

# TOWARDS DEFINING TIGRINYA ETHNO-LINGUISTIC TERRITORIES

*Mapping Language, Settlement, and Identity*

Zeray W. A. Teklay

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## Abstract

This study interrogates the persistent conflict between state cartography and historical human geography in the Horn of Africa, using the Tigrinya-speaking populations as a critical case. It argues that pre-1991 administrative boundaries in Ethiopia artificially fragmented a coherent, historically documented ethno-linguistic territory for reasons of political and administrative convenience. Through a synthesis of primary source analysis, including nineteenth-century travelogues, twentieth-century linguistic surveys, colonial reports, and historical maps, the paper reconstructs the geographical extent of Tigrinya language and its settlement patterns. The analysis demonstrates that the western (Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta, and their adjacent areas), northwestern (Tselemti, Waldebba, and their surroundings), and southern (Raya-Azebo and Raya-Kobo) frontier districts were consistently recorded as integral parts of this Tigrinya sphere long before the twentieth century.

Cartographic evidence from authorities such as Longrigg (1945) and Levine (1965) visually reinforces this textual consensus, depicting a contiguous cultural zone straddling the modern Ethio-Eritrean border. The paper concludes that the post-1991 borders of the Tigray Regional State constituted a significant constitutional and political realignment, an attempt to reconcile state administration with this long-obscured ethno-linguistic reality. Ultimately, this research reframes contemporary border disputes as manifestations of a deeper historical and political tension: the imposition of centralized administrative logic onto enduring organically formed cultural geographies.



## 1 Introduction: The Cartographic Dilemma

The political map of the Horn of Africa manifests a persistent conflict between the cartography of the state and the historical geography of its peoples. This preliminary study analyzes that conflict through the case of Tigrinya-speaking populations. It argues that the geographical distribution of these populations' delineates a coherent set of ethno-linguistic territories that have been persistently fragmented and obscured by superimposed administrative boundaries prior 1991. By synthesizing historical, linguistic, demographic, and cartographic evidence, this work reconstructs these territories historical context. It places particular emphasis on demonstrating how the western districts, Walqayt (also spelled as Wolqait, Walkait, Uolqait, Wolcalt, Welkalt, Welqayt, Wolqayet), Tsegede (also spelled as Tsagaddy, Tseghedie, Sagade, Tsagadie, Tseghede), Kafta (also spelled as Qafta, Cafta), north-western district, Tsallamti (Tsalamt) and Waldduba (also spelled as Uoldebbà), and the southern districts, Raya-Azebo and Raya-Kobo (collectively known as Raya/Doba), are integral to the Tigrinya speaking sphere.

The analysis hinges on a critical distinction. Administrative (political) boundaries are constructs of political power, drawn for purposes control and subject to change by decree, as seen in Imperial and Derg era restructuring of provinces, or the 1948 detachment of western and southern districts from the historic Tigre province. Ethno-linguistic territories, in contrast, are defined by the empirical realities of language, cultural practice, and long-term settlement patterns, realities that can be traced through historical sources. For the western, north western and southern Tigray territories, the evidence for their Tigrinya character is consistent and pre-modern: nineteenth-century linguists recorded Tigrinya as spoken "west of the Tekezzé," colonial-era officials noted their demographic and economic ties to the highlands, and twentieth-century maps depicted them within the Tigrinya linguistic zone.

Therefore, this research does more than catalog historical facts; it provides a framework for resolving a modern cartographic contest. It demonstrates that the post-1991 political boundaries of the Tigray region represented a significant, evidence-based realignment, an attempt to reconcile political administration with the long-documented geographical distribution of the Tigrinya-speaking populations in Ethiopia. By centering the analysis on the historically verifiable ethno-linguistic territories, particularly their contested western, north western and southern reaches, this paper offers a definitive account of a region whose true historical geography has too often been secondary to the narratives of state power.

## 2 Nomenclature of the Historical Provinces of "Tigre" ("Tigray") and of "Tigre": Clarifying Key Terms and Historical Confusion

The nomenclature of the historical province of "Tigre/Tegre" (later renamed as "Tigrai/Tigray" by the Derg regime), and of "Tigre proper" has led to persistent ambiguity and misunderstanding. This

confusion is compounded by the fact that Tigre and Tigrinya are two distinct languages and mutually unintelligible. Official and historical usage of the terminologies Tigre (Tegre), Tigray (Tigray/Teegray), and Tigrinya has often conflated places names, ethnic or social designations, and languages. A prerequisite for clear analysis is resolving the persistent ambiguity surrounding the terms "Tigre," "Tigray/Tigray," and "Tigrinya."

To prevent further confusion regarding the historical terminology of the province of "Tigre", later retitled as "Tigray" and "Tigre proper", it is essential to first provide clarifying historical background. This foundation will then support the subsequent analysis of historical documents, ethnolinguistic, demographic and cartographic sources pertaining to Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territories. This section clarifies this nomenclature, drawing on foundational linguistic and administrative sources.

## 2.1. The Administrative Clarification: Stephen H. Longrigg:

Brigadier Stephen H. Longrigg, who was the Chief Administrator of the province of Eritrea (1942-1944), under his work titled, "A Short History of ERITREA"(1945), provided a pragmatic tripartite distinction crucial for clear discourse:

*"Confusion has many times arisen, both in speech and writing, from common misuse of the words Tigré, Tigray, and Tigrinya. The first of these has two meanings; it is the language described above (which is also often known as Hasa or Hassa) and, secondly, it is used for the lower or serf-caste element of the Eritrean Muslim population themselves who speak it. Tigray (for which the alternative form Tigre is for clearness best avoided) is the region or province of northern Ethiopia. Tigrinya is the language of the Tigray, spoken also by the Christian highlanders of Eritrea. It has alternatively been called Tigray; but again this form, though claimed as more correct, must if used create confusion with the province-name."<sup>1</sup>*

Longrigg, writing from a position of colonial administration, provides a pragmatic, tripartite distinction crucial for clear discourse. He identifies "Tigré" as a language (Tigre) and a social group within the Eritrean Muslim community. He reserves "Tigray" solely for the Ethiopian province and champions "Tigrinya" as the unambiguous term for the language of that province and the Eritrean highlanders. Longrigg's prescription aimed to end the conflation of a province, a language, and a caste/ethnic label from a position of colonial administration.

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<sup>1</sup>. Stephen H. Longrigg, "A Short History of ERITREA", published by Oxford University Press, London, 1945. Pp. 17.

## 2.2. The Linguistic-Historical Perspective:

Edward Ullendorff also in his book, "The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia: A Comparative Phonology" 1955, provides:

*"Just as Amharic was named after the province (Amhara) where it had its origin, so Tigrina is thus called after its home, the Tigre province. Ludolf refers to it as "Tigrensis". But the position is a little complicated because we have two languages by the name Tigre: one, "Tigre", is nowadays spoken nowhere near the Tigre province, but to the north of it. The other "Tigrina" or "Tigray" (with the Amharic or in Amharic forms, respectively), is spoken all over the Tigre province and has also the name "Tigre" plus ending = Tigrensis. The term "Tigrina" (with Amharic ending) was first introduced into Europe by A'Abbadie (J.A, 1843) in the form of togryana; this was changed by Munzinger to Tigrina (Vocabulare, p.111). This unfortunate terminology leading to much ambiguity has since been generally accepted under protest and with the sole object of avoiding further confusion. Tigre and Tigrina are two distinct languages and mutually as unintelligible as Spanish and Italian.*

*The position is, however, even worse than that, for until the latter part of the 19th cent. Tna was called "Tigre" by Europeans. Thus, Salt's vocabularies include one of the "Tigrai languages", but the actual words make it perfectly clear that he refers to what we now term Tna. Isenberg's grammar (1984) gives rise to the same confusion.<sup>2</sup>"*

Linguist Edward Ullendorff traced the root of the confusion to the historical European practice of using "Tigre" for both what are now distinguished as Tigre and Tigrinya languages. He confirms that Tigrinya derives its name from the province of Tigre, just as Amharic does from Amhara. The core problem he identifies is the historical European practice of using "Tigre" for both what are now distinguished as Tigre and Tigrinya languages. His analogy to Spanish and Italian underscores their distinctness despite a common ancestry, arguing that the merged terminology is a scholarly inconvenience that obscures linguistic reality.

## 2.3. The Ullendorff's additional Linguistic-Historical Perspective:

Edward Ullendorff in his book, "THE ETHIOPIANS: An Introduction to the Country and People" (second edition), further provides:

*"Tigre (in the Kassala province of the Sudan it is generally referred to as al-Khassiya) might also be called northern or lowlands Tigrinya, for that is its genesis. But the sharp geographical barrier of the escarpment and long independent development have brought about a clear differentiation, so that nowadays the two languages are mutually unintelligible. The area of Tigre comprises the eastern lowlands of Eritrea (i.e. the administrative division of Massawa and the Dablak islands), the northern and western plains the Keren and Agordat divisions), the Mensa, Marya, Ad*

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<sup>2</sup>. Edward Ullendorff, "The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia: A Comparative Phonology", Published by Taylor's (Foreign) Press, London, 1955. Pp. 18-19.

*Temariam, Ad Tekles, Beni Amer tribes as well as many smaller tribal units which need not be enumerated here.<sup>1</sup> The Beni Amer overflow into the Kassala province. Several tribes are bilingual, e.g. Tigre-Bilen or Tigre-Beja.*

*The Tigre-speakers constitute the pastoral and nomadic sector of the Eritrean population. Almost all of them are Muslims. The total number of Tigre-speakers, in both Eritrea and the Sudan, has been estimated at some 250,000.*

*There appear to exist some dialectal divergences between the eastern and western lowlands, but owing to the highly unsatisfactory state of our knowledge of Tigre it is very difficult to express oneself in more than purely impressionistic terms about the question of dialects in Tigre. Since the populations of the eastern and western plains have virtually no contact with each other, the likelihood of divergent linguistic development is very considerable.*

*Unlike Tigrinya, Tigre possesses no velar fricatives, and its sound structure has generally not been subjected to heavy pressure by non-Semitic substrata. The verbal pattern in the perfect is *gatla* (in contrast to Ge'ez and Tigrinya *qatala*). The syntax is somewhat less influenced by Cushitic than is the case with Tigrinya and Amharic, but the existing documents are generally either translations or songs and proverbs with little scope for the free flow of prose style. In the sphere of the vocabulary the action of Beja and Bilen can be discerned. Until recently there existed no proper dictionaries of Tigre, for the few word-lists that had been published could not be said to have more than interim value. Now the first installments of Littmann's *Tigre Wörterbuch* have begun to appear, and the task of editing this material is in the competent hands of Professor Maris Höfner. We are poorly placed for grammars. The outline prepared by the *Missione Cattolica* is of some practical value but has no scholarly pretensions; it is also somewhat influenced by the compilers' knowledge of Tigrinya. Leslau's useful sketch is based on printed texts in the Ethiopic script rather than on living acquaintance with Tigre. More recently a small mimeographed manual of Beni Amer Tigre was issued by two district officers who had experience of the language during their work in the Sudan. We are desperately in need of as many well transcribed texts as possible from all parts of the Tigre-speaking area. Tigre cannot boast any written literature, but Littmann has taken down large numbers of songs and dirges which are collected in several stout volumes of his Princeton texts. The Gospels, the Psalter, religious books, and some customary law codes have been published by Swedish missionaries. Tigre-speakers are very largely illiterate, and those who have pretensions to literacy generally turn to Arabic; as Muslims and traders they frequently find Arabic a more useful means of communication. There is no doubt that Tigre is losing ground in favour of Arabic, but it is as yet impossible to express this in terms of figures. The decision of the Eritrean Government, in 1952, declaring Tigrinya and Arabic the official languages of Eritrea (although many Tigre-speakers know little or no Arabic) is significant and augurs ill for the future of Tigre.*

*In order to convey an idea of the relationship of Amharic, Tigrinya, and Tigre towards each other and towards Ge'ez, we might enlist the helpful parallel of the Romance languages. If Ge'ez is compared to Latin, Tigrinya takes the place of Italian (both because it is most closely akin to the 'parent'-tongue and also on account of its continuance in the original home), Tigre would then be likened to Spanish, and Amharic to French (also because it has been subjected to the most far-reaching changes). The small Semitic islands to the east and south of the Amharic area vary in size and significance. Some of them have preserved Semitic characteristics which are lost elsewhere, and in a few instances we find curious parallels with the North Ethiopian languages. These parallels are no doubt due—as has already been mentioned in Chapter III—to the stationing in those regions of military garrisons from the north. Some progress has been made in*

*the disentanglement of traits of North Ethiopian, Amharic, and Cushitic origin, but future tasks are still immense and of great complexity."*<sup>3</sup>

This quoted passage makes clear that the peoples who speak Tigre in Eritrea and the sudn, on the one hand, and those who speak Tigrinya in Ethiopia and Eritrea, on the other, are historically and sociolinguistically distinct. Ullendorff's analysis helps disentangle a persistent confusion between Tigre, Tigrinya, and Tigray by demonstrating that linguistic, ecological, and social boundaries do not coincide with administrative or cartographic labels. This clarification addresses the Tigre/Tigray/Tigrinya confusion as a microcosm of the broader issue of boundary making in the Horn of Africa, where geography, language, and political divisions are frequently conflated. In the following section, I therefore examine historical documents and cartographic evidence concerning the linguistic distribution of the Tigrinya-speaking populations with particular emphasis on Western and Southern territories of Tigray.

#### 2.4. Defining "Tigre Proper" in Context:

It is also necessary to provide some clarifications regarding the historic province of "Tigre proper" in pre-modern Ethiopian state. Some arguments erroneously claim that the historic province of "Tigre proper" constituted the sole territory of Tigrinya speakers prior to 1991. Such arguments typically rely on isolated district lists cited without context and overlook a fundamental parallel. In pre-modern Ethiopian state, "Tigre proper" functioned as a political nucleus/heartland whose boundaries were administrative rather than ethnic. A comparable situation existed with "Amhara proper", which served as the historic core of Amhara homeland until 1942<sup>4</sup>. Beta Amhara is the original homeland of the Amhara people.<sup>5</sup> This does not imply that Amharic speaking populations were confined to its borders; they were historically present across Shoa, Wollo, Gojjam, and beyond.

By the same token, the historic province of "Tigre proper" was the heartland of the Tigrinya-speaking people, yet its borders never encompassed the entire Tigrinya/Tigray ethnic group. Substantial Tigrinya speaking communities have long resided beyond those borders, most notably in

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<sup>3</sup>. Edward Ullendorff, "The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People", published Oxford University Press, New York Toronto, (second edition, 1965), first published in 1960. Pp. 127-30.

<sup>4</sup>. Amhara, as a historical province, ceased to exist as a distinct administrative unit, and its provincial name disappeared from the Ethiopia's administrative map in 1942 following the country's liberation from the Italian colonial occupation (1936-1941). However, prior to 1942, the historical province of Amhara did not encompass Wolkait, Tsegede, Tsallanti, Kafta, Raya-Azebo, Semien, Shoa, Gojjam, Yeju, Begemdir, Angot, or their surrounding provincial territories; rather, it existed as one of the Ethiopia's historic provinces until 1942.

<sup>5</sup>. Whatever their origin the Amhara people seem to have a mixture of various people, whose ethnogenesis took shape at an earlier time, most probably in the region of Beta Amhara." The Amhara had long been the advance guard of Christian expansion to the South," Tadesse Tamrat, Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527 (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1972): p. 66.

the Eritrean highlands (Hamasien, Akele Guzai, Seraye), as well as within the historical provinces of Begemder & Semien (later Gondar) and in Wollo. Just as "Amhara proper" did not contain all native Amharic speakers, "Tigre proper" did not contain all Tigrinya speakers. Consequently, the territorial extent of any historic province, whether in the pre-modern or modern state, cannot be equated with the full geographic distribution of its corresponding ethnic group.

### 3 Mapping Tigrinya Settlement Patterns: Historical and Cartographic Evidence

This section presents the core historical, linguistic, and ethnographic evidence that delineates the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory, with particular focus on its western, northwestern, and southern extensions. Historical, linguistic, and ethnographic sources consistently depict the Tigrinya-speaking zone as a cohesive cultural and demographic block spanning both sides of the modern Ethiopia-Eritrea border, with significant western and southern extensions.

1). Professor Edward Ullendorff<sup>6</sup> in his work titled, "The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia: A Comparative Phonology" (1955), provides:

*"Tigrinya<sup>86</sup> is spoken in the area largely identical with that of the old Aksumite Empire and may thus lay claim to being-at least geographically- the direct successor of Ga'az. Its territory<sup>87</sup> covers the administrative divisions of Hamasien, Seraye, Akkele Guzay, the fringes of the Keren and Massawa divisions, the Tigre province itself, and as far to the south-west as Walqayt.<sup>88</sup>*

*The Tña speakers form the compact, densely populated, sedentary, agricultural block of the Eritrean and Northern Abyssinian plateau. They are overwhelmingly Christians of the monophysite ("Coptic"<sup>89</sup>) persuasion. In 1945 I estimated the number of Tña speakers at 1,300,000 90 of whom nearly 500,000 live in Eritrea; the rest are in the Tigre province of Northern Ethiopia. Cerulli<sup>91</sup> considers this an over-estimate."<sup>7</sup>*

Ullendorff offers a precise geographical definition. By anchoring the Tigrinya zone to the ancient Aksumite Empire, he makes a powerful claim of historical continuity. His list explicitly incorporates the core Eritrean highland provinces (Hamasien, Seraye, Akkele Guzay) into the same linguistic territory as the Ethiopian province of Tigre. Crucially, he maps this territory westwards to include Walqayt, an area which is constitutionally delineated within the territory of Tigray Regional State on the basis of

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<sup>6</sup>. Edward Ullendorff (1920–2011) was a leading British scholar in Semitic linguistics and Ethiopian Studies. He served as Professor of Ethiopian Studies (1964–79) and later as Professor of Semitic Languages (1979–82). Ullendorff's scholarship was centered on Ethiopian Semitic languages, the Ethiopian context of the Bible, and the broader history and civilization of the Horn of Africa.

<sup>7</sup>. Edward Ullendorff, "The Semitic Languages of Ethiopia: A Comparative Phonology", Published by Taylor's (Foreign) Press in London, 1955. Pp. 21.

ethno linguistic delimitation criteria as specified under both the 1991 Transitional Government Charter of Ethiopia and the 1995 FDRE Constitution. This defines the Tigrinya sphere in terms of historical and linguistic geography, not contemporary political borders.

According to this source, the Tigrinya territory covers the administrative divisions of Hamasen, Serae, Akkele Guzay, the fringes of the Keren and Massawa divisions, the Tigre province itself, and as far to the south-west 'as Walqayt. Therefore, this passage carefully maps the geographical extent of Tigrinya language and culture distribution, extending beyond modern Eritrea into the historic Tigre province itself, and as far to the south-west 'as Walqayt, reinforcing claims of historical continuity.

Professor Edward Ullendorff<sup>8</sup> also in his another work titled, "The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People", (second edition), provides:

*"Turning to the great Tigrinya-speaking block of the Eritrea and north Ethiopian highlands, we enter the area of the old Aksumitic Kingdom whose dominion was, in later centuries, carried southwards by the people of Amharic speech. Here is historic Abyssinia par excellence, the Semitized people of the plateau with their Semitic language and Old Testament way of life.*

*As the following chapters on history, religion, language, social structure, &c., will be primarily concerned with this population of the northern and central highlands, we can here be brief. Tigrinya -as the name implies- is the language of the Tigray province. It is spoken throughout the Eritrean plateau and extends as far south as Lake Ashangi and the Wojerat district; it then crosses the Takkeze westwards to the Tsellemti and Wolkayt regions. And the people who speak this language are the authentic carriers of the historical and cultural traditions of ancient Abyssinia. In Eritrea the three highland provinces of Hamasien, Serae, and Akkele Guzay comprise rather more than half the population of that territory. Although there are some differences of tradition and customary law between these provinces, their ethnic homogeneity is complete: it is expressed not only in physical and linguistic identity but also in long historical and political association as well as in their allegiance to monophysite Christianity. The same system of social structure and land tenure as well as cultural affinity extend beyond the artificial administrative border into the Tigray. Eritrea was always an artificial creation, for the people on both sides of the frontier are one in race and civilization. In the Tigray, there is the old cultural capital of Ethiopia, Aksum, now a small market-town, with the administrative centre of Adwa, the city of battle fame, in close proximity. The governmental headquarters of the Tigray is nowadays at Makalle in the eastern part of the province. The Tigrinya pocket in Wolkayt and Kafta in the extreme west is outside the traditional boundaries of the Tigray. After the Italo-Ethiopian War the entire Tigrinya block were united in a Greater Eritrea, but this arrangement came to an end shortly after the liberation of Ethiopia.*

*In the historical survey below we shall see how, with the decline of Tigrean predominance, political power passed to the Amharic-speaking people who inhabit the great mountain massif to the south of the Tigray province. The kingdoms of Lasta, Amhara, Gojjam, and Shoa symbolized this southward shift, yet they accepted the Semitized civilization of*

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<sup>8</sup>. Edward Ullendorff is Professor of Ethiopian Studies in the University of London.

*the north and became its principal militant exponents. While a greater measure of non-Semitic ingredients in the Amharic language may accurately reflect a lesser degree of ethnic Semitization among the Amharas than is the case with the Tigreans, both groups nevertheless form a largely homogeneous entity which is expressed in a common historical consciousness, in their adherence to the monophysite doctrine, and in a similar social organization—all of which have scarcely been disturbed by linguistic diversity."*<sup>9</sup>

Here, Ullendorff moves from linguistics to ethnography and political history. He posits the Tigrinya speakers as the primary heirs to Aksumite/Abyssinian civilization. His most direct statement, "the people on both sides of the frontier are one in race and civilization", explicitly rejects the notion that the colonial border created a fundamental ethnic or cultural divide. He frames the Eritrean-Ethiopian frontier as a political artifact cutting through a unified ethnographic region. This excerpt presents a historical-ethnographic analysis of the Tigrinya-speaking populations of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, focusing on themes of cultural continuity, political history, and ethnic identity within the Horn of Africa.

More specifically, the text says that Tigrinya language is spoken throughout the Eritrean plateau and extends as far south as Lake Ashangi and the Wojerat district; it then crosses the Takkaze westwards to the Tsellemti and Welkayt regions at that historical time. This means the geographical extent of Tigrinya language and culture, extending beyond modern Eritrea into Tigray and adjacent regions (Walkayt, Tsellemti), reinforcing claims of historical continuity.

The excerpt also stresses the ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and historical homogeneity of Tigrinya-speaking populations across present-day Eritrea and Tigray, portraying them as one people in race and civilization, united by language, social structure, land tenure, and religion (Monophysite Christianity) and bearers of ancient Abyssinian traditions. The text describes that Eritrea's highland population (Hamasiyen, Serae, Akkele Guzay) is ethnically and culturally identical to the people of Tigray (Ethiopia). Eritrea is described as an artificial administrative creation, with colonial borders cutting across a historically unified people. The frontier is portrayed as administratively imposed rather than culturally meaningful. There is emphasis on a shared historical tradition dating back to the Kingdom of Aksum, which later influenced the Amhara and other southern peoples through "Semitized" culture (language, religion, and social structure). In summary, the passage presents the Tigrinya-speaking highlanders as the core inheritors of ancient Abyssinian civilization, united by culture, religion, and social structure across the Ethiopia–Eritrea border. It acknowledges a historical southward shift of political power to Amhara regions but insists on an underlying civilizational unity among Semitized highland Ethiopians, minimizing the divisive impact of linguistic differences.

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<sup>9</sup>. Edward Ullendorff, "The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People", (second edition, 1965), published by Oxford University Press, New York Toronto, first published in 1960. Pp. 36-37.

Furthermore, Ullendorff in this latter work further provides:

*"Tigrinya, 1 i.e., the language of the Tigray province, is spoken in an area largely identical with that of the old Aksumite Kingdom and may thus lay claim to being-at least geographically-the direct successor of Ge'ez. Its territory covers the eponymous Tigray province, the three highland regions of Eritrea, Hamasien, Serae, and Akkele Guzay, the fringes of the administrative divisions of Keren and Massawa, and reaches as far south as Tembien and south-west as Wolkayt. The Tigrinya speakers form the compact, densely populated, agricultural block of the Eritrean and northern Abyssinian plateau. They are overwhelmingly monophysite Christians and are proudly conscious of their cultural and linguistic heritage. In 1945 I estimated the number of Tigrinya-speakers at 1,300,000, of whom nearly 500,000 live in Eritrea. There are, in my experience, remarkably few dialectal distinctions in Tigrinya; certain insignificant regional variants can be recognized in the Akkele Guzay and in some of the southern areas.*

*Tigrinya phonetics do not deviate markedly from the-sound structure of Geez: spirantization may occur in some instances under relevant conditions, and two of the laryngals have coalesced in pronunciation (which had probably happened already in the later stages in Ge'ez). The morphology displays a few innovations: in inflectional affixes and the use of auxiliaries in the determination of tenses, but the syntax is almost as far removed from the Semitic type as is that of Amharic. The vocabulary is a good deal less influenced by Cushitic elements than the Amharic dictionary but Agaw components are by no means infrequent.*

*We possess some good Tigrinya grammars compiled by Praetorius, Mauro da Leonessa, Conti Rossini, and Leslau. Francesco da Bassano has given us a useful dictionary, although meanwhile we require quite a substantial supplement, a need which even Abba Yohannes Gebreegzi'abber's recent Tigrinya-Amharic Dictionary has not entirely satisfied.*

*Tigrinya literature is still in its beginnings. There is very little original creation, but among a good deal of translation a recent rendering into Tigrinya of Robinson Crusoe might be mentioned. Mission societies have published the complete Bible in Tigrinya as well as a fair number of religious books. Several codes of customary law have been printed in addition to collections of proverbs and songs. The constitution of an Eritrean government in 1952 has greatly stimulated the output of works in Tigrinya. It might also be mentioned that Tigrinya was the first Ethiopian language to possess a regular daily newspaper (Amharic followed a little later). Yet there have long existed weekly journals in Amharic, while the first regular publication in Tigrinya was inaugurated as late as 1942, when the British Administration founded the Eritrean Weekly News."<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup>. Edward Ullendorff, "THE ETHIOPIANS: AN INTRODUCTION TO COUNTRY AND PEOPLE", (second edition), LONDON OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW YORK TORONTO 1965. Pp. 126-7

2). Franz Praetorius<sup>11</sup> in his 1871 work, "GRAMMATIK DER TIGRINASPACHE IN ABBESSINIEN HAUPTSACHLICH IN DER GEGEND VON AKSUM UND ADOA", provides key observations on the Tigrinya Ethno-linguistic distribution as follows:

*"Das Sprachgebiet des Tña bestimmt Abbadie a. a. O. folgendermassen: § 3 Langue tagr-yaña, parlée dans le Tāgray proprement dit, l'Agame, l'Akala gouzay, le Sarawe, le Hamasen, le Dimbijan et à l'ouest du Tekaze, dans le Walkayt, le Waldouba, le Sawana et les environs de Dôbbabar.<sup>2</sup> Ueber die Dialekte der Sprache sagt er ferner: On doit y distinguer les dialectes suivants, a) de l'Agame b) d'Abba Garima c) du Walk'ayt, et peut-être du Hamasen. Obwohl Abbadie's Angaben stets mit einiger Vorsicht zu gebrauchen sind, so glaube ich mich doch überzeugt zu haben dass die diesmalige Angabe über das Sprachgebiet des Tña vollkommen richtig ist, und genauer als die Angaben anderer Berichtstatter denen man sonst mehr Glauben schenken kann. Der nördlichste Ausläufer der Sprache würde demnach in den Distrikt Dimbijan fallen am östlichen Ufer des oberen Laufs des Anseba ungef. 15½ Gr. nördl. Br. Nördlich und nordöstlich würde hier das Tigré angränzen ebenso nordwestlich im Lande der Bogos wo zu gleicher Zeit aber auch noch Bilen, ein Agaundialekt, gesprochen wird;<sup>4</sup> im Osten aber gränzt die Sabosprache an, welche nebst dem ihr aufs engste verwandten Dankali dialekt überhaupt den ganzen Osten des Tña zu begränzen scheint. Unmittelbar südlich an Dimbijan schliesst sich Hamasen an um die Quellen des Anseba und Mareb. Auch Munzinger erwähnt in der § 2 citirten Stelle das Tña als Sprache Hamasens. Von hier aus zieht sich das Sprachgebiet weiter nach Süden das westliche Ufer des Mareb entlang nach dem Lande Sarawe mit dem schon erwähnten reineren oder ursprünglicheren Dialekt; auf dem östlichen Ufer des Mareb aber scheint unmittelbar südlich von Hamasen das Gebiet des Sabo stellenweise bis ziemlich dicht an den Strom heranzutreten da nach Munzinger (O. St. 138) die Tero'a welche an den Abhängen von Asmara und Saberleben die Sprache der Sabos angenommen haben.<sup>2</sup> Weiter nach Süden aber nimmt auch östlich vom Mareb das Sprachgebiet des Tña grössere Ausdehnung an im Lande Akalagouzay<sup>3</sup> an welches sich unmittelbar südlich der Distrikt Agame anschliesst. Hiermit haben wir schon das eigentliche Tigré erreicht, das Land zwischen Mareb und*

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<sup>11</sup>. Professor Franz Praetorius (1847–1927) was a distinguished German orientalist and Semitic linguist recognized as a leading authority on Ethiopic (Ge'ez) and related languages. His enduring reputation rests primarily on his seminal work, the *Äthiopische Grammatik* (published in 1886). This foundational text offers a systematic introduction to the grammar of the ancient Ge'ez language, detailing its phonology, morphology, and syntax, and is enhanced by paradigms, a chrestomathy, and a glossary. His work was based purely on philological and linguistic analysis of manuscripts and religious texts, a common model for 19th-century Orientalists, who often worked from materials collected by travelers, missionaries, or colonial agents. Despite never conducting fieldwork in the region, his foundational grammatical analyses, deduced solely from written sources available in European collections, are considered remarkable. Praetorius also made significant contributions to the study of other Ethiopian languages. His *Grammatik der Tigrinasprache in Abessinien* (1871) and *Zur Grammatik der Gallasprache* (1893, on the Oromo language) are similarly regarded as culturally and academically vital works.

Takaže und ihren Verlängerungen nach Südosten hin. Hier ist das Centrum des Sprachgebiets des Tña, während es sich durch die erwähnten nördlicheren Länder immer nur als ein verhältnissmässig schmaler Streifen zieht.

Nach Südwesten zu wird gewöhnlich der Takaže als Sprachgränze zwischen Tña und Amharisch angegeben. Diese Angabe findet sich besonders häufig bei Munzinger welcher übrigens persönlich diese Gegenden leider nicht besucht hat. Es ist dies jedoch ungenau, da wir ausser A's hiermit im Widerspruch stehenden Nachricht noch andere beweiskräftige Zeugnisse haben für die Ausdehnung des Tña jenseits des Takažo obwohl wieder andere Nachrichten Munzingers Angabe zu bestätigen scheinen. So sagt Sapeto (*viaggio e missione cattolica fra i Mensà i Bogos e gli Habab. — Roma 1857*) p. XXXII von den Distrikten Samên Waldubba und einigen anderen jenseits des Takaže: *Queste provincie appartengono all' altipiano dell' Amhara per la lingua, pel fisico dell' uomo, e la natura stessa del sito. Ueber die Sprache von Waldubba sind mir ausser diesen beiden einander widersprechenden Nachrichten Abbadie's und Sapeto's keine weiteren bekannt, wohl aber über die Sprache Samên's (wozu Abbadie's Sawana gehören würde). So sagt Rüppell II 33 in Uebereinstimmung mit Sapeto dass die Bewohner von Samên sich ausschliesslich des Amharadialekts bedienen, und bemerkt hierbei ausdrücklich den Widerspruch in welchen er sich mit Bruce stellen müsse welcher versichert dass in Samên sowohl Sitte als Sprache denen der Provinz Tigrê gleich seien; jedoch fügt Rüppell hinzu habe Bruce das eigentliche Samên gar nicht besucht. In der That glaube ich lassen sich die verschiedenen widersprechenden Angaben in Betreff der Sprache Samêns aus der verschiedenen engeren oder weiteren Auffassung dieses geographischen Begriffs erklären. So scheint Rüppell unter Samên nur die westlichen Abhänge des grossen Gebirges zu verstehen, westlich und südlich vom Passe Selki.<sup>1</sup> Dass hier schon amharisch gesprochen werde ist allerdings ziemlich gewiss. Unter der Voraussetzung dieser Auffassung liesse sich also auch nichts gegen Sapeto's Zeugnis einwenden. Bruce scheint dagegen unter Samên den ganzen östlichen Theil des vom Takaže umflossenen Landes zu verstehen auch nördlich vom Passe Selki, und im Nordwesten dieses Passes wird entschieden noch Tña gesprochen. Unmittelbar westlich von demselben liegt das Sawana Abbadies und ein wenig nordwestlich hiervon die Stadt Hauassa von deren Sprache wir in Seetzen's linguistischem Nachlass<sup>2</sup> ein längeres Glossar haben, nämlich von der „Sprache von Tigrj, welche in der Stadt Hâussa gesprochen wird.“ Man merkt es diesem Glossar aber durchaus an, dass die amharische Sprachgränze in nächster Nähe sein muss, da dasselbe besonders lautlich bedeutend amharisirt, und ein grosser Theil der darin enthaltenen Vokabeln spezifisch amharisch ist. Man würde aber sehr irren wollte man auf die übereinstimmenden Zeugnisse Munzingers Rüppells und Sapetos sich stützend den Dialekt von Hauassa etwa für einen nördlichen tigrinisirenden amharischen Dialekt ausgeben. Schon die ausdrückliche Bezeichnung dieses Dialekts als Sprache von Tigrj obgleich Hauassa gar nicht in Tigrê liegt würde dieser Annahme entgegenstehen. Das Nähere hierüber wird im Verlauf dieser Arbeit gezeigt werden.*

Wie weit sich im äussersten Osten die Südgränze des Tña erstreckt vermag ich nicht anzugeben. Auf der Mitte der Südgrenze trifft es mit dem Agau zusammen welches auf beiden Ufern des oberen Takaželaufs, nördlich ungefähr bis zur Höhe der grossen Krümmung nach Westen, geredet wird, und welches sich nach Westen wie schon gesagt bis zum Pass Selki, nach Osten bis über den Distrikt Avergale<sup>1</sup> diesseits des Takaže hinaus erstreckt.

§ 4 Schon in der Zeitschrift d. d. morg. Ges. XXII S. 747 f. ist Veranlassung genommen worden auf den von Gelehrten Reisenden und Missionären gewöhnlich nicht gemachten Unterschied zwischen den beiden Sprachen Tigrê und

*Tigrina binzuweisen. Abbadie war der erste welcher zwischen zwei besonderen Sprachen langue tigrinya und langue tigray unterschied,<sup>2</sup> seitdem hat unseres Wissens nur Munzinger durch die hiermit identischen Namen....*"<sup>12</sup>

The following passage is an English translation of the quoted text. The original German version is provided in the cited work.

*"Abbadie determines the linguistic territory of Tigrinya (a. a. O.) as follows (§ 3): Langue tagr-yaña, parlée dans le Tāgray proprement dit, l'Agame, l'Akala gouzay, le Sarawe, le Hamasen, le Dimbijan et à l'ouest du Tekaze, dans le Walkayt, le Waldouba, le Sawana et les environs de Dôbbabar. Concerning the dialects of the language, he further states: One must distinguish the following dialects: a) that of Agame, b) of Abba Garima, c) of Walk'ayt, and perhaps that of Hamasen.*

*Although Abbadie's statements must always be used with some caution, I nevertheless believe myself convinced that his present indication of the linguistic territory of Tigrinya is entirely correct, and more precise than the statements of other reporters to whom one otherwise tends to lend greater credence. The northernmost extension of the language would accordingly fall in the district of Dimbijan, on the eastern bank of the upper course of the Anseba, approximately 15½ degrees north latitude. To the north and northeast, Tigré would border here, as it would also to the northwest in the land of the Bogos, where at the same time, however, Bilen, an Agaw dialect, is also spoken.<sup>1</sup> To the east, however, the Sabo language borders on it, which together with the Dankali dialect, so closely related to it, seems in general to delimit the entire eastern side of the Tigrinya area. Immediately south of Dimbijan lies Hamasen, around the sources of the Anseba and Mareb. Munzinger also mentions Tigrinya, in the passage cited in § 2, as the language of Hamasen. From here the linguistic territory extends further south along the western bank of the Mareb to the land of Sarawe, with the already mentioned purer or more original dialect. On the eastern bank of the Mareb, however, immediately south of Hamasen, the territory of Sabo seems in places to approach quite closely to the river, since according to Munzinger (O. St. p. 138), the Tero 'a, who live on the slopes of Asmara and Saher, have adopted the language of the Sabo.<sup>2</sup> Further south, however, the linguistic territory of Tigrinya also expands east of the Mareb, in the land of Akalagouzay,<sup>3</sup> which is directly adjoined to the south by the district of Agame. With this, we have already reached Tigré proper, the land between the Mareb and the Takaze, and their extensions toward the southeast. Here lies the center of the Tigrinya linguistic area, whereas through the aforementioned more northerly regions it always extends only as a relatively narrow strip.*

*Toward the southwest, the Takaze is usually given as the linguistic boundary between Tigrinya and Amharic. This statement is found especially frequently in Munzinger, who, moreover, unfortunately did not personally visit these regions. This, however, is inaccurate, since, apart from A.'s report, which stands in contradiction to this, we have other compelling testimonies for the extension of Tña beyond the Takaze, although other reports again seem to confirm Munzinger's statement. Thus Sapeto says (Viaggio e missione cattolica fra i Mensâ i Bogos e gli Habab — Rome*

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<sup>12</sup>. Franz Praetorius, "GRAMMATIK DER TIGRINASPACHE IN ABBESSINIEN HAUPTSÄCHLICH IN DER GEGEND VON AKSUM UND ADOA", Halle, Verlag Der Buchhandlung Des Waisenhauses, 1871, Berlin. Pp. 5-8.

1857), p. XXXII, of the districts of *Samên*, *Waldubba*, and several others beyond the *Takaze*: These provinces belong to the *Amhara* plateau in terms of language, physical characteristics of the people, and the very nature of the site.

Regarding the language of *Waldubba*, apart from these two mutually contradictory reports by *Abbadie* and *Sapeto*, no further information is known to me; but information does exist regarding the language of *Samên* (to which *Abbadie*'s *Sawana* would belong). Thus *Rüppell* (vol. II, p. 33), in agreement with *Sapeto*, states that the inhabitants of *Samên* exclusively use the *Amhara* dialect, and he explicitly notes here the contradiction in which he finds himself with *Bruce*, who asserts that in *Samên* both customs and language are the same as those of the province of *Tigrê*; however, *Rüppell* adds that *Bruce* did not visit *Samên* proper at all. Indeed, I believe that the various contradictory statements concerning the language of *Samên* can be explained by the differing narrower or broader interpretations of this geographical concept. Thus, *Rüppell* seems to understand *Samên* as only the western slopes of the great mountain range, west and south of the *Selki* Pass.<sup>1</sup> That *Amharic* is already spoken there is indeed fairly certain. Under the assumption of this interpretation, therefore, nothing could be objected against *Sapeto*'s testimony. *Bruce*, on the other hand, seems to understand *Samên* as the entire eastern part of the land surrounded by the *Takaze*, including areas north of the *Selki* Pass; and in the northwest of this pass, *Tña* is decidedly still spoken. Immediately west of the same lies *Abbadie*'s *Sawana*, and a little northwest of this the city of *Hauassa*, of whose language we possess a longer glossary in *Seetzen*'s linguistic papers<sup>2</sup>, namely of the "language of *Tigrî*", which is spoken in the city of *Hâussa*." However, it is quite noticeable in this glossary that the *Amharic* language boundary must be very close, since it is, especially phonetically, considerably *Amharicized*, and a large part of the vocabulary contained in it is specifically *Amharic*. One would, however, be greatly mistaken if, relying on the concordant testimonies of *Munzinger*, *Rüppell*, and *Sapeto*, one were to present the dialect of *Hauassa* as, for example, a northern, *Tigrinya*-influenced *Amharic* dialect. The very explicit designation of this dialect as the language of *Tigrinya*, although *Hauassa* does not lie in *Tigrê* at all, would oppose such an assumption. Further details on this will be shown in the course of this work.

How far the southern boundary of *Tña* extends in the extreme east I am unable to state. In the middle of the southern boundary it meets the *Agau*, which is spoken on both banks of the upper course of the *Takaze*, northwards approximately as far as the latitude of the great bend toward the west, and which, as already stated, extends westward as far as the *Selki* Pass and eastward beyond the district of *Avergale*<sup>1</sup> on this side of the *Takaze*.

§ 4 Already in the *Journal of the German Oriental Society* (*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*), vol. XXII, p. 747 ff., occasion was taken to draw attention to the distinction—usually not made by scholars, travelers, and missionaries—between the two languages *Tigrê* and *Tigrinya*. *Abbadie* was the first to distinguish between two separate languages, *langue tigrinya* and *langue tigray*,<sup>2</sup> and since then, to our knowledge, only *Munzinger* has done so by using the identical names employed here ...."

In this preceding quoted text, *Praetorius*, drawing on the 19th-century work of *Antoine d'Abbadie*, provides one of the earliest systematic linguistic geographies. This French quotation is a foundational document. It confirms the mid-19th century understanding that the *Tigrinya* language (*təgr-yañā*) was spoken not only in *Tigray* proper and the Eritrean highlands but also in a series of western districts "à l'ouest du *Tekazé*" (west of the *Tekezé* River): *Walkayt*, *Waldubba*, and *Sawana*. In this work, he strongly maps that a series of western districts, west of the *Tekezé* River, such as the territories of *Wolkait*, *Qafta*, *Tselemti*, *Waldubba*, *Sawana*, and their surrounding environs are the

Tigrinya speaking populations settlement areas. This is very critical historical evidence that strongly demonstrate the settlement patterns of the Tigrinya-speaking populations in the Western Tigray areas that predates 20th-century political movements.

Therefore, it can be argued that, unlike in the Raya area, the impact of Shewan assimilationist policies was minimal in Wolkait Tsegede. The people of Wolkait Tsegede and other neighbouring territories maintained their Tigrinya language despite the pressure of the assimilationist policies of the imperial and military regimes. Tigrinya is predominantly spoken in Adi Arqai, Abderafie, Mai Tsebri, and other nearby places beneath Lemalimo that are presently under the Amhara region.

However, the present map of the Tigray Regional State does not include all Tigrinya-speaking peoples of Tigray; in the direction of Gonder, the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory of Tigray extends up to Lemalimo. This clearly implies that, even though the people who reside in these mentioned areas and their environs are Tigrinya-speaking communities, and the territories were under the Tigray kingdom for centuries, the current Tigray Regional State's delimitation did not use historic land ownership or language to demarcate the border between the Tigray and Amhara regions in the west.

3). Stephen H. Longrigg<sup>13</sup> under his work, "A Short History of ERITREA", also provides:

*"The western marches of Eritrea for centuries belonged to the Taka province of the old rulers of the Nile. South of the present frontier were and are the Ethiopian districts of Kofta and Wolkait, across the Setit from the Kunama country; of Adi Abo and Shiré, across the Mareb west of Axum: and of Agamé, farther east up to the escarpment that overlooks the Dankali plain. All these form part of the great Tigray province or kingdom. The Tigray is homogeneous in language and culture with the highlands of Eritrea which, in history as in geography, formed for centuries an integral part of it. The western boundary of the Tigray is formed by the course of the rivers Takazze and Tsellari, the eastern by the great escarpment, the southern by a line running east and west below Lake Ashangi.*

*Such unity or separateness as Eritrea (or the highland nucleus thereof) possessed or still possesses was marked, from the earliest modern times, by the expression Mareb Mellash. "Across the Mareb", which served the Court and officers of Ethiopia to differentiate it from the rest of the Tigrinya-speaking northern areas of the kingdom. The expression is not yet dead. "The quantity and quality of its content, in terms of unity or separateness-however assessed-were never of more significance to Eritrean politicians and those of its greater neighbour. The territory was also known in early days simply as the Bahreder, 'sea land\*.'"<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup>. Brigadier Stephen H. Longrigg was military governor of Eritrea between 1942 and 1944. On May 1942, he was appointed Chief Administrator of the British Military Administration (B.M.A.) in Eritrea. He firmly recognizes the existence of strong ties between the Tégréñña-speakers living on both sides of the Ethio-Eritrean frontier.

<sup>14</sup>. Stephen H. Longrigg, "A Short History of ERITREA", published by Oxford University Press, London 1945. Pp. 9

Longrigg, as an administrator of Eritrea during the British Military Administration in Eritrea, synthesizes geography, history, and ethnography to make a political argument. He states unequivocally that the Eritrean highlands and the Ethiopian Tigrai are historically "integral." He notes that even Italian administrative changes in 1936 acknowledged this unity by incorporating the entire Tigrinya-speaking block. His post-WWII recommendation for a "united Tigrai" underlines his conviction that the colonial border was illogical from almost every perspective, historical, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and economic.

He also, under the same work, provides:

*"A decree of June 1936 prescribed the new status of Eritrea, the powers of its governor and judiciary, and its revised boundaries.' These were extended southwards to include the entire Tigrai, with all the Tigrinya-speaking folk (except for the addition in 1939 of the Wolkait district, south of the Kunama), as well as some Galla and Dankali districts. The new governorate was nearly double the old colony in size as in population. The commissariati newly included are mentioned in Appendix A. The new frontiers of Britrea held the field from 1936 to 1941, with the one major addition of the Wolkait. They recognized at least, what the Mareb frontier that of before 1936, and since 1941 -had ignored, the essential unity of the Tigraeans."*<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, he further provides as follow:

*"The outstanding problems, therefore, are now two: that Asmara-Massawa and the highlands, and that of Keren and its tribes.*

*It cannot be justifiable to continue, if it can at all be avoided, the cleavage enforced by the present Eritrean southern boundary between the Ethiopian Tigrai and its northern part which is the Eritrean plateau. Every consideration of history and of race, language, culture, and economics urges the effective uniting of these two areas. The result would be a notably homogeneous and compact unit of population, from which both parts would benefit and to which both have their own contributions to make-the northern area, its port and communications; the southern, its cornfields and its manpower. The whole unit would have natural and already acknowledged frontiers.*

*Its political disposal need be no insoluble problem.*

*Firstly, it could be assigned without stipulation to the Emperor, at the risk (if present conditions in the Tigrai are any guide) of allowing a general reversion to Ethiopian standards of administration, and the decay or destruction of fifty years of outstanding material progress in the northern part of the territory, Eritrea. Our first assumption-the paramount importance of the well-being of the population-seems to be unsuited by this solution.*

*Secondly, the territory could be so assigned with the proviso or safeguard of the employment by the Emperor of European advisers or inspectors. There can be no confidence, however, that the presence of these would suffice to maintain*

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<sup>15</sup>. Stephen H. Longrigg, "A Short History of ERITREA", published by Oxford University Press, 1945. Pp. 141

*administration at a satisfactory level. There is, indeed, enough evidence to suggest every probability of the contrary. Nor would any régime of excluded or privileged areas, or local safeguards, produce anything but friction and trouble.*

*Thirdly, the united Tigrai unit or State could be placed under the sovereignty of the Emperor and be administered, in his name and on his behalf, by a European power if such be found will-ing to assume the task and to face the certain (but not serious) financial loss from the administration Ethiopia, increased by new homogeneous territory (including an admirable port) would benefit by an enlightened administration both of this and of the now disaffected and almost ungoverned Tigrai. This solution would be generally (but not unanimously) welcome in the Eritrean highlands, and almost certainly in the Tigrai also-where direct rule' by the Shoan dynasty has hitherto been a record of ceaseless rebellion and discontent. It would be viewed critically by the Ethiopian government; but this should not, perhaps outweigh the certain advantage of the population at large.*

*In the case of Keren and its tribes the decision to be made is as between adhesion to the Sudan or to the Eritrean plateau, whatever be the fate of the latter. The argument from sovereignty over this area in past centuries would rather favour the Ethiopian claim, and the peoples' strain of Ethiopian blood runs counter to their present Islamic culture. In sentiment they are strongly anti-Ethiopian. The balance of advantage to the tribes-men and townsmen of the area lies; it can scarcely be doubted, in inclusion in the Sudan, if this may be conceded to them. The one Hamasien-type Coptic district, on the Keren borders, else- where described, would pass to the highlands.*

*To summarize these suggestions, it appears to the present writer that a partition of the territory should be made. Muslim tribal areas adjoining the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan should be included in that country. The central Christian, highlands of Eritrea, with the port of Massawa and the Sambar and the Sabo tribes, should form part of a United Tigrai state or province which should be placed under the sovereignty of the Emperor of Ethiopia but be administered, in his name, by a European power for either a stated or an unstated term of years. The Dankali country with Assab should be assigned unconditionally to the Emperor. Eritrea would cease to exist. "<sup>16</sup>*

In this quoted text and also in the preceding passages, Longrigg described that "the Tigrai is homogeneous in language and culture with the highlands of Eritrea," and that the colonial border was an artificial cleavage of one people. Perhaps the most compelling testimony comes not from a linguist or historian, but from the man entrusted with determining Eritrea's post-war fate. Brigadier Stephen H. Longrigg, Chief Administrator of the British Military Administration in Eritrea (1942-1944), synthesized the available evidence into an official political analysis. His conclusions are unequivocal and directly support the historical-linguistic argument.

Longrigg's analysis begins with a clear recognition of unity, stating that the Eritrean highlands and the Ethiopian Tigrai are "homogeneous in language and culture" and for centuries formed "an integral part of it." He explicitly lists the western districts, including Kafta and Wolkait, as constituent parts of this "great Tigrai province or kingdom." Building on this foundation, he offers a sharp critique

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<sup>16</sup>. Stephen H. Longrigg, "A Short History of ERITREA", published by Oxford University Press, 1945. Pp. 173-175

of the colonial border as an unjustifiable "cleavage," noting that even the Fascist Italian administration of 1936, by annexing the entire Tigrai, had "recognized... the essential unity of the Tigræans" that the Mareb River border had ignored.

This diagnosis led Longrigg to a prescriptive recommendation of profound significance. He argued that "every consideration of history and of race, language, culture, and economics urges the effective uniting of these two areas", the Eritrean plateau and the Ethiopian Tigrai, into a single, homogeneous unit under Ethiopian sovereignty. His seminal post-war proposal was, therefore, the creation of a "United Tigrai" state. Longrigg's analysis is critical because it demonstrates that the ethno-linguistic unity of the Tigrinya highlands was not a scholarly abstraction but a concrete political and administrative reality recognized by colonial powers. His proposed "United Tigrai" directly mirrors the logic behind the post-1991 borders of the Tigray Region, which sought to correct the colonial and imperial cleavages he so clearly identified.

4). Longrigg in his work titled, "A Short History of ERITREA", also contains a linguistic map of the distribution languages in Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia during 1935-1944 that clearly show the territories of Wolkait, Kafta-Humera, Tsegede, Tselemti, Raya-Azebo and their surrounding environs as the Tigrinya speaking areas. This linguistic map<sup>17</sup> of the distribution languages in Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia which is provided by Brigadier Longrigg is attached in this work (see Appendix A).

As noted above, this map plainly displays the distribution of languages spoken in the present day Eritrea and the Northern Ethiopia during 1935-1945. Longrigg's map clearly labels the area south of Lake Hashenge as "Doba (Raya & Azebo)" and encloses it within the shaded Tigrinya language zone. The southern boundary of this zone is drawn along a latitudinal line south of the lake, explicitly incorporating the Raya-Azebo valleys. This is a direct cartographic rejection of the territory's post-1943 administrative transfer to the province of Wollo. Longrigg, assessing the region at the very moment of that transfer, recorded its linguistic and cultural orientation as Tigrinya.

The map highlights that the political detachment was a punitive administrative act, not a reflection of ethnographic reality. Longrigg's inclusion of Doba reinforces his thesis of a "great Tigrai province" with natural frontiers. The map also shades the territory west of the Tekeze bend, including Wolqait, Tsegede, Tselemti (marked as Tsalamt) and the Kafta-Humera lowlands, as part of the Tigrinya speaking zone. It shows this western extension as contiguous with the core highlands, using the Angareb and Tekeze rivers as defining features, not absolute borders. This directly challenges the narrative that the Tekeze River was an immutable western boundary. Longrigg's cartography shows

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<sup>17</sup>. Ibid., Pp. 39.

the Tigrinya linguistic area spilling across the Tekezze River, encompassing a western plateau and lowland district. This visualizes the historical and economic ties of these areas to the Tigrayan highlands.

This Map by Longrigg and all other Maps by European scholars such as J. Spencer Trimingham and the languages distribution map consistently indicate Wolkait, Kafta-Humera, Tselemti, and their adjacent western districts up to north of Angerab River as the Tigrinya-speaking linguistic zone. Cartography provides visual synthesis. These maps, created for linguistic and ethnographic reference, are powerful evidence because they represent scholarly consensus at the time of their publication. They translate the textual linguistic areas descriptions from Ullendorff, Praetorius, Rusell, Bryan, Abbadie, Kolmodin, Levine, Lionel Bender, Leslau, Sbacchi, Longrigg and other scholars into a spatial form, clearly depicting the Tigrinya language area spilling across the Mareb and Tekezzé rivers, encompassing what are now contested borderlands. Their consistency across different relevant linguistic, historical and cartographic sources published pre-1991 strongly reinforces the claim that the territories of the Wolkait, Tsegede, Setit-Humera, Kafta-Humera, Tselemti and their surrounding environs are Tigrinya ethno linguistic areas.

Furthermore, Brigadier Longrigg additionally provides:

*"4. Tigray and Ethiopia, 1900-35*

*While the Italian colonizers, within their frontiers at last secure and agreed, could proceed with the administration of Eritrea, the empire of Ethiopia pursued for forty years its separate courses. These lie outside the scope of the present work, and must be dismissed in a few lines. The Tigray, henceforth nearly always divided for administration into a number of districts, did not again achieve its formidable unity. Nevertheless, it remained conscious of its separateness, and hostile-sometimes with a bitter and active, sometimes with a dull smouldering, resentment- against the rule of the Shoans in Addis Abeba. Onwards from the rebellion of Ras Mangasha in 1898, revolt or mere disobedience were habitual. At no time did the emperor show his consciousness of the need for special care, wise conciliation, for this turbulent province with its separate language and traditions, its virile independence which the imperial crown had so lately rewarded."*<sup>18</sup>

5). John Markakis<sup>19</sup> in his prominent work titled, "Ethiopia: Anatomy of A Traditional Polity" (1974), states:

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<sup>18</sup>. Stephen H. Longrigg, "A Short History of ERITREA", published by Oxford University Press, 1945. Pp. 130-131.

<sup>19</sup>. John Markakis, a Greek national, is a renowned political historian of Ethiopia. He received his BA in political science from Brooklyn College and his MA and PhD in government and African studies from Columbia University. He specializes in the economy of African states, with a particular focus on Ethiopia and its neighbors in the Horn of Africa. For most part of his life, he taught at the University of Addis Ababa. He was a scholar enriched with a deep knowledge of Ethiopian's political history, he

*"The structure of the provincial administration is based on the traditional design according to which homogeneous units with a sense of historical identity constituted separate entities for purposes of government. Traditionally, the major provincial units in northern Ethiopia were Tegra, Wolkait, Semien, Begemdir, Wag, Lasta, Gojjam, Amhara and Shoa. The demarcation of the southern provinces following their conquest was more haphazard, and criteria of homogeneity and historical identity often gave ground to considerations of political and administrative convenience, which resulted in frequent changes. Something in the neighbourhood of thirty four distinct units existed prior to war. After liberation, the provincial boundaries redrawn, with similar units being incorporated into twelve large provinces. The central province of Shoa expanded greatly, as did the province of Wollo-which was made into a fief of the crown prince-and the province of Hararge, also a fief of the imperial family, which in area became by far the largest province of the empire. **The province of Tigre, already greatly reduced in size by the separation of the Eritrean Highlands in the north, lost some more territory in the south to Wollo.** Amhara ceased to be a distinct province and its historic name disappeared from the map. Later, the huge province of Hararge was split, and Bale province was created from the south-western section. Finally, reunion with Eritrea brought the total number of provinces to fourteen.*

*The fourteen provinces vary greatly in size of area and population. .... As in the case with the provinces, the sub-provinces (awraja) divisions within each province represents partly the continuity of traditional entities and partly political and administrative expediency. Similarly also, they vary greatly in size of area and population. The diversity of Ethiopia's terrain and people provides striking contrasts within each province, particularly in the southern province. All the southern provinces, as well as Wollo, Tigre, and Eritrea in the north, contain land at both extremes of the altitude scale and a mélange of ethnic groups, languages, customs, and local economies ranging from nomadism to settled agriculture."*<sup>20</sup>

This quoted passage clearly indicates that the Eritrean Highlands in the north were an integral part of the province of Tigre, but later it was separated from it and thereby the province of Tigre was greatly reduced in size by the separation of the Eritrean Highlands in the north. After this, later the southern part of the province of Tigre provided to the province of Wollo by the Imperial government, which resulting in loss of the territory of Tigre in the south.

John Markakis also in his renowned work titled, "National and class conflict in the Horn of Africa" (African studies series), provides:

*".... The Woyane, as the rebellion became known, engulfed the eastern half of Tigray. The name has populist and republican connotations, as is often the case with peasant-based movements, and communal institutions, especially local*

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also published historical books, namely "Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity," "Class and Revolution in Ethiopia," "National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa," "Pastoralism on the Margin" and others.

<sup>20</sup>. John Mark Markakis, Ethiopia: Anatomy of A Traditional Polity, published by Oxford University Press, New York, 1975 (first published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974). Pp. 289-90.

*assemblies, assumed a prominent role in decision-making, a process that was in the main informal and spontaneous. Military leadership was exercised by local notables and bandits of some renown, and the best-known leader of Woyane, Haile Mariam Redda, was a bit of both. After several skirmishes in which they bested the government's soldiers and occupied several towns, including the provincial capital Ma kale, the rebels committed their forces to a foolhardy assault on the mountain fortress of Amba Alage. The battle lasted nearly three weeks, and the government enlisted the aid of the British, who sent some men and warplanes to bomb the rebels. Having suffered heavy casualties without gaining their objective, the Tigray lost heart and dispersed in October 1943. An historian notes Woyane was a movement 'harnessed to the past', its goal being simply to restore the status quo ante.<sup>16</sup>*

*One consequence of the rebellion was the redrawing of Tigray's administrative boundaries, involving the loss of two districts in the west (Wolkait and Tselemt) to the province of Gondar, and Raya, a district in the south, to the province of Wollo. The reduced province occupied an area of 66,000 square kilometers, and its population in the 1960s was estimated to be nearly two million. In the 1970s, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front claimed an area of 102,000 square kilometers -which included the detached districts - and a population of some five million, one-fifth of which was said to live outside the boundaries of the province. Not all its inhabitants are Tigray or Christians. Eastern Tigray is the home of the Raya and Azebo Oromo who live on the plateau, the Afar in the Danakil lowlands, and the Sabo on the escarpment. All of them are Muslim, a creed which is estimated to represent about 30 percent of Tigray's inhabitants.*

*With the exception of the Afar nomads, and the Raya Oromo who have a mixed economy, the Tigray are predominantly subsistence cultivators producing teff and sorghum. Agricultural production rests on a shrinking base, because the region is the worst affected by ecological degradation in the highlands. ...."<sup>21</sup>*

Under the preceding quoted texts, Markakis provides the modern political context for the shrinking of the administrative province of Tigray. He identifies two key moments: first, the colonial separation of the Eritrean highlands, and second, the post-rebellion punitive detachment of western (Wolkait, Tsegede and Kafta), northwestern (Tselemt and Waldduba) and southern (Raya-Azebo and Raya-Kobo) districts by the central government.

This analysis explains the discrepancy between the historical/linguistic extent of Tigrinya settlement and the smaller boundaries of the former Ethiopian province of Tigray, framing the changes as politically motivated reductions. The administrative province of Tigray was subsequently reduced in size by political detachment: the Eritrean highlands were separated by colonial formation, Western territories like Wolkait, Kafta and Tsegede were administratively detached from Tigray and incorporated into Begemder & Semien (later Gondar) following the 1943 Woyane rebellion. Therefore, the historical province of Tigre during Imperial and Derg regimes never contained all Tigrinya speakers. The modern Tigray Region's boundaries, established in 1995, represent a political

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<sup>21</sup>. John Markakis, "National and class conflict in the Horn of Africa" (African studies series), first published 1987 in collaboration with the African Studies Centre, published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, Cambridge. Pp. 250-51.

realignment based on ethno-linguistic settlement patterns, seeking to reunite a historically coherent cultural and linguistic zone that had been divided by colonial and imperial administrative decisions.

6). Bryan Margaret Arminel<sup>22</sup> in her foundational 1947 linguistic survey work "The distribution of the Semitic and Cushitic languages of Africa", maps the Tigrinya language territory as follows: it is spoken in Tigre proper, Agame, Akale Guzay, Sarawe, Hamasen, Dimijan, and west of the Tekeze, in Wolkayt, Waldouba, Sawana, and the surroundings of Dobbahar.<sup>23</sup> This delineation is particularly significant as it represents a pre political, mid 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarly consensus. When later linguists like Edward Ullendorff reference the geographical extent of Tigrinya, they are drawing directly on Bryan's detailed survey data, which unambiguously placed the western districts within the Tigrinya linguistic sphere.

7). Kolmodin J. A.<sup>24</sup> in his a preliminary travel, geography and research report work titled, "Meine Studienreise in Abessinien, 1908-1910 (Vorläufiger Bericht)" (1910) provides that the Tigrinya language, spoken in Tigre proper, Agame, Akale Guzay, Sarawe, Hamasen, Dimijan, and west of the Tekeze, in Wolkayt, Waldouba, Sawana, and the surroundings of Dobbahar.<sup>25</sup> Building on this 19th-

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<sup>22</sup>. Bryan Margaret Arminel from the late 18th century was a British linguist and researcher known for her significant contributions to the classification and documentation of African languages, particularly in collaboration with Archibald Norman Tucker. Her work has a particular emphasis on languages in Northeast Africa, including those in Ethiopia. Bryan's research extensively covered the languages of Northeast Africa, an area that includes modern-day Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea. Margaret Arminel Bryan's primary contribution was providing a rigorous, systematic, and comprehensive framework for the study of numerous African languages, with specific and lasting impact on the field of Ethiopian and Northeast African linguistics.

<sup>23</sup>. Bryan Margaret Arminel, "The distribution of the Semitic and Cushitic languages of Africa", published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University: London, New York 1947. pp. 9-10.

<sup>24</sup>. The Swedish orientalist Johannes Kolmodin (1884-1933), based on scholarly and bibliographic sources, published scholarly works. After spending 1908–1910 in Italian Eritrea and Ethiopia studying less-known Ethio-Semitic languages (especially Tigrinya), Kolmodin returned to Sweden and published a report in 1910 summarizing his early research findings. Then, he published *Traditions de Tsazzege et Hazzega. Textes tigrigna* (Archives d'études orientales, Volume 5, No. 1), Rome 1912; *Traditions de Tsazzege et Hazzega. Annales et documents* (Archives d'études orientales, Volume 5, No. 3), Uppsala 1914; and *Traditions de Tsazzege et Hazzega. Traduction française* (Archives d'études orientales, Volume 5, No. 2), Uppsala 1915.

<sup>25</sup>. Kolmodin Johannes A., "Mein Studienreise in Abessinien, 1908-1910" (Vorläufiger Bericht)" MO, Uppsala, 1910), *Le Monde Oriental*, Vol. 4 (1910). Pp. 240-242.

century foundation, the early 20th-century fieldwork of Swedish orientalist Johannes (J.A.) Kolmodin confirmed the same linguistic geography. In his preliminary travel report, "Meine Studienreise in Abessinien, 1908-1910" (1910), Kolmodin recorded the Tigrinya language as spoken in the core highland provinces and, critically, "west of the Tekeze, in Wolkayt, Waldouba, Sawana, and the surroundings of Dobbahar." Kolmodin's on-the-ground research, conducted on the eve of major political transformations in the Horn, provides a crucial snapshot that anchors the earlier observations of d'Abbadie and Praetorius and is directly echoed in the later systematic survey of Margaret Bryan. This continuity across six decades of scholarly observation, from the 1850s to the 1910s, establishes a robust pre-modern consensus on the western extent of the Tigrinya-speaking region.

8). Professor Alberto Sbacchi<sup>26</sup> in his work titled, "Ethiopia under Mussolini: Fascism and the Colonial Experience" (1985) provides:

*"Lessona insisted that Amhara include territories of Amharic-speaking people. The region of Tselemt, though a Tigrean-speaking area, was annexed to Amhara to secure a well-defined frontier of that governorship (meaning Amhara governorship during Italian occupation), along the Takaze river. Other regions such as Wolkait, Woldeba, Tsegade, Semien, Wogera, and Belesa were inhabited by Tigrean -speaking people rather than Amhara. All of these regions south of the Setit River gravitated economically towards Asmera and not to Gondar."*<sup>27</sup>

In the Amharic translation of Sbacchi's "Ethiopia Under Mussoloni: Fascism and The Colonial Experience" (1985), published by Emishitaw Alemayehu, this passage is rendered as follows:

*"ሌሶና የአማራ ጠቅላይ ግዛት አማርኛ ቋንቋ ተናጋሪ የሆኑ ግዛቶች ብቻ እንዲይዝ ቢከራከርም ፀለምት በአብዛኛው ትግርኛ ተናጋሪ አካባቢ ቢሆንም የጠቅላይ ግዛቱን ወሰን የተከፈነ ወንዝ በመከተል ለመከለል ሲባል ወደ አማራ ተከልሏል። ሌሎች እንደ ወልቃይት፣ ዋልድባ፣ ፀገዬ፣ ሰሜን፣ ወገራ እና በለሳን የመሳሰሉ ግዛቶች ከአማራ ይልቅ በትግርኛ ተናጋሪዎች የተያዙ (ትግርኛ ተናጋሪዎች የሰፈሩበት) እና ከኢጣሊያ ወረራ በፊት ከሰቲት ወንዝ በስተደቡብ የሚገኙት እነዚህ አካባቢዎች (ግዛቶች) የኢኮኖሚ ግንኙነታቸው ከጎንደር ይልቅ ከአስመራ ጋር ነበር"።*<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>. Alberto Sbacchi is a renowned historian specializing in Fascist Italy's colonial history, particularly its brutal invasion and occupation of Ethiopia in the 1930s, authoring key works like Ethiopia under Mussolini and Legacy of Bitterness, using extensive archival research to detail Italian administration, settler implantation, atrocities, and the Ethiopian resistance, challenging national amnesia about this period. His studies are grounded in primary sources, including records from the Ministry of Italian Africa, Mussolini's Secretariat, and secret police archives.

<sup>27</sup>. Alberto Sbacchi, "Ethiopia under Mussolini: Fascism and the Colonial Experience", published by Zed Books; Totowa, N.J., USA, London, 1985. pp. 91-92.

<sup>28</sup>. እምሸታው አለማየሁ፣ ኤልቤርቶ ሰባቺ እ.ኤ.አ. በ1985 “Ethiopia Under Mussoloni: Fascism and The Colonial Experience” በሚል የፃፈውን መፅሐፍ በመተርጎም በ2002 ዓ.ም ያሳተመው የትርጉም መጽሐፍ፣ ገጽ 98.

In the 1930s, Italian administrative records, as discussed by Sbacchi, indicate that the indigenous populations of Wolkait, Tselemti, Waldduba, Tsegade, Semien, Woggera, Belesa and surrounding districts were predominantly Tigrinya speakers. Colonial planners were aware of this linguistic reality but nonetheless incorporated areas such as Tselemti into the Amhara Governorate for strategic reasons, particularly to establish a militarily coherent frontier. This political decision overrode the region's natural ethno linguistic character and its historical economic ties to the Tigrinya highlands centered on Asmara. Sabacci's work on Italian administration reveals that colonial planners were aware of the ethnic and linguistic realities. The statement that these western Tigrinya areas gravitated economically towards Asmara (in Eritrea) rather than Gondar further underscores their historical ties to the northern highland nexus, not the Amhara heartland. He describes that the Western regions such as Wolkait, Waldeba, Tsegade, Semien, Wogera, and Belesa a Tigrean-speaking population settlement areas.

9). Donald N. Levine<sup>29</sup>, a preeminent sociologist and Ethiopianist, in his renowned scholarly work titled, "Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society" (1974), provides:

*"In addition to satisfying local consumption needs, the products brought to local markets are taken by traders to progressively larger regional centers. At the regional markets, of course, people as well as goods come from more dramatically diverse backgrounds and longer distances. To the regional market at Debre Tabor, which Simoons also studied, people brought ginger from Chiiga, a Kimant district (six days); wool saddle blankets from Gaint, an Amhara district (three days); **cotton from the Tigrean district of Wolqait (eleven days)**; silverwork from Desie, an ethnically mixed town (ten days); salt from the northern Afar region (two weeks); and coffee from the Jimma Oromo (about one month)."*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>. Donald N. Levine (1931 –2013) was an American sociologist, educator, social theorist and writer at the University of Chicago. He was renowned Ethiopianist sociological theorist. Levine's publications on Ethiopia include dozens of articles, parts of *The Flight from Ambiguity: Essays in Social and Cultural Theory* (1985), and two books, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (1965), and *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (1974). His last book on Ethiopia was *Interpreting Ethiopia: Observations of Five Decades* that came out on November 20, 2014. His unique experiences living among peasants of Northern Shoa, visiting historic monasteries, and enjoying personal connections with modernizing Ethiopians from all political viewpoints, offer acute glimpses into everything from local life-worlds to historic perspectives spanning two millennia. Before joining the Chicago faculty in 1962, he taught at Ethiopia's University College of Addis Ababa. He received a Doctor of Letters honoris causa in 2004 from Addis Ababa University, where his citation read: "Ethiopianist, sociological theorist, educator.

<sup>30</sup>. Donald N. Levine, "Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society", published by University of Chicago Press, 1974. pp. 41.

In the Amharic translation of Levine's Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society (1974), published by Million Neqneke under the title "ታላቋ ኢትዮጵያ የብዙ ነገዶች ማህበረሰብ፣ የረጅም ዘመናት ዕድገት", this passage is rendered as follows:

“በተጨማሪ ወደ ቀበሌው ገበያ የመጣው ዕቃ የቀበሌውን የፍጆታ ፍላጎት ከማርካቱም በላይ እንደገና በሌሎች ነጋጌዎች ወደ ክፍለ ሃገር ገበያ ይወስዳሉ። በየክፍለሀገሮች ገበያ ሰዎችና ዕቃዎች የሚመጡት ከልዩ ልዩ ሥፍራ ከመሆኑም ሌላ የሚመጡት ረዘም ካለ እርቀት ነው። ለምሳሌ ወደ ደብረ ታቦር ገበያ የሚመጡት፣ ሲሞን አጥንቶ እንደመሰከረው፣ ገበያተኞች የቅማንት ወረዳ ከሆነው ከጭልጋ (በእግር ስድስት ቀን የሚያስኬድ) ጅንጅብል፣ ከአማራው ወረዳ ከጭልጋ (በእግር ሦስት ቀን የሚያስኬድ) የሱፍ ብርድልብስ፣ ከትግራውያን ወረዳ ከሆነው ከወልቃይት (በእግር 11 ቀን የሚያስኬድ) ጥጥ፣ በብሄር ሰብጥር ድብልቅ ከተማ ከሆነው ደሴ (በእግር 10 ቀን የሚያስኬድ) የብር ሥራ፣ ከሰሜን አፋር (በእግር 15 ቀን የሚያስኬድ) ጨው፣ ከአሮሞ ጅማ (በእግር አንድ ወር የሚያስኬድ) ቡና ይዘው ይመጣሉ።”<sup>31</sup>

This identifies Wolqait as a Tigrean district at the time of his study and the publication of this work. In this passage, Levine explicitly identifies Wolqait as a Tigrean district, demonstrating that this ethno geographical classification was standard in academic literature prior to the contemporary political conflict over the territory. Donald Levine's unselfconscious reference in a 1974 work to "the Tigrean district of Wolqait" provides crucial socio-economic data from a leading Western scholar. It demonstrates that this classification was an established, non-controversial geographical fact within academia prior to the contemporary political conflict. This neutral, ethnographic snapshot reveals that Wolqait's identification as Tigrayan was embedded not only in language maps and chronicles but also in the standard descriptive terminology of modern social science. As such, it powerfully refutes the claim that Wolqait's association with Tigray is a late 20th-century political invention.

10). Donald N. Levine's classic work, “Wax & Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture”, includes a linguistic map of the Northern Ethiopia that clearly shows the geographical distribution of nationalities of Northern Ethiopia, including Tigrinya speaking populations. The map<sup>32</sup> of the Northern Ethiopia provided by Levine is attached in this work (see Appendix B).<sup>33</sup>

Like Longrigg, Levine’s map similarly incorporates the Raya-Azebo territory within the shaded “Tigrinya” ethnic region. It depicts it as a southern protrusion of the Tigrinya highlands, bordering

31. ሚሊዮን ነቅንቅ፣ "ታላቋ ኢትዮጵያ የብዙ ነገዶች ማህበረሰብ፣ የረጅም ዘመናት ዕድገት"፣ ኦዲስ አበባ ዩንቨርሲቲ ፕሬስ፣ የመጀመሪያ እትም 1993 ዓ.ም፣ ገጽ 40

32. Donald N. Levine, “Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture,” published by University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, originally published in 1965.

33. የደርግ መንግስት "Class Struggle and The Problem In Eritrea" በሚል ርዕስ በ1971 ዓ.ም ባሳተመው መጽሐፍ ላይ በሰሜን ኢትዮጵያ የሚገኙትን ብሔረሰቦች መልክዓ ምድራዊ ስርጭትን አድማስ የሚያሳይ ካርታ አካትቷል። በዚህም ካርታ ላይ እንደተመለከተው ከተከዜ/ከሰቲት ወንዝ በስተደቡብ የሚገኙት ወልቃይት፣ ፀገዴ፣ ቃፍታ፣ እንዲሁም ጸለምት፣ ዋልድባ፣ እና የመሳሰሉት አጎራባች አካባቢዎች በአብዛኛው የትግርኛ ቋንቋ ተናጋሪዎች ወይም ትግራውያን የሰፈሩባቸው ስፍራዎች መሆናቸውን አረጋግጧል።

the Oromo sub-groups and Amhara zones. Southern (Raya-Azebo) included as “Doba” within Tigrinya zone; southern boundary is a line below Alamata included within Tigrinya ethnic shading as a southern extension. This alignment with Longrigg’s map, two decades later, confirms a persistent scholarly view of the region’s ethnic geography despite its administrative to Wollo. Levine’s map captures the demographic reality post-detachment but pre-federalism. It shows that while politically severed, Raya-Azebo was still ethnographically categorized as Tigrinya by leading sociologists. This supports the argument that the 1991 federal border adjustment was an attempt to realign politics with this enduring ethnographic map.

The map also extends the Tigrinya shading west of the Tekeze to cover Wolqait, Tsegede and Kafta region. Accordingly, the Tekeze River in its western course is therefore does not serve as an ethnic boundary between Tigrinya-speaking and Amharic-speaking zones on this map. Tigrinya settlement and influence extended across the river into these plateau and lowland districts. The border of the shaded area in the northwest appears to run north of the Angareb River, implying the included territories stretch towards the modern Sudan border. Like Longrigg, Levine does not treat the Tekeze in all its courses as an ethnic boundary throughout its entire course. Levine’s inclusion of northwestern districts, such as Tselemti and Waldduba, reflects the academic understanding of their settlement by Tigrinya-speaking communities (including historically documented Beta Israel groups). The map visually asserts that the northwestern frontier districts are an integral part of the Tigrinya ethnic mosaic, not outliers. Hence, the area shaded to indicate the territory Tigrinya language distribution encompasses southern Eritrea and several western regions, including Wolkait, Kafta, Tsegede, Woldeba, Tselemti, Semien, Wogera, and Belesa, as well as Raya-Azebo.

Notably, many of these western, north western and southern areas were administratively delineated outside of the historical Tigre/Tigray province during Imperial and Derg regimes. Crucially, the Tigrinya-speaking zone on Levine’s map corresponds closely to the borders of the post-1991 Tigray Regional State. The post-1991 Tigray does not include the eastern part of the historic Tigre/Tigray province, which was incorporated into the present day Afar Regional State under ethnolinguistic logic of the FDRE Constitution.

However, the map also shows a large portion of Tigrinya speaking territory west of the Tekeze River, specifically, areas beneath Mount Lemalimo and the Angareb River, which are currently part of the Amhara Regional State. In fact, much of these western, north western and southern territories were integral parts of the historic province of Tigre until their punitive administrative transfer. Following the suppression of the First Woyane rebellion in 1943, the imperial government detached the western districts such as Wolkait and Tselemt to Begemedir & Semien and the southern districts such as Raya-Kobo and Raya-Azebo to Wollo. This was a political reprisal, not a reflection of ethnolinguistic realities.

Therefore, Levine’s map reveals a double discrepancy. First, it shows the 1991 Tigray Regional State’s borders closely mirror a pre-existing Tigrinya speaking zone, except some areas in the west and south. Second, it highlights how the post-1991 federal settlement, while constitutionally committed to

ethno-linguistic borders, did not reverse the politically motivated amputations of the Imperial era. Consequently, the inter-regional border delimitation between Amhara and Tigray failed to fully adhere to the constitutional principle of aligning borders with linguistic identity, leaving a significant portion of Tigrinya speaking population administratively separated from their ethno-linguistic region.

**Common Cartographic Argument by Longrigg's Map (1945) and Levine's Map (1965):**

The region is consistently mapped as part of the Tigrinya cultural sphere despite imperial border changes. The cartographic record provided by Longrigg and Levine presents a coherent, multi-frontier visualization of the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory. By consistently incorporating the southern (Raya-Azebo) and northwestern (Tselemti/Kafta) districts, areas explicitly detached by imperial decree, these maps serve as silent witnesses against the historical permanence of those administrative borders. They transform the textual argument into a spatial one: the political geography of the Imperial and Derg eras did not align with the human geography documented by contemporary observers. The post-1991 map of Tigray, therefore, can be seen as an attempt to resolve this historic cartographic contradiction, making state borders reflect the long-mapped realities of language and settlement.

Consequently, the maps do not depict the historic province of Tigre/Tigray; they depict a Tigrinya-speaking cultural region that is larger than that province, encompassing territories administratively assigned to the provinces of Begemdir, Semien, and Wollo. This is the foundational visual evidence for the post-1991 federal logic. Both maps also utterly contradict the claim that the Takezze River formed a natural and permanent western ethnic boundary. They show Tigrinya presence on both banks. In the south, they show the boundary not as a river but as a transitional zone with the Oromo sub-groups (in Raya-Azebo). Moreover, the close resemblance between the shaded areas on these pre-1991 maps and the borders of the modern Tigray Regional State is unmistakable. This strongly suggests that the federal architects were not inventing new borders but were giving political form to a long-documented ethnographic and linguistic region that had been fragmented by imperial and colonial administration.

In conclusion, the cartographic record provided by Longrigg and Levine presents a coherent, multi-frontier visualization of the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. By consistently incorporating the southern (Raya-Azebo) and northwestern (Tselemti/Kafta) districts, areas explicitly detached by imperial decree, these maps serve as silent witnesses against the historical permanence of those administrative borders. They transform the textual argument into a spatial one: the political geography of the Imperial and Derg eras did not align with the human geography documented by contemporary observers. The post-1991 map of Tigray, therefore, can be seen as an attempt to resolve this historic cartographic contradiction, making state borders reflect the long-mapped realities of language and settlement.

11). Yuri Kobishchanov, in his work titled, "Ethnoses and Cultures of Africa", states that:

*"The Tigrays rank third in number, after the Oromo and Amhara, among the Ethiopian ethnic groups. It is the largest group in the north, exceeding 2,500,000, 1,000,000 of whom live in Eritrea, comprising 50 percent of the*

*province's population and more than 1,000,000 live in the Tigre province, making up 80 percent of its population. The rest of the Tigrays are found in the Begemdyr province and in the regions bordering on Eritrea and Tigre."<sup>34</sup>*

He further provides:

*"The Tigrays are proud of the fact that their region was the center of the ancient Axumite civilization and that their language is very close to that of the Axumites. But it was expressly this closeness which hampered the development of the Tigray language for a long time as the Geez language had been the standard language till the late 19th century. The progress of the people and their language was hamstrung by political factors as well. Starting with the 10th and 11th centuries the Ag'azi country, as the Tigrays' territory was known at that period and many centuries before, became a marginal area. Axum, from the 4th to 7th centuries, a prospering capital, was deserted and retained only a part of its former significance as a religious center, while the political centres shifted to the south.*

*True, Tigre (including the Tigray part of Eritrea) preserved its statehood in the form of a vassal principally ruled by a Makwannen (Prince) or a Negase-babr (king of the Sea) who often displayed, overtly or covertly, a striving for independence which was invariably crushed by the central power. The Tigray feudal lords were rarely admitted to the helm of power. In the modern period this tradition was broken only twice: between 1769 and 1772 when Mikael Sybul, the Tigre ruler, was a de facto, though never crowned, head of the entire country and in 1872-1889 when Bezzybyh-Kasa, who had been an independent Tigre ruler since 1867, proclaimed himself Emperor of Ethiopia and took the name of Iohannes IV.*

*From the 14th century Tigre particularism found its expression in various religious movements and, from the 18th century on, in Kara-baymanot, an extreme Monophysite deviation of Christianity. Between 1915 and 1916, under Lij Iyasu, the Tigre clergy headed by Ibune Petros, a Copt from Egypt, hoped to seize leadership of the Ethiopien Church, Entente interference, which backed a reactionary coup against Lij Iyasu buried these plans.*

*Meanwhile, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy captured the Tigray province of Hamasien, Serae and Akkele Guzey and incorporated them into its colony Eritrea. According to Tigray sources, Emperor Menlik recognized the seizure allegedly because it was a means of weakening Mangasha, the then Tigray ruler, son of Yohannes IV and contender to the Ethiopian throne. The Tigrays' territory remained divided for a short period from 1896 to 1936. At the early stages of the 1936-1937 Italian-Ethiopian war Tigre was occupied by fascist Italy and united with Eritrea as part of Italian East Africa. Since that time on the country of the Tigrays has more than once changed its political status, administrative division, and official language but preserved its territorial integrity for more than four decades."<sup>35</sup>*

This quoted text contains demographic, historical, and political claims about the Tigray people that require careful analysis. Before colonial boundaries (late 19th century), the continuous Tigrinya speaking highland zone stretched across northern Ethiopia: Tigray proper (Enderta, Agame, Tembien, Raya highlands), Parts of Begemdir (now partly situated within the Amhara Regional State), and border

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<sup>34</sup>. Yuri Kobishchanov, "Ethnoses and Cultures of Africa", Ethnocultural Development of African Countries, Journal of African Studies By Soviet Scholars No. 6 (1984). pp. 170.

<sup>35</sup>. Ibid, pp. 170-171.

highlands adjoining the Province of Eritrea Central–Southern Eritrea (Hamasien, Serae and Akkele Guzay) and the historic Tigre province. This constituted a culturally and linguistically contiguous plateau, unified by Tigrinya language. Italian colonization split this contiguous Tigrinya speaking region: Northern highlands incorporated into Italian Eritrea and southern highlands remained within Ethiopia (Tigray province).

Crucially, the border did not follow linguistic or cultural lines. Families, church networks, and land tenure systems were divided administratively but not culturally. This accounts for the presence of Tigrinya speakers on both sides of today's Ethiopia–Eritrea border. The statement that Tigray preserved its territorial integrity for over four decades after the Italian occupation is a crucial point. It implies that the Tigrayan-inhabited highlands of Eritrea and the Tigray Province of Ethiopia are a single, naturally unified territory that was artificially divided by colonialism (Italy) and later by the Eritrean-Ethiopian border (federated in 1952, annexed 1962, and independent 1993). This perspective is central to Tigrayan nationalist narratives and was a subtext in tensions between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean government after 1991. It is directly contested by Eritrean nationalism, which views Eritrea as a distinct multi-ethnic sovereign state.

In addition to this, the text frames 'the country of the Tigrays' as a coherent ethnic territory spanning both sides of the modern Ethiopia-Eritrea border. This reflects an ethno-nationalist perspective that contrasts with modern state borders. He notes a brief period of division (1896-1936) followed by forced unification under Italian occupation (1936-1941) as part of Italian East Africa and concludes that despite post-WWII changes in political status, administration, and language, Tigrayan inhabited territory maintained its "territorial integrity" for over four decades. In conclusion, the quoted passage is not a neutral demographic report. It is a snapshot of a particular ethno-nationalist historical narrative that demographically establishes the Tigray people as a significant cross-border nation. It also politically implicitly argues for the fundamental unity of Tigrayan territory across the modern border. Furthermore, it also historically attributes the Eritrea-Tigray split to Italian colonial machinations and Ethiopian imperial betrayal (Menelik's).

Another Russian historian, Vatanar Yaga, under his pre-1991 Article titled, "Administrative-Territorial Division and Ethnic Processes", provides that ".... *The Tigre province is populated predominantly by the Tigray (some of them have found themselves in Eritrea; this historically formed division of the people was due to the seizure of Ethiopia's maritime regions by Italy at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). .... **Tigre includes the Raya and Azebo region, the traditional territory of the Raya and Azebo (subdivisions of the Oromo).**"<sup>36</sup>*

Besides, Cooke Anthony Charles, Routes in Abyssinia, provides:

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<sup>36</sup>. Vatanar Yaga, "Administrative-Territorial Division and Ethnic Processes", Ethnocultural Development of African Countries, Journal of African Studies by Soviet Scholars No. 6, 1984. pp. 153.

*"To the north of Wofela is Wojerat, which is much less elevated than the neighbouring regions, might almost be classed in the low country; its inhabitants, however, having freed themselves from the Gallas, having remained Tigreans. It is one of the most wooded districts of Abyssinia and its forests contain many wild animals, particularly elephants and rhinoceroses.*

*Salt says, Wojerat is a wild country, abounding in elephants, lions, rhinoceroses, and every species of game.*"<sup>37</sup>

On the Tigray/Tigrinya population, Yaga states that Tigre (Tigray) province is predominantly populated by Tigray people. A portion of this population ended up in Eritrea, not because of internal migration, but due to Italian colonial seizure of Ethiopia's Red Sea territories in the late 19th century. This reinforces the argument that the division of Tigrinya-speaking populations across Ethiopia and Eritrea is historically contingent and colonial, not ethnically natural. On Raya and Azebo, Yaga further states that Raya and Azebo are included administratively within Tigre (Tigray) province. These areas are the traditional territory of the Raya and Azebo Oromo. This acknowledges that Tigray province was not ethnically homogeneous, even historically. Yaga is emphasizing that the then "Tigre/Tigray province" exclusively Tigray (Tigrinya-speaking) land. It is an administrative-territorial unit that incorporated: Tigrinya-speaking highland populations and Oromo-speaking sub-groups (Raya and Azebo).

This directly challenges simplified narratives that treat the then Province of Tigre/Tigray as ethnically delimited territory, i.e., a territory whose borders coincided neatly with a single ethnic group (Tigrinya/Tigray) and as an ethnically uniform, i.e., populated exclusively or overwhelmingly by one people without recognized internal diversity or "primordial" territory, i.e., an ancient, fixed, and natural ethnic homeland that existed unchanged over time. Conversely, this underscores that the spatial distribution of Tigrinya-speaking populations extended beyond the historical province of Tigre/Tigrai into Begemdir, Wollo, and Eritrea, a consequence of administrative boundary-making that did not correspond to ethno-linguistic territorial configurations during the Imperial and Derg periods.

This historical evidence challenges essentialist interpretations that the historical Province of Tigre/Tigray as a primordial and ethnically bounded homeland. Instead, it reveals the province as an administratively constituted and ethnically plural space, shaped by imperial expansion, incorporation, and long-term processes of cultural interaction. Therefore, the then province of "Tigre"/"Tigray" was a historically layered, multi-ethnic administrative territory, within which Tigrinya speakers formed a majority but not an exclusive or primordial population. Nevertheless, it is important to note that inhabitants of these traditional territories' of Raya and Azebo experienced a gradual process of

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<sup>37</sup>. Cooke Anthony Charles, *Routes in Abyssinia*, printed, 1867, Published by Harrison and Sons, London (Presented to the House of Commons, in pursuance of their Address Dated November 26, 1867). Pp. 187.

linguistic integration into Tigrinya speaking communities over period of time, as a result of a prolonged interaction with the Tigrinya speaking populations that re-established themselves in, or continued to inhabit, these areas in the aftermath of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Oromo expansion. Likewise, as Cooke's text *Wojjerat's* inhabitants at that time, having freed themselves from the Gallas, have remained Tigreans.

12). Alemseged Abbay, "Identity Jilted or Reimagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles", highlights the historical and political arguments of the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP):

"Liberal Progressive Party (LPP)

Elites who were neither frightened by Ethiopia's agents nor corrupted by its money formed the only independent party in Kebessa - the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP). Their goal was to patch Eritrea and Tigray together to create an independent "Tigiay-Tigrignie" state with the slogan "Eritrea for Eritreans":

The geographic position, its culture, its history and its trading are a clear proof that Tigray is part of Eritrea as it was before the Italian occupation of 1889 and in the years 1935-1945.<sup>79</sup>

The LPP argued that before the advent of Italian colonialism, Tigray and Eritrea used to be a unit of the "Land of Agazi" or "Nation of Agazi" or "Tigray-Tigrignie" and when Italy occupied Ethiopia (1936-41), the "two sisters" that had been separated for fifty years were reunited.<sup>80</sup> For them it was legitimate that the two should be reunited in an independent "Tigray-Tigrignie".

The leaders of the LPP, who advocated the creation of a "Greater Tigray" state, were quite familiar with the need for a defined social space for their nation-to-be. A nation, after all, is a territorial conception.<sup>81</sup> Thus they had a compact territory in mind with a well-defined boundary when they pleaded with the victors of World War II for the independence of their "historic land", their "homeland" - "Tigray Tigrignie":

Eritrea which trusts in the fairness of the Great Powers, is anxiously waiting for the proclamation of its INDEPENDENCE with the consequent annexation of the Tigray territory, including territory between the Taccazze river and the stream Ala, **the territories of Tselemti, Ulcait and Zeghedie, the latter [the last three] being populations of Tigray origins.**<sup>82<sup>38</sup></sup> (Emphasis added)

Alemseged Abbay reports that the **Liberal Progressive Party (LPP)** in Eritrea envisioned a political and territorial project uniting Eritrea and Tigray into a single independent "Tigray-Tigrignie"

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<sup>38</sup>. Alemseged Abbay, "Identity Jilted or Reimagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles", published by the Red Sea Press, Inc., Asmara, 1998. Pp. 37-37; see also *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941-93*. pp. 37-38; see also Memorandum of the Liberal Progressive Party to the Inquiry Commission, Appendix 101, Foreign Office 371-69365.

state. The LPP argued that before Italian colonialism, Eritrea and Tigray were historically a **unit of the "Land of Agazi"**, sharing culture, language, trade networks, and political history. Thus, it argues that Tigrayans, south of the Mereb river, and the Kebessa (highland) Eritreans, north of the Mereb river, are ethnically one people, tied **by** common history, political economy, myth, language and religion. Italian occupation and later Ethiopian rule had separated these historically contiguous regions, but the LPP claimed that their **"two sisters"** should be reunited under a defined, compact territorial conception of a Tigrinya-speaking nation.

The LPP specifically invoked areas such as Tselemti, Uolcalt, and Zeghedie, populations with Tigray origins, emphasizing a **link between ethno-linguistic identity and territorial claims** in the 1940s, roughly 50 years before the TPLF-led EPRDF overthrew the Derg and took power in Addis Ababa. This evidence demonstrates that both Tigrayans south of the Mereb River and Kebessa Eritreans north of the Mereb River regarded the inhabitants of areas such as Tselemti, Welkalt, and Zeghedie as populations of Tigrayan origin long before the TPLF began its armed struggle.

The implications for understanding Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory are significant. First, the LPP's claims reinforce the idea that Tigrinya settlements historically extended across the Mereb River into what are now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. This case illustrates how Tigrinya-speaking populations were conceptualized as a coherent national and territorial unit ("Tigray-Tigrignie"), highlighting the intersection of language, settlement patterns, and political imagination. Second, areas such as Tselemti, Welkalt, and Zeghedie serve as concrete geographic reference points for reconstructing historical Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territories. The LPP's arguments suggest that modern political borders do not fully reflect the historical extent of Tigrinya-speaking populations, underscoring the importance of ethno-linguistic approaches that integrate historical settlement and socio-economic networks.

Accordingly, the territorial conception of the Tigrinya-speaking people encompassed both the Christian Eritrean highlands (Bahre-Negash) and the present-day Tigray region, including Welkalt, Qafta, Tsegede, Tselemti, and Waldeba in what is now referred to as Western Tigray. This historical citation is politically significant because it demonstrates that the conception of a unified Tigrinya homeland and associated settlement patterns, including the western districts, existed among Eritrean intellectuals in the mid-twentieth century, predating the emergence of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Consequently, it shows that the view of these territories as intrinsically Tigrayan was not solely an Ethiopian internal claim but part of a broader, cross-border nationalist imagination.

In the same work, he also states that *"The current Tigrayan rational actors, too, imagined their community south of the Mereb, excluding Eritrea. Due to the energy generated by the primordial power of ethnicity, the Tigrayan insurgency mushroomed relatively suddenly. With the exception of the Kebessa, it started essentially as a Risorgimento nationalism. Wolqait, Tselemti and Raya Qobo, Tigray's "Alsace and Lorraine," were reclaimed from neighboring*

*Gondar and Wello administrative regions. The primordialby-dictated Tigrayan insurgency, thus, emerged as a prodigious movement that enabled Eritreans to realize their otherwise impossible aspirations.*<sup>39</sup>

Under this quoted passage, contemporary Tigrayan nationalist actors largely envisioned their political community as lying south of the Mereb River, explicitly excluding Eritrea. Driven by the deep-rooted force of ethnic identity, the Tigrayan insurgency emerged rapidly, resembling a form of *Risorgimento* nationalism aimed at unifying fragmented territories into a cohesive political entity. He notes that the Tigrayan community south of the Mereb regarded reclaimed borderlands, such as Wolqait, Tselemti, and Raya Qobo, as Tigray's "Alsace and Lorraine," territories taken from the neighboring pre-1991 Gondar and Wello administrative regions on the basis of ethnolinguistic criteria contemplated by the Ethiopian current constitutional framework. He further notes that this south-focused mobilization simultaneously enabled Eritreans to pursue political aspirations in the northern highlands, aspirations that would likely have been far more difficult to realize had the Tigrayan nationalist project extended across the Mereb River.

13). Late G.W.B. Huntingford under his work titled, "THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF ETHIOPIA: From the First Century AD to 1704", provides:

*"Northern Ethiopia from the time of Zar'a Ya'a qobl till 1580 was divided between two viceroys called Bahērnāgas and Tēgre Mākṵännēn. The northern part, which included the coast, comprised Hamasen, Bur, Sarawe, and Sire, and was under the Bahērnāgas, whose capital was at Dēbarwa in Hamasen; this was the 'Barnagais province of Alvares. The southern part, eventually extending to Wag and Wajrat, was under the Tēgre Mākṵännēn, governor of Tēgre', and was the Tigrimahom province' of Alvares. The dividing line between the two territories was the river Marab in XVI (Alvares, P). 139)." <sup>40</sup>*

He also posits that "*territories of the Bahērnāgas merged with those of the Tēgre Makṵännēn between 1580 and 1588, HSD;*"<sup>41</sup> He further notes that Tēgre Mahon (Makṵännēn) is a little district of the kingdom of Tigre. Furthermore, he provides: "*Ezana would appear to have had control over the country comprised in the provinces of Sire, Tēgre, Agame, Tamben, Gar'alta, Hawzen, Sera'e, Manberta, Enderta, and Sabart, that is, ten of the seventeen provinces that in the middle ages formed the territory of the Tēgre Makṵännēn. The southern provinces of Tēgre do not seem to be represented in these two charters: Lasta, Salawa, Wajrat, Bora, Arab, and Abargale These are the seventeen provinces that in the middle ages formed the territory of the Tēgre Makṵännēn.*"<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>. Ibid., pp. 223.

<sup>40</sup>. G.W.B. Huntingford, "The Historical Geography of Ethiopia: From the First Century AD to 1704", (edited by Richard Pankhurst), published by the Oxford University Press, New York, 1989. Pp. 97.

<sup>41</sup>. Ibid., Pp. 99

<sup>42</sup>. Ibid., Pp. 61.

The historical depth of Tigray as a political and territorial entity is established by pre-colonial sources. G.W.B. Huntingford's historical geography elucidates the administrative structure of northern Ethiopia from the 15th to 17th centuries. During this period, the region was divided between two major viceroys: the Bahērnāgas, ruling the northern coastal highlands (encompassing Hamasen, Serae, and Sire), and the Tēgre Mākwännēn, governing the southern heartland province of Tigrē. Critically, the boundary between these two viceroyalties was the Mareb River, the very line that later became the colonial border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This demonstrates that the Mareb was historically an internal administrative demarcation within the Abyssinian state, giving rise to the term Mareb Mellash ("Beyond the Mareb") to denote the northern district.

Furthermore, Huntingford lists the core provinces of the Tēgre Mākwännēn, including Sire, Agame, Tembien, and Enderta, which correspond directly to the core Tigrinya speaking districts documented in later centuries. He also notes the territory's historical expansion to include areas like Wajrat (Wojjerat). This medieval framework is essential for two reasons. First, it provides the deep historical precedent for the "great Tigray province or kingdom" referenced by 19th and 20th-century observers. Second, it definitively shows that the modern Ethio-Eritrean border is the fossilization of an ancient internal provincial boundary, not a reflection of primordial ethnic or cultural separation. The unity of the Tigrinya highlands across this line is, therefore, not a modern political claim but a restoration of a long-standing historical and administrative reality.

14). Wolf Leslau<sup>43</sup>, "DOCUMENTS TIGRIGNA (ÉTHIOPIEN SEPTENTRIONAL) GRAMMAIRE ET TEXTES PAR" provides:

*"LA LANGUE TIGRIGNA*

*La langue tigrigna est à considérer comme une forme évoluée du guèze (éthiopien ancien) ou d'un dialecte très proche du guèze. Cette langue a subi au cours des siècles l'influence d'autres langues sémitiques d'Éthiopie (amharique et tigré) d'une part et de langues couchitiques d'autre part.*

*Il n'y a pas de langue commune tigrigna; il se présente plusieurs formes dialectales très proches les unes des autres. Ces différences sont aussi bien du domaine de la phonétique, de la morphologie et de la syntaxe que du domaine du lexique; mais tous les gens parlant le tigrigna se comprennent entre eux.*

*La littérature écrite du tigrigna date de la colonisation italienne. Elle se limite à quelques ouvrages de caractère religieux et à des traductions des Évangiles. Par ailleurs, des savants occidentaux ont recueilli de la bouche d'informateurs indigènes quelques exemples de la littérature populaire en prose et en poésie.*

*Le nom de cette langue « tigrigna » (tagrāññā) ou « tigray » (tagray) est un dérivé du nom Tigré, nom d'une des régions où cette langue est parlée.*

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<sup>43</sup>. Wolf Leslau (born November 14, 1906 in Poland; died November 18, 2006) was a linguist scholar and a specialist of Semetic languages and one of the foremost authorities on Semetic languages of Ethiopia. In 1946, he travelled to Ethiopia to study previously unrecorded and unstudied Semetic languages of Ethiopia.

*Le tigrigna est parlé dans une partie de l'Érythrée et dans une partie de l'Éthiopie septentrionale, notamment dans les régions de Hamasen, Akkele Gouzay, Seraé, Dembelas, Chiré, Adiabo, Wolkayt, Woldebba, Tsellemti, Tigré proprement dit, Agamé et Haramât, Gberalta, Tembien, Enderta et Wogerat.*

*Le tigrigna est une des langues du groupe sémitique éthiopien. Font partie de ce groupe:*

*I. Éthiopien septentrional:*

*a) le « guèze », éthiopien ancien conservé par l'usage religieux*

*b) le « tigré » (au Nord du tigrigna)*

*c) le « tigrigna ».*

*II. Éthiopien méridional :*

*a) l' « ambarique »*

*b) le « gafat », langue actuellement disparue*

*c) l' « argobba »*

*d) le « harari »*

*e) les dialectes « gouragué ».*

*Le tigrigna s'écrit en caractères éthiopiens. L'écriture n'est pas étudiée dans ce livre étant donné que celui-ci s'occupe uniquement de la langue parlée. On se référera à l'exposé de Marcel Cohen, *Traité de langue ambarique*, p. 17-27."<sup>44</sup>*

The following passage is an English translation of the quoted text; the original French appears in the cited work.

#### "THE TIGRIGNA LANGUAGE

*The Tigrigna language is to be considered as an evolved form of Ge 'ez (ancient Ethiopian) or of a dialect very close to Ge 'ez. Over the centuries, this language has been influenced, on the one hand, by other Ethiopian Semitic languages (Amharic and Tigré), and on the other hand by Cushitic languages.*

*There is no single common Tigrigna language; rather, several dialectal forms exist that are very close to one another. These differences concern phonetics, morphology, and syntax as well as vocabulary; nevertheless, all people who speak Tigrigna understand one another.*

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<sup>44</sup>. Wolf Leslau, "DOCUMENTS TIGRIGNA (ÉTHIOPIEN SEPTENTRIONAL), GRAMMAIRE ET TEXTES PAR", PARIS LIBRAIRIE C. KLINCKSIECK II, RUE DE LILLE, II, 1941 TOUS DROITS RÉSERVÉS. Pp. 1-2.

*The written literature of Tigrigna dates from the Italian colonization. It is limited to a few works of a religious nature and to translations of the Gospels. Moreover, Western scholars have collected from the mouths of indigenous informants a few examples of popular literature in prose and poetry.*

*The name of this language, "Tigrigna" (ṭagrāññā) or "Tigray" (ṭagrāy), is derived from the name Tigré, which is the name of one of the regions where this language is spoken.*

*Tigrigna is spoken in part of Eritrea and in part of northern Ethiopia, notably in the regions of Hamasen, Akkele Gouzay, Seraé, Dembelas, Chiré, Adiabo, Wolkayt, Woldebba, Tsellemti, Tigré proper, Agamé, Haramât, Gheralta, Tembien, Enderta, and Wogerat.*

*Tigrigna is one of the languages of the Ethiopian Semitic group. The following belong to this group:*

*I. Northern Ethiopian:*

- a) "Ge'ez," ancient Ethiopian, preserved through religious usage*
- b) "Tigré" (to the north of Tigrigna)*
- c) "Tigrigna".*

*II. Southern Ethiopian:*

- a) "Amharic"*
- b) "Gafat," a language now extinct*
- c) "Argobba"*
- d) "Harari"*
- e) the "Guragé" dialects.*

*Tigrigna is written in Ethiopian characters. Writing is not studied in this book, since it deals solely with the spoken language. Reference will be made to the presentation by Marcel Cohen, *Treatise on the Amharic Language*, pp. 17–27."*

This excerpt provides a concise historical and geographical analysis of the Tigrinya language. It specifically states that Tigrigna is spoken in part of Eritrea and in part of northern Ethiopia, (Tigray Region and beyond): Dembelas, Chiré, Adiabo, Wolkayt, Woldebba, Tsellemti, Tigré proper, Agamé, Haramât, Gheralta, Tembien, Enderta, and Wogerat. This list precisely outlines the historical core area. Historically, Tigrinya is presented as a modern, living continuation of the ancient Ge'ez civilization, shaped by regional linguistic contacts. Its written tradition is young, but it rests upon an older oral foundation.

Geographically, it is firmly rooted in the central highlands of Eritrea and the Tigray region of Ethiopia, with its speech community defining a specific cultural and historical zone within the Horn of Africa. Its classification underscores its deep roots in the region's Semitic language family. It also notes that the name "Tigrigna" or "Tigray" is derived from "Tigré," the name of a core region where

the language is spoken. (Note: Today, "Tigré" typically refers to the related language in Eritrea and Sudan, while "Tigray" is the Ethiopian northern region.)

15). Bahru Zewde in his work titled, "A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991", provides that:

*"In Tegre, a term denoting the Marab Melash ('the land to the north of the Marab river') and the Red Sea coastal region, as well as present-day Tegray, a strong ruler emerged in the person of Ras Walda-Sellase, at about the beginning of the nineteenth century."*<sup>45</sup>

The quoted text defined "Tegre" as a term encompassing three distinct geographical areas: (1) Marab Melash, (2) the Red Sea Coastal region, and (3) the present day Tigray region, including the Western, North-Western and Southern Tigray territories. It demonstrates that the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory is historically larger than the modern administrative region of Tigray regional state, and that its division is a result of later political events, not natural or ancient separations. Therefore, this textual description indeed demonstrates that the Tigrinya speaking people ethno-linguistic territories: the Marab Melash ('the land to the north of the Marab River') and the Red Sea coastal region, as well as the present-day Tigray Regional State, including the Western Tigray, North Western and the Southern Tigray Zones.

In addition to this, Bishop Samuel Gobat<sup>46</sup> under his work, Journal of A Three Years Residence in Abyssinia, provides that:

*"Tigrai and Amhara are separated partly by the lofty mountains of Samen, which stretch themselves in a gigantic range, to the majestic Laota."*<sup>47</sup>

Bishop Samuel Gobat, in his *Journal of a Three Years' Residence in Abyssinia*, notes that "Tigrai and Amhara are separated partly by the lofty mountains of Samen, which stretch themselves in a gigantic range, to the majestic Laota." Samuel Gobat, Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, clearly indicated the Tigrai province extended to the Semen Mountains, noting that Tigrai and Amhara were separated "partly by the lofty mountains of Samen, which stretch themselves in a gigantic range, to the majestic Laota." This description indicates that the **western territories of Tigrai, south of the Tekeze River, extended westward up to the Semien Mountains**, forming a natural

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<sup>45</sup>. Bahru Zewde, "A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991", (Edited by DONALD D. DONHAM & WENDY JAMES), published by Addis Ababa University Press, Addis Ababa, originally published in 1991. Pp. 15

<sup>46</sup>. In 1830 Samuel Gobat (born in 1799, later Anglican Bishop at Jerusalem) went to Abyssinia and visited Gondar the first European to do so since the days of Bruce. He published in 1834 a Journal of 'Three Years' in Abyssinia, but a year later he returned to Ethiopia accomplished by three protestant missionaries.

<sup>47</sup>. Samuel Gobat, Journal of A Three Years Residence in Abyssinia, published in London in 1850. Pp. 37.

boundary with Amhara. Historically, these regions were considered part of the **Tigrai province**, reflecting the province's traditional western extent prior to the 19th-century political reorganizations.

16). Gazetteer of the World, Dictionary of Geographical Knowledge, provides:

*"TIGRE, a province of Abyssinia, which has given name to almost all the NE districts of that country. It lies between the parallels or 12° and 30 N. and is composed in great measure of an elevated plateau supported by steep and lofty mountains, and intersected with fertile valleys and plains. The Tacazze, which intersects it in a N and W course, receives nearly all its streams. On the E it reaches in part to the sea, from which, however, it is to a great extent epanatec by a salt and sandy plain. Its principal subdivisions are Sereh, T. Proper, Tembien, Enderta, Wojerat, Adana, Agami, Serawi, Samen, Salo, Woggam, Waldabba, and Walkayt."*<sup>48</sup>

According to the *Gazetteer of the World*, Tigre was a province of Abyssinia encompassing much of the northeastern highlands. It consisted of an **elevated plateau, steep mountains, fertile valleys, and plains**, with the Tacazze River flowing through it. Its principal subdivisions included Sereh, T. Proper, Tembien, Enderta, Wojerat, Adana, Agami, Serawi, Samen, Salo, Woggam, Waldubba, and Walkayt. Historically, these territories correspond to the **Tigrinya-speaking highlands**, including the present-day Tigray region and the Eritrean highlands ("Baharnagasch"), and extended westward to **Walkayt, Waldubba, Tselemti, Tsegede**, and the Semien Mountains, marking the traditional western boundary of the province.

17). Michael Russell, under his renowned book titled, "Nubia and Abyssinia: Comprehending their Civil History, Antiquities, Arts, Religion, Literature, and Natural History" provides that:

*"Of these we shall have occasion to take some notice in the sequel; meantime we proceed to give a tabular view of the Abyssinian provinces, which will serve much better than the most minute description to illustrate the distribution, the extent, and the relative position of the several parts of that great empire."*

#### I. AMHARA.

- |                   |               |
|-------------------|---------------|
| 1. Amhara proper. | 5. Begemeder. |
| 2. Dembea.        | 6. Angote.    |
| 3. Damot.         | 7. Walaka.    |

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<sup>48</sup>. Gazetteer of the World, Dictionary of Geographical Knowledge 1856. COMPILED FROM THE MOST RECENT AUTHORITIES, AND FROM A BODY OF MODERN GEOGRAPHY, PHYSICAL, POLITICAL, STATISTICAL HISTORICAL, AND ETHNOGRAPHICAL. Pp. 2.

4. *Gojam.*

8. *Marrabet.*

II. TIGRE.

- |                                |                            |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. <i>Tigre proper.</i>        | 7. <i>Avergale.</i>        |
| 2. <i>Agame.</i>               | 8. <i>Samen.</i>           |
| 3. <i>Enderta.</i>             | 9. <i>Temben.</i>          |
| 4. <i>Wojjerat, or Wogara.</i> | 10. <i>Sire, or Shire.</i> |
| 5. <i>Wofila.</i>              | 11. <i>Wolkayt.</i>        |
| 6. <i>Lasta.</i>               | 12. <i>Waldubba.</i>       |

III. MIDRE BAHARNAGASH, OR THE DISTRICT OF THE PRINCE OF THE SEA.

- |                    |                     |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>Masuah.</i>  | 6. <i>Ampilla.</i>  |
| 2. <i>Arkeeko.</i> | 7. <i>Madir.</i>    |
| 3. <i>Weab.</i>    | 8. <i>Arena.</i>    |
| 4. <i>Zullo.</i>   | 9. <i>Duroro</i>    |
| 5. <i>Tubbo.</i>   | 10. <i>Jarvela.</i> |

IV. INDEPENDENT STATES IN THE SOUTH

- |                     |                    |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. <i>Shoa.</i>     | 7. <i>Cambat.</i>  |
| 2. <i>Efat.</i>     | 8. <i>Hurrur.</i>  |
| 3. <i>Gooderoo.</i> | 9. <i>Gidm.</i>    |
| 4. <i>Enarea.</i>   | 10. <i>Adel.</i>   |
| 5. <i>Gurague.</i>  | 11. <i>Bali.</i>   |
| 6. <i>Kaffa.</i>    | 12. <i>Dawaro.</i> |

*We do not think it expedient to encumber our pages with the more minute geographical distribution, which are not only expressed in language extremely uncouth, but are moreover applied to districts whose limits are still undetermined. The curious reader will find numerous details in the works of Bruce, Salt, Lord Valentia, Niebuhr, and Malte Brun, Darkened however by an unnecessary variation in the nomenclature, and sometimes, we are sorry to add, by the cloud of ignorance and of controversy.*"<sup>49</sup>

This passage from Michael Russell's *Nubia and Abyssinia* (1833) provides a provincial framework of the Ethiopian Empire around the early 19th century, just before significant European colonial influence. He explicitly lists "Tigre proper," Agame, Wojjerat, or Wogara, Wofila, Lasta, Enderta, Abergale, Semein, Sire, or Shire, Wolkayt, Waldubba and Temben" as distinct provinces under the

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<sup>49</sup>. Michael Russell, "Nubia and Abyssinia: Comprehending their Civil History, Antiquities, Arts, Religion, Literature, and Natural History", published by J. & J. Harper, No. 82 Cliff Street, New York, 1833. pp. 79.

broader "Tigre" kingdom. This shows the pre-colonial administrative division within the culturally contiguous Tigrinya speaking highlands. The division between north and south is an older administrative reality.

In analytical terms, however, this passage demonstrates that historical Ethiopian provinces were flexible administrative constructs with uncertain boundaries, created for purposes of governance and description rather than as ethnically or linguistically homogeneous territories. Consequently, linguistic groups, such as Tigrinya speakers, were distributed across multiple provinces, and provincial names should not be read as primordial ethnic homelands. In simpler terms, the author suggests that Ethiopian provinces were rough, pragmatic groupings whose borders were unclear and contested, whose nomenclature varied among authors, and whose organization was not based on ethnicity or language. This interpretation strongly supports earlier arguments concerning the misalignment between administrative boundaries and ethno-linguistic territories.

More specifically, the passage conveys, the author believes that very detailed territorial descriptions are written in awkward or unclear language, applied to districts whose boundaries are not clearly defined, geographical knowledge was incomplete and contested, and existing sources are inconsistent. Even respected authors (Bruce, Salt, Valentia, Niebuhr, Malte-Brun), who use different names for the same places, apply the same names to different areas and sometimes contradict one another. In short, the author conveys that going into too much geographical detail is not helpful because the names and boundaries of districts are unclear, inconsistent, and disputed in the available sources. Readers who want those details can consult other works, but they should be aware that these accounts are often confusing and unreliable.

Michael Russell in the same work further states that:

*"In recent times the most important section of the empire is that which embraces the province of Tigré, bounded, as Mr. Salt informs us, on the north by the Bekla, Boja, Takuke and several wild tribes of Shangalla; on the west by the mountains of Samen; and by the Denakil, Doba, and Galla territories, on the east and south; including not less than four degrees of latitude, and nearly an equal extent in a longitudinal direction. The high range of the Samen hills, stretching from Waldubba to the south of Lasta, together with the line of the Tacazze, which flows in a north-easterly course along its base, sufficiently point out the natural boundary between Tigré and Ambara.*

*This large and very populous district contains a number of cities which make a considerable figure in the history of Ethiopia, more especially Axum, Dixan, Chelicut, and Antalo. The first of these was the ancient residence of the Abyssinian monarchs, who still go thither for the purpose of being crowned. .... On the eastern frontier stands Antalo, which during the visit of Mr. Salt was the seat of government, being the residence of the viceroy Ras Welled Selased. It consists of about a thousand hovels constructed of mud and straw .... Generally speaking, Tigré is fertile and well peopled; but the inhabitants are described as a very ferocious, bloodthirsty, corrupt, and perfidious race.*

*On the western side of the provinces now described are Sire, Samen, Wogara, which is sometimes called Wojjerat, Walkayt, and Waldubba. This last is occasionally extolled as one of the granaries of Abyssinia. .... Father Tellez*

*imagines that the loftiest of these summits are higher than the Alps; but we find none of them capped with snow, except perhaps those of Saimen in the province of Tigré, and of Namera in the district of Gojom.*"<sup>50</sup>

Based on the historical and geographical analysis of this text, we can reconstruct the historical boundaries, internal divisions, and socio-political significance of Tigré province in the early 19th century mountains of Somen (Simien Mountains, though Simien is in modern-day North Gondar, indicating the boundary extended into what is now Amhara region). The text describes that Sire, Samen (Simien), Wogam/Wojerat, Walkayt, and Waldubba districts were populated predominantly by Tigrinya-speaking people, governed by local chiefs (Shum) under the authority of the Ras of Tigré. This historical snapshot reveals Tigré as a powerful, populous, and strategically vital province within the Ethiopian Empire, with clearly defined internal subdivisions and strong cultural cohesion rooted in the Tigrinya language and Orthodox Christian tradition.

18). Henry Salt<sup>51</sup>, *A Voyage to Abyssinia: And Travels into the Interior of that Country*, provides:

*"The kingdom of Tigre is bounded by the Belka, Boja, Takue, and several wild tribes of Shangalla on the north; by the mountains of Samen on the west; and by the Danakil, Doba, and Galla, on the east and south; comprehending and extent of about four degrees in latitude, and about the same in a longitudinal direction, and forming in shape the irregular figure of a trapezium."*<sup>52</sup>

This description indicates that, according to early 19th-century European geographical understanding, the kingdom of Tigre extended north to Belka, Boja, Takue, and Shangalla tribes; west to the Semien Mountains; east to the Danakil; and south to Doba and Galla territories. Salt's account demonstrates that the **Tigrean kingdom's boundaries were not defined solely by the Tekeze River**, as some later claims suggest, and that the historical administrative and territorial extent of Tigre was broader and more irregular than a simple river boundary would imply.

19). Henry Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia: And Travels into the Interior of that Country*, provides:

*"Above Temben, to the westward of Axum, is situated the province of Shire, which forms a pretty sharp angle with the Tecazze in the latitude of 14°; and on the opposite side of the river extend still farther westward, the districts of Waldubba and Walkayt, both of which continue to pay tribute to the Ras."*<sup>53</sup>

Henry Salt, in *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (1814), notes that the districts of Waldubba and Walkayt, located west of the Tecazze River, continued to pay tribute to the Ras of Tigray. This observation

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<sup>50</sup>. Ibid. pp. 74-78.

<sup>51</sup>. Salt was an English diplomat, and Egyptologist who traveled extensively in Ethiopia in the early 19th century.

<sup>52</sup>. Henry Salt., "Voyage to Abyssinia: And Travels into the Interior of that Country", 1814. pp. 378 and 381.

<sup>53</sup>. Id.

reflects early nineteenth-century European geographical and political understandings, in which “Tigre” was conceived not as a narrowly bounded province but as a broad regional sphere of influence. Salt’s description situates Tigre as a major political entity whose authority extended westward beyond the Tecazze through tributary relationships, including Waldubba and Walkayt. While this does not imply uniform or permanent territorial incorporation, it indicates that these districts were historically linked to the Tigrayan polity rather than being peripheral or marginal areas.

In this period, European accounts often treated the Tigrayan highlands and the Eritrean plateau associated with the Baharnägash as part of a wider northern highland nexus, though administrative boundaries and political authority remained fluid. There is also an image from the 1814 publication “A Voyage to Abyssinia” by Henry Salt, historically the Walkayt region paid tribute to the Ras of Tigray. Thus, the territorial organization of “Tigre” included the Eritrean highlands (“Baharnagasch”) and the current Tigray region, comprising the districts of “Walkayt” and “Waldubba” in the westward in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

20). Cooke Anthony Charles, *Routes in Abyssinia*, provides:

*"Lasta is also classed with Tigre. This province which has also given its name to the kingdom, of which it now forms part, is bounded on the west by the Tehera-Agous, on the north by the Ejjon-Galla, on the south-east by Angot, and on the north by Bora and Ouofila."*<sup>54</sup>

Historically, Cooke’s description reflects an early nineteenth-century European understanding of “Tigre” as a broad regional designation rather than a narrowly bounded province. Cooke’s observation that Lasta was “classed with Tigre” suggests a perceived political or geographical association between these regions. The boundaries he attributes to Lasta, extending toward Angot in the southeast, indicate that contemporary European writers conceived the Tigrean sphere as reaching well into the northern Ethiopian highlands. While Angot lies south of Doba, and thus suggests a southern extension of Tigre’s perceived influence, the precise southern limits of this influence remain fluid and cannot be fixed with certainty to specific river boundaries on the basis of this text alone. Cooke’s classification of Lasta with Tigre places the western extent of the Tigrean region, as understood by early European writers, at the Tehera-Agous.

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<sup>54</sup>. Cooke Anthony Charles, *Routes in Abyssinia*, printed, 1867, Published by Harrison and Sons, London (Presented to the House of Commons, in pursuance of their Adress Dated November 26, 1867). Pp. 187).

21). Kiflu Tadesse<sup>55</sup> in his work, *The generation*, volume 3 (ያ ትውልድ፣ ቅጽ 3) provides a crucial observation: 'የወልቃይት ሕዝብ የሚናገረው ትግርኛ ቋንቋ ቢሆንም የሚዘፍነው ግን በአማርኛ ነው።'<sup>56</sup> It may be translated as: *Although the people of Wolkayt speak Tigrinya language, they sing in Amharic.*

This quoted passage is significant because it comes from an Amhara source and explicitly identifies Tigrinya as their spoken language. The text clearly indicates that the Wolkayt community's language is Tigrinya. Tadesse, an Amhara witness, confirms they speak Tigrinya. The fact that they sing in Amharic is a separate cultural practice that does not contradict their native language, Tigrinya. The act of singing in Amharic is not a communal, identity defining practice of the Wolkayt people. The fact they sometimes sing in Amharic is a separate cultural phenomenon, influenced by popular media, state institutions, or itinerant artists, and does not negate their primary linguistic identity. Singing in Amharic is an individual or adopted practice, not proof that Amharic is their native tongue. Therefore, Tadesse's testimony actually supports that the Wolkayt people are fundamentally Tigrinya speakers.

In this regard, the testimony of Mekonnen Zelelew is definitive. A well-known political figure born and raised in Wolkayt, he stated in 2018: "*My parents were foundational members of this community for generations. I have heard two claims: 'Wolkayt is Amhara; Wolkayt has never spoken Tigrinya.'* Both are false. *Wolkayt has been inhabited by Tigrinya speakers from the beginning. It was the Amharic language that came into Wolkayt—not the other way around. Amharic arrived with policemen, teachers, and especially with the Azmari [traditional vocalists] from Gondar... The people of Wolkayt have a culture distinct from the Amhara.*"<sup>57</sup>

This linguistic and cultural distinction is visible in daily life. An elder will not dance Eskista (a characteristically Amhara dance) even at his own son's wedding; he will observe it from his seat. Yet, that same elder will dance with joy to Tigrinya music. This instinctive cultural affinity demonstrates that it is wrong to claim Tigrinya is not indigenous to Wolkayt. The historical record supports this: Amharic was introduced systematically only in the last century by state functionaries and cultural influences, while Tigrinya has been the territory's spoken language since time immemorial.

22). An Africa Watch Report, *Evil Days: 30 years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*, states:

*"Geographical Terms*

*Ethiopia is beset by conflicting territorial claims; the status of Eritrea is only the best-known instance. Eritrea is referred to as a "territory", a word that aspires to be neutral between the conflicting claims that it is a province and that it is by right an independent country. In addition, the provinces that existed under Haile Selassie had their boundaries*

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<sup>55</sup>. Kiflu Tadesse was EPRP member, an Amhara by ethnicity, and he was resides in the districts of western Tigray, particularly Wolkayt district in 1970's.

<sup>56</sup>. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation (ያ ትውልድ)* Volume 3, University Press of America. pp. 88.

<sup>57</sup>. 'Interview with SBS Radio on ማስጠንቀቂያ ስለ ወልቃይት [Warning about Wolkayt]', available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocCiMfXdm7o>

*and names revised on certain occasions, became "administrative regions" after the revolution, and then were completely reconstituted in 1987, with the introduction of a larger number of regions and some autonomous zones. This report used the term "province" to refer to geographical and administrative entities such as Harerghe and Shewa in the form in which they existed up to 1987. "Gonder" is used for the province formerly known as "Begemdir". There are conflicting claims as to the geographical extent of Tigray. Purely for convenience, the smaller government-defined Tigray is used in this report, the Tigrinya-speaking areas of north Gonder and Wollo claimed by the TPLF are generally referred to as the "borderlands" of Tigray. The Post-1987 names and boundaries are not used, because they were instituted only very late in the day, and only incompletely. "The Ogaden" is used to refer to the lowland area of Harerghe, Bale and eastern Sidamo inhabited by ethnic Somalis, most of whom belong to the Ogaden clan."*<sup>58</sup>

This text indicates that Ethiopia is beset by conflicting territorial claims; the status of Eritrea is only the best-known instance. The name Eritrea is referred to as a "territory", a term that seeks to be neutral between the contradictory claims that it is a province and that it is by right an independent country. Besides, the provinces that were existed under the Imperial regime, Haile Selassie, had their borders and designations reviewed on certain times, became "administrative regions" following the revolution from the Italian colonial occupation in 1942. And then they were entirely reconstructed in 1987, with the introduction of 25 regions and five autonomous regions. For the first time, Gondar as a provincial name was employed in 1946 for the province formerly known as "Begemdir & Semien" after the liberation of Ethiopia from the Italian colonial occupation in 1942. There was no a province named Gondar prior to 1946 in Ethiopian history.

23). An Africa Watch Report September 1991 also states:

*"Tropical livestock disease in 1983 in southern Tigray province resulted in the loss of more than 60 percent of the cattle in the districts of Endameboni, Alamata and Raya-Azebo."*<sup>59</sup>

Likewise, Ernesta Cerulli, Taylor & Francis, "Peoples of South-West Ethiopia and Its Borderland: North Eastern Africa Part III", provides:

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<sup>58</sup>. Evil Days: 30 years of War and Famine in Ethiopia (An Africa Watch Report September 1991, Pp. v)

<sup>59</sup>. Evil Days: 30 years of War and Famine in Ethiopia (An Africa Watch Report September 1991, Pp.18.

*"Concise, critical and (for its time) accurate, the Ethnographic Survey contains sections as follows: Doba are reported to have lived in Tigray Province in the 16th century."<sup>60</sup> "In many areas of Tigray the harvests were not so bad; Raya (eastern Tigray), Kobo (north Wollo), and Simien (north Gonder) are areas where grain surpluses existed too."<sup>61</sup>*

Based on ethnographic surveys, it is established that the Doba (Raya-Azebo and Raya-Kobo) are reported to have resided within the historical province of Tigre/Tigray in the 16th century. Thus, Raya-Azebo and Raya-Kobo were historically integral parts of the historical province of Tigre/Tigray as early as the sixteenth century. Taken together, these passages demonstrate that the territorial organization of the province of "Tigre" included the Raya-Azebo and Raya-Kobo (Doba) territories in its southern extent prior to September 1991. Consequently, this evidence clearly undermines the assertion that the political border between the Tigre province/kingdom and its adjoining province(s) was consistently and exclusively defined by the Takazze River along its entire course, both in the pre-modern Ethiopian state and in the modern period.

Furthermore, the Africa Watch Report September 1991 provides:

*"The Weyane in Tigray*

*Following the restoration of Haile Selassie after the defeat of the Italians in 1941, there was a revolt in Tigray. Known as the Weyane, this was the most serious internal threat that Haile Selassie faced. An alliance of the Oromo semi-pastoralists of Raya Azebo, disgruntled peasants, and some local feudal lords, under the military leadership of a famous shifa, Haile Mariam Reda, the rebels nearly succeeded in overrunning the whole province. British aircraft had to be called in from Aden in order to bomb the rebels to ensure their defeat. While some of the aristocratic leaders, such as Ras Seyoum Mengesha, were treated gently and ultimately allowed to return and administer the recalcitrant province, there were reprisals against the ordinary people. Most notably, the Raya and Azebo Oromo were subjected to wholesale land alienation, and much of their territory transferred to the province of Wollo. This area was badly hit in subsequent famines, partly as a consequence."<sup>62</sup>*

The Africa Watch Report (September 1991) describes the Weyane revolt in Tigray following the restoration of Haile Selassie after the Italian defeat in 1941. The revolt represented the most serious internal challenge faced by Haile Selassie, with an alliance of Raya-Azebo Oromo semi-pastoralists, disgruntled peasants, and some local feudal lords under the leadership of Haile Mariam Reda nearly overtaking the entire province. British aircraft were brought from Aden to suppress the rebellion.

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<sup>60</sup>. Ernesta Cerulli, Taylor & Francis, "Peoples of South-West Ethiopia and Its Borderland: North Eastern Africa Part III", 2017 M02 10 -150 pages.

<sup>61</sup>. Evil Days: 30 years of War and Famine in Ethiopia (An Africa Watch Report September 1991, Pp. v). pp. 19

<sup>62</sup>. Evil Days: 30 years of War and Famine in Ethiopia (An Africa Watch Report September 1991, Pp. v). pp. 96

Although some aristocratic leaders, such as Ras Seyoum Mengesha, were treated leniently and reinstated to govern, ordinary populations suffered harsh reprisals. In particular, the Raya and Azebo Oromo communities experienced widespread land alienation, and much of their territory was transferred to the province of Wollo, contributing to long-term vulnerabilities, including severe impacts during subsequent famines.

24). "Ethiopia, A Country Study Federal Research Division Library of Congress" (Edited by Thomas P. Ofcansky and LaVerle Berry Research), completed July 1991, provides:

*"Discontent in Tigray*

*Overt dissidence in Tigray during Haile Selassie's reign centered on the 1943 resistance to imperial rule known as the Weyane. The movement took advantage of popular discontent against Amhara rule but was primarily a localized resistance to imperial rule that depended on three main sources of support. These were the semi-pastoralists of eastern Tigray, including the Azebo and Raya, who believed their traditional Oromo social structure to be threatened; the local Tigray nobility, who perceived their position to be endangered by the central government's growth; and the peasantry, who felt victimized by government officials and their militias. The course of the Weyane was relatively brief, lasting from May 22 to October 14, 1943. Although the rebels made some initial gains, the imperial forces, supported by British aircraft, soon took the offensive. Poor military leadership, combined with disagreements among the rebel leaders, detracted from the effectiveness of their efforts. After the fall of Mekele, capital of Tigray, on October 14, 1943, practically all organized resistance collapsed. The government exiled or imprisoned the leaders of the revolt. The emperor took reprisals against peasants suspected of supporting the Weyane. Although a military resolution of the Weyane restored imperial authority to Tigray, the harsh measures used by the Ethiopian military to do so created resentment of imperial rule in many quarters. This resentment, coupled with a long-standing feeling that Shewan Amhara rule was of an upstart nature, lasted through the end of Haile Selassie's reign. After Haile Selassie's demise in 1974, separatist feelings again emerged throughout Tigray."*<sup>63</sup>

25). John Markakis and Nega Ayele provide:

*"The province of Eritrea comprises the northern edge of the plateau and a large lowland area extending to the Sudan border on the west and north and the Red Sea on the east. The foot-hills and the lowland plains are inhabited by pastoral groups adhering to Islam and speaking languages not spoken on the plateau. The Eritrean portion of the plateau is the natural and historical extension of Tigre province, and is inhabited mainly by members of the dominant northern national group, who are Christian and speak Tigrinya. A minority of Musiims are also to be found on the plateau. Massawa has long been the major port in the area, coveted by every power which sought to control trade in the Red Sea. It thus happened that the coastal area and Massawa passed successively der the control of Arabs, Ottomans,*

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<sup>63</sup>. Ethiopia, A Country Study Federal Research Division Library of Congress Edited by Thomas P. Ofcansky and LaVerle Berry Research Completed July 1991 pp. 48.

*Egyptians and Italians. The last moved on to the plateau towards the end of the nineteenth century to establish the colony they named Eritrea.*"<sup>64</sup>

This passage explains that the province of Eritrea comprises both the northern edge of the Ethiopian plateau and extensive surrounding lowland areas extending west and north to the Sudan border and east to the Red Sea. While the lowlands are inhabited primarily by Muslim pastoral populations speaking languages distinct from those of the plateau, the Eritrean portion of the plateau is described as the natural and historical extension of Tigre province and is inhabited mainly by Tigrinya-speaking Christians, with a Muslim minority. The political entity known as Eritrea emerged in the late nineteenth century, when Italian colonial expansion moved from the Red Sea coast onto the plateau and consolidated these diverse regions into a single colonial territory.

26). G.W.B. Huntingford under his work titled, "THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF ETHIOPIA: From the First Century AD to 1704", provides:

*"Adaro is a village as big as Madhane Alem [Adwa] and is two days from Adwa. The 1st day one goes from Adwa to 'Agab Sire. This route is on the plateau (dagā) as far as Samama, which is 12 a day beyond 'Aqab Sire: this last village has lost much of its importance. (ND 372 HFD Semama district some 35 miles W of Adwa. 7 It is on the frontier of Sire [Siré which extends from there to the NNW and to the Takkaḗ. Adaro is the town of 'Add' Yabo IND 371 HFD Adi Abol Quab'ayn [Cecchi, Koberin, between the Obel and the Marabl is a qualla with some mountains. From 'Aaab Sire to Girariš is a day and a half: from Girariš. it is said to be four days' trave to the negro country.*

*'Sow'ate hanse is a negro town, said to be as big as from 'Adwa to Aksum [12 miles.] Dajac Haylu set fire to it, and it took some weeks to burn.*

*'1st day: From 'Adwa to Gobedra, passing by Aksum in Tigray. It is an erme, and a stopping-place for salt-merchants. [About 4 miles from Aksum there is an ancient figure of a lioness incised on a rock here; Géod. 2 marks the place as Kabanat, lion sculpté sur le rocher'; it is known as the 'lion of Gobedra', Guida.] 2nd day: from Gobedra to 'Aqab Sire. 3rd day to 'Addi Gidad, a toll-post as at Aksum and at Agab Sire: this post has only about 15 goio (huts made of boughs). It is 25 miles from Gobedra, Guida.] On the 4th day the toll-post of May Taman (snake) is reached, and you sleep at the little hamlet of May Šibinni [ND 372 HFD Temen.] 5th day: toll-post at Dambaguina [ND 375 HFD] where the traders separate, some going to Walgayt, and the rest to Gondar. The sleeping place is at Addi Anday, a small hamlet. 6th day to the Takkaḗ [15 miles.] 7th day to Gin'a in the territory of the monastery of Waldibba: Gin'a is in the hands of the negroes. It is a qualla, although the Takkaḗ flows between deep banks there as far as Čilačqañe: Gin'a is the name of a river larger than the Firaḗira which always flows like a torrent. 8th day to Masire (negro country), a river as big as the Gin'a and flowing like it.*

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<sup>64</sup>. John Markakis and Nega Ayele, "Class and Revolution in Ethiopia", published by the Red Sea Press, 1986. Pp. 61.

*You sleep at May Si'e. 9th day to May Dirabo where you eat. These last two rivers are as big and as swift-flowing as the previous ones except May Si'e. Between the two last is May Abba Naṣa. You sleep at the Zarema, which rises at Dibbababr [ND 374 HES Debivar.] It is the biggest of these rivers, and receives the Ansyā, the stream of 'Addi Arkay, May Dirabo, and Imba Abriham [the Ansyā was crossed N of Addi Arkay.] 10th day to Imba Abriham, a little river where a Thursday market is held. Sleep at Kualema, a large river which yields nothing to the Zarema in size or swiftness; it probably flows into the Takkaṣe [ND 374 HFD/HES Calima, rising on the E of the Walqāyt upland and flowing into the Takkaṣe.] 11th day: cross the Dinderik ua, a large tributary of the Kualema [ND 374 HFD Denderoqua, affluent of the Calima from the W.] The stopping place is at May Himur [ND 374 HFC Mai Cumer] where there is a Thursday market; sleep at Bartut, uninhabited, with a stream. 12th day: after climbing a steep ascent 'Addi Qabay is reached, a town as big as Adwa [ND 374 HFC scirella.] It is situated on a very broken plateau daga, and is the first place in Wolkayt; it has a Saturday market." 13th day: Širila, district and Monday market ND 374 HFC Scirella.] The same name is given to a river which probably flows into the Zarema: this river has 4 branches; the distance to 'Addi Qabay is half a day. [The Širila appears to flow into the Calima, though it is not named on ND 374; the Zarema is from Širila to 'Addi Qabay seems to be about right. One must too far to the E and is also E of the Calima. The distance imperfectly surveyed.] 14th day: six hours to Idaga silus on plateau, however, that the Calima-Zarema area is still very the plateau, with several villages: from there it is a day and a half to Qabā, a name to which is added the attribute of Idaga hamus because of the day of its market [Thursday]. All this is on plateau. Kulita has a Saturday market, and is half a day's journey from Idaga Hamus [ND 374 HFC.*

*Culita, about 17 miles from Scirella]. To the right, and on the extreme edge of Walqayt, is Durkutta, a town smaller than Adwa. Beyond is Aqat Warqi in Wolkayt. Below Durkutta is negro country: the negroes who work for the people of the plateau come into this last town, because the plateau people cannot face the heat of the qualla. [It is possible that Durkutta is meant for Birkuttan, some 25 miles N of Culita, between it and Tekkaṣi, and more than 2000 feet lower.] All the day's marches mentioned in this country to Wolkayt are made by traders with loaded donkeys: on this assessment it would take 5 days from Adwa to Digsā; [see footnote above; the journey from Adwa to Kulita seems to have been about 135 miles.]"<sup>65</sup>*

The journey is framed as a trade route from the heart of Tigray (Adwa, Aksum) into Wolkayt. The journey begins in the undisputed Tigrinya heartland (Adwa, Aksum, Gobedra). The description treats Wolkayt not as a foreign land but as a contiguous extension of the Tigrayan plateau (daga), with a familiar structure of markets, toll posts, and administrative points. Huntingford's translation of an historical itinerary provides concrete, place-by-place evidence of continuity. The journey from the Tigrayan heartland (Adwa) into Wolkayt is described seamlessly, using the same terminology (daga for plateau, Addi for village).

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<sup>65</sup>. G.W.B. Huntingford, "THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF ETHIOPIA: From the First Century AD to 1704", Edited by RICHARD PANKHURST Ethiopic spellings revised by DAVID APPELYARD. First published 1980. Pp. 259-261.

This historical narrative treats Wolkayt not as a foreign land but as the next district on the plateau, with familiar market patterns and topography. This source material strongly implies a shared cultural and linguistic space without needing to state it explicitly. The route proceeds through a series of named waypoints ('Aqab Sire, Addi Gidad, May Taman, Dambaguina, Addi Anday) to the Takkaze River. After crossing, it enters Wolkayt at 'Addi Qabay.

The entire narrative uses the same structure, listing towns, rivers, toll posts, and market days, without any indication of crossing a cultural or linguistic frontier. The traveler's frame of reference (e.g., "as big as Adwa") remains constant. The toponymic or names of places in Wolkayt follow clear Tigrinya: 'Addi/Adi (meaning "village" or "place of" in Tigrinya): 'Addi Qabay, 'Addi Anday, 'Addi Arkay, 'Addi Gidad. May (meaning "water/river" in Tigrinya): May Taman, May Šibinni, May Si'e, May Diraho, May Abba Naza, May Himur. Market day names, such as Idaga Hamus (Thursday Market), Idaga Sensis, Kulita (Saturday Market) are a market. Naming settlements for their market day is a hallmark of the Ethiopian highlands.

The prevalence of Tigrinya toponyms within Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta, and Tselemti constitutes primary linguistic evidence of the territory's deep-rooted Tigrayan identity. As noted by linguist Nancy Dorian<sup>66</sup>, geographical features are typically named in an indigenous language, reflecting a community's profound historical connection to a place. Names often commemorate significant events or embody mythological associations, making toponymy a durable archive of ethnic and cultural presence. Therefore, the fact that the landscape of Wolkait-Tsegede is inscribed with Tigrinya place names strongly affirms the longstanding indigeneity of Tigrinya speakers and the Tigrayan identity in the region. This cultural continuity is further evidenced by demographic data.

Despite prolonged periods of external pressure, including assimilationist policies from the then consecutive central governments of Ethiopia, the communities of Wolkait-Tsegede have preserved their Tigrinya language and cultural identity. This resilience is quantified in the 1994 National Census<sup>67</sup>, wherein a decisive majority (88.29%) of the population in Wolkait-Tsegede and adjacent territories self-identified as Tigrayan. Taken together, the linguistic evidence embedded in the land and the self-ascribed identity of its inhabitants provide a compelling, twofold argument for recognizing Wolkait-Tsegede as an integral part of the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic and cultural domain.

Furthermore, the text identifies the Takkaze River as a significant geographic feature, but not as a cultural boundary. The true boundary is repeatedly highlighted as that between the plateau (daga) and the lowlands (quolla) or "negro country." 'Addi Qabay, the first town in Wolkayt, is explicitly said

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<sup>66</sup>. Nancy Dorian, 'Linguistic and ethno linguistic fieldwork', in Joshua Fishman (ed), *Handbook of language and ethnic identity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (1999). pp. 32.

<sup>67</sup>. Central Statistical Authority, 1995, the 1994 population and housing census of Ethiopia: Results for Tigray region, volume I, Addis Ababa, Central Statistical Authority.

to be "situated on a very broken plateau (daga)." This places Wolkayt firmly within the same ecological and, by implication, cultural zone as Tigray. The route carefully notes where the plateau ends: "Below Durkutta [in Wolkayt] is negro country." And "Gin'a is in the hands of the negroes." This creates a binary: the named, market-town plateau vs. the generically labeled "negro country" lowlands. Wolkayt's settlements are part of the former category.

Therefore, the journey log does not need to state the language explicitly. The internal evidence is conclusive that the route proceeds seamlessly from Tigray into Wolkayt. The place names in Wolkayt are structurally and linguistically identical to those in Tigray (Tigrinya prefixes, market-day names). The societal description (markets, monasteries, plateau ecology) matches that of Tigray. The only stark boundary mentioned is the vertical one between the plateau (including Wolkayt) and the "negro country" lowlands. By meticulously describing a journey from the core Tigrinya-speaking Christian plateau (Adwa, Aksum) into Wolkayt, while consistently differentiating it from the "negro" lowlands, the author strongly implies that Wolkayt is inhabited by the same "people of the plateau." The social, economic, and geographic continuity is overwhelming.

Consequently, the logical and contextual inference is that the "plateau people" of Wolkayt are, like their neighbors in Adwa, Tigrinya-speaking populations. Consequently, based solely on the lines of the journey and the names of the places, Wolkayt is described as a geographic and cultural extension of the Tigrinya-speaking plateau.

Huntingford, in the same work, also stated as follows:

*"From Gäbäz, 'Ezana went to HMS, which may perhaps represent Hamasen, the northern province of Ethiopia. Here came all the tribes of Mētin, a name which recalls the Metine of the Cosmas inscription. The next names, /MW, read as presumably between Damo by Littmann, and MTT, were Hamasen and Sämen, which follows. From Sämen 'Ezana crossed the river' and /L king of WYLO came to him. This has generally been taken to represent Walqayt, the province west of Waldēbba (e.g. Littmann in DAE. vol. IV, p. 23). On the other hand, the name of the old kingdom of Waläqa east of Gojjam and the Abbay is written Waylaqa in a XV MS of the Gadlä Taklä Haymanot (Paris B.N. Éth. 56, fol. 13r., Conti Rossini, RRAL. 5 ser. 1894). This form contains the letters present in WYLQ. Although Waläqa is some two hundred miles or more south of Samen, it was a kingdom, whereas Walqayt was no more than a province; and I think that when all the topographical considerations are examined, Waläqa is as possible as Walqayt."*<sup>68</sup>

This passage highlights that Walqayt, the province west of Waldēbba, was historically a smaller administrative unit, as Littmann similarly observed. Huntingford further notes that the reading WYLQ could equally refer to Waläqa, a kingdom south of Semien, when all topographical considerations are taken into account, suggesting that both interpretations are plausible.

Moreover, he further provides that:

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<sup>68</sup>. Ibid., Pp. 52.

*"The heartland of Ethiopia consists of a high plateau, much of it 5000 to 7000 feet above the sea, exceedingly mountainous, rugged, and broken by innumerable deeply sunk rivers. On the W the plateau descends to a relatively low region with an average altitude of some 3000 feet, alternating with stretches of higher ground culminating in the mountains of Walqayt which are separated from the Sēmen mountain mass by lowland. All this western area is unhealthy; and though it could be reached from the Sudan and Egypt, the difficulties of terrain and the local inhabitants virtually ruled out this western approach as a regular route for entering Ethiopia."*<sup>69</sup>

Huntingford describes the western Ethiopian plateau as descending to a relatively low region with an average altitude of approximately 3,000 feet, interspersed with stretches of higher ground that culminate in the mountains of Walqayt, which are separated from the Semien mountain mass by lowlands. This entire western area is described as unhealthy, and although it could be reached from Sudan and Egypt, the difficulties of the terrain and the presence of local inhabitants effectively prevented this route from serving as a regular entry into Ethiopia.

27). G.W.B. Huntingford under his book titled, "THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF ETHIOPIA: From the First Century AD to 1704", further provides:

*"The final extent of Galla settlement was the whole of Shoa, eastern Amhara to the Baselo, extending north east wards into Angot, Wafla, and Doba, the northernmost being the Raya (Azebo) some 50 miles NE of Lake Ashange."*<sup>70</sup>

*"Angot is the province east of Lasta, in CGA VIII said to be ruled by Zan Amora, and tributary to the king Qeda, a lost province (GV., CB, 111, 145) is mentioned in the Heggä wäsēr, atä magēst in the record of the Ęras Baldäräba in conjunction with Doba, Dänkäle, and Bēgvēna (Bodl. Bruce 92, fol. 7v, Qč'a; Frankfurt 18 Varenbergh, Qedä). Statements in the Futuh that Qeda was in the country of Zubil (p. 405), which is Zobēl 15 miles SE of Alomätä, and that it was a frontier town of Tegre (p. 409), suggest that it may have been in fact the province later known as Doba, which was added to Tegre in 1679 (AJIB. 31/31)."*<sup>71</sup>

According to Huntingford, Alomätä likely functioned as a key frontier settlement of Tegre, situated just northwest of Qeda/Zubil, which lay 15 miles to the southeast. Positioned in this way, it would have played a strategic role in controlling movement and commerce between Tegre and neighboring regions, marking the last major Tigrayan settlement before entering a different political or cultural zone. This frontier area, encompassing what later became Doba and, further north, the Raya-Azebo region, gradually became contested but was eventually incorporated into the modern Tigrayan territorial construct. While Tegre proper was predominantly inhabited by Tigrinya-speaking Christian highlanders, Alomätä's frontier location suggests it may have served as a point of contact

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<sup>69</sup>. Ibid., Pp. 28.

<sup>70</sup>. Ibid., Pp. 138.

<sup>71</sup>. Ibid., Pp. 81.

and interaction with neighboring groups, including Afar, Argobba, and Amhara. Consequently, the historical region of Qeda (later known as Doba) can be understood as a southeastern frontier territory of Tegre, whose political affiliation was acknowledged prior to its formal annexation in 1679.

28). Stephen H. Longrigg, "A Short History of ERITREA", also provides:

*"The Axum kingdom corresponded very little with the modern state of Ethiopia. It did not, in its golden age, extend south-wards beyond the limits of the present Tigrai, where, and in modern Eritrea, may be found the descendants of its warriors. Its continuity with the later 'Solomonid' dynasty of Ethiopia is a vainglorious and political claim. The conversion of Axum to Christianity dates from the fourth century A.D., when missionaries of Syrian race, followed by saints and preachers in abundance, planted the quickly growing seed of that monophysite doctrine to which Ethiopia has ever since been faithful; but paganism long lingered in the farther areas, and in some Jewry held its own."*<sup>72</sup>

Stephen H. Longrigg, in *A Short History of Eritrea*, emphasizes that the Axumite kingdom's historical extent differed significantly from modern Ethiopia. During its golden age, Axum did not extend southwards beyond the present Tigray region, **meaning the southern limit of Axum roughly coincides with the** current southern boundary of Tigray. It included territories corresponding to modern Eritrea, where descendants of Axumite warriors are still found. Longrigg also notes that Axum converted to Christianity in the 4th century A.D., primarily via Syrian missionaries, establishing the monophysite Ethiopian Orthodox Church, though pagan and Jewish communities persisted in peripheral areas for some time.

Stephen H. Longrigg further provides:

*"4. The Ge'ez Languages*

*Among the many contributions made to Africa by the invading Semite was the language of south Arabian or, Sabaeen type (nearly related to Arabic and Hebrew) which they brought. It was known, from one of their own tribe names, as Ge'ez; and from it arose the presence, familiar to-day, of Semitic languages in Hamitic Ethiopia and Eritrea. The variety of these suggests firstly, that the recipient peoples may themselves have spoken a variety of Hamitic tongues; second, that Ge'ez was perhaps no in uniform dialect the language of the newcomers; thirdly, that it was imposed on the language of the Africans in varying degrees of thoroughness, according to the times and spaces of its spread, and to local resistances. Ge'ez at all events remained the only written language, and held (still holds) a unique position as the tongue of the Coptic Liturgy. It was also the common ancestor of the three languages spoken in modern times in northern Ethiopia and Eritrea- Amharic, Tigré, and Tigrinya.*

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<sup>72</sup>. Stephen H. Longrigg, "A Short History of ERITREA", published by Oxford University Press (1945). Pp. 13.

*Of these Tigrinya-unwritten until recent years-seems to represent the mixture of Ge'ez with the language of the Agau or Hamites of the northern plateau. Tigré is the simpler blend nearer to Ge'ez but to-day still unwritten and not intelligible to Tigrinya-speakers. It was produced by contact with the Beja peoples of the coast and of the northern hills. Amharic, a written language, but perhaps the farthest from the parent tongue, resulted, farther south in Ethiopia, from a mixture of a Ge'ez already heavily modified in Axum times, with Shoan or Sidama dialects. The language of the Axum empire, Greek in court circles, was probably a near approximation to Tigrinya among the people. Amharic became the State language of medieval and modern Ethiopia by reason of the southward re-orientation of the State. It is not spoken in modern Eritrea where instead the Christian plateau folk speak Tigrinya (uniformly with the Tigrai districts), and the Muslim hill and plain folk speak Tigré.*"<sup>73</sup>

Stephen H. Longrigg notes that the Ge'ez language, introduced by South Arabian Semites, became the written and liturgical language of the Axumite Empire and the ancestor of Amharic, Tigré, and Tigrinya. Tigrinya is spoken by the Christian highlanders of Eritrea and Tigray, arising from Ge'ez mixed with Agau/Hamitic languages; historically unwritten, whereas Amharic is developed farther south from heavily modified Ge'ez mixed with Shoan/Sidama dialects; became the state language of Ethiopia and is not spoken in Eritrea. Longrigg emphasizes that Tigrai (or Tigre) refers to the province/region of northern Ethiopia, while Tigrinya is the language of Tigray and Christian Eritrean highlands, avoiding common confusion between terms. This underscores Tigray's historical and linguistic continuity with the northern Eritrean highlands.

Moreover, he states that:

*"From the fourteenth to the eighteenth century Eritrea was a remote area of the empire, peopled in part by a race of Ethiopian type homogeneous with the Tigray, in part by strangers or whom the royal authority was slight or nothing. The plateau area of the territory kept, in general, its direct dependence on the central government until the eighteenth century was well advanced. The rule of the Negus in it was no more developed no more enlightened, than elsewhere; indeed, the special position of Eritrea as the coast-belt and gateway of Ethiopia-and the long occupation of that gateway by a foreign power deprived the central government of such monopoly of power as could otherwise have been theirs.*

*At no time did civilizing influences reach Eritrea from the Ethiopian State. The standards of daily life, at all levels, were of the lowest. Refinement, even the most elementary comfort was unknown. The existence of the common people was not far from savagery, power was everywhere abused, all rules of morality as of good taste were flouted. Ethiopia produced no literature, since the few dreary records of miracles, saints, or fevotions cannot deserve the name; and literacy was confined to a part of the priesthood. No science or form of knowledge was pursued; such mental energy as existed was wasted on the endless and half-grotesque disquisitions of theology, from which no peril of the State, no crying need of the times could divert the frequent synods at the royal Ethiopian art is a bar- court. barized offspring of Byzantine, with*

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<sup>73</sup>. Ibid., Pp. 16-17

*added (and often curious conventions of its own. Neither in painting nor architecture was any work produced capable of refining or uplifting the people."*<sup>74</sup>

This clearly indicates that from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century Eritrea was a remote area of the empire, peopled in part by a race of Ethiopian type homogeneous with the Tigray, in part by strangers or whom the royal authority was slight or altogether absent.

He also further clarified as follows:

*"2. The Major Immigrations, Fourteenth to Fifteenth Centuries*

*Tradition apart, what element of difference (we began by asking) can be established between Eritrean highlanders and Tigraean-or, less narrowly, what influences were at work, on the Eritrean plateau we are now considering, to give the Eritrean a distinctive character? The map supplies the evident and immediate answer.*

*"The nearer to the centre of the Ethiopian highlands and their vigorous intrusive peoples, the greater the stream of invasion therefrom, by groups or by single families. "The Tigray therefore, however separate in language from Amhara and Agau, was exposed (especially in a period of scanty population and no control) to constant influx from alien neighbours. This influx was different both in quality and in volume, we can assume, from the similar infiltration into Eritrea, though the latter was also recurrent and considerable scores of kinship groups in Eritrea to-day claim origin in an ancestor immigrant from Tembien Shiré, or Agamé, while many a group of virile Agau throughout the dark and middle ages sought new homes in the Hamasién or Sarae, bringing always his legend of high ancestry. This regular infusion of new blood from the Ethiopian highlands, including the Tigray itself, is an important element in the modern Eritrean. The largest and most obvious of Agau immigrations-that of the Bilein-occurred later than the age we are now considering.*

*It is balanced by similar immigration from the north-west. The Beja tribes, often referred to, are indeed a significant and little-changing element in Eritrean history, as age-long neighbours, occasional conquerors, and suppliers of an important man-power contribution. Indeed, the main prehistoric invasion of the Ethiopian plateau and coasts by Hamitic peoples- the creation of Ethiopia itself-was the work of peoples strictly similar to the Beja. The ninth-century Beja State (or States) on Eritrean soil was perhaps short lived; but it, and centuries of penetration before and after, could not but modify the Ethiopian-type peoples of the plateau to a sensible extent. Those of the plateau fringes-the pastoral peoples of the Nagfa hills and the Barka valley-were, in the fourteenth century, predominantly Beja in race, with some Ethiopian affinities; and later changes of legend, religion, and habit have not altered this. The Sambar tribes were an equal blend of both elements.*

*A special phase of Beja immigration is somehow contained in the traditions, which in outline are true to history, of the Belu clan clans. That these were of Beja origin is certain; that they entered Eritrea as pagans, and soon (at latest*

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<sup>74</sup>. Ibid., Pp. 25-26

by the fifteenth century) adopted Islam on the coast and Christianity territory were proud to claim this origin. It has indeed been suggested, but with little probability, that the ancient wells and terraces found in the northern hills are the relics of Belu occupation; others, associating the name Rom (by which these traces are designated) with its usual meaning of 'European', attribute them to inland enterprises of the Adulis or Cobaitu folk. In any case, the Belu were, from their first appearance, a dominant as well as a numerous element. Their traces are found in group of family origins, in tombs and place legends, throughout the high-lands.

Unquestionably they supplied, for long years, a ruling class to the Bani Amir tribesmen whose habitat was and is the western lowlands of Eritrea, while they assumed the leadership equally of the tribal elements along the coast. They settled in strength at Harkiko (known also for centuries as Dogono or Dohona), the village port just south of Massawa, and were in such predominance there that the incoming Turks, as we shall see, made immediate use of their authority. The nature of the Belu pretensions was similar to that of those Ethiopian families, whose like advent to fresh areas, in a position of command, we shall shortly study. It explains both their assumed authority and accepted claim to nobility, and their later fall from eminence in all areas save that of Massawa. Always a minority, they failed to withstand the advent of later elements in various and now unremembered forms, and disappeared among the mass of the people. But it tells nothing of the date of their invasion. This was probably not less than a century before the first Turkish landings in 1517, and probably much more. It cannot reasonably be identified with the ninth-century Bejr 'kingdom'.

We pass from this consideration of Agau and Beja penetration in Eritrea—the latter a major element from which the Tigrai is exempt—to others which have made a lesser contribution to the highlands. None is more obvious than the maritime position of the territory, which has always given it a unique place in the Ethiopian world. The latter country has been debarred by nature from the sea by wide deserts—or at best by bush-grown wilderness—on every side, and these inhabited by alien races: only in the neighbourhood of Massawa does the highland closely approach the coast. One result has been the easy penetration of Eritrea by seaborne or sea-regarding influences. Strangers from overseas have landed, merchandise has come and gone, the pre-vailing religion of the Red Sea and of the east has entered. Ever in the centuries. We are now studying a flourishing Muslim civilization was centred at the Dahlak Islands and at Massawa. The Dahlak State had been on terms with the far-off Abbasid Khalifate of Baghdad, claimed to rule part of the Yemen coast and offered (it is said) a refuge to poets and philosophers of the Faith. This could not but influence coastlands and highlands alike; and from the port originated in part those communities of Muslims—far superior to the Copt, as they still are, in trade and in affairs—which were already found in Debarua and other settlements of Eritrea and the Tigrai. Descendants of these (and in part perhaps also of the earliest Muslim refugees of the Prophet's own age) are the present-day Jiberti.<sup>33</sup>

Another influence can be imagined in the presence of military garrisons consisting of levies (otherwise than local) at the disposal of the ruler (such as those sent by Negus Zara Yakut to quell disorder in 1450) and the racial mixture which these have always involved; and still another in the descendants of refuge-taking families, or even whole clans, in this remotest of the Negus's dominions. The presence of Coptic monasteries was a socially stabilizing element, though some going and coming of newcomers would result. The best example is the celebrated monastery of Bizzen. This, on the pinnacle of the mountain so named some miles seaward of Asmara, was founded by a monk Filepos in the thirteenth century and achieved immediately both wealth and fame. Its cultural influence on the Coptic world of Eritrea has always

*been eminent, and its prior and monks-already nine hundred strong at the death of the founder -took a leading part in the theological controversies of Ethiopia.*"<sup>75</sup>

The historical and geographical evidence demonstrates that the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia and the highlands of modern Eritrea formed a contiguous ethno-linguistic and cultural zone dominated by Tigrinya-speaking Christian populations. European travelers and scholars such as Henry Salt, Bishop Samuel Gobat, and the *Gazetteer of the World* consistently depict Tigray as extending westward to the Semien Mountains and southward to the Doba and Danakil regions, incorporating districts such as Walkayt, Waldubba, Shire, and Tsegede. Eritrean highlands, particularly the regions of Hamasien, Serai, and Akkele Guzai, are repeatedly described by Markakis, Longrigg, and Tegegn as demographic extensions of Tigray, shaped by repeated migrations from the Ethiopian highlands, including Tigray itself, and influenced by Agau and Beja settlements. These migrations, along with the maritime and Islamic connections of Massawa and the Dahlak Islands, contributed to the formation of a distinctive highland culture while reinforcing ties with the Tigrayan core. Linguistically, Ge'ez served as the common liturgical ancestor, while Tigrinya became the vernacular linking Tigray and Eritrean highlanders, contrasting with the Tigré language of lowland Muslim populations.

Collectively, these sources indicate that the historic province or kingdom of Tigray was a major territorial entity whose administrative, cultural, and demographic influence extended into what is now Eritrea, with its southern and western frontiers, including Alomätä, Doba, and the Raya-Azebo regions, serving as transitional zones interacting with neighboring ethnic and political entities. This challenges claims that Tigray was confined by the Tekezze River, emphasizing its broader historical extent and enduring connection to the Eritrean highlands.

29). John Markakis, "National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa", stipulates that:

*"The central highlands of Eritrea are a demographic extension of Tigray, inhabited by Tigrinya-speaking Christian cultivators, and were considered part of the Abyssinian domain. Imperial control over this area was never firm and, as the political centre of gravity of Abyssinia shifted southwards, it became increasingly remote and always subject to the intermediacy of the provincial lords of Tigray province. The Mareb Mellask was aptly described as a dominion of Abyssinia and a dependency of Tigray the 'vassal of a vassal'. This status did not apply to other parts of what was to become the colony of Eritrea: the northernmost projection of the highlands in the Keren and Sahel provinces, the Barka plain on the western lowland and the Red Sea coast with Massawa."*<sup>76</sup>

According to Markakis, the central highlands of Eritrea were a demographic and cultural extension of Tigray, inhabited mainly by Tigrinya-speaking Christian cultivators, and historically considered part of the Abyssinian domain. Imperial authority over this region was limited, leaving it

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<sup>75</sup>. General Stephen H. Longrigg, "A Short History of ERITREA", Pp. 31-34

<sup>76</sup>. John Markakis, "National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa", published by the press syndicate of the University of Cambridge, New York, 1987. pp. 14-15.

largely under the indirect control of Tigrai provincial lords, with the Mareb Mellask described as a “vassal of a vassal.” In contrast, other areas that later became part of colonial Eritrea, such as Keren, the Sahel provinces, the Barka plain, and the Red Sea coast near Massawa, remained outside this political and administrative influence.

John Markakis, in the same work, also provides that:

*"The third zone comprised the plateau provinces of Akkele Guzai, Serai and Hamasien, the home of the Tigrai-speaking Christian peasantry of Abyssinian stock. Jabarti Muslim communities are also found here. This region, often referred to as Kebessa (highland), holds over 50 percent of Eritrea's population, an even larger share of its urban population, and most of the modern economic capacity of the country. The third zone therefore was potentially the most important of the four, though, since the movement was slow to make inroads into the Christian domain, it was to remain the weakest."<sup>77</sup>*

According to Markakis, the plateau provinces of Akkele Guzai, Serai, and Hamasien were home to Tigrai-speaking Christian peasantry of Abyssinian stock, though Jabarti Muslim communities were also present. This region, often referred to as Kebessa (highland), contains more than 50 percent of Eritrea's total population, an even larger share of its urban population, and most of the country's modern economic capacity. Despite this potential importance, the region remained the weakest of the four zones, as the movement was slow to penetrate the Christian highland population.

30). Melakou Tegegn, "Eritrea: Evolution Towards Independence and Beyond" (1994) stipulates:

*"Historical Background: Eritrea' before Eritrea*

*'Eritrea' as we know it today had not existed before Italian colonization. Divided along the lines of religion and ethnicity, the peoples inhabiting today's Eritrea were hostile to each other. The highland of Eritrea, however, had always been part and parcel of Abyssinian civilization. Inhabiting the northernmost part of the Axumite empire, the Tigrean people of Eritrea have always been kith and kin to the people of Tigray. The highland of Eritrea had been ruled by the Abyssinian kings centred in Axum and Gondar, as an integral part of this empire.*

*For the sake of political propaganda, however, this part of Eritrea's history is distorted, if not deliberately, by the ideologues from different sides. Bereket H. Selassie, a historian and once a spokesman for the EPLF, writes that 'the Eritrean people had stubbornly resisted Abyssinian attempts to rule them. A few lines above, however, he stated that (Bereket 1980: 49), By 300 AD the greater part of Eritrea, as well as Tigray, formed the central region of the Christian Axumite empire. Bereket seems to make a distinction between the Axumite empire and what he calls the 'Abyssinian' empire dominated by 'Amharas'. Tekeste Negash, an Eritrean himself, accused Bereket of distorting history, not even consulting Kolmodin's Traditioes de Tsazzege et Hazzege (Rome 1912), 'a thoroughly prepared collection of oral tradition of the history of the Abyssinian people in Eritrea. In the almost three centuries that are covered by the book, there is only a single instance of a conflict pertaining to the allocation of power between the Abyssinian districts of Eritrea*

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<sup>77</sup>. Ibid., 113-114.

*and the imperial centre at Axum and later at Gondar. Bereket's assertions are not only exaggerations but also unfounded. Ethiopian history is replete with fierce armed conflicts between kings and princes of different regions and rebellions and civil wars. If one uses Bereket's analogy, all the regions that were at loggerheads with each other must have 'stubbornly resisted Abyssinian rule. The paradox is, however, they were all Abyssinians, including the Tigreans of Eritrea. The objective of Italian colonialism was to create an Italian East Africa that would comprise Eritrea, the rest of Ethiopia and part of Somalia. What was an obstacle not only to this grand Italian ambition in the Horn, but also to the European colonial design as a whole in East Africa, was the fierce patriotism of the Abyssinian (Ethiopian) people and their relative military strength.*

*The Italians designed a policy to divide the forces of the Ethiopian emperor. Thus, even as early as the 1870s, they established trade links with Menilek, supplying him with guns in exchange for gold and coffee. With the occupation of Massawa in 1885, and with war imminent between Yohannes and the Italians, Menilek was in a quandary as to whom to support, for many of his own generals naturally supported Yohannes, since the Italian occupation of Massawa was an occupation of an Ethiopian territory.*

*Yohannes died in 1889 in a battle fighting against the Mahdists, who threatened to conquer his empire. Menilek was crowned as emperor of Ethiopia, succeeding Yohannes, and the Italians effectively colonized Eritrea, uniting the hitherto unconnected and hostile regions of the plateau and the lowlands. Eritrea is thus a creation of Italian colonialism.”<sup>78</sup>*

According to Melakou Tegegn, modern Eritrea did not exist as a unified political entity before Italian colonization. The highlands of Eritrea were historically part of Abyssinian civilization and inhabited by Tigrean-speaking peoples closely related to those of Tigray. While some historians, such as Bereket H. Selassie, have claimed that Eritreans resisted Abyssinian rule, Melakou argues that such claims are exaggerated and neglect the largely integrated political and cultural relationship between Eritrean highlanders and the Abyssinian empire centered in Axum and Gondar. Italian colonial policy in the late 19th century deliberately unified the previously disconnected and sometimes hostile highland and lowland regions, creating Eritrea as a colonial construct. This process included strategic manipulation of Ethiopian politics, trade, and military pressures, culminating in the occupation of Massawa in 1885 and the formal establishment of Italian control.

31). Gizachew Tiruneh under his work titled, "The Rise and Fall of the Solomonic Dynasty of Ethiopia: Is the Kebra Nagast a Time-Bound Document?" (2015) provides:

*"Geographical Clues*

*It is clear that the Yemenis, like Ethiopians, have oral traditions that associate the Queen of Sheba with their land. This may have been based on the reference of sacred texts, such as the Old Testament and the Holy Qur'an, as*

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<sup>78</sup>. Melakou Tegegn, "Eritrea: Evolution Towards Independence and Beyond", 1994. (Published under "ETHIOPIAN CHANGE Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy", edited by Abebe Zegeye & Siegfried pausewang). Pp. 50-51.

*the Queen of Sheba or Saba. Given that Sheba or Saba was a known region in ancient South Arabia, it makes perfect sense for the Yemenis that the Queen of Sheba must have been their ruler. However, no Sabaeen inscriptions have been so far found that support the existence of a queen monarch ruling Saba; nor is the name of the Queen of Sheba itself found in any of the Sabaeen inscriptions. In addition, many Ethiopians and Ethiopianists disagree with the claim of the Yemenis that Makeda was their queen. For instance, Hirny (2006: 1) argues that a region called Saba exists in Tigray, northern Ethiopia. According to the Book of Axum (መጽሐፈ አክሱም), a revered Ethiopian text, Makeda lived in Assab, a northeastern town of ancient Ethiopia (Budge, 1928: 221; Hansberry, 1970; Sergew, 1972). Assab is a port city to this day in modern-day Eritrea but was variedly called in ancient days as "Azab or Asabe or Saba, which meant 'the Southern lands or 'the lands of the south' (Hansberry, 1970: 45-46) in the Ethiopian languages of the time. Indeed, in an inscription found in northern Ethiopia, a ruler claimed that he was the king of D'MT and Saba, suggesting that there was a region named Saba in ancient Ethiopia (Munro-Hay, 2005: 20). Munro-Hay (2005: 21) contends that "an Ethiopian Saba need not be dismissed out of hand..." Josephus had also referred to the Queen of Sheba as 'the queen of Egypt and Ethiopia'. In addition, Christ had called Makeda "the Queen of the South." Moreover, medieval Christian writers such as Michael of Tinnis and Abu Salih had suggested that the name Saba' applied to Abyssinia (Munro-Hay, 2005: 20); see also Ullendorff, 1968; Evetts, 2001). Ptolemy, Artemidorus, and Strabo (ancient Greek-speaking geographers) also believed that the port of Saba was located in Ethiopia (Taddesse, 1972: 14; Goldenberg 2003: 18)." Furthermore, all of the products mentioned in the Old Testament and taken by Makeda to Solomon as gifts (that is, spices, gold, and precious stones) were more abundant in Ethiopia than in Arabia (Hansberry, 1970: 50). Finally, Hirny (2006: 3) claims that Makeda even used to rule the Yemeni Saba during her time.*

*The foregoing arguments seem to give some credence to the KN's claim that Makeda was an Ethiopian queen.*<sup>79</sup>

Gizachew Tiruneh discusses the debate over the historical identity of the Queen of Sheba (Makeda). Gizachew Tiruneh notes that while Yemeni traditions associate the Queen of Sheba (Makeda) with South Arabia, Ethiopian sources locate her in the northeastern highlands of ancient Ethiopia, a region closely linked to what is now Tigray and adjacent Eritrean highlands. The *Book of Axum* identifies her residence in Assab (also called Azab or Saba), historically part of the northern Abyssinian highlands. Inscriptions from northern Ethiopia mention rulers claiming kingship over **D'MT and Saba**, suggesting that Saba was a recognized region in the Ethiopian highlands, overlapping areas that include modern Tigray. Classical authors (Josephus, Strabo, Ptolemy) and medieval Christian writers also placed Saba in the Ethiopian domain, further supporting the highlands, including Tigray, as the Queen's historical territory.

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<sup>79</sup>. Gizachew Tiruneh, "The Rise and Fall of the Solomonic Dynasty of Ethiopia: Is the Kebra Nagast a Time-Bound Document?", 2015. Pp. 59-60.

Additionally, the Old Testament description of gifts (gold, spices, and precious stones) aligns with resources available in the northern highlands rather than South Arabia. Taken together, these sources suggest that **Tigray and the northern Abyssinian highlands formed part of the historical setting of Makeda's kingdom**, reinforcing Tigray's centrality in the Axumite civilization and its enduring historical and cultural significance within the Ethiopian highland world. Scholars such as Munro-Hay and Hiruy argue that this evidence lends credibility to the *Kebrä Nagast's* claim that Makeda was an Ethiopian, rather than a Yemeni, queen.

32). John Markakis under his book titled, "Ethiopia: Anatomy of A Traditional Polity," states:

*"The province of Eritrea comprises the northern edge of the plateau and a large lowland area extending from its base to the Sudan border on the west and north and the Red Sea on the east. The foothills and lowland plains are inhabited by a mélange of pastoral tribes adhering to Islam and speaking languages which are not spoken on the plateau. The Eritrean portion of the plateau is the natural and historical extension of Tigre province; consequently, it is inhabited by Ethiopians of the dominant ethnic group-who speak Tigrinya, and most of whom are Christians -with a minority of Muslims traditionally known as Jabarti. Historically, the region was part of the Ethiopian empire, ruled by an official entitled Bahr Nagash (ruler of the sea). Massawa has long been the major port in the area, coveted by every power which sought to control trade in the Red Sea. It thus happened that the coastal area and the port of Massawa passed successively under the control of Arabs, Ottomans, Egyptians, and Italians. The last-named occupied Massawa in 1885 and gradually moved on to the plateau to establish the colony they named Eritrea. In 194, following control the expulsion the Italians, Eritrea came under British Control.*

*During the next decade, the fate of the former colony became an international issue: and while the diplomatic battle was fought abroad in the chancelleries of the great powers and in the United Nations, the people of Eritrea defined the issue for themselves, mainly along religious lines. As one writer put it, they rallied under their rival religious banners and now stood divided against one another in opposing Moslem and Christian factions'. Generally speaking, the Christian Eritreans, who constitute approximately half of the population, supported the strong claims of Ethiopia for unification.<sup>7</sup> However, since the majority of the Christians of Eritrea are Tigre, their enthusiasm for unity with Ethiopia is somewhat tempered by the traditional Tigre antagonism towards the Shoa dynasty that rules Ethiopia, 'and by the knowledge that their language, Tigrinya, is not accorded official recognition in the empire. The Muslims of Eritrea, who constitute the other half of its population, were generally opposed to union with Ethiopia, though the alternative they found most attractive, namely, independence, was obviously not a viable one given the economic interdependence of Ethiopia and Eritrea and the manifest determination of the former not to accept such a solution.*

*The federation of Eritrea, as was the compromise solution recommended by the United Nations General Assembly in 1950 and accepted, for the time being at least, by all parties concerned. Eritrea was given legislative, executive, and*

*judicial power to govern its domestic affairs, while defence, foreign affairs, currency and finance, interstate commerce, and communications became the responsibility of the Ethiopian crown.*"<sup>80</sup>

Under this text, John Markakis frames the Eritrean plateau as the natural and historical extension of the Ethiopian province of Tigray. He notes that this region is inhabited primarily by Tigrinya-speaking Christians, whom he identifies as belonging to Ethiopia's dominant ethnic group, alongside a Muslim minority traditionally known as the Jabarti. Markakis further explains that these Christian highlanders, constituting roughly half of Eritrea's population, generally supported unification with Ethiopia. However, their support was qualified by historical Tigrayan suspicion of the Shoan Amhara dynasty ruling Ethiopia and by the lack of official recognition given to their Tigrinya language within the empire. In contrast, Eritrea's Muslim population, making up the other half, largely opposed union with Ethiopia and favored independence. Yet, as Markakis observes, independence was seen as economically unviable given Eritrea's ties to Ethiopia and Addis Ababa's firm rejection of such an outcome.

The 1952 population figures, approximately 514,000 Muslims and 510,000 Christians, reflected this deep communal and political divide. This even split produced a deadlock that played out on multiple levels: among the great powers (the US, UK, and USSR), within the United Nations, between Ethiopian officials and competing Eritrean political movements, and among Eritrea's own population. No popular referendum was held. Instead, the United Nations General Assembly intervened with a 1950 resolution that recommended a federal compromise. Eritrea would govern its internal affairs while Ethiopia controlled defense, foreign affairs, currency, and interstate trade. This federation was implemented in 1952 under the Ethiopian Crown.

Finally, it is important to clarify Markakis's terminology. His use of "Tigre" refers to the Tigrinya-speaking Christian highlanders of the plateau. In modern official usage, the term Tigray refers to the Ethiopian Regional State; the term Tigrinya refers to the Semitic language spoken by Christian highlanders in both Tigray and central Eritrea; and the term Tigre refers to a distinct, related Semitic language spoken primarily by Muslim lowland groups in Eritrea and Sudan. Therefore, when Markakis uses "Tigre," he is specifically referring to the Tigrinya-speaking Christian highlanders of the Eritrean plateau.

33). In 1912, W. B. Cotton (Indian Civil Service) observed that:

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<sup>80</sup>. John Markakis, "Ethiopia: Anatomy of A Traditional Polity", published by Oxford University Press, 1974. Pp. 361-63.

*“The part of Abyssinia which I wished to visit, however, namely Walkait, is altogether under Tigrean influence, and it is easy to understand that in the present condition of affairs a Shoan passport might prove the worst of introductions into Tigrean territory.”*<sup>81</sup>

This passage indicates that Welkait was, at the time, under Tigrean political and social influence. Consequently, possession of a Shoan (Shewan) passport, that is, identification associated with the Shoa-based Abyssinian state, could be counter-productive or even dangerous when entering Tigrean territory. The observation reflects internal political divisions within Abyssinia/Ethiopia in the early twentieth century, rather than the existence of international borders. In essence, Cotton’s account suggests that Tigray and Shoa functioned as distinct spheres of political authority, and that Tigrean-influenced areas did not readily accept Shoan administrative presence.

The historical significance of this passage lies in the fact that it represents a contemporary (1912) external observation by a British colonial official. It demonstrates that Welkait was regarded as being under Tigrean influence rather than Shoan administration at that time. The phrase “altogether under Tigrean influence” is particularly strong and unambiguous, lending support to interpretations emphasizing regional autonomy, political differentiation, and ethno-linguistic influence in northern Ethiopia prior to later processes of centralization.<sup>82</sup>

34). Gianni Dore in his Kunama ethnography provides that:

*“The Tigrinña from Wälqayt, Adyabo [historically linked with Shiré], and Säraye are remembered for their raids to obtain slaves, grain and cattle.”*<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>. Cotton, W. B., Sport in the Eastern Sudan: From Souakin to the Blue Nile. London: Rowland Ward, Ltd., 1912.

<sup>82</sup>. አጼ ፋሲል ለመናገሻነት የመረጡት ቦታ ቀድሞም ጎንደር ተብሎ ይጠራ ነበር። ጎንደር የሚለው ስያሜ አመጣጥ እንዴት እንደሆነ የጎንደር ከተማ ማዘጋጃ ቤት በ1966 ዓ.ም «ትዕይንተ ጎንደር ዜና» በሚለው ጋዜጣ ላይ ወይንኦ ሰይንኦ የተባሉት ወንድማማቾች ከብዙ አመታት በፊት ከእንደርታ አወርጃ ኩሐ ተነስተው በሰሜን በኩል አቋርጠው በአንገረብና በቀሃ ወንዝ የሚገኘውን ቦታ ይዘው ከሰፈሩበት በኋላና አገሩን እያቀኑ ከተባዙ በኋላ ወንድማማቾቹ በድንበር ገፈኸን በመባባል በተጣሉበት ጊዜ ሸማግሌ ከሁለቱ ወንድማማቾች በእድሜ አነስተኛውን የሆነውን አይቶ አንተስ ብሆን ምን አለ «በሱ ጎን እደር፣ አሁንም ቢሆን አሱ ጎን እደር» ብሎ በመወሰኑ የተነሳ ቦታው ጎንደር ተብሎ ይጠራ እንደነበር ጠቅሷል። የሁለቱ ወንድማማቾች መጥተው ባዶ ቦታ ላይ እንደሰፈሩና ጎንደር የሚለው ስያሜ በነዚህ ወንድማማቾች ምክንያት እንደወጣ በ«ትዕይንተ ጎንደር ዜና » ጋዜጣ ላይ ተመስክሯል። የአጼ ፋሲል አባት አጼ ሱስኒዮስ ዋና ከተማቸው ደንቀዝ የነበረ ሲሆን ልጃቸውም እስከ 1627 ድረስ መቀመጫቸውን ደንቀዝ አድርገው ነበር።

<sup>83</sup>. Gianni Dore, “Kunama ethnography”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): Encyclopaedia Aethiopia, vol. 3, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007. pp. 445.

This text identifies Walqayt as part of a coalition of Tigrinya speaking provinces capable of coordinated military/raiding action beyond their borders. The observation by Gianni Dore in his Kunama ethnography that Tigrinya-speaking highlanders from Welqayt were historically dominant and exerted military and economic power over neighboring territories, including those of non-Tigrinya groups like the Kunama.

In simpler terms, the statement confirms two key points about the historical role of Welqayt's Tigrinya-speaking society: (1). A Center of Power and Authority: The people from Welqayt, alongside other Tigrinya-speaking provinces like 'Adyabo (Shiré) and Sāraye, organized and conducted raids. This shows they had the social organization, resources, and military capacity to project power outside their own territory. (2). Expansion and Subjugation: The purpose of these raids, to obtain slaves, grain, and cattle, reveals an expansionist and extractive relationship with neighboring ethnic groups. This is a direct historical mechanism for how servile groups like the "Bet Baria" or assimilated groups like the Ch'aré may have been incorporated into the highland socio-economic system.

Dore's single sentence, therefore, provides decisive external corroboration for a broader historical thesis. It proves that the dominance of the Tigrinya language and highland socio-political structures in Welqayt was actively constructed and enforced through military and economic power. This evidence solidifies the image of Welqayt not as a peripheral territory to a Tigrinya core, but as itself a historic node of Tigrinya power, fully participating in the statecraft, expansion, and extractive economy characteristic of the wider highland polity. The raids were not a side activity but a central function of its political economy, directly shaping the ethnic and social landscape that later sources would document.

Therefore, this quote shifts the perspective from the internal view of Welqayt society to the external view of its neighbors. It shows that the dominance of Tigrinya language and culture in the Welqayt region was not passive but was actively enforced through historical patterns of power, conflict, and resource extraction. This completes the picture of Welqayt as a historic, powerful node within the Tigrinya-speaking highland world.

Ferdinando Martini, "Relazione sulla Colonia Eritrea" (early 20th c.) also provides that:

*«La gente di Adiabo e dell'Uolcait ne approfittò subito per compiere nuove razzie, specialmente nel territorio compreso fra il Gasc e Setit, del quale ci eravamo completamente disinteressati.»*<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>. Relazione sulla Colonia Eritrea del R. commission civile deputato Ferdinando Martini per gli esercizi 1902-1907 presentata dal ministro delle colonie (Bertolini) nella seduta del 14 giugno , published by Tipografia della Camera deli Deputati, 1913, pp. 67

An English translation of the text quoted above is provided as follows: “*The people of Adiabo and Uolcalt (Wolqayt) immediately took advantage of the situation to carry out new raids, especially in the territory lying between the Gash and the Setit, an area in which we had completely lost interest.*”

Martini's account captures the same power block, Walqayt and Adiabo, in action. This passage portrays Wolqait and Adiabo as neighboring communities with governance and linguistic connections. It demonstrates the persistence of local political coordination between the people of Adiabo and Uolcalt (Wolqayt). It also shows raiding as a flexible tool of frontier governance, used to control territory and resources. Martini presents them as a single raiding bloc, indicating coordinated action grounded in shared interests. He frames them as a joint actor in the borderlands, highlighting local agency in areas neglected by colonial authorities rather than formal political boundaries.

Together, these historical sources from both ethnographic memory and colonial documentation reveal Wolqait not as a peripheral territory, but as an active historic center of Tigrinya political and military power. Welqayt functioned as a historic node within the wider Tigrinya polity. Its society was not a passive recipient of highland culture but an active generator and enforcer of that culture's dominance.

The practice of organized raiding was a central, enduring feature of its political economy, serving dual purposes: (1). internally, it fueled wealth accumulation and social stratification; and (2). externally, it projected power, shaped ethnic frontiers, and subjugated neighboring populations. When colonial rule created an unstable frontier, the Welqayt-Adiabo power structure seamlessly adapted this longstanding practice to the new geopolitical circumstances. Therefore, the dominance of the Tigrinya language and highland socio-political structures in Welqayt was neither accidental nor merely demographic. It was the direct result of centuries of active power projection, economic extraction, and military coercion, a reality etched both in the historical memory of subjected neighbors and in the frustrated reports of colonial administrators.

35). Douglas Newbold (ed.), *Ethiopia: Amharic Studies in Honour of Wolf Leslau* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965) states:

“The Tigrina language is the daughter of literary Ethiopic, or Ge‘ez, and is spoken in the centre of the ancient kingdom of Aksum. The main provinces where it is used are Hamasen, Dembalas, Saraie, Okkule, Guzai, Tigray (Tigre), and Tembien. The largest of these provinces is the one called by the inhabitants themselves Tigray and in literature and by the Amharas Tigre. With the Amharic adjectival termination the language is known as Tigrina.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>. Newbold, Douglas. *Ethiopia: Amharic Studies in Honour of Wolf Leslau*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965. Pp. 84.

This passage offers a precise mid-20th-century scholarly clarification of terminology that had often been confused in earlier literature. It makes interrelated distinctions critical for understanding the historical geography and linguistics of the Horn of Africa. The text explicitly states that “Tigre” is the Amharic and literary name for the province whose inhabitants call it Tigrai. This usage is strictly territorial. The author is careful to avoid the other common, and confusing, use of “Tigre” to denote a distinct lowland Semitic language spoken in parts of Eritrea and Sudan.

In this text, the term “Tigre” refers only to the highland province of Tigre in northern Ethiopia. The language is named Tigrina (Tigrinya), formed by adding the Amharic adjectival suffix -ña to the provincial name “Tigre.” “Tigrina” denotes the Semitic language spoken in that province and throughout the wider Aksumite highland region. Therefore, the quotation provides a clear scholarly correction of earlier ambiguity. Any analysis of Tigrinya identity or territory that ignores this historical continuity in favor of strictly national frameworks misses the deeper geographical and historical reality preserved in this source.

It also says that Tigrina was spoken across a set of central highland provinces that formed the core of the ancient kingdom of Aksum, Hamasen, Dembalas, Seraye, Akkele Guzay, Tigrai/Tigre, and Tembien. So, the language is associated with but not confined to the historic province of Tigre. By showing Tigrinya spoken across multiple provinces, only one of which is Tigre, the text undermines any claim that Tigrinya belongs primarily to one side of the modern border. It presents Tigrinya speakers in Eritrea and Ethiopia as participants in the same linguistic and historical tradition, not as separate or derivative communities.

It was published shortly after Eritrea’s federation with Ethiopia (1952) and just before the Eritrean War of Independence escalated, this entry captures a scholarly consensus that recognized the cross-border nature of Tigrinya, documents traditional provincial geography before it was overshadowed by modern political narratives, and serves as a linguistic and historical counterpoint to later politicized claims about language and territory. Therefore, it confirms that Tigrinya is the language of a multi-provincial zone, Tigrinya language is not limited to historic province of Tigre/Tigrai, and modern political borders divide, but do not erase, this older cultural-linguistic unity. Finally, the text lists only the main Tigrinya-speaking provinces at that time and is not an exhaustive administrative inventory. This clarification helps disentangle the often-conflated geographic, ethnic, and linguistic uses of the terms and affirms the broad, shared historical basis of Tigrinya language and culture across the Eritrean–Ethiopian highlands.

36). Job Ludolphus, *A New History of Ethiopia Geography of Abyssinia*, writes:

“All Habessinia is exceeding mountainous; so soon as you have travelled two days’ journey from the Red Sea, you must presently climb the high mountains of Tigre; among which Lemalmona lifts up her head more lofty than the rest; which they that travel to the royal camp in Dembea are forced to

clamber over. The steps of which, if they may be so called, are so dangerous, and the path so narrow, that if companies meet, men and horses, giving the way, fall headlong into a bottomless abyss.”<sup>86</sup>

This quoted text associates Lemalmona with Tigray. The text places Lemalmona on the critical escarpment route that was under the sphere of influence or control of the Tigrayan regional power in the early 17th century, when the Portuguese Jesuits were active. The most straightforward reading is that Lemalmona is located within the mountainous region just defined as "the high mountains of Tigray." Lemalmona is one element within the set called "the high mountains of Tigre." So within the internal logic of the sentence, Lemalmona belongs to Tigre. Therefore, it "belongs to Tigray" in this textual context. This reflects the 17th-century traveler's geographical perspective and the regional dominance of Tigray along that corridor. It is a vital piece of historical evidence for Tigray's strategic control of the escarpment routes.

37). Doctor Jacques Faitlovitch in his work titled, "THE FALASHAS", provides:

*"The Falashas speak the languages of the region in which they dwell, and contrary to the assertion of several travellers, they have no dialect of their own. Those who live in the central and southern provinces speak Amharic, and those of the north employ Tigrigna, two sister languages which are spoken in Abyssinia."*<sup>87</sup>

Jacques Faitlovitch observed that the Falashas (Beta Israel) spoke the languages of the regions in which they lived and possessed no distinct spoken dialect of their own. According to his account, those residing in the central and southern provinces spoke Amharic, while those in the north spoke Tigrigna, two closely related languages spoken in Abyssinia. Published in 1920 and informed by earlier fieldwork conducted by scholars such as Joseph Halévy, this observation directly challenges claims that Tigrinya-speaking populations in areas such as Wolkait are recent transplants.

Opponents often assert that Tigrinya speakers in Wolkait arrived only in the modern period. However, Faitlovitch's statement confirms that Tigrinya-speaking communities, specifically among the Beta Israel, were native to northern regions historically administered under Begemder, including Semien and adjacent districts, long before the twentieth century. Wolkait, which lies beyond the Semien highlands, is repeatedly identified in historical sources as an area of Falasha settlement,

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<sup>86</sup>. Job Ludolphus, *A New History of Ethiopia Geography of Abyssinia*, published by Samuel Smith bookfeller, London, 1684, English translation. Pp. 28.

<sup>87</sup>. DOCTOR JACQUES FAITLOVITCH, "THE FALASHAS", Privat-Docent at the University of Geneva [Reprint from the *American Jewish Year Book* 5681] PHILADELPHIA THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY OF AMERICA (1920). Pp. 16.; see also Danny Friedmann, "Identity and change: The example of the falashas, between assimilation in Ethiopia and integration in Israel"(1990), *Dialectical Anthropology*.

providing a concrete geographic link between general references to “the north” and the specific territory now under dispute.

This interpretation is corroborated by earlier accounts, including James Bruce’s eighteenth-century manuscripts, which document Tigrinya-speaking Beta Israel communities in Wolkait and Tsegede. Together, these sources indicate that a significant indigenous population within the historic province of Begemder, particularly in the Wolkait area, was Tigrinya-speaking. This evidence demonstrates that Begemder governed a multilingual population and that administrative jurisdiction did not dictate linguistic identity. The Tekezze River, while sometimes serving as a political boundary, was never a rigid linguistic frontier.

Tigrinya-speaking populations existed not only north of the river in Tigray, but also south and west of it in areas such as Semien, Wolkait, Tsegede, and Tsallamti. Beta Israel communities were sedentary, village-based, and economically integrated as farmers, artisans, and soldiers. As a result, they adopted the dominant language of their surroundings. In northern Begemder, this language was Tigrinya. The use of Tigrinya by the Beta Israel thus reflects cultural geography rather than political borders or a distinct ethnic dialect.

The claims that Wolkait and Tsegede belong to the Amhara Region are partly based on the mistaken assumption of an exclusively Amharic-speaking past and, in part, on historical administrative divisions. However, the historical, linguistic, and demographic records provide clear evidence that Tigrinya-speaking communities were long-established and indigenous within these same provincial boundaries. To invoke historical provincial borders while disregarding the documented linguistic reality of the population conflates administrative history with cultural and linguistic identity<sup>88</sup>.

38). Nur, Taha Hassan, *The Sudan-Ethiopia Boundary: A Study in Political Geography*, provides:

*"The Western Frontiers of the Axumite Empire (? -700 A.D.)*

*Almost all the available evidence, though this in many aspects is meagre and inadequate, tends to show that the western expansion limits of the Axumite Empire was approximately at the upper parts of the River Atbara. The Emperor of the Adulis Inscription (about the second half of the first century A.D.) claimed to have conquered the Beja tribes. "I proceeded next against the Tangilae (the most powerful Beja tribe) who adjoin the borders of Egypt." He also claimed that he reduced, "all the nations on the West up to Kasu". Budge, from whom these quotations are taken, believes that the evidence is enough to believe that the east bank of the Nile was the western frontier of the Axumite Empire. Emperor Ezana in his famous inscription called himself King of Beja and the Kasu. From Ezana's inscription it would appear that the Axumite Empire had two frontiers to the west, one was the Nile on which Ezana had probably little real influence until he was strong enough to undertake an effective expedition. The other frontier seems to have been at the Atbara where the Axumite authority might have been directly enforced (see Fig. 18). This is even more emphasized*

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<sup>88</sup>. Under FDRE Constitution, the delimitation criteria for state borders is ethno linguistic identity, but not historical administrative divisions.

by the following extract from the same inscription in which he justified his expedition against the peoples of Noba to the west of his country.

*"And they will not cross the River Tekaze (Atbara) said the peoples of Noba (Sudan subjects); and they were in the habit of attacking the peoples of Karsa and making war upon the Red peoples."*

*'Ezana did attack the Noba and fought a crucial battle with them', says 36 Budge. A later inscription describes an Axumite Emperor fighting in the neighbourhood of Kassala and mentions the Baria tribe, which is still known in the same area, being attacked. This inscription strongly suggests that Kassala was a border settlement as it is today.*

*After the collapse of the Axumite Empire in the eighth century A.D., there is no information about the existing conditions and it seems that the whole region was broken up into tiny Kingdoms, Sheikhdoms, and City states (see Fig.19) which were still in existence in the sixteenth century when they were gradually conquered and federated into the Fun Kingdom of Sennar."<sup>89</sup>*

This passage from Taha Hassan Nur (1971) regarding the western frontiers of the Axumite Empire demonstrates that the western limits of the Axumite Empire (c. 700 A.D.) were roughly at the upper Atbara River, with some evidence suggesting influence reaching the east bank of the Nile. Nur cites epigraphic evidence (the Adulis Inscription and Ezana's inscriptions) to argue that the western frontier of the Axumite Empire extended to the Atbara River and possibly the Nile.

This establishes that the Western Tigray/Eritrea-Sudan border region has been a politically contested frontier zone since antiquity, not just since the 19th century. The inscription mentions the "Baria tribe" near Kassala, a term historically used pejoratively for "black"/enslaved groups (later echoed in the Barya/Tsellim Bet of Western Tigray). The Beja tribes (ancestors of the Belew/Beja groups that later ruled the Mezega kingdom in Western Tigray) were already under Axumite influence or conquest.

The dual-frontier system illustrates Axumite strategic differentiation: direct control in the Atbara region versus nominal influence along the Nile. This reflects early examples of frontier administration and control in the Horn of Africa, relevant to later Tigrayan and Eritrean borderlands. The presence of groups such as the Beja, Noba, and Baria in inscriptions and later records highlights long-term persistence of ethnic groups in northeastern Sudan and western Eritrea. This continuity can inform studies of later borderland societies such as the Ch'are in Western Tigray or the Blin in Eritrea.

After Axum's collapse (8th century), the region fragmented into small kingdoms, sheikhdoms, and city-states, a political landscape that persisted until the rise of the Funj Sultanate of Sennar. This

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<sup>89</sup>. Nur, Taha Hassan, "The Sudan-Ethiopia boundary: a study in political geography", 1971. Pp. 59-60

fragmentation echoes the decentralized, multi-polity environment described by Smidt in both the Blin and Ch'are cases.

The historical Axumite frontiers provide context for understanding the dynamics of multi-ethnic borderlands, where political authority was often indirect, and groups retained autonomy while interacting with more dominant powers. The survival strategies of the Ch'are and Blin reflect a long-standing regional pattern of adaptation and negotiated autonomy. This relevant historical and geographical excerpt is highly significant to our ongoing discussion, as it adds an ancient historical dimension to the borderland dynamics examined in Wolbert G.C. Smidt's works.

Therefore, Axumite western frontier was Atbara River Western Tigray as a perennial borderland between highland Christian and lowland Muslim/Nilotic groups. And it mentions "Baria" tribe near Kassala Ch'are called Barya by Habesha highlanders; Blin also referenced in relation to Kassala in Egyptian records. Beja tribes under Axumite influence Belew/Beja as rulers of the Mezega Kingdom in Western Tigray in the 16th century.

Moreover, Samuel W. Baker's 1874 account of the Nile tributaries in Abyssinia does not include any reference to the Beni Amer people in the areas he traveled and described.<sup>90</sup> David A. G. Green (in his 1974 economic analysis) suggests that the absence of the Beni Amer in Baker's narrative could indicate that they were not present in the Mazega lowlands region (Mazega lowlands region is often referred to by Sudanese as part of Al-Fashaga) at the time. One possible explanation is that their southward movement into that area occurred only after the Mahdist period (i.e., after the late 19th-century Mahdist upheavals in Sudan).<sup>91</sup>

39). Wolbert G.C. Smidt, "Preliminary Report on an Ethno historical Research Among the Ch'aré People, a Hidden Ethnic Splinter Group in Western Tigray", provides the following texts<sup>92</sup>:

1. Research Area & Population (Western Tigray Lowlands)

*"In the western lowlands of Tigray there is a 'black' population, which claims to be the indigenous population of the area, the Tsellim Bet. The Tigrinna term 'Tsellim Bet' (lit. 'Black House') is used in the weredas Mezega and Tsebri in the western Tigrayan lowlands to designate a local population of 'black' people of different origins. The term - and the people - are unknown in any other parts of Tigray and were also virtually unknown to researchers."*

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<sup>90</sup>. Samuel W. Baker, wrote "The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia, and the Sword Hunters of the Hamran Areas", published by Macmillan and Co., London, 1867.

<sup>91</sup>. Green, David A. G., Ethiopia: An Economic Analysis of Technological Change in Four Agricultural Production Systems (East Lansing, 1974), 9–13.

<sup>92</sup>. Wolbert G.C. Smidt, "Preliminary Report on an Ethno historical Research Among the Ch'aré People, a Hidden Ethnic Splinter Group in Western Tigray."

"The two subgroups of the Tsellim Bet which are said - by their own oral tradition and Habesha legends - to be indigenous to these areas are the Ch'are and the Shiro, who are both 'physically different', but also to some degree culturally, from the dominating Habesha culture."

"The research presented in this article was carried out in late March to beginning April 2008 in Megu' and May Gaba and surrounding villages. May Gaba is the administrative centre of Mezega wereda, which today belongs to the Welqayt District in the Western Zone of the Regional State of Tigray (sometimes also called Welqayt- Tsegede Zone). Historically, the term Welqayt designated only the highlands in western Tigray and was a political entity for its own, with their own governors interlinked both with the rulers in Gonder and with local rulers in Tigray and other Tigrinna- speaking provinces. Today, the administrative term Welqayt also includes the lowlands between the Welqayt highlands and the Tekkeze river, which are called the Mezega lowlands."

## 2. Language: Tigrinya Dominance & Language Shift

*"The Ch'are and Shiro today speak Tigrinna and have integrated themselves to a large extent into the dominating culture, but a number of elders have retained some knowledge of their ancestral language."*

*"Usually, Ch'are who are above 50 or 60 years old confirm, that in their youth they had regularly heard Ch'arinna, but already then it had been replaced by Tigrinna in daily practice."*

*"The well-known linguistic map of Ethiopia drawn by SIL International follows the same information: Gumuz are shown only much further south, and western Tigray is marked as fully tigrinophone."*

## 3. Social Hierarchy & Terms: Barya, Tselim Bet, Habesha

*"Locally, they are known under the Tigrinna term 'Tsellim Bet' (House of Blacks), and were formerly mainly called 'Barya' in the sense of 'slave' (or 'serf') by Ethiopian highlanders. Today, they are regarded as ethnic Tigrayans, as they speak almost exclusively Tigrinna. But different from the highlanders, they are not called Habesha and also do not use this term for themselves."*

*"In casual talk, Habesha informants called them 'Barya' (a 'black person', with the connotation of 'slave', generally regarded as pejorative), but immediately explaining that that term shall not be employed any more."*

## 4. Historical Context: Mezega Kingdom & Political History

*"As a frontier area between Ethiopia and the Sudan, western Tigray was historically marked by the historical presence of both Muslim and Christian powers, such as the Muslim Mezega kingdom of Queen Ga'wa in the 16th century, and the Gondarine kings in the 17th century."*

*"Mezega regularly appears in sources especially since the 16th century. In that time this was the name of a vast lowland kingdom, whose boundaries are only very approximately known: It encompassed all of the western Tigrayan lowlands, extended up to Ras al- Fil in the Metemma area in the south, and to the north into today's southwestern Eritrea and the northern Sudanese border areas around Kassala."*

*"Mezega was ruled by Muslim groups of Beja background ('Belew')... Oral tradition in today's Mezega mentions the rule by 'Belew Kelew' which declined with the rise of the Gondarine kingdom."*

## 5. Identity & Invisiblity

*"The Ch'are informants strongly underlined that their relation to the Habesha was traditionally very good, as they were helping each other. However, they also mentioned that in the past there was the danger to get kidnapped. They underlined, that their identity was 'Tigrayan', but they were not Habesha. They spoke Tigrinna like all Tigrayans, but their origin was different."*

*"This group, however, does not appear in any official record of that same period. The Ethiopian Institute of Nationality Studies does not mention them... This further illustrates, that the group described in this article were highly 'invisible' - or more correctly: their existence was simply overlooked."*

These passages highlight Western Tigray as a historically complex frontier region, influenced by both Muslim and Christian powers, such as the Mezege kingdom under Queen Ga'wa in the 16th century and the Gondarine kings in the 17th century. The fluid boundaries of these polities, extending across modern Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan, underscore the historical interconnectedness of the lowlands and highlands. The marginalization of groups like the Ch'are and Shiro suggests that political histories often overlook peripheral populations, rendering them "invisible" in official records. This invisibility has implications for understanding regional governance, border dynamics, and the historical recording of ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

The Ch'are and Shiro (Tsellim Bet) represent groups that were historically labeled as "Barya" (slaves or serfs) by highland populations, yet their self-identification as Tigrayans, and not Habesha, highlights the nuanced social and ethnic hierarchies within Tigray. Their relative invisibility in historical records reflects both social marginalization and the selective recognition of ethnic identities in the Ethiopian historiographical tradition. This has implications for studies of social stratification, serfdom, and the integration of minority communities into majority cultures.

While the Ch'are and Shiro originally spoke their own languages (e.g., Ch'arinna), intergenerational shifts toward Tigrinya demonstrate a process of cultural and linguistic assimilation. The retention of ancestral language knowledge among elders provides insight into historical language maintenance, while the broader adoption of Tigrinya reflects the dominance of Tigrinya-speaking cultures in Western Tigray. This case illustrates a broader phenomenon of language shift among minority communities in Ethiopia, highlighting the tension between integration and preservation of linguistic heritage.

Together, these passages indicate that the Mezege Kingdom (16th–17th centuries) was a significant Muslim Beja polity that controlled Western Tigray lowlands before Gondarine expansion. Tigrinya spread not only as a lingua franca but as a mechanism of assimilation. Unlike the Ch'are of Western Tigray became Tigrinya-speaking (who almost completely shifted to Tigrinya), the Blin retained their language throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The Bilen (Blin) were not Tigrinya speakers in the sense of having abandoned their language.

Instead, they existed in a multilingual borderland environment where Tigrinya was one of several languages of power and exchange. Their ability to retain the Blin language while navigating Tigrinya-

dominated political spheres highlights a key theme in Smidt's work: peripheral groups could adapt to imperial pressures without surrendering core linguistic and cultural identity. This stands in sharp contrast to the Ch'are, who experienced complete language shift under conditions of slavery and social erasure. Thus, the Ch'are case confirm that the narrative of Tigrinya expansion in the western Tigray by showing that Ch'are's language shift to Tigrinya under significant Tigrean expansion, political and cultural influence.

Current tensions in Western Tigray (e.g., Welkait/Tsegede) cannot be understood without this layered history of settlement, slavery, and marginalization. The invisibility of groups like the Ch'are in official narratives has allowed their lands and histories to be politicized and appropriated. In summary, Smidt argues that the history of the Horn of Africa cannot be written only from the center. The Blin and Ch'are cases show how borderland communities have used flexibility, hybridity, and hidden resilience to survive centuries of conquest, slavery, and assimilation. Their stories are not marginal footnotes but central to understanding the region's past and present conflicts.

This research calls for a decolonized, inclusive historiography that recognizes the agency, complexity, and enduring presence of the Horn's most marginalized peoples. The passages call attention to inaccuracies or omissions in historical and linguistic maps, such as those produced by SIL International and other colonial-era cartographers. Correcting these gaps has implications for understanding the distribution of Tigrinya speakers, the historical presence of marginalized groups, and the broader ethno linguistic landscape of northwestern Ethiopia. It also emphasizes the need for nuanced approaches that combine oral history, archival research, and linguistic analysis.

40). A.H.M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Abyssinia*, 1935, Oxford, provides:

*"The language also underwent modifications as it became diffused, and the Amharic dialect, which is generally spoken in the central highlands and is now the official language of the country, is farther removed from the classical Ge'ez than, is the dialect of Tigre. .... The Abyssinian kings gradually lost control of northern Tigre. .... At the present day the northern half of Tigre is included in the Italian colony of Eritrea; its population is, however, still to a large extent Abyssinian in language and in religion."*<sup>93</sup>

This text explains the linguistic evolution of Abyssinia and the geopolitical division of the Tigrinya speaking population. It establishes Tigrinya as a distinct, ancient language group within the Ethiopian sphere. It also shows that by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tigrinya speakers were already divided by a colonial border. Despite the political order, the population in what is now Eritrea remained largely native Tigrinya speakers and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. He also notes that Amharic, which was the official language of the country, is generally spoken in the central highlands of Abyssinia/Ethiopia.

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<sup>93</sup>. A.H.M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Abyssinia [Ethiopia]*, 1935, Oxford. pp. 8-

41). Elisee Reclus, *The Earth and Its Inhabitants: Africa*, vol.1 North East Africa, published by D. Appleton and Comlany, 1886, provides:

*"Some of the Tigré crests are verifiable mountains, not merely in absolute altitude, but also in their elevation relative to the surrounding plains. Thus east of Adua, the deft cone of Semayata attains a height of 10,306 feet, or over 3,000 feet above the town occupying a depression of the plateau at its base. Eastwards, near the outer ledge of the uplands, are other lofty hills, one of which, Aleqwa, rises to a height of 11,250 feet."*<sup>94</sup>

In this quoted text, Tigré's mountains, like Semayata (10,306 ft) east of Adua, rise dramatically from the plateau floor, showing significant relative height. It also notes that Aleqwa is explicitly placed within the Tigré region, specifically in its eastern highlands. Its location "near the outer ledge of the uplands" suggests it is on the eastern escarpment of the Tigray Plateau, overlooking lower plains (likely towards the Red Sea or the Afar Depression). Therefore, Aleqwa is part of Tigré's eastern frontier landscape, a towering peak marking the edge of the uplands before the land descends toward lower eastern regions.

42). Donald N. Levine observed that:

*"To the north, the Wello and Yejju Oromo tribes adopted many Ambara practices and the Ambara language as well, but kept their separateness by becoming Muslims during the eighteenth century. Beyond them, the Raya Oromo maintained more elements from their pastoral way of life, but were influenced by Tigrea neighbors and immigrants to learn the Tigrinya language."*<sup>95</sup>

In the Amharic translation of Levine's *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (1974), published by Million Neqneke under the title "**ታላቋ ኢትዮጵያ የብዙ ነገዶች ማህበረሰብ፣ የረጅም ዘመናት ዕድገት**", this passage is rendered as follows:

*"ወደ ሰሜን ከፍ ሲል የወሎና የየጁ ኦሮሞዎች ጎሳዎች ብዙ የአማርኛን አሠራር ዘዴዎችና የአማርኛ ቋንቋ ወረሱ፤ ነገር ግን በ18ኛው ክፍለ ዘመን ላይ እስልምናን በመቀበል ልዩነታቸውን ገለጹ። ከነርሱ ባሻገር የራያ ኦሮሞዎች ከግጦሽ ፈላጊ ዘላንነት ባህሎቻቸው አብዛኛውን ጠብቀው ቢያስቀሩም ከትግራውያን ጎረቤቶቻቸውና ከተፈናቃዮች የትግርኛ ቋንቋ ተምረዋል።"*<sup>96</sup>

Taken together, the English original and its Amharic translation suggest that the Raya Oromo sub group gradually shifted from speaking their native Oromo language (Oromiffa) to Tigrinya, the language of their northern neighbors and immigrants in the southern Tigray. This shift appears to have unfolded over an extended period and was likely driven by sustained interaction with Tigrayan communities along their shared frontier, ongoing population movements, and the increasing social

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<sup>94</sup>. Elisee Reclus, *The Earth and Its Inhabitants: Africa*, Vol.1 North East Africa, published by D. Appleton and Comlany, 1886. Pp. 134.

<sup>95</sup>. Donald N. Levine, "Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society", 1974. Pp. 82.

<sup>96</sup>. ሚሊዮን ነቅንቅ፣ "ታላቋ ኢትዮጵያ የብዙ ነገዶች ማህበረሰብ፣ የረጅም ዘመናት ዕድገት"፣ አዲስ አበባ ዩኒቨርሲቲ ፕሬስ፣ የመጀመሪያ እትም 1993 ዓ.ም፣ ገጽ 74

and administrative prominence of Tigrinya within the northern Ethiopian highlands. Through prolonged contact, economic exchange, and sociopolitical integration would have reinforced the use of Tigrinya in public, commercial, and inter-communal contexts.

Over successive generations, this process appears to have led to the widespread acquisition of Tigrinya as a primary language among many Raya communities, contributing to a gradual reconfiguration of local linguistic and cultural identity. As a result, a Raya identity emerged that was predominantly Tigrinya-speaking and strongly influenced by Tigrayan cultural norms, while still retaining a distinct historical consciousness of Oromo origins and elements of a modified Oromo pastoral heritage.

In Levine's account, the reference to "immigrants" may plausibly include Tigrinya-speaking populations, who had been displaced from the Raya Oromo area itself during earlier periods of conflict and later resettled in the Raya region following the area's incorporation into expanding state structures. If so, this would imply that the Raya zone, including present-day Raya-Azebo in southern Tigray and Raya-Kobo in northern Wollo, had long-standing links to Tigrinya-speaking populations, even prior to the seventeenth century penetration of Raya Oromo groups into the region. This historical process helps explain why the Raya and Azebo Oromo populations inhabiting Raya-Azebo in southern Tigray and Raya-Kobo in northern Wollo are largely Tigrinya speakers. In contemporary classifications, consequently, they are treated as part of the broader Tigrayan ethno linguistic sphere.<sup>97</sup>

43). Sir E.A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia: Nubia and Abyssinia*, provides:

*"Divisions of Abyssinia. Travellers and others state that the country is divided into Kingdoms and Provinces. De la Croix enumerates 10 Kingdoms and 10 Provinces; the former are Tigré, Dambia, Begamder, Gojam, Amhara, Enarya, Shoa, Angot, Damot-Dari and Damot-Adari: the latter are Mangasha, Salam, Wagara, Abba-Gale,*

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<sup>97</sup>. Clapham Christopher observed that: "The Tigreans have always been a distinct sub-section of Abyssinia as shown by the following: "The Tigrinya-speaking areas of northern Ethiopia have historically possessed an intensified sense of regional identity, expressed not only in language, but in differences in customary land tenure, and in adherence to distinctive doctrines within the Orthodox Church. Strategically, the area was a frontier region, since it was there that the Ethiopian highlands came to closest to the Red Sea, and to the main Islamic centers of the Sudan. Politically, it was governed very largely through an indigenous aristocracy, which intermarried with the Amhara aristocracy to the south, and intervened readily in national politics, but maintained both a distinctive identity and a high level of functionalism among its own members. The Ethiopian emperors normally maintained an indirect control over the area through the manipulation of these local conflicts." See, Clapham Christopher, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, published by Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988. Pp. 205

*Walqait, Sagad, Samien, Sloa, Walaga, and Deba. Ludolf mentions 9 Kingdoms and 5 Provinces, and Bruce found there were 4 Kingdoms, viz. Tigré, Ambara, Shoa and Gojam, and 19 Provinces.*

*In Tigré were Enderta, Antalen, Siray, Bahr-Negus and Tigré (Tigray), and in Ambara and other parts of the country were Samien, Waldabba, Begamder, Walaku, Dambia, Damot, Agaumder, Kuara, Enarya, Rās al-Fil, Thyelga, Sakahala, Guto and Lasta. Salt mentions 3 Kingdoms only, Tigré, Ambara and Shoa. Kingdoms were governed by hereditary feudal chiefs, the king being their overlord, and the Provinces were the possessions or estates of the king. At the present time the Kingdoms are divided into provinces and districts, some of which are governed by hereditary tribal chiefs, each of which has the title "Rās," and some by officials of various grades and titles. The three kingdoms today are Tigray, Ambara and Shoa.*

*In ancient times Tigray in northern Abyssinia was the most important of the three kingdoms, for in it was situated the town of Aksum (identified by some with the Τῆρεις of Strabo), which was not only the religious center of the country, but the capital of the Kingdom. Its seaport was Adulis, the modern Zullab, and it was a rich and prosperous town; in later times it lost its importance, and Adua became the capital. The present capital is Makalay.*

*The principal Provinces of the Kingdom are Ader (capital Adigrat), Antalen, Aruemder, Arsay, Ashangay, Bagalay, Bahr-Negus (capital Digsa), Enderta (capital Makalay, and chief towns Tehelikot and Antalu), Yambela, Gheralta (capital Anzen), Lasta (capital Sakota, chief town Lalibala), Mangasha, Sagad, Salam, Saruy, Sloa, Sorat, Tembien, Tigray Makonen (capital Adua), and Zeluay.<sup>98</sup>*

This means that, according to early European scholarly and travel-based classifications summarized by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, Tigray was consistently identified as one of the core historical kingdoms of Abyssinia, often listed first and treated as the most ancient and politically significant of them. Multiple independent authorities cited by Budge, De la Croix, Ludolf, Bruce, and Salt, recognize Tigré/Tigray as a distinct kingdom, with clearly named internal provinces such as Enderta, Siray, Tembien, Antalen, Bahr-Negus, and others.

The repeated inclusion of provinces such as Walqait, Dambia, Samien, and Lasta within the broader political geography associated with Tigray or neighboring northern kingdoms indicates that these areas were historically integrated into the northern Abyssinian state system rather than lying outside it. Budge's account further emphasizes that Tigray's primacy derived from its role as the seat of Aksum, the religious and political center of ancient Ethiopia, with Adulis as its seaport, underscoring Tigray's early centrality in Ethiopian civilization.

Moreover, Budge's distinction between kingdoms (ruled by hereditary feudal chiefs under a king) and provinces (royal possessions or estates) reflects a long-standing internal administrative structure in which Tigray functioned not as a peripheral region but as a foundational political core. Budge's statement that "in ancient times Tigray in northern Abyssinia was the most important of the three

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<sup>98</sup> Sir E.A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia: Nubia and Abyssinia* (according to the hieroglyphic inscriptions of Egypt and nubia, and the Ethiopian chronicles), vo.1, published by Methuen & Co. ltd., 1928, pp. 123-124.

kingdoms” is particularly significant, as it situates Tigray historically above Amhara and Shoa in terms of antiquity and state formation.

Taken together, this evidence supports the conclusion that Tigray constituted a historically continuous, territorially defined, and politically central kingdom, with long-established provinces and administrative institutions. This historical reality provides essential context for understanding later demographic changes, population movements, and linguistic or cultural shifts in adjacent regions, including areas that would later experience Oromo settlement or ethno linguistic transformation.

44). Irma Taddia, in her study *"Giovanni Ellero's Manuscript Notes on the Falasha of Walqayt,"* provides detailed ethnographic evidence on the social, linguistic, and religious composition of the Falasha in Wolqayt, highlighting the region's long-standing Tigrinya-speaking population alongside smaller minority communities:

*"Walqayt is historically linked to Tigray, although isolated and difficult to reach from Tigray; the language of the people is Tigrinya, with words in Amharic and some local characteristics."*<sup>99</sup>

The quoted passage describes that Walqayt (also referred to in colonial-era boundary documents as Uolcait) is historically linked to Tigray, although geographically isolated and separated from central Tigray by rugged terrain. The local population primarily speaks Tigrinya, incorporating Amharic loanwords and distinct regional linguistic features, a pattern reflecting centuries of social and economic interaction rather than centralized political imposition.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup>. Irma Taddia, Giovanni Ellero's Manuscript Notes on the Falasha of Walqayt, (Edited by Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi), published by Routledge 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN in *Jews of Ethiopia: The birth of an elite*, 2005. Pp. 46.

<sup>100</sup>. To quote Ellero: 'Il Uolcait è pressoché sconosciuto agli stessi Abissini, che si limitano a dirlo regione selvaggia e misteriosa' ['Uolcait is almost unknown to Abyssinians themselves, who define it as a mysterious and savage land']. 'Più che punto d'incontro, il Uolcàit fu barriera contro cui vennero a cozzare interessi contrastanti di Sudanesi da occidente, di Beja da nord, di Tigrini da Oriente, di Amhara da sud. Negli ultimi secoli questi ultimi prevalsero politicamente, ma si limitarono ad inviarvi esattori di tributi e woyzerò cadute in disgrazia' ['Rather than a crossroads, Uolcàit is a barrier against which many different people happened to fight: Sudanese from the west, Beja from the north, Tegreans from the east, Amhara from the south. During the last few centuries Amhara prevailed politically, but confined it to tax collectors and woyzerò fell into disgrace']. 'In un paese, su cui mai i capi del Tigray riuscirono a consolidare la loro egemonia e che quelli dell'Ahmara ebbero sempre in poco conto, il principio di autorità non è sentito. Il dissidente . . . troverà sempre persone disposte a seguirlo' ['In a country over which the rulers of Tegray were not able to consolidate their hegemony

Many scholars note that, while Walqayt has long-standing historical connections with Tigray, it has also functioned as a border region with mixed administrative control over the centuries. Drawing on Irma Taddia's analysis of Giovanni Ellero's unpublished field notes, Walqayt emerges as a historically Tigrinya-speaking borderland whose long-standing connections to Tigray coexisted with pronounced geographical isolation and weak, intermittent political incorporation.<sup>101</sup> Ellero's meticulous fieldwork documents Walqayt as a mountainous and largely inaccessible region, historically linked to Tigray yet separated from its political centers by difficult terrain, where Tigrinya constituted the primary spoken language, with loanwords from Amharic and distinctive local features.

Irma also notes that:

"Walqayt is an extreme interesting area for Ethiopian history, a borderland among different states, authorities and political powers. But Walqayt is little known, even by scholars of modern Ethiopia. This borderland is located north of Gondar, between the Angareb and Tekazze rivers, isolated for many centuries because of the mountainous nature of the terrain and its general inaccessibility. Both despite and because of these factors, therefore, Walqayt has played an interesting role in Ethiopian history."<sup>102</sup>

In this quoted text, Irma emphasizes that Walqayt is a historically significant yet understudied borderland in Ethiopian history. She describes Walqayt as being located north of Gondar, between the Angareb and Tekazze rivers, and characterizes it as a region situated among different states, authorities, and political powers. According to Irma, the mountainous nature of the terrain rendered the area largely inaccessible and isolated for many centuries, which contributed to its limited presence in historical scholarship. At the same time, she suggests that both this isolation and Walqayt's position as a borderland played an important role in shaping its place in Ethiopian history.

Furthermore, Irma Taddia's analysis of Ellero's manuscript highlights:

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and that Amhara used to despise, the principle of authority is not perceived. Dissidents will surely find people able to follow them'].

<sup>101</sup>. Irma notes "Oral tradition confirms that Walqayt was incorporated into the Empire during Ba'eda Mariam's rule (1468–78) and was, before this century, a Muslim country ruled by Bejwa (Balaw). During Bakaffa and Iyasu II (eighteenth century) Walqayt was ruled by the central power, but we have news about rebellions and local power autonomy, lasting to Tekla Giyorghis rule and Yohannes. The Walqayt awra  $\bar{g}'a$  was ruled by a meslenie nominally dependent on Semien (in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries) but was in fact autonomous; it is historically linked to Tseghedie and with this district often fought against the central power."

<sup>102</sup>. Ibid., pp. 43-44.

"According to Ellero's notes, **the Falasha in Walqayt were about 370** (Tseghede excluded). The main informants Ellero quotes to support his material were a Faitlovitch pupil in Addis Ababa, Tesfai Adera, and a Deftenà, Desta Zaudie, both from Addi Agau (Uefargbef).

The main areas of settlement where Falasha used to live as gabbar, cultivating lands in the villages economy were: Addi Agau, 11 gabbar (Uefargbef); Zana and Addis Masno Enghida, 3 gabbar (Scirella); Addis Malei, 1 gabbar (Belamba); Cafta, 7 gabbar (Cafta); Sola (Sola); Sciogada (Aura); Ceballoco, 1 gabbar (Degenà); and Chessad Daga (Tsello). Ellero claims there is 1 mesghid (in Addi Agau) and 6 chesci (2 in Addi Agau, 2 in Scirella, 2 in Chessad Daga).

Falasha strongly believe in the coming of a Messiah (lover of God = fetani nai egzïabie) who will certainly arrive from Jerusalem in the form of a normal man; therefore called negus. They believe that upon his arrival a true golden age will be instituted, and they believe in this new age. They vaguely remember the Jerusalem temple.

When you ask them about their origins, Falasha answer that they arrived in Ethiopia from Jerusalem, in the period of King Nebuchadnezzar and that they came through Egypt following the route of the Setit/Tacazze river. **Their first land would have been Adiabò, and from Adiabò they would have spread throughout the entire Tegray, particularly in the Semien.** They would have called themselves simply Israeli, and claimed Atzïe Denghel Dauit was the king when they arrived.

The members of the original twelve groups (negbedè) would have come from Egypt to Ethiopia (the original groups were called Rabièl, Simon, Leu, Yeudà, Sacòr, Zablòn, Dan, Neftalieu, Assièr, Goad, Beniam, Yosief).

In the original settlement of Adiabò they did not have a proper social organisation. They started organising themselves in Semien, and they chose a chief (scium, mesaffenti) named Ghideon. They did that because Atzïe Degel Dauit encouraged them to convert to Christianity. Six or seven chiefs replaced Ghideon, both named Ghideon as well. The residence of scium, in Semien, was Melatà, near Encet Caf and Mai Tzçalò (where the first Ghideon died).

They call themselves Falasha (emigrants), chaila (somebody who disagrees with people) and they are rigorously endogamous. **They use Tigrinya as their language and their Christian names are Tigrinya (but we also found Abraham, Ishac, Recà). ....**

One might here reflect on the social history of the area: according to the written field notes, we stressed the role of Falasha in the gabbar economy. In this sense the information on the various villages is very detailed. In many pages of the manuscript Ellero mentions Falasha living as gabbar in various areas of Walqayt, and I shall cite here the most important ones where the presence of Falasha settlement is certain.

- In **Addi Agau** (deš of Uefargbef), a village whose inhabitants were of Agau or Falasha origin, there are 14 gabbar, all Falasha. All the villagers in Addi Agau celebrate in a collective prayer the feast of Mehalla and all the Falasha coming from the region used to attend this ceremony. The tradition refers to a certain Falasha anchorite (an old hermit) from Semien, who lived and prayed here – a man called Abba Sefrà. In the village four cemeteries testify to the presence of Falasha groups that were once bigger than in Ellero's time.

- In the got (**addi**) of Addi Gurmaz (deš Belamba) there is a Falasha cemetery similar to the one of Addi Malei.

● In **Addi Malei** (*deš Belamba*) there is one Falasha gabbar. In the abandoned area of Addi Uerari there is a Falasha cemetery (more than 100 tombs). Tradition recalls the presence of ten Falasha families, generically called Addi Agau by Christians and Muslims.

● In the village of Zuà Chidane Mehret (*deš Zua*) the informants recall an old blind Falasha who lived there before the founder Zebbil settled in the village at the time of negus Bedemariam.

● In the village of Sechelà (*deš Scirella*) there is a Falasha gabbar.

● In the village of **Addi Hazila** (*deš Scirella*) there are three Falasha gabbar.

● In the village of **Addi Decchi Bagali** (*deš Aura*) there is a Falasha gabbar.

● In the village of Sciocda (*deš Aura*) there is a Falasha gabbar.

I would like to conclude this brief survey by quoting the similarities between written documentation and my first field information, collected last year in Walqayt.<sup>103</sup> (Emphasis added)

According to Ellero's field notes, the Falasha presence in Walqayt was numerically limited, approximately 370 individuals, excluding Tseghedie, but socially and economically significant, as they were largely integrated into the regional gabbar system. Ellero documents Falasha households cultivating land across multiple settlements, accompanied by religious infrastructures (mesghid and chesci) and cemeteries attesting to earlier and larger Falasha populations. Linguistically, the Walqayt Falasha used Tigrinya as their vernacular, likely alongside liturgical use of Ge'ez, and bore predominantly Tigrinya baptismal names, while maintaining strict endogamy and a distinct religious identity centered on messianic belief and a remembered connection to Jerusalem.

As documented by Ellero and contextualized by Taddia, the presence of Tigrinya in Walqayt reflects long-term historical linkage, geographic proximity, and sustained social interaction rather than political domination. Despite enduring historical connections to Tigray, Walqayt remained geographically isolated and politically marginal, with Tigrayan rulers unable to consolidate lasting hegemony. The widespread use of Tigrinya among both Christian populations and the Falasha indicates that the language spread through everyday social, economic, and familial networks, not through centralized authority or ethnic assimilation. Place names in Walqayt, such as Addi Hazila, Addi Decchi, Addi Malei, Cafta, and Mai T'zaalò in Semien, further reflect long-standing Tigrinya settlement and the predominance of Tigrinya as a mother tongue. These toponyms underscore Walqayt's character as a frontier zone in which linguistic and cultural continuity was sustained locally rather than imposed by political power.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that Tigrinya became the predominant language of Walqayt through centuries of settlement, mobility, and integration. While Walqayt shares deep linguistic and

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<sup>103</sup>. Ibid.. Pp. 48-49.

cultural ties with central Tigray, its geographic isolation and history of semi-political autonomy distinguish it from the core highlands. Historically, it is therefore best understood, similar to other semi-autonomous frontier zones in the Horn of Africa, as a Tigrayan borderland shaped more by localized social interaction than by sustained centralized rule.

45). The following excerpt from Giovanni Ellero's "Il Uolcait" (1948) provides direct ethnographic evidence on the social, linguistic, and demographic characteristics of Wolqayt:

*"Sebbene isolato dai Tigré, il Uolcait suole esserne considerato parte, sia perché tigrina ne è la massa della popolazione, con iniezioni ambara, e tigrino ne è il linguaggio, sebbene deformato nel lessico in modo da assumere spiccate caratteristiche dialettali. L'amarico è compreso da buona parte della popolazione e, per così dire, tollerato nella vita d'ogni giorno. Un censimento dell'autorità italiana accertò la presenza di 2060 famiglie, delle quali 1965 cristiane (318 di ex-schiavi in gran parte residenti stabilmente nel Mezega), 73 musulmane e 22 falascia. Data una composizione di cinque persone per famiglia, si hanno 10.300 abitanti. La natura è qui più generosa che altrove nel Tigré. Terreni ottimi, abbondanza d'acque, selvaggina, pesci."* <sup>104</sup>

This quoted passage contextually translated from Italian as follows:

*"Although isolated from Tigray, Wolqayt is generally considered a part of it. This is both because the bulk of the population is Tigrinya, with an Ambara admixture, and because the language is Tigrinya, albeit deformed in its lexicon in a way that gives it pronounced dialectal characteristics. Amharic is understood by a good part of the population and is, so to speak, tolerated in daily life. A census by the Italian authorities recorded the presence of 2,060 families, of which 1,965 were Christian (318 families of former slaves, largely settled permanently in Mezega), 73 were Muslim, and 22 were Falasha. Assuming an average family size of five persons, this gives 10,300 inhabitants. Nature is more generous here than elsewhere in Tigray. There are excellent soils, an abundance of water, game, and fish."*

Giovanni Ellero's ethnographic study *Il Uolcait* (1948), based on field research conducted in the late 1930s, has important implications for understanding the historical extent and internal structure of Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory. His observations demonstrate that linguistic and cultural affiliation in northern Ethiopia cannot be equated mechanically with later administrative boundaries, but must instead be understood in relation to settlement history, vernacular language use, and patterns of everyday social life.

Ellero characterizes Uolcait (Walqayt) as geographically isolated from the Tigrayan highlands while nonetheless being "generally considered part of Tigray" on linguistic and cultural grounds. Central to this characterization is his identification of Tigrinya as the primary vernacular of the

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<sup>104</sup>. Ellero, Giovanni. "Il Uolcait." In *Antropologia e storia d'Etiopia*. Note sullo Scirè, l'Endertà, i Tacruri e l'Uolcait', *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (gennaio-giugno 1948), pp. 89-112

population. Although he notes lexical divergence and pronounced dialectal features, Ellero treats these as outcomes of geographic isolation rather than indicators of linguistic displacement. Such variation is typical of frontier regions and does not undermine the classification of the local speech as Tigrinya. The persistence of Tigrinya as the language of village life, agriculture, religious practice, and customary interaction situates Walqayt firmly within the broader Tigrinya linguistic continuum.

Demographic data further reinforce this interpretation. Ellero's use of Italian census records indicates a population overwhelmingly composed of Christian households, alongside smaller Muslim and Falasha communities, all embedded within a predominantly Tigrinya-speaking social environment. The presence of religious diversity does not correspond to linguistic fragmentation or to the existence of a competing ethno-linguistic majority. Rather, it reflects internal pluralism within a shared vernacular framework. By contrast, Ellero's treatment of Amharic underscores its secondary and instrumental role. Amharic is described as being understood by a portion of the population and "tolerated" in everyday life, a formulation that suggests accommodation rather than linguistic dominance. Its functional association with administration and external authority indicates superimposition rather than indigeneity. Ellero does not present Amharic as a native community language in Walqayt, nor as a marker of an Amhara ethno-linguistic substrate.

Toponymic evidence provides particularly strong support for long-term Tigrinya presence. Ellero records an overwhelming predominance of place names with Tigrinya etymologies, with only a marginal number attributable to Amharic and limited Arabic influence in lowland or trade-related contexts. Given the conservative nature of toponyms, this pattern strongly suggests historical continuity of Tigrinya-speaking settlement in the region.

At the same time, Ellero emphasizes Walqayt's character as a frontier zone. Difficult terrain and ecological conditions historically constrained sustained administrative integration with the Tigrayan core, producing a situation in which cultural and linguistic continuity coexisted with political and administrative fluidity.<sup>105</sup> Walqayt thus appears not as a transitional zone into Amhara territory, but as a peripheral extension of north-western Tigray, culturally aligned with Širé and adjacent highland districts.

Taken together, Ellero's findings imply that Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory historically extended beyond the tightly governed Tigrayan highlands into western frontier regions such as Walqayt. This extension was demographically substantive and socially embedded, rather than the result of elite domination or recent migration. The case of Walqayt illustrates how Tigrinya identity historically functioned as a vernacular, community-based phenomenon shaped by settlement patterns and ecological realities, rather than by fixed administrative borders. Ellero's work therefore provides

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<sup>105</sup>. Ellero also notes that Qafta and Bertukan constituted the core highland part of Walqayt.

critical ethnographic evidence for understanding the historical depth, geographic reach, and internal diversity of the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic sphere.

46). The following excerpts from Gianni Dore's<sup>106</sup> article, "Spazio politico, attraversamenti, ricomposizioni etniche nel bassopiano occidentale eritreo", illustrate the historical links between the present-day Western Tigray Zone (Wälqayt region) and Tigrinya/Tigray, highlighting the region's long standing Tigrinya speaking populations:

1. On political and economic integration into the Tigrayan highland system

*"Le stesse terre basse dell'etiopico e decentrato Wälqayt, dette mäzäga, sono storicamente inglobate nei rapporti di produzione dell'altopiano."* The quoted text is translated contextually as follows: *"The same lowlands (mäzäga) of the Ethiopian and decentralized Wälqayt are historically incorporated into the production relations of the highlands."*

*"I contadini locali vi scendevano stagionalmente, per la semina in luglio e per il raccolto tra dicembre e gennaio [...] I villaggi mandavano avanti almeno uno schiavo per impegnarvi un buon terreno."* The quoted text is translated contextually as follows: *"Local peasants descended there seasonally, for sowing in July and harvesting between December and January [...] Villages would send at least one slave ahead to secure a good plot of land."*

*"L'altopiano etiopico si collocava tra le organizzazioni sociali che [...] si alimentavano con un continuo prelievo dall'esterno, scaricando sulle più deboli società periferiche i costi della rigenerazione."* The quoted passage is translated as follows: *"The Ethiopian highland positioned itself among the social organizations that [...] fed themselves through a continuous extraction from the outside, offloading the costs of regeneration onto weaker peripheral societies."*

2. On control by Tigrinya-speaking elites and rulers

*"Per secoli i tigrinofoni da Est e da Sud-est sono stati gli interpreti di un modello che prevedeva, nei periodi stagionali favorevoli, grandi e piccole razzie con l'obiettivo di prelevare nelle terre basse uno stock di animali, cereali ed esseri umani destinati alla circolazione schiavile."* The quoted text is rendered contextually as follows: *"For centuries, Tigrinya speakers from the East and Southeast have been the interpreters of a model that envisioned, during favorable seasonal periods, large and small raids aimed at extracting from the lowlands a stock of animals, grains, and human beings destined for the slave trade."*

*"Gli schiavi venivano o acquistati da mercanti e 'imprenditori di frontiera', come diventò, nel tempo della turkiyya, Mekke Nemir, o prelevati con razzie oltre il Täkäzze tra le genti Kunama [...]."* The quoted text is contextually translated as follows: *"Slaves were either purchased from merchants and 'frontier entrepreneurs,' as Mekke Nemir became during the Turkiyya, or seized through raids beyond the Täkäzze among the Kunama people..."*

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<sup>106</sup>. Gianni Dore is Professor of Ethnography and History of Africa, Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

"Nel periodo italiano vi erano insediati da tempo ex-schiavi di origine kunama, ormai emancipati, coltivatori [...] vincolati con il contratto detto *sisō* (un terzo) sotto il controllo di sorveglianti al servizio dei capi dei distretti alti del *Wälqayt*." The quoted text is translated contextually as follows: "During the Italian period, there had long been settled former slaves of Kunama origin, now emancipated, cultivators [...] bound by the contract called *sisō* (one-third) under the control of overseers in service of the chiefs of the high districts of *Wälqayt*."

### 3. On historical settlement and Tigrayan presence

"*Dei paesani wälkatot, ad esempio, si erano spostati nel Däqqi Täsfa, alle pendici del Serä'ē eritreo, prima della fine del secolo XIX [...].*" The quoted text is rendered contextually as follows: "Some *Wälqayt* villagers, for example, had moved to *Däqqi Täsfa*, on the slopes of Eritrean *Serä'ē*, before the end of the 19th century..."

"*Le tradizioni attestano la capacità di piccoli imprenditori politici di rispondere ai peculiari bisogni di quest'area, garantendo sicurezza e manodopera alle coltivazioni. Questi stringono accordi politici e alleanze matrimoniali con l'élite locale [highland Tigrayan elite]...*" The quoted text may be translated contextually as follows: "Traditions attest to the capacity of small political entrepreneurs to respond to the peculiar needs of this area, guaranteeing security and labor for cultivation. They struck political agreements and matrimonial alliances with the local elite..."

"*Questi villaggi e la loro popolazione composita sono una illustrazione esemplare della fluidità etnica dell'area, una periferia inglobata rispetto ai centri abissini...*" The quoted text may be translated contextually as follows: "These villages and their composite population are an exemplary illustration of the ethnic fluidity of the area, an incorporated periphery relative to Abyssinian centers..."

"*Un modello di movimento interno che ha funzionato nei periodi di crisi ha visto svuotarsi i villaggi lungo il Gash e un retrocedere verso i più protetti paesi delle colline di Nord-est e i monti Libān a ridosso della regione tigrina del Dambe'ā, per poi muovere in direzione inversa nei periodi di tranquillità. .... Un diverso tipo di mobilità poteva riguardare interi paesi, con andirivieni tra bassopiano e alture tigrinofone del Wälqayt e dello Šire.*" The quoted text is translated contextually as follows: "A model of internal movement that functioned in times of crisis saw villages along the Gash emptying and a retreat towards the more protected hill countries of the northeast and the Libān mountains bordering the Tigrinya region of Dambe'ā, then moving in the opposite direction during peaceful periods. .... A different type of mobility could involve entire villages, with back-and-forth movements between the lowlands and the Tigrinya highlands of *Wälqayt* and *Šire*. This notes movement between *Wälqayt* (the *Wälqayt* lowlands and the *Wälqayt* Tigrinya highlands) and *Šire*, both core Tigrinya-speaking regions. Both the *Wälqayt* lowlands and the *Wälqayt* highlands are included in this circulation. *Walqayt* is explicitly labeled as "tigrinofono." (Emphasis added)

".... Nel periodo italiano vi erano insediati da tempo ex-schiavi di origine kunama, ormai emancipati, coltivatori adattati fisiologicamente e culturalmente alle terre basse, vincolati con il contratto detto *sisō* (un terzo) sotto il controllo di sorveglianti al servizio dei capi dei distretti alti del *Wälqayt*. .... Questi stringono accordi politici e alleanze matrimoniali con l'élite locale, attirano come seguaci anche tigrini cristiani e formano nuovi villaggi. ...." The quoted text is translated contextually as follows: "During the Italian period, there had long been settled former slaves of Kunama origin, now emancipated, cultivators physiologically and culturally adapted to the lowlands, bound by the contract called *sisō* (one-third) under the control of overseers serving the chiefs of the high districts of *Wälqayt*. .... They struck political

agreements and matrimonial alliances with the local elite, attracted as followers even Christian Tigrinyans, and formed new villages." (Emphasis added)

"*Le stesse terre basse dell'etiopico e decentrato Wälqayt, dette mäzäga, sono storicamente inglobate nei rapporti di produzione dell'altopiano.*" The quoted text is translated contextually as follows: "*The same lowlands (mäzäga) of Ethiopian and decentralized Wälqayt are historically incorporated into the highland production relations.*" (Emphasis added) This explicitly anchors Mazaga within Walqayt, not outside it. In Dore's framework, Walqaytot are part of the Tigrinya-speaking highland world.

#### 4. On borders, taxation, and Tigrayan administration

"*Per i capi etiopici il confine, in cui imporre tributi sui traffici, era fatto non di linee ma di 'punti', corrispondenti ai valichi o guadi, detti kella (porta) o berri (argento/denaro)...*" The quoted text is translated contextually as follows: "*For Ethiopian chiefs, the border, on which to impose tolls on traffic, was made not of lines but of 'points,' corresponding to passes or fords, called kella (gate) or berri (silver/money)...*"

"*Governarne la posizione interstiziale, tenerne sotto controllo l'esposizione alla variabilità delle congiunture storiche e ambientali, ereditarne ed eventualmente ridefinirne circoscrizioni e confini, fu problema storico che gli Italiani dovettero fronteggiare quando si trovarono a governare direttamente anche la nuova regione.*" The quoted text may be translated contextually as follows: "*Governing its interstitial position, keeping under control its exposure to the variability of historical and environmental conjunctures, inheriting and possibly redefining its circumscriptions and borders, was a historical problem the Italians had to face when they found themselves directly governing the new region as well.*"

"*... È evidente che, come con gli ascari e i na'ib di Massawa, gli Italiani devono iniziare con figure già in relazione con i turchi o con i capi tigrinofoni a sud dello Širē, perché hanno intraprendenza, conoscenza del territorio e tecniche, sia pure da riconvertire alle nuove finalità coloniali. ....*" The quoted text may be translated contextually as follows: "*It is evident that, as with the ascari and na'ib of Massawa, the Italians had to start with figures already in relation with the Turks or with Tigrinya-speaking chiefs south of Širē, because they had enterprise, knowledge of the territory and techniques, albeit to be reconverted to new colonial purposes.*"

#### 5. On demographic and cultural ties

"*Verso il Tākäzže si trattava di governare il regime dei pascoli: la scarsità dei pascoli dell'altopiano spingeva gli allevatori tigrini a gennaio a scendere verso il fiume e oltre fino al Gash...*" The quoted text may be translated contextually as follows: "*Towards the Tākäzže, it was a matter of governing the pasture regime: the scarcity of highland pastures pushed Tigrinya herders in January to descend towards the river and beyond to the Gash...*" (Emphasis added)

"*Fino alle linee tracciate dai trattati coloniali secondo la logica binaria del 'dentro o fuori', i confini di cui qui si tratta sono 'bordi', rimangono terre di appartenenze sfumate e lealtà mutevoli, aree fuzzy dove si può essere 'un po' da una parte e un po' dall'altra'...*" The quoted text may be translated contextually as follows: "*Until the lines traced by colonial treaties according to the binary logic of 'inside or outside,' the borders dealt with here are 'edges,' remain lands of blurred belonging and mutable loyalties, fuzzy areas where one can be 'a bit on one side and a bit on the other'...*"

*"Il termine babeša, con cui i Tigrini denominano l'altopiano in cui vivono, è conosciuto dai Kunama come kebesa..."* This quoted passage may be translated contextually as follows: **"The term Habeša, with which Tigrinyans denote the highlands where they live, is known to the Kunama as kebesa..."** (Emphasis added)

#### 6. On post-colonial continuity

The passages from Gianni Dore's analysis of the western Eritrean–Ethiopian lowlands provide a historically grounded framework for understanding Wälqayt (present-day Western Tigray Zone) as a frontier region structurally and demographically linked to the Tigrinya-speaking highland world. Read together, these excerpts reinforce the interpretation of Wälqayt not as an external or alien space vis-à-vis Tigray, but as a historically incorporated periphery within the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic sphere, characterized by mobility, asymmetrical integration, and ethnic fluidity rather than fixed boundaries.

Regarding the structural incorporation into the Tigrinya highland system, Dore repeatedly emphasizes that the lowlands (mäzäga) of Wälqayt were “storicamente inglobate nei rapporti di produzione dell’altopiano.” This formulation is significant: incorporation is framed not merely as episodic contact, but as a durable structural relationship linking the lowlands to the Tigrinya highlands through seasonal agriculture, labor mobilization, pastoral movement, and tribute extraction. Seasonal descent by highland peasants for cultivation, as well as the advance occupation of land through enslaved labor, situates Wälqayt within the economic reproduction of the highland Tigrinya system rather than outside it. From a demographic perspective, this indicates that population movements between highlands and lowlands were intrinsic to Tigrinya social organization. The lowlands were not demographically autonomous zones, but spaces whose productive cycles, land tenure arrangements, and labor regimes were subordinated to highland Tigrinya communities and elites.

Concerning the political dominance of Tigrinya-speaking elites, Dore's references to centuries of raids, extraction, and political entrepreneurship led by “tigrinofoni da Est e da Sud-est” underscore the role of Tigrinya-speaking actors as primary agents shaping the political economy of Wälqayt. Control over land, labor, and mobility was exercised through chiefs and district leaders from the Tigrinya highlands, including Širē and adjacent areas. For centuries, Tigrinya-speaking actors managed seasonal raids and resource extraction from the lowlands, including human and material goods, which were integrated into highland systems.

During the Italian period, former Kunama slaves became cultivators under oversight linked to Tigrinya district chiefs, forming new villages through political and marital alliances with the local highland elite. Even during periods of Ottoman-Egyptian (Turkiyya) and later Italian influence, colonial authorities relied on intermediaries already embedded in networks with Tigrinya-speaking chiefs south of Širē. Demographically, this pattern implies that authority, governance, and social hierarchy in Wälqayt were historically articulated through Tigrinya political structures. Non-Tigrinya populations, particularly Kunama, appear in Dore's account primarily as subjects of enslavement, incorporation, or dependent agricultural labor, rather than as autonomous territorial majorities.

With regard to settlement, mobility, and ethnic composition, Dore's discussion of village movements and internal migration reveals a long-standing circulation between the Wälqayt lowlands, Wälqayt highlands, Širē, and neighboring Tigrinya regions such as Dambe'ā. Villagers from Wälqayt had been moving within the region and into neighboring areas (e.g., Eritrean Serā'ē) before the end of the 19th century. The circulation between lowlands and highlands demonstrates a historically Tigrinya-speaking presence and fluid internal mobility within Tigray-linked territories. Entire villages moved back and forth depending on security and environmental conditions, reinforcing the idea of a shared demographic field rather than separate ethnic territories.

Crucially, Dore explicitly describes both the Wälqayt highlands and lowlands as *tigrinofone*, situating them squarely within the Tigrinya linguistic domain. The presence of emancipated ex-slaves of Kunama origin, bound by sharecropping contracts (*sisō*) and controlled by chiefs of the high districts of Wälqayt, further illustrates demographic layering rather than displacement. These populations were incorporated into a Tigrinya-dominated socio-economic framework, often forming new villages through alliances with local elites and attracting Christian Tigrinya followers. This process points to ethnic recomposition within a Tigrinya territorial matrix, not to the erosion of that matrix.

Dore's analysis of borders as "punti" (*kella, berri*) rather than fixed lines reinforces the notion that pre-colonial boundaries functioned as mechanisms of regulation and extraction, not as ethnic frontiers. Wälqayt's "posizione interstiziale" was governed through control of passes, rivers, and taxation nodes, linking it administratively and fiscally to Tigrinya polities rather than separating it from them. The Italian colonial encounter, as Dore notes, did not create these relationships but inherited and attempted to rationalize them. This underscores that the linkage between Wälqayt and Tigrinya-speaking authority predates colonial boundary-making and cannot be reduced to modern administrative decisions.

Wälqayt lowlands were historically incorporated into the highland production system, with local peasants participating in seasonal sowing and harvesting, and villages sending representatives to secure land. The highlands extracted resources from peripheral lowlands, reflecting structural interdependence.

The seasonal movement of Tigrinya herders toward the Tākāzze and Gash rivers reflects a shared ecological and cultural geography spanning highlands and lowlands. Tigrinya herders utilized lowland pastures seasonally, highlighting long-term economic and cultural integration. The area maintained "fuzzy" borders with blurred allegiances, demonstrating a continuity of Tigrinya influence over centuries. The recognition of the highlands as *habeša* by Tigrinyans and *kebesa* by the Kunama further confirms the cultural centrality of the Tigrinya highland world, with Wälqayt positioned as its southern and western ecological extension. These patterns suggest that Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory historically functioned as a gradient rather than a bounded block, with Wälqayt occupying a peripheral yet integral position within it.

Dore's observation that post-1991 stable settlement of Tigrinyans in the lowlands constitutes a rupture of an older model is particularly important. It implies that historically, Tigrinya influence over

Wälqayt was exercised through mobility, dominance, and integration rather than mass sedentary colonization. Yet this does not negate historical belonging; rather, it clarifies the mode of territoriality as frontier-based and dynamic.

Demographically and historically, this supports the conclusion that Wälqayt was long embedded within the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic sphere, even as its population composition remained fluid and its administrative status variable. The persistence of economic, political, linguistic, and cultural ties provided the basis for later claims of administrative continuity, even as modern state practices transformed settlement patterns.

Taken together, Dore's evidence aligns closely with Ellero's earlier ethnographic findings and reinforces a consistent historical interpretation: Wälqayt represents a Tigrinya-speaking frontier zone whose demographic composition was shaped by incorporation, mobility, and asymmetrical power relations rather than by ethnic replacement or external domination. The Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory, as reconstructed from these sources, extended into Wälqayt not as a rigidly bounded homeland, but as a historically layered space in which linguistic dominance, political authority, and demographic circulation anchored the region firmly within the Tigrinya world. Collectively, Dore's analysis confirms that Wälqayt has been historically intertwined with Tigray and its Tigrinya-speaking population through political, economic, social, and cultural networks that span centuries.

47). Here are the direct quotes<sup>107</sup> from Leo Reinisch work, "Sprachen von Nordost-Afrika. Erster Band: Die Barea-Sprache", 1874, the texts supporting the points on sociolinguistic context:

1. On bilingualism in the Hagr district and Tigrinya influence:

*“Nicht so wie die Kunáma welche seit alters her sich von fremden elementen frei zu erhalten wussten, haben dasselbe die Barea auszuführen vermocht. Vornemlich sind die vom gaue Hagr am meisten innige verbindungen mit fremden eingegangen one dadurch an irer sprache bisher einbisse zu erleiden. [...] Obgleich aber die Barea ser leicht sich das Tigré aneignen, so sind sie doch völlig ausser stande, die semitischen laute ... nachzumachen und so klingt in irem munde das Tigré ser eigentümlich.”* This quoted passage may be translated contextually as follows: **“Unlike the Kunáma, who since ancient times knew how to keep themselves free of foreign elements, the Barea have not been able to do the same. Especially those from the district of Hagr have entered into the closest relations with foreigners without yet suffering damage to their language. [...] But although the Barea acquire Tigré very easily, they are completely unable to reproduce the Semitic sounds ... so that Tigré sounds very peculiar in their mouths.”** (Emphasis added)

2. On Tigré-speaking immigrants shifting to Barea:

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<sup>107</sup>. Leo Reinisch, Sprachen von Nordost-Afrika. Erster Band: Die Barea-Sprache (Languages of Northeast Africa. First Volume: The Barea Language), published in 1874. Pp. 36-7 and 46.

“Die bewoner von Habaretta und Schilko sind insgesamt eingewanderte Haffara, ired Ursprungs also Tigré, sie haben aber ihre eigene Sprache gegen das Barea vertauscht.” This quoted passage may be translated contextually as follows: “**The inhabitants of Habaretta and Schilko are all immigrant Haffara, originally therefore Tigré, but they have exchanged their own language for Barea.**” (Emphasis added)

3. On political subordination to Abyssinia and tribute:

“Politisch hängen die Barea und Kunáma in so ferne von Abessinien ab als sie dahin jährlichen Tribut entrichten [...] Im letzten Decennium zahlte der Gau von Hagr jährlich 1500, der von Mogoréb 1000 Maria Theresien Taler an die ägyptischen Behörden. [...] Senlichst wünschen die Barea, es möchte einer ihrer Fronvogte das Feld raumen um dem andern ganz sich unterwerfen und so aus ihrer Doppelstellung befreit werden zu können.” Contextually translated, it means: “Politically, the Barea and Kunáma depend on Abyssinia insofar as they pay it annual tribute [...] In the last decade, the district of Hagr paid 1500 Maria Theresa thalers annually, that of Mogoréb 1000, to the Egyptian authorities. [...] The Barea sincerely wish that one of their two overlords would leave the field so that they could submit entirely to the other and thus be freed from their dual position.”

Leo Reinisch’s *Sprachen von Nordost-Afrika* (1874) provides an early and methodologically rigorous account of linguistic contact in the north-eastern African borderlands, offering crucial evidence for understanding the historical limits, permeability, and modes of expansion of Tigrinya (Tigré) ethno-linguistic territory. In particular, these quoted passages above document a historical period of intense contact, political subjugation, and language shift between Barea and Tigrinya (Tigré) peoples in the late 19th century. Leo Reinisch’s observations on Barea–Tigrinya relations document a sociolinguistic frontier shaped by political subordination, economic dependency, and intense contact, but not by uniform linguistic domination or demographic replacement.

Reinisch’s description of the Barea, especially those of the Hagr district, highlights a pattern of asymmetrical bilingualism. The Barea acquired Tigrinya with relative ease due to sustained interaction with Tigrinya-speaking populations and political authorities. Their inability to reproduce Semitic phonology resulted in a distinct Barea-accented variety of Tigrinya, which Reinisch explicitly notes as sounding “very peculiar” in their mouths. This observation is critical for delimiting Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory. It demonstrates that Tigrinya functioned as a language of wider communication and political interaction beyond its native core, but that such use did not automatically entail language shift or ethno-linguistic assimilation. The persistence of Barea as the dominant native language indicates that contact occurred across a frontier zone rather than within an area of consolidated Tigrinya linguistic dominance.

Even more revealing is Reinisch’s account of Habaretta and Schilko, where communities of Tigré-speaking origin (“Haffara”) are said to have abandoned Tigrinya in favor of Barea. This constitutes strong evidence against a model of linear or unidirectional expansion of Tigrinya at the demographic level. Despite the broader regional prestige of Semitic languages, Barea could operate as the socially dominant language in specific local contexts, powerful enough to assimilate immigrant Tigrinya speakers. From a demographic perspective, this suggests that Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory did not advance through simple settlement-driven replacement, but coexisted with zones in which non-Semitic

languages retained, or even asserted, local dominance. Such cases mark the outer limits of effective Tigrinya linguistic territoriality in the late nineteenth century.

Reinisch's discussion of tribute payments and dual political subordination, to Abyssinian and Egyptian authorities, demonstrates that **political dependency did not translate into linguistic absorption**. The Barea and Kunama paid tribute and were embedded in regional power structures linked to Abyssinia, yet this subordination coexisted with strong linguistic resilience. Reinisch's contrast between the Barea and the Kunama further clarifies this point: while both were politically subordinate, their linguistic responses to contact differed, underscoring that language outcomes were shaped by local social structures rather than by domination alone. For the historical geography of Tigrinya, this reinforces a key distinction: zones of political influence and extraction extended beyond zones of demographic and linguistic consolidation. Tigrinya authority could be exercised in areas where Tigrinya was neither the majority language nor the primary community code.

Reinisch locates the Barea homeland "between Barka, Tach, and the Takazze," placing it squarely in a multi-ethnic frontier zone between Semitic (Tigrinya), Cushitic (Beja), and Nilo-Saharan (Kunama) spheres. This spatial framing is essential. It situates Tigrinya not as an all-encompassing regional language, but as one pole within a complex contact ecology. Within this ecology, Tigrinya acted as a language of intergroup communication, a marker of political authority and tribute relations, and a source of lexical and phonological influence, while remaining demographically bounded by resilient non-Tigrinya speech communities.

Taken together, Reinisch's evidence implies that Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory in the nineteenth century was characterized by **graduated boundaries rather than sharp frontiers**. Core Tigrinya-speaking regions were surrounded by contact zones where bilingualism, partial acquisition, and even reverse language shift occurred. These zones cannot be treated as marginally "Tigrinya" in demographic terms, even when they were politically subordinated or economically integrated. In contrast to regions such as Wälqayt and Širē, where Ellero and Dore document Tigrinya as the dominant vernacular embedded in local social life, Reinisch's Barea case represents a **true outer frontier** of Tigrinya linguistic influence. Here, Tigrinya did not replace indigenous languages, and its speakers could themselves be linguistically assimilated.

In conclusion, Reinisch's 1874 account thus provides an essential counterbalance to expansionist or homogenizing models of Tigrinya territorial history. It shows that Tigrinya influence radiated outward through political and economic networks, but that **demographic and linguistic incorporation stopped well short of universal assimilation**. The historical Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory emerges as a layered space: a consolidated core, an incorporated frontier (such as Wälqayt), and an outer contact zone (such as Barea territory) where linguistic dominance remained contested. This differentiation is crucial for any historically grounded reconstruction of Tigrinya territoriality in northeast Africa.

48). In his article *"Identity Jilted or Reimagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles,"* Alemseged Abbay observes that, before the late nineteenth-century colonial interventions, the highlands on both sides of the Mereb River constituted a unified ethno-historical space, bound together by Tigrinya language, Orthodox Christianity, shared cultural practices, and integrated economic networks:

*"Before colonialism in the 1880s, the Eritrean highlands (Kebessa), north of the Mereb, and Tigray proper to its south, shared a common ethnic identity-bound by economic interdependence, common language, religion, culture and history. The history that both share goes beyond the Axumite era of the first millennium A.D. The trans-Mereb was the cradle of the Axumite Empire whose power reached the Arabian Peninsula to the east and Meroe to the west. Thus, the main port of the Empire, Adulis, now in Eritrea, is as much Tigrayan as Eritrean; likewise, the capital of the Empire, Axum, now in Tigray, is as much Eritrean as Tigrayan.*

*Even when Axum declined by the 10th century A.D. and its empire was fragmented into independent petty states, Kebessa remained a part of Tigray. Nor did the occupation of the coast by the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century change the status of the Kebessa hinterland as part of Tigray. The semi-autonomous Bahr Negasi ("King of the Sea") who ruled Kebessa was not an independent leader.<sup>2</sup>*

*Kebessa continued to be a part of Tigray. In the 17th century, the trans-Mereb Tigray was ruled by the Tigra Macuenen. Dabarwa, in Kebessa, was the joint capital of the Tigra Macuenen and his subordinate, the Bahr Negasi.<sup>3</sup> In the 18th century, too.<sup>108</sup>*

Alemseged's analysis of Eritrean and Tigrayan nationalist trajectories provides a crucial macro-historical framework for situating Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory within longue durée patterns of political, cultural, and demographic continuity. Alemseged's discussion of the Kebessa (Eritrean highlands) and Tigray proper underscores that the Mereb River, later politicized as a boundary, did not historically constitute an ethno-linguistic or cultural frontier. Alemseged emphasizes that prior to colonial intervention in the late nineteenth century, the highlands north and south of the Mereb formed a single ethno-historical space, unified by Tigrinya language, Orthodox Christianity, shared cultural institutions, and economic interdependence. This unity was not episodic or symbolic but structurally embedded in everyday social life and political organization.

Importantly, Alemseged situates this continuity well before the Axumite period, while also highlighting Axum as a shared civilizational foundation rather than a territorially exclusive heritage. This implies that Tigrinya-speaking populations historically spanned the Mereb, reinforcing the idea that ethno-linguistic territories cannot be strictly equated with modern political borders. It also implies that Tigrinya historical settlement, political structures, and economic networks supported a trans-Mereb

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<sup>108</sup>. Alemseged Abbay, *"Identity Jilted or Reimagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles"*, published by the Red Sea Press, 1998. Pp. 2; see also Alvarez, F. trans. Lord Stanley, *Narratives of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia during the Years 1520-1527*. New York, 1881. pp. 8, 52-54, 59.

Tigrinya cultural and linguistic continuum. This underscores that defining Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territories must consider historical integration.

By characterizing both Adulis and Axum as simultaneously “Tigrayan” and “Eritrean,” Alemseged implicitly rejects nationalist retrojections that seek to partition Axumite history along modern state lines. His framing supports an understanding of early Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory as trans-regional and non-segmented, spanning what would later become Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. The Axumite Empire is thus presented not as an antecedent of separate identities, but as the formative matrix of a shared Tigrinya-speaking cultural world. This perspective is particularly significant for demographic history: it implies long-term population continuity across the Mereb rather than north–south population replacement or divergence. Linguistic unity is treated as endogenous to this space, not as the result of later political imposition.

Alemseged’s account of the post-Axumite period further reinforces the distinction between political fragmentation and ethno-linguistic continuity. Even after the decline of Axum in the tenth century and the emergence of multiple petty polities, Kebessa “remained a part of Tigray.” Fragmentation occurred at the level of sovereignty, not identity. This observation aligns closely with frontier-based models of African political organization, in which authority was segmented while cultural and linguistic affiliation persisted. Crucially, Alemseged notes that external interventions, such as Ottoman control of the Red Sea coast, did not sever the hinterland from Tigray. The Kebessa interior continued to function as part of the same highland world, linguistically and culturally integrated with Tigray south of the Mereb.

The discussion of the Bahr Negasi further illustrates this continuity. Rather than portraying the Bahr Negasi as an independent or ethnically distinct ruler, Alemseged situates the office within a broader Tigrayan political hierarchy. The semi-autonomous nature of the position did not negate its embeddedness within Tigrayan political structures. The shared capital at Dabarwa, serving both the Tigre Macuenen and the Bahr Negasi, provides concrete institutional evidence of an integrated political space spanning the Mereb. From a demographic and ethno-linguistic perspective, this implies sustained elite circulation, administrative cohesion, and cultural homogeneity across the highlands. Political autonomy at the margins did not translate into linguistic divergence or separate ethnogenesis.

Alemseged’s analysis has direct implications for reconstructing the historical geography of Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory. It confirms that: (1) The Mereb River was not a historical ethno-linguistic boundary, but later became one through colonial and post-colonial state formation. (2) Tigrinya identity predates modern nationalism, grounded in a shared highland cultural ecology rather than in state affiliation. (3) Political decentralization did not produce ethnolinguistic fragmentation, even across centuries of shifting sovereignties.

When read alongside Ellero and Dore, Alemseged’s work situates regions such as Wälqayt within a broader pattern: a Tigrinya ethno-linguistic core characterized by internal variation, frontier dynamics, and administrative fluidity, but anchored in deep historical continuity. In contrast to Reinisch’s Barea frontier, where Tigrinya influence did not translate into demographic dominance, the

Kebessa–Tigray space represents a consolidated Tigrinya homeland whose division is historically recent and politically contingent.

In conclusion, Alemseged’s contribution reinforces the interpretation of Tigrinya ethno-linguistic territory as a **historically unified highland space**, extending across the Merab and encompassing both Kebessa and Tigray proper until the late nineteenth century. The subsequent divergence of Eritrean and Tigrayan political identities is thus best understood not as the culmination of ancient ethnic separation, but as a modern reconfiguration of a previously shared linguistic, cultural, and demographic landscape. This insight is essential for disentangling historical ethno-linguistic realities from later nationalist narratives and for situating frontier regions such as Wälqayt and Tsegede within the deeper history of the Tigrinya world.

## 4 Mapping Tigrinya Settlement Patterns: Official Demographic Evidence

In the absence of official census data prior to 1984 in Ethiopia, assessments of the ethno linguistic identity of resident populations in these areas must rely primarily on indirect sources, including ethno linguistic and place-name evidence recorded by European travelers and scholars, as well as contemporaneous administrative records. These include ethno linguistic and toponymic evidence documented by European travelers, scholars, and other observers, as well as administrative records reflecting historical patterns of language, settlement, and identity.

Prior to 1994, available population information was based largely on data collected several years earlier and was often approximate in nature. In many cases, there was no complete or timely population and housing data for administrative units below the level of district or Wereda (an administrative unit below a district and above a farmers’ association). This does not imply that population data at the regional or national levels was fully complete or free from limitations, but rather underscores the extent and severity of the deficiencies in the pre-1994 data. Since 1984, however, Ethiopia’s national population and housing censuses have provided comprehensive and systematic official data, constituting the most authoritative basis for analyzing population size, distribution, and ethno linguistic composition in Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta-Humera, Setit-Humera, Tselemti, Waldubba, and Raya-Azebo, including the Alemata special woreda.

### 4.1. The 1984 Population and Housing Census

Ethiopia’s first official national population and housing census was conducted in 1984 under the military government (the Derg regime). Owing to security concerns, logistical constraints, and ongoing conflict, however, the census did not cover extensive areas of northern Ethiopia. In particular, no official enumeration was carried out in Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta-Humera, Setit-Humera, Tselemti, Waldubba, or adjacent areas, and only limited data were collected from urban parts of the Raya-Azebo area. The 1984 census covered 85 awrajas, 441 woredas, and 668 urban centers, out of a total of 101 awrajas, 604 woredas, and 819 urban centers nationwide. It explicitly excluded extensive lowland and

pastoralist areas, rural zones of Tigray and Eritrea, and several urban centers in Tigray<sup>109</sup>. Consequently, the census did not generate reliable or localized demographic data for the western and northwestern frontier districts under discussion.

Despite these limitations, some critics cite 1984 census figures from the former Gondar Province, claiming that ethnic Amharas constituted 84.3 percent of the provincial population (2,542,723 persons), while Tigrayans accounted for only 6.3 percent (190,183 persons)<sup>110</sup>. They argue that these figures demonstrate an Amhara demographic majority in Wolkait prior to 1991 and that the inclusion of the area in Tigray was a post-1991 political reconfiguration. This argument is fundamentally misleading for two reasons. First, the cited figures represent **aggregate provincial-level data** for the entire historic Gondar Province and do not reflect the demographic composition of individual districts such as Wolkait, Tsegede, Tselemti, Waldubba, Setit-Humera or Kafta-Humera. Applying provincial averages to specific, non-enumerated localities constitutes a statistical fallacy. Second, even during the Derg period, authoritative state-produced materials contradict the claim of a predominantly Amhara identity in these areas.

Notably, the official linguistic map prepared by the Derg regime and published in *Class Struggle and the Problem in Eritrea* (1978) clearly depicts territories south of the Tekeze River, including Wolkait and Tsegede, as part of the Tigrinya linguistic and cultural zone. This contemporaneous government document affirms the long-standing identification of these areas within the Tigrinya sphere and undermines assertions of a pre-1991 Amhara demographic dominance.

#### 4.2. The 1994 Population and Housing Census

The 1994 national population and housing census<sup>111</sup> was the first comprehensive census to enumerate the populations of Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta-Humera, Setit-Humera, Tselemti, Waldubba, Raya-Azebo, and Alemata. Its results indicate that these districts were overwhelmingly Tigrinya-speaking by mother tongue and predominantly Tigrayan by ethnic identification. The 1994 national population and housing census indicates that Tigrayans constituted the overwhelming majority of the population in the concerned areas. In Wolkait, Tigrayans numbered 87,099 (96.6%), while Amharas accounted for 2,734 (3.03%). In Tsegede, Tigrayans comprised 45,532 persons (76.1%), compared to 14,226 Amharas (23.8%). In Tselemti, the census recorded 87,012 Tigrayans (89.1%) and 10,382

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<sup>109</sup>. The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia Results for the Tigray Region, Central Statistical Authority, 1998.

<sup>110</sup>. Alene Kassaw & Mbabazi Veneranda, TPLF's Annexation of Wolkait, Ethiopia: Motivations, Strategies, and Interests, Cogent Social Sciences, Vol.10, 2004- Issue 1, publication online on July 10, 2024.

<sup>111</sup>. The 1994 National Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia were conducted under the auspices of the Population and Housing Census Commission that was set up under Proclamation No. 32/1992 in accordance with the Transitional Government Charter of Ethiopia.

Amharas (10.6%). Similarly, in Kafta-Humera, Tigrayans constituted 41,999 persons (86.3%), whereas Amharas numbered 3,000 (7.8%). Linguistic data further corroborate this pattern. In the western zone of Tigray, Tigrinya speakers accounted for 94.45 percent of the population by mother tongue, while Amharic speakers constituted only 4.85 percent.

### 4.3. The 2007 Population and Housing Census

The 2007 national population and housing census<sup>112</sup> confirms and reinforces the findings of the 1994 census. In the western zone of Tigray, Tigrayans constituted 92.3 percent of the population. Tigrinya was reported as the mother tongue by 97.14 percent of residents, while Amharic was spoken by 2.75 percent; all other languages combined accounted for only 0.11 percent. The consistency between the 1994 and 2007 censuses<sup>113</sup> demonstrates a stable and continuous demographic pattern across more than a decade, spanning the federal transition and the early twenty-first century. These findings directly contradict claims that the Tigrinya identity of these communities is a recent political construct or the result of post-1991 demographic manipulation.

### 4.4. Addressing Counter-Narratives Using Census Data

The official census data also refute several common counter-claims advanced to challenge this demographic reality.

#### 4.1.1 Claims of Mass Displacement of Amharic Speakers

Some accounts allege that large-scale forced displacement of Amharic speakers occurred in western Tigray after 1991. However, this argument is **fundamentally flawed and unsubstantiated by any tangible evidence**. First, there is no concrete documentation demonstrating the existence of post-1991 large-scale forced displacement of Amharas from western Tigray.<sup>114</sup> Second, official census data contradict these claims. In 1994 census, Amharic speakers in Tigray numbered 93,258

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<sup>112</sup>. The 2007 National Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia was conducted under the auspices of the Population Census Commission that was established by Proclamation No. 449/1997 in accordance with Article 103 of FDRE Constitution. The Population Census Commission is chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and the members of the Commission were drawn from various relevant Ministries, Regional State representatives, House of Federation, National Electoral Board and the Central Statistical Agency.

<sup>113</sup>. The 1994 National Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia Results for the Tigray Region, Central Statistical Authority, 1998; and 2007 Population and Housing Censuses of Ethiopia, Analytical Report, Vol. 2, prepared by Central Statistical Authority, 1998.

<sup>114</sup>. No evidence of sharp declines in Tigrinya-speaking population; instead, growth patterns are consistent with normal population increase. Besides, both census data and ethnographic studies show no large-scale movement of Amharas out of the region.

(2.97 percent of the regional population). By 2007, this figure increased to 131,811 (3.05 percent), representing a growth of 38,553 persons. Such growth is inconsistent with claims of mass displacement and instead reflects **normal population increase**, possibly accompanied by limited migration from the neighboring Amhara region. Had large-scale displacement occurred, **absolute numbers of Amharic speakers between 1994 and 2007 would have sharply declined rather than increased**. In fact, the data demonstrates moderate growth consistent with normal population increase and maybe some migration into the Tigray State, not massive displacement out.

Moreover, historical and ethnolinguistic research consistently supports the predominance of Tigrinya in Wolqait and its surrounding areas. Many scholars including Giovanni Ellero (1948/1955), Ullendorf, Longrigg, Sbacci, Levine, Leo Reinisch, Gianni Dore, Irma Taddia, Kiflu Taddesse, and others have documented that Wolqait has been a primarily **Tigrinya-speaking settlement area for centuries**, long before 1991. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that the region's demographic and linguistic composition reflects **long-standing Tigrinya habitation**. This means that Wolqait's population has historically been **ethno-linguistically Tigrinya**, and that narratives of post-1991 demographic engineering or mass expulsion of Amharic speakers are **inconsistent with both historical records and empirical census data**. Consequently, both historical evidence and census data undermine claims of mass displacement of Amharic speakers from western Tigray in the post-1991 period.

#### **4.1.2 Claims of Large-Scale Post-1991 Intra-State Re-settlement**

Some claims assert that large-scale resettlement occurred in western Tigray after 1991 and, as a result, the issue should not be determined based on the 1994 and 2007 census results. However, officially approved census data indicate the opposite. Population distribution patterns further undermine allegations of state-sponsored demographic engineering. According to the 2007 census, over 50 percent of Tigray's population resided in the Central and Southern zones, approximately 35 percent in the Northwestern and Eastern zones, and fewer than 15 percent in the Western and Mekelle Special Zones. Only 8.3 percent of the region's total population lived in the Western Tigray Zone, a distribution clearly inconsistent with claims of large-scale resettlement.

Large-scale resettlement typically leaves multiple "footprints": abrupt demographic shifts, administrative records of settlement, infrastructure expansion, and changes in the local social or cultural composition. In the case of western Tigray, the 1994 and 2007 census evidence, showing modest population growth, stable ethno linguistic composition, and a low proportion of the regional population, does not exhibit these indicators, which is why claims of mass resettlement are not supported.

Moreover, intra-state settlement or resettlement is constitutionally permitted in Ethiopia, and any demographic changes resulting from such lawful intra state movements do not legally invalidate the

1994 or 2007 census results.<sup>115</sup> Post-1991 intra-state resettlements occurred in almost all regional states, yet these changes do not prevent assessing the ethno-linguistic composition of the resident population in areas where such movements took place.<sup>116</sup> While minor post-1991 changes, including relatively denser Tigrinya settlement in the Wälqayt lowlands, represent a departure from the historical pattern of highland influence without dense settlement, the longstanding historical and ethno-linguistic ties remain strong. These ties continue to support Tigray's territorial and administrative claims over both the Wälqayt lowlands and highlands. Therefore, the assertion that these censuses cannot be used to assess the ethno-linguistic composition of the resident population in western Tigray due to alleged post-1991 intra-state resettlement lacks both factual and legal basis.

It is also important to note that organized settlement and frontier development in the Setit-Humera and Metema areas predate 1991. During the imperial period, Emperor Haile Selassie pursued a capitalist development strategy that was widely characterized as urban-biased and placed limited emphasis on smallholder agriculture, despite the sector's central role in economic growth.<sup>117</sup> The regime nevertheless promoted large-scale commercial farming to supply food to a growing urban labor force, provide raw materials for emerging industries, and generate foreign exchange.<sup>118</sup> As part of this strategy, private large-scale mechanized agriculture expanded rapidly during the 1960s, particularly in lowland areas such as the Awash Valley and Setit-Humera.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup>. Article 39 of the FDRE Constitution allows “nations, nationalities, and peoples” the right to self-administration, including mobility and settlement within the state, without invalidating census or historical claims. Therefore, lawful intra-state movements do not erase historical ethno-linguistic patterns and census data.

<sup>116</sup>. Almost all regional states implemented intra-state resettlements after 1991 (e.g., Oromia, Amhara, Somali regions), yet the censuses remained the official demographic record. This establishes a nationally accepted legal principle that lawful resettlement does not invalidate census results.

<sup>117</sup>. Ofcansky, T. P. and Berry, L., *Ethiopia: a country study*. (4th Ed.), Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991.

<sup>118</sup>. Cohen, J. M. 1987. *Integrated Rural Development: The Ethiopian Experience and the Debate*. The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala.

<sup>119</sup>. Kline, G. and Donahue, S. 1969. *Agricultural mechanization in equatorial Africa*, East Lansing, Michigan: Institute of International Agriculture, Michigan State University.

By the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, Setit-Humera underwent a major agricultural transformation, shifting from subsistence-based production to large-scale mechanized commercial farming. With the introduction of privately owned mechanized agriculture, the area became a major center of commercial grain production, attracting substantial labor migration from the highland districts of Begemidir, Simien, Eritrea, and Tigray. These developments significantly altered land use patterns and population distribution in what had previously been sparsely inhabited frontier zones.

Following the 1974 revolution, the Derg regime introduced radical land reform and imposed centralized state control over agriculture. Large estates, including those in Setit-Humera, were redistributed to peasant associations or converted into state-run commercial farms. These farms were often administered by cooperatives, military units, or bureaucratic structures, preserving large-scale production while placing it under strict central oversight. The Derg also promoted settlement by landless peasants from other regions, and resettlement programs frequently displaced local communities or restricted traditional seasonal grazing practices. While mechanized agriculture and commercial cash-crop production continued from the imperial period, the Derg replaced elite-driven land grants with state-managed and collectivized systems, further transforming the socio-economic landscape and intensifying demographic change in the frontier areas.

These historical processes are documented in detail by Alemayehu Erkihun in *"The Boundary Tensions and Frontier Claims between Ethiopia and the Sudan, 1950s–1974: The Case of Sätit-Humära and Mätäma"* (International Journal of History and Cultural Studies, Vol. 5, No. 4, 2019). Alemayehu Erkihun provides:

*"Although the Ethio-Sudanese boundary negotiation was culminated with causing unending controversy and the legacy of far reaching consequences, the Gnyynn lines caused no immediate public protest from the Ethiopian side. Frontier claims and the quest for re-demarcation were a hot agenda, neither in Ethiopia nor in the Sudan until the late 1950s. The frontier territories on the both sides of the border was uninhabited and agricultural activities were less practiced. Claims for the ownership of frontier farmlands appeared since the late 1950s, with the beginning of the agricultural revolution in Setit-Humera and Metema, large scale mechanized farming supported by tractors produced for marketing purpose.*

*With this agricultural revolution, the rist land owners of Welqait and Armachibo possessed the vast and virgin frontier areas in between the River Angereb and Setit such as Mebach, Lugdi, Redam, Gelan Zeraf, Deblob, Amberkit, Miol Meda, Kormur and Alkadra. Besides, the Ethiopian government leased frontier territories in Setit-Humera to several domestic cash crop producers and some foreign nationals.*

*Similarly, the eastern bank of the River Guang such as Delelo, Dirmaga, Girar Wuha, Kor Homer, Shimalagara, Abu Tir, Gelaluban, Sennar, Koredam, Babre Selam as far as the River Angereb, rapidly owned by the ristland owners of Aramchio and offered to the veteran solders and different sections of society including civil servants for cash crop production.*

*In addition, in both Setit-Humera and Metema, the government provided large scale farm lands to the returnees of Korea and Congo peacekeeping forces. Eventually, peasants from the neighboring districts facing with the shortage of the farmlands, recurrent drought and famine such as Lay Gaynet, Ebinat, Belesa, Meket, Simada, Shire, Adwa, Aksum*

*and highland Eritrea migrated towards uninhabited frontier areas of Setit-Humera and Metema since the late 1960s.*<sup>120</sup>

In this quoted text, Alemayehu Erkihun shows that prior to the late 1950s, frontier territories on both sides of the Ethio-Sudanese border were sparsely inhabited and minimally cultivated. With the agricultural revolution in Setit-Humera and Metema, large-scale mechanized farming expanded rapidly, supported by state policies and private investment. Rist landowners from Welqait and Armachiho appropriated vast frontier lands between the Angereb and Setit rivers, while the Ethiopian government leased additional tracts to domestic and foreign commercial producers. Comparable developments occurred along the eastern bank of the Guang River, where land was allocated to veterans, civil servants, and other groups for cash-crop production. The government also granted large-scale farmland to returnees from Korean and Congo peacekeeping missions. As a result, peasants from land-scarce and drought-affected districts, including Lay Gaynet, Ebinat, Belesa, Meket, Simada, Shire, Adwa, Aksum, and the highlands of Eritrea, migrated to the previously uninhabited frontier areas of Setit-Humera and Metema from the late 1960s onward.

Taken together, this evidence demonstrates that population movement and state involvement in settlement in Western Tigray and adjacent frontier areas were longstanding features that began decades before 1991. Although the state officially described these frontier areas as “uninhabited,” local Tigrayan agro-pastoralists from Welkait, Tsegede, and Tselemti had long used them seasonally for grazing and limited cultivation. State-supported settlement, commercial large-scale land allocation and central government employed new civil servants, including police forces, over the Setit-Humera areas often marginalized these customary land-use rights and large scale displacement of local peasants from their land, altering both the demographic composition and socio-economic structure of the region.

By the mid-1970s, these developments had fundamentally transformed Setit-Humera and surrounding areas from a sparsely populated frontier into a politically and economically integrated zone under imperial administration. While Alemayehu frames these changes in terms of frontier governance, land tenure, and state consolidation, they also weakened historical ties to Tigrayan provincial authority, disrupted traditional socio-economic systems, and laid a historical foundation for later disputes over land, jurisdiction, and identity in the Welkait area. Although these disputes only became explicitly politicized and ethnically framed in subsequent decades, they can be traced directly to the combined effects of mechanized agriculture, state-led settlement, and migration policies implemented during the 1950s–1970s.

If intra-state resettlement alone were sufficient grounds to dismiss census data, then earlier demographic assessments, such as those associated with the 1984 census period, would also be subject

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<sup>120</sup> . Alemayehu Erkihun, "The Boundary Tensions and Frontier Claims between Ethiopia and the Sudan, 1950s–1974: The Case of Sätit-Humära and Mätäma", *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies (IJHCS)*, Volume / Issue: Vol. 5, No. 4, 2019. Pp. 3-4.

to invalidation. However, the 1984 census did not produce detailed or reliable zonal-level data for contested frontier areas and therefore cannot serve as a comparable demographic baseline. In contrast, the 1994 and 2007 censuses were systematically conducted, officially endorsed, and provide the most reliable basis for assessing population distribution in Western Tigray.

### 4.1.3 Claims of Coerced Ethnic Identification

Some have argued that the results of the 1994 and 2007 censuses were invalid because residents in certain areas were allegedly coerced into identifying as Tigrayan. This claim is fundamentally unfounded for several reasons. First, there is no credible evidence supporting the assertion that residents were forced to declare a Tigrayan identity during either census. Second, there are no documented reports, official, media, or otherwise, of state-sponsored reprisals, penalties, or intimidation linked to ethnic self-identification before or during the census exercises. Third, both censuses were federal undertakings conducted under the supervision of the national Population and Housing Census Commission and were formally approved by the Ethiopian parliament, making systematic and unreported coercion highly implausible. Fourth, while the Amhara Regional Government has raised interstate border disputes, most notably the Gechew or Tsegede-Tegede border issue between Tigray and Amhara, which was resolved through constitutionally permitted mechanisms in 2018, there is no record of any claim regarding coerced ethnic identification during the 1994 or 2007 censuses. This further reinforces that allegations of forced identity shifts during these enumerations lack any foundation.

**In conclusion,** the 1994 and 2007 national population and housing censuses, formally approved by the Ethiopian parliament in accordance with the FDRE Constitution, provide comprehensive, systematic, and legally authoritative demographic data for the western and southern frontier districts. Together with contemporaneous state-produced linguistic materials from the Derg period, they establish a consistent pattern of predominant Tigrinya-speaking populations in Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta-Humera, Setit-Humera, Tselemti, Waldubba, Raya-Azebo, Alemata, and their environs. This empirical record forms a robust evidentiary basis for the constitutional ethno-linguistic delimitation of these areas and decisively contradicts claims that their Tigrinya identity is a recent or politically manufactured phenomenon.

## 5 Opposing Narrative by the Amhara Elite: Critique and Rebuttal

A central opposing narrative rests on the historical claim that the Tekezze River served as the fixed administrative boundary between the historic provinces of Tigre (later Tigray) and Begemdir& Semien (later Gondar) prior to 1991. Proponents, primarily Amhara elites, argue that the modern boundary between Amhara and Tigray regions should therefore adhere to this historical precedent. This section will engage with and refute the key tenets of this argument.

**1. The Core of the Opposing Claim:** Almost all opposing claims rely on the administrative boundaries between Begemdir & Semien (later renamed as Gondar) province and the Tigre province during the Imperial and Derg regimes, citing sources such as James Bruce, Plowden, and Clapham, they argue that the Tekezie River historically served as the administrative boundary separating Begemdir/Semien from Tigre/Tigray province<sup>121</sup>. Thus, the administrative boundaries between Amhara and Tigray regional states should follow these historical administrative borders.

For example, Daniel Kendie states: “*According to Plowden, the region of Tigray consisted of all Christian regions north of the Tekezie River. The sub-divisions were Hamassien, Seraye, Akele Guzay, Agame, Tigray Proper, Shire, Adiabo, Tenbien, Wajrat and Shilabo [Plowden, 1848].*”<sup>122</sup>

He further notes: “Ethiopian Emperor Zara Yakub (1434–1468) appointed the Bahre Negash (‘Ruler of the Sea’) and gave him authority over the northern provinces of Ethiopia, including the Dahlaque Islands of the Red Sea, Massawa, Tigray, Shire, Hamassien, Akele Guzaie, and Seraie, naming the region Medri Bahri (‘land of the sea’), and decreeing that the Tekezie River be the administrative boundary between the domain of the Bahre Negash and the Amhara provinces to the south [Crawford, 1958]. The Tekezie River has therefore served as the administrative boundary separating Begemdir/Semien/Gondar Province from Tigray for centuries. Emperor Sertse Dingil (1550–1592) reaffirmed Zara Yacob’s declaration in 1563.” Moreover, Kendie references Christopher Clapham: “Wolkait-Tsegede, which is separated from Tigray by the impressive natural barrier of the Setit-Tekezie River, has never been governed as part of Tigray at any period in the past, but has come under Gondar and Semien. The Tigray People’s Liberation Front needs to define Tigray in geographically appropriate ways .... Instead, it has claimed part of northern Gondar, asserting entirely fictitiously that for a couple of years in the early 1940s, it was governed as part of Tigray. [Clapham, 1988]”

In this text, Daniel is argued that since the administrative boundaries between the provinces of Tigre/Tigray and Begemdir & Semien/Gondar was the Tekezeze River in the west, the borders of the Tigray and Amhara regional states should be the Tekezeze River in the west. In short, he argues that Wolkait-Tsegede, separated from historic Tigray by the Tekezie, was never part of Tigray, despite

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<sup>121</sup>. In Haile Sellase I's imperial Ethiopia, Walqayt was a Wereda (the capital Addi Ramas) within Waggera awraja of Begemdir and Semien.

<sup>122</sup>. Daniel Kendie, "The Historical Facts of Wolkait and Tsegede Beyond Western Tigray, A Letter to the Ethiopian Community", May 17, 2023. Accessed <https://zehabesha.com/the-historical-facts-of-wolkait-ans-tsegede-beyond-western-tigray>. See also አቻምየለህ ታምሩ፣ "የወልቃይት ጉዳይ፡- የወልቃይት፣ ጠገዬ፣ ጠለምት እና ሁመራ የወሰንና የመልከዓ ምድር ታሪክ ምርምር ውጤት (ከ323 ዓ.ም. እስከ 1983 ዓ.ም.)"፣ 2010 ዓ.ም.

substantial historical and cartographic evidence to the contrary. Therefore, the argument asserts that the Tekeze River historically served as the fixed administrative boundary between Tigray and Begemdir/Semien (later Gondar). Citing sources like Plowden, Bruce, and Clapham, it claims that Wolkait-Tsegede was therefore never part of Tigray and should belong to the Amhara Region based on historical provincial lines.

**2. Critique and Rebuttal of the Opposing Narrative:** For instance, Walter C. Plowden under his work, "Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country", provides that: "*Dejajmatch Qobaey was the younger son of a celebrated warrior, Hilo Mariam, whose ancestors had for some generations ruled the province of Semen. At the time of his father's death he was a boy, governing the province of Walkait, recovered by his father's prowess from the chief of Teegray, with whom existed a ceaseless feud and warfare. His father, who despised him, in dying left his wambar or throne to his eldest son, then with him in Semen.*"<sup>123</sup> This cited text plainly reveals that the historic province of Walkait was under the control and administration of the chief of Teegray prior to its forcible takeover by Qobaey's father by force from the chief of Teegray in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, numerous other historical sources provide evidence that the historic province of Walkait and its surrounding areas were historically governed and administered by various native Tigrinya speaking rulers prior to 1991.<sup>124</sup> Such historical evidence directly challenges claims that neither the province of Walkait, Tsegede, Kafta, Tselemti, and their surrounding areas were never governed or administered as part of Tigray at any point in the past prior to 1991, that they belong to Begemdir and Semien, or that they were never governed and administered by any native Tigrinya speaking rulers prior to 1991.

In relation to this, it is necessary to note that the historic province of Semein did not encompass the Wolqait, Kwolaggeria, Tsegde, and Waggera; rather, these were distinct provinces or districts with their own geographic and climatic identities. Walter Chichele Lowden, in his work titled, "Travels in Abyssinia and Galla County With an Account of A Mission to Ras Ali in 1848.", 1868 (edited by his brother Trevor Chichele Lowden), provides: "*In the noble portion of territory still in the possession of the Christians of Eastern Africa, is blessed with a climate that may, perhaps, challenge a comparison with any in the world. Its ordinary temperature is from 50° to 80°, but it contains, within its small extent of a few hundred miles, the variations of heat and cold that are usually found only in portions of the globe which are distant from each other. A few hours' ride will take you from the burning valley of the Takaꝛꝛee, or the agreeable warmth of the country of Kwolaggeria, to the frost and hail-covered peaks of Semen; again a short road, and the bleak and wind-swept plains of Waggera will remind*

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<sup>123</sup>. Walter C. Plowden, "Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country With An Account of A Mission To Ras Ali in 1848", edited by Trevor C. Plowden, published by Longmans, Green, and Co. in 1868, London. pp. 382.

<sup>124</sup>. Walter C. Lowden, in his work, "Travels in Abyssinia and Galla County With an Account of A Mission to Ras Ali in 1848.", states that: "*The province of Walkait, unexplored by Europeans, and traversed by Mr. Parkyns alone, abounds in serpents and in every species of animal life; the elephant, the giraffe, the lion, the rhinoceros, and the buffalo, roam through those deep forests, with the Shankalla or Negro of those countries, whose hand is against every man: the wild ass and the black panther are found in other parts.*"

*you of the Sussex Downs in March: by the slightest change, in fact, you may obtain a residence within a degree of the wished-for temperature, be it that of Italy, England, or Bengal.”*<sup>125</sup>

Lowden’s main point was that in a few hours’ ride, one could travel from the hot lowlands of the Takazzee to the warm midlands of Kwolaggeria, onward to the cold high mountains of Semen, and finally to the wind-swept plains of Waggera. When he writes “the peaks of Semen,” he refers specifically to the high mountain summits of the Semien Massif in northern Ethiopia. This description underscores how province, terrain, and climate were intimately linked, showing that even a single region could encompass vastly different environmental and human experiences, which in turn affected settlement patterns, agriculture, military operations, and political control in the early 19th century. More importantly, it directly challenges any claim that Semen itself encompassed the Wolqait (hot lowlands wolqait and highlans Wolqait), warm midlands (Kwolaggeria), cold mountains, and wind-swept plains (Waggera); rather, these were distinct provinces or districts with their own geographic and climatic identities.

It is also important to note that the provincial boundaries during the pre-imperial, Imperial and Derg regimes were not delineated on the basis of ethno-linguistic criteria. This is evident from administrative boundary names used in Ethiopia in 1935, as well as from the provincial naming conventions during the Imperial and Derg periods. On the eve of the Italian invasion, Ethiopia was administratively divided into numerous provinces and administrative boundaries names of Ethiopia in 1935 were:

"1. Amhara Sayent	17. Gurage	32. Semen
2. Arusi	18. Harar	33. Shawa
3. Awsa	19. lubabor	34. Shawa-Gimira
4. Azabo	20. Janjaro	35. Sibü
5. Bagemder	21. Jimma	36. Sidamo
6. Bako	22. Kafa	37. Tegre
7. Bale	23. Kambata	38. Wag
8. Banesso	24. Kulio Konta	39. Walayta
9. Bela Shangul	25. Lasta	40. Wallaga

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<sup>125</sup>. Walter Chichele Lowden, in his work titled, "Travels in Abyssinia and Galla County With an Account of A Mission to Ras Ali in 1848.", 1868 (edited by his brother Trevor Chichele Lowden). Pp. 28.

- |               |            |                            |
|---------------|------------|----------------------------|
| 10. Boran     | 26. Limmu  | 41. Wallo                  |
| 11. Charchar  | 27. Maji   | 42. Yajju." <sup>126</sup> |
| 13. Gera      | 28. Ogaden |                            |
| 14. Gojjam    | 29. Qellam |                            |
| 15. Goldeya   | 30. Rayya  |                            |
| 16. GuraFarda | 31. Salale |                            |

Native Amharic speaking peoples were found across multiple provinces among the 42 listed above. Likewise, native Tigrina speaking peoples were also found in various provinces within these 42 administrative units. This demonstrates that the delimitation criteria of these provincial administrative units at that time were not based on ethnic or linguistic criteria. With liberation from Italian occupation, Emperor Haile Selassie's government issued Imperial Decree No. 1 of 1942, which consolidated the old provinces into 12 Governorates-General (Taklai Ghizat):

- |              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
| 1. Arsi      | 7. Kaffa    |
| 2. Begemder  | 8. Shewa    |
| 3. Gamu-Gofa | 9. Sidamo   |
| 4. Gojjam    | 10. Tigre   |
| 5. Hararghe  | 11. Wallaga |
| 6. Illubabor | 12. Wollo   |

Two key changes followed: one, Bale was split from Hararghe to become a 13th province in 1960. Two, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952 and fully integrated as the 14th province in 1962. A central policy of this period was that provincial boundaries were deliberately drawn to include multiple ethnic and linguistic groups for administrative and political reasons. The Derg military regime retained the existing provincial structure initially, relabeling them as Regions (Kifle Hager). By 1981, Addis Ababa and Asseb had become separate administrative units, creating 16 divisions in total. However, the 1987 Constitution of Ethiopia established a new structure of regions. Proclamation No. 14 of 1987 created 30 regions, divided into two tiers:

**(1). 5 Autonomous Regions:** Asseb, Dire Dawa, Eritrea, Ogaden, and Tigray. These were granted self-governing status, often in recognition of ongoing conflicts or distinct political histories.

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<sup>126</sup>. Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*, published in 1991, he adapted it from Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, London, 1969, and Corrado Zoli, *Etiopa d'oggi*, Rome 1935 (Edited by DONALD D. DONHAM & WENDY JAMES). Pp. 81.

**(2). The twenty-five administrative regions were:** Addis Ababa, Arsi, Assosa, Bale, Borana, East Gojam, East Harerge, East Shewa, Gambela, Ilubabor, Kefa, Metekel, North Gonder, North Omo, North Shewa, North Welo, Sidamo, South Gonder, South Omo, South Shewa, South Welo, Welega, West Gojam, West Harerge, West Shewa.

However, political/administrative boundaries also do not negate the presence or continuity of a population's ethno linguistic and cultural identity across those administrative boundaries. Above all, under the present constitutional framework whether the Tekeze River was the administrative boundaries between the historic provinces of Tigre/Tigray and Begemdir & Semien/Gondar during the Imperial and Derg regimes, is immaterial. The 1995 FDRE Constitution determines regional borders not by historical administrative lines, but by ethno-linguistic criteria.

Additionally, some contemporary arguments by Amhara elites cite the statement from Nubia and Abyssinia that “the high range of the Samen hills, stretching from Waldubba to the south of Lasta, together with the line of the Tacazze, which flows in a north-easterly course along its base, sufficiently point out the natural boundary between Tigré and Amhara” to claim that the Tekeze River, throughout its entire course, constituted the historical boundary between the provinces of Tigre and Begemdir–Semien, and that modern regional borders between Tigray and Amhara should therefore be redrawn accordingly. This interpretation, however, misreads the source. The passage describes only physical geography, but not administrative boundaries. The quoted statement from Nubia and Abyssinia is referring to the Simien (Samen) mountain range, together with the specific segment of the Tekeze River that runs along its base, as forming a natural geographic division between regions commonly known as Tigré and Amhara.

This literal description does not establish a fixed administrative boundary, a legal border, or a sharp ethnic or linguistic division. Rather, it reflects the way in which topographic features such as mountains and river gorges shape patterns of movement and regional differentiation. Further, the passage explicitly limits its geographic scope to the stretch extending from Waldubba to the south of Lasta. It refers only to the segment of the Tekeze River adjacent to the Simien massif, not to the river's entire course. The river is mentioned as a supporting geographic feature reinforcing the mountain barrier, not as an independent or continuous boundary line.

Consequently, the passage does not imply that the Tekeze River as a whole constituted a historical boundary between Tigre and Amhara, which the river alone separated the two regions everywhere, or that areas south of the Tekeze cannot be historically associated with Tigré or with Tigrinya-speaking populations. The quotation represents a geographer's descriptive shorthand, not an ethnographic, administrative, or juridical claim. Last but not least, even if the historical boundary between the provinces of Tigre and Begemdir–Semien could be precisely established, it would remain immaterial to the delimitation of borders between the contemporary Tigray and Amhara regions, which are products of modern constitutional and political processes rather than continuations of pre-modern provincial boundaries.

Notably, apart from relying on historical administrative divisions from the Imperial, Derg, and Zemene Mesafint periods, proponents of the Amhara claim have not produced historical, linguistic, cartographic, or archaeological evidence demonstrating that the communities of Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta, Tselemti and Raya-Azebo were ethnically Amhara or were predominantly Amharic-speaking. In essence, the Amhara elites' territorial argument rests almost entirely on the administrative boundaries between the province of Begemdir & Semien (later Gondar) and the province of Tigre (later Tigray) during the Imperial and Derg eras, and from this infers that present-day regional borders should conform to those historical divisions.

Nevertheless, under the present constitutional framework, whether Wolkait, Tsegede, and Kafta were governed under the provinces of Tigre/Tigray or Begemdir & Semien/Gondar prior to 1991 is immaterial. The FDRE Constitution determines regional borders not by historical administrative lines, but by ethno-linguistic criteria. In addition to this, while the Tekezze River has served as a natural boundary, this does not imply that modern administrative borders follow it precisely, nor that Tigrinya-speaking communities are absent south of the river. While James Bruce is often cited in support of the Tekezie boundary, his own manuscript collection (MS Bruce 94) records that Welkayt, Tsegede, Tsallamti, and Wag Hemra were inhabited by Tigrinya-speaking Beta Israel communities in the 18th century. This directly undermines claims that these areas were detached from Tigrinya cultural spheres before the 20th century.

Moreover, the Tekezze River was served as an administrative boundary between the provinces of Tigray and Begemdir & Semien (later renamed as Gondar) during Imperial and Derg regimes does not necessarily mean that it always functioned as a formal permanent, fixed administrative boundary, nor does it imply that there were no Tigrinya-speaking populations south of the Tekezze. The administrative border between the provinces of Tigre (later Tigray) and Begemdir & Semien (later Gondar) during Imperial and Derg governments did not fixed, but frequently changed<sup>127</sup>. Provincial borders during Imperial and Derg regimes were frequently redefined, depending on political and other reasons. Besides, the historical record demonstrates that Begemdir & Semien (later renamed as Gondar) from the pre modern state into the modern state, constituted a diverse and multi ethnic imperial core. Its demographic mosaic was composed of ethno linguistic communities, but not limited to, Agew (Qemant, Quara, Bilen), Negro (Shankilla), Bete Israel, Amhara, Oromo, and native Tigrinya speaking populations. Thus, any claim that frames this historic province solely as the administrative territory of the Amhara ethnicity is fundamentally inaccurate. More importantly, the historic Province of Amhara proper did not border the province of Tigray.

On the other hand, a natural boundary does not imply a legally defined provincial line. Thus, the Tekezze River forms a natural boundary between the historic province of Tigre and its adjoining

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<sup>127</sup>. Until, 1948/1949, the Tekezze River was not served an imperial imposed provincial border in the west between the provinces of Tigre and Begemdir & Semien during the Imperial Derg regime. At first, the provincial border of these provinces in the west was not the Tekezze River. The Tigre provinces extends westwards beyond that river.

provinces does not mean that it was functioned as a formal administrative boundary, nor does it imply that there were no Tigrinya-speaking populations south of the Tekezze. More importantly, the premise of a unified "Province of Amhara" bordering Tigray in the west is historically inaccurate. Tigray's traditional western neighbor was the province of Begemder, while other adjacent region in the south was Angot/Yejju. The idea of a large 'Amhara' region directly west of Tigray is a cartographic construct that originated with Italian East Africa's borders after 1935. Remarkably, the notion of a single, clearly defined Amhara province directly abutting Tigray is a modern cartographic construct, formalized during the reorganization of Italian East Africa after 1935. Prior to 1942, provincial boundaries of Ethiopia were fluid and not fixed/permanent, and historical areas associated with Amhara identity did not constitute a single administrative entity bordering Tigray. The rigid borders seen today reflect modern administrative practices rather than pre-colonial political geography.

**3. The Constitutional Paradigm Shift:** The 1995 FDRE Constitution fundamentally changed the logic of state organization. It dissolved the old provincial map and established regions based on ethno-linguistic settlement patterns. Every regional state (Amhara, Oromia, Somali, etc.) was formed by merging territories from multiple former provinces. To single out Tigray's western borders as illegitimate is to apply a discarded administrative logic selectively. More importantly, the incorporation of Wolkayt, Tsegede, Kafta, Tsellemti, Raya-Azebo, and their surrounding areas into the Tigray Regional State followed the same constitutional and methodological principles applied to all interstate borders in post-1991 Ethiopia. The FDRE Constitution explicitly replaced the former administrative-provincial map with a new ethno-linguistic territorial framework. Consequently, every Regional State, including Amhara, Oromia, Afar, Somali, and Tigray, was formed by merging territories from multiple former provinces based on language and identity, not historical administration.

To single out Wolkayt as "illegitimately" incorporated is to selectively reject the constitutional logic that legitimizes the borders of all Regions. Opponents who demand Wolkayt's return to Amhara Region based on pre-1991 borders are logically obliged to also demand the return of Raya to Wollo Province, the return of Afar areas in Tigray to their former provinces, and the dismantling of Amhara Region itself, which did not exist as a unit before 1995. They do not make these demands, because doing so would unravel the entire federal structure. Thus, the selective focus on Wolkayt reveals that the argument is not about historical consistency, but about political opposition to Tigray's post-1991 borders specifically. In essence, the Wolkayt debate is not a unique historical grievance; it is a political challenge to the 1995 FDRE Constitution itself.

**4. The Official Demographic Reality:** Concerning comprehensive and systematic demographic data on the ethno-linguistic identity of resident populations in Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta, Tsellemti, and Raya-Azebo, no official census was conducted in Ethiopia prior to 1984. Prior to the 1984 Population and Housing Census, the sources of demographic data of the country were only sample surveys.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup>. The 1984 Population and Housing Census, Analytical Report at the National Level, Central Statistical Authority, December 1991. Pp. ii.

In the absence of pre-1984 official census data, the most reliable indicators of the ethnolinguistic identity of resident populations in these areas prior to 1984 are: (1) ethnolinguistic and place-name evidence recorded by European travelers, scholars and others, which reveal patterns of language, settlement, and identity before 1984, and (2) administrative records that likewise reflect patterns of language, settlement, and identity before 1984. Notably, opponents selectively cite to demonstrate political boundaries, while disregarding their demographic and ethnolinguistic implications.

Critically, once comprehensive and systematic official demographic data became available through Ethiopia's official national population and housing censuses, such data must be taken into account when determining the ethnolinguistic identity of resident populations in Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta-Humera, Setit-Humera, Tselemti, Alamata, and Raya-Azebo. There have been three official national population and housing censuses in Ethiopia since 1984. However, the 1984 official census did not provide any demographic data for these areas except Raya-Azebo, as no official census enumeration was conducted there in that year due to security and other reasons.<sup>129</sup>

By contrast, the 1994 and 2007 national population and housing censuses<sup>130</sup>, formally approved by the Ethiopian parliament in accordance with laws of the country<sup>131</sup>, provide comprehensive and systematic demographic data for these areas, including detailed information on the ethnolinguistic identity of resident populations. Since these official censuses were formally approved by the Ethiopian parliament, they constitute authoritative and sufficient sources on the ethnolinguistic identity of resident populations. In view of that, the 1994, and 2007 national population and housing censuses recorded the resident populations of Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta, Tselemti, and Raya-Azebo as overwhelmingly native Tigrinya-speaking.<sup>132</sup> This empirical continuity across three decades, spanning

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<sup>129</sup>. The 1984 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia covered 85 Awrajas, 441 Woredas and 668 urban centers out of 101 awrajas, 604 woredas and 819 urban centers. It has not covered lowland areas with pastoralist population, rural areas of Asseb, Tigray and Eritrea and some of the urban centers in Tigray.

<sup>130</sup>. The 1994 National Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia Results for the Tigray Region, Central Statistical Authority, 1998; and 2007 Population and Housing Censuses of Ethiopia, Analytical Report, Vol.2, prepared by Central Statistical Authority, 1998. As we can see it from the 2007 Population and Housing Census more than fifty percent of the population of the region is living in Central Tigray and Southern Tigray Zones. And about 35 percent of the population of the region is living in North Western and Eastern Tigray zones. Fewer than 15 percent of the populations are living in Western and Mekele special Zones. Spatial distributions of the population by zone show significant variations. Only 8.3 percent from the total population of Tigray Region found in Western Tigray Zone. This evidence directly challenges claims that there were massive resettlements conducted in the Western Tigray Zone in post-1991 for demographic shift.

<sup>131</sup>. The 1994 National Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia was conducted under the auspices of the Population and Housing Census Commission that was set up under Proclamation No. 32/1992 in accordance with the Transitional Government Charter of Ethiopia; The 2007 National Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia was conducted under the auspices of the Population Census Commission that was established by Proclamation No. 449/1997 in accordance with Article 103 of FDRE Constitution. The Population Census Commission is chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and the members of the Commission were drawn from various relevant Ministries, Regional State representatives, House of Federation, National Electoral Board and the Central Statistical Agency.

<sup>132</sup>. Ethnic identity of a person is traced through his/her national origin.

the Derg era, the federal transition, and the early 21st century, directly contradicts the narrative that these communities were historically Amhara or that their Tigrinya identity is a recent political artifact.<sup>133</sup> The census data provides the demographic foundation upon which the constitutional ethno-linguistic delimitation logically proceeded.

**5. Territorial Reduction of Tigre/Tigray and Linguistic Erosion of Tigrinya:** Here, it is important to note that historically the provincial entity of Tigray has experienced territorial reduction and linguistic erosion, leading to demographic shifts and a contraction of the Tigrinya cultural map. Western Tigray, while now a constitutional region, possesses a history that predates the modern state. Despite imposed administrative boundaries by successive imperial rulers, Western Tigray's historical, cultural, linguistic, and anthropological continuity with Tigray remains evident. This continuity decisively refutes attempts to detach Western Tigray from the broader Tigrayan historical and linguistic sphere. Western Tigray is not a modern invention but a living link to a civilization spanning millennia. In Western Tigray, memory, heritage, territory, and identity are inextricably connected, products of an enduring highland civilization. Its people are, in identity and origin, Agazian, Aksumite, and ultimately Tigrayan, autochthonous to their land.

**6. Lack of Countervailing Evidence:** The opposing narrative provides no body of historical linguistic, cartographic, or demographic evidence demonstrating that Wolkait, Tsegede, Kafta Humera, Tselemti, or Raya-Azebo was historically and demographically predominantly Amharic-speaking by mother tongue or ethnically Amhara territories.

**7. Procedural Distinction between Identity Question vs. Inter-State Border Dispute<sup>134</sup>:** Finally, it is important to note that the demand of the Wolkait (later renamed as Wolkait-Tsegede) Amhara identity question Committee was and is an identity recognition question<sup>135</sup>, not inter-states border claim<sup>136</sup>. Under Article 39(5) of the FDRE Constitution, a given community claiming a distinct

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<sup>133</sup>. Conversely, the total number of Amharic speakers by mother tongue in the Tigray Region under the 1994 census was 93,258 which was 2.97 percentage of the total population of the region, while the total number of Amharic speakers by mother tongue in the Tigray Region under the 2007 census was 131,811 which was 3.05 percentage of the total population of the region. So, the number of Amharic speakers was increased by 38,553.

<sup>134</sup>. For further details, see *ዘርአይ ወልደሰንበት፣ "የወልቃይት የማንነት ጥያቄ- በታሪክና በሕገ መንግስቱ"*፣ published online on hornaffairs.com website on June 2, 2016; see also Zeray W/senbet, "The Legality of The Wolqait Question: Issues to Worry About", published online on hornaffairs.com website on September 15, 2016.

<sup>135</sup>. *ወልቃይት ትናንት እና ዛሬ ክፍል አንድ* - YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhIumLpFrCA>; see also *ወልቃይት ትናንት እና ዛሬ... የወልቃይት ጠቀዴ የማንነት ጥያቄ ክፍል ሁለት* - YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWYjzYfD7SU>

<sup>136</sup>. <https://tigrigna.voanews.com/a/welkite-tsagedie-case-sent-to-tigray-region-said-colonel-demeke/3276789.html>; see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ny1P5bKFI6I>; *የወልቃይት ጠገዴ የአማራ*

ethnic identity can apply for recognition, which may entail intra-state administrative reorganization.<sup>137</sup> Identity recognition questions are made to the concerned Regional State Council, or if the concerned Regional State Council has not been decided within two years or if the decision made dissatisfied the concerned party, to the House of Federation.<sup>138</sup> The identity recognition question shall be submitted to the House of Federation only under conditions that the question has not been given due solution by various organs in the administrative hierarchy of the regional State concerned.<sup>139</sup>

Conversly, according to Articles 48 and 62(6) of the FDRE Constitution and other relevant subordinate laws of the country, only the concerned and contiguous/adjoining regional state governments can legally raise an interstate border dispute. Thus, a formal written claim from a contiguous regional state (in this case, Amhara or Afar) is the mandatory first step to initiate the constitutional process for resolving an interstate border dispute, if any, when the issue is a border dispute rather than an identity claim.<sup>140</sup> This is not an optional procedure; rather it is the constitutionally required procedure under the FDRE Constitution and enabling Proclamation. This formal interstate border dispute or interstate border claim is what officially identifies and establishes the "parties" (concerned interstate border disputing regional States) to the legal border dispute(s).<sup>141</sup>

Critically, the Amhara Regional Government has not formally raised a new interstate border claim over these areas since the 2018 written agreement with the Tigray Regional State, which resolved the Tsegede-Tegege border dispute in accordance with Article 48 of the FDRE Constitution and relevant enabling laws. Accordingly, the Tsegede-Tegege border dispute, having been constitutionally resolved, cannot be re-raised or re-adjudicated under Article 48 of the FDRE Constitution and relevant enabling laws. Under Article 48 of the FDRE Constitution and relevant enabling laws, a previously constitutionally resolved and finalized interstate border determination cannot be re-raised

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ማንነት አስመላሽ ኮሚቴ ህዝባዊ ውይይት ቢድብረ ታቦር - YouTube  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjQojQ\\_CthY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjQojQ_CthY)

<sup>137</sup>. A Proclamation to Define the Powers and Functions of the House of Federation, Proclamation No. 1261/2021, Article 24(1).

<sup>138</sup>. Ibid, Articles 24 and 27.

<sup>139</sup>. Ibid, Article 27(1).

<sup>140</sup>. The existence of an inter-state border dispute cannot be legally established by any agreement between the federal agreement and TPLF. Its existence must be decided based on constitutional and legal frameworks. If a formal written call for discussion is not made by concerned regional State, then there is no border dispute in law.

<sup>141</sup>. Without a formal claim, the concerned elected regional administrations of regions lack a specific legal case to resolve, the HoF lacks a legal case to adjudicate, and there are no formal legal "parties" to the dispute.

or re-adjudicated over the same territory, on the same legal and factual basis, merely by re-labelling it as a "new claim". Such a claim would be legally inadmissible, as Article 48 does not permit the reopening of settled interstate boundary determinations. Accordingly, even the formal presentation of a purported new interstate border claim would not confer jurisdiction to re-adjudicate the Tsegede-Tegede boundary, which already been conclusively determined under Article 48 of the FDRE Constitution. Re-litigation of a settled interstate boundary is constitutionally impermissible.<sup>142</sup>

Therefore, the opposing claim by Amhara elites is a tautology: it uses selectively cited historical administrative records to argue for a return to the administrative divisions those records describe, while ignoring the demographic reality of the administered population and the transformative constitutional law that superseded that old order. The debate over Wolkait is, in essence, a debate over the foundational federal pact of 1995.

## 6 Conclusion and Implications: History, Law, and the Cartographic Imperative

This study has examined the fundamental tension between organic ethno-linguistic territories and the imposed administrative cartographies of successive states, using the case of the Tigrinya-speaking peoples as a critical example. Our analysis concludes that the Tigrinya presence constitutes a coherent constellation of territories systematically fractured by political borders, with the post-1991 map representing a belated administrative acknowledgment of this pre-existing reality.

The core findings are as follows:

**I. Deconstructing the Historical Fallacy: Provinces vs. Ethno-Linguistic Regions:** A persistent misconception in Ethiopian political discourse conflates the pre-1991 provincial entity of "Tigre" (renamed "Tigray" by the Derg) with the exclusive ethnic homeland of Tigrinya speakers. This view selectively cites historical borders while ignoring their administrative logic and the demographic realities beyond them. Under both the Imperial and Derg regimes, provincial boundaries were instruments of central control, designed for administrative efficiency, tax collection, and military mobilization, not for encapsulating ethnic groups.

Consequently, a province's borders never intended to, and never did, contain an entire ethnic group. They were political-administrative units, not ethnic-cultural maps. This fallacy is decisively disproven by the formation of every other major Regional State after 1991. The Afar Region was formed from territories of the former provinces of Tigray, Wollo, Shoa, and Hararge; no "Afar province" ever existed. Similarly, Oromia, Amhara, Somali, and others were created by consolidating territories from multiple, disparate historical provinces. This universal practice demonstrates that post-

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<sup>142</sup> For further reference, see Z.W., "Constitutional Supremacy and Contested Territories in Ethiopia: Pathways under Article 10(4) of the Pretoria Agreement and Article 2(1)(d) of the Nairobi Declaration", published online on UMD media website on October 2, 2025.

1991 state formation consciously transcended and dissolved the old provincial map to reflect actual ethnolinguistic settlement patterns, a process applied uniformly, including to Tigray.

A narrower version of this misconception argues that "Tigre proper" was the only territory where Tigrinya speakers lived. This ignores a clear historical parallel: until 1942, a core province known as "Amhara proper" existed as the historic nucleus of the Amhara people. No credible scholar argues that Amharic-speaking populations were confined to its borders; they were historically present across Shoa, Wollo, Gojjam, and beyond. The same principle applies to Tigre proper. "Tigre proper" was the heartland, but significant Tigrinya-speaking populations have long resided beyond its borders, most notably in the Eritrean highlands (Hamasien, Akele Guzai, Seraye) and within Begemder and Wollo.

The territory of any historic province and the extent of its corresponding ethnic region are not synonymous. The ethnic region has always been larger, reaffirming the vital distinction between a political-administrative unit and an ethnic-cultural sphere. The historical province of Tigre proper functioned as a political and administrative nucleus, not as an exhaustive container for the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic group. Consequently, treating its traditional borders as definitive ethnic boundaries is a fundamental historical error.

**II. The Empirical Evidence:** Contemporary colonial administrators, early scholars, and primary sources define a contiguous Tigrinya ethno-linguistic region that predates modern borders. This zone encompassed the Eritrean highland provinces of Hamasien, Serae, and Akkele Guzay; the core Ethiopian province of Tigray; and specific western, northwestern, and southern districts, including Wolkait (Welkai), Tsegede, Kafta-Humera, Tsellamti, Waldubba, Sawana, Raya-Kobo, and Raya-Azebo.

The analysis of the western districts (Welkai, Tsellamti, Kafta-Humera, Satit-Humera), the northwestern districts (Tsellamti, Waldubba) and the southern frontiers (Raya, including present-day Raya-Kobo) employs cartographic, linguistic, and documentary evidence to demonstrate that these areas are not recent additions but long-standing integral components of the Tigrinya cultural sphere. Historical records document Tigrinya as the prevalent language in these areas long before the emergence of modern territorial disputes. Contemporary colonial administrators and early scholars described the Tigrinya highlands as culturally and linguistically homogeneous, characterizing the political borders drawn through them as artificial cleavages. Nineteenth-century linguistic surveys placed these districts within the Tigrinya zone, twentieth-century maps consistently depicted them as such, and historical records confirm their socio-economic orientation toward the Tigrinya highlands. The maps in Appendices A and B serve as primary-source evidence, visually incorporating the western, northwestern, and southern frontier zones into a greater Tigrinya-speaking region.

**III. The Constitutional Paradigm and Legal Imperative:** The mismatch between old provinces and new regional borders reflects a profound paradigm shift. The Transitional Period Charter (1991) and the FDRE Constitution (1995) instituted an ethno-federal system where settlement patterns, identity, and language became the primary constitutional criteria for delimiting borders, a revolutionary break from past administrative logic. The post-1991 federal reconfiguration of Tigray is

framed here not as a novel political invention, but as a corrective realignment. It sought to reconcile administrative boundaries with the long-documented ethno-linguistic geography, addressing distortions created by earlier punitive or arbitrary border-making.

A related challenge questions the constitution's legitimacy, arguing key groups like the Amhara were not adequately represented. This argument is untenable. The FDRE Constitution has served as the supreme law for nearly three decades; its legitimacy stems from its role as the foundational social contract and operational reality. The Amhara Regional State itself is a product of this constitutional logic, formed by consolidating parts of Gojjam, Wollo, and Shoa. To reject the constitution's legitimacy over borders is to reject the legal basis of the Amhara region's own existence. The FDRE Constitution provides mechanisms for amendment (Articles 104 & 105); debates must occur within this order. Accordingly, the provincial maps of the Imperial and Derg eras hold no constitutional standing. They were explicitly dissolved. Therefore, any argument using the borders of "Tigre proper" to restrict Tigrayan territory is fundamentally flawed: it is historically inaccurate and constitutionally irrelevant.

**IV. Roots of Contemporary Conflict:** Present-day border disputes are, therefore, manifestations of unresolved historical tensions. They originate from the persistent subordination of documented settlement patterns and cultural geography to centralized administrative logic, rather than from any ambiguity in the historical record itself.

V. The Present Constitutional and Legal Requirement: The FDRE Constitution dictates the procedures for raising identity questions and inter-state border disputes. In the absence of a formal, resolved claim and given the finality of agreements like the 2018 Tsegede-Tegede accord, the constitutionally defined territories of the Tigray Regional State must be preserved. Since ultimate resolution must follow constitutional procedures, through inter-state agreement or a decision by the House of Federation, the currently unrestored and illegally occupied territories of Tigray must revert to the constitutional authority for that territory: the Tigray Interim Regional Administration. The de facto local administrations imposed by the Amhara Regional State in these areas are illegitimate and must be dissolved by the federal government. Failure to enforce this principle sets a dangerous precedent, rewarding the illegal use of force and undermining the constitutional framework. Hence, the restoration of legitimate authority over Western Tigray, Southern, and parts of Northwestern Tigray is a legal and constitutional imperative designed to prevent unilateral border changes by violence.

**VI. Final Synthesis:** Whether the issue is framed as an identity question or a border dispute, it has not been formally adjudicated through constitutional channels. It is currently presented in an intermingled manner, often predominantly as an Amhara identity question within Tigray. If and when these issues are formally brought before the constitutional order, their resolution must adhere strictly and in good faith to the FDRE Constitution. Disregarding clear constitutional provisions for political expediency undermines the rule of law.

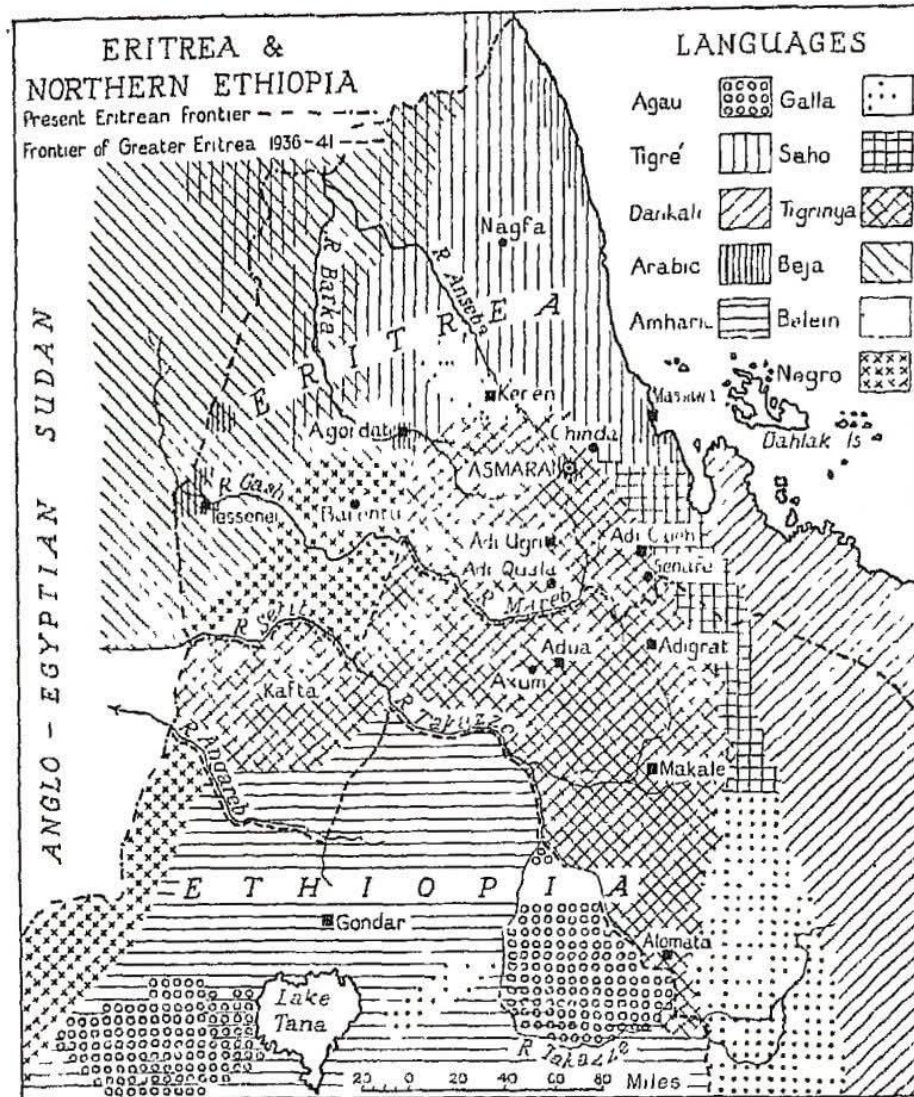
The post-1991 political map of Tigray did not create a new entity but offered a belated administrative acknowledgment of a pre-existing, geographically coherent ethno-linguistic reality. Understanding the distinction between contested political cartographies and documented ethno-linguistic territories is essential for a meaningful interpretation of the region's past and its ongoing discourse. The restoration of constitutional order is not merely a political demand but a fundamental requirement of constitutionalism itself.

In summary, this study establishes that the Tigrinya-speaking population historically inhabited a coherent and contiguous ethno-linguistic territory. This geographic continuity, documented across centuries by travelers, linguists, and cartographers, was systematically fragmented by successive administrative regimes. Imperial, colonial, and post-imperial state boundaries were imposed without regard to this underlying human geography, leading to the political dismemberment of a culturally unified region.

While this analysis does not advocate for the mechanical translation of historical ethno-linguistic maps into modern political borders, it definitively counters claims that the Tigrinya presence in contested frontier districts is recent or artificial. The evidence demonstrates that current conflicts are, in significant part, legacies of a historical process that repeatedly fractured a cohesive cultural region for political and administrative convenience.

7 APPENDICES

Appendix A: Stephen H. Longrigg's Linguistic Map of Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea (c. 1945).



Appendix B: Donald N. Levine's Ethnographic Map of Northern Ethiopia from Wax & Gold (c. 1965).

