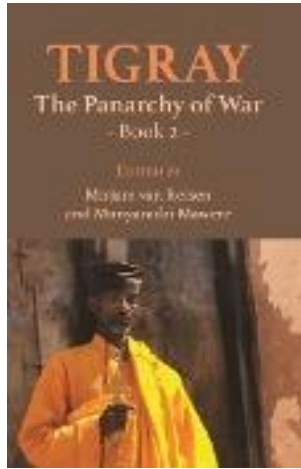


War Makes States: From 'Game Over' to the Idea of Tigray Statehood

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Chapter in:
Tigray. The Panarchy of War. Book 2.



Cite as: Gebrewahd, M. T., Van Reisen, M. & Tesfa, D. (2024). War Makes States: From 'Game Over' to the Idea of Tigray Statehood. In: Van Reisen, M. & Mawere, M. (eds.) *Tigray. The Panarchy of War*, Volume 1. Langaa, Bamenda. Pp. 351-399. Chapter URL:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385451757_War_Makes_States_From_'Game_Over'_to_the_Idea_of_Tigray_Statehood

Book URL:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385394658_Tigray_The_Panarchy_of_War_Book_2

The Note on Content and Editorial Decisions can be found here:

<https://raee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Note-on-Content-and-Editorial-Decisions-Van-Reisen-Mawere-Tigray-Panarchy-of-War-Book-2-2024.pdf>

The list of figures in colour can be found here:

<https://raee.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2024/10/Figures-Tigray.-The-Panarchy-of-WarVolume-2-1.pdf>

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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).¹

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).

¹ 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 iIMAGE 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

decades² (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 primordialism³ schools argued that a nation is an expression of age-old feelings of belonging, rooted in

² 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.

³ 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 review⁴ 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

⁴ 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 Aгаа'zi*, the nation of *Aгаа'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:⁵ 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 (nota⁶) developed by St Yared, and philosophy of “God, religion and the law of conscience”⁷ by philosopher Zerayakob the Aksum.

The ancient Tigray,⁸ prior to Menelik-II of Shewa, who became king of kings and emperor in 1889, was a self-contained kingdom or Geez

⁵ 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 Freminat. 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.

⁶ Locally known as ‘Geez, Ezile and Ararat’

⁷ In Tigrinya known as ‘Hige-lubona’ – Law of the heart

⁸ Tigray had different names like ‘the Aгаа'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 historically directly linked, rather their relationship has been ‘mythical’ or legendary

civilisational state (Abbay, 1998; Tibebe, 1995). Haggai Erlich,⁹ 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 Tsehaye, 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.¹⁰ It preserved its history, culture, heritage, identity, language, and territorial entity from

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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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, Harega, 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.

European colonisation, Amhara feudal state (of Menelik-II and Haile Selassie-I) oppression and assimilationist nation-building (*Amharanized 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).¹¹ The split between the Tigrinya ethnic group has resulted in a challenge to the current Tigray state (Erllich, 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 (Erllich, 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 a giving the state an “African look” (Abdullahi, 1998). It allows wide ranges of autonomy, including that “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

¹¹ 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).

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-Semitic 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).¹² 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.

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

¹² 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>

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) (iMAGE 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).¹³ 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 8th 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.*¹⁴ (ERi-TV, 2018b)

These statements were widely circulated from 2018 onwards, prior and during the 2020–2022 war on Tigray, repeated on social media

¹³ Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation later removed the reference to Daylight Hyenas in the online version. Verified DZ (2024).

¹⁴ The original text is: “ወያነ ዝፈጠሮ ፖለቲካዊ ጸወታን ኣሸካሳልን ኣኸቲሙ እዩ ዝበለ ፕሬዚዳንት ኢሳይያስ ንሱ ዝፈጠሮ ሓድጊ ንምጽራይን ፖለቲካዊ ሕጽቦ ንምክያድን ግን ዕቱብን ንቐሕን ጸዕሪ ከምዘድሊ ኣሰሚናሉ።” (Sawa, published 13 July 2018, speech held 12 July 2018) 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)).

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

divide them across different countries, including in Yemen. The Eritrean Mereja.com media outlet reprinted the post:¹⁵

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 Tegarau youth have already settled, and providing a safe passage for the remaining Tegarau to be relocated to the Arab country Meles Zenawi had once proudly called "the ancestral home for Tegarau. (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.¹⁶

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

¹⁵ 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).

¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ 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'¹⁸ against Tigray:

¹⁷ 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/ (accessed 13 January 2024).

<https://www.facebook.com/261522124370013/posts/pfbid02igy3o3eyfLcck6Q1FLyAc5ZUYkGJAE4c7fyRWa7oc9uPWFpFGveGNQd44Hx6zu4l/?app=fbl> (accessed 13 January 2024).

¹⁸ 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

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 Tigrai 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 generally¹⁹) 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)

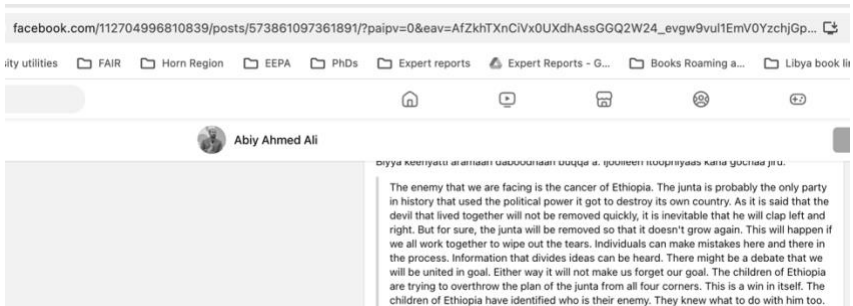


Figure 10.1. Screenshot posting by @PMAbiyAhmedAli on 18 July 2021, original in Amharic and Oromo (Translated by Google)

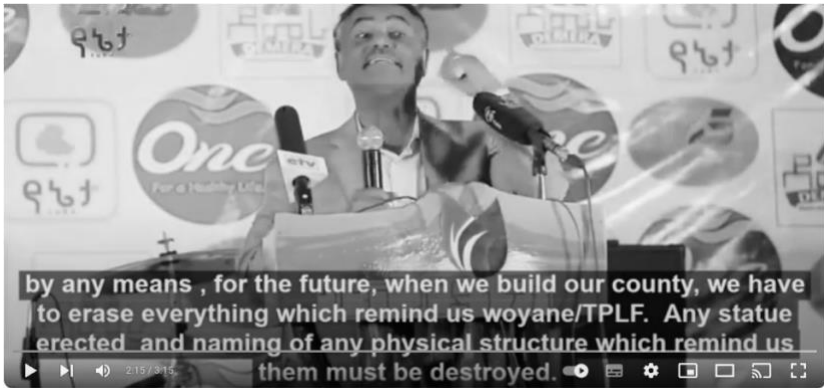
This speech was further distributed by the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Amhara Media Corporation and the Fana Broadcasting Corporate, emphasising the rhetoric of Tigray being a

¹⁹ 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 2021²⁰ 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”.²¹



Daniel Kibret (AKA Satnael Kisret) public hate speech against Tigrayans with English subtitle.

Figure 10.2. YouTube verified on veracity²²

²⁰ 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).

²¹ 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.

²² link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiNir2fRmk8&t=133s> (accessed 27 May 2024)

Daniel²³ (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).²⁴ Asked to clarify who he was referring to, Daniel Kibret answered: “They’ refers to the terrorist TPLF group” (AFP, 2021).

²³ 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.

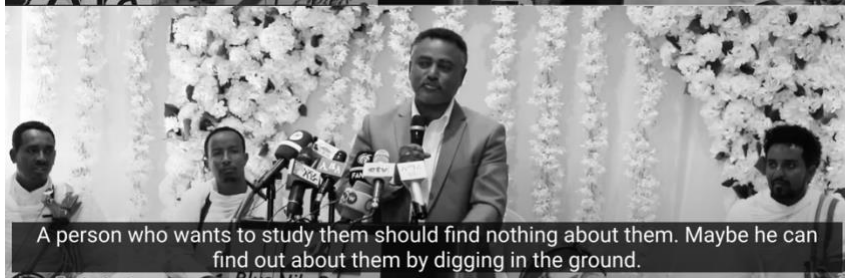
²⁴ Benesch links the statement to hate speech used in Kenya: “He seems to have learned the worst lessons about dangerous speech from other countries: in neighboring Kenya in 2006, for example, in the months leading up to an explosion of inter-communal killing, leaders of one ethnic group also used the term ‘weeds’ to refer to members of another Kenyan group” (Benesch, 2021).



They should be erased and disappear 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 2021²⁵

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

²⁵ 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).²⁶ 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-19th 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

²⁶ 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. (iMAGE 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 Sibul, Mussie, Walta, Haftom, Kelebet, Hayelom, Birbane Meskel, Kesbi Gebru, Amora, Tilahun Gizaw, specially like comrade Meles Zenawi and many more heroes. [Applause]²⁷ (iMAGE eTHIOPIS, 2018)

²⁷ Original text: ከምቲ ብዙሓት ዝስማዕምዕሉ ትግራይ መዳሕንቲ ኢትዮጵያ ዝተቐበረላ ምድሪ እያ። {ጭብጨባ}

ትግራይ ኩርዓት ታሪኽ ሃገርናን መበቆል ስልጣናን ዝኾነ ሓወልቲ አኸሱም ዝርከበላ ቦታ እያ። ትግራይ ካብ ሃይማኖትነት ሓሊፎም ናይ መንነትና መግለጺ ናብ ምኳን ዝበፀሑ ናይ ክርስትናን እስልምናን ሃይማኖት ናብ ሃገርና ንመጀመርታ ግዜ ብአክሱምን ነጃሽን አቢሎም ዝኣተውላ ክልል እያ። {ጭብጨባ}

ሓዚ ሓዚ ድማ ልዕሊ 3000 ዓመት ዝቐፀረት ከተማ ኣብ ሸረ ማይ ኣድራሻ ከባቢ ዝተረኸበላ እንትኸውን ሃገርና መፈጠርታ ከተማታት ዓለም ንምኳና 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.*²⁸ (iMAGE eTHIOPIS,2018)

The narrative against national oppression and in favour of liberation, which evolved out of the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s

ሐዚ ሐዚ ድማ ልዕሊ 3000 ዓመት ዘቐፀረት ከተማ ኣብ ሸረ ማይ ኣድራሻ ከባቢ ዝተረኸበላ እንትኸውን ሃገርና መሬጠርታ ከተማታት ዓለም ንምኻና ዝምስክር እዩ። {ጭብጨባ}

ትግራይ መበቆል ማህሌታዊ ያሬድን ዘርእያቆብን ዝአመሰሉ ዓባይቲ 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 ዝአመሰሉ ብሓፈሻኡ ድማ ዘርዘርካ ዘይውዳእ ዓዲ ኣሸሓት ጀጋኑ ተጋደልቲን እያ። {ጭብጨባ}

²⁸ Original text:

ትግራይ ኣብ ሃገርና ለውጢን ዴሞክራሲን ክመፅእ ዝተቻለሉ ዝተፈላለዩ ናይ ፖለቲካ ሓይልታት ህዝባዊ ድጋፍን ዑቕባን ዝረኸቡሉ ናይ ኢህወደግ ውድባት ካብ ፀላእቲ ሓቢኢን ሓብሒባን ናብዚ ደረጃ ዘብፀሐት እያ። {ጭብጨባ}

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 fascist 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 Ambara 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*'²⁹ or the '*Kebessa*'³⁰ – 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-based identity (1961–1991); and the post-1993 war-born young state identity, locally known as *Hadasb*³¹ Eritrea.

²⁹ Tigrinya for the 'Governor of the Sea' and refers to the people of north Mereb River.

³⁰ Tigrinya for 'Highland Eritrea', which includes 'Hamassien', 'Seraye', and 'Akole-guzai'.

³¹ Tigrinya for 'the new state of 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 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 recalls 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 2018, 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 kebessa (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.

Acknowledgments

We thank the double-blind peer review team for their considerations and suggestions.

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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