

Open Letter to Arria-Formula Meeting (@UN) on the protection of Cultural Heritage in Armed Conflict.

By TADAUK.ORG

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‘The Ethiopian State intentionally destroyed or intentionally failed to take appropriate measures to prohibit, prevent, stop, and punish intentional destruction of cultural heritage of great importance for humanity in Tigray’
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On Tuesday 2 May 2023, France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will co-host an Arria-formula meeting (@UN) on the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict. The meeting is being co-sponsored by non-Council members Cyprus and Italy.

This will be an opportunity for the Arria-formula Meeting participants to highlight the destruction of Tigrayan National Heritage, particularly the destruction of Churches, Mosques and Monasteries, looting of valuable religious and historic books, destruction of Tigray heritage.

Targeting Tigray’s Heritage and Values

It is impossible to presently know how many thousands of Tigrayans have been killed in the war that began in November 2020. These atrocities took place without regard to age, gender, social class, health or any other factor. All this information will require careful, systematic research which cannot currently be conducted. These murders were accompanied by land grabbing, ethnic cleansing and widespread and genocidal rape. As Ethiopian and Eritrean government forces and private militia attacked Ethiopian citizens living in the northernmost region of Ethiopia, Tigray, they also **attacked religious, historical and cultural sites of immense value including museums, archeological sites, mosques, churches and**

monasteries. Tigray heritage icons were deliberately and systematically targeted, especially those that were popularly celebrated and held historical significance.

To appreciate the full weight of these attacks, the role and influence of the Church in Ethiopia which has underpinned historical and modern claims of political and military authority, shaped community identity, and informed cultural narratives, must be understood. Bombing, terrorizing, and otherwise degrading churches and monasteries strikes at traditional Ethiopian power structures, cherished multifunctional gathering places, sacred spaces, and represents a grave dishonoring of cultural values and works of great beauty.

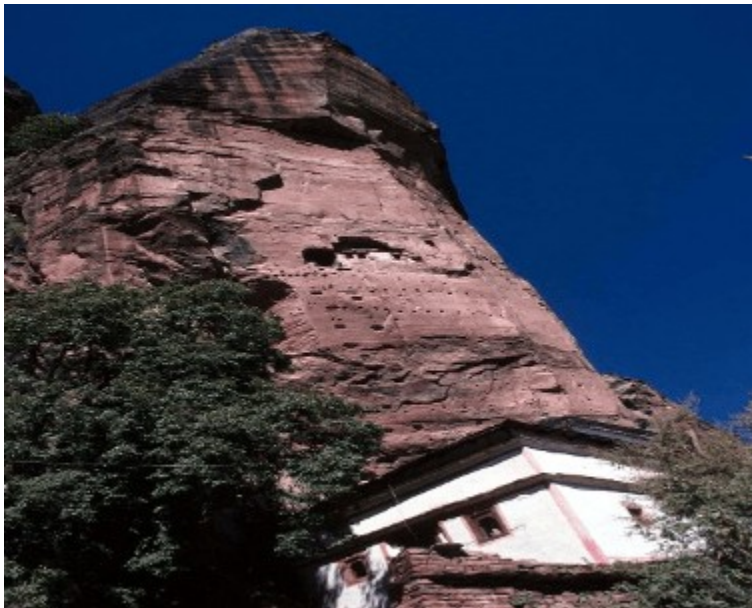
Targets of war: a survey of churches, monasteries and historically significant sites

Tigray is a land of precious heritages with thousands of monasteries and churches, about 150 of them rock hewn. Tourists from around the world and pilgrims from across the country have travelled to visit these sacred spaces. These are Tigray heritage icons and they; their historical objects, sacred items, priests and congregations have been intentionally targeted. At the time of writing at least 40 churches and monasteries have had a general assessment of damages, but we assume that hundreds of monasteries and churches have been affected in one way or another by the hostility. A detailed report from the Tigray Orthodox Church Diocese just three months into the war in February 2021, showed us that 326 members of the priesthood had already been killed; we do not have clear data on how many members of the clergy were killed in the many months that followed. At least 112 priests and deacons of Tigray origin have been detained in Addis Ababa, many of whom were arrested during the Ethiopian Meskel festival in September 2021. The atrocities have been perpetrated by joint forces: Ethiopian National Defense Forces, Eritrean Defense Forces, and Amhara forces (Amhara Militia and Amhara Special Forces) and have been supported by drones and military personnel from various countries, most significantly the UAE, Turkey and China.

On the eve of the popular annual celebration of St. Mary which draws crowds to the holy city of Aksum every year, a bloody massacre began. Aksum; Tsion, the holy city, is the Head of Churches and Monasteries in Ethiopia. The chapel at the Church of Our Lady Mary of Tsion in Aksum is trusted as the treasury of the biblical Ark of the Covenant. The faithful were participating in a unique monthly 7 day supplication [ritual](#) where they surround and circle the sacred church of Mary Tsion three times, reflecting how Zion in the Old Testament is described as being surrounded by protective mountains, when they were

suddenly interrupted by force. Eritrean troops had arrived, many congregants stayed on the church compound hoping to protect the Ark of the Covenant and they were massacred. Over the course of two days on November 28th-29th 2020 there are estimates 800 civilians, [see also this](#), were killed, including priests and children. Aksum, the ultimate spiritual and historical pride of the people of Tigray, not to mention Orthodox Christian Ethiopia as a whole, was disgraced.

Maryam Dengelet is a monastery and church complex with a newer church stationed in front of and below an ancient rock hewn church. Significantly, an unvocalized Aksumite Geez inscription was recently found near here. The ancient rock hewn church was also recently reopened after being inaccessible for 200 years, revealing unique and precious heritage items. Eritrean soldiers arrived on the day of Maryam Dengelet's most popular annual festival, Saint Mary's Feast Day on Nov 30th 2020, looted property and conducted a ruthless [execution](#) of civilians including elders, children and priests.



Maryam Dengelet (courtesy of Michael Gervers, 2002)

The Firedashum Massacre is one of the underreported massacres in Eastern Tigray; after destroying the village houses and the only millhouse nearby, Eritrean troops massacred more than sixty-one civilians, more than five of them priests. More than 32 civilians and priests were said to have been killed in the church of *Medhanie'alem Gu'tolo* (a church dedicated to Jesus) during its holyday on January 4th 2021. Moreover, another church nearby, named *Enda Qirkos Firedashum* (source: Mahibere Deqiqe Estifanos), a church dedicated to St. Cyriacus, was [burned](#) and its heritage, both ecclesiastical

materials and manuscripts, destroyed at the same event. The Firedashum villagers were horrifically killed, intimidated and there are reports of villagers being tied down for days in front of their killed relatives. Detailed identities and stories of all the individuals killed in this village are known and well documented by the locals.

These first few incidents listed indicate a pattern of targeting churches on their holy days and festival days when large numbers of congregants and priests were in attendance. Ethiopian Christmas Day 2020 for example, is known to have been one of the deadliest days for civilians in the war so far, with the- Debre Abay Massacre, and multiple churches and communities attacked at the same time. During the Ethiopian Christmas week of 2021 between the 4th-8th of January, Eritrean troops are believed to have executed 300 Saho speaking civilians of the Irob minority group alone, in a horrifying door-to-door campaign. 72 of the individuals are well known, however the northeastern area of Tigray where the Irob people live has been under continuous Eritrean occupation the entire course of this war and some of the atrocities have been hard to verify.

Most of the brutalities in Eastern Tigray were committed by Eritrean soldiers. ***Qirqos Ligat in Zalambessa*** was one of the first reported churches to be [destroyed](#) by them ([as you can see in the video](#)). Targeting churches and sacred spaces became worse as the soldiers advanced to the center of the state with numerous churches and monasteries in central Tigray and Eastern Tigray defaced by Eritrean forces.



The church of Qirqos Ligat (source: social media)

The renowned 6th century monastery of ***Debre Dammo***, a compound only accessible by rope up a sheer cliff on a flat-topped mountain, is the first Christian monastery in Ethiopia (6th century) home to a rich collection of

manuscripts, and it is where various prestigious Ethiopian monks got their monkhood from. Although no fighting was taking place in its vicinity, and while the site was of no strategic advantage, it was deliberately shelled by Eritrean soldiers. While there is some variance in local reporting, it is clear that the monastery was bombed, buildings around the complex were damaged and one monk was killed. More than five Eritrean soldiers were reported to have climbed up to the monastery, vandalized the space and intimidated the monks.



The first Christian Monastery in the Sub-Saharan Africa, Debre Damo

(Courtesy of Michael Gervers, 2004)

The famous rock hewn Ger'alta churches in east Tigray were damaged by shelling, including the 14th century church ***Abuna Abraham*** known for its diverse architectural features and wall paintings; members of the monastic community were threatened and beaten. Priests and civilians were intimidated in the monastery of ***Abuna Yematta of Guh***, a place dedicated to one of the 6th century Nine Saints and known for its impressively detailed, ancient frescos. This rock hewn church and the beauty of its surrounding mountains drew many tourists to Ger'alta and made it a well-loved tourist destination. 19 civilians were killed and 2 injured here on May 7, 2021.



The Monastery of Abune Abraham (Hagos Abrha Abay, 2018)

Wugro Qirqos is an iconic church that sits on a very important part of the historic trade route leading to the Red Sea. Local residents [filmed](#) the historic church as it appears to be shelled by invading forces. The church of Debre Medhanit Amnuel Ma'go, in the Wereda Kiltewla'lo district of Negash, was Shelled twice on 24th November 2020 by the Eritrean soldiers. The church building and its ecclesiastical materials were destroyed; the image of Emanuel/Jesus, after whom the church is named, was also damaged, as can be seen in the photograph.



The church of Debre Medhanit, Amanuel Ma'go (Source: Dimtsi Weyane Tigray)

The rock hewn church and monastery complex of ***Maryam Yerefeda in Digum (Eastern Tigray)*** is historical church with three *tabots*, dedicated to St. Mary, St. Gabriel, and St. Michael; the church is said to have been attacked three times, especially on 25 December 2020, and 14 January 2021. Eritrean troops are believed to be primarily responsible. According to [testimony](#), two generators, two amplifiers, and a bell were destroyed. *Maryam Yerefeda's* library is totally ruined. Throughout the length of their occupation of Tigray, Eritrean soldiers became known for looting any property they found. The full extent of private property, church materials, icons that were looted by the Eritreans forces are not yet well documented.

Waldibba in Northwestern Tigray is one of the biggest, and most well-established monasteries in Ethiopia. It had a strong link with Debre Bonkol of Aksum, which was a place of Bahre Negasi of the 13th century. Founded in the 14th century by a Tigrayan monk from Aksum named Abba Samuel. *Waldibba* was among the monasteries that historically remained

untouched during conflict, even by Ahmed b. Ibrahim al-Gazi, who notoriously caused widespread destruction of sacred spaces in his 16th century invasion of Ethiopia. More than one thousand monks and a few hundred nuns are believed to live in the monastery, belonging to more than 18 distinct monastic communities. These coenobitic monastic communities hail from all over Ethiopia with a majority of them being from Tigray.

Many of the **monks** who live on the compound never leave it, devoting their lives to study and prayer. The *Waldibba* compound is sizable and is not only a monastery. It also contains a vast hermits' desert with a wilderness that is surrounded by rivers including the Ensiya and Zarema rivers. This compound has been used as a sanctuary for destabilized individuals; members of the Derg Regime were believed to have hidden themselves in the monastery because monasteries are independent entities, and historically and culturally considered to be untouchable by the secular community.

That belief has been shattered during this war. Hundreds of ethnically Tigrayan monks were cast out of the monastery by Amhara forces and their Amhara 'brethren'. Some were actually killed inside the monastery while they were praying. Most monks of Tigrayan origin were evicted and displaced to cities and other monasteries across Tigray.



Destabilized Monks of Waldibba (source: Tsegaze'ab Kidane)

The monastery of *Mer'awe Kirstos* in north-western Tigray became known as an asylum for many of these monks. However even here where Waldibba monks sought refuge, more than 50 civilians, ten of them priests, are reported to have been massacred by Amhara forces (Source: Mergeta Qetsela). Precious manuscripts and heritages from this monastery were also looted. Some of the monks of *Waldibba*, many of whom were elderly, did not recover from the beatings endured while being expelled from the monastery. Others, having had such limited contact with the outside world for years until their expulsion, quickly became sick and died during their exile. Seventy-one year old Abba Gebrewahid, is one example of a revered monk who was troubled, became sick, died and was buried in Aksum. According to local reports and eyewitness testimony, the Amhara forces committed all these atrocities at *Waldibba* in collaboration with some of the non-Tigrayan origin monks from the monastery itself.



Gospel from the Monastery of Mer'awe Kirstos

(Courtesy of Michael Gervers, 2005)

The monastery of *Debre Abay*, which was established by Samuel of Waldibba at the end of 14th century during the reign of Dawit II, is a famous center of excellence for Ethiopian orthodox traditional schooling, providing education in a variety of disciplines and preeminent in the field of church

liturgy mass service (Qəddase). It was attacked by Ahmed b. Ibrahim al-Gazi in the 16th century and the church in the monetary compound was bombed by the Italians in the Second-Italian-Abyssinian War. The mid to second half of the 19th century was a very significant period for Debre Abay and for its reputation as a monastery. Throughout modern times it has remained a popular school. Any Ethiopian deacon who graduates from *Debre Abay* is as proud of his education as any of today's most renowned university graduates. This icon of Tigray's and Ethiopia's heritage was vandalized by the Amhara and ENDF forces. Civilians, priests and students were ferociously killed, its heritage was looted, and fabric of the monastery's traditions was erased. Access to Northwestern and Western areas of Tigray is limited. Western Tigray, where ethnic cleansing and horrific brutalities like the Maykadra massacre and the extrajudicial executions in- Humera continue, much of the territory is still under occupation by the ENDF and their allied forces. Subsequently, no report about monasteries and churches from there is included in this article.



The Monastery of Debre Abay (Courtesy of Michael, Gervers, 2005)

In Wejjerat in southeastern Tigray, as they were preparing one evening for the anniversary day of *Ezgi'na Mam'at Church*, the faithful were interrupted. Their evening meal was purposely destroyed and elders were taunted inside the church; this was committed a few weeks after about 7 elders were massacred nearby, in Tsehafti. Ethiopian soldiers who had been camping in the surroundings of *Abune Aregawi Church of Quiha* for a short

time, and used to smoke cigarettes inside the church, and they are said to have entered the *St. Mary Church* of Quiha during the service of the mass, threatening civilians and priests.

Even though the degree of damage is not yet clear, local reports show the ***Yeha Monastery*** was affected and manuscripts were looted; it may also be connected to-the **Ahsi'a Massacre** where more than 117 civilians, 19 of them in Addi Gitaw alone, including priests, were massacred (source: Qol'a Baray). In just the church of Debre **Anbessa, Kidanamihret** church, more than 10 civilians and priests including the church administrator Abba Gebremeskel, were brutally killed by Eritrean soldiers. The guardian of the Ahsi'a secondary school whose name was Gebre'aregay, escaped the violence and he claimed asylum in **Debre Anbessa**, but he was still killed inside the church. A university student and one operator from Sur Construction company were among the murdered youth. Sexual abuse was also committed here. We do not yet have clear data about the church building and its heritages.

The monasteries of ***Endabba Tshima*** (a church dedicated to one of the Nine Saints in Edaga Arbi), *Tseftsef Kidanamihret* (Nebelet), *Maryam Wuqro* (Nebelet) among the other churches in Central Tigray, in one or another way, were attacked by the Eritrean forces. Civilians were killed around the monastery of *Endabba Thishma*. Some monasteries in Qola Temben (Central Tigray) like ***Endaba Noba, Endaba Yohanni, Jiwamare Mika'el*** were part of the target. The church of *Jiwamare Mika'el*, had precious manuscripts looted by the Amhara and ENDF forces.

Northwest, Central, Eastern part of Tigray are relatively the most attacked zones in case of heritage; this is mainly because these areas were the main gets of the Amhara and the Eritrean forces, who were described to be more brutal; many other churches and monasteries in the Northwestern Tigray were attacked by Amhara forces and ENDF. The targets in the **Mahiberedego Massacre**, for example, were members of a local congregation traveling together to a religious feast called a *Tsebel*. Local reports describe the civilians as being brutally murdered by ENDF and Amhara forces and thrown off the edge of a cliff.

The Church of Maryam Medhanit in Northwest Tigray (Addi Da'ero), as you can see in the picture, has been [destroyed](#) by the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers; Christians congregated in the church and sang the [prayer "O Lord, Have mercy on us"](#) after its destruction. The church of *Enda Abune Aregawi* (Addi Da'ero) is also affected from shelling. *Kidanemihret Amburko* (Tselemti) and *Abune Zer'abruk* both in the northwestern Tigray were damaged from shelling by Amhara forces. Another monastery called *Abune*

Tadewos was damaged by bombing (by a zu-23) and heritage objects, including manuscripts, were looted. Many civilians were also killed and their heritage, including manuscripts, were looted in the monastery of *Abune Thomas* in Northwestern Tigray. More than 12 monasteries, at least in this article, were yet reported to have been damaged in Northwestern Tigray, mainly by Amhara and ENDF forces; the reports are from local sources.

Enda Amanuel Samre and Qeretsa Maryam of Seharti are among the churches known to have been damaged by shelling in southwestern Tigray. ***Qeretsa Maryam*** was bombed from the air. The grounds surrounding the church of *Maryam Korem* were recently bombed by drones and we know that many civilians died in the attack. We do not yet have a report on the physical damage to the church. Brutalities in the South and Southwestern Tigray have not yet been well reported. According to local reports and Dimtsi Weyane Tigray Television, reported recently, 175 civilians including priests were killed during the Bora Massacre on Nov 23, 2020; according to the report, until the first three months of 2021, other 179 civilians were injured; 438 goats and sheep, and 46 cattle were looted or slaughtered there. Moreover, 387 quintals of grain were burned; 180 houses were burned down, 17 women raped; unspecified church located in Neqsege areas was totally burned; in the church of *Eguyat St. Mary*, a monk named Abba Hiluf was executed. In Gedefena in the St. John Church area, a priest named Mamu and three their deacons were killed, with a total of nine priests reported to have been killed around that village. All this destruction was committed by ENDF and Amhara forces. I was in Southern Tigray during the first three months after the war started, I am a witness, among other things, for an unimaginable destruction of agricultural investments in southern Tigray. In Rayya, massive farmlands, dairy farming (including estimated to 500 Holstein-Friesian cows from a single farm of Haleka Moges) were made out of use; this can be covered in detail in a separate article.

Archeological sites, museums and memorial sites were affected, in addition to the damage inflicted on religious buildings and their environments. Aksum Archaeological Museum was looted on Feb 1, 2021 by the Eritrean soldiers; according the curator of the museum Layn Mawcha. Among other things, 26 Aksumite coins (10 gold, 16 silver) were looted by the Eritrean soldiers. Cars with heavy loads were said to have been in many of the restricted areas around the Aksumite stelaes; this could be one of the most frustrating issues in case of the stelaes, which were already endangered after the one restituted from Italy was erected. The office of Wuqro Archeological Museum is reported to have been damaged by Eritrean soldiers. Two other archeological sites around Wuqro and in Aksum, Addi Gutay have also reported that their

shelter, fences and related archeological materials have been looted and vandalized by the Eritrean forces.

The *Emperor Yohannes IV Palace*, the home of a significant Ethiopian king from the 19th century, is found in the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle. The palace was renovated and transformed into a [museum](#) with UNESCO's assistance. Today most of the cultural artifacts in the [museum](#) have been destroyed or looted by federal Ethiopian forces. *Tigray Martyr's Memorial Museum* found in Mekelle near the Tigrayan Martyrs Monument, a symbolic and educational site commemorating Tigray's revolutionary struggle in the 1980's, has been completely [devastated](#). When these two heritage sites were attacked, the city of Mekelle was totally controlled by the Ethiopian National Defense Force. There were no skirmishes, battles or shots fired anywhere near these culturally significant sites, yet they were intentionally obliterated by Ethiopian soldiers. The same is true for the statue of *Qeshi Gebru*, a female fighter against the Derg Regime in the 1980's. Members of ENDF and Amhara forces applauded and knocked it over in Humera; the event is documented in [video](#) footage that has been circulated on social media.

Upon the destruction of development infrastructure like textile factories, large agricultural assets, schools, health centers and the list here could on, private properties and heritages were looted. There are widespread reports of Eritrean soldiers looting private property so exhaustively that they even took cooking utensils. There are also many reports indicating that Eritrean soldiers would then burn whatever was left behind, even a family's food items. Heritage antiquities were looted both for economic gain (with many items containing silver and gold) and for the intentional discarding of Tigrayan values. Antiquity shops in and outside the Ethiopian borders must now have received looted Tigray heritage items. A friend of mine from Kenya informed me that someone approached him to sell Tigray antiquity objects. Our vigilance in documenting online heritage selling, and general assessments of heritage loss in Tigray can be important for accountability and repatriation (if possible) after the war.

The "Policy Document for the Integration of a Sustainable Development Perspective into the Processes of the World Heritage Convention" (UNESCO, 2015) treats cultural heritage rights as being human rights. A draft policy of the International Criminal Court (ICC) published on 22 March 2021 article 8:41 says, ***"War crimes fall under the Court's jurisdiction under article 8 of the Statute, and at present may offer the most straightforward means to address intentional harm to cultural heritage—not least since it is well established that these crimes not only address violence to the person but***

also to property.” As Tigray heritage, including the world registered heritages like Aksum, are part of our shared global heritage and history, it is incumbent upon the responsible and capable international bodies to be well concerned about the targeted destruction and theft of Tigray heritage icons, to advocacy for accountability, and for everything from restitution up to rehabilitation.

Al Nejashi: Targeting a symbol of Tigray’s religious symbiosis (or coexistence/freedom)



Negash mosque – one of the oldest in Ethiopia – damaged by shelling

While the Muslim population in Tigray remains a minority, they have a very significant historical mosque located in Negash. Some of Muhammad's first followers found refuge with the Christian Aksumite Empire when they were facing persecution in Mecca. The King at the time welcomed the Muslims with open arms, provided them with protection and freedom to worship, and refused to expel the refugees even when rulers in Mecca sent lavish gifts and delegations to persuade him.¹⁵ tombs of the first immigrants from the First Hegira in Islam are located on the grounds of the *Al Nejashi Mosque* in Eastern Tigray. It is considered to be an important symbol of the first Islamic settlement in Africa; today the oldest known Arabic inscription in Ethiopia and Eritrea is actually found in Quiha, Enderta in Eastern Tigray and dates back to 972; studies tell us that some of the Arabic inscriptions discovered in Enderta were brought to the Archeological Museum in Addis Ababa during the 2nd half of the 20th century. During this war the minaret of Al Nejashi Mosque was intentionally severely damaged; its dome partially [collapsed](#) and its façade was ruined. Civilians near the mosque were also killed.



Photo source: from [BBC News](#)

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church's historical influence on the state

Church and State have been closely connected throughout Ethiopian history, dating back to the time of King Ezana of the Aksumite Empire who converted to Christianity c. CE325. The Church became more dominant in Ethiopian literature after the 13th century when the story of the *Kəbre Negest* (lit. Glory of Kings), a textual masterpiece outlining the foundation of the Solomonic Dynasty, was produced.

While there is no current known record of Aksumite kings claiming to be direct descendants of the Biblical King Solomon, the narrative of *Kəbre Negest* was instrumental in denouncing their predecessors, the Lasta/Agaw kings of the so called Zagwe Dynasty (post Aksumite era that ended in the 13th century). The texts also validated the Shewan Kings' claims to being direct descendants of the Aksumite legacy, which according to the *Kəbre Negest*, was a part of the Solomonic line. While the intended purpose of the *Kəbre Negest* is not yet well understood, the idea that it documented a dynastic Solomonic royal entitlement through Aksum indicates an intention to claim historical legitimacy. The colophon of the manuscript reports that the *Kəbre Negest* was composed by *Nəbure Id Yishāq* of Aksum at the order of *Ya'bike Egzi'* then governor of Enderta, Tigray. The Aksumite church of that time (late 13th-early 14th century) and their narrative values made their own contribution to the authentication of the Aksumite claim. Most importantly, the belief that the Ark of the Covenant is housed and protected in Aksum, was significant for the kings, and their claims to divine ordination. The *Kəbre Negest* provided a strong legal foundation for the Church and the governing state, especially after the 14th century.

Even when medieval and modern Tigrayan nobles were perceived as competitors and threats by the Shewan kings, the Solomonic kings of Shewa persisted in glorifying their connection to Aksumite kings and the Ark of the covenant. Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434-68) introduced strong concepts of Mariology to the church, and elements of that focus combined with the Ark of the Covenant became the anchor for the whole royal package. The 15th century was a golden age for Gə'əz literature and hagiographic tradition across the whole of Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. From this crucial period onwards, the Ethiopian Judaio-Christian (Orthodox) belief is highly packed with folklore as the medieval oral and hagiographic traditions were influenced by myth and legend, which were instrumental for identity branding, power legitimacy and religious canonization. The existing folklore intermingled with a strong tradition that followed of manuscript production, translation and adoption mainly from Syriac and Arabic sources, and brought the discourses of eschatology and prophesy into the Ethiopian religious state. The intermingling of the near east, and its religious and diplomatic relation with the Ethiopian state was influential during the medieval time. The Egyptian influence on the church has always

been present and all Ethiopian patriarchs were from Egypt until 23 April 1891 when the first Ethiopian Archbishop Abba Basilius was ordained.

When a revolutionary group of Tigrayan monks called the Stephanites (14th - 15th cent.) led by their founder Estifanos, formed a movement against King Zara Yaqob's religious reforms, they were perceived as a real threat to King Zara Yaqob's power and he dealt very harshly with them. The Stephanites mainly rejected King Zara Yaqob's excessive veneration of the cross, the festivals of St. Mary and the millenarian doctrine of Debre Şəyon (lit. *Mount Zion*, Ethiopian eschatology). When they also strictly opposed the idea of bowing down to a king, Zara Yaqob characterized them as ፀረ ማርያም which literally translates to mean "enemies of Mary" in order to detach them from the Head of Churches and Monasteries in Aksum Tsion; he then massacred hundreds of them in broad daylight. Elements of their movement existed for one hundred years but they were brutally hunted down and tortured, clearly to be made an example of. Interestingly, most of the monasteries in Tigray which are linked to the Stephanites are dedicated to St. Mary: *Gunda Gundo Marya*, *Asira Metira Maryam*, and *Maryam Dibo* are some of them. The monastery of *Samuel Qoyetsa*, a well-known monastery in Northwestern Tigray, named after Abba Samuel, the spiritual father of Estifanos, was attacked by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and the Amhara Forces (AF). Priests were massacred and its heritage looted. The nunnery and church of *Asira Metira St. Mary* in Eastern Tigray, one of the places where the Stephanites established their sect, was also targeted and the church's heritage was looted. Monasteries with monks from the Stephanite tradition are renowned for their habit of doing good work. *Asira Metira St. Mary* is known to produce fruit, like oranges and apples. According to local reports, Eritrean soldiers destroyed some of their property.



The monastery of Samuel Qoyeşa (Hagos Abrha Abay, 2017)

Modern Ethiopian kings and their chroniclers were often preoccupied with prophesy and myth. Emperor Tewodros II (1855- 1868) for example, who was known as a modern Ethiopian reformist, was also known to consider himself as the prophesied “King Tewodros”, a king written about in the Ge’ez prophetic literature as Fikare Iyesus, and told about in oral prophecies. The prophesied King Tewodros was expected to be a king who would peacefully rule all of Ethiopia for 40 years and would be known as the “Lord of Peace”. Emperor Tewodros II was far from peaceful, destroying and burning many Christian churches because of the clergy’s reluctance to approve of his reformation; and his 13-year reign was riddled with battles and conflict.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church’s current political influence

Today, complex and conservative oral traditions and beliefs of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church are intermingled with the religion and politics that is still alive in Ethiopia. It seems that Ethiopia has encountered a miscarriage of social revolution and sidelined a real modernization process in the 20th century. There are many ordinary Ethiopians who are still waiting to see “The Lord of Peace” who will rule them for 40 years. Of course, it is easy to understand why a society fed up with a long history of civil wars would be eager to see a “Lord of Peace” and hence create a literary displacement foreshadowing stability. Even in the last decade there have been elders, mostly monks and hermits, in different Ethiopian monasteries and deserts, who claim themselves to be, or use oracles to prophesy about, the coming of “Emperor Tewodros”. 40 years is a significant number associated with any narrative about the “Lord of Peace” in Ethiopia.

This is a good moment to recapitulate some of the speeches of Ethiopia’s current Nobel Peace Prize winning Prime Minister, who is drenched in blood. The day Abiy Ahmed came to power, he said that his mother had told him a prophecy that he would be the 7th King of Ethiopia. Of course, he would be the 7th Ethiopian king/leader after Emperor Tewodros, but we are not sure what he meant by that. The Prime Minister’s political speeches frequently allude to Ethiopian Kings, he even commissioned a new statue of Emperor Menelik II in his palace. From the very beginning Abiy Ahmed seemed intent on manipulating Amhara activists desiring to be perceived as a king. In Abiy Ahmed’s [recently released](#) ten years’ strategic plan he said they had “Not only a ten-year plan, but also we have outlined a 30 years plan and in 2050 Ethiopian Calendar (2057) Ethiopia will be one of the most famous countries in the world.

There is also a plan that says, ‘there will be [two super-powers](#) [in the world], one of them will be Ethiopia’. [Now] if we agree on the ten years’ plan, we will discuss the thirty years’ [another time]”; and here we see that the idea of “forty years” is present.

After Abiy came to power, there have been various fresh and complex stories of prophecy that should not be overlooked when seeking to understand Ethiopian politics. Among many other mysticisms, a book has been written in Amharic about a monk from Eastern Tigray called *Abba Zewengel [Zäwängel]* who is said to have lived for more than 610 years. He died on October 21st 2019, just after he finished overseeing the building of his beautiful new church called *Mesqele Kirstos* (Cross of Christ) on the 30th of September 2019. Many Ethiopians had visited Abba Zewengel and consulted with him, relying on his wisdom and advice during the course of his lifetime. The Ethiopian Patriarch himself visited Abba Zewengel during the inauguration of the church, when it was named *Debre Sina* (lit. Mount Sinay). According to the book and related fragmented oral stories, after three years of hostility and brutality in Ethiopia, Abba Zewengel said: “The Lord of Peace” called Tewodros will come to power by 2015 EC (a year from now in 2023) and will rule Ethiopia peacefully from that church for the next forty years. The prophecy says there will be war and a plague in the whole world, and Ethiopia will become a global destination for displaced people. There are plenty of social media narratives circulating today that relate to this. Even the reluctance of some people to be vaccinated against Covid-19 has been twisted into this narrative. I myself for a moment wondered about the prophecy when at the beginning of 2021 I met an American living at the same hotel as was I in Addis Ababa. He informed me that he came to Ethiopia, which he called a “world destination,” to escape the Covid vaccinations in the US. I am not sure whether he evacuated from Addis Ababa when many diplomats recently left the city, because of the war.

According to the popular, oral stories of Abba Zewengel (we are not yet sure if he is the source of his own stories after all), 2056 EC will be the end of the peaceful life, the “False Messiah”, and two super beasts who will come to fight each other in the world. Is it not ironic then that Abba Zewengel’s own church *Mesqele Kirstos* was shelled many times, and destroyed by Eritrean soldiers at the beginning of January 2021, for Prime Minister Abiy does not want his ‘monarchy’ challenged by the prophesied “Lord of Peace.” It is a paradox that Ethiopia is currently one of the most destabilized countries in the world. Like many other churches, [Mesqele Kārstos Ma‘abino](#) was damaged on Ethiopia’s Christmas Day; Mahibere Deqiqe Estifanos, source of the data, made [documentary](#) film of it; almost all its ancient artefacts, including manuscripts were damaged. This is a good example of how prophecies,

apocalyptic stories and mysticism can be instrumental in deceiving the community.

The Ethiopian Prime Minister and his associates have been obsessed with Ethiopian public opinion, which is strongly associated with religious apocalyptic narratives. This is a manipulative and deceptive approach to gain legitimacy in the eyes of both the Ethiopian church elites and feudal politicians. Together, the Prime Minister, his associates, the Ethiopian church elite and the feudal politicians are influential in constructing and orchestrating messaging and propaganda in the Ethiopian media. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's advisor, Daniel Kibret, for example, is amongst the church deacons known to narrate deceptive stories, while lacing them with bigotry. His ambitious claims, which rely on the Aksumite legacy, with its powerful religious, historical and mystical heritage, continues to this day.

Fracture of church authority

In the traditional sense of Christianity in Ethiopia, most believers rely on the practical deeds of their religious leaders and their confession fathers rather than on the scriptures. A priest in Tigray is multifunctional: a farmer, church servant, manuscript producer, traditional school teacher, etc. Not only were they massacred; **the farmlands they plough are soaked with blood; the churches they serve are damaged, the manuscripts they produce have been looted or burned, the religious students they teach have been hunted down and murdered.**

Many religious preachers, priests, and monks of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church participated in the brutalities in one or another way. Hence, the tradition of fearing God, respecting elders, kissing the hands/crosses of the clergy, and trusting religious leaders has been challenged in Ethiopia and especially in Tigray. It has resulted in cultural shock and may undermine or damage societal values. Hence, proactive rehabilitation is called for before the people of Tigray descend into a social and cultural collapse.

Already there are stories of women who were raped in front of their parents, who have committed suicide. Women who have become pregnant after being sexually abused have suffered deep, life changing, psychological trauma. Many interethnic marriages (mainly Tigray and Amhara, who had good mutual co-existence) have been so badly damaged the couples have divorced. Families have suffered from serious social crises.

Tigrayan society is now immersed in depression and frustration. They feel betrayed by both the state and the church. They have been denied recognition and justice from church leaders, federal representatives and from the global community.

As stated earlier, Aksum Tsion is the head of the church; it is the source of church's law in Ethiopia, a holy city which is home to the Ark of the Covenant. More than 45 thousand arks in Ethiopia (one in the sanctuary of each church) are believed to be its replicas. The Ethiopian Patriarch is as the title of the Pope of Aksum. Yet the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) was silent when Aksum was disgraced; while Christian churches were destroyed, priests murdered, and ecclesiastical materials and manuscripts burned and/or looted. Except for the Patriarch, Abune Mathias, who is originally from Tigray, none of the members of the church council (synod) have officially condemned the brutalities. The Ethiopian Patriarch remains censored and under house arrest by the Ethiopian government, which collaborates with some members of the EOTC.

Subsequently, the Tigray Orthodox Tewahido Church became discontented after the EOTC position was found to be well below expectations. The Tigray Orthodox Tewahido Church Diocese stated its concerns and issued press releases to complain to the EOTC many times. Finally, on 7 January 2021, the International Orthodox Tewahido Church Association of Tigray Clergies sent an official letter to the EOTC in Addis Ababa announcing that the Tigray Church was severing its ties with the Ethiopian Church.

Destruction and theft of intangible Tigrayan heritage

In modern Ethiopia, there have always been disputes over the values ascribed to the cultural and historical objects and beliefs of different identities and political groups. This is especially true between Tigray in the north and the Amhara in the centre of the country. Throughout the country, there is also strong competition. Each group claims to have the best, the first, the oldest of everything. This sometimes becomes xenophobic, not only amongst Ethiopia's

nations states, but also for many Ethiopian's perceptions of their superiority in global esteem and importance.

It is important to understand that there is a tradition of moving both tangible and intangible objects of cultural significance into the center of the country. This has been a common phenomenon which long predates the current war. There are various royal artifacts and ecclesiastical material which have been removed from Tigray and rehoused in areas of the Amhara Region or Addis Ababa. The *Museum of Entoto St. Mary Church* is a good example of this. Several ancient royal objects were taken from Aksum. There is a growing tendency to call this church the "Head of Churches and Monasteries" and demonstrates the trend of shifting Aksum Tsion's position away from its historical home and to central Ethiopia. Irrespective of the displacement of cultural artifacts and the distortion of oral narratives of Aksumite values, the Aksumite Empire and its historical significance in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is a well-established concept. It has, furthermore, remained popularly unchallenged because of the existent physical existence of buildings and statues, the written evidence, both in manuscripts and inscriptions, which has made it difficult to alter the historical narrative, despite media manipulation. The Ethiopian government's objective appears to be the physical destruction of this heritage and the material documentation that supports it. Every effort is being made to eradicate the vital historical record that makes Tigray central to Ethiopia's spiritual and emotional life.

[Ashenda \(Tigray women's festival\)](#) is a long-celebrated folkloric and religious tradition in Tigray, in some parts of Eritrea, and some Agaw areas. It is one of the most colorful events of social performing folk arts that lasts for two weeks starting every August 22. It is a beautiful, multigenerational celebration with dancing and singing and it is considered to be the 'Day of Freedom' for Tigrayan women. Almost a decade ago, the Ethiopian government took the initiative to register *Ashenda* as one of UNESCO's world cultural heritages. As soon as this began, officials of Tigray and Amhara Culture and Tourism Bureaus, under intense pressure from political activists, engaged in a complicated conspiracy to try to take ownership of the festival. This festival had never been celebrated in a central Amhara in the past. Despite this, *Ashenda* was celebrated in August 2018 in Amhara's capital city, Bahirdar. This was the very first time it happened, and apparently the last; it was mostly believed to aimed at foregrounding *Ashenda* in Amhara for the registration only. There was, furthermore, a movement cultivated and strengthened by the Federal Government and Amhara politicians to call this festival the "Ethiopian Women's Festival," rather than "*Ashenda*" its authentic, historically correct name, during the registration process. This was intentional; an attempt to disassociate the festival from Tigray. While the application for registration was

being processed, the Ethiopian government officially suspended it at the end of 2021. *Ashenda* itself, as it is celebrated in Tigray, is part of the intangible heritages of Tigray, which has been damaged during the war. Far from celebrating freedom, the conflict has denied Tigrayan women their freedom; has starved them and left tens of thousands sexually abused. Tigray health facilities [reported 1,288](#) cases of gender-based violence during February to April 2021 alone: hence the *Ashenda* festival of 2021 was a day of lamentations.

[Mahlete Gumaye](#), is named after the colorful folksong of the people of south and southeastern Tigray (especially in Rayya, Wejjerat and Enderta areas). It is an adventure, held most years, which involves a tour and gathering to celebrate folk-art in Awdewur. This is an area of jungle in the wilderness between Rayya and Wejjerat. It includes folksongs, oral poems, tales and legends and is accompanied by culture performances. *Dibarte*, is an ancient tradition involving women blessing villagers and is integral to Mahlete Gumaye. The women themselves are called after the practice: “*Dibarte*”. The etymology of this term has not been thoroughly studied but relates to driving out a spiritual power. The origins of Mahlete Gumaye comes from a desire to preserve endangered cultural values. The psycho-social problems of individuals are released in this isolated setting or “retreat”. Awdewur was attacked by drones early in the war, apparently targeting militia. I was there on 17th November 2020, a few days after the drone attack. It was also the location of one of the bitter battles for control of Tigray which occurred in the middle of November 2020, before ENDF forces took control of Mekelle. Both the place of the cult and its intangible values were vandalized; *Mahilete Gumaye* did not take place in 2021. Instead, it was celebrated in Frankfurt (Germany) – as a means of commemorating this important element of Tigrayan culture. But Awdewur itself is now a place of depression and desolation.

St. Yared of Aksum, a famous saint known for his role in Ethiopic musical compositions and notations with well-established oral and hagiographic tradition in Tigray, is facing a similar fate. Powerful figures now claim that he was actually not from Aksum but originally from Gonder in the Amhara region. Saint Yared is said to have lived at the end of the 5th and beginning of the 6th century when the Nine Saints, the Byzantine Roman monks, came to Aksum. Today there is a plan to construct a new church dedicated to Saint Yared in the Amhara region.

Al-Nejash is the site of the first known Islamic settlement in Africa, and is a significant historical site in Tigray. One may ask why a huge mosque named after *Al-Nejash* is under construction in Addis Ababa, rather than in Tigray.

An intentional and systematic minimizing of Tigrayans in the annual celebration of the battle of Adwa, disregarding their extensive contributions to the anti-colonial war, which was fought in central Tigray, is part of the same agenda. There are many other examples of attempts to erode and minimize Tigray's role in Ethiopia's long and important heritage; to replace it with an alternative narrative based on a central Ethiopian version of events, with Aksumite values. As political tensions increased, the region's invaders took out their frustrations on Tigray's cultural heritage, which they have plundered or destroyed. The region, Ethiopia and humanity as a whole, has suffered the consequences.

A culture, a heritage, people under attack

Besides the human carnage, icons of Tigray's heritage have been intentionally targeted. The destruction of its intangible heritage and a widespread and intentional violation of values has aggravated the brutality. Social norms have been transgressed without hesitation. Older women and little girls – without regard for their age – were raped in front of their relatives. So too were nuns and the wives of priests. Soldiers interrupted church services to intimidate, abuse and kill members of the clergy. Places of spiritual healing, like holy water springs and [supplication](#) settings, were demolished.

Churches and monasteries which were historically used as places of asylums and refuge during conflicts, and were even believed to be endowed with a spiritual power to protect those seeking a haven, became hunting grounds where Tigrayans families could find no refuge. The sanctuaries themselves were destroyed.

This has led to doubt and confusion about the norms and beliefs of the society. It has even led many people to feel that they can no longer even pray. **The aggressors have not only prevented Tigrayans from communicating with the international community, but they have also remained silent about this heinous crimes.**

The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization meeting in Paris at its thirty-second session in 2003 has clearly articulated ,

Expressing serious concern about the growing number of acts of intentional destruction of cultural heritage,

Referring to Article I(2)(c) of the Constitution of UNESCO that entrusts UNESCO with the task of maintaining, increasing and diffusing knowledge by

"assuring the conservation and protection of the world's inheritance of books, works of art and monuments of history and science, and recommending to the nations concerned the necessary international conventions",

Recalling the principles of all UNESCO's conventions, recommendations, declarations and charters for the protection of cultural heritage,

Mindful that cultural heritage is an important component of the cultural identity of communities, groups and individuals, and of social cohesion, so that its intentional destruction may have adverse consequences on human dignity and human rights,

Reiterating one of the fundamental principles of the Preamble of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict providing that "damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world",

Recalling the principles concerning the protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict established in the 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions and, in particular, in Articles 27 and 56 of the Regulations of the 1907 Fourth Hague Convention, as well as other subsequent agreements,

Mindful of the development of rules of customary international law as also affirmed by the relevant case-law, related to the protection of cultural heritage in peacetime as well as in the event of armed conflict,

Also recalling Articles 8(2)(b)(ix) and 8(2)(e)(iv) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and, as appropriate, Article 3(d) of the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, related to the intentional destruction of cultural heritage,

Reaffirming that issues not fully covered by the present Declaration and other international instruments concerning cultural heritage will continue to be governed by the principles of international law, the principles of humanity and the dictates of public conscience,

Adopts and solemnly proclaims the present Declaration:

I. Recognition of the importance of cultural heritage

The international community must recognize the importance of the protection of cultural heritage of Tigray and affirm its commitment to fight against its

intentional destruction in any form so that such cultural heritage may be transmitted to the succeeding generations.

II. Scope

1. The present Declaration addresses intentional destruction of cultural heritage including cultural heritage linked to a natural site such as in Tigray.
2. For the purposes of this Declaration "intentional destruction" means 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.

III. Measures to combat intentional destruction of cultural heritage

1. Ethiopia should take all appropriate measures to prevent, avoid, stop and suppress acts of intentional destruction of cultural heritage, wherever such heritage is located.
2. The Ethiopian government should adopt the appropriate legislative, administrative, educational and technical measures, within the framework of their economic resources, to protect cultural heritage and should revise them periodically with a view to adapting them to the evolution of national and international cultural heritage protection standards.
3. Ethiopian Government should endeavour, by all appropriate means, to ensure respect for cultural heritage in society, particularly through educational, awareness-raising and information programmes.
4. Ethiopia is party to:
 - (a) The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two 1954 and 1999 Protocols and the Additional Protocols I and II to the four 1949 Geneva Conventions.
 - (b) Ethiopia must promote the elaboration and the adoption of legal instruments providing a higher standard of protection of cultural heritage, and
 - (c) Must promote a coordinated application of existing and future instruments relevant to the protection of cultural heritage.

IV. Protection of cultural heritage when conducting peacetime activities

When conducting peacetime activities, States should take all appropriate measures to conduct them in such a manner as to protect cultural heritage and, in particular, in conformity with the principles and objectives of the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, of the 1956 Recommendation on International Principles Applicable to Archaeological Excavations, the 1968 Recommendation concerning the Preservation of Cultural Property Endangered by Public or Private Works, the 1972 Recommendation concerning the Protection, at National Level, of the Cultural and Natural Heritage and the 1976 Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas.

V. Protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict, including the case of occupation

When involved in an armed conflict, be it of an international or non-international character, including the case of occupation, States should take all appropriate measures to conduct their activities in such a manner as to protect cultural heritage, in conformity with customary international law and the principles and objectives of international agreements and UNESCO recommendations concerning the protection of such heritage during hostilities. The Ethiopian government has violated these cardinal rules & should be held accountable.

VI. State responsibility

The Ethiopian State intentionally destroyed or intentionally failed to take appropriate measures to prohibit, prevent, stop, and punish intentional destruction of cultural heritage of great importance for humanity in Tigray, whether or not it is inscribed on a list maintained by UNESCO or another international organization, bears the responsibility for such destruction, to the extent provided for by international law. The Ethiopian government should allow Independent International Investigators to assess the level of atrocities committed in Tigray and other war zones in Ethiopia.

VII. Individual criminal responsibility

Ethiopia should take all appropriate measures, in accordance with international law, to establish jurisdiction over, and provide effective criminal sanctions against, those persons who committed, or ordered to commit, acts of intentional destruction of cultural heritage of great importance for humanity, whether or not it is inscribed on a list maintained by UNESCO or another international

organization. The Ethiopian government must comply and take criminal responsibility.

VIII. Cooperation for the protection of cultural heritage

1. The Ethiopian Government should cooperate with with UNESCO to protect cultural heritage from intentional destruction. Such cooperation should entail at least:

- (i) provision and exchange of information regarding circumstances entailing the risk of intentional destruction of cultural heritage;
- (ii) consultation in the event of actual or impending destruction of cultural heritage;
- (iii) consideration of assistance to States, as requested by them, in the promotion of educational programmes, awareness-raising and capacity-building for the prevention and repression of any intentional destruction of cultural heritage;
- (iv) judicial and administrative assistance, as requested by interested Regional States, in the repression of any intentional destruction of cultural heritage.

2. For the purposes of more comprehensive protection, The Ethiopian Government must take all appropriate measures, in accordance with international law, to cooperate with other States concerned with a view to establishing jurisdiction over, and providing effective criminal sanctions against, those persons who have committed or have ordered to be committed acts referred to above (VII – Individual criminal responsibility) and who are found present on its territory, regardless of their nationality and the place where such act occurred.

IX. Human rights and international humanitarian law

In applying this UN Declaration, Ethiopia must respect international rules related to the criminalization of gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, in particular, when intentional destruction of cultural heritage is linked to those violations.

X. Public awareness

The Ethiopia Government should take all appropriate measures to ensure the widest possible dissemination of this Declaration to the general public and to target groups, inter alia, by organizing public awareness-raising campaigns.

References & Acknowledgement:

Dr. Hagos Abrha Abay is a Postdoctoral fellow at [CSMC](#), Universität Hamburg and a founder and member of St. Yared Center for Ethiopian Philology and Manuscript Studies (SYCEPMS), Mekelle University. An earlier version of this chapter was presented to the European Parliament, which is planning to publish it. This article represents the views of Dr Hagos, and does not represent the views of any group or institution.[\(232\) #Ethiopia and #Eritrea are destroying #Tigray by Dr. Hagos Abrha Abay - YouTube](#)

*Dr. **Hagos Abrha Abay** is a Researcher of Philology and Ge'ez Manuscript Culture. He shared a historical perspective on the Tigray crises ...*[\(232\) #Ethiopia and #Eritrea are destroying #Tigray by Dr. Hagos Abrha Abay - YouTube](#)

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