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023)

The discussants explained that in their eyes, Eritrea had perpetrated ethnic cleansing against Tigrayans, a plan which they believe had been explained on television by President Isayas when people were focused on the Peace Agreement (Interviewee GSFGD02, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023; interviewee SHIDI11, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023). Respondents argued that Eritrea was among the main designers of the Tigray war, as Eritrea had mobilised and even trained Somali soldiers to engage in the war in Tigray (AXFGD01, a focus group interview with DT, face-to-face, 23 March 2023).

However, the respondents felt that international actors did not treat the involvement of Eritrea from the perspective of aggression and invasion (Interviewee AXFGD01, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 23 March 2023). The international policy actors focused on peace, but while doing so, failed to address the destabilising role of Eritrea in Tigray and in the Horn of Africa in-general (Interviewee GSIDI01, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 July 2023; interviewee SMIDI15, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 June 2023; interviewee GSFGD02, focus group discussion by Tesfa, face-to-face, 8 July 2023).

Referring to Tigrayans as ‘junta’, including Tigrayans as collectively responsible for the situation in Eritrea, the Tigray population was subjected to a so-called retaliation. A 17-year-old who was kidnapped by Eritrean soldiers on 11 September 2021 (which is the Geez New Year celebration) from her home in Sheraro was told that being Tigrayan was enough for her to be subjected to the violence perpetrated on her. She said:

*As I was taken through Badme to Shambuko along with 46 other adolescent girls and women as well as 405 men all below 18 years old except 16 elders, they used to beat, harass and gang-rape me. When I asked them why to put all this suffering on me, they responded ‘you Agame, Tigrayan shut up, your game is over Ms. Junta now*

*ours starts'. They used to claim Tigray for all they do not have. They even said 'this suffering is small in comparison to the way you Agame locked us for 30 years. (Interviewee SHIDI10, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023)*

Many children and a few elders were kidnapped by the Eritrean Army from Sheraro and were first taken to Shambuko, then finally, they were imprisoned in Adi-Beare for a month and 17 days (Interviewee SHIDI10, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023; interviewee SHIDI09, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023). Another child, aged 15, who was kidnapped from a field where he was rearing cattle on the outskirts of Sheraro on 11 September 2021, stated that he was arrested and pummelled by the Intelligence Unit of the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) in Barentu Town. He said:

*The place where I was arrested along with 4 children of my village for 11 months is called "Enda Sleya Mahyur" [literally translated as Intelligence's Arrest Room]. We found ten people who were arrested before us. The soldiers usually told us that 'the destiny of Agame men is to be slaughtered in the hand of Eritrean men while Agame women must give birth to an Eritrean child who takes his father's role'. Out of the total of 15 men, most of us children, in the room I was arrested, the Intelligence Unit took the five men and they didn't return until I was released after 11 months. Among them, I know two. (Interviewee SHIDI09, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023)*

Since he came back to Sheraro in August 2022, he said he was still confused as to what to tell his parents and usually hid from them. He added "Explaining what happened to them is expected from me; but what should I say" he questioned "Though it was unlikely, I wanted to hope that they were alive" (Interviewee SHIDI09, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 6 June 2023).

The atrocities committed by Eritrea were hidden by a siege and communication black out, together with a disinformation campaign, and atrocities were committed with impunity. The failure to recognise Eritrea as a principal actor in the conflict, will continue to conceal the atrocities committed in Tigray, parts of which Eritrea continues to occupy, despite the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 2 November 2022 (Omer, 2022; Hochet-Baudin, 2022; Bariyo, 2023; Samuel, 2023).



## Conclusion

The chapter explored the secret lead-up to the 2018 Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2017 and 2018, revealing a disinformation campaign that used the peace process as a cover for preparations for war against Tigray. The collaboration between Eritrea and Ethiopia was concealed, allowing Eritrea to commit atrocities in Tigray with impunity. Eritrea's active presence was only officially acknowledged on 23 March 2021, when Prime Minister Abiy thanked President Isayas for the Eritrean involvement and battlefield support to the war.

In late 2017, an Israeli diplomat visited the region to advance an Ethiopia-Eritrea peace plan, offering Ethiopia access to the strategically located Assab port in Eritrea and support for Eritrean infrastructure development. The TPLF rejected the plan. Shortly afterwards Eritrean President Isayas made a threatening statement towards Tigray. Abiy became Prime Minister in early 2018 and, by July, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace treaty with support from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the US, leading to the lifting of UN sanctions against Eritrea. Prime Minister Abiy received the Nobel Peace Prize for these efforts in 2019.

European and French support for infrastructure and military development followed (including naval support), with President Isayas indicating that he had handed over significant authority to Prime Minister Abiy. The details of the peace plan remained undisclosed. Meanwhile, President Isayas framed the TPLF and Tigrayans as the problem, using derogatory terms such as 'Woyane'. While the international public agenda was fully framed on peace, a language of war against Tigray was introduced by the leaders in the region. The supposed peace process masked the formation of a war alliance against Tigray.

During the Tigray war, Ethiopia and Eritrea employed disinformation tactics to deny Eritrea's involvement, while Eritrean soldiers committed atrocities in Tigray against Tigrayan civilians. The disinformation campaign to conceal their presence included a communication blackout, media censorship, and the intimidation of journalists. Ethiopian and Eritrean media and social media denied

Eritrea's involvement, framing the conflict as internal. The disinformation campaign was supported by pro-government diaspora groups of all sides.

Journalists in the local media faced intimidation to prevent them from reporting on Eritrea's involvement and the atrocities committed. This repression continued after Eritrea's involvement was revealed, making it difficult to investigate the situation on the ground. This disinformation campaign confused the public about the nature and severity of the conflict, leaving atrocities unreported and perpetrators unpunished. The result was a tragic confusion of war with peacebuilding, leading to long-lasting instability and impunity for those responsible for the atrocities.

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## **Authors' contributions**

This work has been carried out as part of a PhD study of Daniel Tesfa, who put together the first version of this chapter. Daniel Tesfa provided the theoretical considerations for this chapter. Daniel Tesfa collected primary data for this chapter and analysed them. Mirjam Van Reisen advised on the approach to documenting the arguments presented in the chapter, she reviewed all of the versions, she restructured the text and she offered new empirical material, in order to support the empirical evidence presented. This empirical material was analysed by Daniel Tesfa. Kai Smits added the section on the road-building programme in Eritrea. Daniel Tesfa reviewed all the material and finalised the revision of the chapter.

## **Ethical clearance**

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’.

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### ‘Cannibals’, ‘Daytime Hyenas’, and ‘Not a Human Race’ – ‘Woyane’:

#### The Semiotic Landscape of the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum

*Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen*

መልሐስ ዓፅሚ የብላን ግን ዓፅሚ ትሰብር።

*The tongue doesn’t have a bone, but it can break a bone.*

#### Abstract

After the 2020–2022 Tigray war, there were 154 pieces of graffiti discovered on the walls and artefacts in the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum in Mekelle, Ethiopia. The museum, which celebrated the victory of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) over the Derg regime in 1991, was ransacked and used as a military encampment by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF). A total of 142 pieces of graffiti were analysed for this chapter, using discourse analysis. It was found that the term ‘Woyane’, originally a positive reference to TPLF victories in previous times, was used negatively to apply not only to the TPLF, but Tigrayan people in general. In the graffiti, the term ‘Woyane’ was associated with dehumanising references. The people of Tigray were blamed for the ills in Ethiopia and portrayed as a danger and a threat to peace. This served as a justification for their eradication. The eradication of the ‘Woyane’ emerges from the graffiti as an important theme, indicating such intent as a sub-text to the 2020–2022 war.

**Keywords:** Woyane, graffiti, discourse analysis, Ethiopia, Tigray, genocidal intent, Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum

## Introduction

The intelligibility of war, particularly the rhyme and reasons for it, requires analysis of the signs left in the arena in which it took place. A sign is any image, text, sound, or event that points to something that conveys meaning. A sign communicates; it holds a symbolic power that carries meaning, to those who have access to the symbolic system. To reveal the meaning in signs, there must be access to the symbolic meaning that is revealed to an audience that is part of the social interaction in which the meaning is conveyed. This requires, first and foremost, a study of empirical material evidence of the war.

The siege imposed during the Tigray war ensured that little empirical information about what happened in the arena could be communicated (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024). This disabled the collection, analysis, and interpretation of events, including what resulted from them and why they took place. A siege is able to regulate which audiences can see which images and at what time. A siege leaves ambiguity about who the participants are in the war, who is perpetrating which actions, and the attribution of voice, authorship, and ownership of events. A siege creates a black hole, in which the material evidence of a situation is not empirically available in any form and in which the communication is entirely regulated by gatekeepers, who may have a particular stake in or view of the situation (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024).

The imposition of the siege during the war in Tigray, which stopped all sharing of communication on what was taking place, was a critical event. While the end of hostilities could be regarded as a critical event, so was the lifting of the siege (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024). When a siege is lifted, observations, pictures, texts, and recordings collected from different places inside and outside the arena of war, and online and offline, can be analysed, compared, interpreted in their context and triangulated with other material. How places are left – the under script of the events revealed in language in the form of graffiti, banners or signs – is critical to understanding the meaning of what happened (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024). The work to investigate the war through empirical material is critically important in the process of recording what happened and investigating the potential

hypotheses or conclusions about the rhyme and reasons for the war. The ‘reasons’ – the why – is usually communicated in symbolic language; the ‘rhyme’ needs to be unwrapped and contextualised, to access the meaning that is conveyed to a particular audience.

The Tigray war, which took place from 2020 to 2022, was conducted under an almost near-complete siege. The Internet was closed for long periods; international organisations were severely restricted in their operations; and journalists were not allowed to visit and report and were often discouraged from publishing news reports on the situation (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024). Now, there is the possibility of entering the semiotic landscape and observing what was left behind. This allows analysis to recognise patterns that point to reasoning about what happened and what it meant. This allows the researchers to (re-)enter the arena of the war and seek the symbolic meaning. This is a declaration of solidarity with those who lived it, as we seek an insider’s understanding of what took place and why. The objective is to reveal the situation by recognising the inner symbolic structure of it. It provides acceptance that there is meaning in what happened during the war to those who lived in the war.

Hence, following the lifting of the siege, after the signing of the Pretoria Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities on 2 November 2022 (AU, 2022), there is now the possibility to collect, interpret, and triangulate material that speaks to key elements of the political intentions of the war. This study seeks to identify the rhyme and reasons of the Tigray war by investigating the semiotic landscape in relation to key events.

Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers used public places including historical places, schools, health facilities, etc. as military camps. Soldiers of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) camped in the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle for seven months, from the first week of December 2020 to mid-June 2021. The soldiers wrote various graffiti on the walls of the museum. Taking graffiti writings as one of the real-time indicators of the war moment and the drives into it, this chapter examines the following research question: *What is the content of the graffiti left by the soldiers who camped in the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle?*

## Theoretical framework

### *Discourse analysis*

The term ‘discourse’, as indicated by Gee (1999), covers important aspects of what others have called: discourse (Foucault, 1966); communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991); cultural communities (Clark, 1996); discourse communities (Bizzell, 1992); distributed knowledge or distributed systems (Hutchins, 1995); thought collectives (Fleck, 1979); practices (Bourdieu, 1990); cultures (Geertz, 1973); activity systems (Engeström *et al.*, 1999); and actor-actant networks (Latour, 2005).

According to Gee (1999), discourse involves:

*a) situated identities; b) ways of performing and recognizing characteristic identities and activities; c) ways of coordinating and getting coordinated by other people, things, tools, technologies, symbol systems, places, and times; d) characteristic ways of acting-interacting-feeling-emoting-valuing-gesturing-posturing-dressing-thinking-believing-knowing-speaking listening (and, in some Discourses, reading-and-writing, as well).*  
(Gee, 1999, P 40)

A discourse analysis is based on the details of speech (and gaze, gesture and action) or writing that are arguably deemed *relevant* in the context and which are relevant to the arguments that the analysis is attempting to make (Gee, 1999).

According to Gee (1999), discourse analysis needs to examine four basic questions to understand the discourse of a given content and the language used in the discourse:

- What situated meaning or meanings for a given word or phrase can be reasonably attributed to their ‘author’, considering the point of view of the discourse in which words were used?
- What situated meaning or meanings for a given word or phrase can be reasonably attributed to those who are listening to or reading these words or phrases, again considering the discourse in which these words are used?
- What situated meaning or meanings for a word or phrase can be reasonably attributed to those who are listening to or reading these words or phrases, from the point of view of

other discourses than the one in which the words were uttered or written?

- What situated meaning or meanings to words or phrases can be reasonably attributed to a discourse, recognising the meaning associated in other discourses, irrespective of whether or not we have evidence that anyone actually prompted that activity in the current case at hand?

Building upon these questions, we employed seven aspects (revised edition, Gee, 1999) as tasks and tools of inquiry as explained in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1. Discourse analysis building blocks**

#	Analysis criteria	Definition of analysis criteria
1	Significance	What situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations emerge to build relevance or significance for things and people in context?
2	Practices (activities)	What situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations are employed to enact a practice (activity) or practices (activities) in context?
3	Identities	What situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations are used to enact and depict identities (socially significant kinds of people)?
4	Relationships	How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to build and sustain (or change or destroy) social relationships?
5	Politics	How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations being used to create, distribute, or withhold social



#	Analysis criteria	Definition of analysis criteria
		goods or to construe particular distributions of social goods as 'good' or 'acceptable' or not?
6	Connections	How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversation being used to make things and people connected or relevant to each other or irrelevant to or disconnected from each other?
7	Sign systems and ways of knowing	How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses, and conversations being used to privilege or disadvantage different sign systems (language, social languages, other sorts of symbol systems) and ways of knowing?

Source: Based on Gee (1999)

### ***Intertextuality***

Intertextuality deals with how meaning is driven from a given discourse context. According to Fairclough:

*Intertextuality is basically the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth.* (Fairclough 1992, p. 84)

There are different types of intertextualities. Manifest intertextuality refers to texts that are explicitly presented within each genre, including text, audio, and video content. They are manifestly cued by features on the surface of the text (Fairclough, 1992). On the other hand, constitutive intertextuality refers to the configuration of discourse conventions that implicitly contribute to the production of text (Fairclough, 1992).

In providing interpretations of the graffiti writings, this chapter employs manifest intertextuality to understand the surface-level meaning of the graffiti while constitutive intertextuality is employed when the graffiti has a meaning that is deeper than is conveyed directly in the literal words, and where an explanation of the meaning in the context of the war is required for interpretation.

## Methodology

The study was carried out in Tigray, a northern state of Ethiopia. Key empirical imagery material was collected, revisited, compared, and selected for further inspection. The research employed quantitative discourse analysis aiming to examine the trends across the content, together with qualitative analysis of the graffiti images to understand the explicit and implicit insights behind the collected content. Following Kroon (2024), the following steps were taken to conduct this research:

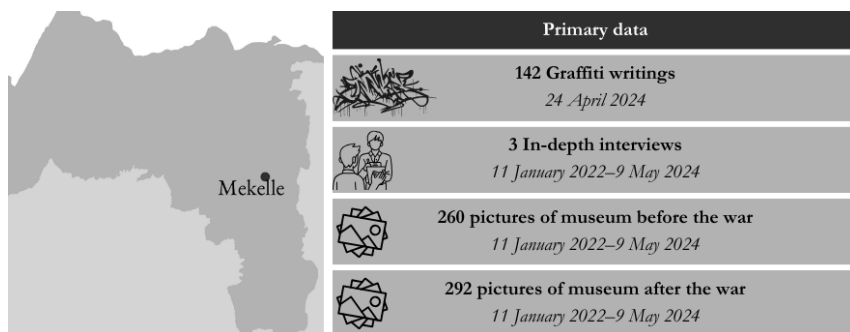
- Synopsis of observations, written texts, and audio recordings
- Selection of meaningful parts by reading and re-reading
- Litteral transcription
- Selection of possible key incidents
- Concrete instances of the workings of abstract principles of social organisation
- Showing the relation between the part and the whole
- Having the potential to make explicit a theoretical 'loading'
- Construction of key incidents and transcripts
- Key incident analysis
- Triangulation
- Understanding (Kroon, 2024)

The methods of data collection and analysis are indicated in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2. Method of data collection and analysis**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Approach</b>
Study subject	Graffiti images written by soldiers
Method of data collection	Capturing photos, observation, and in-depth interview
Sites of data collection	Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Mekelle
Data collection date	24 April 2024
Number of collected data	154
Exclusion criteria	Duplication and blurredness of image
Number of duplications data	12 (4 blurred graffiti that the researcher could not read and 8 duplications)
Number of data used	142
Coding and procedures following	The images of the graffiti expressions were first converted to a computer and then transcribed and translated. The translations were conducted by the first author who captured the photos. The second and third authors crosschecked the translations as compared to the images.
In-depth interviews	IDI01, 11 January 2022 IDI02, 24 April 2024 IDI03, 9 May 2024
Analysis procedures	Discourse analysis was employed through brainstorming the content and outlining major points that led to building the major themes that were grasped from the data.

The frequency of attribution of the pieces of graffiti was examined against Gee's discourse analysis criteria, significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections as well as sign systems and knowledge.



**Figure 3.1. Overview of data collected and used in this study**

A list of all 142 artefacts of graffiti was made, which provided: (i) the photograph; (ii) the place, (iii) text scripted in the original language, (iv) the original language, (v) text in English translation, (vi) building block of discourse analysis referred, (vii) context and comments, and (ix) interpretation. The translation was carried out three times and validated by a panel of judges; if there were any major differences, these were discussed and, where necessary, indicated in the findings.

A corpus of photographs of the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum was captured on 3 February 2020 (before the war) by the third author, in view of a potential threat to the museum as a target if the war broke out in Tigray. The fear of the author was that the museum could be destroyed and, therefore, detailed photographs were taken of the objects on display in the museum. This is a corpus of 260 pictures. Duplicates or blurred pictures were removed from the corpus. Photographs of the museum archive after the war were obtained on 24 April 2024 for analysis, sent by the curator of the museum. This is a corpus of 292 pictures. Duplicates were removed from the corpus received. The first author visited the museum on 24 April 2024 for a field visit. Photographs were seen of the graffiti in the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum on 13 May 2024 (photos made for MO Magazine), to compare with the body received from the curator of the museum. Interviews were undertaken on 11 January 2022, 24 April 2024 and 9 May 2024 to help interpret the photographic and field visit data.

## Results and findings

Guided by Gee's (1999) discourse analysis building blocks and tools of inquiry, the research analysed graffiti writings collected from public spaces in Tigray. This section presents the context of the Martyrs' Memorial Museum before the war, the graffiti written by soldiers while it was serving as a military base during the war, as well as interpretation of these graffiti writings.

### *Transition to war: The site of the Martyrs' Memorial Museum*

Before the war, the Martyrs' Memorial Museum was Tigray's pride. The museum is in the centre of Mekelle, next to a dominating statue commemorating the victory of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) over the Derg. The Museum presented an overview of the history of the TPLF, specifically the TPLF resistance to the Derg through the exhibition of photographs and other artefacts. The TPLF eventually defeated the Derg in 1991.



**Figure 3.2. Pictures of the exhibition in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum**

(Photographs captured on 3 February 2020)

The photographic exhibition portrayed the pride of the TPLF struggle and the participation of the population, including students, women and farmers. The exhibition was not limited to photographs

of battlefields. There were also photographs of the services that the TPLF provided to communities, such as education and health. The photographs on show broadly cover the period 1968–1980. The following photographs are a selection of the Martyrs' Memorial Museum photographic exhibition before the war.

The museum also exhibited a selection of photographs of the TPLF's cooperation with the Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF) and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which fought against the Derg alongside the TPLF. The pictures in the exhibition gave significance to the joint TPLF-EPLF mission carried out in Sahel in the early 1980s.



**Figure 3.3. Eritrean delegation at the first Organizational Conference of the TPLF (1979) and TPLF and EPLF combatants in the Sahel and military leaders fighting the Derg 'Red Star' operation (pictures are dated 1974 EC, converted to 1982 GC)**

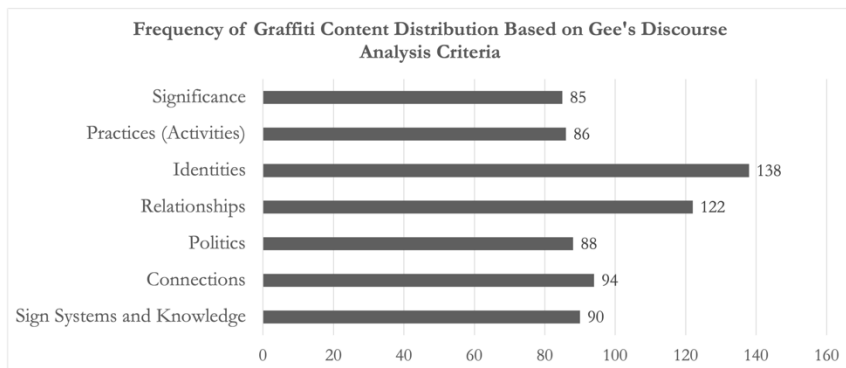
(Photographs captured on 3 February 2020)

The Martyrs' Memorial Museum documented the good times between TPLF and EPLF, while the complexity of the party-to-party relations continued into cycles of war and uncertainty in the region. The museum also comprised documentation of how the armed struggle in Tigray and Eritrea spread to Afar, Agew, Amhara, and other provinces of Ethiopia.

Following the breakout of the Tigray war in November 2020, the Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Mekelle served as a military base for ENDF soldiers. During the war, the historical archive documentation of the museum was looted and burned in the compound of the museum. The archive and display rooms served as a living room, kitchen, and store for the soldiers. The military left messages on walls and artefacts, giving insight into their state of mind during their stay in the museum.

### ***Discourse analysis of graffiti writings***

Using Gee's discourse analysis criteria, the graffiti images were analysed using the seven building blocks, as depicted in Figure 3.4.



**Figure 3.4. Building blocks of content analysis based on Gee's criteria for discourse analysis (frequency, multiple, n=142)**

In the sections below the building blocks of the analysis are further inspected.

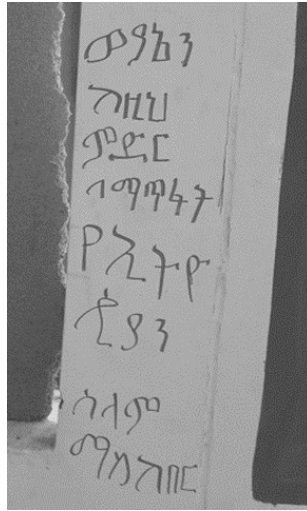
### ***Significance***

'Significance' in discourse analysis describes how languages, meanings, discourses, and conversations are used to build relevance for people and things in each context (Gee, 1999). In the graffiti writings found in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum, the authors of the graffiti indicated 85 times the significance of the law-and-order enforcement operation in Tigray as the only means of protecting Ethiopia's national interest. Furthermore, the graffiti represented Tigrayans as 'cannibals', 'daytime hyenas', and 'not a human race'. This set Tigrayans apart from Ethiopian, referencing them as what can be understood as a non- or anti-Ethiopian being, with the potential to undermine Ethiopians and associated with their eradication from Ethiopia as a strategy to maintain the Ethiopian 'being' and foundational moral system.

The graffiti below (Figure 3.5) reads:

*ወያኔን ከዚህ ምድር በማጥፋት የኢትዮጵያን ሰላም ማስከበር*

*By eradicating Woyane from the Earth, we will maintain Ethiopian peace.*



**Figure 3.5. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘Through eradicating Woyane from the Earth, we will maintain Ethiopian peace’**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This graffiti framed ‘Woyane’ as an entity that erodes Ethiopia’s stability. The term ‘Woyane’ was first used as a symbol of the farmers’ uprising in the Tigray province against the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia between May and November 1943. The rebels organised to protect themselves from the Emperor’s appointee governors, who used to loot the produce of farms in the name of it being tribute and a gift to the Emperor. They named their resistance **ቀዳማዊ ወያነ** (and are referred as ‘First Woyane’) (Tareke, 2009) After almost losing the whole province, Emperor Haile Selassie sought the support of the United Kingdom’s Royal Air Force, which ended the most serious internal resistance the regime faced. The ‘Second Woyane’ revolution refers to the TPLF struggle against the Derg regime, which it defeated in 1991 (Abraham, K. (n.d.).

### ***Practices (activities)***

As a component of building blocks in discourse analysis, practice explores how meaning, language, and discourse are used to enact activities in context (Gee, 1999). To put the significant discourse of maintaining Ethiopia’s peace through the ‘law and order operation’

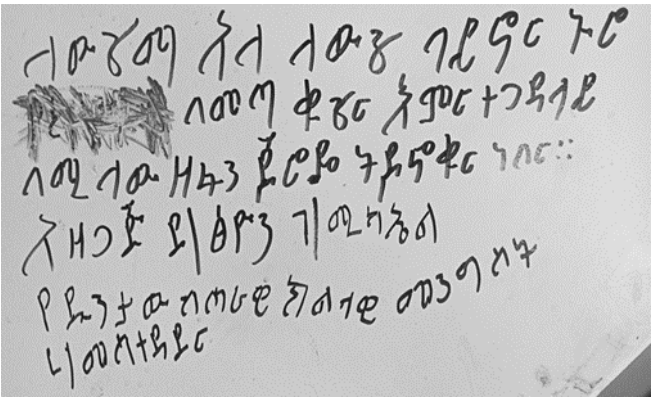


into action, the soldiers used 86 attributions to practices, which included utterances such as: ‘the end of Woyane’ and ‘Woyane is non-existent’. These graffiti expressions used the keywords ‘Woyane’, ‘junta’, ‘TPLF’, and ‘ethnic Tigrayans’ to attribute responsibility for the drawbacks of the regime of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The graffiti writings use terms such as ‘thief’, ‘cannibals’, ‘power losers’, ‘cowards’, ‘racist’, and ‘hunchback dog’ to portray Tigrayans.

One of the graffiti writings (Figure 3.6) in the museum reads:

ለውጥ ላለ ለውጥ ባይኖር ኑሮ የካቲት በመጣ ቁጥር እምር ተጋዳላይ በሚለው ዘፈን  
ጀርዮ ትደነቁር ነበር። አዘጋጅ ደ/ጽዮን ገ/ሚካኤል የጁንታው ብሔራዊ ክልላዊ መንግስት  
ር/መስተዳደር

*There is a change. Had it not been I would have heard the cliché Ember Tegadalay [kudos fighter] song every February. Producer D/Tsion G/Mikael the President of Junta National State Government*



**Figure 3.6. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘There is a change. Had it not been I would have heard the cliché Ember Tegadalay [kudos fighter] song every February. Producer D/Tsion G/Mikael the President of Junta National State Government’**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

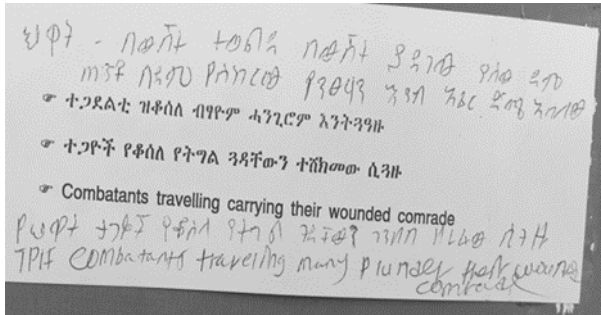
The song Ember Tegadalay (fighter) refers to a military song that celebrates the pride of a Tigrayan fighter of the TPLF fighting the Derg regime. The graffiti references this song, mocking the current TPLF leadership of Tigray Regional State, President Debretsion, associated with the (derogatory) terms of leading a ‘junta’ state.

Some of the graffiti expressions also reflect a sentiment of victimhood, framing the war as an act of revenge by the ‘victims of the EPRDF regime’ against Tigrayans, who are seen as being responsible for the wrongdoings of the past 27 years.

Another graffiti (Figure 3.7) reads:

ህዋት በውሸት ተወልዶ በውሸት ያደገው የሰው ደም ጠጥቶ በደም የሰከረው የንጹሃን  
አንባ አፈር ዴሜ አበላው። የህዋት ታጋዮች የቆሰለ የትግል ዳዳቸውን ገንዘብ ዘርፈው  
ሲጓዙ TPLF combatants traveling many plunder their war comrade

*TPLF who was born in a lie and grew up in a lie, drank human blood and was drunk with blood. The tears of innocence made it get destroyed. TPLF fighters stealing money from their wounded comrade. TPLF combatants traveling many plunder their war comrade. [Underlined text in original graffiti printed in English]*



**Figure 3.7. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘TPLF who was born in a lie and grew up in a lie, drank human blood and was drunk with blood. The tears of innocence made it get destroyed. TPLF fighters stealing money from their wounded comrade. TPLF combatants travelling many plunder their war comrade (underlined text is printed in English in original graffiti)’**

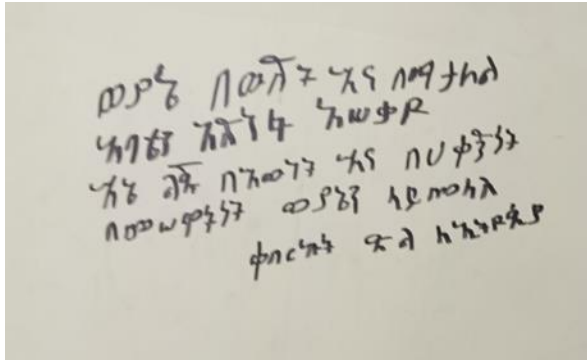
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This text is written as a parody of the subtext to explain a photo in the museum, and the English text mocks the English element of the text in the museum.

There are other pieces of graffiti that reflected the Tigray war as revenge for Tigray’s victory against the Derg regime. The graffiti below (Figure 3.8) reads:

*“ወያኔ በውሸትና በማታለል አባቴን አሸነፉ አሲቃዩ እኔ ልጄ በአውነት እና በሀቀኝነት በመስዋትት ወያኔን ላይመለስ ቀበርኩት ድል ለኢትዮጵያ*

*Woyane defeated my father with lies and deceptions. I, his son, destroyed Woyane once and for all with truthful and honest sacrifice. Victory for Ethiopia.*



**Figure 3.8. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘Woyane defeated my father with lies and deceptions. I, his son, destroyed Woyane once and for all with truthful and honest sacrifice. Victory for Ethiopia’**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This graffiti indicates that the Tigray war was perceived as retaliation for the TPLF/EPRDF’s nation-building narratives after overthrowing the military regime in 1991. The graffiti indicates that the law and order operation in Tigray is understood to have an intention to redefine the history of Tigray’s armed struggle, which overthrew the Derg regime in Ethiopia.

The practices identified in the graffiti (need to overthrow, punish, take revenge, kill) are accompanied by the arrest and punishment of Tigrayans held in the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum. An interviewee testified that he was arrested, held in captivity, and tortured inside the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum (Interviewee IDI01, interview by Tesfa, 11 January 2022, face-to-face). The interviewee stated that ENDF soldiers used the museum as a detention centre (Interviewee IDI01, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 January

2022). The interviewee was arrested after he requested the body of a civilian friend killed by an ENDF soldier in Mekelle. He said:

*[...] they [the ENDF soldiers] plugged in a socket with electricity and tortured me with electric shocks. (Interviewee IDI01, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 January 2022)*

One of the authors who captured the graffiti pictures from the museum on 24 April 2024, also observed the chairs, chains, and electric sockets along with pieces of clothes in the museum, as shown in the Figure 3.9. The interviewee remembered that the open spaces in the corridors of the museum had electric cables and chain rings attached to the chairs:

*As I entered the gate of the museum, they beat me with a rubber band to sit in the chair where they tortured me with the electric cable while handcuffed. (Interviewee IDI01, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 11 January 2022)*



**Figure 3.9. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: chairs and chains to carry out electric shocks in the detention area organised in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

A mother of two who survived arrest, torture, and sexual violence in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum also stated that many of the ENDF

soldiers were using the museum as a military camp as well as a detention centre:

*When I was arrested there, the museum was under the control of Regiment 24 of the Ethiopian Army.* (Interviewee IDI03, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 May 2024)

She added:

*After torturing us, the soldiers used to select some people from among the detainees, and many of them were never seen again.* (Interviewee IDI03, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 May 2024)

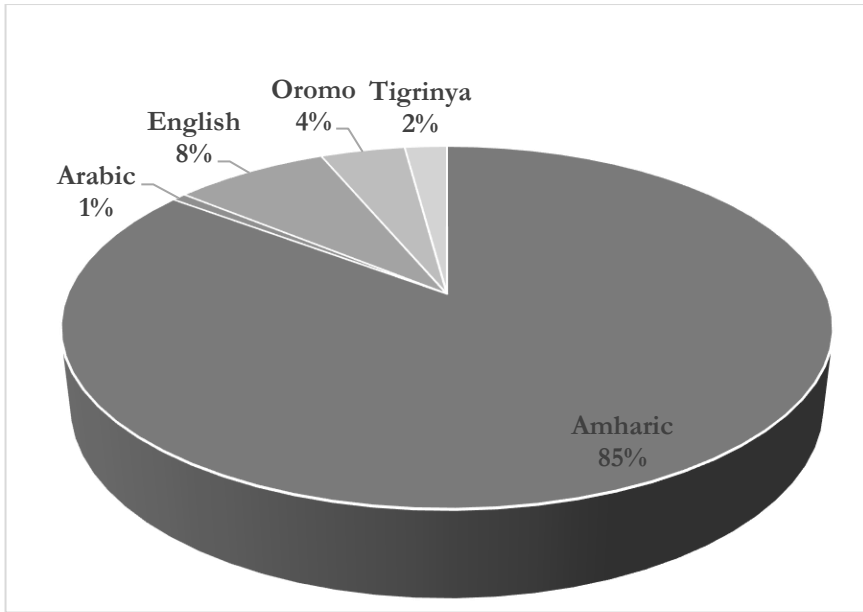
Another interviewee stated that the historical resources in the museum were looted, destroyed, and burned by soldiers inside the compound (Interviewee IDI02, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 24 April 2024). The survivor added:

*... seeing them [the ENDF soldiers] writing insults against your identity is also as painful as the torture itself.* (Interviewee IDI03, interview by Tesfa, face-to-face, 9 May 2024).

The graffiti is perceived as undermining or destroying the Tigray identity.

### ***Identities***

According to Gee (1999), identity in discourse analysis refers to how the speakers or writers of the discourse content identify themselves as socially significant people as compared to the identities of others. Language serves as one of the instruments of identification. Accordingly, among the 142 graffiti images, 121 were written in Amharic, 1 in Arabic, 11 in English, 6 in Oromo, and 3 in Tigrinya languages (Figure 3.10).



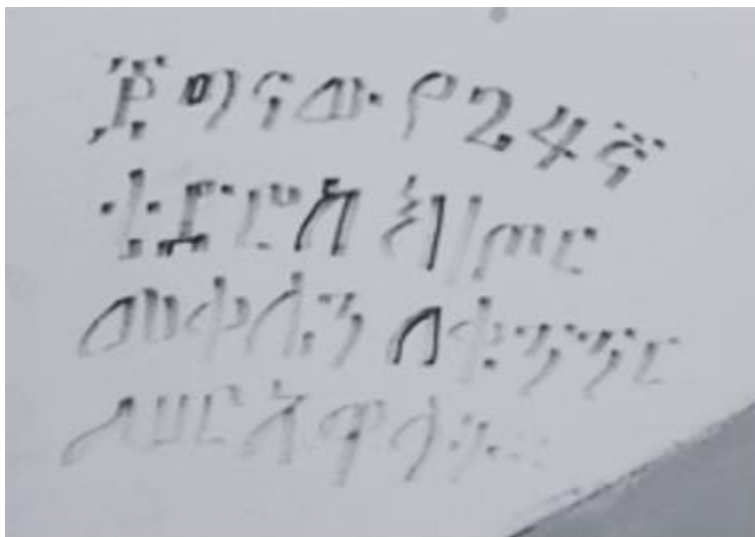
**Figure 3.10. Languages used in the graffiti writing in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum (n= 142)**

We could identify 138 indicators of the identities of the writers of the graffiti, which ranged from political to social, cultural, and religious identities. Many of the writings showed that the writers identified themselves as ENDF soldiers, who expressed the desire to maintain Ethiopian peace and security through the eradication of Tigrayans.

Some of the graffiti writers also explicitly indicated their identity. The picture below is among the graffiti images found written in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Mekelle. The graffiti (Figure 3.11) below reads:

*ጀግናው የ24ኛ ቴዎድሮስ ክ/ ጦር መቀሌን በቁጥጥር ስር አዋላት።*

*The hero 24th Tewodros Regiment [of ENDF] captured Mekelle.*



**Figure 3.11. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘The hero 24th Tewodros Regiment [of ENDF] captured Mekelle’**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Further, the graffiti writings and documents found in the museum showed that Tewodros 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the ENDF was among the armies that camped in the museum. Another graffiti provided specific details of some of the battalions within the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment that camped in the museum. The graffiti below (Figure 3.12) reads:

*ሻሊቃ 2 ሻንበል 2 ጋንታ 4*

*Captain 2, Battalion 2 Unit 4*

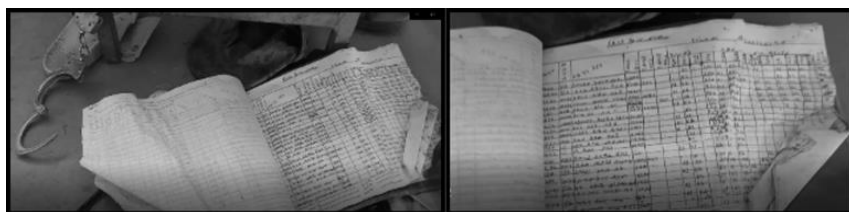


**Figure 3.12. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: 'Captain 2, Battalion 2 Unit 4'**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This indicates that Captain 2, Battalion 2, Unit 4 is among the units that frequently identified themselves in the writings of the 24<sup>th</sup> Tewodros Regiment of the ENDF that camped in the museum.

A list of ENDF soldiers depicted below (Figure 3.13) was left behind by the soldiers who camped there. The list is written in Amharic. The list is one of the artefacts indicating who was camping in the Museum and who the authors of the graffiti most likely are. The understanding that the ENDF used the museum as barracks is corroborated by common knowledge in the community that ENDF forces camped in the museum.



**Figure 3.13. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: List of ENDF soldiers**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)



A further indication of the source of the graffiti is a piece stating “Ethiopian Commando Special Force” on the wall of the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum (Figure 3.14):

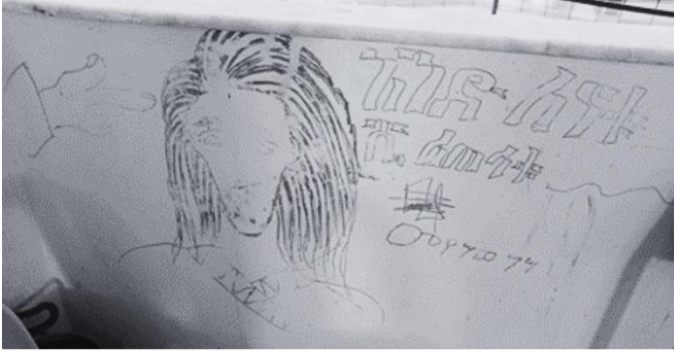


**Figure 3.14. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘Ethiopia  
Commando Special Force’**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Associating the current war phenomena with historical identifications was also observed in the graffiti content. The following graffiti (Figure 3.15) reads:

*አንድ ለናቱ ሺ ለጠላቱ መደሳው ካላ፡፡*

*One for his mother [that fights like a] thousand against his enemies. Mevisaw Kassa.*



**Figure 3.15. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘One for his mother [that fights like a] thousand against his enemies. Meysisaw Kassa**

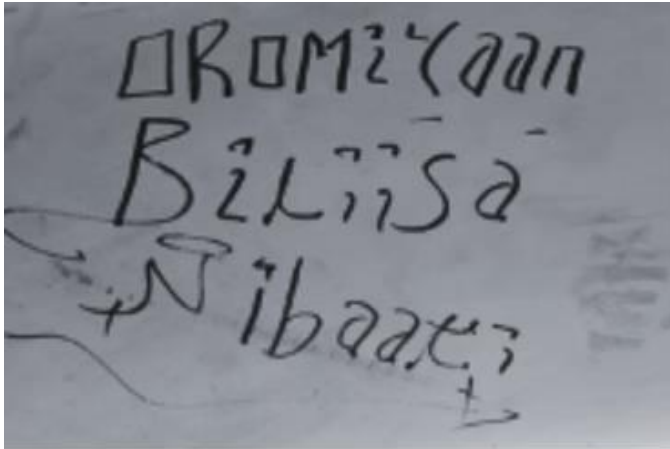
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The term Meysisaw Kassa refers to the name of Emperor Tewodros who ruled Ethiopia between 1855 and 1868. The battles under his reign aspired to achieve a unified Ethiopia. The author of the graffiti, who took part in the Tigray war, may have a positive sentimental appreciation of the emperor’s historical aspirations of a unified Ethiopia – created by force – which inspired the author to paint a symbolic representation of Emperor Tewodros alongside the graffiti.

Another identifier of the actors of the war was graffiti written in the Oromo language. It reads:

*Oromiyaan Biliisa Nibaati*

*Oromiyaan will be independent*



**Figure 3.16. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: ‘Oromiyaan will be independent’**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Religious identifications are also significant among the graffiti images. Three religious denominations are reflected in the graffiti writings in Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: Christian, Muslim, and Waqaa. These pieces of religious graffiti were written in Amharic, Arabic, and English languages respectively.

The graffiti (Figure 3.17) left to right reads:

*ቅድስ ገብርኤል አንተው ጠብቀን ቅዱስ ጊዮርጊስ ይርዳችሁ የምህረት ቀን ይሁንልን።*

*St Gebril, protect me. St George be with you. God make this day a day of mercy for us.*

*بِسْمِ اللَّهِ أَحْيِ دَوْلَةَ 100% رَحِمْنِي وَأَكْبِرْ رَمَضَانَ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ God All IS ONE*

*Allah is 100% my savior. Happy Ramadan. In the name of Allah. Oh, God all is one.*

*ምራን ዋቂ ዋው ሀበሻ ኢትዮጵያ*

*Pave our heading Waqaa now Habesha Ethiopia*

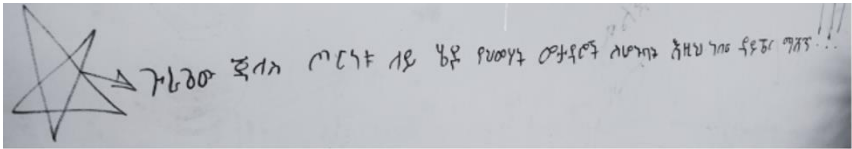


relationships (Gee, 1999). A significant number of graffiti writings discussed relationships (122 times), positively (to build and sustain the social relations among Ethiopians) and negatively (to change and destroy the relationships that Ethiopians had with Tigrayans by framing Tigrayans as enemies). The graffiti portrays Tigrayans as ‘betrayers’ and ‘traitors’, depicting Tigrayans being against peace and unity in Ethiopia. The graffiti conveyed that the relationship between Ethiopians and Tigrayans needs to be destroyed, as Tigrayans had betrayed Ethiopia.

One piece of graffiti reads:

*ጉራጌው ጀሰሰ ጦርነቱ ላይ ሄዶ የህወሃት ወታደሮች ሲሆኑበት እዚህ ነው ዳይፐር መሸጥ።*

*Guraghe [an ethnic name that settled in Southern Ethiopia that is associated with high trade and market orientation] man who went to war observes the situation of the TPLF soldiers, then he said “I should have a good diaper market in here.*



**Figure 3.19. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: belittling Tigrayan people**

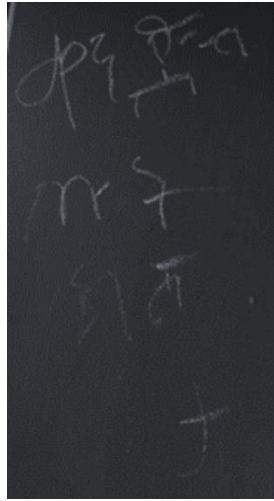
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The Tigrayans are belittled and portrayed as babies (who need diapers). The graffiti use irony as a hidden transcript; Tigrayans are weak and are unable to defend themselves on the battlefield. The graffiti identified Tigrayans as cowards and frustrated.

Another piece of graffiti reads:

*ቀንጅብ ጡት ነክሾች ጅንታ*

*Daytime hyena, Junta renegades who bite [their mother’s] breast.*



**Figure 3.20. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: Daytime hyena, Junta renegades who bites [their mother's] breast**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

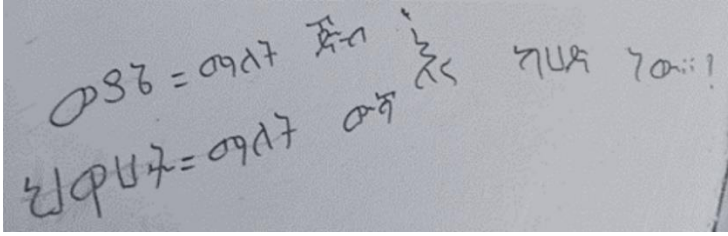
This graffiti represented Ethiopia as a mother that tirelessly worked to see her kids growing while breastfeeding them while the kids (Tigrayans) bite the breast that feeds them. Motherhood is associated with care, love and compassion. The Tigrayans are portrayed as betraying the motherly love, which, in the context of the culture, is a big insult. The term ‘junta renegades’ emphasise the immoral nature of Tigrayans.

Ethiopia is represented as ‘motherhood’ through ‘breasts’ in the graffiti while Tigrayans are represented as ‘kids’ and as ‘daytime hyenas’. As daytime hyenas are dangerous and kids who bite their mother are immoral, fighting these is the responsibility of the Ethiopians to protect their mother, Ethiopia. The graffiti can also be understood to represent the relationship between Ethiopia and Tigray as the former sovereign nation being betrayed by the latter.

Another piece of graffiti states:

*ወያኔ=ማለት ጅብ ህዋህት=ማለት ውሻ እና ከሀዲ ነው።*

*Woyane means hyena; TPLF means dogs and traitors*

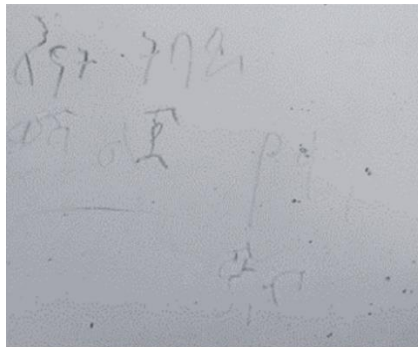


**Figure 3.21. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: Woyane means hyena; TPLF means dogs and traitors**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The content of the graffiti represents Tigrayans as immoral traitors. Sexually explicit expressions were also present in the graffiti. The graffiti below (Figure 3.22) reads:

እናት ትባዳ ውሻ ልጅ የቀን ጅብ::

*Mother fu\*\* the bitch of dog daylight hyena.*



**Figure 3.22. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: sexually explicit degrading texts**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The sexually explicit texts further demean ‘Woyane’, ‘junta’, and other slurs. Some of the graffiti effeminises Tigrayans to demean them, using sexually explicit expressions.

### ***Politics***

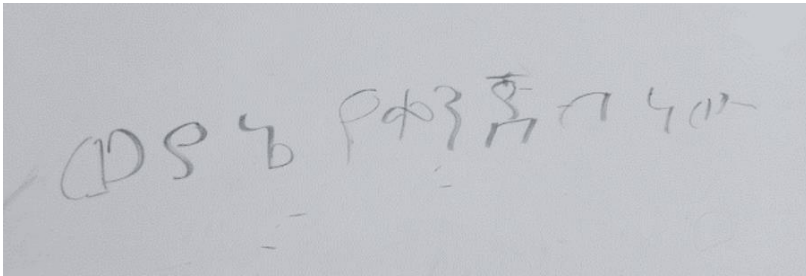
According to Gee (1999), politics reflects how discourses are used to create, distribute or withhold narratives that serve as a good or

acceptable standard across communities. Political discourse was found 88 times in the graffiti.

Some of the graffiti images compared Tigrayans with non-human living things. The graffiti represented Tigrayans as ‘hyenas’, ‘wolves’, ‘rats’, ‘dogs’, and ‘donkeys’ while those that have human representation of Tigrayans framed them as ‘thieves’, ‘traitors’ and dangerous, untrustworthy. The graffiti below (Figure 3.23) reads:

ወያኔ የቀን ጅብ ነው

*Woyane is a daytime hyena.*



**Figure 3.23. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum. Woyane is day-time hyena**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The theme of the Woyane portrayed as a ‘hyena’ connects two terms. Woyane points to the Tigrayan people and has a derogatory or negative connotation in certain contexts, but it is also used by Tigrayan people themselves (as in the Woyane Combat Unit of the TPLF), referring to the pride of the Tigray people and their fight against oppression by colonial powers and expansionists.

The term hyena in the Ethiopian idiomatic expression is used to portray someone as ‘greedy’, ‘thorny’, ‘self-centred’, ‘egoistic’ and ‘stingy’ in character, with a negative orientation to manipulating good values and undermining good morals for personal gain at the cost of society. This relates to hyenas having a night calendar; human beings protect themselves through thorned fences around their house. Anything left in the dark is destined to be eaten by the hyenas. The term daytime hyena then portrays someone who shamelessly shows inhuman and callous behaviour during the day as opposed to the real



nature of the hyena, which roams at night. Thus, someone who is being coined as a ‘daytime hyena’ means a callous and greedy person reflecting inhuman behaviour. This requires people to collectively take all necessary measures to eliminate the daytime hyena in order to maintain acceptable human behaviour and norms. The term ‘daytime hyena’ was introduced by Prime Minister Abiy on 23 June 2018 in a speech broadcast by EBC, but removed in a later edition as well as in later broadcasts (EBC, 2018; Yethiopia News, 2018; Dawro Tube, 2020). The graffiti in Figure 3.24 shows that the use of slurs in the language of the political leader of the country reverberated in the perception of the soldiers sent to Tigray.

How political developments are reflected in the graffiti is shown in the following example. In the last week of November 2020, a list of TPLF leaders was circulated in the mainstream media, with the objective that these leaders should be arrested. The graffiti reflects this in a drawing of the President of the regional state of Tigray with the text:

*ተፈላጊው ደብረጽዮን*

*The wanted Debretsion.*



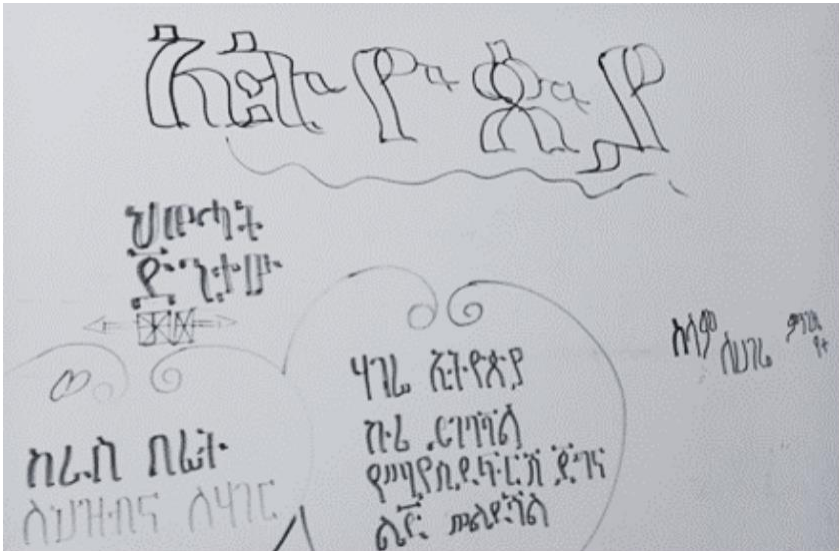
**Figure 3.24. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The soldier's graffiti shows the influence of the communications by the federal government.

Some graffiti expresses strong political nationalistic sentiments. An illustration is the following graffiti (Figure 3.25), which reads:

ኢትዮጵያ ህወሓት ጁንታው ከራስ በፊት ለህዝብና ለሃገርሃገረ ኢትዮጵያ ከራ ይገባል  
የግዴታና ጽኑ ወልደኛ ሰላም ለሀገሪ ምን ጊዜ

*Ethiopia: Prioritize your country's interests before yours. TPLF Junta. Ethiopia be proud, you deserve it, you have a hero son who never let you fall down for others. Peace always for my nation.*



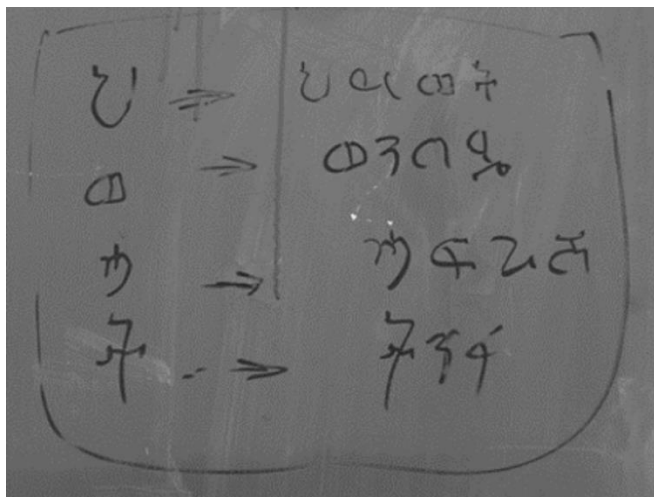
**Figure 3.25. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: nationalistic themes**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The graffiti represents Tigrayans as against peace in Ethiopia. The graffiti signals that the Tigrayans are an outside group, a group that is a threat to Ethiopia's peace. Tigrayans are framed as a threat to Ethiopian national interest. Another political graffiti text (Figure 3.26) reads:

ህወሓት ሁህይወት ወወንዝዴ ሓሓፍራሽ ትትጥፋ::

*TPLF H-Life, W-Gang, H-Created to destroy, T-It needs to be destroyed.*



**Figure 3.26. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: political agenda**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This shows that the author of this graffiti sees the TPLF as an enemy that must be destroyed for the attainment of Ethiopian peace and stability.

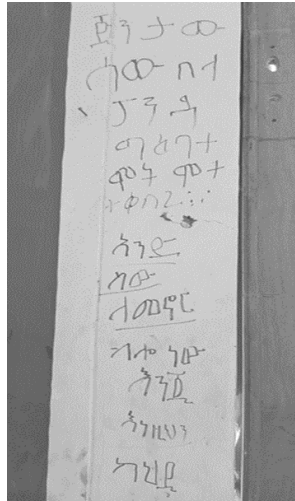
### ***Connections***

Connections refer to the meanings, language and discourses that describe the connection among each other or disconnection from each other (Gee, 1999). The 94 attributions to connection/disconnection show that Tigrayans are not only disconnected from Ethiopia, but also considered a national threat to Ethiopia.

One piece of graffiti (Figure 3.27) reads:

**ጁንታው ሰው በላ ፓንዳ ግዕዝ ቅጥ ተቀበረ። አንድ ሰው ለመኖር ብሎ ነው እንጂ እነዚህን ከህዲ።**

*The cannibal betrayer Junta is dead under the earth. It was to make one person live these all betrayal.*



**Figure 3.27. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The graffiti represents Tigrayans as cannibals. Tigrayans are framed as not only not human, but also anti-human, such that everyone needs to prevent themselves from being eaten by them.

Similarly, the graffiti below (Figure 3.28) shows that the authors categorised Tigrayans as non-human. It reads:

*ወያኔ የሰው ዘር አይደለም*

*Woyane is not a human race.*



**Figure 3.28. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum**

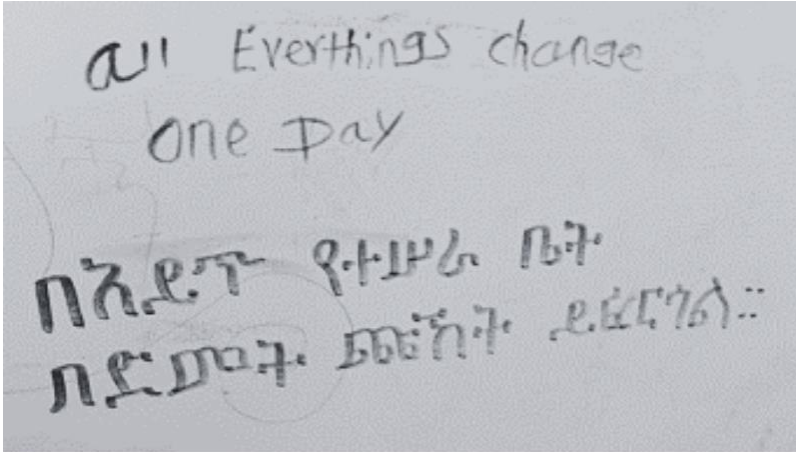
(Captured on 24 April 2024, inscription is very vague)

These expressions appeal for the mobilisation of people against Tigrayans, because such representations present Tigrayans as anti-human and, thus, anti-moral. Anyone who wants to protect their own moral values needs to fight against them.

Another piece of graffiti (Figure 3.29) reads:

*all everything changes one day. በአይጥ የተሰራ ቤት በድመት ጩኸት ይፈርሳል።*

*Everything changes [in] one day. A house built by a mouse will be destroyed by the scream of a cat.*



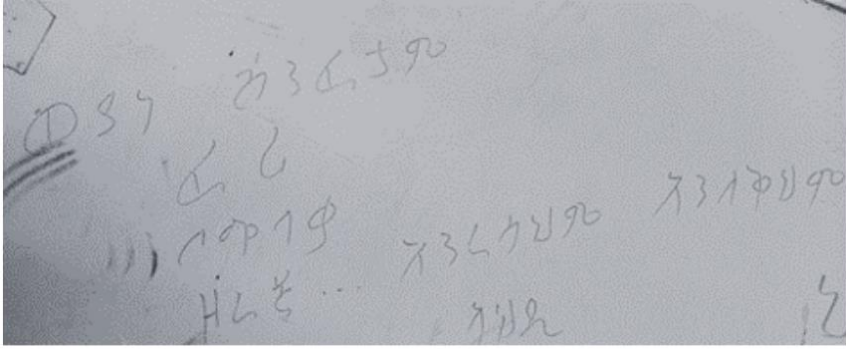
**Figure 3.29. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The text belittles Tigrayans and what they may have achieved (mice, associated with small things) and depicts them as powerless in front of the mighty greatness of Ethiopia (cat). From a connotated intertextuality perspective, this means that Tigrayans are powerless and unable to stand in front of Ethiopians. Other pieces of graffiti frames Tigrayans as cowards who are frustrated by the heroism of Ethiopians. This excerpt (Figure 3.30) reads:

*ወያኔ ሽንፈታም ፈሪ ቦቅባቃ ዘረኛ፡ . . አንረሳም አንለቅህም ከሁዲ።*

*Woyane coward, frustrated and racist. We will never forget, not let you live either. Traitor.*



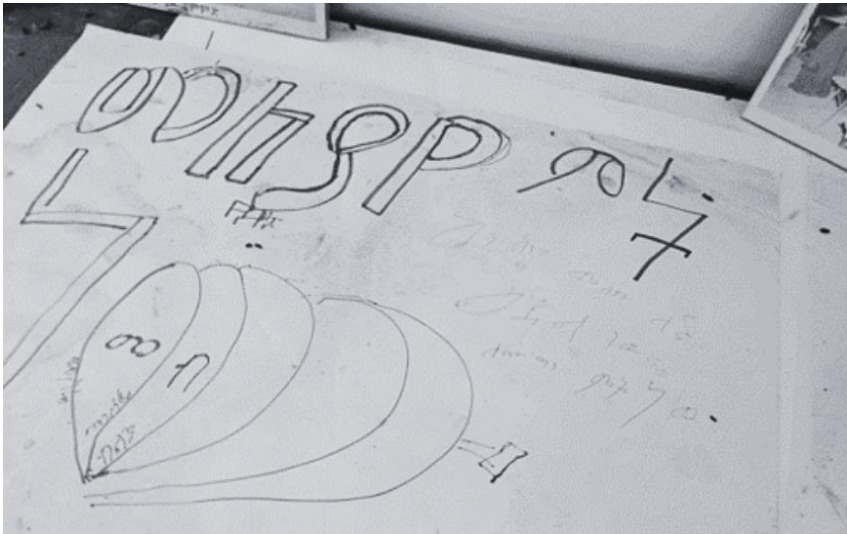
**Figure 3.30. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This text portrays a great level of disconnectedness to the extent that Tigrayans should die.

One of the pieces of graffiti described Ethiopia's disunion from Tigray as a blessing (Figure 3.31); it reads:

*መለያየት ሞት ነው። ከእናንተ መለያየት ለኛ ዕድል ነው። ለእናንተ ግን ሞት ነው።*

*Disunion is bitter like a death. But for us, disunion from you is a blessing while it is death for you.*

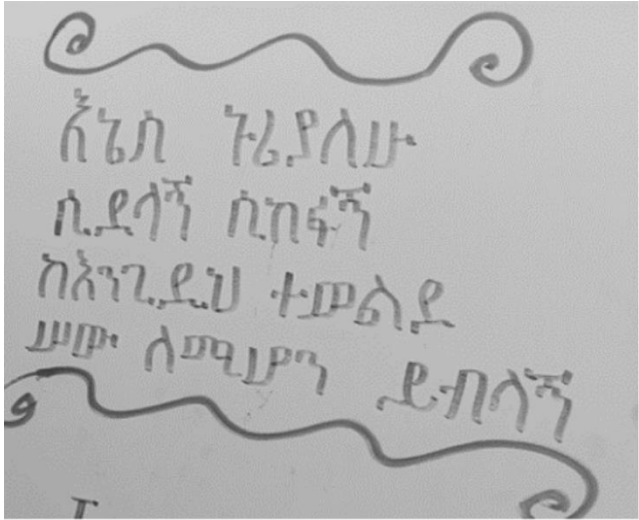


**Figure 3.31. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This shows the serious disconnect of Tigrayans from Ethiopians. Another piece of graffiti (Figure 3.32) reads:

*እኔስ ኑሬያለሁ ሲደላኝ ሲከፋኝ ከእንግዲህ ተወልዶ ሰው ለሚሆን ይብላኝ።*

*I have lived enough whether comforted or not, my worry is for the newborns.*



**Figure 3.32. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Disconnection is also portrayed in this text, which could be interpreted in different ways, but seems to portray a concern for the future.

***Sign systems and ways of knowledge***

Sign systems and knowledge in discourse analysis explore how the representations of a specific group are reinforced to serve as symbolic representations of that group within a particular context. This demonstrates how discourses are transformed into symbols and knowledge that represent the discourse subject (Gee, 1999).

In the religious and cultural context of Ethiopia, labelling someone as anti-religion brings moral shame to the person. The below graffiti excerpt (Figure 3.33) reads:

*የወያኔ መጨረሻ 1 ሞት 2 ከምድረ ገጽ መጥፋት 3 ውሻ 4 ሌባና ቡዳ I love Ethiopia.*

*The end of Woyane 1. Death 2. Being Destroyed from the Earth 3. Dog 4. Thief  
5. Buda. I love Ethiopia.*



**Figure 3.33. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum**

(Captured on 24 April 2024)

This graffiti is a manifesto and a programme for the love of Ethiopia, as well as identifying the reasons for this. Tigrayans are 'dogs' and 'thieves'. It refers to 'buda', a cultural reference to people who are possessed, who have the power of the evil eye, and who can transform into a hyena. This separates the belief system seen as rooted in the well-developed Aksumite empire from that of the society of 'poor', 'simple' people, who are to be hunted and even killed.

This may be a reason for poor, simple people to be socially isolated from others, as they may be possessed and bring evil. In some pieces of graffiti, the author indicated that Tigrayans usually coin their names according to Christian values, but that this is contradicted by them dying, remaining unprotected by God. This claim dissociates Tigrayans from getting sympathy from other Ethiopians with the same religious fellowship, because Tigrayans are labelled as 'anti-religion'. This reveals the necropolitical nature of the graffiti texts, which describe how power is exerted over life and death, highlighting how the Tigray population is rendered expendable or subjected to



death, despite their religious devotion. They have been abandoned by society. They have been abandoned by God. Such utterances have huge impacts, because these pieces of graffiti do not leave room for the believer to think of a shared connection with Tigrayans who are of the same religion.

Among the graffiti writings, sign systems and ways of knowledge are attributed 90 times. In the writings, terms like ‘Ethiopian unity’, ‘nationalism’, ‘heroism’, and maintaining ‘national sovereignty’ are associated with the ENDF and Ethiopians. While ‘betrayal’, ‘theft’, ‘looting’, ‘fart’, ‘cowardice’, ‘renegades’ and ‘cannibalism’ are associated with Tigrayans.

The design of the law enforcement operation was to celebrate the ‘Game over, Woyane’ slogan, which can be traced back to Eritrean President Isayas’ speech in January 2018.

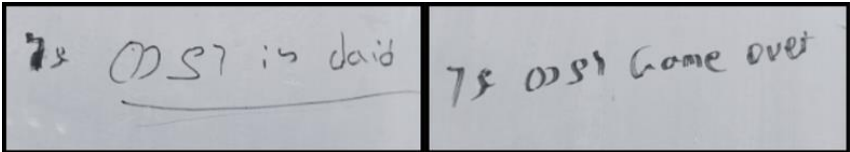
The graffiti writings below (Figure 3.34) read:

*ፍይ ወያኔ is daid*

*Woyane is dead*

*ፍይ ወያኔ Game over*

*Woyane Game Over*



**Figure 3.34. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: Woyane is dead. Woyane Game Over**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

The ‘Game Over’ utterances are among the most common writings, indicating that these terms were common knowledge among the soldiers. Many of the graffiti content attributes the eradication of Tigrayans as a solution, for the sake of maintaining Ethiopian unity. The texts refer to the eradication of Tigrayans as a permanent solution to the problems diagnosed as caused by inherit Tigrayan attributes.

## Discussion

In the exhibition in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum there are photographs showing the presence of members of the ELF and EPLF leaders at the first organisational congress of the TPLF in 1979, referring to the collaboration between the sides, as described by Berhe (2008). Strategic and ideological differences between the two combatants' factions hampered the culturally and socio-economically intertwining of the respective communities (Young, 1996). Shortly after the victory of the TPLF/EPRDF<sup>18</sup> led Ethiopia and newly recognised EPLF-led Eritrea, the differences between the two parties escalated into the Badme War.

The term 'Woyane', which refers to Tigrayans in these significant historic events, plays an important role in all the graffiti. In the graffiti, the term 'Woyane' is not positive but hostile (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024, Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024). The term 'Woyane' is referred to frequently in the graffiti left on the walls and artefacts in the museum, which was extensively damaged in the war (Awet, 2021).

The term 'Woyane' would become an overtly political negative term in Ethiopia in October 2016, after a political activist grabbed a microphone at a podium, during a concert drawing a large crowd in Addis Ababa. The event was a religious Irreecha celebration of Oromo Thanksgiving. The person who took the microphone chanted "Down, down Woyane" (Alemayehu, 2017; Forsenn, 2018; Debele, 2019), in reference to the TPLF and in opposition to the leading political party, the EPRDF, which was led by the TPLF. The slogan would stick and would translate into many songs and expressions. This underscores what Tronvoll (2020) observed as "conflating the TPLF and Tigrayan population", which "has been a common, although flawed, assumption exhibited by many Ethiopians throughout the rule of TPLF/EPRDF". As a result, Tigrayans are "collectively blamed and persecuted for the wrongdoings of TPLF, although they had equally suffered under its suppressive politics"

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<sup>18</sup> The Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) assembled the different political groups in Ethiopia including the TPLF and was for most of the time led by the TPLF leader and later Prime Minister of Ethiopia Zenawi Meles.

(Tronvoll, 2020). The term ‘Woyane’ can be understood as a term in the Ethiopian context that was, and still is, being used to represent all ethnic Tigrayans. The graffiti portrays a stark sentiment of ‘otherness’, identifying Tigrayans in derogatory terms. The sentiments expressed in the graffiti provide a justification for the ‘eradication’ of Tigrayans, as a solution to Ethiopia’s problems.

This graffiti at the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum demonstrates how slogans used by the leaders of the federal government of Ethiopia and Eritrea guided the actions in the war. President Isayas uttered ‘Game over, Woyane’ as early as January 2018 and it reverberated up to when the Eritreans left Tigray in 2023. The ‘daytime hyena’ slur referring to Tigrayans, introduced by Prime Minister Abiy in June 2018, is reflected in the graffiti left by soldiers in the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum. These slogans were indexing the targeting of people in Tigray, which is not just a result of the war, but was part of the propaganda leading up to it and that motivated the soldiers taking part in the war (Gebreslassie & Van Reisen, 2024; Geb & Tesfa, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

The Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle was a symbol of pride among the people of Tigray, celebrating the victory of the TPLF against the Derg regime. During the Tigray war in 2020–2022, much of the museum was destroyed and it was used as a military camp by ENDF soldiers from the last week of November 2020 to the third week of June 2021. Graffiti, document evidence, and survivors’ accounts confirmed that the 24<sup>th</sup> Tewodros Regiment of ENDF and Ethiopian Commando Special Force were in the museum. The museum also served as a detention centre for people who were arrested during the war. There is evidence that it was used for torture and there are allegations that some people who were detained there disappeared.

The soldiers left graffiti on the walls and artefacts in the museum. In some of them, they identified themselves. Guided by the theory of Scott’s hidden transcript and Gee’s building blocks of discourse analysis, this chapter explored the texts in this graffiti. During

observations in the museum 154 graffiti were discovered and photographed. The content of the 142 graffiti was analysed: 121 of the graffiti were written in Amharic, 11 in English, 6 Oromo, 3 Tigrinya and 1 in Arabic languages.

The graffiti described Tigrayans as ‘cannibals’, ‘daytime hyenas’, ‘mice’, ‘dogs’, ‘rats’, ‘traitors’ and ‘non-humans’, indexing them as ‘anti-Ethiopian’ and needing to be ‘eradicated’ and ‘killed’ to maintain Ethiopian ‘sovereignty’, ‘peace’, ‘unity’ and the ‘moral system’. The graffiti writing also framed Tigrayans collectively using the negative term ‘Woyane’, in phrases such as ‘Woyane is dead’, ‘the end of Woyane’, ‘the junta has fallen’, ‘Woyane is non-existent’, ‘Woyane is being killed’, and ‘Woyane has paid for what she did’. The political slogan ‘Woyane, game over’ is also repeated in the graffiti found in the museum. ‘Woyane’ is interpreted as referring to Tigrayans in general, not just the TPLF.

The graffiti shows the collective blaming of Tigrayans (‘Woyane’) for the ills of the TPLF/EPRDF and contains political messages in which the TPLF and Tigrayans (collectively referred to as ‘Woyane’) are blamed for the situation in the country. It is significant for the investigation of genocidal intent that explicit references to the ‘eradication’ of Tigrayans were also found in the graffiti in the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum.

## **Acknowledgements**

We most particularly thank the curator of the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum for the photographs of the museum after it was ransacked in the war. We thank Araya Abrha Medhanyie and Makeda Saba who provided interesting feedback on the earlier versions. The authors thank the double peer reviewers for their feedback and the editorial team for their guidance throughout the research process.

## **Authors' contributions**

The research originates from Daniel Tesfa, who prepared the original concept for it, prepared the research plan, carried out the collection of the data and the analysis. Daniel Tesfa also established the theoretical framework. Daniel Tesfa wrote the first draft of the chapter. His research is part of his PhD on communication during a communication blockade in war-time, as member of the Research Network Globalisation, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC). Mirjam Van Reisen provided guidance on the research at all stages, and reviewed the raw data, the data analysis and contributed to the writing of all versions of the article. She provided the photographs of the museum from before the war as part of a systematic collection of pre-war observations.

## **Ethical considerations**

We received clearance for this chapter of the curator of the Martyrs' Commemoration Museum, who provided approval for the use of the photographs. This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled "Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting".

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.

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# Negative Stereotyping, Creation of a Threat, and Incitement to Genocide: Discourse Analysis of Hate-speech Disseminated in the Tigray War

*Daniel Tesfa & Mirjam Van Reisen*

ሐሶት እንተተደጋገመ ሐቂ ይመስል።

*When falsehoods are repeated, they look alike the truth.*

### Abstract

This research compared the content of speeches made by the leadership of Ethiopia and Eritrea with text left by foot soldiers deployed in the Tigray war to investigate negative stereotyping, the creation of a threat, and incitement to genocide. A corpus of graffiti, left in places used as barracks by Ethiopian soldiers deployed in Tigray, was studied. Themes in the graffiti were compared with themes in utterances by political, religious, and economic leaders of the country as well as celebrities and artists. The analysis shows that the soldiers used similar themes to those used by leaders and celebrities disseminated in public media, portraying Tigrayans as a threat to the country. Most concerning, some of these utterances talked of the extermination of the Tigrayan people as a ‘solution’ to the situation of the country. This ethnographic study found that the negative stereotyping and framing of the Tigrayan people as a ‘threat’ resulted in language directly inciting the extermination of the people of Tigray. Reflecting on the performative aspect of speech, further investigation of genocidal intent is recommended.

**Keywords:** Tigray war, graffiti, hate-speech, incitement, genocide, Eritrea, Ethiopia



## Introduction

Research on the historical development of hate speech, dehumanisation, and incitement to genocide indicates that hate speech campaigns are signs that there is a high potential for the perpetration of crimes against the targeted out-group (Benesch, 2014). There is historical and contemporary evidence that war, psychological warfare, propaganda, and hate speech are interconnected and result in mass killings (Oberschall, 2012; Benesch, 2014).

*War is considered a violent means of attaining a specific objective, but there has always been a continuous flow of carefully directed propaganda messages. (Jowett and Donnell, 2012)*

Military wars are coordinated with a deliberately designed propaganda campaign that targets the ‘enemy’. Lasswell stated:

*The basic idea is that the best success in war is achieved by the destruction of the enemy’s will to resist, and with a minimum annihilation of fighting capacity. (Lasswell, p. 261)*

Propaganda serves as the central element of psychological warfare, allowing actors to employ strategic messaging against adversaries. This effort is often supported by additional military, economic, or political measures, as needed, to reinforce the propaganda (Linebarger, 1954).

Propaganda was used in World War I and World War II, with Telegraph, radio broadcasts, and printed messages serving as instruments of dissemination, resulting in mass propaganda by one group against the other (Linebarger, 1954; Jowett & Donnell, 2012; Lasswell, 1951). After 1945, the ideological struggle between the East and West dominated the propaganda, while the Cold War brought a unique nature and complexity to the propaganda, as a mixture of political, religious and economic interests (Jowett & Donnell, 2012).

Studying its nature, scholars understand that hate propaganda commences long before the physical war is declared and continues long after peace treaties are signed (Jowett & Donnell, 2012; Benesch,

2014). Hate speech is harmful speech directed towards people based on perceived in-group or out-group identity categorisations:

*Hate speech refers to speech that denigrates a person or people based on their membership in a group, usually an immutable group defined by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, for example, sometimes also religion or political affiliation or views.* (Benesch, 2014, p. 5)

Scholars have identified that inflammatory hate speech and mass propaganda are indicators of violence to follow and are critical warning signs of mass violence (Benesch, 2014). Unless the early warning indicators are mitigated, hate propaganda can catalyse mass killings, including genocide (Benesch, 2014; Oberschall, 2012). By teaching people to view other human beings as less than human, and as mortal threats, thought leaders can make atrocities seem acceptable – and even necessary, as a form of collective self-defence. Such hate propaganda preceded the atrocities of the Holocaust (Brustein & King, 2004), Rwanda genocide (Hefti & Jonas, 2020), Myanmar (Morada, 2023), Darfur (Van Schaack, 2004), and the war in Bosnia (Kurspahic, 2010) and continues to risk human rights and peace in many countries today.

The Tigray war broke out in the first week of November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023). The parties fighting in the war, which continued until November 2022, were the coalition of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), Amhara Fano, special forces from Ethiopian regions, and Tigray Special Force, which regrouped itself into the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024). The war was characterised by mass propaganda against Tigrayans in the months and years that preceded the start of the war (Gebreslassie & Van Reisen, 2024; Geb & Tesfa, 2024). The estimation of the University of Ghent is that anywhere between 500,000 and 700,000 people died in the war (Pilling & Schipani, 2023). The research question asked by this chapter is: *How, and in which ways, are the narratives of propaganda campaigns disseminating hate-speech towards Tigrayans, before and during the Tigray war, reflected in the graffiti written by soldiers based in Tigray during the war?*

## Theoretical framework

### *Speech act theory*

Developed by Austin (1962), the speech act theory explores how an utterance can change the information state of the hearer (Salt, 2004). This theory discusses language not only as a tool of message exchange, but also as a vital instrument of action-reaction relations of the interactants. The speech act theory is classified under the ordinary-language philosophy, as it aims to accommodate a wide variety of linguistic functions and as its truth conditions are subsumed under the more general conditions of success of speech acts (Mabaquiao, 2018).

Language serves as a link between the utterances of language users and their actions, including their intentions, which is a crucial consideration in the successful performance of speech acts (Mabaquiao, 2018). The language-world relation is determined by the language-user relation (Austin, 1989). Austin categorised utterances into constative utterances and performative utterances. Constative utterances are linguistic expressions that are either true or false, that are used to explain facts or the state of the metaphysics (Austin, 1962; Mabaquiao, 2018). Performative utterance refers to linguistic expressions that are used to perform certain actions (Austin, 1962; Mabaquiao, 2018). Austin (1989) classified performatives into five categories:

- A commitment by the speaker to take a specific action
- An exposition expounding views, conducting arguments, and clarifying usages and references
- Advocating the exercise of an action
- Behaving, and judging people's behaviours, fortunes, and attitudes towards other people's behaviour
- Reasoning based on evidence or logic concerning value or fact, to the extent that these can be distinguished (Austin, 1989)

Austin (1989) makes us aware that the content of the narratives is performative at different levels and, when repeated and reasoned, also has consequences for actual behaviour.

### ***Hate propaganda and incitement to genocide and atrocities***

Propaganda is the use of images, slogans, symbols, and falsehoods that resonate with prejudices and emotions for persuasion disseminated to mass audiences (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). Propaganda is “an endeavor to spread ideas without regard to truth and accuracy” (Toennies, 1922 as cited in Oberschall, 2012).

Political speech, deliberative discourse in democracies, aims to influence people and create consensus and majority support around the speaker’s position. Political communication during the war is characterised by an appeal to emotion by spreading hate against the out-group, by framing them as the enemy using various techniques including inflammatory speeches, dehumanisation, manipulation, and disinformation, as well as incitement to the extermination of the out-group victims under the pretext of self-defence (Oberschall, 2012; Benesch, 2014; Hefti & Jonas, 2020; Kurspahic, 2010).

In examining the measurement mechanisms for incitement to genocide, Benesch (2014) designed five factors to examine the danger level of inflammatory speech, which include some or all of the following factors.



**Figure 4.1. Most dangerous speech**

(Adopted by author from Benesch, 2014, p. 8.)

According to Van Dijk, the level of audiences' susceptibility to dangerous speech and incitement to genocide depends on when:

*(1) [the audiences] have incomplete or lack of relevant knowledge; (2) foundational norms, values, and ideologies that cannot be denied or ignored; (3) strong emotions, traumas, etc. that make people vulnerable; and (4) social positions, professions, status, etc. that induce people into tending to accept the discourses, arguments, etc. of elite persons, groups or organizations.* (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 375)

Waller (2002) also identified three components of hate speech, hate discourse, and hate ideology in inter-group relations.

- **Stereotyping:** The target group is negatively stereotyped as different, alien, inferior, and inhuman, not meriting protection or rights to life, liberty and property accorded to human beings.
- **Defining as a threat:** The target group is characterised as an extreme threat to the survival and well-being of one's ethnic group, nationality or nation.
- **Incitement towards elimination:** Advocacy for an eliminationist solution to the threat, which ranges from (quotas) and discrimination (legal segregation) imposed on the target, to expulsion (ethnic cleansing) and, in extreme hate discourse, killing and annihilation (Waller, 2002).

Following these three components of hate propaganda identified by Waller (2002), this chapter examines how narratives disseminated from the top of the leadership of Ethiopia and Eritrea were present in the graffiti of the foot soldiers deployed in the Tigray war.

## Methodology

Guided by the speech act theory and dangerous speech indicators, the research examined the mainstream hate speech, disinformation, and incitement, as compared to the graffiti written in public spaces and atrocities committed during the Tigray war. The research employed a qualitative discourse analysis.

**Table 4.1. Method of data collection and analysis**

No.	Criteria	Approach
1	Method	Qualitative discourse analysis
2	Study subject	Mainstreamed speech about Tigrayans, graffiti images written by soldiers and atrocities committed
3	Data collection tool	Capturing photos, observations, reports and interview
4	Sites of data collection	Media content for the speeches Public spaces for the graffiti content: (i) Museum (ii) School (iii) Health facility (iv) Road
5	Specific sites	Martyrs' Memorial Museum (24 April 2024) Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School (27–28 December 2020, 15–17 April 2021) Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital (9 July 2023) Public roads in Shire (Jan 20, 2023) and Mekelle (9 September 2024)
6	Number of collected data	255 graffiti writings and media data 74 Emperor Yohannes School 142 Martyrs' Memorial Museum 2 Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital 37 Media data
7	Selection criteria	Waller's (2002) three components of hate speech, hate discourse, and hate ideology in inter-group relations and Benesch's (2014)

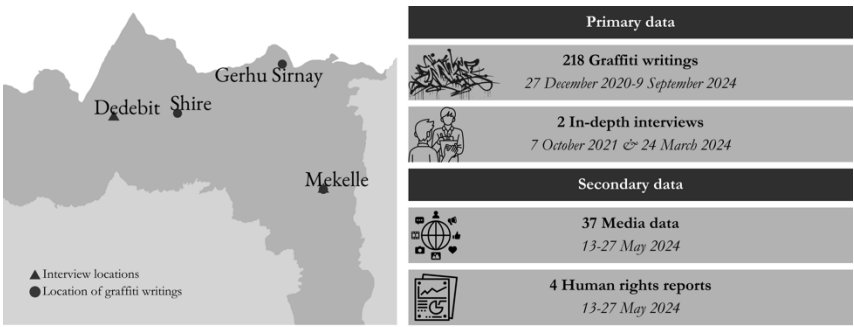
No.	Criteria	Approach
		five factors to examine the dangerousness of inflammatory speeches.
8	Number of included data	37 media data 22 graffiti
9	In-depth interviews	SHIDI01, 7 October 2021 MGIDI02, 24 March 2022
10	Coding procedures	The images of the graffiti were first converted into an object archived in a dedicated server and coded in an Excel spreadsheet. The words were then transcribed and translated. The translations were conducted by the first author who captured the photos. Two colleagues crosschecked the translations, as compared to the images
11	Analysis procedures	Major themes that were grasped from the data were identified. Detailed findings of the sites were published in two other chapters: Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024a); Tesfa & Van Reisen (2024b).

The pieces of graffiti in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum were captured by one of the authors on 24 April 2024, whereas the photographs of the graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School were captured by a member of the school community. These were collected and crosschecked on location. After verification, the messages were transcribed, translated, and analysed according to the research criteria indicated in the theoretical framework. In the text cited in the findings, sexually connotated, rude expressions have been indicated with \*\*\*.

The footage was also compared with footage collected by the Tigray Education Bureau, from where consent for their use was obtained regarding the use of photographs from the Emperor Yohannes

School, and the archive of the Martyrs’ Commemoration Museum, from where consent was received for use of the photographs taken of the museum.

The photographs in Gerhu Sirnay were taken by one of the authors during a research field trip in 2023. The footage of the road transport in Tigray was obtained from X (formerly Twitter) and was verified with other available sources of the photographs published in various social media in 2023.



**Figure 4.2. Overview of data collected and used in the study**

### Study sites

The contents of the graffiti were collected from a school, museum, and health facility in different parts of Tigray. After the outbreak of the war, the Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School that was named after Emperor Yohannes IV. The school is in Mekelle and was used as barracks by soldiers during the war. It was occupied from the end of 2020 till mid-April 2021. The graffiti was found written on the boards, chairs, and walls of the destroyed school.

The other study area was the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle. The museum was a centre of documentation and contained an exhibition on the 17 years of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) struggle and its partnership with the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) (now the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice [PFDJJ]) and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Following the outbreak of the Tigray war, Ethiopian soldiers ransacked and destroyed the museum. It was



also used as a camp for the soldiers. Survivors of arrests and torture also indicated that the soldiers had used the museum as a detention centre where detained people were handcuffed and tortured.

The third study location is Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital in Egela District in the Central Zone of Tigray. Gerhu Sirnay is a small-town in the centre of the Egela, a district that borders Tserona in Eritrea. The Gerhu Sirnay Primary Hospital is the only hospital in the district and serves a population of more than 50,000. The hospital was looted and destroyed by Eritrean soldiers who used it as a military camp. The Eritrean soldiers left graffiti in the hospital, which is the main subject of this research.

## **Results and findings**

### ***Negative stereotyping***

Three months after he was nominated as the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy used the term ‘daytime hyena’ referring to Tigrayans. The term was used following an attack at a public gathering in Meskel Square on 23 June 2018 (EBC, 2018). It was alleged that the attack was carried out by Tigrayans. The Prime Minister said that the perpetrators had escaped to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, and were anti-reformists (Yethiopia News, 2018). In Ethiopia the term daytime hyena is used to portray a person as not being human, someone who shamelessly moves around in search for food during the day, in comparison to the natural rhythm of the hyena who is active at night. It is a derogatory term.



**Figure 4.3. Analysis of hate speech actors on ‘daytime hyena’**  
(Following Benesch, 2014)

When a speaker is a public figure who is part of the top leadership of the country, Dijk (2006) refers to authority as an instrument that encourages people to translate the speeches of the figure into action. ETV (formerly the Ethiopian Broadcasting Network [EBF]), Fana Television, and Walta Television are among the state-owned and ruling party-affiliated media organisations that serve as a main source of information for a significant portion of the Ethiopian public.

A prominent figure, artist, and film actor, Debebe Eshetu, reiterated Abiy’s ‘daytime hyena’ utterance broadcast on the popular film media channel Sodere TV, saying:

*He [Prime Minister Abiy] said hyenas, he is right. What I want to advise Dr Abiy is that there is a tale; eat the hyena and get blessed before you are eaten by them. Let’s eat them and get blessed. We will become sacred.* (Debebe Eshetu, 27 June 2018, Sodere TV, 0:00:46–0:01:01, translation by authors)

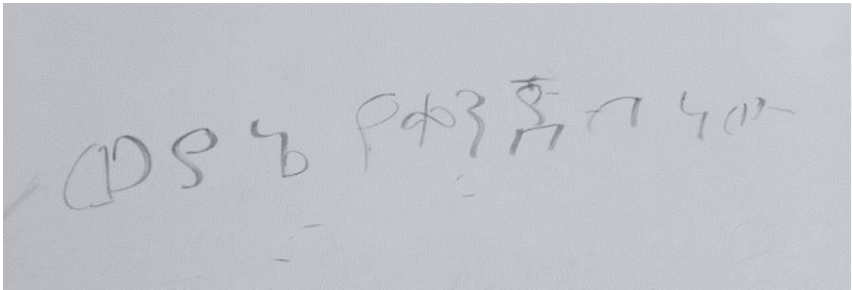
The portrayal of Tigrayans as ‘daytime hyenas’ is also among the commonly used graffiti writings found in Emperor Yohannes School and the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum.

The graffiti depicted below was found in the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum in Mekelle where ENDF soldiers and Special Commando set up their camp. It reads:

ወያኔ የቀን ጅብ ነው

This can be translated as:

*Woyane is a daytime hyena.*



**Figure 4.4. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum. Daytime hyena**

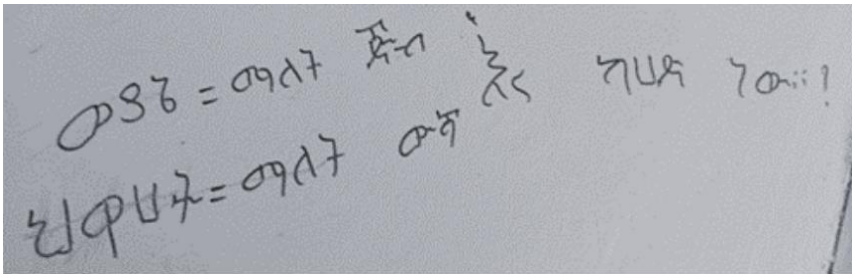
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Another excerpt (Figure 5) states:

ወያኔ=ማለት ጅብ ህዋህት=ማለት ውሻ እና ከህዲ ነው።

*Woyane means hyena; TPLF means dogs and traitors.*

This graffiti presents Tigrayans as immoral traitors who antagonise Ethiopian nationals.



**Figure 4.5. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: Traitors**

(captured on 24 April 2024)

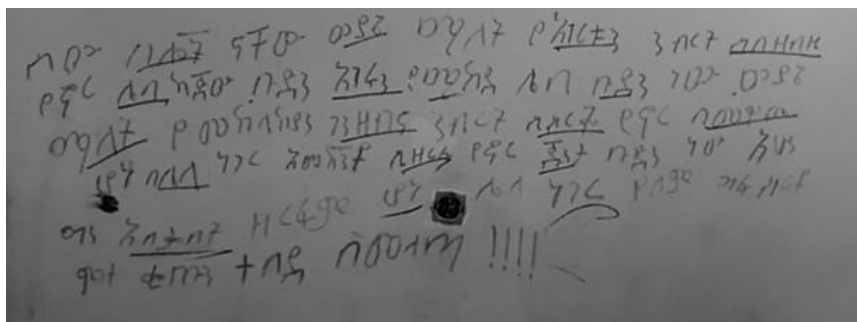
On 28 November 2020, artist Debebe Eshetu stated:

*November is about to end. They are getting warmth from the fire they are setting. As it is tempered, it is about to blow a fuse. I don't feel any sympathy for their burning up. I say they deserve it. (Amharic Tube, 2020, translation by authors)*

The graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School reads:

*ሰዉ በሎች ናቸው ወያኔ ማለት የአገሪቱን ንብረት ሲበዙበዝ የኖረ ሌባ አጃዉ ቡድን አገሩን የሚከዳ ሌባ ቡድን ነዉ ወያኔ ማለት የመከላከያን ገንዘብና ንብረት ሲሰርቅ የኖረ በመዋጮ ሆነ በሌላ አመክኝቶ ሲዘርፍ የኖረ ጁንታ ቡድን ነዉ አሁን ግን አበቃለት ዘረፋም ሆነ ሌላ ነገር የለም ግፍ ሰርቶ ሞተ ቂጡን ተ\*ዳ በመላጣ!!!!*

*They are cannibals. Woyane means a group that was looting the country's resources that had already betrayed one's own nation. Woyane is a junta group that robbed the military's finances and resources by requesting contributions and by other forms. Now, it is over. There is no looting and other crimes. It is already dead while committing the crime. Get fu\*\*d in naked an\*s!!!*



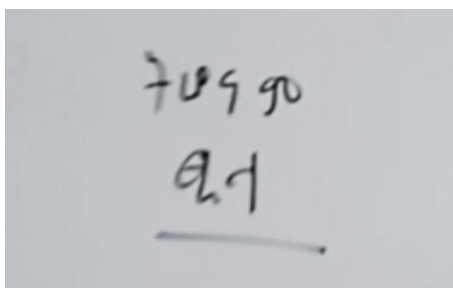
**Figure 4.6. Tigrayans from Emperor Yohannes School: Cannibals**  
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

The above graffiti portrays Tigrayans as cannibals. The implicit meaning is that Tigrayans have no morality, or work against morality, and, therefore, they need to be destroyed to preserve Ethiopian moral values. Similar to Debebe Eshetu’s claim that Tigrayans are set on fire, which he said, “they deserve”, this graffiti also indicated that Tigrayans are already dead.

In December 2018, the state and state-affiliated media ETV, Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), Walta TV, Addis Media Network (AMN), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), and Debub TV disseminated the *Yefitih Sekoka*

documentary, which described Tigrayans as ‘torturers’, ‘murderers’, ‘corrupt’, ‘excruciates’, ‘ghosts’, ‘traitors’, ‘homosexual’ and ‘devils’ who stood against Ethiopia’s national interests.<sup>19</sup>

From the socio-historical context, the transition of power from Hailemariam to Abiy was framed as resulting from the public protect protest movement, in the context of the publicly popular slogan ‘Down, down, Woyane’, contextually referring to Tigrayans as anti-reform (Addis Standard, 2017). While Tigrayans were collectively blamed for the wrongdoings of the EPRDF regime (Tronvoll, 2020), Prime Minister Abiy defined the 27 years of the EPRDF regime as a “dark age” (Mistir, 2019).



**Figure 4.7. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Bedbug**  
(Captured on 28 December 2020)

An offensive graffiti found in Emperor Yohannes Secondary and Preparatory School reads: “ትሆናም ጸላ”, which can be interpreted as “bedbug tsila”.

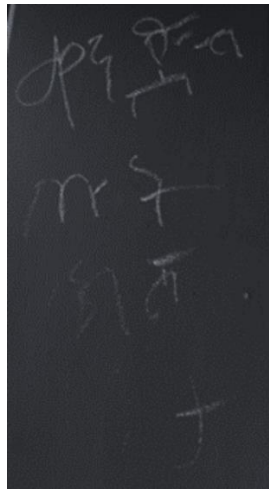
While the soldiers portrayed Tigrayans as ‘bedbugs’, the term ‘tsila’ is a derogatory hate speech word used to identify Tigrayans as being snitches on other Ethiopians and associated with the power held by the EPRDF regime. A snitch is someone who operates secretly. Declaring military action on Tigray on 4 November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy implied that Tigrayans secretly attacked the ENDF

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<sup>19</sup> The actual words used in the documentary to describe Tigrinya speakers were *ደብዳቤዎች* (torturers), *ነፍስ ገዳዮች* (murderers), *ሙሰኞች* (corrupt), *አሰቃይ* (excruciates), *መናፍሰት* (ghosts), *ከሀዲዎች* (traitors) *ግብረሰዶማውያን* (homosexuals) and *ሰይጣኖች* (devils) (Fana Television, 2018a, translation by author).

from behind, using an analogy of the breastfeeding mother and a child biting the breast that feeds him/her (EBC, 2020c). He said:

*Honoured people of Ethiopia, today traitor Ethiopians poked Ethiopia. Ethiopia, its generous hands and its motherly breasts that fed them, are bitten. The Ethiopia National Defence Force that protected its territory and people, with martyrdom in the thousands, wounded, bled, and suffered in desert forts for the past twenty years, was attacked by traitors and their forces in Mekelle and other areas as of the night. This attack is infamous because the army didn't face such a situation while being in the peacekeeping mission in its history let alone in its country where now is attacked from behind, where many sacrificed martyrdom and were wounded as well as suffered destruction of resources.* (Prime Minister Abiy, EBC, 2020c, 0:00:32-0:01:49)



**Figure 4.8. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: Renegades**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Similarly, the ENDF soldiers who camped in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum wrote: "Daytime hyena, Junta renegades who bite [their mother's] breast". This shows that the mainstream hate speech and dehumanisation utterances were heard and reproduced by the soldiers. Taking these soldiers as one of the primary audiences of the media propaganda messages, the similarity in the mainstreamed utterances and the graffiti writings indicates that the speeches were popular among the soldiers. These soldiers, demonstrate a level of hatred against Tigrayans similar to that which was conveyed by the leaders.

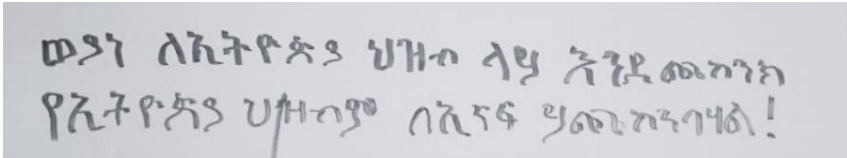
### ***Posing a threat***

Tigrayans were portrayed as alien national security threats to Ethiopia, long before the Tigray war. As a result, they were targeted by the federal government. In media brief Attorney General Adanech Abebe attributed responsibility to ‘Tigrinya speakers’ for planning the assassination of the Oromo musician and activist, Hachalu Hundessa (Fana Television, 2020b).

The documentary ‘Yefitih Sekoka’ (The Agony of Injustice), which was disseminated in all state-owned and ruling party affiliated media in Addis Ababa explicitly used the term ‘Tigrinya speakers’ to refer to ‘criminals’ who were accused of committing human rights violations in prisons. Tigrinya speakers were depicted by the Ethiopian media as less than human, using terms such as ‘weeds’, ‘cancer’, ‘monsters’, ‘devils’, ‘ghosts’, ‘traitors’, ‘homosexuals’, and ‘ogres’ who had betrayed their country (Fana Television, 2018). The documentary represented Tigrinya speakers as perpetuating crimes against Ethiopians, and not being Ethiopian themselves.

The graffiti in Emperor Yohannes School reads:

*Woyane as you were brutal for the people of Ethiopia, the people of Ethiopia now doubled its brutality on you!*



**Figure 4.9. Graffiti from Emperor Yohanes School: on brutality**

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

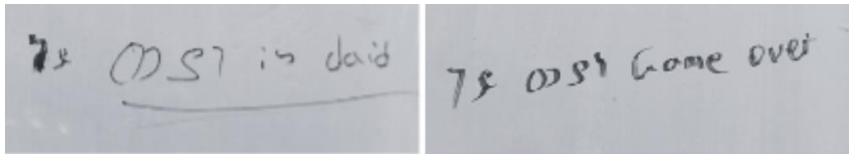
The Ethiopian soldiers were coached to be brutal with Tigrayans. Andargachew Tsige, a leader of the Ginbot-7, an armed group based in Eritrea to fight Ethiopia under the EPRDF, which was labelled a terrorist organisation by the then Ethiopian parliament, instructed Ethiopian soldiers as follows:

*Because there is no other choice, engage them with all the brutality; in your full capacity of brutality without any humanity. Avoiding any Amharan Ethiopian benignancy, without hesitation, whatever it requires, I am frankly speaking, we need*

*to face them with all the brutalities we can [applause] with all the brutalities.*  
(Andargachew Tsige’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:34–4:48; Daniel, 2021)<sup>20</sup>

Andargachew Tsige, said that Ethiopians must face Tigray with all the brutality it could muster. Such instructions did not come in isolation. Eritrean President Isayas said “Game over Woyane” three months before the power transition in Ethiopia from Prime Minister Hailemariam to Abiy. Many of the former rebel groups sponsored by Eritrea joined Abiy’s government, some of them through formal position and others as internal advisors.

The design of the law enforcement operation can be interpreted as a translation of the ‘Game over’ policy, which can be traced back to Eritrean President Isayas’ speech on 14 January 2018 (ERi-TV, 2018a) (ERi-TV, 2018b). The law enforcement operation put the ‘Game over’ policy into action.



**Figure 4.10. Graffiti from Martyrs’ Memorial Museum: Game Over**  
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

Graffiti messages such as ‘Woyane, game over’ and ‘Woyane is dead’ were commonly seen. These expressions have seemingly evolved into a widely embraced consensus among the soldiers regarding the necessary course of action in their context.

Signs of the Eritrea military participating in the invasion are left on the walls of the hospital in Geru Sirnay. A picture captured in Gerhu

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<sup>20</sup> አብረን ለመሰዋት ዝግጁ የሆንን በአገር ውስጥና ከ አገር ውጪ በርካታ ኢትዮጵያውያን እንዳሉ አውቃችሁ አምርራችሁ ሌላ ምርጫ ስለሌለን ነው። አምርራችሁ ያለምንም ርህራሄ ያለምንም አማራጭ ኢትዮጵያዊ ደግነት ያለምንም መላወል በሚያስፈልገው ማንኛውም እውነቱን ነው የምናገረው አረመኔያዊ በሆነ ጭካኔ ነው ልንጋፈጣቸው የሚገባው (ጨብጨባ) አረመኔያዊ በሆነ ጭካኔ (Andargachew Tsige’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:34–4:48; Daniel, 2021).



Sirnay Hospital reads “ኤርትራ ትስዕር”, which is literally translated as “Eritrea is winning” or “Eritrea will win”.



**Figure 4.11. Graffiti on the wall of Gerhu Sirnay Hospital: Eritrea will win**  
(Captured on 9 July 2023)

The broader meaning of the message can be understood as: we take pride in our actions and have demonstrated our capabilities. The graffiti “ኣዖ ወይን,” translates to “Poor Woyane” or “Hopeless Woyane”, deriding the Tigrayan community. This graffiti, found on a wall, was discovered following the destruction of the hospital by soldiers. The message conveys a sense of satisfaction in the completion of the devastation.

A retired Ethiopian military officer, Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, who re-joined the ENDF military leadership during the Tigray war following Prime Minister Abiy’s call (Fana Television, 2020a), stated:

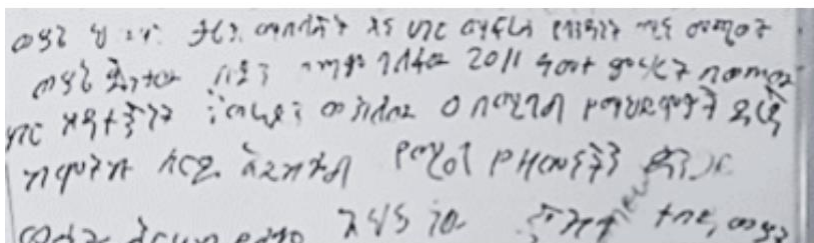
*When the Tigrinya speakers were leaders in the [ENDF] military, soldiers used to fire guns on the public. By then bullets were fired on the public. Now the public wholeheartedly is by the side of the [Ethiopian] military to deter their attempt to*

*break up Ethiopia. So this is a great capacity.* (Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, 7 September 2021, Addis Walta-AW, 2021, 33:17-33:37)<sup>21</sup>

In this speech Tigrayans were represented as anti-Ethiopian national unity, working to break up Ethiopia. This can be seen in this graffiti:

*የወያኔ ህልም ታሪክ ማበላሸት እና ሀገር ማፍረስ የባንዳነት ሚና መጫወት ወያኔ ጁንታ ቡድን በጣም ባለፈው 2011 ዓመት ምህረት በወጣው ሃገር ከዳተኝነት ትግራይን ወክለው 0 በሚባል የማህይሞዎች ደረጃ ከሞትኩ ሰርዶ አይብቀል የሚል የዘመናችን ድንጋይ አህያ ነው ተ\*\*ዳ ወያኔ።*

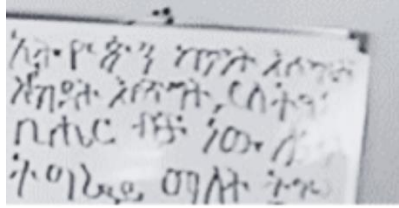
*The dreams of Woyane is destroying history, destruction of country and acting the role of bandits. In the last 2011 (Ethiopian Calendar), Woyane Junta group representing Tigray won 0 award of the ignorants for being traitors. They practiced there is no need for the grass to grow after my passing away [Amharic proverb]. They are stones, donkeys, fu\*\* Woyane.*



**Figure 4.12. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Bandit**  
(Captured on 28 December 2020)

Through the military and political leadership, the portrayal to Ethiopian audiences of Tigrayans as bandits whose aim was to destroy the country was used to mobilise Ethiopians to join the ENDF. These messages were consumed by the soldiers as evidenced in the graffiti writings. In the graffiti, the soldiers explicitly framed ethnic Tigrayans as traitors, who sold Ethiopia for other benefits.

<sup>21</sup> በመከላከያ ውስጥ የነበሩ የትግርኛ ተናጋሪ አመራሮች በነበሩበት ሰአት እኩ ህዝብ ላይ እየተተኮሰ ነበረ። ያኔ ህዝብ ላይ ይተኮስ ነበር። አሁን ደግሞ ህዝቡ ከሰራዊቱ ጋር ሆኖ እነዚህ ኢትዮጵያን ለመበተን በሚፈልጉበት ሰአት በነቁስ ተሰልፎ ነው ያለው። ስለዚህ ይሄ ትልቅ አቅም ነው። (Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, 7 September 2021, Addis Walta-AW, 2021, 33:17–33:37)



**Figure 4.13. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Betrayers**  
(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The graffiti in Figure 4.13 reads:

*ኢትዮጵያን ከጥንት እስካሁን ለከደት እየሸጣት ያለ ትግሬ ብሔር ብቻ ነው። ለምን?*

*The only traitor ethnic group that is selling Ethiopia for betrayal is Tigrayan. Why?*

The hate speech campaign was supported by celebrities and well-known personalities whose views matter when it comes to influencing public opinion. The representation of Tigrayans as traitors and enemies was reinforced by popular prominent artists from the country’s film industry. Among them, artist Chirotaw Kelkay said:

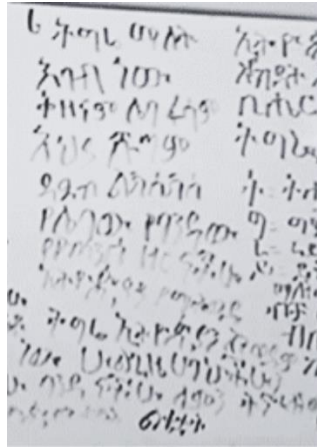
*How these could be our people? It is amazing. How could we feel sympathy for them? Should we wait until they come and slaughter us.* (Artist Chirotaw Kelkay’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:23–4:33)<sup>22</sup>

He advanced the claim that Tigrayans are not Ethiopians. Artist Abrar Abdo said:

*They capture video and show the world that Ethiopian soldiers gunned them down reversing the truth. They do this all the time. How could we feel sympathy for these? How could we be able to think they are Ethiopians? This discourse that they still are our people, or something like that, doesn’t work. They are not.* (Artist Abrar Abdo’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:34–4:48)<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> እንዴት ነው ታዲያ እነዚህ ወገኖቻችን ሊሆኑ የሚችሉት እኛ በጣም የሚደንቅ እኩ ነገር ነው እንዴት ነው እኛ ለነሱ አዝነን የምንጠብቀው እዚህ መጥተው እስኪያርዱን (Artist Chirotaw Kelkay’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 4:23–4:33).

<sup>23</sup> ያንን ደግሞ በፊልም አንስተው ለአለም የኢትዮጵያ ወታደር እንደዚህ ነው የሚረሸነው ብለው በተቃራኒው ገልብጠው ስንት ግፍ ነው የሚሰራው ለነኚህ አንዴት ነው የምናዝነው ለነኚህ እንዴት ነው ኢትዮጵያዊ ናቸው አሁንም ምናምን ወገኖቻችን በፍፁም አይሰራም አይደሉም (Artist Abrar Abdo’s speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television 4:34–4:48).



**Figure 4.14. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Snakes**

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

In this graffiti, Tigrayans are framed as snakes. The graffiti reads:

*ትግሬ ማለት እባብ ነፈ ቅዝናም ሌባ ፈሳም አህያ ሹጣም ደደብ ልክስክስ የሌባው የባንዳው የዮሃንስ ዘር ናችሁ ኢትዮጵያን የማትወዱ ትግሬ ኢትዮጵያን አትወዱም።*

*Tigrayan is a snake. It is coward, thief, fart, donkey, stupid. It is because you are the tribes of the bandit Yohannes that you don't like Ethiopia. Tigrayans don't like Ethiopia.*

A snake in the Ethiopian context is understood as someone who needs to be killed by whatever means before it suddenly bites you with its poison. Thus, the graffiti portrayed ethnic Tigrayans as inhuman, snakes, and killing them is considered self-defence. This was first said by the Daniel Kibret, Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, who described Tigrayans as monsters, devils, and snakes (Tebta Mar, 2019).<sup>24</sup>

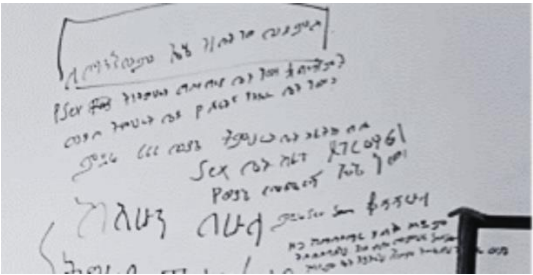
Another dimension of demonising ethnic Tigrayans is by associating culturally sensitive words with Tigrayans. Comparable to the representation of Tigrayans as 'homosexuals' in the Yefitih Sekoka (The Agony of Injustice) documentary (Fana Television, 2018a,

<sup>24</sup> The original words in Amharic by the Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret, are **ጭራቅ** (monsters), **አጋንንት** (devils) and **እባብ** (snake) (Tebta Mar, 2019).

translation by authors), the following graffiti portray Tigrayans as the devil. The graffiti is an excerpt from Emperor Yohannes School, stating that Tigrayans are followers of the Devil's code 666, which is culturally determined as immoral among Ethiopians. It reads:

ለማንኛውም እሄ ትምህርት ቤት ነው። ያፍጽም ትምህርት ማስተማር የሽፍትና የአዳር ቤት ነው። ምድረ 666 ወያኔ ትምህርት ቤት ከፈትኩ ብሎ ያፍጽም ቤት ከፈተ ይገርማል። የወያኔ መጨረሻ እሄ ነው ምድረ ያፍጽም ቆሻሻ ሁላዊ ዜጋዎችን ተማር ይልቅ ኮንዶም ትሰበስባለህ አንተን ብሎ መምህር ያፍጽም ኮንዶም ፊት አያትህ አንተም ትጠቀማለህ ወያኔ።

*Anyways, is this a school? This is rather a sex education school where people spend the night. This is the land of 666, [this is a symbol that stands for the condemned Satanism in the Ethiopian context], Woyane opened a sexual education, assuming it as a school. This is Woyane's dead end. This garbage is where you collect condoms instead of schooling citizens. How on earth can you be considered a teacher. You and your grandfather are used to condoms, Woyane.*



**Figure 4.15. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Devils**  
(Captured on 17 April 2021)

According to Benesch (2014), incitement speech often references the target groups as pests, vermin, insects, or animals, as such dehumanisation tends to make killing seem acceptable.

***Incitement towards the elimination of the group***

During the times of political turmoil, the diaspora-based medium, Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) used an ethnically motivated framing to instigate Ethiopians standing together against the TPLF/EPRDF rule in general and Tigrayans in particular. ESAT called for action against Tigrayans in a broadcast by journalist Mesay Mekonen on 6 August 2016, referring to Tigrayan people as “(deformed) fish” that should be removed:

*This delinquency plan is 5 million people [Tigrayans] to 95 million people [all other Ethiopians]. So, the one and the only way of exterminating the deformed fish from the sea is through dispelling the sea. Thus, without doubt, we call for all to begin taking our measures wherever we are. (Mesay Mekonen, disseminated by ESAT on 6 August 2016, documented by Tghat, 2021, translation by authors)<sup>25</sup>*

The graffiti depicted in Figure 4.16, found in Emperor Yohannes School, reads:

*ኢትዮጵያን ከጥንት አስካሁን ለኪዳት እየሸጣት ያለ ትግሬ ብሔር ብቻ ነዉ ለምን?*

*ትግራይ ማለት*

*ት=ትኩላን ማለት ነዉ*

*ግ=ግንድ አንሳ*

*ራ= ራይጥ አይጠመትጥ*

*ይ= ይቅዘን ቅዘናም ፈሳም ማለት ነዉ*

*ወያኔ ህወሀት ብቻ ሳይሆን ትግሬ የሚባል ብሔር ከኢትዮጵያና ከምድረገጽ መጥፋት አለበት ከሃዲ ሀገር የለውም።*

*The only ethnic group that is selling Ethiopia for betrayal is Tigrayan. Why?*

*Tigray means*

*T=Bedbug*

*G=Stem stealer*

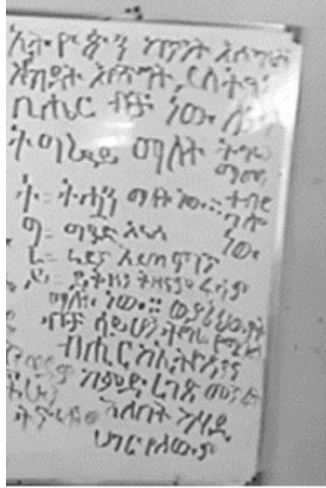
*R= Rats and rodents*

*Y= Full of grief and cowardly*

*Not only Woyane TPLF but the ethnic group named Tigrayan must be eradicated from Ethiopia and the earth. Traitors don't have a country.*

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<sup>25</sup> The original Amharic version of ESAT's call to Ethiopians is as follows: “ይህ የጥፋት እቅድ የታቀደው ከ5 ሚልዮን ህዝብ ለ95 ሚልዮን ህዝብ ነው። ስለዚህ የተበላሸን አሳ ከባህር ማስወገጃ መንገዱ አንዱ ነው የባህሩ ወሃ ማስወገድ። ስለዚህ ሳናመነታ ሁላችንም በየለንበት እርምጃችንን እንድንጀምር ጥሪ እናስተላልፋለን።”



**Figure 4.16. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Elimination**  
(Captured on 28 December 2020)

This graffiti indicates the eradication of ethnic Tigrayans as a solution for Ethiopians to protect themselves from external threats. The soldiers also portrayed Tigrayans as bedbugs, stem stealers, rats and rodents whose mass killing and suffering is irrelevant and insignificant as they are not human beings.

Members of the Amhara Fano were also among the perpetrators of the incitement to violence. A member of the Amhara Fano leadership Mesafint Tesfu said:

*If we are allowed, we urge that as they are defiant, Tigray is too small for us. We will clutch it, [applause continues for 7 seconds]. We will bring the factories you know there. Unless anyone is able to bring it for us, we will by ourselves [acclaim continues for 8 seconds].* (Mesafint Tesfu on 6 December 2018, Documented in Ab sha Tube, 2020, translation by authors)

A member of the Amhara Fano group also stated that the leaders who incite violence had support on the ground, already a year before the breakout of the Tigray war. A member of the Amhara Fano said:

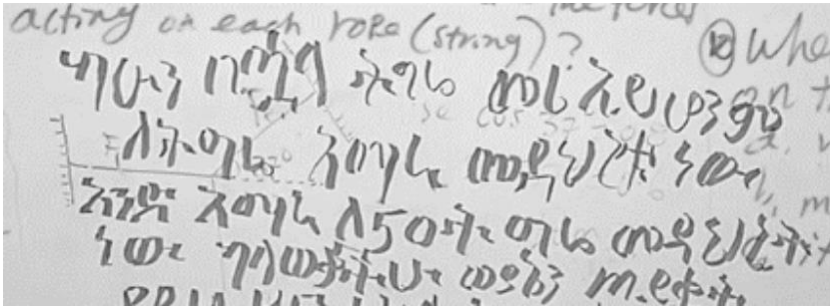
*Instead of dying for nothing, it is worthy to die killing one Tigrayan. Maybe the population of Tigray is 6 million while the population of Amhara is around 30 million. Perhaps if we garrison 6 million people to fight only Tigray, the remaining people will be liberated.* (A member of Amhara Fano, 16 October 2019,

ዲጂታል አማራ ፋኖ, documented by Gebrekristos, 2020, translation by authors)

A piece of graffiti in the Emperor Yohannes school reads:

ካሁን በኋላ ትግሬ መሪ አይሆንም ለትግሬ አማራ መዳህኒቱ ነፈ አንድ አማራ 150 ትግሬ መዳህኒቱ ነፈ ካላወቃችሁ ወያኔን ጠይቁት

*Forever from now onwards, Tigrayan would never be a leader again. It is Amhara who knows how to handle Tigrayans. One Amharan will suffice to deal with 50 Tigrayans. You can ask Woyane's testimony, if you are not aware of it.*



**Figure 4.17. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigrayan would never be a leader**

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

This graffiti reinforces the incitement calls by the Amhara Fano members discussed above. This may indicate that the incitement to violence is copied by the soldiers.

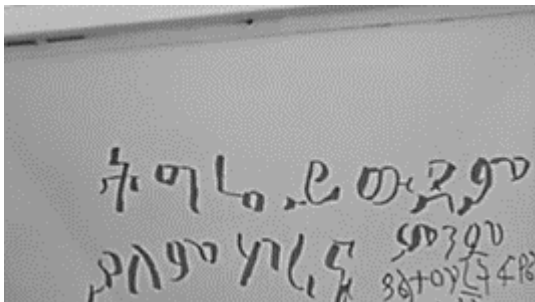
The graffiti writing in the Emperor Yohannes School showed similar utterances encouraging extermination. The graffiti reads:

ትግሬ ይውደም ያለም ኮሮና።

It can be translated as:

*Destroy Tigrayan the Corona [virus] of the world.*





**Figure 4.18. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigranayns as Corona Virus**

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The dehumanisation campaigns against Tigrayans extended from the portrayal of Tigrayans as a threat to national unity and framing Tigrayans as a threat to the world.

The authoritative national Ethiopian Press Agency (EPA) stated that a solution for the stability of the Horn of Africa would be realised following the termination of TPLF. The report said:

*The noticeable symbolic change in the landscape is the irrevocable termination of TPLF, a prominent political and military power that had been destabilising and creating havoc in the nation's politics and the politics of the horn as well. (Solomon, 2020)*

This was stated in a context in which the demarcations between TPLF and the Tigrayan people was increasingly blurred. Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, said on 12 November 2020:

*These people are the devils who escaped from hell; they shall not live impersonated on the Earth. We shall not allow them to live like human beings. We must turn them back to hell. (EBC, 2020a, 00:42:23-00:42:40, translation by authors)*

Referring to the people of Tigray, on 5 September 2021, the President of the Amhara Regional State, Agegnehu Teshagar, said:

*These people [Tigrayans] are enemies to the people of Ethiopia. These people are enemies of Afar, enemies of Gambella, and enemies of Somali. (Yabele Media, 2021, translation by authors)*

A piece of graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School reads:

አሁን የቀረን ትግሬን ማጥፋት ነው።

This can be translated as:

*Now the remaining task we have is to eradicate Tigrayans.*



**Figure 4.19. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Eradicate Tigrayans**

(Captured on 27 December 2020)

The similarities in the speeches and graffiti writings are striking. They may indicate that the elimination of the Tigrayans as an out-group was progressively seen as an acceptable solution to maintain Ethiopian unity. On 18 September 2021, Daniel Kibret, Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, who has a background as a deacon in the Orthodox Church, said:

*As you know, after the fall of Satan, there was nothing like Satan that was created... Satan was the last of his kind. And they (the TPLF) must also remain the last of their kind. There should be no land in this country that can sustain this kind of weed. (Daniel Kibret, 18 September 2021 disseminated by Fana Television, documented by AFP, 2021)*

Speaking to a televised gathering, Daniel Kibret added:

*We must exterminate them not only from their conformation but they must be erased from public memory, from public knowledge, and from the historical archive in a way that a person like these people cannot be created again in this country.* (Daniel Kibret, 18 September 2021 disseminated by Fana Television, documented by Galama Dhugaa, 2021, translation by authors)<sup>26</sup>

Religious leaders were among the proponents of the mainstreamed incitement of the extermination of Tigrayans. An Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest was quoted as saying:

*All of them [Tigrayans], both intellectuals and ordinary people are mad. So if a person is mad, before a hyena eats you, you better eat it and be blessed. The government called for a ceasefire for the sake of reconciliation assuming the criminals would surrender; however, since they [the Tigrayans] are mad to accept the reality, we priests have to baptise them with fire. If they refuse water they have to be baptised with fire.* (Theodros, 2022)

Another religious leader of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church said:

*This Woyane must be buried. It is anti-Ethiopia; it is anti-Orthodox; it is anti-Muslim; it is anti-protestant.* (Religious leader's speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 6:49–6:56)<sup>27</sup>

The graffiti found in the Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Mekelle says:

ስማቸው ገ/እ/ሐር ስራቸው ጸረ እ/ሐር።

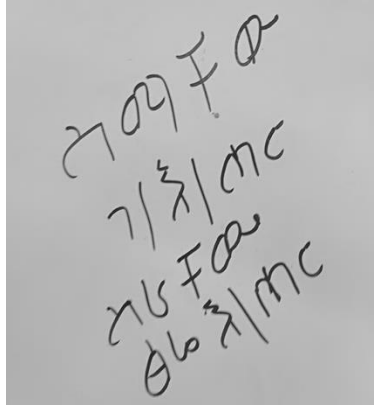
Translated as:

*Their name is G/her [that means God's servant] while their action is against God.*

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<sup>26</sup> Original text, Daniel Kibret: “እንደነሱ አይነት ሰው ዳግም እንዳይፈጠር እዚች አገር ላይ እንዳይታሰብ ከመዋቅራዊ ቦታቸው ብቻ አይደለም ማስወገድ ያለብን ከሰው ህሊና ከሰው ልቦና ውስጥ ከታሪክ መዝገብ ውስጥ ነው ተፍቆ መጥፋት ያለባቸው።” (Galama Dhugaa, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> ይህን ወያኔ መቀበር አለበት። ጸረ-ኢትዮጵያ ነው፤ ጸረ-ኦርቶዶክስ ነው፤ ጸረ-ሙስሊም ነው፤ ጸረ-ፕሮቴስታንት ነው (Religious leader's speech documented by Dimtsi Woyane Television, 2022, 6:49–6:56).



**Figure 4.20. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: Tigrayans as anti-religion**

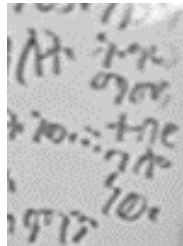
(Captured on 24 April 2024)

In a strongly religiously defined social system, as in Ethiopia, labelling someone as anti-religion brings moral shame and stigma from the religious population. It can cause Tigrayans to be isolated from religious practices and social life with others. Tigrayans were also portrayed as untrustworthy people whose death is the way to address the insecurity of others. The graffiti in Figure 4.21 reads:

**ትግሬን ማመን ቀብሮ ገሎ ነው።**

It can be translated as:

*To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them.*



**Figure 4.21. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them**

(Captured on 17 April 2021)

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Bahir Dar Synod Chief Executive, Melakeselam Efreem Mulualem, and Amhara Regional Muslim Higher Council President, Shek Seid Mohammed, described Tigrayans as ‘anti-religion’, as part of the call to Ethiopians to join the law and order enforcement operation by the government (Amhara Media Corporation, 2021).

Economic leaders operated as actors in the incitement of violence. In encouraging mobilised military trainees in Amhara, Werku Aytenew, the well-known exporter of sesame and producer of oil using crop inputs from Western Tigray, referred to Tigrayans saying:

*These are evils. Not only does killing them and seeing them dying give pleasure, but it is also a pleasure to roast and eat them like a goat.* (Worku Aytenew’s speech as documented by ዓለም Tube, 2021)<sup>28</sup>

There are indicators that part of the public supported the hostile narratives of the government and leadership by participating in mobilisation conferences, anti-Woyane rallies, and music shows which were widely disseminated through media. These events disseminated the narrative that Tigrayans were a threat to national unity and security (EBC, 2020b, 0:39:35).

A graffiti from the Martyrs’ Memorial Museum reads:

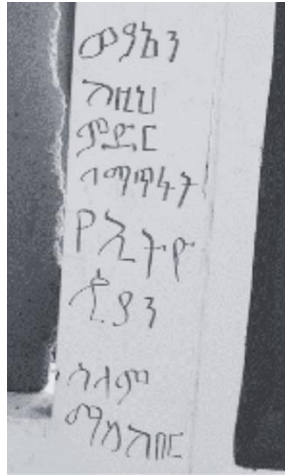
**ወያኔን ከዚህ ምድር በማጥፋት የኢትዮጵያን ሰላም ማስከበር**

This is translated as:

*Through eradicating Woyane from the Earth, we will maintain Ethiopian peace.*

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<sup>28</sup>አንደኛዎቹ አይነት እርኩሶች እነዚህ ገድለህ መሞት አይደለም እንደ ፍየል ጠብሰህ በልተህ መሞት ራሱ በጣም ትልቅ ነገር ነው (ዓለም Tube, 2021)።

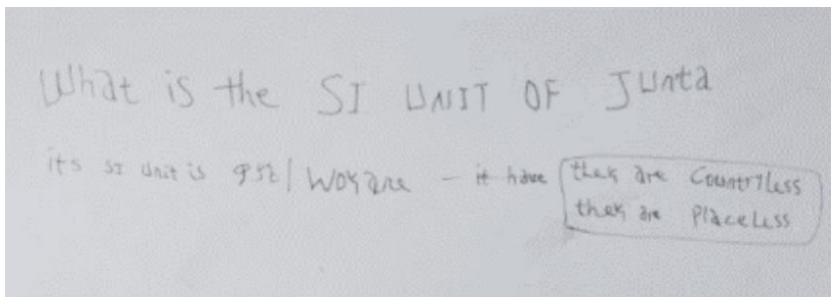


**Figure 4.22. Graffiti from Martyrs' Memorial Museum: Eradicating Woyane from the Earth**  
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

This graffiti framed Woyane and Tigrayans as responsible for eroding Ethiopians' stability, thus, eradicating them is the only solution for Ethiopia to regain its stability.

Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School also reiterated that Tigrayans are non-Ethiopian. It refers to the out-group of Tigrayans as non-Ethiopian enemies, country-less and placeless:

*What is the SI unit of Junta[?] Its SI unit is Woyane-it have. They are countryless, they are placeless.*



**Figure 4.23. Graffiti from Emperor Yohannes School: Tigrayans as countryless**  
(Captured on 15 April 2021)

Consistent with the hate speech, dehumanisation, and incitement to violence campaigns, the Ethiopian government revealed its intention to annihilate Tigrayans when speaking to the European Union's Special Envoy and Finland's Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto. In speaking about the meeting he said:

*When I met the Ethiopian leadership in February they really used this kind of language, that they are going to destroy the Tigrayans, they are going to wipe out the Tigrayans for 100 years, and so forth.* (Dyer, 2021; Anna, 2021)

These annihilation plans of the leaders were reflected by the soldiers in the graffiti and translated into action.

## **Discussion**

This chapter explored how media hate speech and incitement campaigns are related to the mobilisation of soldiers in the Tigray war, using the criteria of Waller (2002) on negative stereotyping, the narrative of the targeted group forming a threat, and incitement towards the elimination of the group. In this chapter, excerpts from narratives from the top leadership of Ethiopia and Eritrea were compared with texts found in graffiti left by soldiers deployed in Tigray. In this study leaders from the top were identified as political leaders at national or regional level, religious leaders, economic leaders and celebrities. The study looked at the parallels in their narratives with those of the foot soldiers deployed in Tigray.

On stereotyping, we found that leaders used terms such as: 'daytime hyena', 'ghosts', 'homosexual', 'devils'; 'monster', 'snake', 'ogre', and 'mouse'. In the graffiti of the soldiers, these and similar terms were also found: 'daytime hyena', 'hyena', 'bedbug', 'tsila', 'Satan', 'snake', 'donkey', 'rat', 'rodent', and 'mouse'.

Characterising the Tigrayans as a threat, the narratives disseminated by the leadership contained descriptive elements and qualifications such as: 'weed', 'cancer', 'traitors', 'corrupt', 'excruciates', 'junta', 'anti-Ethiopian', 'brutal', 'anti-religion', 'enemies', 'murderers', 'torturers', and 'people who bite their mother's breast that feeds them'. Among the graffiti the soldiers who were deployed in Tigray left, the following terms were found: 'cannibals', 'thief', 'looters', 'corona',

‘betrayers’, ‘bandit’, ‘junta’, ‘poor’, ‘hopeless’, ‘coward’, ‘fart’, ‘stupid’, ‘stem stealers’, and ‘renegade who bites their mother’s breast’.

Advocacy for a solution to eliminating the threat ranges from (quotas) and discrimination (legal segregation) imposed on the target, to expulsion (ethnic cleansing), and in extreme hate discourse refers to killing, extermination, and annihilation. In the narratives disseminated by the leadership of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the following examples of public reasoning was found:

- Tigray is too small for us; we will clutch it.
- If we garrison 6 million people to fight only Tigray the remaining people will be liberated.
- Irrevocable termination of TPLF
- These people are the devils who escaped from hell; they shall not live impersonated on Earth; we shall not allow them to live like human beings. We must turn them back to hell.
- These people [Tigrayans] are enemies to the people of Ethiopia; these people are enemies to Afar, enemies to Gambella, enemies to Somali.
- We must exterminate them, not only from their conformation, but they must be erased from public memory, from public knowledge, from the historical archive in a way that a person like these people cannot be created again in this country.
- Before a hyena eats you, you better eat it and be blessed.
- These are evils. Not only killing them and dying, it is a pleasure to roast and eat them like a goat.
- Wipe out Tigrayans for 100 years.

In the graffiti left by soldiers deployed in Tigray the following reasoning was found:

- Not only Woyane, TPLF, but the ethnic group named Tigrayan must be eradicated from Ethiopia and the Earth. Traitors don’t have a country.
- Forever from now onwards, Tigrayan would never be a leader again.
- One Amharan will suffice to deal with 50 Tigrayans.
- Destroy Tigrayan the Corona [virus] of the world.



- Now the remaining task we have is to eradicate Tigrayans.
- Their name is G/her [God's servant], while their actions are against God.
- By eradicating Woyane from the Earth, we will maintain Ethiopian peace.
- They are countryless, they are placeless.
- To trust Tigrayan is after you killed and buried them.

The narratives themselves are performative, as is the writing of the graffiti. The war in Tigray resulted in acts of the destruction of health facilities; the destruction of the means of production; a siege, humanitarian blockade, and complete communication blackout; sexual violence; massacres and extrajudicial killings; and drone attacks and bombardments on civilians (Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024a; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024b; Kahsay B., 2024a; Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024; Kahsay B., 2024b; Kahsay Z., 2024; Medhanyie *et al.*, 2024; Taye *et al.*, 2024; Tefera, 2024).

Direct and public incitement to genocide is among the crimes that are prohibited in United Nations (UN) Resolution 260 Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Article 3 explains that the following acts shall be punishable: (a) Genocide; (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide; (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide; (d) Attempt to commit genocide; (e) Complicity in genocide (UN, 1948).

Words can lead to genocide (Wilson, 2015). The negative stereotyping of Tigrayans, combined with the narratives that they pose a collective threat, as well as the incitement to exterminate Tigrayans, can be qualified as dangerous hate speech (Waller, 2002). This ethnographic research shows that this hate speech prevented the soldiers from seeing Tigrayans as being human. Further research is needed to legally determine whether this speech reflects an intent of genocide.

## Conclusion

This research analysed the content of speeches made by Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders alongside text written by foot soldiers deployed in the Tigray war to explore negative stereotyping, the creation of threats, and incitement to genocide. A collection of graffiti found in

locations used as barracks by Ethiopian soldiers in Tigray was examined. The themes in this graffiti were compared with those expressed by political, religious, and economic leaders, as well as by celebrities and artists. The findings reveal that the soldiers employed similar themes to those propagated by leaders and celebrities in public media, depicting Tigrayans as a threat to the nation.

Hate speech and incitement by the leadership were reflected in graffiti by the foot soldiers deployed in Tigray. This included the use of derogatory terms like ‘cannibal’, ‘daytime hyena’, ‘rat’, ‘bedbug’, ‘traitor’, ‘thief’, ‘ghosts’, ‘homosexual’, ‘monster’, ‘snake’, and ‘devil’ in reference to Tigrayans. These messages were spread by leaders, and these themes were reflected in the graffiti soldiers deployed in Tigray on the walls of their barracks. Alarming, some of these statements referred to the extermination of the Tigrayan people as a ‘solution’ to the country’s situation.

This research suggests that expressions of leaders, media campaigns and graffiti converged in similar derogatory language and themes, which constituted overt and public incitements. The soldiers, influenced by these narratives, echoed messages of annihilation through graffiti in public spaces in Tigray. The dehumanising portrayals of Tigrayans escalated from generalised accusations of human rights abuses to overt calls for the eradication of the people of Tigray, painting them as subhuman beings unworthy of existing.

This ethnographic study concludes that negative stereotyping and framing of Tigrayans as a ‘threat’ led to language that directly incited the extermination of the Tigrayan people. Considering the performative nature of speech, the study recommends further investigation into genocidal intent.

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## **Authors' contributions**

This work has been carried out as part of a PhD study by Daniel Tesfa, who put together the first version of this chapter. Daniel Tesfa provided the theoretical considerations for this chapter. Daniel Tesfa collected primary data for this chapter and analysed them. Daniel Tesfa also wrote the section on the research approach. Daniel Tesfa produced an extensive database with all expressions from different communicators. He verified the origin and carried out the translation. Mirjam Van Reisen provided guidance on the research at all stages, and reviewed the raw data, reviewed the data analysis and contributed to the writing and editing of all versions of the article.

## **Ethical considerations**

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled "Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting".

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.

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### “We Pray to God for Peace to be Restored”: The Systematic Destruction of Cultural and Religious Heritage in Tigray

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ሱር ሰብ ዘመድ፤ ሱር እምነ ሓመድ።

*The root of a man is the kin, the root for stone is the soil.*

#### Abstract

The Tigray war saw deliberate and systematic destruction of cultural and religious heritage, exacerbated by an Internet blackout and restricted access to independent journalists, which hindered accountability. Notable events, such as the devastation at Al-Njehasi mosque and the St Mary of Zion Orthodox Church, were initially denied by the government of Ethiopia, along with the involvement of Eritrean forces. The destruction targeted Tigray's heritage to undermine its identity and cultural significance. This study examined what was known of the nature of the destruction of cultural and religious heritage in Tigray at the beginning of the 2020–2022 war, and what measures were taken to protect this heritage from being destroyed. Five themes emerged: the deliberate nature of the destruction, the massive scale, the significant, yet unacknowledged, involvement of Eritrea, the desecration of religious sites, and the resulting deep community grief. The study found that the conflict aimed to reshape regional power dynamics and erode Tigray's identity as a cultural and religious hub, reflecting a hidden agenda of dominance and control. This systematic attack on heritage was perceived as an assault on Tigray's historical and cultural status, threatening its role as a custodian of traditional heritage in Ethiopia and beyond.

**Key words:** heritage, Debre Damo, Tigray war, Ethiopia, Eritrea, identity

## Introduction

Cultural heritage can become an element of hard power when politics and culture are interlinked, especially during armed conflict (Viejo-Rose & Sørensen, 2015). Conflict goals are associated with the warring parties' aims for a new political and societal system after the war. It is a hidden goal of a certain project planned to be achieved by the attacking party. While there could be several motives for the destruction of historic sites, the major causes are aligned with military, economic, and symbolic reasons, having cross-linkages with one-another. This variety of reasons and motives may occur as a mixed spectacle (Luigi, 2017).

As well as military reasons, the warring parties involved in armed struggle may also gain economic advantage from the looting of cultural heritage (Rothfield, 2008). Incentives for such conduct have increased in recent years (Brodie, 2015). Cultural property is stolen for the sake of selling the looted items to fund the war (Brosché *et al.*, 2016).

Cultural property is also attacked in times of conflict, as it symbolises identity and collective memory (Brosché *et al.*, 2016). The attack on cultural property is neither the end purpose of the conflict nor a narrow military-strategic benefit, but may be employed when the groups involved in the conflict want to indicate their ability and commitment to the conflict (Brosché *et al.*, 2016). Brosché, Legnér, Kreutz and Ijla (2016) provide a typology that refers to (i) conflict goals, (ii) military-strategic attacks, (iii) signalling attacks, and (iv) economic incentives to warring parties. These are not mutually exclusive.

While these theoretical considerations help shine light on the problem, there is, currently, limited empirical data available on this subject nor is there a consistent body of research. The explanation of why heritage is attacked in conflict requires validation with more empirical contributions (Ristoldo, 2018).

Tigray, in Ethiopia, is the centre of civilisation and host to the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Therefore, the region is a rich centre of civilisation and a home for religious and

secular heritages and antiquities. At the outbreak of the Tigray war, serious destruction of cultural and historical heritage was reported. This damage was perpetrated with a total disrespect for the heritage sites and their purposes (Shaw, 2021). In addition to this destruction, brutal acts of violence and killing of religious people have been reported in Tigray (Shaw, 2021; Hagos, 2021).

Heritage is the soul of people's identity, culture, language, and religion. It is inherited from one generation to the next. Heritage includes the legends and culture, as well as practices, embedded in places and archaeological sites. Heritage is the manifestations of a society; it connects the past to the future. Tigray's heritage is diverse and meanders across prehistoric, historic, and contemporary cultural properties.

The foundations of the civilisation of Aksum date back to pre-Aksum centres during the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Dumat and Yeha. There were great successes in the development of these civilisations. The Aksum empire had its own coins and trading connections with the equivalent empires of four great kingdoms. Aksum used Geez and local languages in the kingdom. Aksum influenced developments in architecture, religion, material culture, and the evolution of Ethiopia (Wenig, 2015). There were additional centres: "Meqaber Ga'ewa, erected in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE for the Sabaeen moon god Almaqah" (Wolf *et al.*, 2015, p. 10). The site was ruined many times, and new temples were built over it, at least four times between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE. Tigray's treasures include the pre-Axumite inscriptions at Dumat and the Aksumite Empire civilisation centres that extend through the region on the old routes from Aksum, Atsibi, Quiha, Mariam Nazre, Mifesas Baheri, Sessela, Midere Agew, and Lalibella. The sites geographically cross Ethiopia and Eritrea, with part of the heritage located in Tigray.

The cultural and historical heritage in Tigray is a symbol of local pride and is recognised for its national and international significance. Tigray holds some of the oldest heritage of civilisation in Africa and the world. Its destruction during the Tigray war raises many questions. As Tigray was under siege with a communication blockade from November 2020 onwards (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024), what was

reported during this time on the heritage destruction? What was known at the time, of the actors involved in its destruction? How was this heritage protected from being damaged and destroyed?

To explore these questions this study looks at what was known of the impact of the fighting on the heritage in Tigray at the time, early in the war. Focusing on the information available in late 2020 and the first months of 2021, this study sets out to answer the following question: *What was known of the nature of the destruction of cultural and religious heritage in Tigray at the beginning of the 2020–2022 war, and what measures were taken to protect this heritage from being destroyed?*

### **Cultural destruction and nation building: A framework**

A political community relies on imagination and, therefore, cultural heritage is critical political capital, which can also be contested (Anderson, 2006). Bogdandy *et al.* (2005) find that ‘state-building’ is the process of establishing, re-establishing, and bolstering a public framework that can provide public goods in a specific region. This includes the cultural and religious heritage of a certain place.

Perhaps logically, memory fits into the array of processes that reproduce national solidarity and identity in the process of imagining of a community that belongs together (Bevan, 2006; Calhoun, 2016). A nation must share common memories, while simultaneously deciding what to leave out (Breuilly, 2016). National memory is created by deliberate efforts devoted to channel and (re-)create history and for memorialisation, which also provides more specific recollections within a national context (Calhoun, 2016). According to Anderson (2006), a state will usually employ a methodical approach to nation-building to the point of employing the national media and other governmental institutions in place of real, popular nationalist interest. These systemic strategies are intended to generate or support an existing national consensus of who belongs to it and of what it is constituted by.

As a result, nations are frequently founded on shared narratives about their history and common goals (Renan, 1882; referenced in Esposito *et al.*, 2023). Most of the time, these narratives employ a common rhetoric about the in-group and the out-group, or the ‘other’, which

is seen as a shared threat or enemy that the country must defeat in order to maintain peace and unity (Esposito *et al.*, 2023). This perceived shared threat may occasionally be related to an internal enemy, which is frequently a minority faction within the nation (Esposito *et al.*, 2023). The connection between a direct attack on people and their cultural identity may be part of an overall attempt by the attacker to obliterate historical traces of the group under attack (Bevan, 2006).

The literature on deliberate attacks against cultural property during armed conflicts as a weapon of war is still in its infancy (Ristoldo, 2018). The question of why it occurs needs further investigation (Viejo-Rose & Stig Sørensen, 2015). The creation of a common threat to promoting unity is a mechanism that has been studied by several academic fields and subjected to social network analysis. The psychological mechanism behind the rhetoric of the common enemy, can be loosely summarised in the motto: “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” (Esposito *et al.*, 2023). When there is no agreement on the cultural traditions, practices, symbols, rituals, and historical experience, violence and civil war may result (Bogdandy *et al.*, 2005). This means that the fate of the targeted minority groups could be dramatically affected by the rhetorical devices used against it (Esposito *et al.*, 2023). In these situations, the cultural heritage of one people becomes a target for opposing groups that aim to advance their system of values and ideas at the expense of the ‘other’ group (Nováček *et al.*, 2017). In this situation, heritage becomes a target; gaining control over the heritage advances the political, military, social and psychological objectives of the warring parties.

## **Research methodology**

### ***Approach and data collection tools***

At the beginning of the Tigray war, the authors received a long list of bigger and smaller cultural and religious heritage sites that were attacked. The list, compiled by a local heritage protector, suggested that the destruction of heritage was targeted as a goal in and of itself, and not the collateral damage that can be expected during a war. To investigate this further, the researchers applied an exploratory research design.

The study has three parts. The first part investigates what was reported as a first warning of events during the war. The data consists of entries recorded about the attacks on cultural and religious heritage in the Tigray war in the Situation Reports of the Horn published by the European External Programme with Africa (EEPA).<sup>29</sup>

The data from the Situation Reports were assembled in a spreadsheet and purposeful, open coding was carried out to investigate the entries made in these records about attacks on cultural or religious heritage. EEPA also published a webinar in June 2021 in which experts on heritage spoke about the situation of heritage destruction in the country (EEPA, 2021). The analysis of the EEPA Situation Reports includes the period November 2020 to December 2022. The analysis of all relevant entries was made in May 2023.

The second part of the study concerns an in-depth interview conducted with the head monk of the Debre Damo monastery on 15 February 2021 following reports of shelling of the monastery (EEPA, 2021). The interview was conducted in Tigrinya by a researcher from Mekelle University. This interview provides a direct testimony from the head of the monastery, shortly after the attack on the monastery, and is included as a case in this chapter. The interview was verified, recorded, translated and transcribed. As it is the only recorded interview on this important event; it is included in full as an original record.

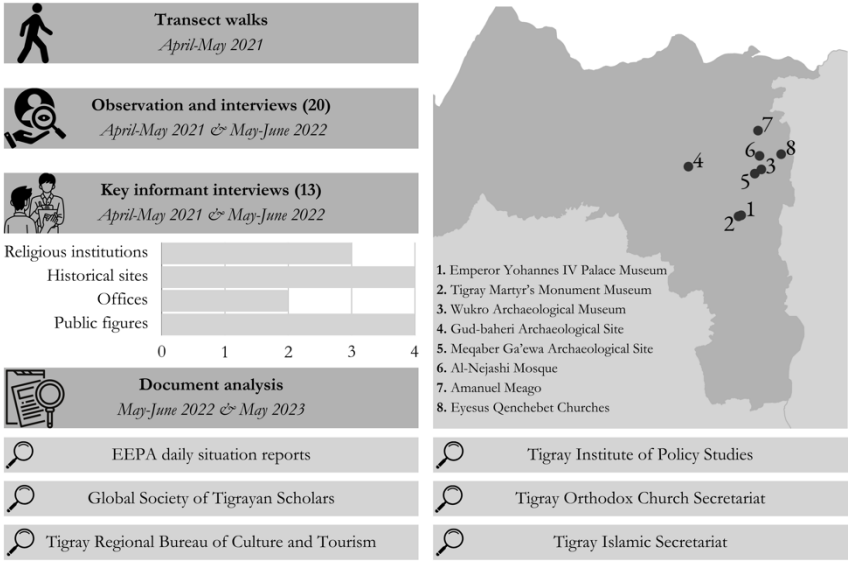
In the third part of this study, on the ground investigations were carried out, including transect walks, observations and face-to-face interviews with persons who resided at the sites. Data was collected

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<sup>29</sup> First published on 17 November 2020, the EEPA Situation Reports remained daily publications for the rest of 2020 and during much of 2021, with a focus on the Tigray war. As a basis for the reports, EEPA received information from on the ground in Tigray. This included, amongst other things, a list of heritage sites destroyed in the first part of the war. Other input included descriptions and interviews with persons who had first-hand witness reports of the attacks in places like Aksum and at Debre Damo. These reports were subsequently verified and printed in the Situation Reports. Being public, the veracity of the reports could be checked further and reported on. When information was contested, further investigation were undertaken and corrections were made on some occasions. The EEPA Situation Reports served as an early warning system.

with a semi-structured topic-list and a transect walk check lists for observations. Additional interviews were conducted with resource persons.

Observational data was collected from the areas of the Eastern and Mekelle zones. These are the Emperor Yohannes IV Palace Museum, Tigray Martyrs’ Monument Museum, Wukro Archaeological Museum, Gud-baheri and Meqaber Ga’ewa Archaeological Sites, Al Nejashi Mosque, Amanuel Meago and Eyesus Qenchebet churches. The in-depth case studies in these selected sites enabled a systematic understanding of the bulky cases and the inductive syntheses of large amounts of data (Flyvbjerg, 2006). When there is a lack of overall empirical material, it is well known “in social science, [that] a greater number of good case studies could help remedy the situation” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 242).





The participants in the study selected for interviews were identified in a purposeful manner, based on their knowledge of the sites and expertise.

**Observation and interviews:** Systematic observation of the damaged religious, archaeological, and historical sites and museums was conducted. In this regard, informal interviews were conducted with people around the damaged heritage sites. The sites visited were identified by the researchers based on preliminary assessments. Moreover, the lived experiences of the researchers throughout the war contributed to the organisation of the observed facts. Semi-structured interviews with people who had experience of the actual events surrounding the destruction of sites, buildings, and objects were conducted.

**Transect walk:** The researchers walked around the damaged cultural property sites. During the transect walks, there were informal discussions with residents in various capacities about the damage caused during the war. This mechanism contributed to a better understanding of the destruction of cultural properties and the nature of the damage.

**Key informant interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with public figures, religious leaders and experts on religious and historical institutions. The interviews were conducted in Wukro Town and Mekelle City.

**Document analysis:** Documents related to the study subject and events were accessed to complement other means of data collection. Documents related to the destruction of cultural properties already done or in process were assessed. In addition to EEPA's Situation Reports, damage assessment reports by the Global Society of Tigray Scholars and Professionals (GSTS) and Tigray Institute of Policy Studies (TIPS) were used.

Data analysis included the process of transcribing raw data, polishing, sorting, and coding of the data. Then the data was interpreted and compared.

**Table 5.1. Participants, data collections tools and timeline**

Category and participants	Data collection tools	Timeline
Observations of case study sites	Checklists, photographs, videos, and field notes	April-May 2021 May-June 2022
20 senior citizens around the case field observation sites	Transect walk and informal discussions	May-June 2022 April-May 2021
Religious institutions (3), historical sites (4), offices (2), and public figures (4) (#13)	Key informant interviews	April-May 2021 June 2022
5 case stories	Case stories	April- May, 2021
Data hubs (EEPA & GSTS)	Document analysis	June 2022 May 2023

***Triangulation, ethical considerations and data analysis***

Data was collected using multiple approaches, sources and techniques. The researchers conformed to the informed consent approach, Mekelle University Research Ethics directions, and articles 3 and 13 of the National Research Ethics Review Guideline introduced by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. In Article 3, the ethical principles section dictates “respect for persons, beneficence, and justice”, referring to the participants in the study. In the case of the importance of research ethics, Article 13 explains the responsibilities of the investigators, the host institution, sponsors, and donors (FDRE-MoST, 2014, pp. 21–22, 69–71). Therefore, the researchers filed permission letters from the respected authorities. In ethics and research integrity, Woldu (2019, p. 7) stated that information about participants in research must be removed from the final version of the research documents. This has been applied in this study.

## Findings: Summary of EEPA Situation Reports

Due to the siege and communication blockade, there was a delay in reporting. The first report on damage to a cultural site in Tigray in the EEPA Situation Reports concerns the attack on the Al-Njesahi Mosque on 17 and 18 December 2020:

*Report that Al-Njesahi Mosque of Negash (Tigray) is looted; the oldest Muslim settlement in Africa. (EEPA, 2020, SR 28)*

*Historic Al Njashi Mosque (the first mosque in Africa) was first bombed and later looted by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops. Tigrayan sources are saying that people have died trying to protect the mosque. (EEPA, 2020, SR 29)*

The historic Al-Njashi Mosque is seen as the first mosque in Africa. In 2020, the EEPA Situation Report reported the following:

- Ritual books and other artefacts from remote monasteries in Tigray were looted and transported to Eritrea (EEPA, 2020, SR 32).
- Assets from Al Njesahi Mosque, including religious manuscripts, books, and letters dating as far back as the seventh century, have been robbed (EEPA, 2020, SR 28; EEPA, 2021, SR 55).
- The Eritrean troops looted St Mary, a Catholic church in Wukro, including cars from the compound (EEPA, 2020, SR 29), and the church in Yeha, an archaeological site (EEPA, 2020, SR 42), which has been amply documented.

EEPA reports that the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and allied forces, including Eritrean military forces, looted property from religious centres and historical heritage sites and attacked these. It is noteworthy that the reports include observations of Eritrean involvement in these attacks, given that the presence of Eritrean troops was denied at that time by the Prime Minister of Ethiopia and the President of Eritrea (Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024).

It was suggested that the Ark of the Covenant, the most priceless sacred artefact of the Orthodox Church and of Christianity in general, should be temporarily moved from Aksum. The idea, however, was

perceived as the “robbery of heritage” and a cover for stealing the Ark of the Covenant.

*Report that Maryam Tsiyon Church has been attacked (local people believe with the aim to take the Ark of Covenant to Addis Ababa). Hundreds of people hiding in the Maryam Tsiyon Church were brought out and shot on the square in front. The number of people killed is reported as 750. (EEPA, 2021, SR50)*

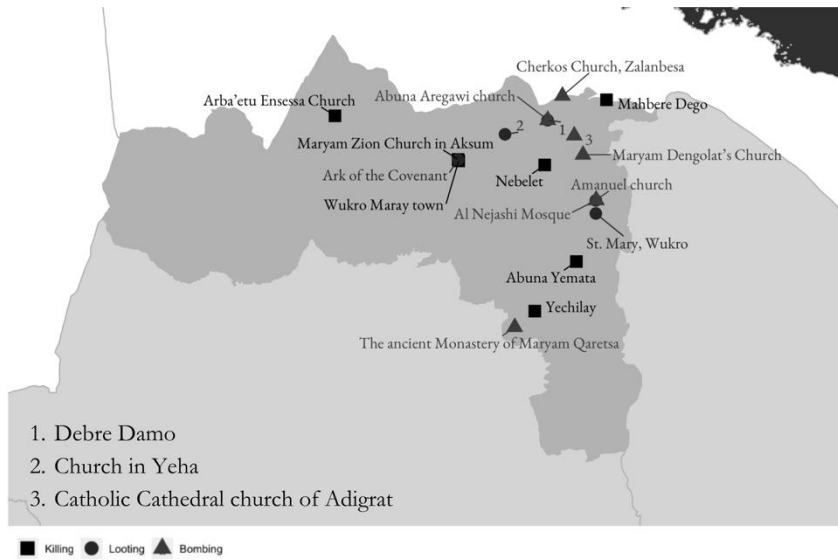
The massacre at the St Mary of Zion Church in Aksum was seen as related to people defending the Ark (EEPA, 2021, SR 66). The massacre that took place in December 2020, is reported by EEPA:

*The massacre on the Orthodox Maryam Tsion Church in Aksum in which 750 people were killed took place half December. People hiding in the church were brought out and shot in the square in front. The Maryam Tsion Church is a sacred place which holds the Ark of Covenant. A witness with experience in war zones states he “has never seen such a degree of inhumanity. (EEPA, 2021, SR 51)*

In 2021, it is reported that the ENDF-allied forces, including the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), intentionally bombed several churches and monasteries. Debre Damo, a 6<sup>th</sup> century monastery in Tigray located on a mountain with a steeply rising plateau about 1,000 by 400 m in dimension, and the ancient Monastery of Maryam Qaretsa near Samre town are cited as examples (EEPA, 2020, SR 29; EEPA, 2021, SR 55; EEPA, 2021, SR 93).

The 6<sup>th</sup> century monastery Debre Damo monastery was shelled by Eritrean troops. Eritrean soldiers climbed on to the sacred convent and stole valuable artefacts and antiquities; some structures atop the flat mountain were demolished. The shelling took place on 11 January 2021. It was justified as an attack to find Tigray regional President Debretsion and his soldiers, who were alleged to be hiding in the monastery – which was not the case. Heavy artillery was launched by the soldiers from Sero, Bezet, and a junction (EEPA, 2021, SR 55; EEPA, 2021, SR 84; EEPA, 2021, SR 92). The monastery itself was hit by more than 18 artillery shells and in total 28 shells landed in the monastery grounds, while more than 100 heavy artillery shells landed at the foot of the monastery without any casualties (EEPA, 2021, SR 92). The attack lasted for more than nine hours (EEPA, 2021, SR 92). The historical and heritage houses destroyed are those constructed in the compound of Debre Damo monastery, built as living areas for

Tigray officials when visiting the monastery and as shelters for monks. The places were inspected and searched after the bombardment of the sites. This was the case in the Debre Damo monastery (EEPA, 2021, SR 92), where all the monks' homes were individually checked by Eritrean troops, except the church.



**Figure 5.2. Map indicating where the destruction of cultural heritage took place**

Examples of destruction reported in the EEPA Situation Reports in 2021, include:

- The Al Nejashi Mosque was shelled and destroyed on December 18. It was first bombed and later looted by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops (EEPA, 2021, SR 44).
- Other places attacked include the Maryam Dengolat's Church, close to Samre, and the hilltop Amanuel Church, which was shelled 17 times on 24 November 2020 (EEPA, 2021, SR 47; EEPA, 2021, SR 77; EEPA, 2021, SR 81; EEPA, 2021, SR 108).
- The Amanuel Church was sheltering people looking for safety when the church was attacked and many were killed (EEPA, 2021, SR 47).

- The ancient Monastery of Debre Damo in Tigray was bombarded by Eritrean soldiers using heavy artillery. Debre Damo, is the name of a flat-topped mountain, or amba, and a 6th-century monastery in Tigray, Ethiopia. The mountain is a steeply rising plateau about 1000 by 400 m in dimension. (EEPA, 2021, SR 55).
- A shrine holding the remains of followers of the Prophet Muhammad in the Nejashi Mosque was damaged (EEPA, 2021, SR 55).
- Cherkos Church in Zalanbesa, a church carved during the 5th century, was bombed and one side of the Church was completely destroyed (EEPA, 2021, SR 61).
- The Catholic Cathedral Church of Adigrat in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 65) was damaged.
- In the Abuna Aregawi Church, 26 shelter houses of monks were burnt and destroyed (EEPA, 2021, SR 92).
- It was reported more than 1,200 monasteries and churches are ruined, religious treasures looted (EEPA, 2021, SR 181).
- Historical buildings that were constructed by Emperor Yohannes IV, Ras Alula Aba Nega, Ras Seyoum, and Enda Raesi were among those burnt and destroyed (EEPA, 2021, SR 92).

Other reports of civilian people killed at the heritage sites are:

- Arba'etu Ensessa Church on 29 November 2020
- In the Church at Wukro Maray town, over 300 civilians from three villages, including priests, were killed by Eritrean troops (EEPA, 2021, SR 125).
- In the district of Tanqua Abergele, Yechilay, in a village called Jijiqe on 27 April 2021, another incident was reported where civilians were massacred including deacons, priests, and visually impaired persons (EEPA, 2021, SR 139).
- In a small rural settlement on steep slopes below the 5th century stone church of Abuna Yemata, people were killed on 8 May (EEPA, 2021, SR 160).
- In Mahbere Dego, 193 young men and women were killed and thrown off cliffs (EEPA, 2021, SR 181).

- In a mosque near the town of Nebelet, a two brothers who were guardians of the mosque were killed (EEPA, 2021, SR 145).

Generally, the massacre against civilians was seen to be based on their religion and ethnicity (EEPA, 2021, SR 142). International experts warned in vain of historical vandalism and cultural cleansing and called for the protection of religious sites (EEPA, 2021, SR 59; EEPA, 2021, SR 89).

The churches in Tigray contain some of the world's rarest and oldest Christian manuscripts, and the Situation Reports of EEPA warned that the evidence is mounting that many manuscripts were taken by the occupying forces (EEPA, 2021, SR 79). The theft of such religious assets was carried out with a high degree of organisation and planning.

### **Case study: Shelling of Debre Damo Monastery**

This case study is a special testimony. It was conducted in a phone interview by a researcher. The interview was conducted with the head monk of Debre Damo, on 15 February 2021. The interview provides a clear description of what happened to Debre Damo monastery in the period of January 2021. As it was conducted shortly after the events occurred, during the period that the communication blockade was fully in place, it is a rare testimony on this important event. The interview is, therefore, presented in full. The head monk testified as follows:

*It was on January 11, 2021, Shabiya (Eritrean soldiers) shelled Debre Damo monastery. They were firing heavy artilleries from Sero, Bazet and an intersection road which goes to Feresmay town. The upper part of the monastery was hit by more than 18 heavy artilleries and in total 28 artilleries landed at the monastery. The shelling lasted for a whole day from 7:00 am in the morning till 4 pm in the afternoon. Besides, more than 100 heavy artilleries have also landed at the foot of the monastery but was without any casualties.*

*During the shelling, all monks were on a prayers program inside the church. Normally from 09 January 2021 till 15 January 2021, monks do prayers. There was no damage and nothing happened to the Abuna Aregawi Church but 26 shelter houses of monks were completely destroyed and burnt. Metal sheets and wood parts of the houses were burnt to the ground. Houses which belongs to Aste. Yohannes*

*IV., Ras Alula, Ras Seyoum and Enda Raesi are among those completely destroyed. These houses were also heritages of the monastery. 150 houses were built by Emperor Atse Yohannes IV To be used as a shelter for monks. One monk aged 67 was killed by the artillery while praying inside his house and his body parts was dispersed all over the area and even it was very difficult to collect the body parts for burial.*

*Then after the shelling, on the next day [January 12, 2021], Eritrean soldiers approached the monastery and said they want to climb and inspect the monastery. They fired three bullets to the sky to scare us (the monks) and make their request accepted as the thick leather rope used to climb was already pulled up by the monks.*

*Then the monks went down and when we ask the Eritrean soldiers why are you doing this? Why do you want to destroy the monastery? how come you bomb a monastery? This monastery was not bombed and shelled during the times of Yodit Gudit, Ahmad Gragn and even the Derg regime had many tanks and bombs but this monastery was never touched; then the Eritrean soldiers said we were informed that Debretsion and his soldiers are hiding in the monastery and that is why we were shelling the monastery for the whole day.*

*Later we told them the information they got is incorrect and then they asked us (the monks) to handover if there are arms and properties of militias kept inside the monastery and they left. The Eritrean soldiers came back on January 14, 2021, and asked to climb up to the monastery and search everything in the monastery. 6 Eritrean soldiers climbed to the monastery with the support of the monks and searched all houses of the monks. The church was the only place not searched. After all the inspection, when they knew nothing was inside, the soldiers were very sad and regretted for shelling the monastery and said we should have not bombed it.*

*After that when we asked them why are you doing (in reference to the shelling) this to us (the monks), they said you are lucky you lost only one monk but our 8 (7 Christian and 1 Muslim) soldiers were killed by snake. This information was obtained from the soldiers themselves. The soldiers did not loot (even a needle) from the Monastery. However, from the surrounding community, around 30 Eritreans soldiers came with a car and looted grains, television, generator and other goods of farmers.*

*Later the car overturned while travelling to a place called Gidera and 28 of them died and only 2 survived. Still Eritrean soldiers are present in various areas surrounding the monastery and looting of goods and properties of farmers is almost everywhere.*



*We have collected the remains of the heavy artillery which landed at the Monastery into one place. Right now, there is great anger and sadness in the Monastery as this happened after more than 1600 years since its establishment. All monks of the monastery are now in great danger and in need of assistance as their food, goods, cloths and shelter is destroyed and burned to the ground. Previously, we were making living from a small amount of assistance and contribution we get by people of the surrounding community but now even the people have lost everything because of the looting, and we (all the monks) are in great danger.*

*The monastery has faced great destruction, and the houses destroyed were also heritage of the monastery and this need to be disclosed to the international community. The monks (we) are currently living in danger, uncertainty and fear; we are also very scared when we hear gunshots and we don't know when this conflict might end and even the monastery might be bombed again, there is no guarantee.*

*Currently, the Eritrean soldiers are present at the foot of the monastery as well as in the surroundings areas such as Kisad Edaga (the road intersection which goes to Adva). Sometimes they came to the foot of the monastery but never climbed again.*

*We want our peace to be restored; we want our people to get peace; our people are being killed without any crime and we call on the international community to support us for the conflict to be stopped. Finally, we pray to God, peace to be restored to our people as there are no winners but only losers from a war. (Head Monk, Interview, 15 January 2021)*

The interview contains several important elements:

- The monastery was shelled and the destruction was not caused by collateral damage, but the damage was deliberate. The attack was based on the instruction to arrest Tigray President Debretsion, who the soldiers said they were told was potentially hiding in the monastery. This was not the case.
- The monastery was attacked by Eritrean soldiers in early January 2021, at a time when the Eritrean government still claimed that Eritrea and Eritrean soldiers were not participating in the war.
- Religious leaders from the monastery were injured and killed.
- Important heritage buildings were destroyed.

It is noteworthy that, according to the head monk, the Eritrean soldiers showed regret after they realised what they had done. This may reflect that the soldiers were conflicted with the orders they had received and may also be a sign of the cultural proximity of the soldiers who carried out these attacks and the objects of these attacks: the Tigray communities who were keepers of the region's joint heritage. The interview was published in the EEPA Situation Reports on 25 February (EEPA, 2021, SR 92).

### **Findings from the ethnographic data**

The interviews, transect walks and observations confirmed the findings of incidents that emerged from the analysis of the EEPA Situation Reports. The field visits allowed for in-depth investigation of the incidents. Based on the coding of the empirical findings a number of themes were identified. The detailed findings are discussed below.

#### ***Deliberate destruction***

A field observation in Negash town and discussion with mosque leaders confirmed that the damage to Al Nejashi Mosque and the Shrine-Kabaa was done intentionally (field observation, Kahsay and Woldu, Negash, 9 June 2022). The Al Nejashi Mosque and Shrine (Kabaa) were shelled (field observation, Kahsay and Woldu, Negash, 9 June 2022). Several shells targeted the Mosque while there was no active fighting around it. Several artefacts from the Mosque and fossils believed to be the messengers of Mohamed were damaged. The shelling was carried out by Eritrean military forces (Religious leader, interview with Kahsay and Woldu, 9 June 2022, Negash).

The opinion was expressed that the major religious centre for Muslims, Al Nejashi Mosque, and the significant symbol of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, St Mary of Zion in Aksum, were deliberately targeted in this war (Interview U, interview by Kahsay, 10 May 2022, Mekelle). It came as a shock that the UNESCO-registered heritage site and museum, Aksum, was not protected. In addition to the hundreds of churches damaged, burned, or looted, two of the major monasteries in Tigray, namely Walidaba and Debre Damo, were also targeted, and there was no sign of combat near these sites

(Interview U, interview by Kahsay, 10 May 2022, Mekelle). Looking at the trends of the attacks on religious and historical sites, the argument was provided that the purpose of the attacks was to dismantle the historic bases of the Tigrayans. This would harm their identity as the birthplace of old heritage from Christianity, Islam, and Catholicism (Interview U, interview by Kahsay, 10 May 2022, Mekelle).

Other instances of destruction include the federal government-administrated Emperor Yohannes IV Palace Museum and the Tigray Martyrs Monument Museum in Mekelle. There was no combat engagement in these places at the time as the Tigray government and TPLF leaders left the city before the arrival of the allied invading forces (Observation, Woldu, Mekelle, 8 May 2022). The facilities of the two museums were completely ruined. Adigrat Martha's and Wukro Museum's libraries were part of the destruction (Observation, Woldu, Mekelle, 8 May 2022). The federal Ethiopian government tried to form new alternative narrations and pilgrimage holy site rhetoric, such as the Tedbabe Mariam of Wollo, which has an equivalent position with St Mary of Zion in Aksum (Observation, Woldu, Mekelle, 8 May 2022).

Cultural properties were looted, disappeared, or were burned, and some parchments were displayed for sale in international markets (Interview U, interview by Kahsay, 10 May 2022, Mekelle). Archaeological sites and heritage were seriously damaged or destroyed. The Gud Baheri archaeological site was looted; the ancient obelisks in Mifisas Baheri, near Hashenge Lake, were shot with live machine gun bullets and the obelisks fractured (Interview K, interview by Woldu, face-to-face, 4 June 2022, Mekelle). The soldiers opened the temporary store of artefacts in Maichew and crushed the treasures by driving military tanks over them. Bulldozers dug trenches on the archaeological sites in Shire, Mai-Adrasha, which were completely ruined, and the artefacts excavated from the site, which were in temporary storage, were burned and crushed. Another piece of evidence is available in Adigrat: the Gulomekada Archaeological Site's artefacts, which were shelved in the Adigrat temporary store, were destroyed. The antiquities were broken (Interview H, interview by Woldu, face-to-face, 19 June 2022, Mekelle). The destruction of

Amanuel Church in Eastern Tigray is another example of where the shelling of such centres was intentional, as the Church is located far from the main road where the fighting was taking place. The Church was hit by heavy artillery and was heavily damaged (Interview G, interview by Kahsay, 20 May 2022, Mekelle). It is not credible to perceive this as collateral damage.

The logical conclusion, therefore, is that the cultural and religious properties in Tigray that were affected were purposefully targeted for destruction by the allied forces (Interview K, interview by Woldu, face-to-face, 4 June 2022, Mekelle; and interview G, interview by Woldu, face-to-face, 7 June 2022, Mekelle).

### ***Destruction was systematic and on large scale***

The destruction of heritage sites was not only deliberate, but also systematic and on a large scale. A preliminary assessment was conducted in 2021, organised by the Tigray Institute of Policy Studies. The assessment showed that a high level of destruction of heritage sites occurred in Tigray. The total number of cultural heritage objects counted before the war was 164,666 objects; and the preliminary assessments of the institute was that 116,763 objects were damaged (Interview H, interview by Woldu, face-to-face, 19 June 2022, Mekelle). The impression was that the heritage items were purposefully destroyed. The above count of heritage objects that were destroyed during the war also included places where there had not been fighting; hence, the destruction was systematic (Interview H, interview by Woldu, face-to-face, 19 June 2022, Mekelle).

In addition to the religious centres, historical sites, museums, and historic palaces were also damaged, such as the Martyrs Monument Museum, which offered a history of the Tigray People's Liberation movement and its freedom struggle against the dictatorial and cruel regime of the Derg in 1991. The ENDF soldiers lived in those buildings and left them ruined; they burned files, damaged many pieces of furniture, and destroyed historic accounts kept in the buildings (Observation, Woldu, Mekelle, May 8, 2022).

### ***Eritrean perpetration of destruction of heritage***

The Al Nejashi is well known in the daily social movements among the Eritrean Muslim community, including as the name of many community-based associations in Eritrea. This is quite remarkable, given that the borders between Eritrea and Ethiopia have been closed for decades. Whilst the heritage site is more than 100 kilometres away from the assumed Ethiopian and Eritrean boundary, the Eritreans were promoting the mosque as being in Eritrean territory for their fellow Arab travellers. The Eritrean Army shelled the mosque causing damage to its roof (Interview H, interview by Woldu, Face-to-Face, 2 June 2022, Mekelle). Eritrean soldiers also caused damage to the St Mary Dengolat, south-west of Mekelle city. The Church was ruined by the Eritrean Army in the 15<sup>th</sup> round of shelling, while there was no combat in the village (Interview H, interview by Woldu, Face-to-Face, 2 June 2022, Mekelle). The evidence of Eritrean destruction of heritage sites clearly confirms the early Eritrean participation in the Tigray war, despite repeated denials from Prime Minister Abiy until 23 March 2021.

### ***Desecration***

Religious institutions were deliberately targeted, damaged, and destroyed; churches and mosques and their shrines were subject to trespass by armed soldiers; many clergy from these churches were humiliated and killed. Allied force soldiers committed sexual intercourse in the churches and killed priests inside the buildings and compounds of churches and mosques (Field visit, Kahsay and Woldu, Negash, 9 June 2022). These compounds were used as trenches (Field visit, Kahsay and Woldu, Negash, 9 June 2022).

These religious institutions were treated as military garrisons. The institutions and clergy were targeted to undermine the foundation of Tigrayan society, which is highly religious, and to force the population to question their religion, lose faith in their own history, and halt the preservation and conservation of the heritage, leading to the disintegration of Tigray society (Interview K, interview by Woldu, face-to-face, 4 June 2022, Mekelle; and Interviewee G, Interview by Woldu, face-to-face, 7 June 2022, Mekelle).

Moreover, civilians were killed, humiliated, and subject to violation of while participating in religious rituals, as in the case of Aksum, and religious leaders were targeted and killed. According to one respondent, these acts show that religious rituals and religious entities could not save Tigrayans, suggesting that their religion, values, and beliefs were meaningless (Interview M, interview by Kahsay, 10 May 2022, Mekelle). It is believed among the Tigray population that immediately after their arrival in Aksum, the soldiers of the allied forces tried to take the Ark of the Covenant from St Mary of Zion. This was perceived to be done under the leadership of Deacon Daniel Kibret, member of Ethiopia's House of Peoples' Representatives, and advisor to the prime minister of Ethiopia, who narrated publicly the legendary experiences of the Ark of the Covenant taken from former conflicts. Kibret was understood to suggest that the Ark should be taken to Lake Tana for safety. According to the population of Tigray, this was an attempt to take the Ark away from Aksum to Lake Tana. (Interview M, interview by Kahsay, 10 May 2022, Mekelle; Field visit, Kahsay and Woldu, 9-10 June 2022, Negash).

### ***Causing grief and damage***

The destruction of the heritage sites is extremely painful. An interviewee observed:

*I visited and assessed the archaeological sites, and Mai Adrasa in Shire. I did not eat a meal for three days. It was even very difficult for me to drink water. Because I am a professional in the field and a Tigrayan, all the treasures are mine. Furthermore, the more I know about the secrets of the site, the more I believe there is nothing more painful than that feeling and experience. It shall be explained in words more than genocide; [...] a [...] better to say cultural cleansing. It is extremely painful.* (Interview G, Interview by Woldu, face-to-face, 2 June 2022, Mekelle)

These attacks resulted in the emotional destabilisation of the people in Tigray. Tigray's heritage is a shared value of the community. It is a source of income and has historical value. The destruction undermined the social fabric of Tigray society, for which the heritage signifies respect and tolerance and contributed to harmonious social relations, based on shared pride and care for the heritage.

## Discussion

The first attack reported on heritage in Tigray was the attack on the Al-Njesahi Mosque on 17 and 18 December 2020. The attack on the Orthodox St Mary of Zion Church in Aksum, in which 750 people were killed, took place in mid-December 2020, but was only reported in January 2021, due to the siege and total communication back out. In 2021, it is reported that the ENDF-allied forces intentionally bombed the famous ancient monastery of Debre Damo, a 6<sup>th</sup> century monastery in Tigray located on a mountain with a steeply rising plateau. In all three prominent cases, as well as in less prominent incidents, it is reported that EDF were the main perpetrators, or involved alongside the ENDF and its allies. The visible presence of the EDF stands in stark contrast with the denials of both Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia and President Isayas of Eritrea of the presence of the EDF in Tigray. The Prime Minister Abiy publicly recognised the support the ENDF received from Eritrea for the first time on 23 March 2021, in a speech to the Ethiopian Parliament (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024).

The elements described as main themes emerging from the EEPA Situation Reports in the early months of the conflict, the in-depth case-study, and the visits to selected sites found the following perceptions:

- That there was a deliberate intention behind the destruction of cultural and religious heritage in the Tigray war
- That the destruction was systematic and significant
- That there was specific involvement of the Eritrean military in the destruction of key sites of cultural and religious value to Eritrean citizens
- That the desecration of religious sites was intentional
- That the destruction caused deep grief and mental harm to the Tigrayan community

The Situation Reports published by EEPA as an early warning device were distributed in various media and sent to diplomatic missions and journalists. It may, therefore, be assumed that the publication of the destruction of heritage, including by the EDF, was known and

protective measures could, and should, have been put in place to protect these heritage sites.

According to observers in Tigray, the destruction of the heritage had a hidden goal of diminishing the status of Tigray as a keeper and curator of historical artefacts and of the cultural capital of Ethiopia. Observers comment that the Eritrean military used the destruction of heritage as a tool to undermine the historical and cultural value of Tigray, to diminish the cultural identity of Tigrayans.

It is noteworthy that the Ethiopia government apologised for the attack on the Al-Njesahi Mosque in January 2021 (BBC, 2021). The Ethiopian government did not disclose at that time that the mosque was attacked by the EDF. The mosque had just been restored with support from Turkey after the 2018 Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace Agreement was concluded (AA, 2018). The Ethiopian government said it would repair the mosque (BBC, 2021).

The danger of losing important globally important heritage sites was recognised in February 2021 (published on 8 February 2021), when the Global Society of Tigray Scholars wrote to UNESCO President, Audrey Azoulay, referring to the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the Convention of the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. The scholars stated that “there exist widespread and evidence-based reports of genocidal ethnic cleansing and killings, starvation through a deliberate isolation of the region, vandalization of public and private properties and destruction and looting of cultural and sacred sites” (EEPA, 2021, SR 79). The scholars stated that a unique part of humanity’s heritage is at risk, including UNESCO World Heritage Site at Aksum, which contains monolithic tomb markers that are 1,700 years old, among others. The fragile rock churches and archaeological sites date from between 800–1,000 AD (EEPA, 2021, SR 79). Michael Gervers, University of Toronto, states that “This is cultural cleansing. The (Ethiopian) government and Eritreans want to wipe out the Tigrayan culture” (EEPA, 2021, SR 79).

Anderson reminds us that every community relies on the narrations that bind communities together as an imagined one. The contestation of these communities, when politicised, can be a motivation for the



destruction of cultural and religious capital that the community holds and which binds it together. The findings of the study lead to the conclusion that the destruction of the cultural properties of the people of Tigray is associated with the perpetrators' political and societal goals for a new political ordering after the war.

Reflecting on the danger posed by political contestations to the cultural and religious heritage, Stone (2013) proposed a 4-phase approach for the protection of cultural heritage in situations of conflict that may harm cultural heritage:

- Long term action
- Immediate pre-deployment action
- Action during the conflict
- Post-conflict action

None of the four tiers identified by Stone were given attention when the law enforcement operation was announced by the federal government of Ethiopia and the war in Tigray broke out. With military tactics lacking measures for protection, before and during the conflict, without a long-term set of objectives, and with limited support in the aftermath of the hostilities, the heritage sites in Tigray have suffered tremendously.

This makes it relevant to seek answers to the question why. *Why* the sad attacks on the world's heritage in one of the oldest civilisations of humanity with its historic inter-religious importance? *Why* the lack of protection and support for the protection of these sites? And, *why*, the apparent lack of concern for what the world has lost. The keepers of the cultural and religious heritage in Tigray, the religious leaders, and the local communities whose identity is strongly rooted in the cultural and religious history of the old Aksumite empire are our best hope that all will not be lost.

This study suggests that concerned stakeholders, such as the Tigray Bureau of Culture and Tourism, professionals in the field, the Tigray leadership, and local, national, and international organisations interested in the conservation, restoration, and rehabilitation of cultural and religious heritage must ensure that detailed studies of the damage are undertaken, including thorough inventories of the

destroyed and looted structures, artefacts, and treasures. In addition, the researchers recommend future research focusing on the damage to the intangible heritage of the people of Tigray resulting from the war and provide support for their restoration.

## Conclusion

When the first stories emerged of the death and destruction at the Al-Njehasi Mosque and at the religious festival in the St Mary of Zion Orthodox Church in Aksum, the events were denied, as was the presence and participation of Eritrean forces. The combination of the siege, the Internet black-out, the lack of access of journalists, and the deliberate denial of the participation of the Eritrean forces in the war in Tigray made it very difficult to report on and verify the destruction and undermined accountability (Gebreslassie *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024).

This study identified five themes as typical for the destruction of cultural and religious heritage in the Tigray war. These are that the destruction:

- Was deliberate
- Was systematic and on a massive scale;
- Included significant participation by Eritrea, which was officially not recognised as a party to the war
- Went hand-in-hand with the desecration of sites, affecting the religious authority of the sites
- Caused deep grief and damage to the social fabric of communities in Tigray

This chapter prompts the question: Why was a systematic attack on the cultural and religious heritage that Tigray holds? This study found that the goal of the conflict was to reshape the structure of control and domination in the region across Ethiopia and Eritrea, and this may be a principal reason for the systematic attack on Tigray's heritage. This hidden goal corresponds with the hidden way in which Eritrea participated in the war, as an important perpetrator of the systematic destruction of Tigray's cultural and religious heritage.

The combined federal Ethiopian and Eritrean attack on Tigray's heritage was seen to undermine what symbolises Tigrayan identity, as keeper of the traditional heritage of the region. It was seen in Tigray as an attempt to destroy the idea of Tigray as a historic cultural centre of the region, of Ethiopia, of Africa and of the world, and to undermine its cultural and religious identity.

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## **Authors' contributions**

The first author designed the research and implemented the study. He is a GAIC PhD fellow and implemented the research independently, under supervision of the supervisors. The second author assisted on the collection and assisted in the analysis of the data and reviewed earlier versions. The third author reviewed all the article versions and contributed to enhancing the quality of the chapter with textual revision on all sections of the chapter.

## **Ethical clearance**

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled "Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting".

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.

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“Why is God Silent?”:

### Damage and Destruction of Religious Heritage Sites in East Tigray

*Hagos Gebremariam & Amanuel Abrha*

መን የረድአ ዝቕበረ፤ መን ይንገር ዝነበረ፡፡

*It is he who buried that should tell, it is he who has witnessed who should give testimony.*

#### Abstract

The study examines the impact of the 2020–2022 Tigray war on the region’s rich cultural heritage, focusing on Eastern Tigray, in northern Ethiopia. Tigray is home to significant archaeological sites, rock-hewn churches, and other cultural assets. However, these sites have suffered from neglect and recent destruction due to both human and natural factors. A survey conducted across 181 sites, including churches and monasteries, revealed severe damage and loss. The conflict resulted in the killing of 134 religious leaders, as well as the destruction of religious buildings, archaeological sites, museums, and artefacts. The survey identified 36 major incidents, with Eritrean military involvement in 28 cases, often operating with impunity due to their denied presence. The Eritrean invasion seems to have been planned with intelligence missions, and following the destruction of heritage sites during the war, specialised teams were seen to come, select and organise the transportation of valuable assets to Eritrea. The conflict’s impact on cultural heritage was exacerbated by the siege and Internet blackout, hindering the reporting and verification of events. The findings highlight the urgent need for enforcement of legal protection, criminal persecution, and accountability to safeguard these invaluable cultural resources.

**Key words:** cultural heritage, destruction, damage, religious and archaeological sites, museum, Eastern Tigray, Ethiopia



## Introduction

Located in northern Ethiopia, the Tigray region has some of the earliest religious and archaeological sites (Curtis, 2005; Munro-Hay 1991; Phillipson, 1998, 2000, 2003; Fattovich, 2010; Mengistu, 2004, 2008; D'Andrea *et al.*, 2008). Archaeological studies from these sites indicate that this region is the origin of social complexities and states in the Horn of Africa (Michels, 2005; Negash, 1997; D'Andrea *et al.*, 2008; Schmidt and Curtis, 2001; Fattovich and Bard *et al.*, 1997; Fattovich *et al.*, 2000; Munro-Hay, 1989; Bard *et al.*, 1997).

Tigray is home to prehistoric rock art sites, both rock engravings and paintings (Negash, 1997; Gigar, 1979, 2000; Meressa, 2007; Hagos, 2011). In addition, it is one of the first places where Christian civilisations arose, and have continued to flourish, since the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Ethiopia was the second country in the world (after Armenia) to officially adopt the Christian faith (Phillipson, 2009) and the first to embrace Islam when it was introduced to the Horn of Africa in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, which makes the country the world's second holiest place next to Medina (Yemane *et al.*, 2014). As a result of this, the region hosts a tremendous collection of ancient and remarkable built and rock-hewn churches (Asrat, 2002; Kiros *et al.*, 2013; Phillipson, 2009; Telele, 2018).

Tigray is known for its hundreds of extraordinary churches, which were cut out of the naturally existing rocks some 900 years ago (Gobeze, 2004, 2008; Phillipson, 2009). These churches are the witnesses of the region's history and determine the architectural identities and cultural artistic achievements of the communities that constructed, inherited and protected these (Nosnitsin, 2013; Gervers and Fritch, 2010; Bidder, 1958; Buxton, 1947; Finneran, 2009; Gerster, 1970; Mengistu, 2004; Jager & Pearce, 1974; Lindlah, 1970; Mercier & Lepage, 2012; Pankhurst, 1960; Phillipson, 2009; Schuster, 1994). However, all these and other heritage resources of the region have been under threat due to anthropogenic and natural causes. Different armed conflicts and wars have damaged and destroyed many historic sites and cultural treasures of the country and the region (Buxton and Matthews, 1974; Erlich, 1994; Henz, 2000; Tamrat, 1972).

This study aims to assess and describe the impact of armed conflict on the tangible and intangible religious and cultural heritage in Eastern Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. It asks: *What is the impact of the 2020–2022 Tigray war on the rich cultural and religious heritage of Eastern Tigray?* As the number of heritage resources that have been damaged by the conflict is large, this assessment is intended to help in the identification of the damage to help prepare an appropriate recovery and rehabilitation plan.

## **Context of the war in Tigray**

The armed conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia's northern most region, began on 3 November 2020 (ICHREE, 2023). On 4 November the federal government of Ethiopia launched a law enforcement operation. Allied forces of the federal government included the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and its allies: the Amhara regional state special forces and Amhara militia (Fano) (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024). The allied forces also included Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) and Somali soldiers trained in Eritrea, which was denied for the first five months of the war and only publicly recognised by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy on 23 March 2021 during a session of the Ethiopian Parliament (Tesfa *et al.*, 2024). The allied forces were supported at different phases during the conflict by drones from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, China and other countries. The government of the Tigray Regional State was led by Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The region was defended by the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF).

A Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed on 2 November 2022 in Pretoria between the Government of Ethiopia and the regional administration of Tigray, led by the TPLF (AU, 2022). Eritrea is not a party to the agreement. Not all regions were returned to Tigray administration after the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, however, in the subsequent period (up to the time of publication), the hostilities in Eastern Tigray came to an end. The circumstances after the conclusion of the Agreement allowed the researchers to survey the state of Tigray's cultural and religious heritage in that sub-region, following the war.

## **Conflict-driven threats to cultural and religious heritage conservation**

The world's cultural heritage has been continuously threatened due to human and natural agents, such as urbanisation, development, war and conflicts, erosion, earthquakes, and landslides (Ascherson, 2007). Armed conflict is undoubtedly one of the main causes of the loss and destruction of cultural heritage sites and property (Olukoya, 2016; O'Keefe, 2006; Ascherson, 2007). There have been many devastating losses to valuable and irreplaceable heritage resources since World War I (Olukoya, 2016; O'Keefe, 2006; Ascherson, 2007; Kila, 2010). In World War II, cultural heritage, religious buildings, cities, towns, and their civilian inhabitants were targeted and suffered the destruction and looting of cultural properties, contributing to the intentional extermination and genocide of the Jewish population by Nazi Germany (Auwera, 2012; Ascherson, 2005; Brosché, *et al.*, 2017; Schmidt, 2016). The ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia (1991–1995), the worst armed conflict in Europe since the Second World War, also caused the loss of lives of tens of thousands of innocent civilians and led to the intentional destruction of museums and places of worship (Lindhagen, 2018; Brosché, *et al.*, 2017), as part of a broader strategy of ethnic cleansing.

Cultural heritage has been the target of deliberate destruction in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan in the Middle East (just to mention a few) (Lostal *et al.*, 2018; Brosché, *et al.*, 2017; ICCROM, 2012; Lindhagen, 2018). The civil wars and absence of a functioning state in Afghanistan have led to the destruction and plundering of its rich cultural heritage. The National Museum of Kabul was hit by rockets and severely damaged, and looted several times, which resulted in the loss or disappearance of about 100,000 or 70% of its collections (Lindhagen, 2018; Johan *et al.*, 2016). The National Museum of Kuwait was burned down. Kuwait's national heritage was robbed and looted. The Baghdad Museum lost 4,000 artefacts, which were looted; some of which were found at international art auctions in New York and London (Ramasastry, 2003; Lindhagen, 2018; Brosché, *et al.*, 2017). In the Syrian civil war, a vast number of churches and monasteries were attacked and the looting of cultural antiquities has

also been described as a strategy for economic rewards in territories controlled by ISIS (Islamic State) (Lindhagen, 2018; Brosché, *et al.*, 2017).

In the Horn of Africa, a region rich in cultural and religious heritage, the conservation of heritage is an age-old challenge. In Ethiopia, thousands of heritage resources have suffered serious damage and destruction from conflicts and the subsequent looting of artefacts since the Aksumite period (Henze, 2000). The 16th-century, war between the Christian highland kingdom and the Muslim Jihadists of Ethiopia, and the invasion of Ahmed Gragh and Yodit Gudat against the Christian Empire were some of the best known wars and conflicts in the history of the country, which devastated the priceless cultural heritage of the country, particularly, Christian heritage, including ancient churches, monasteries and associated treasures (Buxton and Matthews, 1974; Erlich, 1994; Henz, 2000; Tamrat, 1972). Numerous cultural heritage sites and artefacts were also damaged and looted during the political instability under Emperor Menelik, Emperor Hailesele, and Derg regimes. In Eritrea, the destruction of some Aksumite archaeological sites was reported as in the case of the stelae (an ancient upright stone slab bearing markings) of Metera, an Aksumite site near the town of Senafe, which was destroyed by bombing during the 1998–2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war (Libsekal, 2010).

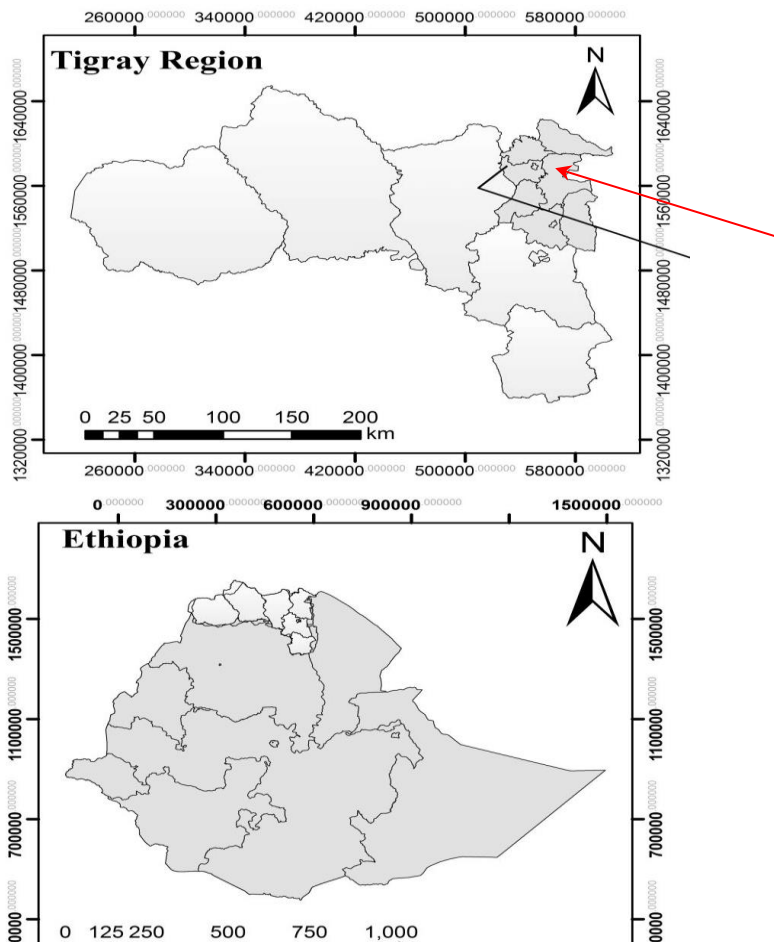
## **Methodology**

### ***Data collection***

The Eastern Tigray Zone is well known for its rich cultural and religious resources. In the first phase of this study, a surveying method was employed. The field survey was conducted in 2021/2022. For security reasons, the researchers travelled to many of the places without cameras or mobile phones. Priests and local farmers provided updated information about the location of military personnel to avoid possible risks. Both authors know the area well. The fieldwork was carried out using an emic ethnographic approach.

The survey included 181 sites, of which 172 of them were churches and monasteries in the Eastern Zone of Tigray (Figure 6.1). The

antiquities looted from each surveyed site were recorded. The investigation surveyed the damage to the religious sites (religious buildings and their ecclesiastical materials) and historic and archaeological sites, including archaeological and church museums. The damage was inventoried and described in detail in a notebook. One of the challenges was the initial lack of clarity regarding the information about damaged heritage sites.



**Figure 6.1. Map of the study area in its regional context**

During the preliminary assessment, the witness reports from the locations could not always be interpreted with the precision required.

For instance, some non-ecclesiastical<sup>30</sup> materials looted or damaged may not be considered heritage objects. As a result, the researchers visited the heritage sites frequently, to make determinations.

In the second phase of this study, 20 sites were selected for further investigation. These sites were studied in-depth. The researchers employed field visits, desk research, interviews with caretakers of the site and members of the communities at the sites, and informal focus group discussions with multiple persons looking after the site. The purpose was to collect and analyse information on the background of the site, the damage and destruction of the site, and the impact of the destruction on the community looking after the heritage site.

Field survey methods included visits, walks, photographing (when possible), inspecting photographs of the community, and inspection of the sites. Documents were consulted at each church administration office of all *woredas* (districts) to gather information on the looted ecclesiastical objects and church servants killed. Field surveys were carried out from beginning of February 2022 to end of April 2022 to obtain first-hand information and identify the damaged cultural and heritage sites. Informal and formal interviews and group discussions were conducted with local communities at each site to understand when, how, and by whom the site was damaged, destroyed and looted and to investigate the harm done to the community and leadership of the site responsible for protecting it. All interviews were conducted in Tigrinya. Many of the informants did not want to be recorded. When there was a need to use electronic equipment, there was often no electricity for charging our devices. During surveys conducted in 2022, the researcher felt a camera could be used to take photos.

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<sup>30</sup> Not connected to the Christian religion.



**Figure 6.2. Overview of the study data and methodology**

### ***Triangulation of data on the determination of perpetrators***

The survey information regarding the perpetrators was gathered from the local communities at each damaged site. This information was compared with a report obtained from the Eastern Tigray Orthodox Church Diocese, which gave some information, especially as to the perpetrators. Understanding about the perpetrators operating in the locations was provided to the researchers by the local communities near the sites, and this information was triangulated with the data from the survey and the documentation obtained from the Eastern Tigray Orthodox Church Diocese. The researchers found that the triangulation showed great consistency and that this added weight to the findings regarding the perpetrators operating at the sites.

## **Findings**

The findings focus on the damage to religious buildings and ecclesiastical materials, as well as archaeological heritage sites. The first section looks at religious buildings, which is divided into ‘built’ or ‘constructed’ churches, rock-hewn churches, monasteries and the Mosque of Al-Nejash. The term ‘constructed’ churches refers to churches that were built as opposed to churches that were hewn in the rocks.

Among the objects looked at in the orthodox religious holy places is the *tabot*. This is a replica of the Ark of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments. It represents the dwelling place of God on Earth

and is protected by a veil from public sight; it is only seen by priests and placed only in the sanctuary.

Only a few of the many examples of damaged churches, monasteries, and mosques are described below. The second section focuses on the damage to archaeological sites. The third section discusses the findings with regards to the alleged perpetration of attacks on religious and heritage sites.

## **Constructed churches and monasteries**

### ***Egri Qeran Qeddus Mika’el Church***

This constructed church dedicated to St Mika’el (annually celebrated on 12<sup>th</sup> December according to Geez calendar) is in Kilde Awla’elo *woreda*, Negash *Tabia* of eastern Tigray. It can be easily reached through the main road Adigrat-Mekelle; one must turn to the east just before entering the small historic town of Negash. Local people narrate that before the existing church was founded, there was another church dedicated to St Mika’el in this place during the ‘time of Princes’ (*Zemene Mesafint*), from 1785 up to 1889 E.C. The priests said that, during the time of Shye (*Zemene Shye*), many valuable treasures of the church had been taken to the surrounding churches of that time to protect them from the damage due to the destruction of the church and treasure hunting of that time. After 117 years (in 2006), its *Tabot*, which had been taken to Mariam Zigb Church (a church within Saesie Tsa’eda Emba *woreda*, some kilometres west of St Mika’el Church), was returned to its original place and the existing church re-established.





**Figure 6.3. Damage to St Mika'el's church building shelled by Eritrean troops, and partially restored**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

Taking the perspective from the community living in the place, the local understanding of the presence of possibly Aksumite period archaeological evidence indicates that this place had been an ancient settlement and burial place. The evidence is identified as stone rubble, grinding and polishing stones, human skeletal remains, and ceramics (Figure 6.4) found within the churchyard. These material objects have not previously been reported, and there is a need for further investigation of the interpretation of these objects by the community as pre-Aksumite.



**Figure 6.4. Artefacts (pottery shards, stone rubble, and grinding stones) discovered at an archaeological site situated within St Mikael's churchyard**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

On the 23 November 2020, the ENDF allied with the EDF fought against the Tigray Special Forces in the surroundings of the church. During the fighting, the EDF attacked towards the direction of the church and it was damaged by heavy weapons and mortars. The exterior and interior surfaces of St Mika'el's Church building were shelled by Eritrean troops. The surfaces were partially restored months later. The integrity of the archaeological landscape has been disturbed. It is believed that this is because the EDF wrongly assumed that the Tigray Special Forces might have been stationed within the church and its surroundings. The northern and southern walls of the church building have been damaged, its roof has partly collapsed, and other sections of the church such as *Bet Mabber* (a room where baptism activities are carried out) have been damaged (Figure 6.2).

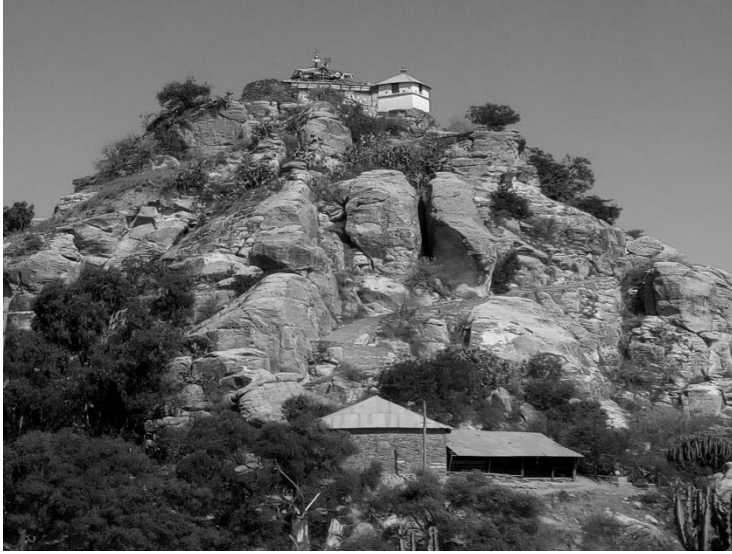
### ***Hasen St Gabria'el Church***

The new church of Hasen St Gabria'el, (not far from St Mika'el Church) is situated along the Adigrat-Mekelle main road. The church was attacked on the 23 November 2020. The Ethiopian and Eritrean forces who carried out the attack caused serious damage to the ecclesiastical materials of the church including the manuscripts and printed holy books. The joint forces were stationed inside the church, where they slept; they used the church treasures as sleeping materials and threw them away when they left the church.

### ***Ma'ago Debre Medhanit Amanuel***

The small church of Amanuel Ma'ago holds celebrations on 28 December every year. It is located near the well-known Muslim pilgrimage site of Negash. It is situated on the top of a hill with a spectacular view (Figure 6.5), which is visible from the Adigrat-Mekelle main road.

Although the church looks recent, local tradition recounts that it has received a marble *tabot* consecrated for Amanuel and was founded in the time of Abraha and Atsbaha, the legendary kings of Aksum. The presence of rock-cut cistern near the church points to it being much older. According to local knowledge, the *tabot* was stolen and went to the Enda Iyesus Church of Gondar during the 'Time of the Princes'. In the time of Tewodros II (r. 1854–1968), it was substituted with a new marble *tabot*. The church was also burnt down in 1850 EC, and its sacred items including the marble *tabot* was changed. The church has centuries-old treasures such as silver, stone, and wooden processional and hand crosses, printed holy books, and manuscript collections (four gospel book from late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century old, missals, and late 18/19<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts).



**Figure 6.5. View of Ma'ago Amanuel Church from the Western direction**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

Over the course of two days (24–25 November 2020) of fighting between the ENDF and their allies (the EDF) and the TDF in the vicinity of the Ma'ago Amanuel Church, the church building and its associated ecclesiastical objects were hit by 17 shells fired from tanks. The roof of the church burned and was destroyed because of the shelling by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers.

The researchers observed the church being shelled while they were heading towards Mekelle from the northern direction. Community witness testimonies were used as the main source of information. At that time, the joint Ethiopian and Eritrean troops were the ones that had tanks, which the researchers personally saw while crossing Adigrat a few days before the church was destroyed. The researchers have a picture of one of the tanks. The researchers also observed tanks destroyed near the church.



**Figure 6.6. Damage to the Ma'ago Amanuel Church building and severely damaged ecclesiastical objects (broken hand crosses, and männbärä tabot, and damaged paintings)**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

The church's treasures and liturgical objects such as printed holy books (such as 'Ta'amre Maryam, 'Ta'amre Iyesus, Dersane Mika'el, and Senksar) were burned, and other church objects like the 'throne' of the *tabot* (männbärä *tabot*), processional and hand crosses, and paintings were also severely damaged during the same event (Figure 6.6).

### ***Ligat Debre Hiwot Qirqos Church***

The church of Debre Hiwot St Qirqos holds an annual celebration on 15 January. It is in Gulomekeda *woreda*, Addis Alem district/*tabia*/, some five kilometres south of the town of Zalambesa. It can be reached through the main Zalambesa-Adigrat road, after some three to five minutes' drive and approximately five-minutes' walk to the south of the main road. Local tradition puts the foundation of the church as at the time of Emperor Gebremeskel (the legendary successor of Emperor Kaleb, an Aksumite king during the sixth century). The church preserves a few historical and archaeological

materials, such as two stone objects: one stone suited for seating and one engraved stone of unknown function, which can be seen at the entrance of the church compound and standing in the churchyard, respectively (Figure 6.7). These objects are both dated to possibly Aksumite times. Ligat is also known for the tradition of manuscript making, which has existed for 150 years in this area. Now this tradition is in danger of extinction due to the socio-economic crisis of the scribes.



**Figure 6.7. Engraved stones (possibly Aksumite period) within the churchyard and entrance of the church**

Source: Hagos (2022)

This church, its ecclesiastical materials, and manuscripts has been burned and destroyed during armed conflicts and wars at different times. The 16<sup>th</sup> century war between the Christian highland kingdom and Muslim Jihadists of Ethiopia, the invasion of Gudit and Ahmed Gagn in the Christian Empire, and the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict of 1998–2000 devastated and destroyed the historical church building and its associated priceless treasures. The church building was re-established at the end of each conflict, and the existing church building was re-established in 1998 EC. As one can see in the picture below (Figure 6.8), this church was severely damaged during the

Tigray war. On 19–21 November 2020, it was deliberately shelled by Eritrean soldiers such that its north and west walls as well as its roof collapsed. According to witnesses, the church building was hit by more than 5 heavy shells, out of a total of 11 heavy shells that landed in its immediate surroundings. The exterior and interior parts of the church building have been destroyed (Figure 6.8). Its liturgical and ecclesiastical objects have been broken and some of them burned, several valuable and historical manuscripts and printed holy books have been burned and are lost forever. A report from the church administration office of the *woreda* shows that twenty-five (25) manuscripts (e.g., Metshafe Snkisar, Ta’amre Maryam, Gedle Qirqos, Dersame Mika’el, Ta’amre Iyesus, Zena Selassie, Gede Teklehaimanot, Gedle Gebremenfesqidus etc.) and fifteen (15) printed holy books (Haimanote Abew and Metshafe Gtsawi) have been burned; church umbrellas were also burned and many other ecclesiastical objects (prayer stick, drum or *kebero*, processional and hand crosses) were broken by the Eritrean troops.



**Figure 6.8. Destructions of Qirqos Church building (upper left)**  
(Source: social media), **interim conservation works carried out by the**  
**local communities in the interior and exterior surfaces of the church**  
**building**

Source: Hagos (2022)



**Figure 6.9. Some of the burned and destroyed church treasures, ecclesiastical objects and manuscripts**

Source: Hagos (2022)

In Ligat, the church of Yohannes Metmeq, dedicated to St John, located not more than two kilometres from the church of St Qirqos in the north-west, was also bombed by Eritrean troops. Its southern wall was partly destroyed.

### ***Addi Tegna Qeddest Mariam Church***

The church of Addi Tegna Mariam, dedicated to St Mary, has an annual celebration on 21 January. It is in the Gulomekeda *woreda*, Adis Tesfa district (*Tabia*). It can be reached through the main road Adigrat-Zalambesa, after a five-minute drive on a side road (from Ziban Hutsa) to the East direction. The churchyard accommodates two church buildings (both dedicated to St Mary) (see Figure 6.10).





**Figure 6.10. The new (left) and old (right) church buildings of St Mariam Addi Tegna**

Source: Hagos (2022)

The old church building is built in the Aksumite architectural style: it has a ‘monkey-head’ and wooden beams which are typical characteristics of this period. Local history says that this church was built at least two hundred years ago. The local communities and churchmen also witnessed that ancient building stones remain (such as stone rubble and dressed rectangular stones).



**Figure 6.11. Manuscript collections of Addi Tegna Mariam Church, which were found in poor preservation conditions**

Source: Hagos (2022)

Human skeletal remains indicate the existence of ancient settlements and burials. These had been exposed previously while excavating and constructing the new church. The discoveries of such archaeological evidence and architectural features of the existing old church building give further weight to the hypothesis that the site is centuries old. The second church building is new, built-in 2010 EC. Its construction was undertaken with the permission of the Culture and Tourism Office of the *woreda*.

In addition to the old church building, which is the most remarkable feature of the site, the church possesses moderate collections of ancient and valuable manuscripts and printed holy books, many of which were found in poor preservation conditions (Figure 6.11).

On 17 November 2020, both the new and old church buildings were shelled by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. The bombardment lasted two hours and the north walls of both churches partially collapsed. The roof of the new church building has also been destroyed.



**Figure 6.12. The new and old church buildings of Mariam Addi Tegna, were both shelled by Eritrean forces**

Source: Hagos (2022)

### ***Firedashum Mekane Sema'et Qirqos Church***

The church of Qirqos, a church dedicated to St Cyriacus, is in Gulomekeda *woreda* of Fredashum district (*Tabia*). It is located about a forty-to-fifty-minute drive from the Adigrat-Zalambesa main road; one turns at Qerseber (before the town of Fatsiy) towards the right. It is situated in a flat plain mountainous area, surrounded by valleys and gorges. There is not much information on the history of the church, but the churchmen claim that it was founded some centuries ago. The building of the church is rectangular; built in the Aksumite architectural style: a 'monkey head' and wooden beams are typical characteristics of the time.



**Figure 6.13. The old and new church buildings burned church door, manuscripts, church umbrellas and other ecclesiastical objects of the church**

Source: Hagos (2022)

Nearby, a huge new church is being constructed (Figure 6.13). At the beginning of January 2021, the new church was burned by Eritrean troops. As one can see in the picture below, its doors and top parts of the church have sustained severe damage (Figure 6.13). The church had a rich collection of manuscripts, printed holy books, and many other church treasures and ecclesiastical objects. Unfortunately, most

of these heritages, both ecclesiastical materials and manuscripts, were burned and destroyed at the same event. As reports from the administration office of the church show, several valuable manuscripts (e.g., *Metshafe Qeddasse* (6), *Gebra Hemamat* (3), *Arbaete Ensisa* (2), etc.), processional and hand crosses, and church umbrellas have been destroyed (see Figure 6.13) during the shelling and bombardment of the church.

### ***Mukuyam Debresina Qeddest Mariam***

The church of Mukuyam Debresina Qeddest Mariam, a church dedicated to St Mary, was damaged and burned by Eritrean and Ethiopian troops.



**Figure 6.14. Burned manuscript and damaged processional silver cross of Mukuyam Debresina Qeddest Mariam Church**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

It is in the *woreda*, district of Addis Tesfa, some five kilometres North of Ziban-Hutsa. The attack took place on 24 December 2020,

according to the local community. The church's ecclesiastical materials and treasures such as manuscripts, printed holy books, crosses, *kebero*<sup>31</sup>, *atranos*<sup>32</sup> etc. were burned and damaged (see Figure 6.14).

### ***Monastery of Debre Damo***

The famous 6<sup>th</sup> century monastery of Debre Damo is dedicated to Abune Aregawi or Zemikael, one of the 'nine saints' who taught the Gospel in the country. The Debre Damo monastery is located on a steep high rock, in the Western corner of the same *woreda*. It is the first Christian monastery in sub-Saharan Africa and exhibits Aksumite styles of construction. It is home to a rich collection of manuscripts. It provides a home to monks who live as hermits. The monastery is not accessible other than by climbing the rock on which the monastery is located with a rope.

Debre Damo monastery was shelled by Eritrean troops over several days, starting 11 January 2021. While some reports stated the monastery was shelled a hundred times, the findings from the survey dispute this. The witnesses in the survey identified that the top of the Debredamo plateau was shelled exactly 18 times through heavy artillery, shelled from a distance, and deliberately at the Debre Damo monastery located on the high plateau. This corresponds with the findings of Kahsay *et al.* (2024), who published a detailed interview with the head monk, recorded in January 2021 after the shelling.

Although the main historical church buildings are not damaged, more than ten other buildings (such as the houses where the monks resided) and their immediate surroundings were damaged and vandalised; the church servants were intimidated and one monk was killed.

### ***Ma'abino Mesqele Kirstos Church***

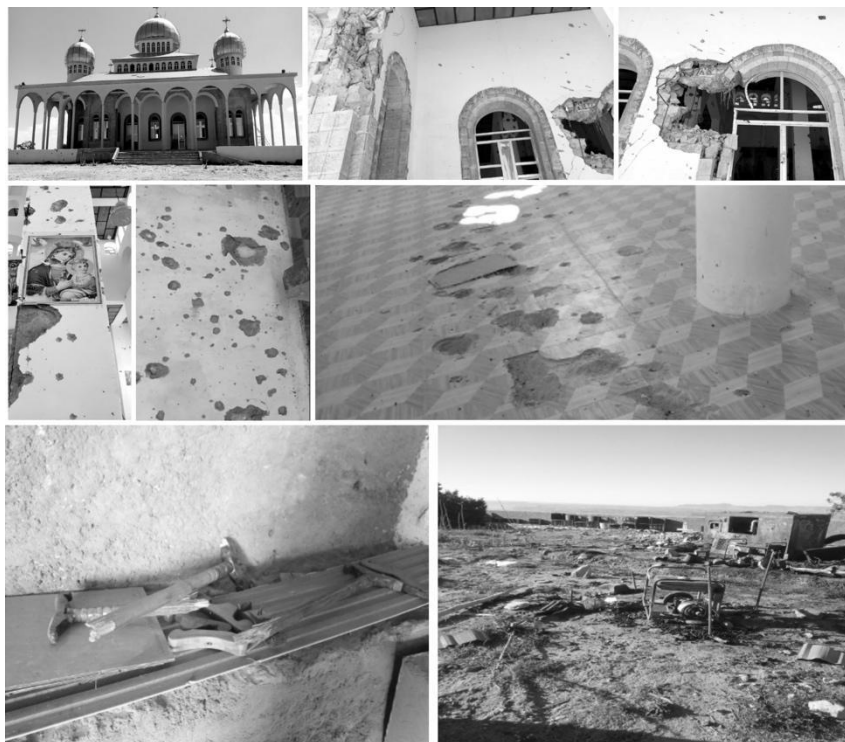
Mesqele Kirstos (cross of Christ) also known as Enda Abba Zewengel's Church, is a new church building located in Irob *woreda*,

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<sup>31</sup> A traditional hand drum used in ceremonies and Orthodox Christian liturgical music.

<sup>32</sup> A church object used to hold holy books. It serves as a stand where the book is placed for reading, typically by religious leaders.

Garabino *Tabia* of Eastern Tigray. It is a large and majestic church building (Figure 6.15), which can be reached by the road Adigrat-Zalambesa; one must turn right at Qerseber (five-kilometre North of Adigrat), after some fifty-minute drive through a gravel (rural) road. It stands on the edge of a plateau which is visible from a distance from all directions. The church was founded recently and inaugurated on the 30 September 2019.



**Figure 6.15. General view of Ma'abino Mesqel Kirstos Church, damage on its buildings and its ecclesiastical materials, and its construction machinery and materials**

Source: Hagos (2022)

There is an intriguing story related to this church. The community narrates a legend about a monk, Abba Zewengel, who established the church, where many Ethiopians visited him to be blessed. There are many popular oral stories about him. People believed that he lived for about 600 years on Earth. Thousands of Ethiopians, including the country's patriarch, had visited and consulted him, relying on his

teachings and council while he was alive. To their surprise, he died a year before the Tigray war broke out, on 21 October 2019. When people would visit and see him, they thought they are blessed. The church is named after him.

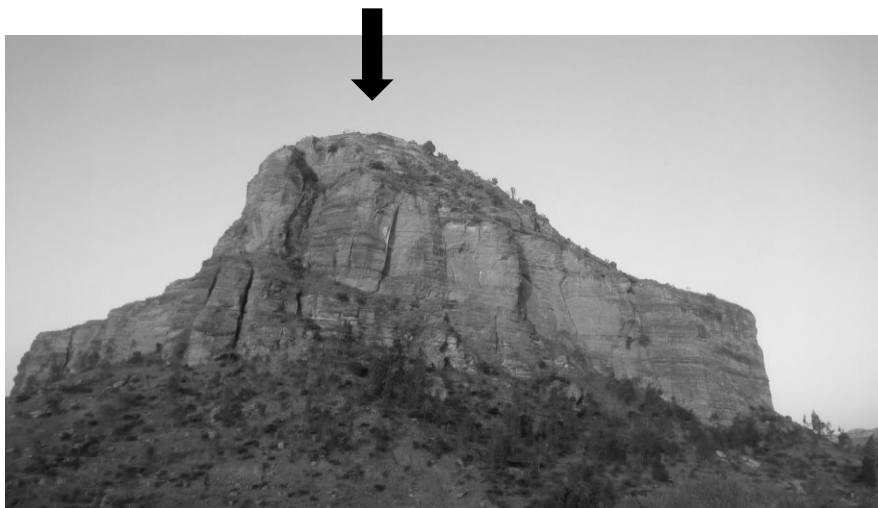
On the 2–10 January 2021, this church was shelled many times by the EDF. Hence, its north and west walls, doors, ceilings, and floors were damaged and these were partially destroyed. As one can see in the picture below, its church treasures and ecclesiastical objects, such as the prayer sticks, have also been severely damaged. According to witnesses, more than 12 heavy artillery landed in the churchyard and different construction machinery and materials were destroyed (Figure 6.15).

### **Rock-hewn churches**

Tigray is the home of rock-hewn churches. To date, about 150 churches are documented, although no complete survey has been done yet. The largest number of rock-hewn churches are in the Eastern Zone (the study area) and Central Zone (Asrat, 2002; Pearce, 1968; Tewoldemedhin, 1970; Buxton, 1971; Friedlander, 2015; Rickerby *et al.*, 2017). All these churches have one thing in common: they are carved into sandstone rock (Asrat, 2002). Sandstone is the most important factor for the presence of these churches in the region (Asrat, 2002). These churches have been deteriorating due to the degradable nature of the rock. The recent conflict has also resulted in severe damage to these churches and their associated treasures. A few examples of the many adversely affected rock-cut churches are discussed below.

#### ***Abune Abraham Debretsion Church***

The rock-hewn church of Abune Abraham, with six *tabots* (dedicated to Abune Abraham, who is believed to be the founder of the church and after whom the church is named, St Mary, St Mika'el, St Arbaete Ensessa, St Kidane Mihret and St Gabriel and which has an annual celebration on the 6 July), is a historical monastery located in Debretsion district (*tabia*), Kite Awla'elo *woreda*. It is situated 4 km South of Degum, standing on the top of a plateau (*amba*), which is visible from north, east and west directions (Figure 6.16).



**Figure 6.16. General View of the church, northern view**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

This church is one of the largest and architecturally impressive rock-hewn churches of Gheralta, which is registered in the tentative lists to become a world heritage site for Ethiopia as a cultural and natural (mixed) site. Some oral history testimonies say that the church was founded in 1297 AD, in the time of King Amdetsion; while others testify that it was constructed in the 4th century AD by St Abraham, after whom the church is named. Most of its interior parts (domes, wall panels, and the back walls of the holy of holies) are abundantly decorated with 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century AD paintings and carvings of Saints, angels, Apostles, and geometric designs (Figure 6.17).

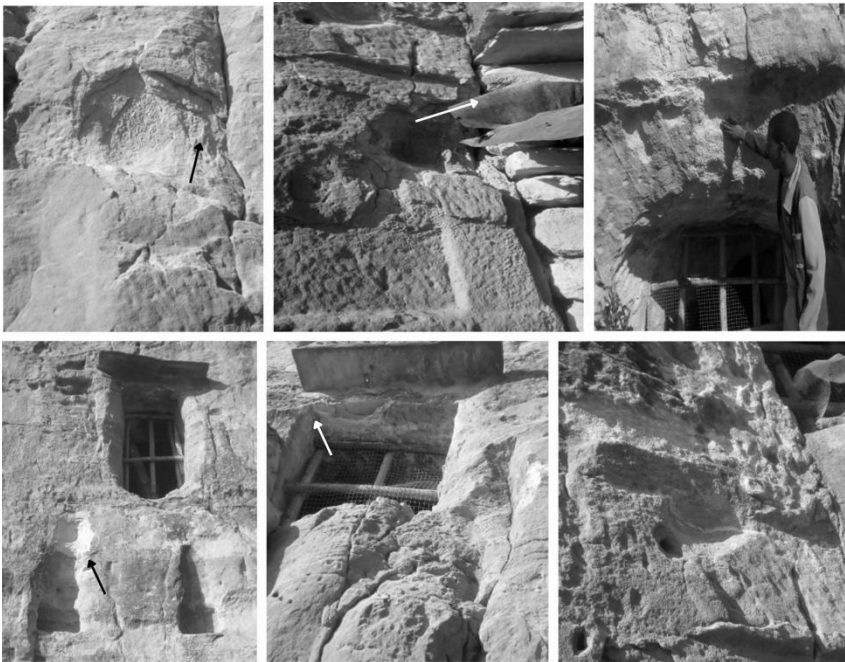




**Figure 6.17. The façade of Abune Abraham Monastery and 14<sup>th</sup> /15<sup>th</sup> century AD paintings and carvings**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

All sides of the church building suffered major damage.



**Figure 6.18. Damage to the Abune Abraham Monastery church building due to shelling**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

The church was shelled twice on 24 November 2020 and 7 December 2020 by Eritrean and Ethiopian forces. The church was bombed 12 times. The repeated attacks on the church building have resulted in cracks and fractures in the structure (Figure 6.18).



**Figure 6.19. Damaged *Bet Mahber*, burial place, and museum at Abune Abraham monastery**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

The burials near the church building and other buildings in the churchyard such as the *Bet Mahber* (a house where baptism activity took place) were also destroyed during the bombardment. Similarly, Figure 6.19 shows the church museum situated within the churchyard, which has also been damaged along with its showcases,

manuscripts, and many other ecclesiastical collections, which were destroyed in the same event.

### ***Mariam Yerefeda Church***

The historical rock-hewn church of Mariam Yerefeda, with three *tabots* (dedicated to St Mary, St Mika'el, and St Gabriel and holding its annual celebration on 21 January), is approximately three to four kilometres West of the Abune Abraham Church, almost parallel to the pinnacles or mountain cliff of Abune Abraham. Located some 2.5 km south of Degum, the church is hewn into a south-facing cliff of hard sandstone (Figure 6.20).



**Figure 6.20. The rock-hewn church of Mariam Yerefeda, a view from Abune Abraham Church**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

This rarely visited rock-hewn church and monastery complex, is difficult to find (Figure 6.21), and it is in a perilous condition due to water infiltration. There is no primary evidence as to the history of the church. There are some Aksumite stylistic features. According to local tradition, this church was constructed by Abune Gebremeskel in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Among the possessions are valuable centuries-old manuscripts and ecclesiastical materials.



**Figure 6.21. The façade, roof and interior architectural elements of  
Maryam Yerefeda's rock church**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

The church was attacked on 25 December 2020 by Eritrean troops.



**Figure 6.22. Maryam Yerefeda's rock church**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

The bombardment lasted five hours and left long-lasting physical imprints over the whole structures. The northern sides of the sanctuary have been destroyed (upper left and right, lower left), and the bell room (lower right) has been destroyed by shelling. The attacks were not limited to the main church building, but other buildings such as the bell room were also destroyed.

### ***Church of Mika’el Minda’e***

The rock-hewn church of Mika’el Minda’e, located some five kilometres west of the famous rock-hewn church of Abraha we Atsbaha, was also bombed and partly damaged. According to the local witnesses, the church was bombed by the EDF. The bombardment lasted for two days, on 4–5 January 2020, and several ecclesiastical objects that were in the treasure house were destroyed. Many of the treasures were burned during this time. This included ancient and valuable manuscripts (10 in total: Negere Mariam 2, Dersane Mika’el 3, Andum Wenjel 1, Ta’amre Iyesus 2, Haymanot Ab 1, Arbaet Wenjel 1); as well as four printed holy books (Ta’amre Mika’el 2, Dersane Mesqel 1, and Metsihafe Qidasse 1), and two processional crosses.

### ***Cherqos Wuqro and Selassie Degum***

As all rock churches of Tigray are carved from sandstone, which is fragile and easily degradable, the frequent attacks and bombings near the churches also harmed them. This has been observed in the rock-hewn churches of Cherqos Wuqro and Selassie Degum, where the opponent forces had fought frequent battles. In Cherqos Wuqro, a semi-monolithic church is located three kilometres north of the town of Wuqro. It is believed to have been carved during the Aksumite period (4<sup>th</sup> century AD). The back side of the structure, where the church is attached to the mother rock, was used as a fortification during the fighting by Ethiopian soldiers. A series of bombings were fired towards Wuqro from here.

Local community witnesses were unsure whether the perpetrators of the attacks were ENDF or EDF military forces. They reported that the EDF shared the uniforms of the ENDF. In other words, the community said that Eritrean soldiers were wearing the uniforms of Ethiopian soldiers. For this reason, the community stated that the forces jointly attacked the churches.

### ***Al-Nejash Mosque***

Tigray is not only the birthplace of Ethiopian Christendom, but also the first to embrace the Islamic faith in the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular (Yemane *et al.*, 2014). Some of the earliest

Islamic followers of the prophet, who escaped from persecution by rulers in Mecca, found a haven and were welcomed by the Aksumite king of the time, in 612 AD. They founded the first Mosque in Africa at Negash, 10 km north of Wugro. Nowadays, Negash is the Islamic world's second holiest place next to Mecca. In Tigray, this place is considered one of the significant cultural heritage sites and is a symbol of the region's religious co-existence.



**Figure 6.23. The exterior and interior surfaces of Al Nejash Mosque, minaret and the mosque's hall which are severely damaged by shelling**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

Hence, the destruction and damage of Tigray's cultural heritages have not been limited to churches and monasteries; mosques have also been targeted. As the joint Ethiopian and Eritrean forces advanced towards Mekelle on 23 November 2020, they shelled and severely damaged the Al Nejashi Mosque building and its ecclesiastical materials. As one can see in the photograph below (Figure 6.23), the

minaret of the mosque was deliberately damaged and its dome partially collapsed.

### **Archaeological sites**

Attacks on heritage by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces have not been limited to religious buildings and their ecclesiastical materials. There have been many devastating losses and damage to several archaeological resources of the region during the armed conflict. Numerous archaeological sites and their findings have been damaged and destroyed because of intentional direct hits and collateral damage. The archaeological sites of Meqabir Ga'ewa and Gud Bahri are among the most heavily affected sites.

#### ***Meqabir Ga'ewa***

The archaeological site of Meqabir Ga'ewa is a recently discovered pre-Aksumite site. It is situated about five kilometres south-west of Wuqro. Discoveries at this site include a Sabean<sup>33</sup> style temple dedicated to Almaqah and a few well-preserved cult objects, including a statue of a seated woman, an altar with a Sabaeen inscription on it, a partially inscribed podium, and other rich artefacts. These were tentatively dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and indicate cultural contact between the Ethiopian highlands and Sabaeans (Pawel & Nowotnick, 2010). On 23–25 November 2020, this site and its immediate environs were repeatedly shelled. According to local witnesses the attacks were deliberate and carried out jointly by ENDF and EDF forces. As one can see in the photograph below (Figure 6.24), the repeated attacks have severely damaged the site and its rich archaeological objects.

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<sup>33</sup> The architectural style of the temple discovered in this site is similar to the temples in southern Arabia.





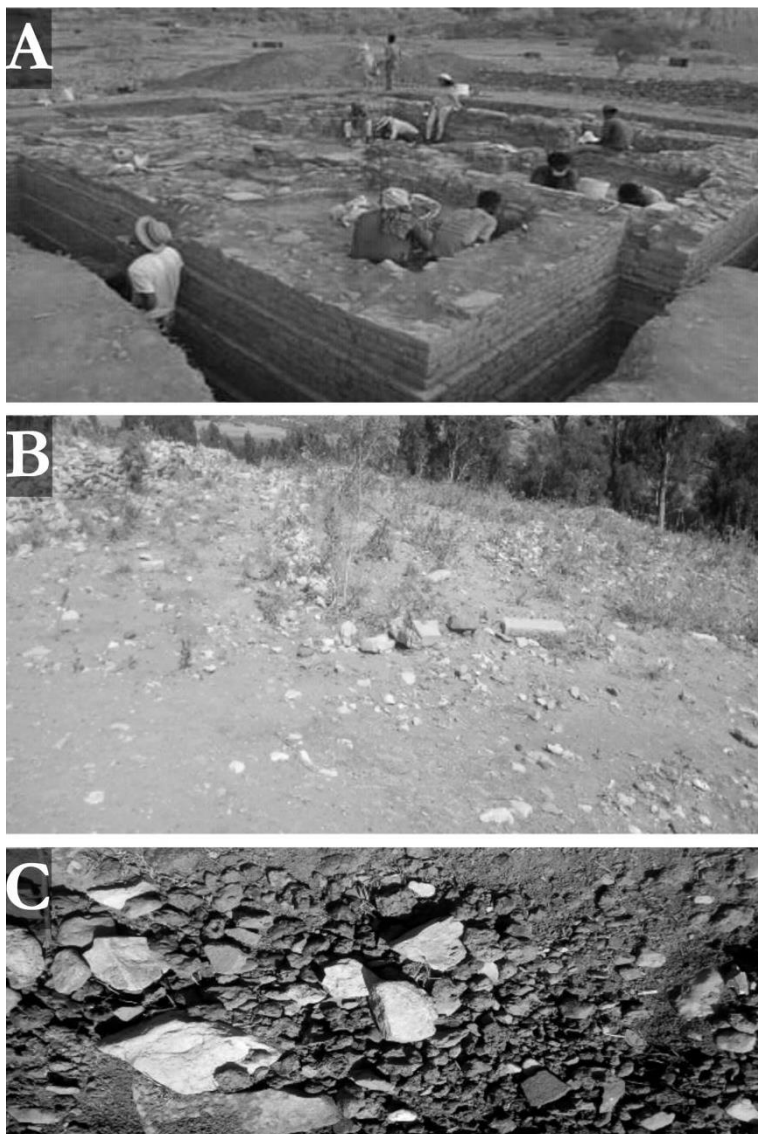
**Figure 6.24. The archaeological site of Meqabir Ga'ewa, damaged cultural objects and collapsed architectural site**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

In addition to damage from direct hits, the site has been used as a shelter for the Ethiopian soldiers, which in turn disturbed the site and its cultural materials.

### ***Gud Bahri***

The archaeological site of Gud Bahri, a recently discovered Aksumite site is situated about 2 kilometres north of Wuqro. Archaeological research work that has been conducted at the site since 2019 shows that it is endowed with Aksumite archaeological evidence (such as ceramics, iron slags, and architectural evidence). These are important findings which could shed light on reconstructing the cultural history of the past (Hiluf, 2019). After the excavation works and once the excavated trenches have been opened, it was fenced and temporarily sheltered. However, the site has been destroyed because of anthropogenic and natural agents of deterioration. Moreover, during the armed conflict, the site was briefly occupied by the joint Eritrean and Ethiopian forces and used as a military camp, which impacted on the territory's archaeological landscape and many of its archaeological objects. The troops occupied the site from 28–29 November 2020.



**Figure 6.25. Gud Bahri archaeological site**

Source: A Facebook; B&C Amanuel (2022)

An Aksumite building was discovered during the excavation season. It was open, fenced, and sheltered before the conflict began (A, Source; social media). The shelters and fences, which were designed as an interim measure for preserving the site from further deterioration, were looted by the forces. The site backfilled three months later following the looting and abandonment of the shelter

(B) and iron slags were disturbed and scattered from their original contexts (C).

### ***Archaeological Museum of Wugro***

Apart from archaeological sites, the Ethiopian and Eritrean forces also destroyed several archaeological and historical museums. The archaeological museum of Wugro, which was founded in 2008 EC, was damaged. The museum is unique in its collections; it housed, preserved, and displayed numerous artefacts (e.g., ceramics, morphologies, decorations and colours, Aksumite coins, glass and metallic objects, grinding stones, Sabeen inscriptions etc.), which were excavated and collected from the pre-Aksumite and Aksumite sites of Meqabir Ga'ewa (near Wugro town), Wakarida (Saesie Tsa'eda Emba *woreda*) and Mariam Anza (near Hawzen town).



**Figure 6.26. The archaeological museum of Wugro with its rich artefact collections**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

According to Mearg Abay, the museum curator, the museum's office along with its necessary records (documents of the museum's collection) was looted and destroyed by the invading forces. The attack was carried out by ENDF and EDF forces jointly, according to the local community testimonies. The attacks took place on 28–29 November 2020.

### ***Meqabir Ga'ewa***

Many artefacts which were temporarily stored (before they are finally stored in a museum) near the archaeological site of Meqabir Ga'ewa

were also severely damaged by Ethiopian forces. The artefacts collected from the site through archaeological excavations were properly stored and placed on shelves. However, after the Ethiopian forces took control of the site, they deliberately displaced, broke, and threw out the artefacts and attached records (written, drawings, and photographic information).



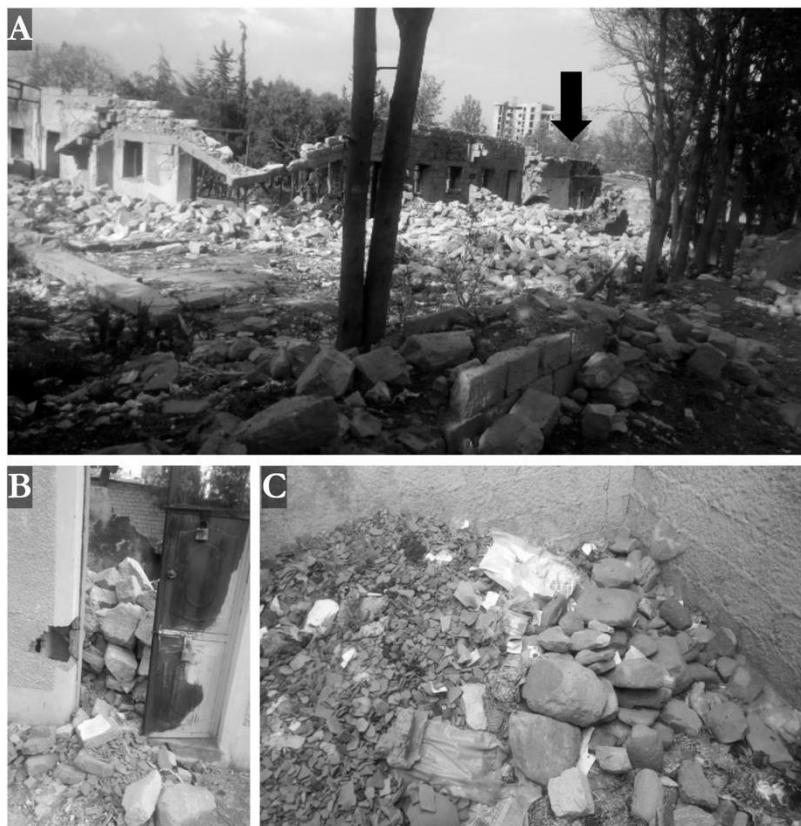
**Figure 6.27. Meqabir Ga’ewa artefacts**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

Some of the artefacts collected from the site, which were safely stored and kept in temporary houses near the site, were displaced and broken by Ethiopian troops when they controlled the site.

### ***Menebeyti archaeological site***

Artefacts that had been collected from the pre-Aksumite and Aksumite site of Menebeyti, Gulomekeda *woreda* (located 15 km north of Adigrat) were shelled and destroyed. The attack was carried out by the EDF on 23 November 2020. The artefacts (in which ceramics and grinding stones constituted the largest class of the collections), were properly stored and placed in the temporary houses at Adigrat, up to when the analysis stage of the archaeological project would be finished, after which time they would be finally stored in a museum.



**Figure 6.28. Menebeyti archaeological site**

Source: Amanuel (2022)

The buildings where the collections had been stored (A) were destroyed and the artefacts (mostly pottery shards and grinding stones) including their tags and descriptions, which were inside these houses, were shelled and destroyed by Eritrean troops.

### ***Effects on intangible aspects of heritage***

Inevitably, when there are attacks on the tangible aspects of cultural resources, the intangible dimension also faces a similar degree of destruction in the areas involved (Lenzerini, 2011; GFDRR, 2017). The destruction of archaeological sites, religious sites, and museums in the study area also had a similar destructive force on various expressions of the intangible cultural heritages. As most researchers agree, there is a direct connection between brutal attacks on cultural heritages and human life (Frowe & Matravers, 2019).

In Tigray, thousands of innocent people were killed by the Eritrean and Ethiopian forces. The population experienced intentional persecution, executions, forced displacements. The people also experienced intimidation of their religious leaders, their church servants, and their elders, which upset the social system. The civilian population also experienced an interruption and prohibition of religious activities, practices, and pilgrimages. The war affected the religious services in every church, monastery and mosque.

Religious leaders and church servants were among the targeted victims of the conflict. Hundreds of priests and deacons<sup>34</sup> were intimidated, and many were brutally killed (see Table 6.1). For instance, there have been murders and attacks on Hasen Gabriel, Minda'e Mika'el, and Egri Qeran Mika'el churches. In these churches, and many other similar churches and monasteries of the region, church servants were killed while they were praying inside the churches, which should be considered a sacred place. Many others were displaced to escape the persecution, leaving the churches without any servants to support the church community.

In most cases, while the churches were under the control of the Eritrean and Ethiopian forces, the soldiers entered each church and vandalised them, intimidating the church servants, and sometimes taking them to prison camps. For example, in Mela'ke Mhret on 7 January 2020, 23 church servants (8 priests, 12 deacons, and 3 *Debteras*<sup>35</sup>), who were hiding inside Abune Abrham church (the church they serve) to escape persecution, were taken to Mekelle and imprisoned there. According to the informant, the detainees had almost nothing to drink and little to eat and they were very worried, everyone feared for their lives.

In most cases, church servants, local communities, and/or congregations were not allowed to go to church to pray and ask for blessings daily. Religious activities such as pilgrimages, funerals, and baptisms, etc. were also forbidden.

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<sup>34</sup> An ordained minister within the Christian Church.

<sup>35</sup> An unordained member of the clergy in the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Church who assists in services and rites.

In some cases, religious festivals were turned into massacres. The Mariam Dengelat massacre, in which hundreds of civilians including priests, elders, and children were executed on the annual festival of the church on 30 November 2020, and the Fredashum massacre, where more than 60 civilians, 5 of them priests, were killed by Eritrean forces, are among the most horrific atrocities committed.

Many innocent elders, people with good knowledge of the past, who are responsible for the inter-generational transmission of knowledge, were particularly targeted in the conflict. In Degum Selassie, for example, a respected intellectual, with good knowledge of history and considered to be a moral leader by the local communities, was brutally killed.

All the above had a considerable impact on the intangible heritage of Tigray. Often, such types of damage have long-lasting social impact.

**Table 6.1. Number of religious and spiritual leaders in Eastern Tigray killed by woreda**

Woreda	Number of the religious and spiritual leaders of communities killed in selected sites							Total
	Priests	Deacons	Monks	Nuns	Religious teachers	Church heads	Sunday school	
Adigrat (town)	1	1						2
Atsibe-dera/ Atsibi Endasilase		1						1
Bizet	1	2						3
Sbuha Sa'esie/ Edgahamus	8	1					15	30

Woreda	Number of the religious and spiritual leaders of communities killed in selected sites							Total
	Priests	Deacons	Monks	Nuns	Religious teachers	Church heads	Sunday school	
Freweiny (Town)								
Ganta-Afeshum	7	6						13
Gere'alta	2	3						5
Gulomeked a	11	2	1		2			16
Hawzen	5	11						16
Irob	0	0						0
Kilte-Awlaelo	2				1			2
Subahasa'-esi'e	8	1					16	25
Tsaeda- emba/ Freweini	2	6					1	9
Tsirae-wemberta	5	2						7
Wukro (town)	2	2						4



Woreda	Number of the religious and spiritual leaders of communities killed in selected sites							Total
	Priests	Deacons	Monks	Nuns	Religious teachers	Church heads	Sunday school	
Hawzen (rural)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	
<b>Total</b>								<b>134</b>

Source: Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Adigrat Diocese (2022)

### ***Social impact of the attacks***

In the testimonies, the interviewees identify in great detail and with great certainty what happened in the attack, and how the attacks affected them and their community.

A witness who was an elder, and had lived in the community, identified that the attacks on holy places were not a singular event, but that in the past the ancient church had also been under attack. In the previous 1998–2000 war involving Eritrea, the ancient church of Debre Hiwot St Qirqos had been attacked by Eritrean forces, which was repeated the 2020–2022 Tigray war, when Eritrean military attacked the ancient church again:

*This ancient church [Debre Hiwot St Qirqos] was destroyed two times in my lifetime by Eritreans. One was during the 1998–2000 Ethio-Eritrean war and the second was on November 19–21, 2020. I would say the second [attack] was very damaging as they shelled it five times with heavy armaments. As you can see, the wall is destroyed, as are the ancient and sacred ecclesiastical objects. Very valuable manuscripts were burnt. We couldn't even try to save them as we fled to save our own life. When we came back later after some days, look.... we found this. This is the act of the devil. Destroying holy places always comes from devils. They also killed our relatives at that time which is a double pain for us. (...) looking at our church destroyed makes me even more powerless and ask why God is silent in looking into*

*this.* (Interviewee 14, church priest, interview by Gebremariam, face-to-face, 15 June 2022, interviewed at Ligat village, Gulomekeda)

Further to providing evidence, the interviewees testified that they felt powerless against the attack and that it hurt them that they failed to protect the holy place. This feeling was certainly expressed by elders and spiritual leaders of the community, who hold a special responsibility to ensure sacred places are safe and defended against attacks. In the context of Tigray, especially the rural areas, where community life centres on the religious spirit of the community, the failure to fulfil this duty was painful. Elders expressed that the successful attacks undermined their confidence that they could serve the community as leaders providing religious guidance. They questioned their faith given their failure to keep the sacred places and the community safe. This feeling was expressed with a deep emotional statement by this elderly interviewee:

*Our church [Ma'ago Debre Medhanit Amanuel] and its sacred objects were burned as we can't use them again, the same with other church objects. Our Tabot [copy of the Arc of the Covenant], thorn tabot [mänbärä tabot], processional and hand crosses, and paintings of saints were damaged during the two days of the war. The shelling came from the northern part as the Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers were coming through the northern direction. The church damage means the end of the world for me and my community. This is a holy place where we express our thoughts with God and celebrate the grace of God. However, our enemies want us to vanish, including from such a holy place.* (Interviewee 8, church priest, interview by Abriha, face-to-face, 25 April 2022, interviewed at Amanuel Meago church compound, Kiltealalo)

The community, who thought that they were living in the safe hands of the sacred spirit, has been deeply affected by the attacks. This has caused them great grief and deep emotions, as expressed by this elder from the community living around the Debre Hiwot St Qirqos Church:

*After we heard the sounds of heavy war from Zalambesa's direction, my family came together to my house, including my now late brother. Immediately, they shelled a heavy artillery into our village. The first one was dropped at the next house and killed animals and a neighbour. Then we fled from our house, but the second shelling followed us, which is when my brother was killed. We couldn't dare to look into his*

*dead body back as we fled. On the second day, our village was occupied by the Eritrean troops. Then we hid ourselves in the next mountain where we looked at the situation from a distance. Then I saw when our church [Debre Hivot St Qirqos] was destroyed. I cried a lot witnessing all the devastation. We are religious people, and this church is the most respected place for us and our community. But when things go wrong, look at what has happened to our church.* (Interviewee 12, church priest, interview by Gebremariam, face-to-face, 15 June 2022, interviewed at Ligat village, Gulomekeda)

Sacred places are more than stones and objects, they signify the symbol of the spirit that keeps the community together.

### **Perpetration of the attacks**

The interviewees identify with clarity the perpetrators of the attacks; they had seen the perpetrators operating in the environment, witnessed military movements, and interacted with soldiers once places were occupied. Based on the witness reports, which were triangulated with the observations of the researchers about the military operations in the sites, and after performing a comparison to corroborate the findings with a report written by the Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Adigrat Diocese (2022), this research found the following about the attacks and their perpetrators, in relation to (i) killing of religious leaders; (ii) burning of religious manuscripts; (iii) identification of perpetrators; (iv) modus operandi by the Eritrean Defence Forces and (v) Theft and looting.

#### ***Killing of religious leaders***

The researchers collected the alleged perpetrators and names of the religious leaders that were killed in several districts in Eastern Tigray during February 2021 and August 2022. The lists of the 134 people killed, mentioned in the interviews, were compiled from the interviews. Those included in the lists are not a complete list of all religious people who died in the districts in the period, but rather an indication, resulting from the interviews. The districts (*woredas*) from which lists of religious leaders that were killed were obtained are: Gantafeshum, Gulomekeda, Subha Saesie, Gheralta, Tsirae Womberta, Bizet, Hawzen, Kilte-Awlaelo, Tsaeda Emba, Atsbi and Wukro. The religious leaders that were listed as killed in these

woredas include priests, deacons, monks, religious teachers, Sunday school students (students who attended Sunday-based religious teachings in each church), and parish heads. Most persons listed as killed as religious leaders were men. Women are not allowed to become priests and deacons, and while the men were serving in the church, the men were targeted. A few nuns and Sunday school students who were killed were female. The religious leaders who were killed were of all ages, with the oldest killed being 80 years of age and the youngest being a Sunday school student, a boy of just 13 years old. The names were printed with permission. The perpetrators are alleged perpetrators, as there has not been a legal determination. The information is collected from the community.

**Table 6.2. Killing of religious leaders in Gantafeshum woreda, 2020**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	55	Priest	Shooting	21/11/2020	EDF
2	M	-	Priest	Shooting	20/11/2020	EDF
3	M	61	Priest	Shooting	21/10/2020	EDF
4	M	-	Priest	Shooting	20/11/2020	EDF
5	M	-	Deacon	Shooting	20/11/2020	EDF
6	M	21	Deacon	Shooting	20/11/2020	EDF
7	M	20	Deacon	Shooting	21/11/2020	EDF
8	M	-	Priest	Shooting	20/11/2020	EDF
9	M	58	Priest	Shooting	20/11/2020	EDF
10	M	-	Priest	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
11	M	19	Deacon	Shooting	20/11/2020	EDF
12	M	-	Deacon	Shooting	23/11/2020	EDF
13	M	25	Deacon	Shelling	29/11/2020	EDF

Source: List compiled in Ganatafeshum, Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

**Table 6.3. Killing of religious leaders in Gulomekeda woreda, 2021**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	80	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
2	M	69	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
3	M	40	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
4	M	50	Monk	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
5	M	90	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
6	M	30	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
7	M	15	Deacon	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
8	M	75	Teacher	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
9	M	76	Deacon	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
10	M	72	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
11	M	48	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
12	M	54	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
13	M	40	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
14	M	60	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
15	M	80	Teacher	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF
16	M	72	Priest	Shooting	05/01/2021	EDF

Source: List compiled in Gulomekeda, Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

**Table 6.4. Killing of religious leaders and Sunday school students in Subha Saesie woreda, 2020**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	70	Priest	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
2	M	44	Priest	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
3	M	67	Priest	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
4	M	60	Priest	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
5	M	51	Priest	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
6	M	43	Priest	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
7	M	57	Priest	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
8	M	61	Priest	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
9	M	26	Deacon	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
10	M	18	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
11	M	17	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
12	M	19	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
13	M	13	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
	M	17	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
15	M	18	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
16	M	19	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
17	M	20	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
18	F	19	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
19	M	18	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
20	F	17	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
21	M	18	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
22	F	17	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
23	F	18	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
24	M		Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF
25	F	17	Student	Shooting	30/11/2020	EDF

Source: List compiled in Subha Saesie, Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022 (Student = Sunday school student)

**Table 6.5. Killing of religious leaders in Gheralta woreda, 2020/21**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	35	Deacon	Shooting	24/14/2021	EDF
2	M	39	Priest	Shooting	24/11/2020	EDF
3	M	45	Priest	Shooting	02/12/2020	EDF

4	M	85	Priest	Shooting	23/11/2020	EDF
5	M	48	Dicon	Shooting	06/01/2021	EDF

Source: List compiled in Subha Gheralta, Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

**Table 6.6. Killing of religious leaders in Tsirae Womberta woreda, 2020/21**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	59	Priest	Shooting	24/12/2020	ENDF
2	M	39	Priest	Shooting	28/11/2020	ENDF
3	M	50	Priest	Shooting	04/01/2021	ENDF
4	M	68	Priest	Shooting	02/12/2020	ENDF
5	M	49	Priest	Shooting	01/01/2021	EDF
6	M	25	Deacon	Shooting	01/01/2021	EDF
7	M	27	Deacon	Shooting	01/01/2021	EDF

Source: List compiled in Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022



**Table 6.7. Killing of religious leaders in Bizet woreda, 2020/21**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	49	Priest	Shooting	01/12/2020	EDF
2	M	27	Deacon	Shooting	03/03/2021	EDF

Source: List compiled in Bizet woreda, Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

**Table 6.8. Killing of religious leaders in Hawzen woreda, 2020/21**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	48	Teacher	Shooting	23/04/2021	ENDF
2	M	73	Priest	Shooting	15/01/2021	EDF
3	M	50	Deacon	Shooting	25/11/2021	ENDF
4	M	72	Deacon	Shooting	20/11/2021	EDF
5	M	68	Deacon	Shooting	04/04/2021	EDF
6	M	63	Priest	Shooting	04/04/2021	EDF
7	M	57	Priest	Shooting	24/04/2021	ENDF
8	M	66	Priest	Shooting	23/11/2020	EDF
9	M	21	Deacon	Shooting	29/01/2021	EDF
10	M	23	Deacon	Shooting	23/11/2020	EDF
11	M	22	Deacon	Shooting	23/11/2020	EDF
12	M	-	Deacon	Shooting	23/11/2020	EDF

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
13	M	19	Deacon	Shooting	23/11/2020	EDF
14	M	-	Deacon	Shooting	23/11/2020	EDF
15	M	21	Deacon	Shooting	26/11/2020	EDF

Source: List compiled in Hawzen, Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

**Table 6.9. Killing of religious leaders in Kilte-Awlaelo woreda, 2020**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	48	Teacher	Shooting	24/11/2020	EDF
2	M	73	Parish Head	Shooting	24/11/2020	EDF
3	M	50	Parish head & Priest	Shooting	24/11/2020	ENDF

Source: List compiled in Kilte-Awlaelo, Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

**Table 6.10. Killing of religious leaders in Tsaeda Emba woreda, 2020**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	48	Parish head	Shooting	24/11/2020	EDF
2	M	73	Priest	Shooting	24/11/2020	EDF
3	M	50	Deacon	Shooting	24/11/2020	ENDF
4	F	72	Student	Shooting	24/11/2020	EDF
5	M	68	Deacon	Shooting	01/12/2020	ENDF
6	M	-	Deacon	Shooting	01/12/2020	EDF
7	M	-	Deacon	Shooting	01/12/2020	EDF
8	M	-	Deacon	Shooting	01/12/2020	EDF

Source: List compiled in Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022 (Student = Sunday school student)

**Table 6.11. Killing of religious leaders in Atsbi woreda, 2020**

#	Sex	Age	Religious Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	48	Deacon	Shooting	24/11/2020	EDF

Source: List compiled in Atsbi, Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

**Table 6.12. The killing of religious leaders in Wukro woreda, 2020**

#	Sex	Age	Status	Cause of death	Date	Alleged perpetrator
1	M	48	Priest	Shooting	24/11/2020	EDF
2	M	73	Deacon	Shooting	24/11/2020	EDF
3	M	72	Deacon	Shooting	21/11/2020	EDF
4	M	68	Priest	Shooting	01/12/2020	ENDF

Source: List compiled in Wukro, Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022).

According to our informants, 134 spiritual and religious leaders and persons have been killed in 18 woredas of Eastern Tigray. Eleven (11) of them were killed by the ENDF while 123 were killed by the EDF since the start of the war in November 2020 up to August 2022. Most of them were killed in Subha Sa'esie woreda on 30 November 2020 by the EDF. All of them, except one, were killed by direct shooting, while the remaining one was killed during shelling (Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022).

### ***Burning of religious manuscripts***

The researchers were able to compile lists of lost artefacts in two locations. In both locations, it concerned the burning of holy scripts. The research was carried out in Debre Hiwot Qidus Cherkos and Mekane Semaait Qidus Cherkos Feredashum.

In Debre Hiwot Qidus Cherkos, the researchers found that 39 religious manuscripts were burned and that in all instances, the destruction of the religious manuscripts was carried out by the Eritrean military of the EDF. The manuscripts are identified in the table below by name.

**Table 6.13. Debre Hiwot Qidus Cherkos Ligat list of burning of religious manuscripts**

#	Name of manuscript <sup>36</sup>	Brana <sup>37</sup>	Print	Total	Condition	Alleged perpetrator
1	Dirsane Rufael	1		1	Burned	EDF
2	Gedle Yohanes	1		1	Burned	EDF
3	Gedle Gebremenfes Qidus	1		1	Burned	EDF
4	Gedle Abune Aregawi	2		2	Burned	EDF
5	Tselote Etan	1		1	Burned	EDF
6	Haymanote Abewe		2	2	Burned	EDF
7	Teamre Maryam	2	2	4	Burned	EDF
8	Zena Selassie	2	3	5	Burned	EDF
9	Dirsane Mikaeal	3	3	6	Burned	EDF
10	Teamire Eyesus	4	1	5	Burned	EDF
11	Sinkisar (one full year)		2	2	Burned	EDF
12	Metshafe Sinkisar (one full year)	1		1	Burned	EDF
13	Amstu Tsewatw		1	1	Burned	EDF

<sup>36</sup> Most of the church manuscripts in the Orthodox churches are identified by who they are devoted to. For example, Teamire Mariam refers to Miracle of Mary and is identified with this name.

<sup>37</sup> Brana is a handwritten book made of folded parchment leaves, usually prepared from goat's skin. The leaves are collected, sown together and given a cover.

#	Name of manuscript <sup>36</sup>	Brana <sup>37</sup>	Print	Total	Condition	Alleged perpetrator
14	Meqdes Milkut	1		1	Burned	EDF
15	Gedle Cherqos	3		3	Burned	EDF
16	Gedle Teklehaymanot	1		1	Burned	EDF
17	Dirsane Gebreal	2		2	Burned	EDF
<b>Total</b>		<b>25</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>17</b>

Source: List compiled in Wukro in Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

In Mekane Semaait Qidus Cherkos Feredashum a total of 157 religious manuscripts were destroyed. The Eritrean military burned these holy scripts in all the recorded occasions, a total of 35 incidents.

**Table 6.14. Mekane Semaait Qidus Cherkos Feredashum list of burning of religious manuscripts**

#	Name of manuscript	Brana	Print	Total	Condition	Alleged perpetrator
1	Qidase	2	1	3	Burned	EDF
2	Arganon	3		3	Burned	EDF
3	Gibre Himamat	3	2	5	Burned	EDF
4	Negere Maryam	2	1	3	Burned	EDF
5	Teamire Maryam	3	2	5	Burned	EDF
6	Gedle Qirqos	5	3	8	Burned	EDF
7	Gedle Abune Aregawi	2	1	3	Burned	EDF

#	Name of manuscript	Brama	Print	Total	Condition	Alleged perpetrator
8	Gedle Gebremenfes Qidus	1	1	2	Burned	EDF
9	Teamire/Gedle Mikaeal	3	3	6	Burned	EDF
10	Teamire/Gedle Gebreal	2	1	3	Burned	EDF
11	Teamire/Gedle Rufael	1		1	Burned	EDF
12	Teamire Eyesus	3	1	4	Burned	EDF
13	Dirsane Senbet	4	3	7	Burned	EDF
14	Beale Mesqel	3	2	5	Burned	EDF
15	Dawit	7	2	9	Burned	EDF
16	Tselote Etan	3	3	6	Burned	EDF
17	Haymanote Abew	4	2	6	Burned	EDF
18	Dirsane Yohannes	2	1	3	Burned	EDF
19	Teamire Teklehaymanot	3	2	5	Burned	EDF
20	Metshafe Teklil	2	1	3	Burned	EDF
21	Aslti	5		5	Burned	EDF
22	Ginzet	7	2	9	Burned	EDF
23	Sinkisar	4	1	5	Burned	EDF
24	Dirsane Mahyaw	2	2	4	Burned	EDF
25	Kidane Mihret	3	2	5	Burned	EDF
26	Medhanealem	5	1	6	Burned	EDF

#	Name of manuscript	Brana	Print	Total	Condition	Alleged perpetrator
27	Zena Selassie	4	1	5	Burned	EDF
28	Abune Libanos	2		2	Burned	EDF
29	Metshafe Choder	3	5	8	Burned	EDF
30	Teamre/Gedle Giorgis	3		3	Burned	EDF
31	Meftihe Siray	5		5	Burned	EDF
32	Gedle Mezgebeselessie	2		2	Burned	EDF
33	Arbaete Ensisa	2		2	Burned	EDF
34	Mahbere Bokri	4		4	Burned	EDF
35	Abune Samuel	2		2	Burned	EDF
<b>Total</b>		<b>111</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>157</b>		<b>35</b>

Source: List compiled in Wukro in Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

In just two locations, a total of 198 religious manuscripts were destroyed by burning, in a total of 52 incidents. In all the incidents the Eritrean military forces of the EDF were alleged to be responsible for the destruction, as reported by the community.

### ***Identification of perpetrators at the inspected sites***

From the 20 sites, all attacks were reported to have happened at the beginning of the war, between November 2020 and January 2021. This corresponds with the findings of Kahsay *et al.* (2024) In 9 out of 20 cases, the attacks were allegedly perpetrated by ENDF and EDF. In all but one of the cases, the Eritrean forces were involved in the perpetration. Kahsay *et al.* (2024) also highlight the importance of perpetration of Eritrean soldiers in the destruction of heritage, even though the Eritrean presence on the terrain was denied by the



countries' leaders until 23 March 2021. The interviews with the witnesses in the communities coherently speak to the contrary.

In the list of findings on perpetrators in this research, only in one case (Meqabir Ga'ewa) was the alleged perpetrator was identified as 'only the ENDF'. In five instances, the EDF was identified as the sole perpetrator.

**Table 6.15. Overview of attacks on sacred places allegedly perpetrated by ENDF, EDF, or both, from November 2020 to January 2021**

#	Churches, monasteries, mosques, archaeological sites	Date	Allegedly perpetrated by ENDF	Allegedly perpetrated by EDF	and ENDF EDF
<i>Constructed churches</i>					
1	Egri Qeran Qeddus Mika'el Church	23/11/2020	V	V	V
2	Hasen St Gabria'el Church		V	V	V
3	Ma'ago Debre Medhanit Amanuel	24&25/11/2020	V	V	V
4	Ligat Debre Hiwot Qirqos Church	19&21/11/2020		V	
5	Addi Teqena Qeddest Mariam Church	17/11/2022	V	V	V
6	Firedashum Mekane Sema'et Qirqos Church	01/01/2021		V	

#	Churches, monasteries, mosques, archaeological sites	Date	Allegedly perpetrated by ENDF	Allegedly perpetrated by EDF	and ENDF EDF
7	Mukuyam Debresina Qeddest Mariam		V	V	V
8	Monastery of Debre Damo	11/01/ 2021		V	
9	Ma'abino Mesqele Kirstos Church	07/03/ 2021		V	
<i>Rock-hewn churches</i>					
10	Abune Abraham Debretsion Rock- hewn Church	24/11/ 2020 & 7/12/ 2020	V	V	V
11	Mariam Yerefeda Rock-hewn Church	25/12/ 2020		V	
12	Rock-hewn Church of Mika'el Minda'e	4&5/01/2020		V	
13	General damage to rock-hewn churches: Cherqos Wuqro and Selassie Degum		NA	NA	
<i>Mosques</i>					
14	Al-Nejash Mosque	23/11/ 2020	V	V	V

#	Churches, monasteries, mosques, archaeological sites	Date	Allegedly perpetrated by ENDF	Allegedly perpetrated by EDF	and ENDF EDF
<i>Archaeological sites</i>					
15	Meqabir Ga'ewa	23 to 25/ 11/2020	NA	NA	
16	Gud Bahri		V	V	V
17	The archaeological museum of Wuqro		V	V	V
18	Meqabir Ga'ewa		V		
19	Menebeyti archaeological site		NA	NA	
<b>Total</b>		<b>Nov 2020 to Jan 2021</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>9</b>

Source: Determination of perpetrators triangulated with documentation of the Eastern Zone of Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese, 2022

In total, of the 20 sites that were inspected, 17 attacks involved the Eritrean military of the EDF, 10 involved the federal Ethiopian military of the ENDF, and in nine sites both EDF and ENDF were involved according to the witness reports, obtained from this investigation.

### ***Modus operandi of attacks by EDF***

From the observations and interviews, it is concluded that the Eritrean forces operated in three phases:

- Phase 1: Reconnaissance: July 2018 – 3 November 2020
- Phase 2: Attacks: 3 November 2020 – March 2021
- Phase 3: Looting: January 2021 – March 2023

The perpetration was carried out in the following sequence. After the signing of the 2018 Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the opening of the borders, intelligence persons and spies operating under the Eritrean military were sent to Tigray to carry out Phase 1. Immediately after the start of hostilities on 3 November 2020 and the declaration of the Law Enforcement Operation on 4 November 2020 by the Ethiopian government, Eritrean troops entered Eastern Tigray and perpetrated systematic attacks on the religious buildings and archaeological sites. In phase 3, the Eritrean troops perpetrated looting.

Different teams were sent to carry out the different tasks associated with the three phases. The first phase was carried out by intelligence operators. The second phase was carried out by Eritrean troops. The third phase was carried out with the support of the highly technically trained teams which were able to identify the value of the objects taken from Tigray to Eritrea and who advised technically on how these should be transported.

It was observed that the looting and theft was perpetrated in two different ways, as per the instruction of the EDF commanders. Smaller objects could be taken by troops for ‘personal use’. The larger objects of greater value were taken separately, and not as individual looted belongings to individual troops.

### ***Theft and illicit trafficking of valuable antiquities***

Looting and theft became as much a threat to Tigray’s artefacts as bombs and shells. Several small artefacts such as coins and ecclesiastical objects especially historical manuscripts, Bibles, scrolls, and crosses were available in most areas of Tigray when they came under the control of the Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Amhara forces, but it appears that the Eritrean soldiers are among the most active perpetrators in the theft and were organised and prepared to do so.

Much of the theft is reported in the archaeological museum of Aksum, the Waldibba monastery, and in the many churches of the Gulomekeda *woreda*, where significant quantities of historical materials have been looted. Reports from church administrations of Debre Hiwot St Qirqos church (near Zalambesa) and St Qirqos church in Fredashum show that thirty-nine (39) printed holy books,

twenty-one (21) centuries-old manuscripts, sixty (60) prayer sticks, ten (10) processional & hand crosses, and fifty-one (51) printed holy books, twenty-four (24) historic manuscripts and other religious utensils, respectively, were reportedly stolen by Eritrean forces.

In 2022 artefacts such as centuries-old manuscripts, Bibles, scrolls, crosses, etc. that were looted from Tigray found on offer to collectors for a few hundred pounds on sites like eBay<sup>38</sup>. According to some researchers, like Hagos Abrha (PhD), an expert in Ethiopian and Eritrean manuscript culture, it should be researched whether these antiquities on offer might have been looted during the war in Tigray (Abrha, 2022). The evidence found in our investigation that a high volume of antiquity objects that were looted in Tigray, strengthens the hypothesis offered by Abrha (2022).

Despite the development and establishment of domestic and international legal frameworks for the protection of religious heritage in the events of armed conflicts, their applicability has been very slow, and sometimes no response to safeguard the heritages under threat was offered. Concerned bodies (such as the Culture and Tourism Bureau and Tigray Orthodox Church Diocese) and heritage professionals and scholars expressed their concern regarding the severe destructions and losses of cultural and religious losses in Tigray (Abrha, 2022).

## **Discussion: Legal frameworks and reconstruction**

After the end of the two World Wars, particularly, following the vast destruction including cultural heritage, the international community provided basic rules for the protection of cultural heritage in the context of armed conflict (Rouhani, 2016; Jimenez, 2019; Lindhagen, 2018; Bauer, 2015). One of the most important is the Hague Convention, which was adopted in 1954, with its two protocols (1954 and 1999), aiming at the safeguarding and protection of cultural properties in the event of armed conflicts. This convention has some structural deficits like the lack of risk preparedness mechanisms and

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<sup>38</sup> For instance: [Ethiopian artefacts on eBay spark fears of looting from war-torn Tigray | The Independent](#)

safeguarding measures, technical assistance, communication networks with UNESCO, and sanctions for the violations against it. Despite this, it provides a recognised framework, and considers that “damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind” (Rouhani, 2016; Jimenez, 2019; Lindhagen, 2018). The UNESCO conventions governing the protection of cultural heritage are:

- 1970 UNESCO Convention for prohibiting and preventing the illicit export, import, and transfer of ownership of cultural properties
- 1972 Convention aiming at the protection of cultural and natural heritages
- 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritages.

The UNESCO conventions concern the protection and safeguarding of heritage of outstanding universal value, and global and worldwide interest, and complement the Hague Convention which protects any cultural property that each state sees fit (Rouhani, 2016; Jimenez, 2019; Lindhagen, 2018).

The 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions were adopted to improve the protection of civilians during armed conflict and ensure the protection of cultural objects and places of worship which constitute the cultural or spiritual heritage of peoples. In addition to the above conventions, different international laws were established at different times. The 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is a treaty-based tribunal and is a global criminal mechanism that aims at prosecuting serious crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crime of destruction of cultural property. The United Nations (UN) Security Council also cooperates with UN member states to prevent the illicit trade of antiquities coming from places affected by armed conflict (Rouhani, 2016; Jimenez, 2019; Lindhagen, 2018). In addition to the international instruments, each country has its domestic legal approaches to protect and prevent the destruction and loss of its heritage resources. In Ethiopia, the ARCCH (Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage) (2000) declared that “exporting cultural heritage is

prohibited and no person may engage in the purchase and sale of cultural heritage for commercial purposes” (ARCCH, 209/2000).

In a submission to the International Criminal Court, the Queen’s University Belfast Human Rights Centre and the Redress Trust observed:<sup>39</sup>

*Symbolically important objects or places are destroyed to sap enemy morale, attack the enemy’s memory, rupture a community’s sense of continuity, and erase the manifestation of its collective sense of identity.* (Queen’s University Belfast Human Rights Centre and the Redress Trust, 2016, p. 5)

In addition to pursuing the legal framework to enforce the law, the findings of this study speak to the importance of justice and material redress, to prevent a re-occurrence and to ensure priority is given to the future protection of these sites. The follow up of the war should include recognition of the identity of the places, communities and people who were attacked. The memory of the events should be purposefully considered as part of healing process in the rebuilding efforts (Van Schaik, 2023).

## Conclusion

In this study, 181 cultural and religious heritage sites were surveyed, and 20 sites were selected for further in-depth investigation. The research was carried out in Eastern Tigray in 2021 and 2022 to understand how Tigray’s cultural heritage was affected by the war. The study must be considered as a preliminary assessment in the field to provide insight concerning the degree and type of heritage damage and losses in the subject area. The study found (i) that archaeological and historic artefacts and many other cultural resources were seriously

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<sup>39</sup> Citing: Stanley-Price, N. (2005). The thread of continuity: cultural heritage in post-war recovery. In *Cultural Heritage in Postwar Recovery: Papers*, ICCROM Forum held on October 4-6 2005, p4; Ascherson, N. (2005). Cultural destruction by war and its impact on group identities, in *Cultural Heritage in Postwar Recovery*. In: *Cultural Heritage in Postwar Recovery: Papers*, ICCROM Forum held on October 4-6 2005, 17-25, p22. Abtahi, H. (2001) The Protection of Cultural Property in Times of Armed Conflict: The Practice of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 14(1) (2001) 1-33, p1.

damaged and destroyed, including religious buildings and their ecclesiastical and liturgical objects, (ii) archaeological sites and museums along with (iii) recently discovered artefacts such as ceramics, metal objects, stone inscriptions and collections, were also damaged and destroyed.

The war also damaged the intangible aspects of the heritage of the region in general, which traditionally boasts a proud social organisation to protect these historic sites. Religious leaders and church servants (priests, deacons, monks, and nuns) were targeted and killed. This research found that in a selection of 18 *woredas* (districts) 134 spiritual and religious leaders were killed. The attack on and killing of spiritual and religious leaders has affected the social fabric in Tigray and undermined the traditional intangible heritage that supports the maintenance and protection of the rich cultural and religious heritage sites in Tigray.

Out of 36 selected incidents studied, it is concluded that in 28 incidents the Eritrean military was involved, and in 17 *only* Eritrean soldiers were involved (as reported by communities). Many of the incidents were reportedly perpetrated by Eritrean soldiers from November 2020 till March 2021, while the presence of Eritrean troops was denied at that time. The attacks were prepared with secret reconnaissance missions carried out by Eritrean military from July 2018 until November 2020. When the war broke out, Eritrean soldiers actively attacked and destroyed heritage in Tigray. Then teams with experts were sent to select and transport the stolen artefacts to Eritrea in specialised transportation missions. Antiquities have been identified on-line for sale, which suggests an increase in illicit trading has been the result.

The witnesses in the communities expressed the belief that the focus of the war efforts was to destroy cultural and religious heritage in an attempt to undermine the pride of the people in Tigray in conserving these age-old sites for humanity. In terms of social impact, the destruction did undermine the community leadership, as they felt they had failed to protect these sacred places. This, in turn, undermined the communities, who rely on the shared sacred values that are symbolised by the religious places and objects they cherish.



Tigray has an abundance of cultural and religious historical heritage that may even date back to pre-Aksumite times. The rich heritage in the region is not simply of local and national significance, but these are cultural resources of global importance. Collectively these resources represent enormous cultural value and the Tigray war, in which these were actively targeted, destroyed and looted, has shown that the community heritage conservation needs active protection.

Post-war conservation efforts should be prioritised. This should be carried out with the involvement of the communities and their leadership. To restore these heritage sites and artefacts, relevant bodies should be given permission to identify the looted antiquities and to alert investigative authorities such as Interpol, so that they can assist in the identification of looted artefacts and their restoration to their original places. The question of responsibility and accountability for the damage resulting from the attacks must be addressed. All legal means to restore justice and exercise reparation measures should be used with the view that the communities can enjoy reconciliation (with the perpetrators) and build peace. The intangible value of heritage conservation should be recognised and communities should be supported by providing psychological support and healing to the community. It is a high priority that value be given to the rich heritage of Tigray and to the people who help to protect it.

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We express our sincere gratitude to the interviewees and participants for their insightful contributions to the study. We also extend our appreciation to the Eastern Zone of the Tigray Orthodox Tewahdo Church Diocese and its branches in the woredas of eastern Tigray for their unwavering support. Our heartfelt gratitude goes to the farmers of eastern Tigray, who generously shared their limited food resources with us during the siege and blockade and guided us to various churches and heritage sites. Finally, we also thank the editorial and peer review teams for their timely assistance and valuable feedback. The editors also thank G., who documented heritage destruction throughout the war-period and communicated with the auditors on his findings. The advice he provided ultimately lead to identifying the researchers of this chapter, which was prepared for this book.

## **Authors' contributions**

The lead author conceptualised the research idea, determined the significance of the study and directed the study, while the second author contributed to the research framework and developed the first draft of the study. Both authors collaboratively conducted the interviews and field visits, collected and organised the data, coded and labelled the information, and performed data analysis. They also reviewed all versions of the article and provided significant input on the conceptual framework.

## **Ethical clearance**

This research was approved by the institutional review boards at Adigrat University (IBR Approval Number: IRB 2023-021), and all participants provided informed consent before their participation in the study.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.

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### Deliberate Destruction: Targeting Symbols of Cultural and Religious Identity in Tigray

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*As for the mother of ten, a hyena ate her.*

#### Abstract

This study concerns the extensive and systematic destruction of cultural heritage in Tigray during the war, focusing on the first months of the war. Churches, mosques, monasteries, heritage sites, museums, and historical places were deliberately destroyed, along with holy books and manuscripts. The damage was geographically widespread and involved looting, burning, and breaking of cultural assets. Massacres, especially against clergy and religious leaders, accompanied the destruction of cultural artefacts, with significant civilian casualties. The Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), and Amhara Special Forces and militias were identified as perpetrators. The presence of Eritrean soldiers, operating under a siege, and who were heavily involved in the perpetration of the crimes, was denied by the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders. The Ethiopian government failed to protect cultural and religious assets and civilians, thus violating international laws. A pathway to ensure accountability for those responsible, compensation for destroyed assets, and the return of looted items, is needed.

**Key words:** Tigray war, heritage, cultural heritage, religious heritage, Eritrea, Ethiopia



## Introduction

Contemporary armed conflicts that use the destruction of cultural heritage and property as a weapon of war are attracting the attention of the international community (Brammertz *et al.*, 2016). Attacks against cultural heritage are acts that affect the common history and values of the international community on a larger scale (Ellis, 2017). This type of crime deeply harms the universal values held by the international community (Ellis, 2017) based on the destruction of cultural and religious identity (Kingston, 2015).

The importance of culture and religion in maintaining a group's identity and, thus, ensuring their survival, is often raised in contemporary discourse (Beyers, 2017). There is more to cultural heritage sites than “just stones” (Rubin, 2014). Instead, they represent a people's identity and history for all of humanity (Ellis, 2017). Concerning this, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) under Article 27 states that “everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (UDHR, 1948).

In no way is the wilful destruction of property that is regarded as symbols of cultural and religious identity a modern phenomenon. This age-old practice is now recognised as an international crime, because it has increasingly evolved into both a weapon and a by-product of war (Ellis, 2017). Sabine von Schorlemer in her study indicated that “Deliberate and systematic acts against cultural heritage have spread to a considerable extent” (von Schorlemer, 2020). The deliberate targeting of Ukrainian cultural heritage during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was reported by the European Parliament's CULT committee on March 2023, can be mentioned as a manifestation of the spread (EU Parliament, 2023). International law has banned the deliberate capture, devastation, or damage of cultural property starting from the early attempts to codify the laws and customs of war. These efforts indicate that even though cultural and religious properties, artefacts, and science may be confined to the territory of a state, “they attracted international protection because of their importance to all humanity, such acts constituted war crimes” (Vrdoljak, 2016). Consequently, several legal regimes protect cultural

heritage, the destruction of which may amount to a war crime if committed under the context of armed conflict.

With this, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Statute) of 1998 establishing the ICC article 8(2) (b) (ix) for example provides:

*For this Statute, “war crimes” means: Intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science, or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals, and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not military objectives. (ICC, 1998)*

The rules and customs of war stipulate that a war crime is committed when the legal, material, and mental elements of the crime are fulfilled. This means the alleged act of cultural destruction should fit into the list of elements mentioned under art. 8(2)(b) (ix) and the perpetrator should commit the act intentionally or negligently. About the destruction of cultural heritage, the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) Appeals Judgement under paragraph 277 indicated that the mental element (intent requirement) that constitutes war crime is “deliberate or with reckless” that results in the destruction or damage of a protected cultural or religious property (ICTY, Prosecutor v Pavle Strugar, 2008)

Global experiences reveal that cultural destruction often occurs in the context of an armed conflict. (Nersessian, 2019). During the wars of subjugation, interstate and civil wars by governments and insurgents around the world, cultural property has always been under attack (Brosché *et al.*, 2016). Attacks on cultural heritage have been used frequently as a weapon of war, frequently in conjunction with intentional attempts to eradicate the symbols of identity and pride of a particular people (Viejo-Rose & Killeen, 2020). In the Tigray war, several reports have come out that cultural destructions have occurred as such (Kahsay *et al.*, 2024).

The research question examined in this study is: *What was the extent and nature of the damage to cultural property during the war in Tigray, were symbols of cultural and religious identity targeted and, if so, do these acts amount to war crimes?*

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach in which fieldwork and desk research were both used to acquire the data. The study has also combined a doctrinal approach to examine whether the acts of targeting symbols of cultural and religious identity amount to being a war crime. To that effect, the study has used a variety of primary data gathering procedures, including semi-structured interviews, observation, and case studies. One of the authors of this chapter has participated as a co-principal investigator of a damage assessment conducted that covered 217 cultural heritage sites in all zones of Tigray, except the Western Zone, which involved 16 data collectors. The study's main conclusions are included in this chapter. A detailed list of locations, asset destruction, and quantified damaged properties has been documented. Data collection methods included taking field notes, taking pictures, and capturing audio. An administrative ethical clearance was obtained from regional authorities to conduct the damage assessment.

**Key informant interviews:** Professionals/experts and government employees working in relevant bureaus/offices functioning at the regional, zone, woreda (district), and town levels were the subjects of key informant interviews. Semi-structured interviewing was the method chosen for the interview. For this study, 30 persons were interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to gather information from experts and decision-makers about different types of heritages present in their area of expertise (especially concerning heritage/s of immense value or to unique treasures that define Tigray and those of premium importance to Tigray) as well as the heritage management and conservation practices of local communities, government offices (at woreda/town, zone, and regional levels), and other stakeholders. The primary data was collected in Mekelle, Wukro, Adigrat, Samre, Adigudom, Hagereselam, Aby-Adi, Enderta, and Maichew. The key informants were 12 experts from government offices at different levels (woreda, zone, and regional offices), 4 experts in tourism management, 4 experts of archaeological site management, 4 experts of heritage conservation, and 6 local community leaders and religious leaders that amounts to 30 key informants.

A total of 20 interviews with randomly selected individuals have been conducted in addition to the key informant interviews with randomly selected people present around the heritage sites. Depending on the wishes of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded and thoroughly noted using notebooks. The interviews took place over the course of two phases; the first phase took place in May and June 2021, and the second one in May and early June 2023.

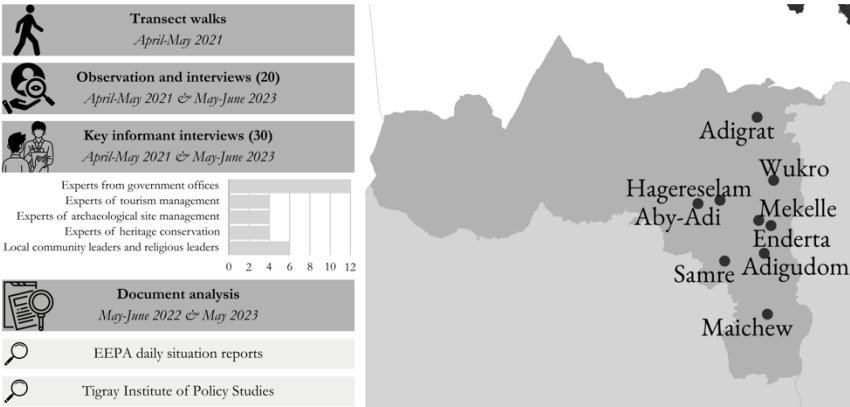


Figure 7.1. Data used and collected in the study

**Observation:** By employing an observation method, the research team were able to collect accurate data on the damage (caused by the war) and risk level (due to existing damage caused by the war and pre-existing exposure and vulnerabilities of sites) of some heritages chosen for extensive quick assessment. Additionally, pictures were taken to record the harm that had already happened, current risks, and the exposure of heritages and heritage sites.

**Transect walk:** Another technique employed in the assessment was a transect walk (sometimes lengthy journeys) to find damaged heritages, a visual inspection to evaluate the damage and condition of the damaged heritages.

**Case studies:** To some extent, detailed assessments (damage and risk assessments) on specific sites/heritages chosen as case studies have been made.

**Desk review:** Desk review has been a crucial data-gathering approach used to help triangulate or validate the conclusions gathered

by the primary data collection methods, even though the condition assessment was mostly done based on the data collected through fieldwork. In any case, the desk review required obtaining and studying historical records, as well as published and unpublished data, especially the damage assessment by the Tigray Institute of Policy Studies (TIPS) and the Situation Reports by Europe External Programme with Africa, which have been used to triangulate the findings. Moreover, the study has also relied on the legal frameworks protecting cultural heritages and those that penalise the deliberate destruction of cultural heritages.

Based on two assessments, an overview was obtained of the number of churches destroyed. This study has significantly relied on data obtained from the fieldwork by the first author, carried out from May to June 2021, and the report written in 2022. The result of the two assessments covers the destruction of all the church buildings found in the six zones. The Western Zone of Tigray which has faced heavy destruction, is not included in the assessment due to the inaccessibility of the region which is still occupied.

### **Obligation to protect**

Cultural properties are the concern of the international community and are accorded international protection because:

*These earliest efforts made clear that although cultural and religious sites and monuments, and works of art and science, may be bound to the territory of a state, they attracted international protection because of their importance to all humanity, such acts constituted war crimes, and perpetrators of such acts would be held to account.* (Vrdoljak, 2016, p. 2)

The origin of legal tools to defend cultural heritage during armed conflicts started at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gerstenblith, 2016). Since the first codifications of the rules and customs of war in the nineteenth century, purposeful taking, destruction, or damage of cultural property has been outlawed by modern international law (Vrdoljak, 2016).

The discourse on the protection of heritage as a human rights issue is especially important (Bennoune, 2016). There are provisions inferring

rights related to cultural heritages, including the right to participate in cultural life and the rights of minorities and native communities to appreciate their way of life, exercise their religious conviction, and speak their language; and “the right to self-determination, the rights to freedom of expression and religion, the right to respect for private life, and the right to education” (Donders, 2020).

Cultural properties under the Hague Convention, Article 1 are defined as:

*For the purposes of the present Convention, the term “cultural property” shall cover, irrespective of origin or ownership: (a) movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above; (b) buildings whose main and effective purpose is to preserve or exhibit the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a) such as museums, large libraries and depositories of archives, and refuges intended to shelter, in the event of armed conflict, the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a); (c) centres containing a large amount of cultural property as defined in sub-paragraphs (a) and (b), to be known as ‘centres containing monuments’.* (Hague Convention, 1954)

The deliberate destruction of cultural assets, artefacts, and customs that belong to other human groups continues to be a major issue for the international community today. Cultural heritage is often under threat during any armed conflict: “it may be attacked deliberately because it represents a symbol of the enemy and its identity, be it historical, cultural or religious” (Techera, 2007). It may also be subject to pillage or theft for profit. Or it may simply suffer incidental damage during hostilities. Today it is widely accepted that attacks against symbols of cultural and religious identity may qualify as act of war crime provided the act is committed in the context of armed conflict. Many argue that “destruction is the inevitable consequence of armed conflict” (Ryška, 2021). However, efforts have been made to mitigate the futile consequences of armed conflict by limiting the means and methods of warfare (Ryška, 2021).

Consequently, cultural and historical properties in an armed conflict are protected based on the instruments of international cultural heritage protection and international humanitarian laws (Ristoldo, 2017). The overarching norms that regulate cultural and historical properties include the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two (1954 and 1999) Protocols; the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property; and the 1972 UNESCO Convention concerning the protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage. Moreover, the 2003 UNESCO Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage (2003), which was adopted after the destruction of the Budha statues in Afghanistan, ordered by the Taliban in 2001 is also relevant. Moreover, international conventions governing cultural destruction as a war crime, such as the ICC, ICTY statutes, and case laws, provide a prescribed protection framework which is discussed because of the alleged acts of destruction in this chapter.

The 2003 UNESCO Declaration defines “intentional destruction” as:

*[...] an act intended to destroy in whole or in part cultural heritage, thus compromising its integrity, in a manner which constitutes a violation of international law or an unjustifiable offence to the principles of humanity and dictates of public conscience, in the latter case in so far as such acts are not already governed by fundamental principles of international law.* (UNESCO, 2003)

The above definition also implies the responsibility of state parties involved in the conflict for failing to take all necessary measures to protect cultural heritage. Moreover, a state that fails to take appropriate measures to prohibit, prevent, stop, and punish any intentional destruction of cultural heritage of great importance to humanity is responsible for the destruction. About this, the Hague Convention states “Parties to an armed conflict are not allowed to direct hostilities against cultural property and must avoid incidental damage to such property. Using cultural property for military purposes is prohibited” (Hague Convention, 1954). This protection concerns any cultural heritage, listed or not by UNESCO. More specifically article 28 of the Hague Convention requires member

states “to take, within the framework of their ordinary jurisdiction, all necessary steps to prosecute and impose penal or disciplinary sanctions upon those persons, of whatever nationality, who commit or order to be committed a breach of the [...] Convention” (Hague Convention, 1954).

This framework establishes that cultural and religious heritage is protected by international law, and acts of intentional destruction constitute war crimes if committed within the context of armed conflict and provided the elements of the crime are fulfilled. Moreover, the above legal frameworks provide that states must prosecute those responsible for the intentional destruction of cultural properties.

Statutes of the international criminal tribunals have also provided punitive provisions to the acts of cultural destruction committed in the context of armed conflict. For example, article 3(d) ICTY Statute stipulates: “[S]eizure, destruction or wilful damage done to institutions dedicated to religion, charity and education, the arts and sciences, historic monuments and works of art and science” amounts to a war crime (ICTY, 1993). This provision also indicates that it applies to war crimes committed in the context of an armed conflict, international or internal (Vrdoljak, 2016). After the legal prescriptions, international criminal courts and tribunals have been responding to unlawful acts of destruction through criminal prosecutions. About this, it is to be recalled that Mali, in 2012, requested the ICC to investigate attacks against the religious and cultural sites which are also registered as World Heritage sites of Timbuktu under UNESCO (Ba, 2020).

The preservation of heritage helps link communities to identify their identity that is rooted down the generations and bridges across time towards new generations (ICCROM, 2011). This reflects the way of life of communities, which describes their history and categorises their identity (ICCROM, 2011), and shall be protected. Nevertheless, cultural property has always been under attack in most cases during armed conflicts (Brosché *et al.*, 2016); attacks on heritage and cultural properties have become a regular phenomenon in several recent armed conflicts (UNESCO, 2014). Furthermore, attacks on cultural



heritage refer to acts of targeting cultural property, which constitute an international crime involving the damage or destruction of such property, often described as ‘cultural destruction’ (Brammertz *et al.*, 2016).

The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) and its two protocols of (1954 and 1999) mention that attacks on cultural property can constitute a war crime (Kelly, 2021). Destruction of cultural and historical possessions may also “meet the definition of a war crime” under the 1998 ICC statute (Weiss & Connelly, 2017). The Rome Statute of the ICC, under Article 8, states:

*Intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science, or charitable purposes, or against historical monuments, provided they are not military objectives, is considered to fall within the meaning of war crimes, both in the framework of international armed conflicts and armed conflicts not of an international character.* (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 2011)

International humanitarian law restricts military attacks in that the attacker must comply with the principles of proportionality, necessity, and distinction (Townley, 2017). Under those principles, any military attack should be proportionate, and the recourse to violence/attack must be justified. On top of that the attackers must distinguish military objects from civil objects, (Article 51 (4) of AP1). This also goes in line with the stipulations of the ICC statute mentioned above that prohibit attacks on cultural heritages if they are not military objects. The Hague Regulations and Geneva Convention (GC, 1949) also provide that precautionary measures must be taken by combatants to spare civilians and civilian objects (Articles 26 & 27 of the Hague Regulations, 1907; Article 19 of Geneva Convention IV, 1949). In this case, cultural properties are regarded as civilian properties unless they are exclusively used for any military purposes and are bestowed special protection.

Ethiopia is a party to many of the above international legal regimes protecting the destruction of cultural properties. That means the state has legal duties to enforce the core obligations of the legal instruments to which it has vowed to implement. Therefore, Ethiopia

has obligations that emanate from the laws and customs of war to protect the destruction of properties that symbolise cultural and religious identity within its territory and anywhere during military engagements.

### **Findings from the EEPA Situation Reports**

The EEPA Situation Report (SR) finds that the ENDF-allied forces, together with EDF, Amhara special forces, and militias, such as Fano have deliberately bombed churches and monasteries, including but not limited to Debre Damo monastery, the historic Al Nejashi Mosque, the ancient Monastery of Maryam Qaretsa, Maryam Dengolat's Church, Amanuel Church in Eastern Tigray, Cherkos Church in Zalanbesa, and the Catholic Religious artefacts are stolen from 1,200 monasteries and churches (EEPA, 2021, SR 181). Historical and heritage structures that were built by kings and rulers who resided in Tigray such as Emperor Yohannes IV, Ras Alula Aba Nega, Ras Seyoum, and Enda Ra'esi were also destroyed and burned (EEPA, 2021, SR 92).

The acts of destruction were deliberate and aimed at destroying the religious knowledge of Tigrayans because the destruction was accompanied by the killing of the religious leaders, priests, deacons, and elders, and they were killed while providing church services and prayers (EEPA, 2021, SR 125). In addition to the killings of religious leaders, sexual violence including rape was committed against religious sisters and nuns, and mothers and daughters were gang-raped (EEPA, 2021, SR 150). The Amhara forces targeted the monks from Waldeba Monastery based on their Tigrayan ethnic background, who were killed, beaten with clear welts, and forced to be displaced from those areas (EEPA, 2021, SR 123). The EEPA SR reported the killing of 28 priests in Guetelo Medhanialem Church (EEPA, 2021, SR 181) and the massacre of six priests and 12 young deacons between the ages of 15 and 20 in the church of Adi'Zeban Karagiorgis in the middle of celebrating the birth of the Virgin Mary, which occurred on 9 January 2021 (EEPA, 2021, SR 145). Those acts are a few of the incidents that reveal the cruel acts of the ENDF and its allied forces perpetrated against civilians in Tigray.

According to a press release issued by Mahbere Kidus Yared Ze Orthodox Tewahdo Church, more than 1,200 monasteries and churches were ruined, religious treasures were looted, more than 160 priests and worshippers were massacred, and nuns and children were raped (EEPA, 2021, SR 181). The Consortium of Religious Institutions of Tigray documented over 326 priests, deacons, Sunday school students, and sheiks massacred by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops in the Tigray region since the war erupted. (EEPA, 2021, SR 153).

The intention of the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments to wipe out the Tigrayan culture was labelled as ‘cultural cleansing’ by many scholars, like Professor Michael Gervers of the University of Toronto (EEPA, 2021, SR 79) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) (EEPA, 2021, SR 99). In addition, the Global Society of Tigray Scholars (GSTS) sent a letter to UNESCO President Audrey Azoulay, drawing his attention to the problem that a unique part of humanity’s heritage was at risk, including UNESCO heritage old monolithic tomb markers that are 1,700 years old, fragile rock churches, and archaeological sites that date to between 800–1,000 AD, for acknowledgment of the concern that this is evidence for the perpetration of an international crime. (EEPA, 2021, SR 79).

From the analysis of the evidence reported in the EEPA Situation Report, it can be concluded that the destruction of cultural and religious heritage was widespread and systematic and contradicts the rules and customs of war to which Ethiopia has obligations to comply. Consequently, the GSTS requested protection from UNESCO, pointing to the importance of the heritage and expressing concern that the destruction of heritage amounts to a war crime. The reports further indicated that the attack also targeted people protecting the sites and those who were providing leadership to the cultural and religious practices.

The pattern and widespread nature of the attacks on religious communities, which were desacralized, further speaks to the belief that the attacks were intentional and cannot be qualified as simply collateral damage of the war. Rather, the indiscriminate nature of the attacks reveals that they were not consistent with the principles of

‘proportionality’, ‘distinction’, and ‘necessity’, which constitute the core pillars of the laws and customs of war.

### **Findings regarding the destruction of heritage**

In the following section, the outcome of the fieldwork on the ground in Tigray is discussed. The assessment was conducted in six zonal administrations in 18 sampled woredas and 50 kebele administrations covering 78 cultural heritage and religious sites. Woredas (districts) are divided into kebele (municipalities). This is the smallest administrative division and is sometimes called *tabiya*.

It was found that out of the total 164,666 cultural heritage objects registered before the war, 116,763 (70.90%) were damaged after the war. The highest percentage of the damage goes to the Eastern and Central zones, with a total damage of 60.8% and 17% of objects, respectively (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). The damage included: religious heritage, paintings, natural attractions, historical objects, manuscripts, paleontological and archaeological objects, and archives (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021).

With a variation in the numbers and extent of damage, the destruction of churches occurred in all the zonal administrations, including Mekelle. In the Southern Zone, 16 church buildings; in the Southeastern Zone, 10 church buildings; in the Central Zone, 120 church buildings; in the North Western Zone, 65 church buildings; and in the Eastern Zone, 21 church buildings were damaged (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021; Hadush *et al.*, 2022). According to the assessment of Hadush *et al.* (2022), more than 292 churches have sustained partial or complete damage, 14 of which are monasteries; transgression orders were passed against 121 churches; more than 5,347 large and small sacred objects have been stolen, and vandalised; 4,055 people have been physically hurt; as many as 1472 houses related to the sites were destroyed; and more than 383 women were raped or gang raped in the course of attacking the cultural heritage sites (Hadush *et al.*, 2022).

In the sample locations of the fieldwork by Habtom it was found that 61.11% of the damage to the cultural heritage was because of looting, while 24.76% and 5.56% were targeted by bombardment and targeted

burning, respectively (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). Inadvertent bombardment and collateral burning, together with other factors, accounted for only 8.5%. Looking at the magnitude of the damage, 77% of cultural heritage was completely damaged, 15.85% was severely damaged, 5.82% was mildly damaged, and only 1.24% was partially damaged (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). The complete damage constitutes 87 of the manuscripts, 57.55% of religious heritage objects, 94.85 of paintings, 72.6% of archives, 67.8% of historical objects, 13% of paleontological and archaeological objects, and 23% of the natural attraction sites. Physical assets of cultural heritage sites, cars, cash, and office equipment belonging to the heritage sites have been damaged as well (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). This is valued at a worth of Ethiopian birr (ETB) 273 million, which converts into approximately USD 5 million.<sup>40</sup> In addition, Habtom found that the administrative and professional staff of the cultural heritage were directly or indirectly affected by the war, which included death, physical disability, internal displacement, sexual violence, and forced disappearance.

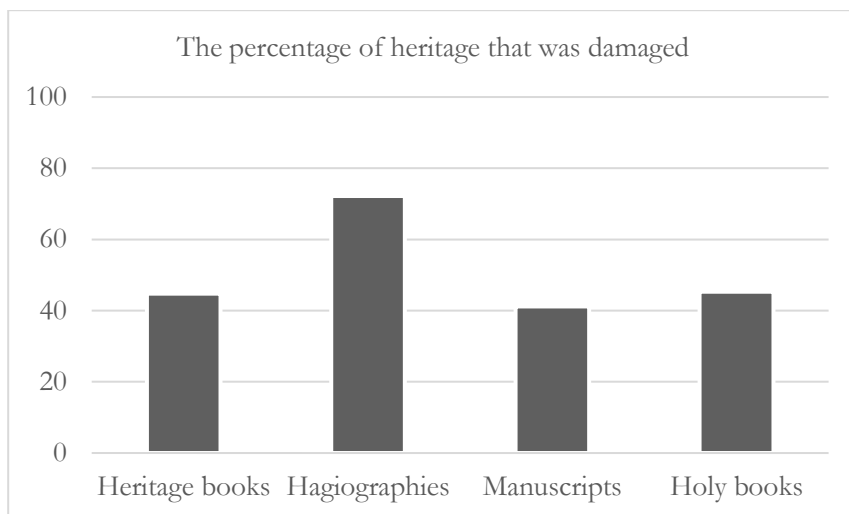
Church regulations were broken as part of the attack against religious identity. The offenses included the carrying of a pistol into a church, which is contrary to religious regulations. The perpetrators have misused and abused church premises and properties; they have used buildings in church compounds as slaughterhouses, dwelling quarters for medical facilities, wearing shoes, etc. Church activities such as worship services, religious rites, feasts, and festivals were stopped, and some churches were completely shut down. Priests and monks were forced to throw away their turbans, take down their hats, and throw their hand-crosses, respectively. Churches were used as fortresses, contrary to the stipulations of the Hague Convention and general principles of the IHL, with holy vestments being used for everyday clothing and the churchyard being used as a residence (Hadush *et al.*, 2022). The sites were desacralized.

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<sup>40</sup> A detailed list of damaged items with their estimated cost has been documented as part of the damage assessment conducted.

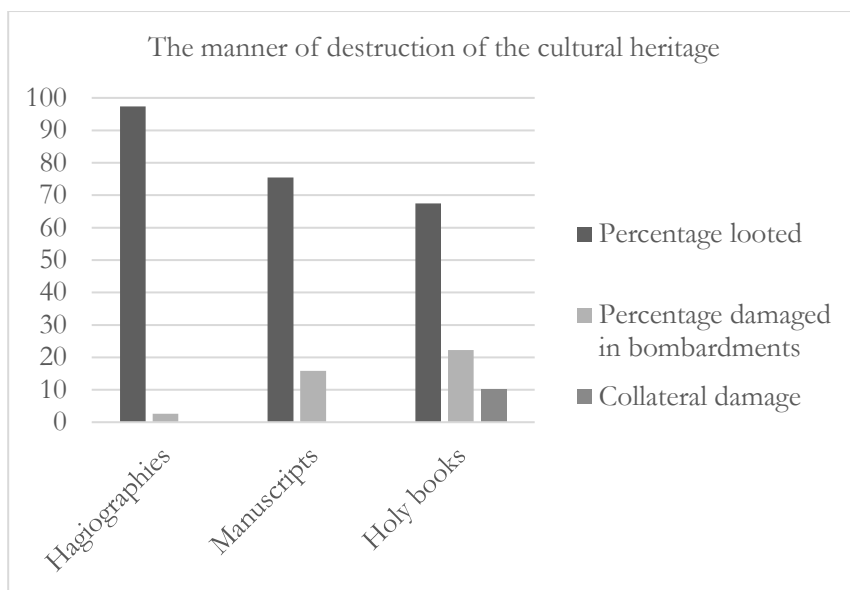
### ***Damage to holy books and parchments***

The assessment revealed out of the total 5,255 heritage books registered before the war, 2,351 (44.73%) were damaged by the war. Specifically, 348 (72.19%) of the 482 hagiographies were damaged, and 1,146 (41.14%) of the 2,783 manuscripts (parchments, codex) registered before the war were damaged (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). In addition, 817 (45.3%) Holy Bible books out of 1,801 and 40 Holy Quran books were damaged by the war (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021).



**Figure 7.2. Percentage of cultural heritage damaged during the war**

While 67.5% of the holy books were looted, 22.25 of them were damaged as a result of bombardments. It is concluded that only 10% of the holy books were damaged as a result of collateral damage. For the parchments, 75.5% of the manuscripts and 97.4% of the hagiography were looted, while 15.8% of the manuscripts and 2.6% of the hagiography were damaged by targeted bombing (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). Of the total damage of heritage books, 97.8% was complete damage, while only 2.16% was severe damage. The manuscript's hagiography was destroyed (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021).



**Figure 7.3. Manner in which cultural heritage was destroyed, i.e., by looting, bombardments, or collateral damage**

Other precious heritage assets like crosses, coins, cloths, and household items from pre-Aksumite and Aksumite kingdoms have also been looted from museums (Interviewee LP, interview with B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, 7 June 2023). Several historical books, holy books, missionary diaries, files that documented the profile of more than 1,000 rock-hewn churches, a Ge'ez-Latin dictionary, etc. have also been partially or fully damaged in the libraries of the Catholic Church in Tigray (Interviewee BB, Archaeologist and lecture in Adigrat University, interview by Habtom, face-to-face, 13 May 2021).

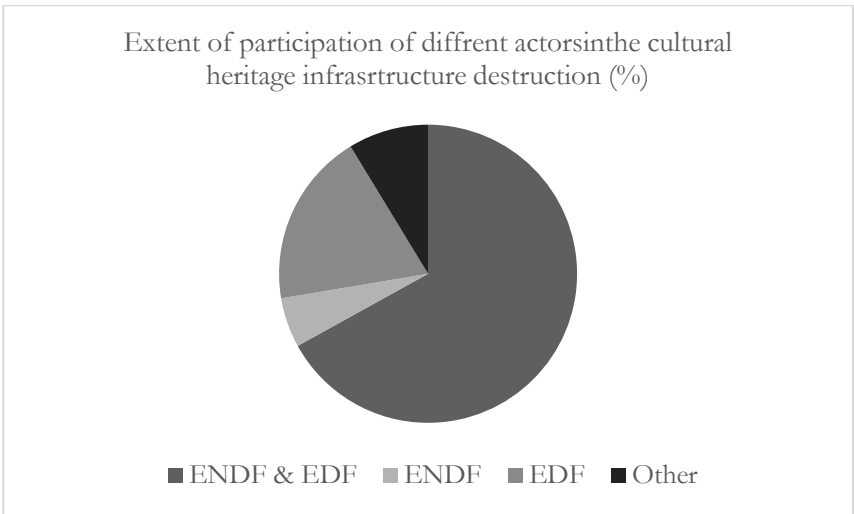
The magnificent rock-hewn cathedrals and the enormous Aksum stele are examples of technological innovation and the early growth of Christianity. Artifacts, documents, and inscriptions are essential because they serve as archives for the identity of the Tigray people. These cultural legacies define Tigray as the birthplace of Ethiopian civilisation. The findings suggest that adversaries of the Tigrayan people deliberately attacked these irreplaceable cultural treasures in the context of the armed conflict. The pattern of the actions of the actors reveals that their ultimate objective was to damage priceless

items with symbolic value to undermine the populace’s ingrained morals (Interviewee GJ- tour guide expert, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, 8 June 2023).

**Perpetrators**

The assessment specifically looked at the alleged perpetration of the damage to the heritage sites. The study found that the damage was perpetrated by the ENDF, EDF, Amhara Special Forces, militias, and gangsters from the local community.

Acts of destruction committed by the combination of the ENDF and EDF accounted for 66.96% of the total damage assessed, while both forces caused the damage separately with 5.4% allegedly perpetrated by ENDF and 18.93% allegedly perpetrated by EDF alone. The ENDF and EDF are together responsible for 86% of the destruction of cultural and religious infrastructure. Also, Amhara Special Forces, militias, and gangsters from the local community perpetrated the remaining attacks.

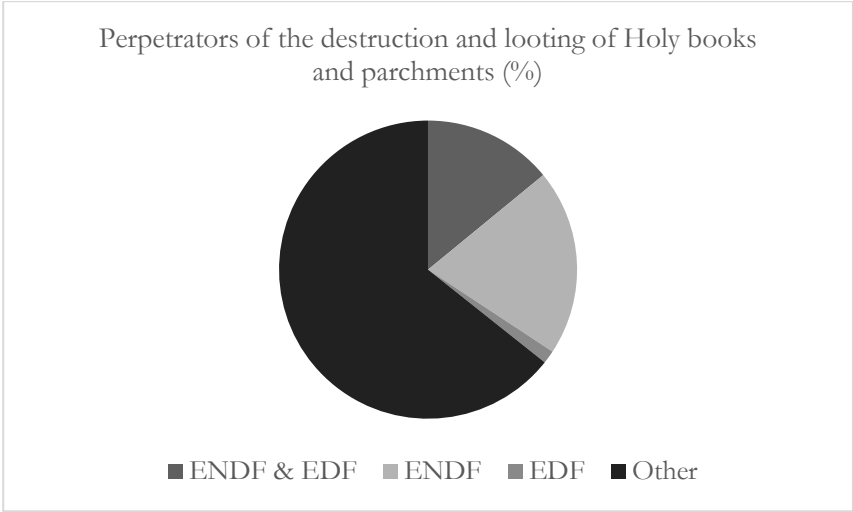


**Figure 7.4. Percentage of destruction of cultural heritage infrastructure carried out by various perpetrators**

As opposed to the damage to cultural heritage infrastructure, the destruction and looting of holy books and parchments goes to Amhara Special Forces and militias, accounting for 59% of the total damage, followed by the ENDF, which damaged 18.54%. Theft by



Eritrean troops specifically of holy books and parchments was relatively limited at only 1.3%, while it occurred at 12.9% jointly with the ENDF. Again, as opposed to the destruction of infrastructure of heritage sites, the assessment conducted in 2021 revealed that massive damage and looting of holy books and parchments was higher in the Southern Zone, accounting for 42.66%, followed by the central and Eastern Zones with 17.99% and 15.14%, respectively (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). This percentage does not include the destruction that occurred at the locations after June 2021.



**Figure 7.5. Percentage of looting, damage, and destruction of holy books and parchments carried out by various perpetrators**

A high percentage of the holy books and parchments were looted. This action could have economic importance as some of the items were seen on the online market, but the action and intention of the perpetrators is more than just getting money (Interviewee LP, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle).

The cultural destruction was not limited to the Tigrinya-speaking people of Tigray; it also affected the Kunama and the Irob communities, minor ethnic groups in the Tigray region. The cultural museums of the Kunama and the Irob communities established in Sheraro and Dewhan towns respectively have been destroyed (Interviewee FJ, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 8 June 2023,

Mekelle). The cultural museum of the Irob community has been destroyed by the EDF (Interviewee FK, interview by B. G. Kahsay, phone, 9 June 2023, Mekelle).

As Tigray is a regional state within the sovereign republic of Ethiopia, the ENDF was supposed to take precautionary measures to protect against any destruction within the territory. More significantly, as a party to the Geneva Conventions, Ethiopia has also the legal obligation to protect civilian property and particularly cultural heritage in the context of armed conflicts. “Tigray region has always been part of Ethiopia. It was therefore not reasonable to expect that the ENDF would destroy a cultural property of its people” (Interviewee MS, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle,).

***‘Their name is God’s servant, while their acts are anti-God’***

Intangible heritage, such as the protocols for worshipping, the respect and value given to religious leaders, and the symbolic attributions of religious materials were violated during the Tigray war (Interviewee MS, interview with B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 7, 2023). Pilgrimage ceremonies of important religious events in Aksum and Dengelat and other areas were attacked, and a bloody massacre of civilians and church leaders took place, costing hundreds of lives. This seriously undermined the religious institutions, and the social fabric of the society attached to religious beliefs (Interviewee BB-archaeologist and lecturer in Adigrat University, interview by Habtom, face-to-face, 13 May 2021).

The damage of the cultural heritage included destruction or/and cracking of physical buildings, erasure of paintings and drawings from the buildings, and looting of movable assets. The destruction of holy books, and other manuscripts, would appear to be aimed at undermining the knowledge of the people of Tigray, after which the identity that has depended on them for centuries will also disappear (Interviewee LP, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle). Linking the cultural destruction with all the massacres that occurred and the orchestrated siege, this level of destruction could not have another meaning other than that it was meant to threaten the culture of the people of Tigray (Interviewee LP, interview by B.

G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle). More importantly, the impression of an interviewee (a historical museum guide who witnessed the destruction of heritage in a place where there had never been fights) was that everything happened with full knowledge of the perpetrators about the consequences of their acts and the context within which their acts occurred (Interviewee MS, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle).

The interviewees expressed the impression that the looting of the holy books and parchments demonstrated the clear intention of the perpetrators to purposefully damage the culture of the people of Tigray contrary to the laws and customs of war. The pattern and context in which the damage occurred prove that the act was deliberately caused to denigrate the Tigrayan people.

A clear example of cultural significance in Tigray is the Tigray Martyrs' Monument Museum, which serves as a source of pride for many Tigrayans, symbolizing the resilience and values of the Tigray people. Located in the center of Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, the museum houses numerous photographs, narratives, and artifacts related to the liberation struggle against the former Derg regime. It also highlights the alliance between the Tigrayan people and the Eritrean People's Liberation Movement (EPLF), showcasing their joint achievements in the fight against the Derg regime. However, the museum suffered extensive damage.

A particularly striking detail related to the destruction is the discovery of a written message at the museum: “ከማቸው ገ/እግዛኣብሄር ስራቸው ፀረ እግዛኣብሄር”, which translates to, “their name is God's servant, while their acts are anti-God” (Field observation, Habtom, 10-June 2022). This message implies that, despite their religious practices and names, the Tigrayan people are considered unworthy in the eyes of God.

In a deeply religious society such as Tigray, this statement is highly offensive, striking at the core of the community's spiritual identity and challenging their very right to exist. Such expressions could provide a justification for the destruction of religious sites and institutions, and even rationalize violence against the Tigrayan people themselves.

In some cases, Eritrean troops were overheard declaring their intention to destroy the infrastructure and assets of the Tigrayan people, with the aim of setting Tigray back by 30 years. Ethiopian forces also left derogatory messages in the buildings and sites they occupied.

As a prominent Ethiopian government figure during the war in Tigray, Deacon Daniel was understood to argue that the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), along with its social structures and ideology, should be completely eradicated from the Ethiopian state and the collective memory, ensuring no trace of Tigray would remain in history. This rhetoric, coupled with the messages left behind by soldiers, was understood by many Tigrayans as an explicit intent to target civilians and civilian infrastructure, particularly focusing on the destruction of Tigrayan culture and religious identities.

Observations in Tigray revealed that many people widely interpreted the actions as aligning with statements made by Deacon Daniel Kibret, a member of the Ethiopian House of Representatives and special advisor to the Prime Minister. Deacon Daniel publicly suggested that bombs should be dropped on major towns in Tigray to intensify destruction and fulfil the planned objectives.

## **Discussion**

This chapter has attempted to incorporate different sources of data on the destruction of cultural and religious heritage in Tigray. The purpose of the study was to take a wide reach with inclusion of as many locations as possible, using different studies that have been undertaken, and to evaluate whether they amount to war crimes. The validity of different sources is triangulated and the overall conclusion is that there was deliberate, extensive, and widespread destruction of cultural and religious heritage contrary to the laws and customs of war; that the attacks involved demeaning treatment of the sites and that the communities associated with the sites were directly affected in multiple ways.

Despite the attempt to integrate different types of sources, the study does not present a comprehensive inventory of all the destruction and has not covered all the religious and historical heritage sites of Tigray

that have been destroyed. This is due to a lack of access to all areas of Tigray. The scale of the destruction reported in this chapter is likely to be conservative. From the interviews and observations, the population has been widely affected.

The findings of this chapter confirm and converge with findings by Tesfa & van Reisen (2024a and b); Tesfa et al., 2024 and Gebremariam & Abrha, 2024. The evidence, direct or indirect, connected to the destruction has proved that the destruction was deliberate, indiscriminate, and contrary to the rules of engagement to which Ethiopia Government is obliged to respect. The pattern and context in which the destruction occurred prove the deliberate, systematic, and widespread nature of the attack and that this cannot be construed as collateral damage.

In this context, the United Nations (UN) Committee of Human Rights Experts, tasked with investigating violations of human rights and humanitarian law in Ethiopia, highlighted in its 2023 report that “religious buildings, in particular churches, were attacked by the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and allied forces,” with paragraph 217 of the report noting that many of these actions, under the reasonable grounds standard, amount to war crimes (ICHREE, 2023).

This chapter gives further evidence to the hypothesis that the systematic and widespread destruction of cultural and religious heritage was aimed at attacking the social fabric through the eradication of the distinct features of the Tigray people as a particular nation and ethnic group, to target civilians and their properties that symbolise the culture and religion of Tigrayans. According to the stipulations of the Geneva Convention, the Hague Regulations, and the statute of the ICC, the above acts amount to war crimes as they were committed in the context of an armed conflict and this was fortified by the reports of the UN Committee of Human Rights experts in Ethiopia. The ICC Draft Policy on Cultural Heritage. (ICC: The Office of the Prosecutor, 2021) elaborates further on the determination of this crime.

## Conclusion

The war in Tigray has resulted in the massive deliberate and systematic destruction of cultural heritage. The destruction that has occurred to the cultural properties in Tigray has been serious. Buildings of churches, mosques, monasteries, heritage sites, museums, and historical places have been destroyed during the war without due regard to the rules of engagement. In addition to the structures and buildings, holy books and parchments have also been destroyed, looted, and damaged. This study provided a detailed inventory of the cultural buildings and heritage assets that have been destroyed, damaged, or looted.

The nature of the damage to cultural heritage during the war in Tigray was wide in terms of geographic coverage; destruction occurred in every place where the perpetrators stayed with similar patterns. The damage extended from the destruction of physical buildings of heritage value and holy places to the looting, burning, and breaking heritage assets, holy books, manuscripts, and hagiographies. Moreover, the pattern and nature of the destruction demonstrates that the acts violated the rules of engagement particularly, the 'proportionality', 'distinction' and the 'precautionary measures' required from all parties to hostility.

Massacres, particularly against clergy and religious leaders, were committed alongside the destruction of significant cultural and religious artefacts, in which civilians were injured and hundreds killed. Evidence reveals that the pattern of the destruction was not the result of collateral damage, but that the destruction was deliberate and indiscriminate that systematically targeted the cultural heritages. The evidence collected in this study suggest that these acts amount to war crimes.

With varied levels of participation and contributions in each location and heritage type, the perpetrators were identified to be the ENDF, EDF, and Amhara Special Forces and militias. In this regard, the Ethiopian government failed to discharge its obligations in respecting the rules of engagement particularly to protect the cultural and religious assets together with the civilians and pilgrims participating in the cultural and religious events.

The perpetrators who ordered and conducted what may constitute international crimes under the Rome Statutes should be held to account. Accountability for committing war crimes as resulting from the deliberate destruction, compensation for the destroyed assets, and returning the looted assets should be among the key priorities of any future negotiations and proceedings. The study identifies the need for an independent investigation into the atrocity crimes that were allegedly committed during the Tigray war, including the war crimes of the intentional destruction of cultural and religious artefacts and the crimes committed against the religious leaders, servants, and pilgrims. Moreover, the study calls for the international community to ensure reparations for the affected communities and rehabilitation of the cultural and religious heritage destroyed during the Tigray war.

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## **Authors' contributions**

The study was planned and carried out by the first author. He is a GAIC PhD fellow. In addition to reviewing previous iterations and helping with data analysis, the second author contributed to the data collection process. The third author evaluated versions of the chapter and made contributions to the legal section of the analysis.

## **Ethical clearance**

No specific clearance was requested.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.



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### ‘The Child of Fire is Ash’: The Lack of a Human Rights Culture

*B. G. Kahsay*

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*The Child [Son] of Fire is Ash!*

#### Abstract

Conflicting parties often have distinct ethnic identities influenced by historical and structural factors. Ethnic conflicts stem from historical events that shape intergroup relations, leading to aggression and the politicisation of ethnic identities. In Ethiopia, accusations against Tigrayans, who have been conflated with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), have been a major cause of human rights violations, especially affecting perceptions among the Amhara. In Eritrea, a sense of superiority over Tigrayans has contributed to harsh actions, despite a shared history and culture prior to Italian colonisation, which introduced a semi-racist attitude among Eritrean elites. This demonstrates a lack of human rights culture. Human rights, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Rome Statute, are universal and apply to all individuals. The Rome Statute outlines crimes against humanity, including various acts of violence and persecution. Despite a general acceptance of these rights in the study area, the study emphasises the need for increased education on human rights in the Horn of Africa, especially given the confusion resulting from political narratives, which has fuelled atrocities.

**Keywords:** Tigray war, human rights culture, human rights education

## Introduction

Human beings have rights merely because they are human (Donders, 2010). Humanity, as it refers to all human beings collectively, is the fundamental standard for the development of human rights (Coupland, 2013). Human beings can be characterised as social animals (Aronson, 2018), live in structured social groups, and communicate and interact with each other (Sakman, 2019) based on their shared way-of-life or culture, which can be diverse depending on where they are and to which ethnic group they belong. Conflicts (including conflicts between ethnic groups) are an intrinsic feature of human relations and have occurred repeatedly on a large scale since time immemorial (Bar-Tal *et al.*, 2014). Cultural differences are socially constructed and these differences in lived experiences contribute to the formation of ethnic groups (Gagnon, 2004). Being uprooted entails having no physical place in the world that is acknowledged and secured by others, whereas being superfluous entails having no place in the world at all (Arendt, 1958). As isolation might – but must not – be the precursor to loneliness, uprooting can be the condition that leads to superfluosity (Arendt, 1958). Loneliness is the acknowledgment of a condition in which humans do not exist as fully human beings with enjoyment of their human rights (Arendt, 1958). Rorty (1993) advances in his theory of human rights culture that education of sentiments is critical to the advancement of human rights.

This research explores how ‘being human’ and, consequently, being eligible for human rights, is understood in the context of the war in Tigray. The research attempted to observe, describe, and analyse the experience of the human rights violations in Tigray in view of a theoretical exploration of the concept of ‘human rights culture’ (Rorty, 1993). The research question is: *How are human rights understood in the context of the war in Tigray?*

## Methodology

This small ethnographic study employed observations through visits and interviews with internally displaced people (IDP) as tools to

gather primary data. Four case studies were conducted in the form of an in-depth study of the situation.

The research employed a qualitative approach. The research is based on the primary data collected from various locations in Tigray regional state. The locations visited include: Chercher area in Southern Tigray; Mekelle; Aby-adi and Aksum in Central Tigray; Gulomekeda, Bizet, and Adigrat in Eastern Tigray; and Shire (home to more than half a million IDPs during the study period). The rationale for the selection of these locations was that these areas were reported as having high number of IDPs. Further, these are the areas that experienced and reported high incidences of atrocities and human rights violations. Some interviews were also conducted in Mekelle city for the research.

The interviews, observations, and case study methods are detailed in Table 8.1.

**Table 8.1. Overview of the research methods and locations**

Method	Selection	Location		Time
16 interviews with community members	Coincidence and purposive	Chercher, Mekelle, Gulomekeda, Axum, Shire	Abi-Adi, Adigrat, Bizet,	March-July 2021
5 interviews with Tigray academics	Purposive	Mekelle		March-July 2021
3 interviews with Tigray political leaders	Purposive	Mekelle		March-July 2021
4 Case stories	Purposive	Adigrat, Shire		April 2021
Observation	Systematic	Chercher, Mekelle, Gulomekeda, Axum, Shire	Abi-Adi, Adigrat, Bizet,	March-July 2021

**Observations:** Throughout the data collection period, the researcher was in the Tigray region. Physical visits were made to some of the locations where the alleged human rights violations occurred. Along with the interviews in March to July 2021, field observations were also made to observe the conditions of the uprooted people and the physical and mental conditions of the research participants.

**Interviews:** A total of 16 civilian community members were interviewed (12 women and 4 men), as well as 5 Tigray academics (2 women, 3 men) and 3 members of the political leadership. The interviews were conducted from March to July 2021. People whose relatives had been killed were interviewed. The participants were community members who were available during the research visits to the IDP towns. Purposive sampling was used for the Tigrayan academics and political elite, based on their area of expertise to complement the research fundings as resource persons who could comment on the findings.

To ensure that the information presented can be understood in relation to the research participants, the participants' backgrounds have been highlighted, but their identities have been anonymised. The interviews were collected in Tigrinya and translated into English. The information was recorded using a notebook. No digital recording was employed. As the researcher is a Tigrinya speaker, services of a translator were not used.

**Case studies:** In addition, four case studies were collected from Adigrat and Shire towns from the people who experienced human rights violations during the war. The case studies served as a gateway to delve deep into the situation. The case studies were collected in April 2021.

**Secondary data:** Secondary data (documents, social media footage, TV reports and video documentaries) were used as general background on the situation.

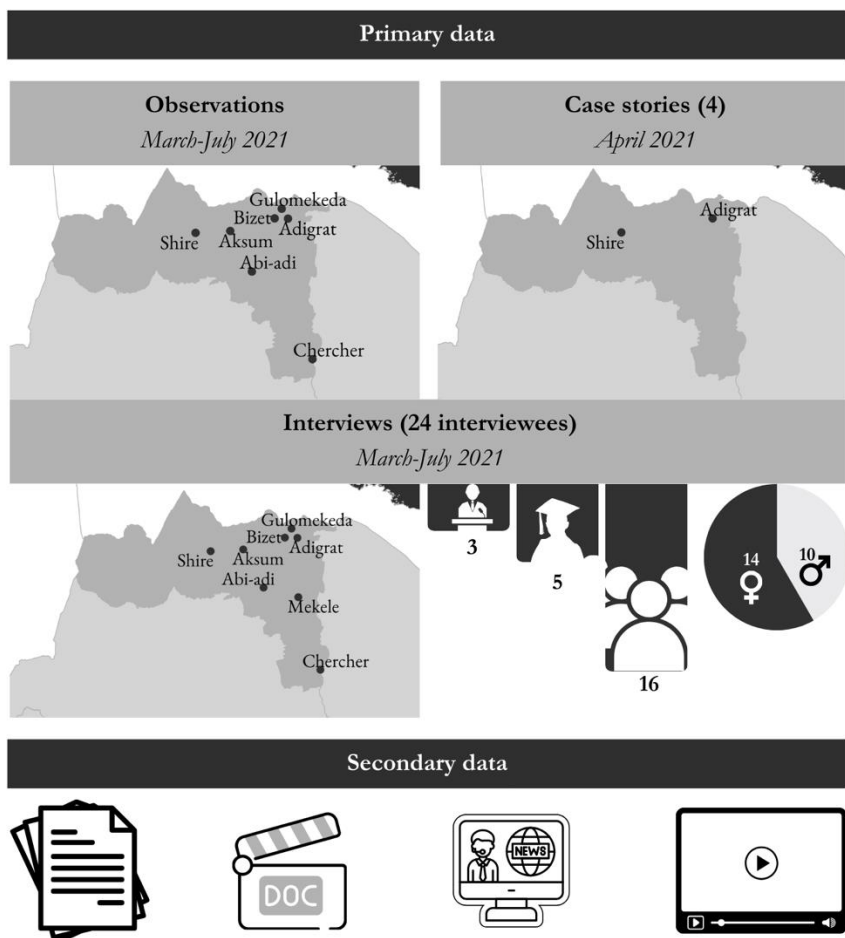


Figure 8.1. Overview of the data collected and used in the study

## Background

Due to the war on Tigray, more than 2.2 million people were displaced within Tigray (UNOCHA, 2021), while an estimated 61,000 people crossed into Sudan as refugees (UNFPA, 2021). At the end of February 2021, 4.5 million people in Tigray were reported to be in urgent need of humanitarian support; towards the middle of May 2021, this figure increased to 5.2 million people (Annys *et al.*, 2021). A Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development-led multi-agency assessment found that the total number of people in the Tigray region in need of relief support in 2022 had reached 6.5 million (BoARD, 2022).



The destruction and disruption of basic services – such as the health system, education facilities, water supply systems, agricultural resources including cutting of live fruit trees, private and public factories and industries, and communication facilities – had been reported (Kahsay, 2021). The closing of the banking system, blockage of communication services, and disruption of transport and supply chains in Tigray have led to millions of people suffering from hunger and other challenges (Kahsay, 2021). During the war, starvation, rape, torture, forced displacement, massacres, and ethnic cleansing (Human Rights Watch, 2022), as well as violation of the rights of refugees, have all been reported (World Peace Foundation, 2021).

During the war in Tigray, millions of people were forced to leave their residence and became (internally and externally) displaced (UNOCHA, 2021). The removal of Tigrayans from various regions of Tigray went beyond a simple uprooting. Repeated calls have been made by concerned parties for the international community to intervene to assist the people of Tigray with humanitarian aid and to protect them from human rights violations (Feldstein, 2020; De Waal, 2020).

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Before we discuss human rights and human rights culture, it is necessary to look at the term ‘humanity’. The term humanity refers to human beings collectively; it can also mean the quality of being humane or benevolent towards fellow humans (Coupland, 2013). The second definition refers to the solidarity between humans, while the first meaning serves as the foundation for the formation of human rights that are equal for all people simply because they are humans. There is a fundamental intrinsic harmony between the natural tendency of human beings “to preserve one’s existence” and an understanding of our moral responsibilities (Zwart, 2014). Zwart explains that this harmony exists between what humans want to attain and what ought to be accomplished (Zwart, 2014).

For Coupland (2001), humanity is interpreted in terms of people’s security and wellbeing. A universally applicable and objective definition of humanity is proposed to clarify the complex

relationships between humanity, inhumanity, the capacity for armed violence, the restraint of armed violence, and international law (Coupland, 2001).

If the concept of humanity binds us, the concept of ethnic identities highlights differences. Ethnic conflict is the result of historical discourses in which the narratives affect relationships among ethnic groups such that they cause resentment between them (Weir, 2012). Conflict usually occurs when there is a difference in desires, values, or thoughts, and when there is no way of settling the disagreement that is acceptable to the different groups (Obah-Akpowoghaha *et al.*, 2013). Conflicts caused by or exacerbated by ethnic issues can result in massive material devastation, substantial loss of life, and the violation of basic human rights, especially in cultures where human rights are not widely recognised (Williams, 2015).

International human rights law, being made principally for peacetime, applies to all people around the world (ICRC, 2003). International humanitarian law seeks to rescue what convincingly can be protected from war (Tomuschat, 2010). People who are not, or are no longer, participating in armed violence are protected by international humanitarian law; hence, parties involved in a fight must always differentiate between fighters and non-combatants. With a firm political and philosophical basis, the international human rights movement is moving forward with the hotly debated claim that human rights values are universal – not culturally dependent – and, thus, can be used to comprehend, appraise, and influence international actors (Slye, 1994).

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was initiated in 1948, both the theoretical and practical facets of human rights were tested by the argument about culture and human rights – or cultural relativism versus universalism (Slye, 1994). The universal human rights agenda has provided the world with a framework that legitimises struggles against the violation of essential human rights (Ishay, 2008). The International Committee of the Red Cross sees that “human rights are inherent entitlements which belong to every person as a consequence of being human” (ICRC, 2003). However, despite the number of countries ratifying the basic international

human rights treaties, contemporary discussions are still contesting and debating the universality and efficiency of human rights management (Slye, 1994). Hence, it is relevant at this point to discuss these two concepts relating to human rights: universalism and cultural relativism.

Advocates of human rights universalism believe that human rights, fundamentally, should be universal, notwithstanding the existence of diverse cultural contexts (Tubor, 2019). Cranston defines human rights as common moral rights, something that all people everywhere should enjoy, and asserts that they are universal rights (Cranston, 1973). According to human rights universalism theory, human beings have human rights by virtue of being human, such rights are immutable and intended to protect human dignity, and all persons should enjoy them equally (Donders, 2010).

Universal human rights represent the overall determination and pledge of the international community to revere and defend humanity, “which carries greater legitimacy, primacy and urgency than any cultural interest” (Asomah, 2015, p.134). As a result, human rights represent a wider agreement concerning human dignity than any specific value, which implies that human rights must not be ignored or ‘banned’ solely based on cultural norms, practices and values (Asomah, 2015). Human rights must be respected in all nations and prevail even when they contradict specific cultural or religious practices, as they are guaranteed in international agreements and resolutions (Musalo, 2015). This understanding is based on the notion of the equal, indivisible, and universal nature of human rights (Lakatos, 2018). Advocates of cultural relativism claim that local cultures can ensure human dignity (Asomah, 2015).

Ayton-Shenker (2014) finds that to have a universal set of moral or legal canons that ensure human freedom and safety, resulting from multiplicity and the context-specific feature of moral values, would be ethically mistaken and morally unmerited. The relativist viewpoint mirrors the pragmatic reality that there is vast cultural diversity around the globe, including varied understandings of right and wrong (Donnelly, 1989; Steiner *et al.*, 2008), good and bad. Because there are decisive variations in the political cultures of different societies,

cultural relativists contend that the generalisation of human nature from the universalism perspective is not convincing (Motala, 1989). Cultural relativism argues that there are no universal human moral codes and that the diversity of philosophies that exists infer that human rights can be understood differently (Donnelly, 1989; Steiner *et al.*, 2008).

The acknowledgement of cultural variances in perspective and values is not the core subject of the theory of relativism. Rather, it is the specific ways in which appraisals or judgements are made (Lakatos, 2018). In fact, some argue that rights only exist when cultures accept them as such (Rorty, 1993; Lakatos, 2018). Radical cultural relativism considers that culture is the only source for a moral right or rule (Lakatos, 2018). Robust cultural relativism is enthusiastic to admit the universal claim of core basic rights but permits differences in relation to most of what are understood as the extra rights (Lakatos, 2018).

Mentioning Ruth Benedict (1943), Pawel Zygałło (2018) notes that every culture has a consistent pattern of thought and action, and, hence, culture is the result of human creativity. On the other hand, as communities create a culture, that culture shapes the way of life and how people observe and experience the world around them – which means that culture is an exclusive invention of a sole selection (Zygałło, 2018).

However, others contemplate both understandings – universalism and cultural relativism – and provide an intermediate ground that assists the accommodation of various societal ways of life, while at the same time proclaiming certain parts of the universality of human rights (Tubor, 2019). In his discourse about human rights, Rorty does not object to the general concept of universal human rights (Slye, 1994). Disapproving of the metaphysical review that inspires much of the discussion about the content of international human rights norms, Rorty offers an alternative approach to create those norms (Slye, 1994). Sentimentality and the guidance of emotions were noted by Rorty as key to a human rights culture (Rorty, 1993). For Rorty (1993) the existence of human rights is dependent on a culture that recognises human rights as rights.

## Study results

This section presents the main findings of the study. There are four themes that emerged from the explorative analysis: (i) an overview of sites where people experienced massacres; (ii) experience of egregious violence and expressions of ‘we’ and ‘them’ in relation to Amhara-Tigray and Eritrea-Tigray identifications

### *Places where massacres were committed*

The killing of civilians happened throughout the region during the Tigray war. Massacres of civilians took place in Aksum Town, Debre Abay in North Western Tigray, Mariam Degelat, Abune-Yemaeta in rural Hawzen, Hitsats in Asgede District, Bora-Selewa and Chercher in Southern Tigray, Mahbere-Dego in Central Tigray, Edaga-Arbi Town and Erob woreda in Eastern Tigray, and Mai-kadra, among other places (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

One of the resource persons later participated in the documentation of the mass killings that occurred in Tigray throughout the war and stated that with different forms of killing and a varied number of people killed ranging from 4 people to nearly 1,000 people, the towns, villages, and districts in which the massacres happened include: Abune Yemaeta village, Adi Fetaw, Adigrat, Adwa, Adi Daero, Aksum, Azeba, Adi Hageray, Bora, Slawa, Chellena, Debre Abay, Dongolat, Edaga Arbi, Edaga Hamus, Endabaguna, Feweyni Town, Finarwa, Gheralta, Gijet, Gu’etelo, Gulomakeda, Guya, Hawzen, Humera, Erop, Kerseber, Kerseber, Mai-Kadra, Maiweyni, Mariam Dengelat, Mekelle, Nebelet, Negash, Shiraro, Tashi, Adi-Awshi (Temben), Guya, Togoga, Workeamba, Wukor Maray, Wukro, and Zalambesa (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, May 2023).

### *Egregious violence*

During the war, countless human rights violations occurred. A health professional in Ayder Referral Hospital who supported women who had been experienced sexual violence said that it was challenging to even talk about what has happened, let alone to have experienced it (Interviewee MK05, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle,

June 2021). These acts of violence were deliberately committed, and the offending military men knew what they were doing.

A displaced woman in Northwestern Tigray said that the men verbally insulted Tigrayan girls and women, using terms such as ‘*tsillas*’<sup>41</sup> (Tigrinya: ታሳ) and ‘bitch’ (Interviewee SH02, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Shire, April 2021).

In Western Tigray, a woman witnessed Amharic-speaking militia opening a womb of a pregnant woman in front of 12 other women (Interviewee SH02, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Shire, April 2021). In rural areas of Asgede, an old woman lost her three sons together with other men and she had to bury them all in the compound where she resides (Interviewee SH01, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Shire, April 2021).

Aksum is one of the places that saw a mass killing of civilians, leaving people in Tigray in shock: “That kind of killing would not be imagined in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what made it severely painful was that it was deliberately made by the so-called ‘brothers’ [Eritreans]” (Interviewee AK01, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Aksum, April 2021).

It is also very difficult to understand a justification that would explain the kind of killing that happened at Abune-Yemaeta of Hawzen Woreda, where a mother and her 30-day-old infant were killed, together with her other three children and an additional 15 people in just less than an hour.<sup>42</sup> One interviewee asked why the survivors were prevented from burying relatives, so that they would not be eaten by wild animals or decay in open air (Interviewee AK02, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Aksum, April 2021). In the cultural context of the northern part of Ethiopia, but also other parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea, corpses should be buried.

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<sup>41</sup> *Tsilla* is a derogatory term to denote Tigrigna speaking people with negative connotation. ‘Tsilla’ refers to a ‘snitch’ from the time that the TPLF had power in Ethiopia.

<sup>42</sup> DW Television, Documentary, 31 October 2021.

Throughout Tigray, countless similar stories are voiced. Thousands of civilians have been brutally killed. When recounting their stories, the interviewees asked: “What gratification would it give someone to see a broken-hearted mother because of killing her son?” (Interviewee MK07, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, July 2021). Another question was: “Why would professional military men kill women, children, and old men to simply loot their property?” (Interviewee MK07, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, July 2021). The interviewee also asked: “What moral grounds would justify these horrendous acts?” (Interviewee MK07, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, July 2021).

### ***Amhara and Tigray: ‘Us’ and ‘them’***

Why did the Ethiopians, and specifically the Amhara, not stand against the atrocities committed in Tigray? In the culture of the Amhara people, callous acts such as those that took place in the Tigray war, are under normal circumstances heavily punished (Interviewee MK10, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

The political competitiveness of the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups has deep historical roots. This competition, however, does not provide a foundation for the existence of ethnic-based categorizations to deal with such kind of difference. The people of Amhara and Tigray have lived in the area long before any political differences arose. Although different historical and socio-cultural factors have resulted in separate ethnic identities, this was not with the aim of gaining comparative advantages (Interviewee MK01, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). There are concerns over the misinterpretation of the narrative of historical events by the Amhara in relation to the Tigrayans causing hostility among the groups (Interviewee MK03, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

More importantly, for the last three decades, the leadership of the Amhara region have put forward a narrative that some territory had been forcefully taken by the TPLF administration and that industries and assets of the Amhara people had been looted by the Tigray forces

during (and after) the fight against the Derg regime<sup>43</sup> (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). In addition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the leading party in Ethiopia since 1991, said to be dominated by TPLF, was accused of oppressing and exploiting the Amhara and the rest of Ethiopia (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). There were also clear media broadcasts and video footage that declared genocidal war on Tigrayans, referring to a majority of 95 million Ethiopians against a minority of 5 million Tigrayans, that should be stopped from taking power, a narrative which was advanced by the Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) (Interviewee MK09, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

A woman whose house was burnt, and whose husband and sister were killed in the Western Zone of Tigray said that she was not sure if the killers were really Amhara people. She was doubtful about their identity, based on knowing their culture, as she had lived with them for years (BG, case study, Shire, 25 April 2021). Another interviewee said that these violent acts committed supposedly committed by Amhara forces do not characterise the make-up of the Amhara people. (Interviewee MK13, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). One explanation could be the result of the hate speeches made by the political leadership. Especially the phrase 'Tigrigna speakers' have come to have denoted a negative connotation in the mind of many Ethiopians (Interviewee MK13, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

### ***Eritrea and Tigray: 'Us' and 'them'***

With regard to the perceptions between Eritrean and Tigray groups, the researcher observed in the refugee camps that Eritrean refugees in Tigray were calling the community that hosted them and the

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<sup>43</sup> The Derg regime was overthrown by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) on 28 May 1991, ending the Ethiopian Civil War (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall\\_of\\_the\\_Derg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_the_Derg)).



Tigrayans who served them as *'wi-egin'* (Tigrinya: ውፊጊን)<sup>44</sup>, which has a negative connotation of inferiority.

The labels used for Tigrayans by Eritreans who were in Tigray also reflect a hierarchy. An interviewee from Mekelle stated that the Tigrayans were labelled as *'agame'* (Tigrinya: ላጋመ)<sup>45</sup> by Eritreans (Interviewee MK08, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

The Eritrean troops in the Tigray war were heard by people in several part of Tigray saying they would turn the Tigrayans back into the 1960s and let the people of Tigray 'drink soup' for 40 years, as they had done to Eritreans for the last 20 years (Interviewee AK03, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Aksum, April 2021). This signified that the Eritrean soldiers had an idea that they were avenging. In addition, the government in Eritrea blames the TPLF administration for its own failure to transform Eritrea, hence, it indoctrinates the younger generation of Eritreans to believe that TPLF and its supporters are the enemies of Eritrea (Interviewee MK13, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021).

The Eritrean troops, regardless of their age, appeared to have an understanding about Tigrayans, which justified in their minds committing such inhumane acts against them. An elderly man in Aksum reported that the military men were 'scavengers', and he in turn questioned whether they could even be considered as human (Interviewee AK03, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Aksum, April 2021).

Interestingly, according to one interviewee, these despicable acts, which were perpetrated against the people in Tigray by the Eritrean troops, do not reflect on the people of Eritrea (Interviewee AD02, case-study interview with Kahsay, Adigrat, April 2021). Whatever the

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<sup>44</sup> *'Wi-egin'* is an alternative term to *'agame'* used by Eritreans to describe Tigrayans in Ethiopia.

<sup>45</sup> Eritreans use the derogatory term *'agame'* to describe things that are socially or physically ugly, according to Gidey Zeratsion (1999). This term has been used by Eritreans to describe Tigrayans and to label them as non-Eritreans, mostly for Tigrayans living in eastern Tigray. From the Tigray side, normally the term is used to describe people of Tigray living in and around Adigrat town.

mass perception of the people living in Tigray, they maintained that such acts would not be expected from Eritrean-born people. Those who committed these crimes are seen as extensions of the hostile regime in Eritrea, who a respondent referred to as ‘deviants’ from their culture (Interviewee AD02, case-study interview with Kahsay, Adigrat, April 2021). That is why “the proud Eritreans should feel ashamed of the acts of their military”.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Similar cultures and norms***

A strong element emerging from the interviews is the perception that Amhara, Tigrayans, and Eritreans have many commonly shared aspects in their culture. The human rights violations, including the killing of civilians and sexual violence, cannot be explained by the cultures of the peoples, interviewees maintained. Particularly in the religions of the peoples, such dehumanising acts are classified as sinful and degrading, hence, forbidden. All the monotheistic religions practised in the cultures are against such malicious acts (Interviewee MK10, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 2021). In Tigray and Eritrea, the same logic applies – humanity is valued and moral values exist to protect humanity (Interviewee MK12, interview with Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, July 2021).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Conflicting parties may possess distinct ethnic identities shaped by historical and structural factors. Naomi Weir (2012) argues that ethnic conflict arises from historical developments that have influenced the relationships between ethnic groups, leading to aggression and the politicisation of ethnic identities. A primary cause of severe human rights violations can be traced to the narratives surrounding Tigray, particularly towards the Amhara in Ethiopia, with accusations against Tigrayans preceding the outbreak of war. The central Ethiopian administration has equated the Tigrayans with the TPLF in the public’s perception, blaming the TPLF for various national issues (Ghebrehiwet, 2021).

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<sup>46</sup> Dimtsi Weyane Television, documentary film titled “ንኣተረሽን ዘምከነ ኣተረሽን”, broadcast 8 November 2021.

On the Eritrean side, sentiments fuelled by a sense of superiority over their southern ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ (Plaut, 2013) have contributed to harsh actions. Eritrea’s leadership has fostered an identity separate from Tigrayans, despite a shared history and culture among the Tigrigna-speaking peoples before Italian colonisation (Plaut, 2013). Abbay also notes that Tigrayans on both sides of the Mereb River share a common ethnicity, history, political economy, myths, language, and religion (Abbay, 1998). However, the Italian colonisation introduced a dismissive, semi-racist attitude among Eritrean urban elites that continues today (Plaut, 2013).

Bereket Kidane supports this perspective, highlighting a significant resentment from Eritreans due to the Tigrayan leadership’s refusal to honour the Algiers Agreement (Kidane, 2014). He also points out that the 1998–2001 war worsened relations between the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia, creating “undeniable hostility and animosity between the two peoples [Eritreans and Tigrayans]” (Kidane, 2014).

Human rights, as universally recognised, apply to all individuals, ensuring everyone possesses the same inalienable rights, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court in 1998, defines crimes against humanity, including various forms of violence and persecution, as outlined in Article 7(1). In addition to promoting retributive justice, the Rome Statute aims to prevent crimes from happening in the future. These definitions are meant to apply universally to all humankind. These universally recognised human rights are generally accepted in the study area’s cultures. Nonetheless, the study highlights the need to strengthen education on human rights across the Horn of Africa region, particularly considering the atrocities committed and the confusion created by political narratives. Rorty’s theory of human rights culture tells us that human rights are only available as rights, if there is a sentimental education that nurtures rights as universally applicable to all human beings.

To end the reflection on this, the Tigrinya proverb ‘the child of fire is ash’ is instructive. The proverb relates to cause and effect: actions or intense experiences often have inevitable consequences. The phrase emphasises the natural outcome of a process. It also refers to

transformation and change: fire can symbolise transformation or destruction, and ash represents what remains after the process. This could be used to illustrate how intense experiences or changes leave behind remnants or results that are different from what existed before. The proverb also associates with ephemeral nature: fire represents something vibrant, powerful, or destructive, while ash symbolises the remains after the energy has dissipated. This suggests the transient nature of life or certain situations, where something once full of life or energy eventually diminishes.

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## **Ethical considerations**

No specific ethical clearance was requested for this research.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.

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### ‘Everything that Held us Together is Now in Ruins’:

#### Exodus and Dissatisfaction after the Peace Agreement in Tigray: A Personal Narrative

*Tom Claes*

ብዙይ ሞያ ሰብ እንተበዝሐ፣ ይመስል ጌሐ።

*An increase in people who offer no value is akin to a gathering of hyraxes.*

#### Abstract

This study is a journalistic reflection on a visit to Tigray at the end of 2023, a year after the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was concluded between Ethiopia and the regional state of Tigray. The author finds that the regional instability continues to persist. Ethiopian forces are stretched thin due to domestic conflicts in Oromia and Amhara, and due to regional tensions, complicating the situation further. Tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia persist. The intertwining regional security dynamics, including the civil war in Sudan, also play a critical role. The uncertainty of the regional dynamics are reflected in views on the situation at a personal level. The author describes a conversation he has with Mahlet, a hotel employee in Dallas Hotel in Mekelle (Tigray), on how the recurring violence affects each generation of her family. Mahlet contemplates fleeing to Europe, burdened by the weight of her family’s past, including her mother’s experiences during the Eritrean-Ethiopian border war and her own survival of recent conflicts. Mahlet expresses deep concern for her daughter’s future, fearing the continuation of violence. The author concludes that her poignant reflection helps to highlight the enduring cycle of conflict that has plagued Tigray and the broader region, affecting generations.

**Keywords:** Tigray, Horn of Africa region, cycle of violence, generational violence, Ethiopia

## **A coffee in the Dallas Hotel in Mekelle**

‘Do you like sugar in your coffee?’ Mahlet Tsegaye asks. It is a quarter past ten in the morning in Mekelle, the capital of the Ethiopian province of Tigray. While life outside is slowly getting underway, it is still remarkably quiet in the Dallas Hotel. Women are busy doing the laundry in the courtyard. A supplier walks into the hotel through the large entrance gate, looks around for a while, and then disappears into a back room.

Mahlet has been working since eight o’clock. The 26-year-old woman carries around a tray of coffee. ‘I worked as a tour guide for years and had a nice salary’, she says while she takes a seat on one of the plastic chairs that were placed randomly in the courtyard. ‘Many tourists visited Tigray, especially to admire the centuries-old churches and mosques. But then, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and everyone stayed away. Suddenly I was out of work.’

And then the worst was yet to come. In early November 2020, a brutal war erupted in Tigray between the regional ruling party Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and its allies. A few weeks later, the fighting reached Wukro, Mahlet’s home city. ‘You could just be shot if you opened your door’, she says in a trembling voice. ‘We were even afraid to go to our neighbors.’

One day, Mahlet heard about a woman who was raped by six soldiers. Her husband, who had to witness the horror, was so devastated that he hanged himself in front of her. It could be me the next day, she pondered. And so, she fled with her three-year-old daughter. ‘We hid in the countryside for weeks. We had no food, no light, nothing.’

Luckily, she still had some money in her bank account. However, because the banking system was down due to the war, she was unable to withdraw anything. ‘I went to the manager of the nearest bank and told him that my daughter was losing weight very quickly. He took some money out of his pocket and gave it to me. We could continue with that for a while. I was afraid I would lose my child.’

In November 2022, after two years of intense fighting, the TPLF and the Ethiopian government reached a peace agreement in Pretoria,

South Africa. Mahlet moved from Wukro to Mekelle shortly afterwards. ‘I needed a job’, she says. ‘Of course, I would much rather be a tour guide again. But do you see any tourists? Today I’m doing a lot of odd jobs at the hotel. I need the money to survive.’

Long hailed as the African tiger, Ethiopia is now struggling to pay its debts. Its economy is in tatters, hit by the coronavirus pandemic and two years of war. Inflation is hovering around 30 percent and food and fuel prices are soaring. ‘Before the war, I used to pay 25 to 30 birr (about 0.50 dollar) for a liter of petrol’, a rickshaw driver in Mekelle explains. ‘Now it is 75 birr (1.30 dollar) at the pump and 100 birr (1.70 dollar) on the black market when petrol stations run out. The price hike means I can no longer put food on the table for my wife and children.’

Life in Tigray has become unaffordable for many people. Young people spend their days on the streets or in one of the gambling dens that are springing up like mushrooms. Some people are deeply in debt. Many have still not received their overdue salaries from during the war. And work is scarce in Tigray, so bills remain unpaid.

### **A visit to Saint Mary’s Church in Dengelat**

‘I had a good income’, Daniel says in flawless English. The smooth young man – cap, sneakers, and hoody – had a job as an IT worker in Mekelle. When war broke out, the region was cut off from all communications and he was left without work. Because he has good language skills and is socially capable, he decided to become a journalist and fixer for foreign reporters.

One of the stories he worked on as a fixer and translator was about Saint Mary’s Church in Dengelat, in northern Tigray. In late November 2020, dozens of pilgrims had gathered at the church to celebrate the Orthodox festival of Zion St Mary. As the celebrants returned from a ceremony in the church, Eritrean soldiers, according to witnesses, opened fire. They had set up camp nearby and were looking for Tigrayan fighters.

‘In a panic, people scrambled up the hill on rocky paths’, the monk of the church tells me in October 2023, when I visited Dengelat. He

witnessed the massacre from nearby. ‘People hid in the bush for days or tried to reach neighboring villages. No one dared to come down out of fear of being killed. We survived by eating the roots and stems of edible wild plants.’

Close to the church, the young farmer Hagos (alias) is sitting on a stone wall. He has just gathered the last of the straw into big bales. His work is done for the day. ‘At least 56 people were massacred there,’ he says, pointing to an open field. It is still unclear how many people died in total. ‘Six of the victims were my wife’s relatives. My mother and sister were also rounded up. They were lucky, a soldier eventually let them go. My sister has now joined the Tigrayan army.’

Before the war, Hagos used to work as a trader in the neighboring town of Adigrat. Since the age of 19, he has made at least five attempts to flee to Saudi Arabia in search of a better life. Each time he was stopped somewhere along the way. He tried to flee during the recent war but was caught in Djibouti. He ended up in a prison in the neighboring region of Afar.

It was never his dream to become a farmer, he explains: ‘This field belongs to my parents. I came back because I wanted to help them. During the attack, the Eritrean soldiers also beat my father and left him for dead. Thank God he survived. But he is disabled and can no longer work.’

Does he dream of a life elsewhere? ‘Of course I do, but that dream has been put aside. There were eight of us at home. My sister and brothers went to fight with the Tigrayan forces; one of them was killed in the war. If the others ever return home, I can go back to work in the trading business. But for now, I will stay here, there is no one else to help my parents.’

Because little was known about the massacre in Dengelat, Daniel set out to the small village in February 2021 together with two foreign journalists to find out about the details. ‘The Tigrayan authorities had called me in advance. They wanted a military convoy to escort us. But Daniel didn’t want to hear about that. ‘I wanted to be able to do independent research. Of course, the Ethiopian soldiers at the checkpoints along the way were also not happy with our presence.

They wanted to stop us from talking to people so that they could control the narrative about what happened in Dengelat.’

In the end, the three managed to reach the church on their own. But in the meantime, they had been reported to the authorities. Once he returned home to Mekelle, Daniel was lifted from his bed at night by Ethiopian soldiers.<sup>47</sup> He would be held for five days: three days in a military camp, and two days in a civilian prison. ‘In the camp I was interrogated, insulted, and threatened’, he explains. ‘They said they would kill me any moment. I was handcuffed on the ground and given no food or water. My passport and all other documents were confiscated and I would never get them back. Nobody knew where I was. Just because I helped foreign journalists.’

### **‘Tigray was unprepared for war’**

For Daniel and so many other Tigrayans, the war did not come out of the blue. ‘The Ethiopian government was surrounded by people who hated the TPLF and the Tigrayans’, he says. When it was founded in 1975, the TPLF was little more than a group of rebellious students who wanted to address the structural backwardness of their region. It had no clear leader and no military experience. Moreover, especially in its early years, it was overshadowed by another rebel group: the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), led by the future president of Eritrea, Isayas.

Despite fighting the same enemy – the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia, better known as the Derg – the two rebel groups differed in structure, military approach, and vision. Eritrea was an Italian colony until 1941 when it came under British rule. It was annexed by Ethiopia in 1952, first as a federation and then as a province in 1962.

From the outset, the EPLF sought independence from Eritrea, while the TPLF sought more rights and political power in Ethiopia. Despite their differences, the two rebel groups would prove successful

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<sup>47</sup> Ethiopian military detains BBC reporter, translators for AFP and FT, 1 March 2021, CPJ, accessed 20 January 2024, <https://cpj.org/2021/03/ethiopian-military-detains-bbc-reporter-translators-for-afp-and-ft/>

together. In the late 1980s, after numerous military defeats and the loss of important arsenals, the Derg forces were forced to withdraw from the rebel areas. On 28 May 1991, TPLF soldiers entered Addis Ababa, less than a week after the EPLF had liberated the Eritrean capital, Asmara.

On 24 May 1993, the new flag was raised in Eritrea: the country was officially no longer part of Ethiopia. With Isayas at the helm in Asmara and Meles Zenawi of the TPLF in Addis Ababa, the future looked hopeful. But things already started to go wrong in 1998: a border dispute over agricultural land around the town of Badme degenerated into a bloody war with trenches and tens of thousands of deaths on both sides. Faced with a humiliating defeat in 2000, Isayas signed a fragile peace agreement. In practice, however, the conflict was not resolved and the border would remain closed.

In 2018, the inauguration of Abiy ended more than a quarter century of TPLF dominance, a period marked by economic growth, but also censorship and harsh repression. With the new Prime Minister, the country seemed to be making a fresh start. He opened prison gates for journalists and political dissidents, lifted censorship, formed a government with half-female ministers, and promised to liberalise the economy. He also dissolved the ruling coalition and replaced it with a unity party, the Pan-Ethiopian Prosperity Party. Most importantly: Abiy made peace with neighboring Eritrea. This surprising move earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in autumn 2019.

Though the international community thought of him as a peacemaker, out of sight of the cameras, Abiy would soon turn out to be a divider. From the moment he took office, he sidelined the Tigrayans: he cut the budget flowing to Tigray and sacked several TPLF party bosses. Moreover, not only was the TPLF targeted, but life was made difficult for the entire Tigrayan population. Bank accounts were blocked, there were arbitrary arrests and Tigrayans had to deal with a lot of hate speech. 'We were labeled as cancer, as weeds or hyenas', Daniel says.

'The problem is that the government of Tigray did not prepare well for war', he continues. 'Eritrea has been a military for thirty years. The country is trained and has enough soldiers. But us? My cousin had ten

days of military training and then went into the wilderness to fight. If you are not prepared, you should not even begin, or immediately surrender yourself.’

## **No future in Tigray**

When Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy sent his army into Tigray, he quickly received support from troops from the neighboring Amhara region and Eritrea. ‘Every morning, we could hear drones and planes flying overhead’, a retired Non-Governmental Worker (NGO) worker in Mekelle recalls. He stayed in the city as Ethiopian soldiers cleared the streets. ‘I could not leave because I would die without medication. I have hypertension and high blood pressure. But like food and water, medicine was hard to find.’

‘Our biggest worry, says the old man, was insecurity. ‘We lived in constant fear. You never knew when you were going to die. We were lucky that our house had a cellar. Whenever we heard planes or drones, we would hide there except for my mother-in-law. She stubbornly stayed in the living room every time. She lived through three wars in her life, the last one broke her.’

The man bats his eyes and rubs his hands uncomfortably. Then he sighs: ‘I don’t see any future for Tigray. Many schools, hospitals and factories have been destroyed and looted.<sup>48</sup> Valuable parts and raw materials were taken. Everything was a target in this war. Everything that held our people together is now in ruins.’

In response to the mass atrocities, more and more young people joined the Tigrayan resistance. The mobilisation of new recruits led to the creation of a new popular fighting force: the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF). The TPLF formed the core of that army, but everyone who wanted to fight joined: students, shopkeepers, professors, and even opposition members who would otherwise not spare their criticism of the TPLF.

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<sup>48</sup> EFFORT says four factories completely destroyed during war, as industries in Tigray gear up to resume production, 27 March 2023, accessed 1 April 2023, <https://eng.addisstandard.com/analysis-effort-says-four-factories-completely-demolished-during-war-as-industries-in-tigray-gear-up-to-resume-production/>



The TPLF grew from a rebel group in the 1970s and 1980s to a proper ruling party in the 1990s and 2000s. For years, there have been accusations of corruption, and the lack of accountability and responsibility. The TDF embodied the hope that the TPLF's monopoly on power could be broken once the war was over.

It turned out differently. One of the conditions of the Pretoria Peace Agreement was that an inclusive interim government would be established in Tigray. Yet the TPLF appears to be claiming all the power again. This has left many Tigrayans frustrated. 'I think everyone hoped for change', Daniel says. 'But what have our sacrifices done for us? Nothing. Even before the war, the economy had collapsed, and now the situation is much worse. Most factories have been destroyed. People have no work, and no prospects for the future. Leaving is the only option if you want to survive.'

'I now have a new passport', he continues. 'Thank God, because there is a major shortage of passports in the Ethiopian government. But I hate that mine says "Ethiopia". We have nothing in common with the rest of the country. I would like to move to Canada. Would I work in IT again? Of course, being a computer scientist is the best job you can think of.'

## **Migration out of desperation**

Daniel is not the only one who thinks about leaving. In an interview with the Addis Standard newspaper,<sup>49</sup> Haysh Subagadis, the head of the Youth Affairs Office in Tigray, expressed his concern about the growing number of young people migrating to the Arabian Peninsula and other African countries via various routes. He did not give exact figures, but he said 'to have received alarming reports' about this.

Rezene (alias), a guide and museum curator, is one of them. However, before the war he never thought about leaving, he explains: 'I always

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<sup>49</sup> Rising number of Tigray youth fleeing to the Arabian Peninsula amid food security challenges, limited job prospects, 16 November 2023, Addis Standard, accessed 2 February 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/news-rising-number-of-tigray-youth-fleeing-to-the-arabian-peninsula-amid-food-security-challenges-limited-job-prospects/>

believed that Tigray was the best for the Ethiopian history and culture. All Tigrayans were thinking of Ethiopians. No one was asking about self-determination before the war erupted. But now, because of the atrocities, not only from the past but also the suffering that's about to come, I only want to be Tigrayan. I think it's better to continue living together as good neighbors.'

Nowadays, many Tigrayans increasingly talk about self-determination, the retired NGO worker says. But he warns: 'If you agree to separate, you should do it in a peaceful and wise way. Ethiopia should allow us to separate, it is our right. Let me tell you a parable. A man is married, and every day he quarrels with his wife. One day he becomes very aggressive, and he shows his hatred towards her. What will be the solution? Is it a good idea to bring in another guy to rape and hit her? Will she be your wife forever? Was it a good solution to stay together? You should convince your partner that you can live separately without harming her. They should believe that the separation is for mutual interest.'

'Everyone is desperate. We have no salary, no medicines, or other necessary things to live a normal life, Rezene says. And yet, he hesitates to leave: 'It might be wiser to emigrate for work or education. But if all Tigrayans leave, our enemies would ultimately win. What they could not achieve with war, they have succeeded with the peace agreement: the region is divided, people are moving away and everyone is at a loss.'

'There are many personal challenges and challenges for our community as a whole', a young healthcare worker at Ayder Hospital in Mekelle says. 'Western Tigray is still occupied by Amhara forces. So, people cannot live there and many of them come to our hospital. Besides that, we have not been paid for almost three years. Only in the last months, the Ethiopian government is giving us our salary. That means only the salary. But we also work night shifts. Those hours are not paid.'

Many people now have debts, he says: 'During the war, we had to beg for money just so that we could eat. I still have debts for food and even for my rent. These days, there are many conflicts. People go to court to ask for their two years' rent. But let's not forget: only the rent

is someone's monthly salary. So, it is not possible to pay back two years of rent. That causes a lot of frustration among the Tigrayan community. One of my colleagues has an appointment in court over a debt of 53,000 birr [approximately EUR 860, eds.]. There are many such cases, even outside Mekelle.'

### **Will there be another war?**

'The economic situation is one thing,' says Daniel, 'but the security of the region is a completely different story. You never know when you will have to fight again. The peace agreement has not yet been fully implemented. Tigray is still not stable. There are rumors that a new war with Eritrea is brewing. And then what?'

In October 2023, Prime Minister Abiy said that he was eyeing the Eritrean port city of Assab. With the independence of Eritrea in 1993, Ethiopia lost its access to the sea. Abiy left no doubt: access to the sea is existential for Ethiopia's survival.

'Abiy is cheating the people', the retired NGO worker says. 'He has his own problem internally. He couldn't resist war and is now fighting with the Fanos, the Amhara militias. He's buying time by saying he will bring back the Eritrean ports to Ethiopia. Nobody believes this propaganda. He couldn't clear the Fanos even properly, so, now he is going to fight with the Eritreans? That's a joke.'

A war over Assab is off the table for the time being. In January 2024, the Ethiopian government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the breakaway Somali province of Somaliland, which should give Ethiopia its long-sought access to the sea through the port city of Berbera. But this deal also creates new tensions in the already volatile Horn of Africa. Somaliland is a former British protectorate that declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but is not recognised by the international community. The port deal with Ethiopia promises Somaliland the prospect of recognition, much to the frustration of Somalia. It says its sovereignty has been violated and is eagerly seeking international support. In this way, Eritrea, as a possible ally of Somalia, comes back into the picture.

Eritrea could use the port deal with Somaliland to start a new war with Tigray. Firstly, because Eritrean President Isayas has not achieved his goal: the complete destruction of the TPLF. Secondly, because Abiy does not have the military strength to wage a war on several fronts the timing could therefore be good. Apart from the tensions with Somalia, the Ethiopian army is already occupied with rebel uprisings in the Oromia and Amhara regions. And thirdly, because the whole regional security complex is intertwined. Many factors might influence the possibility of a new Eritrea/Ethiopia war: for example, the role of Egypt, how the alliance between Somalia and Eritrea plays out, and the possible spillover effects of the civil war that is currently raging in Sudan.

Meanwhile, lunchtime has arrived at the Dallas Hotel. Mahlet, the hotel employee and former guide, stares straight ahead, almost mechanically. Her eyes move slowly over the half-covered courtyard. 'If I get the chance, I'll go to Europe', she says, caressing her daughter's head. She has tried to recapture some of her previous life, but it is no longer the same. 'I'm thinking about my child, you know. My own mother lived in Tigray during the border war with Eritrea. Her mother experienced the battle against the Derg in the 1980s. And, I survived the last war.'<sup>50</sup>

She is silent for a moment. She puts the empty coffee cups on the tray and stands up. And, as she takes her daughter by the hand, she whispers: 'Every generation is torn apart by violence. Who knows what tragedy awaits my child?'

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<sup>50</sup> This paragraph is based on a discussion with Kjetil Tronvoll, 19 January 2024.

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## **Authors' contributions**

The author is the sole contributor to the chapter.

## **Ethical clearance**

Note of the editors: No ethical clearance was obtained. This article was not contributed to this book as an academic article. It was contributed on the invitation of the editors. The article was produced with respect of the ethical considerations for journalists and in respect for and recognition of the importance of journalism. All names of persons are changed.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.

### War Makes States: From ‘Game Over’ to the Idea of Tigray Statehood

*Meressa Tsehay Gebrewahd, Mirjam Van Reisen*

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*A cow gave birth to a fire: she wanted to lick it, but it burned;  
she wanted to leave it, but she could not because it was her own child.*

#### Abstract

This study investigates how the war in Tigray has re-ordered the landscape of the federal Ethiopian state. Initially aiming for an independent Tigray, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) embraced Ethiopianism under the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), in which regional autonomy was combined with federal state building. However, Prime Minister Abiy’s ‘neo-pan Ethiopianist’ approach replaced federation with a centralist model. Since 2018, Tigray was targeted through propaganda and hate speech and its regional autonomy challenged. This escalated into a shattering war. The 2020–2022 war devastated Tigray, leaving its people feeling excluded and fearful. Despite the destruction, Tigray has maintained governance, however, there is a need for stability in the region, which it is argued can only be achieved by autonomy balanced with regional collaboration. The focus is on establishing Tigray as a democratic state that can safeguard the protection of its people. War ‘makes states’: hence, the leadership (of both Tigray and Ethiopia) must reinforce the foundations of a representative state capable of independently protecting and fulfilling the aspirations of its people, within the ever-changing context of the Tigray region.

**Key words:** Tigray, Ethiopia, autonomy, self-determination, nation-building, statehood, interdependence

## Introduction

“War makes state”, argued Tilly (1982). “Only the risk of annihilation makes people abandon the ways they presently use to make sense of the world” (Wainaina, 2022, p. 129). Soon after Prime Minister Abiy was appointed, he referred to Tigrayans as: “daytime hyenas” (Yethiopia News, 2018; Geb & Tesfa, 2024; Tesfa & Van Reisen, 2024). This statement was made not long after he expressed his political aspiration for Ethiopian people to come together – *‘medemer’ መደመር* – which is the Amharic word for ‘synergy’ (Ahmed, 2018). In his inaugural address he said: “Our identity is built in such a way that it is inseparable; it is threaded in a manner that cannot be untangled. It is integrated out of love” (Ahmed, 2018).<sup>51</sup>

Prime Minister (PM) Abiy may have acted on the assumption that a decrease of autonomy at the lower state levels would result in a higher degree of central cohesion. In a parallel to other federal structures, such as the European Union, the pendulum of integration offers a concept of federated structures as constantly dynamic and swinging between magnets of more diffusion and fusion (Wallace & Wallace, 1996, p. 13). A vector determining the movement of the pendulum’s attraction between the two magnetic poles of fusion and difference, is the level of entropy of ideas.

Regional specificity is one key element driving the pendulum in a specific way, in an endemic political and policy competition within a fluctuating and inherently unstable situation. The dynamic evolves around the interplay of ideas, interests and institutions and results from the agentic choices made by actors in responding to the situations that arise (Wallace & Wallace, 1996).

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<sup>51</sup> Ahmed, A. (2018). Full English Transcript of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s Inaugural Address. Translation by Hassen Hussein. OPride. (3 April 2018) <https://www.opride.com/2018/04/03/english-partial-transcript-of-ethiopian-prime-minister-abiy-ahmeds-inaugural-address/> (Accessed on 2 January 2024) and iMAGE eTHIOPIS. (2018). Ethiopian Prime Minister | PM Abiy Ahmed speech in Mekelle (13 April 2018) [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPkZiaMgkTE> (Accessed on 17 September 2023).

The pendulum of policymaking has not been investigated in the specificity of an African context. This chapter investigates ideas about the organisation of power between multiple levels, by studying how the events relating to the war in Tigray have re-ordered the landscape of the federal Ethiopian state. This research investigates the dynamic and resulting realities on the distribution of power across multilevel governance structures in a federated state situation within a region with frequent histories of war.

War-making can result in new statehood. What statehood may emerge from the war in Ethiopia, is a question that must be considered. The potential claim about the statehood of Tigray has emerged as a more urgent route to negotiate the regional dynamics. Whatever lessons can be drawn from other places, the specifics in time and place must lead such an analysis:

*Consider it history in the As If, history as material for theoretical reflection, history as a source of hypotheses which must return, for refinement, rectification, and verification, to the actual experience from which it came. If summarizing European warmaking and statemaking is like skating on thin ice, extrapolating that summary to the contemporary world resembles walking on water. Send out the life-preservers!*  
(Tilly, 1982, p. 23)

Heeding Tilly's warning, this chapter takes an in-depth look at the question of dynamics of multi-level power in an African place, from the perspective of discourse analysis: how ideas are constructed that have consequences for perceptions on legitimacy of power held by whom and at what level, focusing on narratives about:

- The past, identity and belonging
- Federation of organisation of power and threats
- Specificities concerning power balance and distribution.

The research question is: *How has the war in Tigray re-ordered the landscape of the federal Ethiopian state?* To answer this question, this chapter examines the discourse on the distribution of power between the central and federal level in Ethiopia with a case study on Tigray. The Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), having led the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) for almost three



decades<sup>52</sup> (Berhe, 2020), left the federal government structures in 2018 and, from 2020, Tigray was embroiled in a brutal war. The selection of Tigray as focus of research is justified, in that the Tigray war represented an extraordinary shift in federated regional power relations.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***The nation-state***

Milward (1992) provided a remarkable and counterintuitive historic and political account of how the European integration in the European Community strengthened the future scope of the European nation state. While the colonial-based nation-state in Europe was in serious decline following World War II and the subsequent loss of the colonies, Europe's integration saved the European nation state. The European project, based on the fusing of policy areas previously belonging to the mandate of the member states, saved its member states and permitted a continuation of a national identity within the supranational regional integration project.

The arguments on the discussions of nation, nationalism, and nation-building revolve around the concept of a 'nation', originally mainly defined in a European context (Smith, 1998). There is no consensus on the definition of a nation and its constitutive elements. There are broadly two arguments. The primordialism<sup>53</sup> schools argued that a nation is an expression of age-old feelings of belonging, rooted in

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<sup>52</sup> Following anti-government protests against the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Abiy was appointed chairman of the ruling coalition, on 28 March 2018 and was inaugurated as Prime Minister on 2 April 2018. The EPRDF had been in power for three decades and was dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) for most of that period. PM Abiy is originally from the Oromia region of Ethiopia and previously participated as a member of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) in the EPRDF. Abiy has a mixed Oromo-Amhara ethnic family background.

<sup>53</sup> Primordialism is defined by three minimal propositions: (1) Individuals have a single ethnic identity, (2) This ethnic identity is by its nature fixed, (3) This ethnic identity is exogenous to human processes. The constructivist refutation consists of three counterpropositions: (1) Individuals have multiple ethnic identities, (2) These identities can change (although often they do not), (3) Such change, when it occurs, is the product of some human process.

language, ethnicity, or territory, and, hence, the defining traits (like history, language, and physical appearance) are naturally and socially (i.e., socialization) predetermined. Nation-building is, thus, a process of projecting a nation into statehood. The voluntarist (constructivist or instrumentalist) schools, on the other hand, argued that the nation is a modern construct, ‘invention’ (Hobsbawm, 1983), or even ‘imagination’ (Anderson, 1983). According to Andrew Levine (2007, p. 155), a nation refers to a community of people joined together by a common descent and common culture. It represents homogeneous people “sharing a common language, religion, historical myths, and common territory” (Levine, 2007). The French Revolution (1789) offered the definition of a nation as a group of individuals who believe in “equality, liberty, and fraternity”. Accordingly, the nation did not entail a culturally or linguistically defined community, but a set of shared values. In all of these, the question of what forms the basis of sovereignty of the state, must be answered.

Mazzini defined nation and nation-building in terms of political equality and popular consent expressed in the form of “equality, liberty, and association” (Mazzini, 2009, p. 50). He underlined that only these three elements together can constitute a genuine nation. By nation, he meant:

*The entirety of citizens who speak the same language and are associated, under equal enjoyment of civil and political rights, for the common purpose of developing and progressively perfecting all social forces and their activity.* (Mazzini, 2009, p. 50)

He further argued that language, territory, and ethnicity are pre-political factors. The nation is not simply a territory that ought to be strengthened by enlarging its size, nor is it just a collection of people who speak the same language and follow the initiative of a single leader. It is instead an organic whole held together by a unity of goals and common efforts.

Mazzini (2009) gave the nation a political meaning; a ‘commonwealth’ or government by the people, based on a written constitution. Nation-building is thus the institutionalization of popular sovereignty expressed in the form of equality and liberty of individuals based on a written constitution regardless of the pre-political factors including language, territory, and ethnicity. Following the unification of Italy

(1860), Massimo d'Azeglio (one of the founders of united Italy) legendary remarked about nation-building: "Italy has been made; now it remains to make Italians" (Alesina & Reich, 2015, p. 3).

Glezerman (1977) further elaborated on the evolution of a nation as:

*The rise of communities via eliminating feudal disunity, the political unification of territories into a single nation speaking a single language, consolidation of economic links between different parts of the country, and merger of local markets into a national market.* (Glezerman, 1977, p. 12)

The conceptualization resulted in common elements: territory and economic life which formed based on the development of a common language, psychological make-up, and certain traits of national character, manifested in the specifics of a nation's culture (Glezerman, 1977).

### ***Nation-building***

Alesina and Reich defined nation-building as "a process that leads to the formation of countries in which the citizens feel a sufficient amount of commonality of interests, goals, and preferences so that they do not wish to separate from each other" (Alesina & Reich, 2015, p. 3). It is a process of collective identity formation to legitimise public power within a territory. It is "essentially an indigenous process that draws on existing traditions, institutions, and customs, redefining them as national characteristics to support the nation's claim to sovereignty and uniqueness" (Alesina & Reich, 2015).

A successful nation-building process produces a cultural projection of the nation containing a certain set of assumptions, values, and beliefs that can function as the legitimising foundation of a state structure. Cultural projection of a nation is about "building consensus on the cultural traditions, customs, symbols, law, rituals, and the historical experience – *usable past*" (Mylonas, 2007, p. 14). Von Bogdandy, Häußler, Hanschmann & Utz (2005) elaborated on the differences between state-building and nation-building. State-building concerns the construction of state institutions for a functioning state while nation-building is the construction of a national identity. Dinnen (2006, p. 1) also argued that nation-building is "the self-conscious production and dissemination of national consciousness

and sentiment; a felt sense of national identity, led by elites and state officials”. It is also achieving ‘social modernity’, that is:

*An open system of stratification allowing and encouraging social mobility, the state as an impersonal form of government, the pursuit of economic growth, and a cultural system establishing collective meaning and identity for all envisaged members of society.* (Dinnen, 2006, p. 1)

It is more of an abstract process of developing a shared sense of identity or community among the various groups making up the population of a state as Buzan (1991, p. 65) branded it “the idea of the state”.

In general, nation-building is about a total and comprehensive effort of social engineering, in which all elements of a modern state were assembled, i.e., it is about building “legitimacy, capacity, and integration” (Azar & Moon, 1988, p.78). State-building follows the task of building functioning states capable of fulfilling the essential attributes of modern statehood i.e., achieving international recognition, effective military control or law and order, delivering political goods, and building legitimate and strong institutions (Azar and Moon, 1988).

Nationalism in Europe was rooted in the idea that every nation has the right to government (Lawrence, 2005). It was based on the idea that “a state should be founded in a nation and the nation should be constituted as a state i.e., nation and state should be congruent” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 34). Moreover, its appeal was “popular and democratic, and proclaimed the sovereign right of the people to determine their destinies, in states of their own if that was what they desired” (Smith, 1998, p. 1).

In Africa, the colonial project by European powers resulted in the arbitrary division of the nations of Africa across different neighbouring states. African states were artificially created with arbitrary colonial borders. Nationalism in most African states thus formed based on “common territory, common colonial history and common goal for decolonization” (Davidson, 1992, pp. 164–165). Inheriting an “authoritarian colonial state”, Zhou and Machenjera (2017) finds that decolonisation provided with a change of rulers and not a revolution: “the colonial machinery of government was

inherited, and its symbols of power and authority were retained in most countries” (Zhou & Machenjera, 2017, p. 65). Zhou & Machenjera conclude that African leaders “strengthened the unitary colonial state apparatus and expanded its scope enormously” (Zhou & Machenjera, 2017, p. 67), with many countries embracing state-oriented socialism based on a one-party political power structure. Africa has been wrecked by civil wars and the colonial artificial borders have contributed to wars on the continent, notably the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war (Zhou & Machenjera, 2017, p. 70).

In Ethiopia, as in many parts of Africa, nation-building happened in the context of the liberation movements. Even though the situation in Ethiopia is specific and different from other African countries, the ascent of the TPLF happened in the context of a project of liberation, which was somehow twinned with the Eritrea People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). Following the unexpected fall of the cruel Mengistu regime in 1991, both the TPLF and EPLF were catapulted in a project of state-building. This provided structural root causes of civil war, which Roessler refers to as the ‘threat capability’ of exclusion of power: the Tigrayans and Eritreans in Ethiopia managed to penetrate to the centre, with much to lose, given the physical remoteness to the centre (Roessler, 2016, p. 288). Berhe (2020) identifies the following strategic challenges that the TPLF faced in this process, in which it established itself as part of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF): (i) external forces (neighbours, world powers, global economy); (ii) key task challenges (overthrow regime, transition, democracy); (iii) mobilise and maintain support (members, partners, other groups, the public) and (iv) differentiation of polity (regions, ethnic groups, federation) (Berhe, 2020, pp. 13–14).

While the EPRDF was established in response to a perceived call for building a united Ethiopia, there have been different opinions as to what the basis of this united project should be (Ehrlich, 2024). Mamdani sees this as endemic in all liberation struggles on the continent in that “the revolt from below needs to be problemised, for it carries the seeds of its own fragmentation and possible self-destruction” (Mamdani, 1996, p. 24). The Tigray war can be seen as a culmination of this (Plaut and Vaughan, (2023), or in any case, as a failure to persuade a basis for an Ethiopian state-building project,

which is oscillating between autonomy and diversity in a new way. This study aims to contribute to a mapping of how the Tigray war has affected this equilibrium.

## Methodology

Data was collected in a literature review<sup>54</sup> and a systematic review of expressions in the media. In addition, resource persons were asked to comment on the findings of this research. Where relevant, their views are included.

With regards to media articles, a purposeful selection was made with the assistance of an expert on media related to the Tigray war 2020–2022. The selection focused on media expressions that appeared repeatedly in the media as an illustration of the tensions between the central level and the regional states. In this research, the original use of expressions was traced. A discourse analysis was used. Verification with key resource persons was carried out in informal and formal conversations, as indicated, from 2021 to 2024. Given the level of seniority, the sources have remained anonymous. The sources were involved in the verification of material. One source was involved in a longitudinal set of conversations over a longer time period as a background on the documentation that was studied. Another source was involved in an interview carried out to highlight particular aspects discussed in this chapter. The confidentiality of sources was

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<sup>54</sup> The first literature review was conducted to respond to the question as to what extent the scientific literature observed and explained tensions and shifts in the discourse on the federal system of governance in Ethiopia in the periods identified. The literature review was conducted as a purposeful and systematic literature review with key words ‘Ethiopia’ AND ‘federal/federalism/federated’ AND ‘regional state’ AND ‘autonomy’. The focus of the literature was English academic articles. The articles were selected on the basis of title and abstract and included manually with a variation of prioritisation based on the following categories: (i) well cited overview articles on the post 1991 situation (ii) literature about the 2020–2022 period and (iii) literature published after 2022. A second literature review was conducted to look at the shifts in the discourse of the narrations of history in Ethiopian and Tigray history. The purpose was to understand whether shifts occurred in the discourse on the history of Ethiopia and Tigray within the periods identified. The literature review was conducted as a purposeful snowballing exercise. A timeline of political expressions used in the timeline was also constructed, with verification of the sources of the videos and social media.

maintained for security reasons. All source documents are printed in pdf and archived.

The approach to this chapter reveals, inevitably, the presence of ourselves as researchers in the inquiry, which mediates ‘truth’ (Wainaina, 2022) as an honest, time-bound, positioned reflection on a reality that is complex and undoubtedly has many truths (Beattie, 2022). This research is not intended as an objective and total representation of any views occurring in Ethiopia at any time. The focus of this research is to understand the tension between central and regional level from the perspective of Tigray. In Ethiopia, and within Tigray, there are different experiences and discourses on the situation, and this study is not intended to reflect all of the possible different views. Rather, this chapter intends to study the dynamics recorded in discourse of a major shift in Tigray from identification with Ethiopia as the centre of power to autonomy or even independence at the regional state level.

Based on critical junctures on the war in Tigray relevant to this research (Melicherová et al., 2024; Gebreslassie & Van Reisen, 2024), this article considers the following time periods:

- The period before 1991: the period prior to the current constitutional set up
- The period 1991–2018: the period governed by Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister of Ethiopia with Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in a strong leadership position in the Ethiopian up until Prime Minister Abiy came to power in April 2018
- The period 2018–2020: the pre-Tigray war period following the inauguration of Prime Minister Abiy
- The period 2020–2022: the period of the Tigray war
- The period 2022–onwards: the post-Tigray war period

## **Findings**

The findings first discuss the dissonance and congruence of state politics of Tigray in the region in the four periods: (i) the historic roots that present the ancestry of the Tigray state; (ii) the regional state

defined in a multi-level framework in the post 1991 era; (iii) the pre-war period in which Tigray's place in the multi-level composition is reconfigured and (iv) the situation during the war.

### ***Historic roots of Tigray in a dynamic region***

Tigray is rooted in one of the oldest literate civilisations in the world, referred as the Geez civilisation (Tibebu, 1995) – or *Ze-Behere Agaa'zi*, the nation of *Aga'azi* (Abbay, 1998) – the home of the Aksumite Kingdom. These form the political, cultural and religious ancestor of today's Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is also the ancient polity to receive the three Abrahamic faiths:<sup>55</sup> Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Tigray was one of the oldest kingdoms. In terms of art, culture, and philosophy, Tigray and the wider region is endowed with some of the oldest and indigenous art (e.g., the obelisks in Aksum and temples of Yaha), indigenous musical sounds (nota<sup>56</sup>) developed by St Yared, and philosophy of “God, religion and the law of conscience”<sup>57</sup> by philosopher Zerayakob the Aksum.

The ancient Tigray,<sup>58</sup> prior to Menelik-II of Shewa, who became king of kings and emperor in 1889, was a self-contained kingdom or Geez

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<sup>55</sup> Judaism was the oldest faith to enter Tigray. Tigray accepted Orthodox Christianity, in Aksum, in the 4th century AD. during the time of King Ezana of the Aksumite kingdom. King Ezana was the first king to accept Christianity in the kingdom from the Syrian Bishop Aba Selama Freminatos. Aba Selama, later named as ‘Aba Selama Kisatebirhane’, became the first bishop of the Orthodox Church of Tigray and Ethiopia. Moreover, Tigray was also the first Christian kingdom to accept Islam, in the 7th century AD, in the place called Al-Negashi, located in eastern Tigray. The Al-Negashi church is possibly the oldest mosque of Africa. Tigray also accepted Catholicism in the 16th century. Hence, Tigray is a rare case where Judaism, Christianity and Islam have peacefully coexisted since antiquity. More than 90% of the people of Tigray are Orthodox followers followed by Islam, Catholics, and Protestants.

<sup>56</sup> Locally known as ‘Geez, Ezile and Ararat’

<sup>57</sup> In Tigrinya known as ‘Hige-lubona’ – Law of the heart

<sup>58</sup> Tigray had different names like ‘the Aga’azian’, ‘Abyssinian’, ‘Habesha’, ‘ancient/biblical Ethiopian’ – or the ‘Cushitic’, ‘hematic’ and ‘sematic’ people. The ‘ancient Ethiopian’ or ‘Biblical Ethiopia’ was referred, according to the Greek, as ‘black people’ or ‘people of burned face’ south of ancient Egypt that included upper Nile or Meroe (Sudan), Aksum-Red Sea and Puntland of today's Somalia. The ancient Ethiopia and ‘modern Ethiopia’ (post-Menelik-II Ethiopia) are not



civilisational state (Abbay, 1998; Tibebe, 1995). Haggai Erlich,<sup>59</sup> a prominent historian of Ethiopia and Middle East, has summarised Tigray's political history and contributions in the Horn of Africa as ““the gate and the wall”: Tigray is the gate of civilisation, culture and religion to the Horn and it is the wall – the defence, of the Horn against international aggression facing Ethiopia” (Interviewee AB02, personal conversation with Tsehay, face-to-face, July 2023).

After Menelik-II of Shewa was crowned as king of kings in 1890, Tigray sought to find its place in the empire state of Ethiopia, established by Emperor Menelik-II, *Emye-Menelik*. He is considered the founding father of the post-1889 Ethiopia (Henze, 1985). Tigray has remained in continuous existence (i.e., in name, map, and territory) from ancient times into the modern era.<sup>60</sup> It preserved its

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historically directly linked, rather their relationship has been ‘mythical’ or legendary derived from the Solomonic dynasty by Yikono Amlak of Shewa, as legitimate successor of Aksumite, since 1270, to undermine the Zagwe dynasty as an ‘illegitimate’ successor of the Aksumite kingdom. The ‘modern Ethiopia’ of Menelik-II, thus, took Geez script (Amharic), orthodox religion and Solomonic royal family from the ‘biblical Ethiopia’ (Daamat, Yaha and Aksum) as instruments or justification of state formation and nation building of his empire. The people of the Eritrean and Ethiopian state living outside today's Tigray, northern Amhara, and kebessa Eritrea, which have no strong historical lineage with the ancient Ethiopia. That is why, the Oromo, Somali, Gembela, Benshangul-Gumuz, Afar and the people of Southern Ethiopia argue that they were incorporated into, or colonised by, Ethiopia by emperor Menelik in the 19th century during the European colonisation of Africa.

<sup>59</sup> In a conversation between the first author with Haggai Erlich, a historian on Ethiopia and the Middle East Professor at Tel Aviv University, July 2023.

<sup>60</sup> Except for Tigray, all the regions and peoples of Ethiopia had different names and territories during the reign of Menelik, Haile Selassie and Derg; e.g., there was no ‘Amhara people and region’ in name and territory in the pre-1995 Ethiopia rather they were identified as ‘Wollo, Gondar/Begemdir, Gojjam, and Shewa’. By the same token, from 16th century up to Haile Selassie period, the Oromo were referred by the derogatory name ‘Galla’ and their territory was called ‘Shewa, Harerga, Jimma, Wellega, Bala, Borona’, there was no single name representing the Oromo nation and territory. The Benshangul and Gambella people of western Ethiopia were referred to as ‘Shanqila, i.e., slave or black’. The Wollayta in Southern Ethiopia as ‘Wollamo’. The Ethiopian nations and peoples were considered as ‘subjects or serfs’ not citizens of the feudal empire and, hence, Ethiopia was defined as the ‘prison house of nationalities’, a popular slogan of the Ethiopian student movement during the 1974 revolution that toppled Emperor Haile Selassie, the last king of the Solomonic dynasty.

history, culture, heritage, identity, language, and territorial entity from European colonisation, Amhara feudal state (of Menelik-II and Haile Selassie-I) oppression and assimilationist nation-building (*Ambaranized Ethiopianism*), and Derg military fascism and Marxist-Leninist revolution imposed onto “the conservative Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition of Tigray” (Henze, 1985, p.4).

There is a sense in Tigray that it forms a foundation of today’s Ethiopian and Eritrean states (Abbay, 1998), providing the core and the centre of the regions cultural, historical, political, and identity. In this view, the historiographies of Ethiopia and Ethiopianism with more than 3,000 years of statehood, historically evolved from the pre-Aksumite (Daamat and Yaha) and Aksumite periods. The Ethiopian Kings and Queens were considered as descendants of Menelik-I-son of Queen Shaba and King Solomon of Israel.

The Mondial religious denominations (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) first entered Ethiopia through Tigray. The *Geez* script is the ancient language on which today’s official languages are founded: Amharic (the official language of pre-1995 Ethiopia and the working language of the post 1995 federal government) and Tigrinya (the official language of the Tigray State) languages. Lastly, the wars against foreign aggressions of Turkey, Egypt, and Mahdist Sudan; Italian colonialism; and Eritrean (1998-2000 and post-2020) were fought in Tigray by Ethiopia proudly propagating “the never colonised narratives” (Tibebu, 1996). Therefore, in Ethiopia the Tigray region symbolises the cradle of civilisation. It also can be regarded as a cradle of pride, patriotism, nationalism, independence, and sovereignty in Ethiopia and in Africa (Abbay, 1998; Tareke, 2009).

Following the Death of Emperor Yohannes-IV (1872–1889) and the coming of Emperor Menelik-II of Shewa to power in 1890, the people of Tigray partitioned into two, i.e., the people of North Mereb River made to be Eritrean: colonised under Italy (1890–1941), Britain (1941–1952) and Ethiopia (1952–1991) (Gebrewahd, 2013). And the Tigray South of the Mereb River was made under Shewa-Amhara domination and oppression (from 1890–1991).

The TPLF was a mobilising factor in the Southern Tigray part for the 17 years of armed struggle (1975–1991) against the Derg military regime for national self-determination (against national oppression) within Ethiopia. The EPLF was part of the Northern opposition to the Derg fighting for self-determination from Ethiopia in Eritrea. The EPLF was established after the Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF) had begun to organise resistance against Ethiopian domination in the Eritrean lowlands, and later in the Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean highlands (Berhe, 2020).<sup>61</sup> The split between the Tigrinya ethnic group has resulted in a challenge to the current Tigray state (Erich, 2024). The Tigrayans have suffered as the victims of their own internal rivalries, which culminated in the deep and bitter split between Tigrayans in current-day Tigray and the Eritrean Tigrayan (Erich, 2024).

### ***The 1995 Constitution promoting regional autonomy***

While the EPLF set up the Eritrean state with elections for independence held in 1993, after the fall of the Derg regime in May 1991, a TPLF-EPRDF-led government took power in Addis Ababa. EPRDF introduced the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) in 1995.

As a means of balancing the different aspirations for ethnic recognition and autonomy, Article 39 of the 1995 Constitution addressed the issue of self-determination. It recognises the rights of nationalities to self-determination up to and including secession. The FDRE Constitution, Article 39(5), (1995) defined a “Nation, Nationality or People” as “a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory”.

The Constitution could be seen as giving the state an “African look” (Abdullahi, 1998). It allows wide ranges of autonomy, including that

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<sup>61</sup> That both ELF and EPLF used it as the historical justification for the 30 years armed struggle for independence, i.e., colonial thesis. See the EPLF Manifesto (1971).

“Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self- government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and Federal governments”. This is the basis for the regional states and regional governments in Ethiopia, which permit the governments a wide mandate of administrations on matters as wide-ranging as the regional security forces. In adopting this Constitution some hailed it as promoting “an indigenous form of governance whereby the various ethnic nationalities have an overwhelming power over the central government” (Abdullahi, 1998). The secession clause has made the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution the most contested law of Ethiopia and a unique phenomenon in Ethiopia’s political history and constitutional reengineering (Gebrewahd, 2019).

The ‘federalist experiment’, also called the ‘Tigrayan federalist thought’ (Gebrewahd, 2019, pp. 42–43), is the school that refers to Tigray’s integration as an ethnically identifiable identity into Ethiopia as the best option from an economic, political and security perspective. This as opposed to the Amhara assimilation ambition of integrating different ethnic groups of Ethiopia into one new Ethiopian identity. The federalist experiment was argued to be the only remaining option for maintaining the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state, healing its historical wounds, and solving the contradictions among its nations (Markakis, 2011). Finally, federalism was widely expected to justify the mutual destiny of shared rule, produce a larger economy, and a larger population. It was hoped and believed that this could assist in the containment of ethnic nationalist and territorialist polarisation. The idea was to transform the dichotomies of centre and periphery, minorities and majorities, pastoralists and agriculturalists, and highlanders versus lowlanders. It was also hoped that it would transform the split between the Cushitic-Semantic versus the Abyssinian (Habesha) Southerner’s identities (Abbay, 2004).

The decision to organise the security, development and governance of Tigray from its integration in the Ethiopian state, with Tigray leadership occupying positions at the highest level as well as lower levels of the Ethiopian administration was not uncontested. It was

disputed and resisted in Ethiopia. Being characterised by some as an authoritarian state, that repressed civic participation, and treated its people in a top-down paternalistic way, leading to anti-government protests from 2014 onwards (Pellerin & Cochrane, 2023). The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) balancing act was also not an uncontested formula from a Tigray perspective. Contrary to the view of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, from Tigray Prime Minister who ruled Ethiopia for almost three decades, others believed that Tigray should invest in its own people and concentrate efforts on the strengthening of Tigray proper (Interviewee AA01, interview by Van Reisen, face-to-face, June 2022). Within Tigray, the TPLF was accused of "failing to create a merit-based, dynamic, competent, economically prosperous regional state" (Maru, 2019). The sense was that Tigray, like the other regional states, was held back from democracy and development benefits due to the EPRDF's principle of democratic centralism and that Tigray was unable to exercise the principle of self-rule enshrined in the constitution as the EPRDF reduced the 'de jure federalism' into 'de facto centralisation' (Maru, 2019).

### **"Woyane, game over": Eritrea's intent on cleansing in Tigray**

The Eritrean government channel ERi-TV reports that Isayas made a public declaration "Woyane [TPLF], game over" on 14 January 2018 (ERi-TV, 2018a).<sup>62</sup> The term Woyane refers to the uprisings by Tigray and is particularly used by Isayas to refer to the TPLF, but also more generally to Tigray people, or to people he associates with the TPLF, often refugees from Eritrea or people associated with the opposition to Eritrea. The term Woyane is, in this context, a hostile term and is directly associated with the security of the Eritrean state. The phrase "Woyane, Game Over" (ERi-TV, 2018a), can be read as a warning to the TPLF and Tigray. Its timing is noteworthy in that it precedes the appointment of Prime Minister Abiy as chairman of the EPRDF in March 2018.

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<sup>62</sup> Eri TV on 14 January 2018. ERi-TV: Local Media Interview with President Isayas, 14 January 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHSuYgzEW48&t=13s>

In his inaugural address on 2 April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy used a unifying language while addressing the Ethiopian people. PM Abiy visited Mekelle, the capital of Tigray on 13 April 2018 and used a conciliatory tone, recognising the importance of Tigray for Ethiopia: Abiy on his first visit to Mekelle, Tigray in April 2018, immediately after he became prime minister of Ethiopia, in his address, he stated that “Tigray without Ethiopia and Ethiopia without Tigray is meaningless as car without a motor” (ትግራይ ብዙይ ኢትዮጵያ ኢትዮጵያ ድማ ብዙይ ትግራይ ከምመኪና ብዙይሞተር ትርጉም የብሉን) (iIMAGE eTHIOPIS, 2018).

President Isayas repeated the slogan “Woyane, game over” in his address to the people of Eritrea on the annual Independence Day celebration on 24 May 2018 and Martyrs’ Day on 20 June 2018 (Al-Mukhtar, 2018).

Prime Minister Abiy changed his tone immediately after the speech held by President Isayas on annual Independence Day. He referred to the TPLF or Tigrayans as “Daylight hyenas”, reported for the first time as Prime Minister on 15 June 2018 (Yethiopia News, 2018) and on 23 June 2018 on ETV (EBC, 2018).<sup>63</sup> Further, a video telecasted on 12 December 2020, one month after declaring the law-and-order operation against Tigray, displays Abiy again referring to Tigray people as “Daylight hyenas” (Dawro Tube, 2020).

The term ‘cleansing’ (ፖለቲካዊ ሕፃን) is used by President Isayas for the first time on 12 July 2018 (aired on ERi-TV on 13 July 2018) in a seminar of 8<sup>th</sup> Eritrean Youth Festival held in military trainings camp Sawa in Eritrea:

*In the seminar President Isaias said Weyane’s political scuff and sarcasm is over. But he underlined that we need to have serious and intelligent determination to cleanse its ruminants and conduct political cleansing.*<sup>64</sup> (ERi-TV, 2018b)

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<sup>63</sup> Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation later removed the reference to Daylight Hyenas in the online version. Verified DZ (2024).

<sup>64</sup> The original text is: “ወያነ ዝፈጠሮ ፖለቲካዊ ጸወታን ኣሸካዕላልን ኣኸቲሙ እዩ ዝበለ ፕሬዚዳንት ኢሳያስ ንሱ ዝፈጠሮ ሓድጊ ንምጽራይን ፖለቲካዊ ሕጽቦ ንምክያድን ግን ዕቲብን ንቐሕን ጸዕሪ ከምዘድሊ ኣስሚሩሉ።” (Sawa, published 13 July 2018, speech held 12 July 2018)

These statements were widely circulated from 2018 onwards, prior and during the 2020–2022 war on Tigray, repeated on social media and referred in international media reports (Claes, 2020). Hatred was further fed with a narrative comparing the number of “100 million Ethiopians” against “five million Tigrayans” (Wilhelm, 2020). In this narrative, the TPLF and Tigray were solely blamed for any wrongs of the previous political era.

### ***Isolation of Tigray: Blocking of foreign delegations***

In October 2019, the Ethiopian federal government breached the autonomy of the Tigray regional state directly, by stopping 15 Asian diplomats residing in Addis Ababa from visiting Tigray. This was not a once-off incident (Maru, 2019). On 20 December 2019, the Tigray regional state accused the Ethiopian federal government that a Chinese delegation from Shanxi province, which was on its way to visit Tigray, was forcefully disembarked from the plane to Mekelle (Maru, 2019). The Deputy Governor of the province was supposed to meet with the Tigray administration to discuss investment projects, was arranged by the Ethiopian Embassy in China and fulfilled all requirements (Maru, 2019).

Blocking the delegation was seen as a breach of the established practice, in which regional states can exercise autonomy in receiving and sending foreign missions in the areas of trade and investment, aid, culture and education. Observers pointed out that regional states were active in meetings with foreign actors. It was observed that Tigray was the first regional state where delegations were prohibited from visiting by the federal government of Ethiopia (Maru, 2019).

### ***A secret alliance to destroy Tigray***

In October 2020, a posting on Eritrean forum Mereja.com discusses a plan to destroy Tigray. A person identifying as Jenay Gherbregerish Gebremariam, who graduated in Eritrea, posted on 3 October 2020 on Facebook a plan to disperse the Tigray people from their land and

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Translated from Youtube video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccGKFt-2gi8\(7:51-9:36\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccGKFt-2gi8(7:51-9:36)).

divide them across different countries, including in Yemen. The Eritrean Mereja.com media outlet reprinted the post.<sup>65</sup>

*I absolutely agree with the writer that, Tigray's lack of natural resources is the root cause of all the evil that emanates from the barren and inhospitable land, leading its inhabitants to harbor deep-seated resentment towards both the hardworking Ethiopian and Eritrean people who are blessed with the ability to turn dry land into lush green oasis.*

*It make a perfect sense to have a plan for the Tigray people to be dispersed among many nations, primarily into Yemen where over one million Tegraru youth have already settled, and providing a safe passage for the remaining Tegraru to be relocated to the Arab country Meles Zenawi had once proudly called "the ancestral home for Tegraru. (Gebremariam, 2020)*

The post, however extreme, illustrates the emergence of a public mood in social media, swept on by hostile statements from the top leadership, to remove the Tigray people from their land and country and undo it from its leadership.<sup>66</sup>

On 3 November 2020, Tigray was invaded by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Special Forces of regional states in Ethiopia, in alliance with Eritrean President Isayas, with alleged support of drones available from the United Arab Emirates, located in the Assab Port of Eritrea (ICHREE, 2023). While the involvement of Eritrea was denied in the first months of the operation by the Eritrean and Ethiopian leadership, the objectives from the top office in Eritrea are

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<sup>65</sup> The Facebook post originally appeared on mereja.com and was reposted by UMD, the outlet of Prof. Getachew Assefa, originally from Tigray, indicating the content was taken seriously. Originally posted on Facebook and reprinted in Mereja Forum. Gebremariam, J. G. (2020). ትግራይ እንታይ ትኹን? (Next Step....ነባሪ ሰላም ህዝብታት ንኸህሉ). What next should be Tigray (ትግራይ እንታይትኩን?). Mereja Forum. (5 October 2020). Available at: <https://mereja.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=233035#p1108218> (Accessed on 10 January 2024).

<sup>66</sup> The Eritrean government has a close control on social media publications and attempts to exercise control over Eritrean people living in the diaspora, who often engage in posting of social media messages which originate from instructions by the Eritrea Ministry of Information. It is therefore at least conceivable (but not proven) that the idea of this message was (indirectly) authorised by the Eritrean Ministry of Information.



clarified in a leaked secret memo,<sup>67</sup> believed to have originated from President Isayas' right-hand advisor, Yemane Gebreab. It directs what has been referred to by many Tigrayans as an instruction for a 'final solution'<sup>68</sup> against Tigray:

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<sup>67</sup> Three independent sources have spoken independently about the existence of the memo. One source received a phone call with the content for publication and this event and the content has been verified and confirmed on 12 January 2024 (Interviewee AD, interview with Tesfa, WhatsApp, 12 January 2024)., a second source received information on the secret memo and its contents in oral conversation when residing in Qolla Temben (Interviewee AE, interview with Tesfa, WhatsApp, 12 January 2024). A third well-placed source confirmed the existence to the authors independently: "Looks credible. Such details cannot be made up. I also had heard that TDF got a secret document from Eritrea. People from Senafe are committed to support Tigray" (Interviewee AF, interview with Tesfa, WhatsApp, 12 January 2024). The secret document is believed to have been sent to TDF by a military official from Eritrea (Senafe) who had hoped to desert to TDF. The messenger did not reach TDF directly but sent the memo on to TDF through a runner.

The name of the Eritrean military who sent the memo to TDF is known by authors but not printed to protect his safety. The original source in Tigray stated: "I have his name, kept it because he is still in Eritrea. TDF received 27 hand-written pages (copied of the 36 total pages.)". (Information to author in WhatsApp 12 January 2024).

Content of the memo was published by Tigray Media House and confirmed by the Tigray media house DW in 2021. It was re-verified in 2024. The original title of the posting in social media by TMH is: "DW confirms the secret document from Dictator Isayas Office sent by Yemane Isayas chief advisor to Eritrean commanders in Tigray, to liquidate Tigrayan youths". The title suggests that it was believed that the memo was ordered from the office of the President of Eritrea. Links are available:

[https://www.reddit.com/r/Tigray/comments/ms62xe/dw\\_confirms\\_the\\_secret\\_document\\_from\\_dictator/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Tigray/comments/ms62xe/dw_confirms_the_secret_document_from_dictator/) (accessed 13 January 2024).

<https://www.facebook.com/261522124370013/posts/pfbid02igy3o3eyfLcek6Q1FLyAc5ZUYkGJAE4c7fyRWa7oc9uPWFPjEGveGNQd44Hx6zu4l/?app=fbl> (accessed 13 January 2024).

<sup>68</sup> On 16 April 2021 Yemane Gebreab (political advisor of Isayas) distributed a secret document among commanders of the Eritrean Defence Forces, to urge them on with much stronger action. The secret memo is titled as 'our mission in Tigray war did not meet its stated goals'. The memo is particularly directed to the Eritrean military commanders in Tigray. The memo stated that the military mission in Tigray was, by that time, not successful to achieve its planned goals and in the memo the military leaders are ordered to accelerate their military operations in order capture the TPLF military and political leaders, to mercilessly eliminate the Tigrayan youths

*At a time when Eritrean troops are expected to leave Tigray, a secret 27-page memo from the Eritrean President's office reveals a much more sinister and brutal campaign to destroy the region's remaining human capital and resources. This partly reproachful document addressed to senior commanders of the Eritrean army now in Tigray strongly calls for a continued, non-stop work to realize the campaign that aims at the survival of Eritrea and ward off a possible existential threat from a war inside Tigray which, it notes, this far has failed to achieve significant victories. (Tigrai Media House, 2021)*

The memo instructed the Eritrean commanders in Tigray to conduct a harsh campaign to drive out any youth from Tigray:

*The action/ measures taken on the masses of youth were so light that we only helped generate an angry youth that flocked to the TPLF (for training). What we rather should have done was take mercilessly punitive measures that would have emasculated and put them in fear and terror and ultimately drove them to camps and trenches inside Eritrea. Our failure to do just that is making us pay a heavy price. A leadership that harbors sympathies for Tigray and Tigrayans while our own existence/survival is in danger is merely naïve & foolhardy. (Tigrai Media House, 2021)*

The secret memo also identifies the measures needed to destroy the capacity of Tigray including any economic assets and language suggested that the objective of the war was to erase Tigray from the map as an existential threat to Eritrea. (Informal discussion with one of the authors on the secret memo, 2021; re-verified with original source on 13 January 2024).

The Amhara leadership, strong allies of Prime Minister Abiy during the 2020-2022 period, also had their eyes set on retaking western and southern parts of Tigray that they state were part of Amhara until the areas were placed into Tigray by the 1995 FDRE constitution. According to others, historically, Tigray's territory, southern and

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who could be potential fighters of the Tigray Defence forces (TDF), to completely destroy the political economic bases and infrastructures of Tigray, and finalise the war so that to escape the international community's mounting pressure. The memo has been published in part by Tigray Media House, and additional verification of the origin and how the content was communicated has been obtained. The paper is stated to be in Tigray Defence Forces archive, with all other classified items, in the TDF documentation centre.

western respectively, was up to the Al-waha River in northern Wollo and the Angerab River of northern Gondar including Wolqait, Tsegedia and Metema Yohannes of bordering Sudan (Tigray Media House, 2022). And, indeed, there was no designated political establishment or region called ‘Amhara’ in Ethiopia before 1991, rather being historically named ‘Gondar/Begmedir’, ‘Gojjam’, ‘Wollo-Lasta’, and ‘Shewa’. The Amhara armed forces (including the terrorist militant youth group called the ‘Fano’, militia, and special forces) in collaboration with Eritrea, who trained their militia, and the Ethiopian national army, perpetrated a ruinous invasion in Western Tigray.

Testimony provides that the directive in the secret memo from the Eritrean top office to its military leadership in Tigray was sent at the end of March 2021. It may be assumed that the original plan was that by March 2021 the law-and-order operation ordered by President Abiy on 4 November – and intended as a relative short operation to dislodge the TPLF – should have been completed, and that the memo was prompted by anxiety and frustration that this operation had not been successful.

### **Operation Ras Alula Aba-nega**

The Tigray-led Operation Ras Alula Aba-nega lasted from 18–26 June 2021. The operation was named after Ras Alula Aba-nega, the African General of Emperor Yohannes and hero of the battles Gundet of 1875 and Gurae of 1876 against Egypt, battle of Kufit 1885 and Metema of 1889 against Mahdist Sudan; and Degaeli and Sehati of 1887 and Adwa of 1896 against colonial Italy. It was a game changer military operation waged by the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) against ENDF, Amhara militia and Eritrean Army at the historic place called Qola-Temben (lowland areas of Temben) with operation areas named as Shewuate-Higum-Yechila areas around the birthplace of Alula, called Menewe. The operation began after eight months of reorganisation and preparation after the initial withdrawal in November 2020.

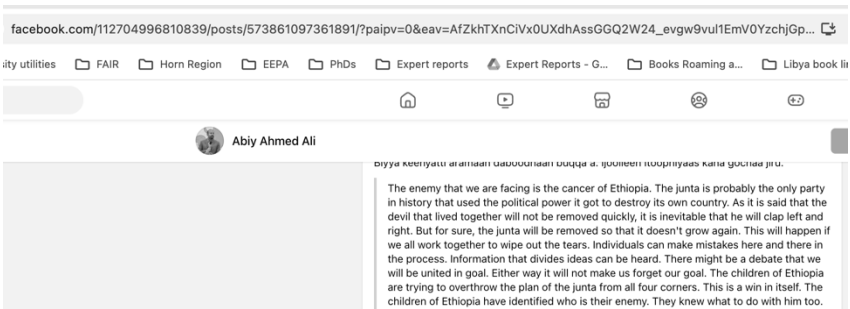
The Operation Ras Alula Aba-nega covered a 100-kilometre square area. It is claimed that more than 35,000 enemy troops were killed

and captured by the TDF. After the successful accomplishment of the Alula operation by the TDF on 26 June 2021, the Ethiopia, Amhara and Eritrean invading armies were evacuated, in disarray, from most of Tigray including from the capital city Mekelle on 28 June 2021.

### Hate speech to ‘erase’ Tigray

Following the success of Operation Alulua, the hate speech against Tigray intensified further. On 18 July 2021, Prime Minister Abiy stated that the TPLF (or Tigray forces of Tigray, or Tigray more generally<sup>69</sup>) is ‘the cancer’ of Ethiopia, that it is a ‘junta’, and that it is an ‘invasive weed’ which should be removed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 2021).

*The enemy we are facing is an enemy which is the cancer of Ethiopia. The junta is probably the only group in history that used its political power to disintegrate its own country. As the saying goes “a familiar devil is not easily dislodged”, so the junta will attempt to cling on desperately.* (TGHAT, 2021)



**Figure 10.1. Screenshot posting by @PMAbiyAhmedAli on 18 July 2021, original in Amharic and Oromo (Translated by Google)**

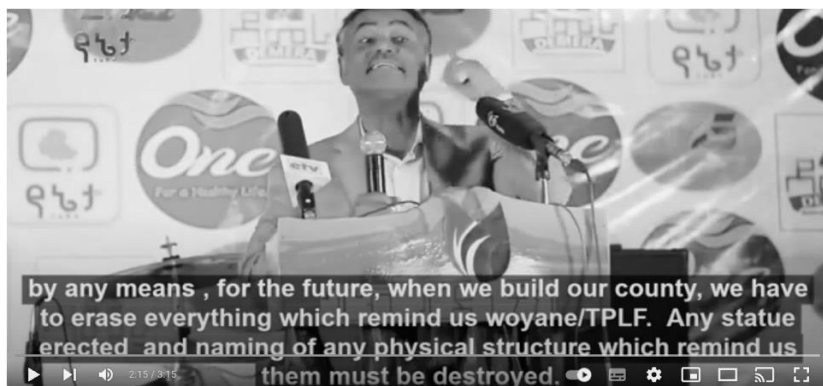
This speech was further distributed by the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Amhara Media Corporation and the Fana Broadcasting Corporate, emphasising the rhetoric of Tigray being a

<sup>69</sup> There are different interpretations of the scope to whom this refers, which in any case refers to the TPLF and Tigray leadership and Tigray forces, but is widely understood as referring more generally to ‘Tigrayans’.

weed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 2021; Ameco, 2021; Kebede, 2021). The USAID Head denounced the use of the inciting language, which was widely reported in media:

*The head of the U.S. Agency for International Development expressed concern Wednesday about the “dehumanizing rhetoric” used by Ethiopia’s leaders amid the nine-month conflict in the Tigray region, whose forces last month were described as “weeds” and “cancer” by the country’s Nobel Peace Prize-winning prime minister, Abiy Ahmed. (Anna, 2021)*

Daniel Kibret, Prime Minister Abiy’s chief social adviser stated in the Ethiopian public media on 18 September 2021<sup>70</sup> that: “we have to erase everything which reminds us of Woyane/TPLF. Any statue erected and naming of any physical structure which remind us of them must be destroyed”.<sup>71</sup>



Daniel Kibret ( AKA Satnael Kisret) public hate speech against Tigrayans with English subtitle.

**Figure 10.2. YouTube verified on veracity<sup>72</sup>**

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<sup>70</sup> There seems to have been at least two events where Daniel Kibret spoke and used hate speech between 18–20 September 2021. A journalist who participated in the event stated to the authors that he was not sure of the exact date but confirmed the event was between 18 and 20 September 2021. The third author’s understanding and memory of the event is that it took place the following day after US President Joe Biden signed the Executive Order on 17 September 2021 (Interviewee AC03. Personal communication with Tesfa, WhatsApp, 16 January 2021).

<sup>71</sup> This is one of the videos which were removed from the online media sphere except two links that remain. These are in the possession of the authors.

<sup>72</sup> link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiNir2fRmk8&t=133s> (accessed 27 May 2024)

Daniel<sup>73</sup> (Danwel, 2021) explained on the Ethiopian public media on 11 September 2021 in Addis Ababa, that the purpose of the war is to eliminate the TPLF from the “map, social structure and fabric, history and memory and branded TPLF (Woyane) as eviler than *Satan* and mentioning the name Woyane should only be used to intimidate people and kids” (Teklehaymanot, 2021, p.1). In a video of 16 September 2021, he further stated that the Tigrayans should be the last of their kind, also using the analogy of the weed (Teklehaymanot, 2021). There is no clear distinction between the TPLF and the people of Tigray, targeted in the speech.

Benesch (2021) reports on an event with high officials of the Ethiopian government in the same week where Daniel Kibret refers implicitly to the TPLF and Tigrayans in similar words and building on hate-speech slurs previously used in Kenya. “There should not be from now and forever any ground that would produce such kind of weed that could repeat them” (Benesch, 2021).<sup>74</sup> Asked to clarify who he was referring to, Daniel Kibret answered: “They’ refers to the terrorist TPLF group” (AFP, 2021).

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<sup>73</sup> Daniel Kibret (other names used: Satnael Kibret), often referred as Deacon Daniel Kibret is a deacon in the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia and was the principal advisor to PM Abiy during the war.

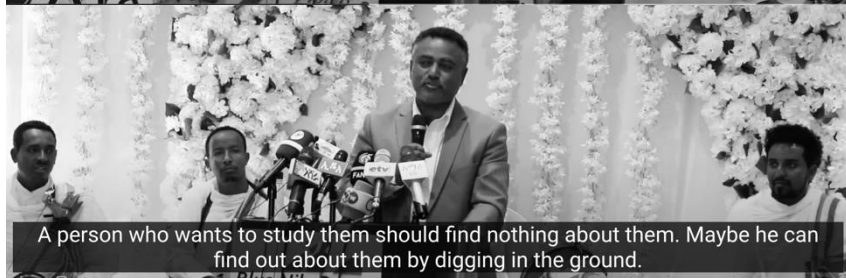
<sup>74</sup> Benesch links the statement to hate speech used in Kenya: “He seems to have learned the worst lessons about dangerous speech from other countries: in neighboring Kenya in 2006, for example, in the months leading up to an explosion of inter-communal killing, leaders of one ethnic group also used the term ‘weeds’ to refer to members of another Kenyan group” (Benesch, 2021).



They should be erased and disappeared by erasure from the human conscience and historical records.



So, from now and forever, we must tell our children about them as examples of evil and a way of scaring them.



A person who wants to study them should find nothing about them. Maybe he can find out about them by digging in the ground.



Satan was the last of his kind. And they must also remain the last of their kind.



**Picture 10.3. RubabaMedia, posted on 17 Sept 2021<sup>75</sup>**

Agegnehu Teshager, the former president of the Amhara region and current speaker of Ethiopia’s House of Federation, criminalised the people of Tigray on the Amhara television (July 2021) as “unless this enemy (Tigrayan) is exterminated, we would not have peace...the Tigrayan are enemies of all other Ethiopian communities and we should fight with patriotism to win against these people” (Somali Guardian, 2021, p. 1). In another video broadcasted by Amhara Media Corporation, the then Amhara Region President quoted as saying “These people [Tigrayans] are enemies to the people of

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<sup>75</sup> Pictures are stills from: “Daniel Kibret calls for genocide against ethnic Tigrayans in Ethiopia” posted at YouTube and verified on veracity. Available at the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQIUYj1iybs> (accessed 24 May 2024).



Ethiopia. These people are enemies to Afar, enemies to Gambella, enemies to Somali” (Yabele Media, 2021).

General Ababaw Tadesse, Vice-chief of the Ethiopian defence, explained the purpose of the war against Tigray was “to destroy the infrastructure and economic bases, to eliminate the political establishment and security apparatus, and destabilise the social bases of Tigray and TPLF” (Tigray prevail, 2021, p.1). Similarly, the Afar Region President, Awel Arba, stated: “Junta must know that even if I have to kill their children, or even if they kill my children or kill me, I will not allow any aid to get to them”. Referring to the position that humanitarian aid would not be allowed to enter Tigray. (Afar Federalist Diaspora Coordination Committee, 2022).<sup>76</sup> This was interpreted as explaining how the siege on Tigray was a coordinated policy.

## **War makes state**

Today’s international order is an order of politico-legal sovereign states. Historically, leaving the ancient empires aside, the post-19<sup>th</sup> century states and nations are the results of ‘state-making wars’ (e.g., Ottovan Bismarck’s Prussian-based German unification via ‘blood and iron’ and Joseph Mazzini and Garibaldi’s Italian Unification); diplomatic and nationalist mobilisation struggles (e.g., Theodor Herzl’s Zionism of the state of Israel); struggles of decolonisation (e.g., post-colonial African states); and struggles of national self-determination via armed struggle and/or referenda (e.g., state of Eritrea and Republic of South Sudan as well as the ‘special autonomous region’ of Quebec of federal Canada and Northern Ireland of devolution in the UK).

Tigray can be regarded as one of the oldest political and territorial kingdoms that has survived several international aggressions of the Egyptian expansionist to control the source of Nile (at the battles of Gundet in 1875 and Gura’e in 1876); Sudanese Islamist Mahdist (at the battles of Kufit in 1885 and Metema in 1889); Italian colonialism

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<sup>76</sup> In the video, Awal Qirba, the president of the #Afar region is states that he will not allow any aid to enter the Tigray region.

during the European scramble for Africa (at the battles of Deguali in 1887 and Adwa in 1896), although it lost Eritrea to Italy: Tigray's international outlet via Massawa and Adulis.

Tigray has been the hotbed of peasant protests and armed liberation struggle (e.g., first Woyane of 1943 and the TPLF-led second Woyane revolution of 1975–1991) against Emperor Haile Selassie national oppression and Derg military fascism (Tareke, 1991). More recently, Tigray defeated the Eritrea aggression on Badme and Zalambesa, from May 1998–2000; by the famous 'Operation Sunset' concluded with the signing the Algiers Agreement. Tigray has defended the aggression of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Amhara during the Tigray war (2020–2022). On 3 November 2022, a Cessation of Arms Agreement was signed in Pretoria between the TPLF and the federal government of Ethiopia. Therefore, Tigray has continued to defend its territorial existence, giving momentum to the doctrine "war makes state" (Tilly, 1985).

Tigray is a heretical phenomenon to the Westphalia state formation and nation-building (nation-state) discourses. It was one of the oldest kingdoms, even compared to the kingdoms of Babylon and Persia, the Roman Empire and China, but became a "national regional state" struggling for regional autonomy within the empire state of Menelik-II (Emye-Menelik, the founding father of post-1889 Ethiopia) (Henze, 1985). Tigray remains a uniquely paradoxical case. Tigray owned an ancient self-contained civilisation providing solid historical and cultural reasons for statehood; a historically verified cohesive Tigrayan nation of uncontested nationhood and 'imagined community'. Tigray maintained its territorial existence against European colonialism and Ethiopian state assimilation (i.e., territoriality). From 1975 to 1991 the TPLF of Tigray waged an armed struggle for the national self-determination of the Tigray nation within a federal multinational state of Ethiopia. Finally, in the 2020–2022 war, Tigray faced the dilemma of staying within Ethiopia or going for an independent republic of Tigray and demanding a place in the order of international states (Interviewee AA01, informal personal communication with Van Reisen, face to face, September 2021).

## *Tigray as the placenta of Ethiopia*

Met with applause, PM Abiy spoke the following words during his first visit to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, as Prime Minister:

*It is an honour for me to be physically present in Tigray, which is not only the source of antica Ethiopia but also the backbone of the modern Ethiopia, and discuss with you.* (iIMAGE eTHIOPIS, 2018)

Tigray's historical (Aksumite civilisation as an ancestor), cultural (St Yared and archaeological sites), and religious (Judaism-Christian and Islam) significance; its legacy as the origin of the Geez alphabet (Geez script); and its independence (the battles of Deguali and Adwa; 'Ethiopia was never colonised narrative') and patriotism (Alula Abanega as the first African General), as well as its position as the birthplace (ancient and modern) of Ethiopia are acknowledged by PM Abiy in his first address in Tigray:

*As many agree, Tigray is the placenta [the birthplace] of Ethiopia. [Applause] Tigray is a region where the pride of our national history and testimony of the antique civilization and where the Aksum Oblisk is found. It is through Aksum and Nejasbi Tigray that the landmarks of Ethiopian identity Christianity and Islamic religions entered. [Applause] Tigray is where Adwa, a place of pride where black [African] and freedom and justice advocates earned freedom, is found. [Applause] And recently, it is a place where newly discovered city of May Adrasba for 3,000 years that is a testimonial that our nation is the source of world urbanization. [Applause] Tigray is the home of philosophers and intellects like the father of chant Yared and Zera Yakob. [Applause] Tigray is the home of those who faced martyrdom for justice and equality so as to build Ethiopia like Sihul, Mussie, Walta, Haftom, Kelebet, Hayelom, Birbane Meskel, Kesbi Gebru, Amora, Tilahun Gizaw, specially like comrade Meles Zenawi and many more heroes. [Applause]*<sup>77</sup> (iIMAGE eTHIOPIS, 2018)

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<sup>77</sup> Original text: ከምቲ ብዙሓት ዝስማዕምዕሉ ትግራይ መዳሕንቲ ኢትዮጵያ ዝተቐበረላ ምድሪ እያ። {ጭብጨባ}

ትግራይ ኩርዓት ታሪኽ ሃገርናን መበቆል ስልጣናን ዝኾነ ሓወልቲ ኣኸሱም ዝርከበላ ቦታ እያ። ትግራይ ካብ ሃይማኖትነት ሓሊፎም ናይ መንነትና መግለፂ ናብ ምኡን ዝበፅሑ ናይ ክርስትናን እስልምናን ሃይማኖት ናብ ሃገርና ንመጀመርታ ጊዜ ብኣክሱምን ነጃሽን ኣቢሎም ዝኣተውላ ክልል እያ። {ጭብጨባ}

ሓዚ ሓዚ ድማ ልዕሊ 3000 ዓመት ዘቐፀረት ከተማ ኣብ ሽረ ማይ ኣድራሻ ከባቢ ዝተረኸበላ እንትኸውን ሃገርና መፈጠርታ ከተማታት ዓለም ንምኽና ዝምስክር እዩ። {ጭብጨባ}

All Ethiopian leaders pre-1974 had claimed the legitimacy of leadership in Ethiopia by stating that they were descendants of Menelik-I of Aksum, Tigray. Even Mengistu Haile Mariam of the Derg regime, in his ‘Ethiopia-Tikdem’ or Ethiopia first, ideology presented himself as a defender of ‘Greater Ethiopia’, with its core in Tigray stretched up to the Red Sea from colonisers, imperialists, and petrodollar Arab-Islamic states (Henze, 1985).

Conversely, the Tigrayans claim that Ethiopia is ‘made by Tigray’, citing the religious, historical, cultural, and political justifications stated above, without differentiating between ‘ancient’ (pre-Menelik-II) and ‘modern’ Ethiopia (Henze, 1985). Prime Minister Abiy recognised this too, in his address on 13 April 2020:

*Tigray is also recognized as a center of political and social movements against feudalism and assimilationist of the based empire state (e.g., the first Woyane peasant revolt of 1943 that sparked the slogan of ‘land to the Tiller, fair taxation and self-rule’), and after the coming of Dergue fascism, Tigray was also the breeding ground of armed liberation forces (the TPLF led Second Woyane revolution of 1975-91) fought for equality and self-determination of nationalities, the land question and remaking the unitary empire state into a multinational federation that shaped contemporary Ethiopian politics (Abbay, 1998; Tareke, 2009; Tibebe, 1995). Tigray was the place where national regime change and democracy seekers used to asylum and being protected that enabled EPRDF to be protected from enemy to develop and reach to its current state.<sup>78</sup> (iIMAGE eTHIOPIS,2018)*

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ሐዚ ሐዚ ድማ ልዕሊ 3000 ዓመት ዘቐፀረት ከተማ ኣብ ሽረ ማይ ኣድራሻ ከባቢ ዝተረኸበላ እንትኸውን ሃገርና መፈጠርታ ከተማታት ዓለም ንምኻና ዝምስከር እዩ። {ጭብጨባ}

ትግራይ መበቆል ማህሌታዊ ያፊድን ዘርኣያቆብን ዝኣመሰሉ ዓበይቲ ፈላስፋታትን ሊቃውንትን እያ። {ጭብጨባ}

ትግራይ ኣብ ቅድሚ ሞት ጠጠው ኢሎም ምእንታ ፍትሒን ማዕርነትን ክቡር መስዋእትነት ዝኸፈሉን ንህንፀት ኢትዮጵያ ቤዛ ዝኾኑን ጀጋኑ ከምኒ ስሑል፡ ሙሴ፡ ዋልታ፡ ሃፍቶም፡ ቀለበት፡ ሓየሎም፡ ብርሃነ መስቀል፡ ቀሺ ገብሩ፡ ኣሞራ፡ ጥላሁን ግዛው፡ ብፍላይ ከምኒ ብፃይ መለስ ዜናዊ ዝኣመሰሉ ብሓፈሻኡ ድማ ዘርዘርካ ዘይውዳእ ዓዲ ኣሸሓት ጀጋኑ ተጋደልቲን እያ። {ጭብጨባ}

<sup>78</sup> Original text:

ትግራይ ኣብ ሃገርና ለውጢን ዴሞክራሲን ከመፅእ ዝተቐለለ ዝተፈላለየ ናይ ፖለቲካ ሓይልታት ህዝባዊ ድጋፍን ዑቕባን ዝረኸቡሉ ናይ ኢህወደግ ውድባት ካብ ፀላእቲ ሓቢኣን ሓብሒባን ናብዚ ደረጃ ዘብፀሐት እያ። {ጭብጨባ}

The narrative against national oppression and in favour of liberation, which evolved out of the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s, has been aired by Tigrayan nationalists. This narrative calls for restructuring of the unitary state into a federal multinational polity, as stated in the 1995 Constitution. It claims that the status of Tigray is to be recognised at least as ‘among equals’ with the many nationalities and, at best, to have a greater role in (re)shaping the political domain of Ethiopia, particularly the federalisation policy.

### ***Tigray’s uneasy survival within Ethiopia***

The Tigrayan leaders were forced to accept emperor Meneliki-II’s Ethiopia and its capital Addis Ababa, as an offshoot of Tigray, relegating Aksum and Mekelle into peripheral status. Tigrayan leaders blame emperor Menelik for the treaties with external powers, marginalising Tigray to its current state of affairs. Tigray leaders also waged revolts (e.g., first Woyane rebellion and second Woyane revolution) against Shewa aristocrats but the Tigray leaders failed to reclaim Tigray’s historic past by failing to declare an ‘independent republic of Tigray’ to join the post-colonial community of African states (Tareke, 1991).

The first Woyane rebellion of 1943, led by Blata Haile Mariam Reda, was the first organised revolt after the death of Emperor Yohannes to oppose Emperor Haile Selassie’s rule. The movement established local assemblies, known as Abo-Gereb, under the slogan “there is no government, let’s organize and govern ourselves” (Tareke, 1991, p. 175). The Woyane leadership criticized the Shewan Amhara aristocracy for contributing to Tigray’s impoverishment and weakening its institutions by pitting Tigrayan nobility against one another (Henze, 1985, p. 22). After the Woyane forces successfully captured Mekelle in September 1943, Haile Mariam Reda issued a proclamation declaring, “Our governor is Jesus Christ; our flag is that of Ethiopia; and our religion is that of Yohannes IV. People of Tigray, follow the motto of Woyane” (Henze, 1985, p. 23).

The TPLF led the second Woyane revolution of 1975–1991 and equally accused the Shewa-Amhara aristocracy of Ethiopia of impoverishing and dehumanising Tigray. As the contradiction between the ‘oppressive Amhara nation’ and other ‘oppressed nations

including 'Tigray' became irreconcilable, the TPLF in its first Manifesto of 1976, declared that establishing an "independent democratic republic of Tigray free from reformist feudal, imperialist and other forms of oppression" (TPLF Manifesto, 1976, p. 24) was the goal of the armed struggle. The TPLF Manifesto characterised the situation of Tigray at the time under Ethiopia and the goal of its armed struggle as follows:

*As a result of economic impoverishment and over-increasing economic exploitation, the Tigrayan masses are tragically suffering repeated famine, severe poverty, and degradation. Moreover, due to intense and fascistic political oppression and repression, the Tigrayan have for long been suffering from the denial of political and human rights, from the perpetuation of all forms of prejudice and discrimination, and the severest hatred and neglect by the Amhara national empire adopted as a policy by the state. All these brought about the dehumanization and destitute life of all the Tigrayan masses... thus, the Tigrayans have been made to be the most hated, suspected, and discriminated against people in the empire, thereby making joint life intolerable. (TPLF Manifesto, 1976, pp. 18–24)*

The TPLF, like its predecessor, after six months, revised its Manifesto and stated the goal of its struggle from an independent democratic republic of Tigray into an autonomous state within multinational Ethiopia on basis of Marxist-Leninist principle of national self-determination of nationalities up to and including secession. Tigray has traditionally favoured the discourse of 'class struggle' over 'national struggle' (Abbay, 2004). The Marxist-Leninist thought of the TPLF leadership undermined the vision of establishing an independent republic.

Considering recent developments, including Ethiopia's military operation in Tigray alongside Eritrea and the imposition of a two-year siege, the situation is being reassessed. Despite Prime Minister Abiy's initial acknowledgment of Tigray's significance within Ethiopia and the region's aspirations under the federal system, Ethiopia is again facing challenges in addressing its core issues, similar to the period before 1991. Since April 2018, with the rise of Prime Minister Abiy and his neo-pan-Ethiopianist policies focused on centralization, concerns have been raised that Ethiopia is showing signs of instability (Weldegiorgis, 2019). The federal government is grappling with

multiple civil conflicts, exacerbated by militant activities in various regions.

In light of the atrocities experienced by Tigrayans, carried out by Ethiopia in collaboration with Eritrea, questions have been raised regarding the ability of Tigray to secure its existence, administration, and autonomy within the current unitary and federal system of Ethiopia. The situation has demonstrated Tigray's resilience in maintaining its internal integrity during the siege, leading to an enhanced perception of its sovereign capacity. Discussions are emerging suggesting that Tigray's remaining option may be the pursuit of independence through an internationally supervised referendum (Tschaye, 2022), referencing Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution.

### ***Tigray's security deficit: A revengeful neighbour***

The '*Bahre-Negash*'<sup>79</sup> or the '*Kebessa*'<sup>80</sup> – today's Eritrea – was part and parcel of the 'historic Tigray' (also referred to as 'Daamat, Yaha, and Aksumite kingdom', 'Abyssinia', 'Habesha', 'Tigray-Tigrigni', 'Behare-Agaazian'), until it was colonised (and called Eritrea) by Italy in January 1890. Until that time, 'port-Adulis' was the Aksumite Kingdom's outlet. Immediately after the death of Emperor Yohannes-IV of Tigray (whose capital was Mekelle), Menelik-II of Shewa and Italy signed the reprehensible Wuchale Treaty in 1889. According to the treaty, the ancient Tigray Kingdom was to be partitioned into Italian Eritrea and Ethiopian Tigray. Following the death of Emperor Yohannes-IV, Tigray lost its political power to Menelik of Shewa, and its territorial integrity was partitioned into Italian Eritrea (north of Mereb River) and Ethiopia's Tigray region – south of Mereb (Abbay, 1998). As a result, Eritrea evolved through protracted Italian colonial identity (1890–1942); British military administration or mandate identity (1942–1952); UN-sponsored federation identity (1952–62); 13 years of armed liberation struggle-

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<sup>79</sup> Tigrinya for the 'Governor of the Sea' and refers to the people of north Mereb River.

<sup>80</sup> Tigrinya for 'Highland Eritrea', which includes 'Hamassien', 'Seraye', and 'Akole-guzai'.

based identity (1961–1991); and the post-1993 war-born young state identity, locally known as *Hadas*<sup>81</sup> Eritrea.

Eritrea has experienced a century-long, challenging process of state formation and nation-building, distancing itself from what some Tigrinya speakers may consider its historic homeland, Tigray. The newly independent Eritrea has been described as an example of a ‘failed post-colonial African state’ (Connell, 2005). Frequently referred to as the ‘North Korea of Africa’ due to its isolated, totalitarian regime, it has also been labeled an ‘open-air prison’ and the ‘gulag of the Red Sea.’ Eritrea is one of the fastest-depopulating nations globally, contributing significantly to the current migration crisis, the largest since World War II (Stavis & Parkinson, 2016; Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits, & Wirtz, 2023). The state has been characterized as a ‘garrison state’ (Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2017), a ‘trench or battalion state’ (Bundegaard, 2004), and a ‘mafia state’ (Plaut, 2017), with the Eritrean Army entrenched for over 25 years, waging a prolonged battle against an imagined enemy known as ‘Woyane’ (TPLF) (Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2017).

Post-1961, Eritrea’s militant nationalism (led by ELF and EPLF in the north of the Mereb River and engaging the Mereb-Mellash people of Kunama, Tigrinya, Saho, and Irob) was framed to be dissociated from the pre-colonial identity of trans-Mereb people of Tigray (south of the Mereb River). Paradoxically enough, the EPLF and its progeny, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), continue to label the people of Tigray and its TPLF leadership as the “existential enemy” of *Hadas* Eritrea, even though TPLF and the people of Tigray are the only political actors in Ethiopia and outside to support and recognise Eritrea’s colonialism-based independence and statehood (TPLF Manifesto, 1976, p. 29).

In their struggle against the Derg regime of Ethiopia, both the TPLF and EPLF jointly fought and toppled the fascist regime. The TPLF not only recognised the Eritrean struggle as a “struggle against colonialism that could only be resolved by achieving an independent state of Eritrea” (TPLF Manifesto, 1976, p. 29), but also a TPLF

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<sup>81</sup> Tigrinya for ‘the new state of Eritrea’.



battalion fought in Eritrea and the EPLF was saved from total annihilation by the Derg's Red Star Campaign of 1984. The TPLF-EPRDF was the only political force in Ethiopia to support Eritrea's referendum in 1993 and to immediately recognise it as a government and its independence (statehood) on 24 May 1993.

After independence, Eritrea's nation-building project – The 'Singaporization' of Eritrea – made Eritrea an industrial powerhouse of the Horn of Africa (Geberewahd, 2018). This was framed as antagonistic to Tigray and Ethiopia. In 1998 Eritrea invaded the Badme triangle, *the casus belli* of the 1998–2000 war. Badme is a village split on the Tigray-Eritrea border. The conflict concerned what was seen as Isayas claiming Badme based on a colonial treaty (Fisher, 2000). The 1998 war was declared to project Eritrea's aspiration to claim its military invincibility in the Horn of Africa over Ethiopia's regional hegemonic stance and for redefining the regional power structure. Eritrea's Horn of Africa power ambition was defeated by Ethiopia in 2000 and, until 2018, Ethiopia-Eritrea relationship was in a 'no war, no peace deadlock' (Gebrewahd, 2018).

The 1998–2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war had long-lasting consequences as President Isayas nurtured a grudge against Tigray. General Tsadkan, who led the military operations for Ethiopia as its military leader of the 2020–2022 war, led the Zalambesa front with Eritrea in Tigray. De Waal published that:

*Gen Tsadkan was intent on advancing towards the Eritrean capital Asmara, but Prime Minister Meles called a halt, saying that Ethiopia's war aims had been achieved and Eritrea was now humbled. (De Waal, 2021)*

A knowledgeable resource person requested to confirm this view recollects the same:

*Many including Tsadkan were unhappy about Meles' decision to stop the advancing ENDF into Eritrea. Part of the TPLF leadership in TPLF had wanted the demise of Isayas. (Interviewee AA01, personal communication by Van Reisen, face-to-face, 6 January 2024)*

Following the 1998–2020, Tsadkan retired from the Ethiopian military.

On 9 July 1918, after 20 years of a no war, no peace stalemate with Ethiopia (1998–2018), President Isayas and Prime Minister Abiy declared that the war was over following the conclusion of the Asmara Agreement. President Isayas confirmed his interest in Eritrea’s economic and political reintegration with Ethiopia in his 14 July 2018, televised speech from Menelik Palace in Addis Ababa, with the words: “From now onwards anyone who thinks that Eritrea and Ethiopia are two different countries is the one who fails to know the truth” (ERi-TV, 2018c).

Tsadkan, who had retired from the Ethiopian military, took the role of mediating between Prime Minister Abiy and the regional government of Tigray, to avoid escalation against Tigray, but without success. In 2020, General Tsadkan took a position in the military leadership of the TPLF defence of Tigray in the 2020–2022 war. Together with Getachew Reda, the spokesperson of the Tigray government during the 2020–2022 war and the later interim President of the regional government of Tigray, Tsadkan led the negotiations in Pretoria on the Cessation of Hostilities with Ethiopia, in which the negotiators were informed that Abiy wanted to get the TDF on side to defend Ethiopia against Eritrea, which Abiy began to see as a threat to his security:

*Tsadkan still supports the idea of Abiy to control Assab or Eritrea. In the background of the Pretoria agreement, Abiy informed members of the Tigray delegation that he wants TDF to join him to fight against Eritrea...Isayas knows this.* (Interviewee AA01, personal communication by Van Reisen, face-to-face, 6 January 2024)

In light of the above discussions, it appears that Eritrea presents a significant security and geopolitical challenge to Tigray. Tigray has not only lost its historical territory and access to the sea, but Eritrea has also served as a base for external forces (e.g., Turkey, Egypt, Sudan, and Italy) and has engaged in direct conflict with Tigray twice (1998–2000 and 2020) within its 31 years of statehood. Given Eritrea’s continued instability, its ongoing geopolitical and security challenges for Tigray, and its repeated acts of aggression, it seems necessary for Tigray to adopt a fundamentally different approach toward Eritrea. Tigray’s evolving aspirations for statehood, shaped by its wartime

experiences, align with broader ambitions to address the entrenched nature of the garrison state in Eritrea.

A growing movement among Eritrean youth, particularly those in the diaspora, envisions their future within the broader region and cultural identity, given the lack of prospects within their home country (Irgau, 2022). Erlich (2024) refers to the vision of a Greater Tigray, is shaped by several factors: the historical significance of the kebesa (highland) region, the historic association of Eritrean ports with Tigray, and the idea of a reimagined Tigray emerging as a key player in the evolving balance of power in Red Sea and Horn of Africa geopolitics.

### **Discussion: Military threats and state-making**

In the last decade, Ethiopia has experienced widespread open protests across the country due to the rise of both radical ethno-nationalist and neo-pan-Ethiopianist movements, particularly from the Amhara region, which have posed significant challenges to the country's multi-ethnic federalism and overall stability. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the first Oromo leader in Ethiopia, has promoted a more centralist, "restorationist" approach, in contrast to the previous ethno-nationalist federal system. This shift comes despite the long-standing demands for self-determination of ethnic groups, which has been a key driver of various armed liberation movements in Ethiopia's modern history (Rowe & Gebrewahd, 2021). Since 2018, some observers have compared Ethiopia to a potential "African Yugoslavia" (Bieber, 2019). The Southern Nations and Nationalities Region has been Balkanised into several small regions and the Somalia and Afar regions have also been victims of trans-border communal conflicts. Remoteness from the centre of power (Roessler, 2016) and the ambiguous pressures from neighbours and global actors (Berhe, 2020) has changed the political landscape in Ethiopia, in which the focus on regional governance has increased. Berhe sees that "the regional parties are acting on their own to assert control inside their regions and competing (at times violently) over resources and administrative boundary issues" (Berhe, 2020, p. 303).

Upon taking office, PM Abiy began his reforms by discrediting the previous 27 years of federal nation-building, referring to the TPLF-

EPRDF's rule as a "dark era" and accusing the former government of engaging in "state terrorism" (Fisher & Gebrewahd, 2018). Since April 2018, political divisions between federalist, secessionist, and centralist forces have reached new heights. A report by the International Crisis Group in December 2019 warned that, if the federal reforms were not properly handled, there could be a risk of state collapse or disintegration (Malley, 2019).

War is a route to state-making for a balance of power that ensures security. Krause (1998) discusses the argument of Ayoob (1995) on security following the fall of the Berlin Wall, in terms of "the assertion that neither orthodox nor 'new' conceptions of security adequately capture the 'security predicament' of Third World states; and the claim that Third World security imperatives are inextricably linked to the ongoing process of state formation" (Krause, 1998, p. 126).

Charles Tilly (1982) in his historical comparative analysis of European states, defined states as 'agents of organised violence' performing four activities:

*War Making: Eliminating or neutralizing their rivals outside the territories in which they have clear and continuous priority as wielders of force; State making: Eliminating or neutralizing their rivals inside those territories; Protection: Eliminating or neutralizing the enemies of their clients; and Extraction: acquiring the means of carrying out the first three activities – war making, state making, and protection.* (Tilly, 1982, p.15)

Tilly (1982) argued that war makes states, implying that states result from the organisation of the elimination of rivals, both from within and outside of the state, and extract the resources necessary for the making of the state. According to the above definition, state-making, thus, depends on the state's ability to monopolise and concentrate the means of coercion in its own hands, within the territory and among the population it controls. Hence, it is possible to infer that the accumulation of power is crucial to state-making.

State-making is informed by interdependence; states rely upon their environment and upon each other to varying degrees. The pendulum of policymaking in an interdependent situation revolves around the inadequacy of the state, the power of globalisation and the specificity of a specific region (Wallace & Wallace, 1996, p. 13). State-making

depends on the ability to *de facto* and *de jure* administer and defend the security of the citizens of that state against threats. Tigray has proven to be able to organise administration and security and to protect its citizens against the military threats that confronted the territory, be it at high costs.

The Tigray war has stimulated a new thinking among young generations of Tigrayans following the signing of the Pretoria Agreement. This has been fuelled by Isayas's destabilising policy and Ethiopia's irreconcilable tensions. Amhara, Oromia, Gambela, and Benshangul regions have been immersed in protracted chaos and fighting.

An article in the Financial Times was headlined, "We want independence more than ever: Inside Tigray's divisive war" (Schipani, 2021), while African Arguments published a piece titled, "As a Tigrayan, my bond with Ethiopia feels beyond repair" (Kahsay, 2021). Under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia has been destabilized by ethnic and communal conflicts. PM Abiy's policy of consolidating the nation under a more centralized regime, along with his covert collaboration with Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki to weaken the Tigrayan leadership, and the use of extreme rhetoric, has contributed to fragmentation. As a result, the desire for greater autonomy, and even independence, is now being seriously considered by both Tigrayan citizens and leaders.

## **Conclusion**

The recurring cycle of violence in Tigray can be attributed to the lack of a clear vision for nation-state building. The pre-1960s Tigrayan leadership operated within a semi-feudal cultural and political structure characterized by feudal patriotism, but it lacked a state-building agenda. The post-1960 TPLF leadership, while rooted in Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideologies, was shaped by the conservative Judeo-Christian traditions of Tigray, yet did not develop a coherent national vision for Tigray. Initially, the TPLF's 1976 manifesto advocated for the creation of an independent democratic republic of Tigray. However, this vision shifted over time, with the TPLF embracing 'Ethiopianism' over Tigrayan independence and

prioritizing class struggle over the concept of nation-building. Under TPLF-EPRDF leadership, Ethiopia pursued a constitutional framework that balanced regional autonomy with federal state-building.

Following the dissolution of the EPRDF, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed introduced a ‘neo-pan-Ethiopianist’ narrative, seen as an attempt to replace federalism with a more centralized state model. Leading to the war from 2020 to 2022, it left Tigray devastated, with its population feeling excluded, alienated, and vulnerable to threats from neighboring regions, including Eritrea. In this context, there has been a re-evaluation of state-building in Tigray.

While Tigray was able to defend its territory during the war, the cost was immense, both in terms of lives lost and the destruction of infrastructure and cultural heritage. Despite this, Tigray has maintained governance over the region. The need to break the cycle of violence has spurred discussions on establishing stability by defining the balance between autonomy and federal-regional collaboration. The adage that “war makes states” suggests that the leadership must now focus on strengthening the foundations of a representative state capable of ensuring the security and aspirations of its people within the dynamic geopolitical context of the region.

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## **Authors' contribution**

Meressa Tsehay Gebrewahd is the main author of this chapter. He collected the material for this research, conducted the analysis and wrote the first version of this chapter. Meressa also conducted the revision of the subsequent versions. Professor Mirjam Van Reisen (second author) revised the first version of the chapter and revised the structure of the chapter. Daniel Tesfa conducted the research on the analysis of the narratives presented in this chapter, the translation, interpretation, and analysis.

## **Ethical clearance**

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’.

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