Tigrayan Nationalism's Historical Paradox:

Deconstructing Ethiopia's Past Without Erasing Its Own

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the deadly Tigray War, 2020–2022, in Ethiopia, questions of history have resurfaced with renewed urgency. Among thinkers within Tigrayan political discourse, there is now a concerted effort to craft a distinct historical narrative—one that underscores Tigray's unique political and cultural identity, separate from Ethiopia. Yet this endeavor encounters a stubborn reality: much of Tigray's historical record is deeply interlinked with that of the Ethiopian state (Marcus, 1994; Henze, 2000).

From the days of the Axumite kingdom to the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV, Tigray has oscillated between being both a central engine of Ethiopian state-building and a target of imperial centralization (Kaplan, 1992; Phillipson, 2012). This duality complicates nationalist aspirations. One notable framing asserts that Tigrayans have suffered multiple genocides, yet this uses a modern concept to describe many premodern episodes whose motivations were predominantly political, religious, or regional.

A more persistent dynamic in Ethiopian history lies in the tension between the center and the peripheries—a pattern shaped earlier by imperial ideology, sacred monarchy, and religious division, only later transformed by colonial and modern state pressures (Burbank & Cooper, 2010). The analytical challenge is not to determine whether Tigrayan nationalism is justified, but to assess how it negotiates this historical complexity: can it deconstruct imperial myths without erasing Tigray's own legacy embedded within them?

Empire vs. Nation-State: Ethiopia's Historical Dilemma

For much of its past, Ethiopia functioned as an empire rather than a nation-state. Political theory categorizes empires as multiethnic polities asserting cohesion via dominance and ideology, while nation-states rely on shared culture, language, and institutions (Burbank & Cooper, 2010). Ethiopia's historical trajectory aligns closely with the imperial model, particularly through its expansion from the Axumite period and incorporation of diverse regions (Phillipson, 2012).

A central ideological pillar of imperial legitimacy was the Kebra Nagast ("Glory of the Kings"), a 14th-century Ge'ez epic that narrates the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, producing the founder of the Solomonic dynasty, Menelik I (Kaplan, 1992; Henze, 2000). Scholars note that the text likely served to legitimize the restoration of the Solomonic line after the Zagwe dynasty, functioning as a political charter granting rulers divine authority—a tradition embraced not only by monarchs in Shewa and Gondar but also by Tigrayan emperors such as Yohannes IV (Bahru Zewde, 2001).

Tigray's position in this imperial system was paradoxical: cradle of Axumite civilization and Orthodox Christianity, home to rulers, yet subject to marginalization when the imperial center

shifted southward. This entanglement poses a dilemma for nationalist historiography: how to claim separateness without erasing periods of centrality and influence. Comparable cases exist elsewhere. Scotland's role in the British Empire is one such example (Colley, 1992).

Claim of Multiple Past Genocides

In contemporary Tigrayan political and public discourse, the term "genocide" has become a prominent descriptor—invoked to frame as many as eleven historical episodes of mass violence against Tigrayans. This reflects deep historical trauma, yet its uncritical proliferation risks losing analytical precision, undermining historical credibility, and entrenching a politics of perpetual victimhood (Fein, 1993; Straus, 2016). The concept of genocide was first articulated by Raphael Lemkin in the early 1940s (Lemkin, 1944) and codified in the 1948 UN Genocide Convention. Lemkin defined genocide as more than mass killing; it encompassed coordinated actions to destroy a group's foundations—its culture, economy, and institutions. Recognition is not limited to post-1948 events: the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1917 is widely acknowledged despite preceding the legal term (Akçam, 2012), illustrating that historical atrocities can be assessed under the concept even if contemporaries lacked the vocabulary.

Sociologist Helen Fein—founder of the International Association of Genocide Scholars—expanded Lemkin's thinking to include "genocide by attrition," destruction through sustained conditions such as famine, disease, and displacement (Fein, 1993). Fein's influential 1993 analysis classified the 1980s famine in Tigray as genocide, citing deliberate state policies that blocked aid and worsened starvation (de Waal, 1991; Fein, 1993).

Using this broader framework, certain modern episodes plausibly meet the genocide threshold: the 1980s famine and the 2020–2022 war, the latter documented by Amnesty International (2022) and the New Lines Institute (2024) as involving killings, sexual violence, and deliberate deprivation of food and healthcare.

Earlier episodes—such as punitive campaigns in the Zemene Mesafint or under Menelik II fit more within patterns of dynastic warfare or imperial suppression common to multiethnic empires (Marcus, 1994). While devastating, evidence for intent to eradicate Tigrayans as an ethnic group is far less certain.

It is notable that, despite the gravity of these tragedies, there has been no sustained Tigrayan movement for formal international genocide recognition akin to the Armenian advocacy model (Akçam, 2012). This absence underscores the need for careful historical framing.

The aim here is not to negate legitimate genocide claims but to urge evidentiary rigor. Recognition is vital when warranted, but uncritical inflation of the term risks embedding a perpetual victimhood narrative that, once normalized, can paralyze a society's capacity for reconciliation and forward-looking politics (Moses, 2002).

Ethiopia's Historical Conflict Patterns

Beyond genocide claims, Ethiopia's history is marked by a recurring center–periphery dynamic (Bahru Zewde, 2001). Strong imperial centers—whether in Axum, Gondar, or Addis Ababa—extracted resources, imposed cultural norms, and demanded loyalty; weaker centers allowed peripheries to assert autonomy.

Religious wars were a recurrent pattern. Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi's 16th-century campaigns devastated the Christian highlands, including Tigray, but were framed primarily in religious rather than ethnic terms (Trimingham, 1952). The Zemene Mesafint fractured Ethiopia into semi-autonomous principalities, with shifting alliances often crossing linguistic and cultural lines. Dynastic succession disputes regularly sparked violence, but these were typically about political legitimacy, not ethnic elimination.

The Modern Birth of Ethnic Politics

Ethnicity became a dominant organizing principle in Ethiopian politics during the 20th century. The Italian occupation (1936–1941) introduced racialized governance and administrative divisions based on ethnolinguistic categories (Marcus, 1994). After liberation, Haile Selassie's centralizing policies privileged Amharic and Orthodox Christianity, alienating non-Amhara, non-Christian communities.

By the 1970s, liberation movements including the Tigray People's Liberation Front—mobilized on ethnic lines. The EPRDF's 1995 constitution enshrined ethnic federalism and the right to secede (Vaughan, 2003). This embedded ethnicity into Ethiopia's political structure, reshaping governance and opposition. Comparable dynamics have played out in Nigeria, where ethnic federalism and resource disputes fed the Biafran War (Uche, 2008).

The Nationalist Predicament: Rewriting Without Self-Erasing

For Tigrayan nationalism, the intellectual challenge is to construct a history that affirms distinct identity without erasing Tigray's central role in Ethiopian state formation. Wholesale rejection of Ethiopian history erases periods of centrality; uncritical embrace undermines narratives of marginalization.

A balanced approach would document contributions to imperial governance, record episodes of subjugation, avoid anachronistic application of modern legal terms, and situate Tigray's history within broader African patterns of empire and ethnicity (Burbank & Cooper, 2010).

History as Clarity, Not Myth. Ethiopia's history resists simple binaries. Tigray's identity reflects both agency and vulnerability. Whether the future brings federal reform, autonomy, or independence, credibility depends on nuance: distinguishing between religious, regional, dynastic, and ethnic conflicts, and applying "genocide" with care and evidence.

Replacing myth-making with clarity strengthens not just political claims, but also the capacity for collective recovery.

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