

# Ethiopia: Amhara–Tigray Relations in the Shadows of the Civil War (2020–2022) in North Wollo

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**Abstract:** The Amhara and Tigray communities share a strong bond based on geographic proximity, religious affiliation, related means of livelihood, shared cultural practices, and economic interdependence. Yet, the relationship between the two communities has long been affected by power rivalry among their respective elites. The post-2018 politico-economic struggle for control of state power ultimately triggered the onset of the Ethiopian civil war (2020–2022). This article empirically investigates how the territorial expansion of the Ethiopian civil war impacted ethnic relationships between the Amhara and Tigray communities in North Wollo (NW), drawing theoretical insights from theories of ethnicity. Employing primary and secondary qualitative data, the study revealed that the three-decades-long practice of ethnic-based federalism championed by Tigrayan elites engendered ethnic-based affiliation among younger generations, who primarily identified themselves with an ethnic identity. This eventually deteriorated Amhara–Tigray community relations due to three interrelated factors: local violence in NW, factors associated with the 2018 political reform, and the advent and territorial expansion of the Ethiopian civil war. The civil war, primarily driven by elite interests, resulted in a lack of trust, diminished social relationships, and growing suspicion between members of the two communities. Unless genuine people-to-people reconciliation is conducted, the elite-driven rift between the two communities will further worsen the socio-economic interactions of the local populations.

**Keywords:** Amhara–Tigray, ethnic-based administration, ethnic identity, Ethiopian Civil War, TPLF.

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## **Introduction**

The Amhara and Tigray communities have historically shared close ties rooted in geographic proximity, religious affiliation, interdependent livelihoods, and overlapping cultural practices. Yet, these longstanding communal bonds have often been overshadowed by the enduring political rivalries between their respective elites. Both Amhara and Tigrayan elites played dominant roles in shaping Ethiopia's political order across ancient, medieval, and modern periods, frequently competing for hegemony over the Ethiopian state (Jalata, 2009). As Teshale (1995, cited in Tronvoll, 2009) aptly described, the political relationship between the two groups' elites resembled a "sibling rivalry." While they viewed each other as adversaries in the struggle for power, both were simultaneously perceived by other Ethiopian groups as the Habesha elites who historically monopolized the country's politics and identity (Jalata, 2009).

This historical dynamic has generated scholarly debate on whether Ethiopia's past largely reflects the political and cultural histories of the Amhara and Tigray peoples (Wallelign, 1969). For much of Ethiopia's modern history, political leadership was indeed dominated by elites from these groups, particularly those from the central and northern highlands. Critics have argued that the Ethiopian state was crafted in the image of Amhara-Tigray culture and history (Wallelign, 1969). Yet, despite their joint dominance, political competition between the two was intense. The contestation between Yohannes IV and Menelik II in claiming the King of Kings' position provides a clear example of Ethiopia's early modern history (Bahru, 2001).

The year 1991 marked a significant turning point in Ethiopia's history with the adoption of an ethnic-based federal system. In practice, this transition entrenched the dominance of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which consolidated power and evolved into an increasingly authoritarian force over the subsequent three decades (Lyons, 2019). Mounting popular discontent against the TPLF since 2014/15 eventually culminated in the 2018 political reform, initially welcomed by many Amhara elites, but which quickly reignited inter-elite rivalry. These tensions contributed to the outbreak of the Ethiopian civil war (2020–2022), one of the most destructive conflicts in the country's recent history.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how the territorial expansion of the Ethiopian civil war impacted the long-standing cordial relationships between the Amhara and Tigray communities in North Wollo (NW). The article argues that the civil war, being primarily a conflict among political elites, led local Amhara communities to view Tigrayans with suspicion, thereby straining their cordial relations. It also examines how the three-decades-long practice of ethnic-based federalism, championed by Tigrayan elites, fostered ethnic-based affiliation among younger generations, who primarily identified with an ethnic identity. This development eventually contributed to the deterioration of relationships between the Amhara and Tigray communities during the lead-up to and throughout the Ethiopian civil war.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

### *Ethnic identity, political mobilization and civil war*

Ethnic identity is widely recognized as one of the key factors shaping civil wars in multi-ethnic societies. Denny and Walter (2014) argue that ethnic groups possess distinct incentives and opportunities to mobilize for conflict, making them more prone to civil war than non-ethnic groups. Indeed, since the end of World War II, approximately 64% of all civil wars have been fought along ethnic lines (Denny & Walter, 2014). Stewart (2008) similarly observes that “mobilization along group identity lines has become the single most important source of violent conflict” (p. 7).

Ethnicity, as a collective form of identity, has demonstrated a unique capacity for social and political mobilization (Young, 2003). In the African context, Tegegne (1998) underscores its role as one of the most effective instruments of political mobilization. Ethnic identity typically draws on elements such as mythical kinship, ancestry, language, religion, shared values, and common culture (Young, 2003). In Ethiopia, attitudes toward ethnicity since its official recognition have diverged into two perspectives: one that views it as part of democratization and the recognition of diversity, and another that regards it as divisive and a threat to national cohesion, potentially leading to balkanization (Tegegne, 1998).

Scholars agree that when group mobilization occurs along ethnic lines, identity can become a powerful driver of conflict, especially when reinforced by socioeconomic and political grievances (Watts et al., 2017). While ethnicity alone may not directly cause internal wars, it often exacerbates existing tensions (Yilmaz, 2007). This is particularly evident when states marginalize or repress ethnic groups, or when territorially based groups with separatist agendas challenge the central government (Watts et al., 2017). In such contexts, ethnic elites and “entrepreneurs” mobilize their constituencies through narratives of oppression, exclusion, and self-determination, thereby making ethnicity a central organizing principle of conflict.

Overall, the literature highlights the centrality of political motivations and identity in civil wars, given that armed groups frequently organize along ethnic lines (Zartman, 2016). These dynamics are clearly visible in the Ethiopian civil war, where the TPLF, representing the Tigrayan ethnic group, contested the federal government beginning in late 2020. The ethnic-based federal system, entrenched since 1991, facilitated mass mobilization along ethnic lines, drawing Amhara and Tigrayan communities into confrontation. Political elites on both sides strategically appealed to co-ethnics, framing the war as a defense of group interests, thereby deepening intercommunal suspicion and hostility.

### *Theories of ethnicity*

The study of ethnicity is often framed through three major theoretical perspectives: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism. Each offers a distinct lens for understanding how ethnic identities emerge, persist, and shape social and political

dynamics. Primordialism views ethnicity as natural, innate, and deeply rooted in primordial attachments such as blood ties, common ancestry, language, religion, and shared history (Yang, 2000). From this perspective, ethnicity is an ascribed identity—fixed at birth, inherited from one’s ancestors, and transmitted across generations (Isajiw, 1993; Jesse & Williams, 2010). Ethnic boundaries are considered static and immutable, making ethnicity a permanent marker of identity. While this approach underscores the enduring power of ethnic ties, it is often criticized for its inability to explain the emergence of new ethnic groups, the transformation of identities over time, or the dissolution of ethnic boundaries. In the Ethiopian context, the civil war (2020–2022) may appear to reflect a primordial struggle, as the conflict unfolded largely along perceived ethnic lines—particularly between Tigrayans and other groups. Yet, primordialism alone overlooks the social, political, and historical processes that have shaped these divisions.

Constructivism, by contrast, argues that ethnicity is not natural or fixed but socially constructed. Ethnic identity is created and re-created through historical processes, social interactions, and everyday practices (Isajiw, 2000). From this standpoint, belonging to an ethnic group is not solely determined by biology or ancestry but by shared cultural practices, values, beliefs, and historical experiences. Constructivists emphasize the fluidity of ethnic identity, highlighting that it changes across time and space in response to shifting social and political contexts. Ethnicity, therefore, is dynamic and open-ended rather than predetermined.

Instrumentalism offers a more strategic view of ethnicity, conceptualizing it as a tool used to pursue material, political, or social advantages (Yang, 2000). According to this perspective, individuals and, more often, elites deploy ethnic identities to mobilize support, gain resources, or consolidate power. Ethnicity thus persists not because of inherent attachments, but because it can be manipulated and leveraged for tangible benefits. In this sense, ethnic identity is highly flexible and contingent, often activated in moments of political competition or conflict.

Taken together, these three perspectives illuminate different dimensions of ethnicity: its deep emotional resonance (primordialism), its socially constructed and shifting nature (constructivism), and its instrumental use in political competition (instrumentalism). For this article, they provide a useful framework for analyzing how the Ethiopian civil war reshaped Amhara–Tigray relations in NW. While primordial attachments help explain the intensity of ethnic mobilization, constructivist and instrumentalist perspectives are more effective in capturing how political elites and historical processes redefined ethnic boundaries and strained intercommunal relations during the conflict.

## **Methodology**

The study utilized a qualitative approach. The target population for the data collection were residents of NW, particularly, Woldia and Raya Kobo, who had first-hand experience on the civil war and its preceding events. The research site was purposely selected for several

key reasons. First, the NW area borders the Tigray region, which experienced a civil war, during which many locals were under Tigrayan control. This suggests that the conflict likely affected local dynamics, necessitating engagement for a nuanced understanding of the social and political landscape. Second, the area has a historically significant Tigrayan population, many of whom were displaced to Tigray due to fears of violence during the war, impacting community relations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for grasping the current social fabric. Finally, there is a lack of empirical studies on the civil war at the local level, particularly in the NW, underscoring the need for targeted research to inform academic and policy debate from below.

The study also adopted a snowball sampling technique to ensure the representation of well-informed diversified members of the communities in the research site so that youths, women, elders, local government officials, and religious leaders were contacted for data collection. Both primary and secondary data sources are utilized for data collection. Primary data were gathered through in-depth individual interviews and Focus Group Discussions, conducted after obtaining oral consent from each informant. Secondary data were collected by consulting journal articles and books. Furthermore, the study utilized thematic analysis and provided testimonials from informants under the condition of anonymity, using only codes to represent the excerpts taken from them.

### **Historical Background to the Amhara-Tigray Elites Relationships and Rivalry**

The Amhara elite, particularly during the imperial era until 1974, dominated the central state apparatus, controlling the bureaucracy, the military, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which served as a legitimizing institution for Imperial rule (Markakis, 1974). Similarly, the Tigray elites held politico-economic power during the Imperial era and consolidated power before the Era of Princes and Menelik II's rise in Ethiopia (Mohammed & Kidane, 2023). During both the eve of the Era of Princes and following Menelik's rise to power, the Tigray elites felt their power was usurped from them by the Amharas (Ibid.). Since then, power has been concentrated within the Amhara elites due to their tight control of the state institutions. At the end of the 20th century, however, the Tigray elites rose to prominence after overthrowing the Derg regime in 1991. The TPLF then became a dominant political force in the post-1991 federal state structure (Young, 1997). This shift marked a transition from Amhara to Tigray elite domination.

Historical grievances have played a significant role in the rivalry between the Amhara and Tigray elites. The historiography of Ethiopian statecraft reveals a complex interplay between historical contestations, ethnic identities, and conflicts (Bahru, 2001). These complex historical contestations also shaped the post-1991 elite manipulation of ethnic identities. For instance, while the Tigrayan elites justify their positions in the post-1991 period as rectifying the historical domination perpetrated by the Amhara ruling elite, the Amhara elites justified their position of mobilizing the Amharas during the recent Ethiopian civil war by blaming the TPLF for marginalizing the Amharas during the Tigrayan elite's

three-decades-long rule. The Tigray elite's dominance in the post-1991 period exacerbated feelings of exclusion among the Amhara and other ethnic groups.

Despite rivalry, the Amhara and Tigray elites have engaged in political collaboration and worked towards shared goals. Along with other people of Ethiopia, they have fought bravely for Ethiopia's independence from foreign aggressors. Notable examples include Yohannes IV's resistance against the Egyptians in Gundet and Gura in 1875 and 1876, and Menelik II's war against the Italians in Adwa in 1896 (Bahru, 2001; Admasu, 2010). These wars, led by the Tigrayan and Amhara kings and lords, demonstrated cooperation and collective action.

Nonetheless, the political relationship between the Amhara and Tigray elites was often marked by tensions and power struggles. Competition for control over the center of power has been a recurring theme. In the early stages of modern Ethiopian history, Emperor Tewodros II came to power after defeating a Tigrayan lord named Dejazmach Wube Hailemariam at Deresge Maryam (Mohammed & Kidane, 2023). This event exemplified the power rivalry between the Amhara and Tigray elites at the turn of modern Ethiopian history. Another instance of power rivalry occurred between Tewodros II and Yohannes IV when Yohannes was allied with General Napier, a British commander-in-chief who led an expedition against Tewodros to secure the release of British missionaries (Bahru, 2001). Yohannes's collaboration with Napier helped him consolidate his power. After the death of Yohannes IV, there was also a struggle between the Tigrayans, who expected Ras Mengesha Yohannes to succeed as the King of Kings, and the Amhara, represented by King Menelik, who assumed central power (Sisay & Alemu, 2020). Similarly, the competition for power between the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and the TPLF elites in the final days of the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime led to fierce separation and competition between the Amhara and Tigray elites.

To mitigate potential rivalries, however, the Amhara-Tigray elites often engaged in strategic political marriages (Mohammed & Kidane, 2023). For instance, Tewodros II gave his daughter Aletash to a Tigrayan elite, Dajjach Baryaw Pawlos, to foster goodwill (Bahru, 2001). Furthermore, in an attempt to unite the royal houses of Shewa (Amhara) and Tigre, Iyassu was united in marriage with Romanawarq, daughter of Ras Mengesha Yohannes of Tigre (Ibid.). Thus, the Amhara and Tigray elites exhibit a blend of cooperation and competition: cooperation occurs when power is concentrated in one group and contained through various strategies, such as political marriage, while competition arises during power vacuums. This dynamic has significantly influenced Ethiopia's political landscape throughout its history.

Concomitant with political power and control of state institutions, the Amhara elites accumulated wealth from land ownership during the Imperial period (Crummey, 2000). Similarly, the post-1991 Tigray elite's economic base has been closely linked to their control over the state and its resources. The TPLF-dominated EPRDF implemented economic

policies that favored state-led development and the growth of party-affiliated businesses (Lyons, 2019). The Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), for instance, was a key economic vehicle for the Tigray elite, allowing them to consolidate economic power (Aalen, 2011). Tigrayans' control of the economy, on the other hand, created resentment among the Amhara elites for being excluded from politico-economic power. The Tigray elite's control over state resources and party-affiliated businesses after 1991 marginalized the Amhara elite.

The shifting power dynamics between the Amhara and Tigray elites, with both groups leveraging their control over the state and economy to consolidate their positions, have also led to class formation in the country. While the Amhara elites in the past created a rigid class structure between the peasantry and the feudal aristocracy (Markakis, 1974), the post-1991 Tigray elites favored party-affiliated social classes and bureaucrats that are tied to the state and party structures (Lefort, 2012). However, this has also led to growing inequalities and tensions between the elites and the broader population, both in the pre- and post-1991 periods. While class inequality in the Imperial period led to the 1974 revolution, post-1991 party-affiliated social inequality contributed to the fall of the TPLF-dominated regime.

### **Amhara-Tigray Communities Socio-Economic Relationships in North Wollo**

The Amhara and Tigray people share a strong bond based on geographic proximity, religious affiliation, related means of livelihood, sharing of similar cultural practices, and economic interdependence (Tronvoll, 2009). In the words of Tronvoll (2009), the Amhara and Tigray communities are 'ethnic cousins'. Despite speaking different languages, the two communities utilize the same alphabet and share mutual social and cultural practices (Tronvoll, 2009). The NW area is a significant location where Tigrayans and Amharas have cohabitated in large numbers. The relations between the two communities in the study area are multifaceted and encompass social, cultural, and economic dimensions.

The Amhara and Tigray communities have social and cultural ties, shared history, and proximity. The way of dressing, especially in the Raya areas of the Amhara and Tigray, is the same. The communities share similar cultural practices such as traditional music and dancing, and they are connected in weddings, mourning, and intermarriage relations (IDI-31, 17 November 2023, Kobo). In terms of dialect, for instance, the communities in Raya Kobo used to say 'Eneye,' and the Tigrayans also used to say 'Enewey' to refer to their mothers, indicating the presence of language interrelation (IDI-21, 30 October 2023, Kobo). These close relations were a result of cohabitation. Through government assignments, Amhara individuals working in Tigray areas and Tigrayans working in the NW fostered intermarriage, leading to a high level of mixed identity. Cross-marriages between Tigrayans and Amhara members of the community contributed to this dynamic. As a result, as one informant stated, 'the Amhara and Tigray communities are intertwined like a rope' (IDI-15, 16 October 2023, Woldia).



The two communities had a tradition of resource-sharing and actively participated in shared social and religious festivities. Religious pilgrimages were common, including Tigrayans travelling to the Lalibela rock-hewn church in NW and Amharas undertaking pilgrimages to the Axum Tsion Church and the Al Nejashi Mosque in Tigray. To further strengthen their bonds, the communities would come together by joining social and religious associations, allowing them to spend time celebrating various festivals collectively. One method of fostering social connections within the communities was through godparenting. This Christian religious tradition involved families entrusting their newborn child to individuals or families with whom they shared a strong relationship. If the newborn was male, he would be assigned a godfather who would play a role in his baptism and take responsibility for his spiritual upbringing. Similarly, if the newborn was female, she would be assigned a godmother. This practice served as a significant tie between the two communities living in NW, strengthening their relations through shared religious involvement. This tradition provided a framework for nurturing their relationships and fostering a sense of unity and kinship between the two groups.

The Amhara and Tigray people had strong economic interaction before the start of the war. Agricultural products or food items such as teff, cereals, onions, sheep, and goats were transported to Tigray from or via Woldia and Raya Kobo. As IDI-35 (20 November 2023, Kobo) noted, during times of holiday, cattle marketplaces of Woldia and Raya Kobo were controlled by merchants who took cattle to Tigray. There were also industrial products or building materials that the communities in Woldia and Raya Kobo brought from Tigray, such as cement and steel. As one informant stated, 'There was no problem when both members of the communities engaged in economic interactions; they used to support each other and cared for each other' (IDI-22, 06 November 2023, Kobo).

According to informants, Tigrayans were actively involved in business ventures in NW. A considerable number of boutique shops in Woldia and Raya Kobo were initiated and owned by ethnic Tigrayans. Tigrayans initially embarked on their entrepreneurial journey through peddling practices, engaging in the exchange of household goods for clothing within the local community. As one informant rightly put it, 'The Tigrayans served as the focal point of economic interaction in NW' (IDI-2, 29 September 2023, Woldia).

In conclusion, the Amhara and Tigray peoples share common ties across various dimensions. Nonetheless, the ethnic political structure and elite politics that have been in play since 1991 have fostered division between members of the two communities. The mobilization of elites along identity lines has created a sense of ethnic grievance, leading co-ethnics to unite with their ethnic leaders, resulting in violence and impacting people-to-people relations at the local level.



## **Ethnic-based Administration and the Path to the Ethiopian Civil War**

Following its takeover of power in 1991, TPLF/EPRDF introduced ethnic-based federalism and formulated the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution. The constitution presented a debating narrative of ‘rectifying historically unjust relationships’ (FDRE Constitution, 1995), which indirectly implied that the relationships between Ethiopia’s nationalities were dominated by the ‘Amhara nation’ (TPLF, 1976). This narrative is continually challenged by the Amharas, who assert the Amhara identity, questioning the constitutional provision as an instrument endangering the Amharas (Admasu, 2010). Nonetheless, as Pausewang (2005) rightly asserted, ‘no one could win legitimacy without accommodating the demands of the different ethnic groups for freedom from domination’ (p. 284) in the aftermath of the demise of the Derg regime. Hence, it suffices to say the TPLF took the right measure in instituting ethnic federalism as a means of ensuring the rights of nationalities to gain legitimacy from the various armed groups fighting for liberation, since the armed groups that fought the Derg were organized based on ethnic identity and were determined to liberate their respective nationalities.

Nevertheless, recognizing the rights of nationalities and constituting regional administration based on ethnic identity are different policy options. Recognition of the rights of nationalities does not necessarily require establishing an ethnic-based administration. What is needed most is the flourishing of democracy and good governance that balances individual and group rights. Without democracy and good governance, the rights of nationalities cannot be safeguarded even if ethnic-based administration is instituted. This was true when the EPRDF regime was forced to vacate political power through widespread protests in 2018 due to a lack of good governance (Semir, 2019), despite exercising ethnic-based administration for nearly three decades.

The 1991 political transition in Ethiopia showed a greater focus on power consolidation by the TPLF than on power sharing, which turned the TPLF into an authoritarian political party (Lyons, 2019). The main grievance the TPLF held against the Ethiopian government was that Tigrayans had too little representation in the central government. Yet, after consolidating power in 1991, the TPLF-dominated government was criticized for the over-representation of minority Tigrayans in the central government, leading to growing popular discontent against the TPLF.

After nearly three decades of authoritarian rule, the TPLF faced popular resistance, and anti-TPLF protests took on an anti-Tigrayan sentiment. TPLF and Tigrayan-owned businesses were targeted for destruction in different parts of the country. For instance, ‘Selam Bus’—owned by a TPLF-affiliated company—was a target for attack. Tigrayan businesspeople living in Oromia and Amhara regional states were also targets for attack due to localized economic grievances and perceptions that corruption benefited TPLF leaders and their affiliates (Lyons, 2019). This attack developed a grievance on the part of the TPLF to organize and take action in defense of their positions. As Lyons rightly put

it, 'the TPLF adopted the populist position of defending its people against others who intended them harm' (Lyons, 2019, p. 201).

The politicians who came after the introduction of ethnic-based administration have instilled divisive thinking in the minds of the younger generation, promoting the idea that one should solely identify with their ethnic identity as Tigre for Tigrayans or Amhara for Amharas (IDI-3, 30 September 2023, Woldia). This manipulation has become an ingrained norm these days. As a result, informants noted how the sole purpose of Tigrayans was rooted in their Tigrayan identity when the Tigray fighters maltreated local Amharas in NW during the territorial expansion of the war, as well as by their depiction of common slogans such as 'ትግራይ ትስዕር' (Tigray shall prevail)' (IDI-4, 02 October 2023, Woldia).

### **What Role Did the 2018 Political Reform Play in Igniting Elite Rivalries?**

The 2018 political reform was unpredictable in its quick sidelining of the TPLF from power and was acclaimed with widespread support (Semir, 2019). The general euphoria, however, did not last long. The measures taken by the reform surprised many observers and the population alike; however, it soon became clear that the process did not solve the country's problems. There have been various identity-based attacks (Badwaza & Temin, 2018) and the proliferation of ethnic-based armed groups in different parts of the country. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed, massacred, and displaced (Raleigh & Fuller, 2021). The immediate liberalization of the political space opened the Pandora's box of identity politics, whereby groups engaged in mob justice, attacking and killing individuals, and destroying the properties of those who did not belong to their ethnic identity.

The reform brought political competition between the TPLF and the federal government (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). The TPLF, aligning with the Tigray people, claimed to protect Tigrayans while accusing reformers of seeking to eradicate Tigray by blaming the TPLF for the country's problems. The rise of violence throughout the country and the relatively peaceful state of the Tigray region following the reform compelled the TPLF to boldly criticize the reformist government and the former comrades in the Amhara region. The blockage of roads connecting the federal government with Tigray in the Amhara region, which impeded trade in and out of Tigray, the total attribution of the EPRDF's failure to the TPLF and Tigrayans, and the jailing of senior TPLF officials (Lyons, 2019) made the TPLF aggrieved towards the reformist group and tactically alienated itself. This led to the mobilization of Tigrayans to defend themselves against perceived threats.

The TPLF viewed the overall move of the post-2018 administration as totally endangering the TPLF and ethnic Tigrayans. The following quote from Assefa Fisseha's study vividly reveals the TPLF's perception:

*the Addis Ababa-Asmera-Bahir Dar axis is a secret pact to isolate and attack the TPLF. For many Tigrayan observers even outside of the TPLF, the post-2018 political developments in Ethiopia and the Horn is reminiscent of the years that*

*followed the death of emperor Yohannes IV. Internal and external forces are doing their best to attack the TPLF and marginalise Tigray. Right or wrong, this was the dominant perception on the mind of Tigrayans in 2020 and sadly that is what happened subsequently* (Assefa, 2023, p.766).

Due to the close attachment of ethnic identity and politics, there was a biased assumption that equated TPLF with the Tigray population and vice versa, which made Tigrayans to be prey for violence in different parts of the country. Concerning this, Abiy implored the people not to see all Tigrayans as TPLF since many Tigrayans are in poor living conditions (Fisher & Meressa, 2019). However, both before the advent of the 2018 reform and after the reform, innocent Tigrayans were targeted for violence as a proxy for the political domination and authoritative rule of TPLF. The main contention here is that the exclusionary identity politics that the TPLF exercised made Tigrayan populations more vulnerable than other ethnic groups in the country.

### **How did Local Violence in North Wollo Shape Amhara-Tigray Relationships?**

Before the onset of the Ethiopian Civil War and its reach into NW, the relations between the Amhara and Tigray communities in NW had severely deteriorated due to national and local factors. Due to the political domination of the TPLF for over a quarter of a century, grievances were disseminated over lack of access to political power, exclusion from economic opportunity, and serious violations of human rights opposing the government throughout the country (Temin & Badwaza, 2019). The widespread national anti-TPLF movement that erupted throughout the Oromia and Amhara regional states in 2015/16 contributed to the onset of violence in NW.

A sense of victimhood and vulnerability was shared by the Amhara ethnic groups throughout the Amhara region (Yared, 2022). This sense of victimhood targeted the TPLF regime as the cause of the suffering of the Amharas living in different parts of the country and led them to adopt popular protest supported by social media activism as the best strategy to oppose the government. Likewise, the Amharas in NW shared the Amharas' cause in other provinces and joined the widespread protests that started in Gonder city. As one informant noted, 'The protestors in Woldia town faced the well-armed "Agazi forces" with empty hands in late 2017 and early 2018' (IDI-11, 11 October 2023, Woldia).

The TPLF-led regime's politicization of identity spurred the rise of a consolidated Amhara ethnic identity. The state-led organizing principle of ethnic identity led political parties to be organized along ethnic lines, gradually resulting in the formation of ethnically based Amhara political parties and a growing ethnic-based Amhara identity (Yared, 2022). This development was rooted in the narrative of 'Amhara oppressor/others oppressed,' exacerbated by identity-based attacks and socioeconomic exclusion of Amharas compared to Tigrayan elites. In response, Amhara youth increasingly embraced their ethnic identity, advocating for its recognition and rights, especially following the 2018 reforms.

The emergence of the Amhara identity, however, posed a threat to other ethnic groups in the country. The Tigray elites, in particular, associated the consolidation of the Amhara identity with an irredentist policy (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023) and framed its rise as an effort to restore the traditional Amhara-dominated imperial regime. The historically contested lands of Wolkayit, Raya, and Telemet, demarcated to the Tigray regional state by the TPLF-dominated regime, were strongly claimed by Amhara nationalities and the ruling Amhara elites. This claim was forcefully suppressed by intimidating and confining committees established to work for the return of these lands and the recognition of the Amhara identity living in these areas while the TPLF was in power (Sisay & Alemu, 2020).

The TPLF's attempt to arrest Colonel Demeke Zewde, a leader of the Wolkayit Identity Committee, on 12 July 2016 in Gonder, set off violence in the Amhara region. A year later, the 07 August 2017 violence in Bahir Dar city around the Kobel area sparked further unrest in the region. Similarly, on 03 December 2017, in Woldia town, confrontations between the Mekelle and Woldia sport club fans ignited another conflict in Woldia. The 03 December 2017 event became an initial incident expanding the anti-TPLF movement in Raya Kobo. Gradually, the problem related to the soccer match escalated, and Tigrayans—both those involved in the issue and innocent bystanders—became targets of attacks in Woldia and Raya Kobo. As one informant noted, 'That event turned the relations between the two communities to deteriorate in our area, and then enmity and hatred developed within the minds of the community' (IDI-34, 19 November 2023, Kobo).

Following the soccer match incident, another event occurred on 20 January 2018 in Woldia that further deteriorated relations between the two communities and resulted in the destruction of Tigrayan properties. The incident happened the day after the Ethiopian Epiphany, during the annual Ethiopian Orthodox Christian religious ceremony. On that day, many Christians gathered to celebrate St. Michael through hymns. The tradition of celebrating this annual festivity lasts for hours, with the ark of the covenant and spiritual leaders blessing the town's streets en route to the church. During this time, while the youths were celebrating through songs, there was unnecessary confrontation with the 'Agazi' security forces deployed for security reasons (Youth FGD, 06 October 2023, Woldia).

According to informants, some youths used the religious gathering as an opportunity to express their support for their kin Amharas in Gonder and to voice dissatisfaction with the ruling regime through local songs and dancing. They criticized the regime's failure to serve the Amharas equally, highlighting that the government only benefited its ethnic group and that the military was loyal to a single ethnic group, which aggravated the security forces into taking action. While tens of thousands of believers were celebrating the religious festival, the military fired tear gas into the crowd, disrupting the peaceful celebration. This action immediately turned the celebration into chaos, with children and the elderly particularly unable to protect themselves due to the large crowd and the suffocating tear gas (Elderly FGD, 18 October 2023, Woldia).

Following the 20 January 2018 event, acts of destruction targeted the properties of ethnic Tigrayans. Local youth perceived the Tigrayans living in Woldia and Raya Kobo, especially those who were economically well-off, as representatives of the TPLF solely based on their ethnic identity. They believed the economic disparity in the area was a direct consequence of a system benefiting Tigrayans (Youth FGD, 06 October 2023, Woldia). Consequently, Tigrayan-owned businesses, hotels, shops, and residences became targets of destruction driven by the youth's animosity toward ethnic Tigrayans. However, some Tigrayan-owned hotels and residences were spared from attack. This incident in Woldia and Raya Kobo illustrated the consequences of ethnic identity politics in Ethiopia, where ethnicity and territory are intertwined. It showcased how a different ethnic group can be forced to leave an area based on identity, reflecting the impact of politicized ethnicity and ensuing tribalism.

The ethnic-based attacks against Tigrayans in Woldia and Raya Kobo were the main factors contributing to the deterioration of Amhara-Tigray relations preceding the 2020 civil war. It can be argued that the motivations behind these ethnic-based attacks against Tigrayans in NW were a recent phenomenon rooted in the post-1991 political system, not local disputes or factors. The politicization of ethnicity by the TPLF and the subsequent economic exclusion and physical abuse of Amharas in different parts of the country led to ethnic Tigrayans in NW becoming targets of violence as a substitute for the policies of the TPLF.

Overall, the factors that contributed to the development of grievances and further deteriorated peaceful relations between the Amhara and Tigray communities in NW were deeply rooted in national politics. Rather than being isolated incidents, they were shaped by national influences and followed a specific pattern of implementation at the local level. The actions of the respective elites from both communities played a significant role, as they were aggravated by a sense of grievance and influenced by manipulated trends set at the national level.

### **How did the Ethiopian Civil War Shape the Dynamics of Amhara-Tigray Relations?**

The Amhara-Tigray elites place great importance on ethnic identity, resulting in a mindset confined within the boundaries of these identities. The institutionalization of ethnicity since 1991 heightened awareness of one's ethnic identity and led individuals to view one another primarily through this lens. This alignment with a particular ethnic identity exemplifies the notion of primordial identity. The ethnic-based administration introduced in the early 1990s established clear ethnic boundaries for different groups. Consequently, ethnic groups were compelled to primarily identify with their respective regions, such as the Amharas with the Amhara region and the Tigrayans with the Tigray region. This process had a cascading effect: ethnic groups developed a sense of security within their own group but experienced fear and suspicion toward others. This dynamic was particularly evident in NW, where the Amhara and Tigray communities viewed each other with suspicion during the escalating violence of the civil war and its preceding events.

The Amhara-Tigray community relationship was severely impacted by the Ethiopian Civil War and the events leading up to it. The war exacerbated ethnic divisions between the Amhara and Tigray communities. As one informant stated, 'It resulted in the mutual destruction of brothers and sisters' (IDI-21, 30 October 2023, Kobo). Relations between the two communities began to deteriorate during the 2017/18 local violence and were further strained by the civil war. An informant from Raya Kobo observed how the war created animosity: 'If you ask the Raya Kobo people simply about the Tigrayans, there is grievance; community members associated the war and the overall crises of the country with the TPLF and the Tigrayans' (IDI-30, 16 November 2023, Woldia).

The destruction caused by the war led local communities in NW to equate the TPLF with all Tigrayans. As one informant from Raya Kobo noted:

*Earlier my thinking was that the TPLF and the Tigrayan people were not similar. But the two rounds of invasion and the resultant crises the Tigrayan fighters done on us changed my mind into thinking that all, at least the majority of Tigrayans, are supporters of TPLF and they are against the interests of Amharas. We believe that the TPLF and the Tigray people are one and the same. The war made the Tigrayans our enemy* (IDI-34, 19 November 2023, Kobo).

As a result of the war, the relationship between the Amhara and Tigray communities in NW is severely shattered. To mention a few of these pieces of evidence, their socio-economic interaction has been impacted; internally, some Tigrayans living in NW felt excluded from the society, while the Amhara communities harbored resentment towards Tigrayans residing in NW, especially after experiencing the severe danger inflicted by Tigray fighters during the territorial expansion of the war in NW; externally, the transport route that the Tigrayans used to travel to Addis Ababa was redirected from Amhara towns to Afar areas.

The local communities in Raya Kobo observed how the territorial expansion of the war into their area further deteriorated relations and saw hatred in the communities due to the Tigrayan fighters' evil treatment. As one informant observed:

*The Tigrayan fighters insulted the Raya Kobo people as donkeys. They had treated us like animals. They equated us with donkeys that saw hatred between the Amharas and Tigrayans. On 09 September 2021, for instance, the Tigray fighters had engaged in house-to-house search and killing of youths. They had also beaten women asking for men's weapons. Those acts were not forgettable and had severely impacted our relations* (IDI-20, 28 October 2023, Kobo).

The war resulted in a profound lack of trust and a breakdown of social relationships, causing members of the two communities to view each other with suspicion. As one informant noted, 'Following the war, the Amhara and Tigray communities lost trust in each other and did not have social gatherings as before' (IDI-1, 29 September 2023, Woldia). Similarly, another informant observed, 'It is difficult for the time being to have a cordial and earnest relationship between the two communities' (IDI-15, 16 October 2023,



Woldia). Differences in political positions among the elites meant that there were no open, popular, or governmental interactions between the communities.

The war also eroded cultural and religious interactions. Previously, pilgrimages to sacred sites in both Tigray and Amhara areas were a common manifestation of intercommunal ties. However, after the war, movement between communities was severely restricted. Pilgrims from NW were hesitant to visit sacred sites in Tigray, while Tigrayan communities avoided holy sites in NW. As one informant noted, ‘The two brother and sister communities who were not different except language get into a state of enmity by the work of the politicians’ (IDI-3, 30 September 2023, Woldia). From an instrumentalist perspective, the informant suggested that political elites actively created enmity between the communities.

Relations between the two communities largely ceased due to the war’s devastation and the influence of propaganda. One informant remarked, ‘Earlier, the local communities of Raya Kobo used to travel and engage in trade relations far beyond Mekelle. But after the war, such relations stopped. The war disconnected the people and broke family relations’ (IDI-32, 19 November 2023, Kobo). Shared social events, including intermarriage, were also disrupted, and movement between areas became limited. As an informant from Kobo noted, ‘We are not confident even to go to Kukuftu, beyond Mehoni, which is two hours of travel for buying cattle. Our relations have stopped and we became enemies’ (IDI-28, 15 November 2023, Kobo).

The war had particularly severe consequences for individuals with mixed identities, born to both Amhara and Tigray families (IDI-2, 29 September 2023, Woldia). It fostered enmity between community members, some of whom engaged in killing each other during the conflict. The destruction and loss of life left enduring scars and deep-seated grievances toward Tigrayans in NW. As one informant from Woldia observed:

*We entered into a blood feud. The Tigrayans were displaced from here, and members of our communities were killed and massacred. Properties were pillaged, and vehicles bought with bank loans were burned and looted. And it left an unhealed scar on both of us. Even after the government agreed to stop the war and resume peaceful relations, the two communities did not develop trust in each other. Fathers and sons were separated; mothers and sons remained separated because one of the parents would leave if they were from Tigray* (IDI-4, 02 October 2023, Woldia).

Although the federal government and the TPLF reconciled and signed the peace agreement in Pretoria, South Africa, on 02 November 2022, formal people-to-people relations have not been restored. As informants noted, although the merchants come and go from both sides, there was no heartfelt trust as there was before. Nonetheless, the relation is not broken to the level that it could not be maintained due to a lack of conflict between the people. It is the political stalemate between the elites that has strained the communities. If the two communities had genuine mediators, either from the government or the community elders, the problems between the two communities would heal soon. One informant noted, ‘If



opportunity is facilitated to reconcile the people, they would cry and hug and heal better because the communities shared strong religious ties both in Christianity and Islam' (IDI-6, 04 October 2023, Woldia).

The impact of the civil war on the relations between the two communities is not limited to the NW area alone; instead, it is one manifestation of the deteriorated relations between the two communities. Evidence revealed that due to the civil war, the relations between the entire Amhara and the Tigray communities were shattered. In his interview during the Ethiopian 2016 New Year, the then interim president of the Tigray regional state, Mr. Getachew Reda, affirmed that the Amhara and Tigray people are great people who cannot remain hostile, highlighting their grievances. To improve the relations between the two people he stated how his administration took the lead in visiting Bahir Dar, the capital of the Amhara region<sup>1</sup>, following the Pretoria agreement believing the role of elites can shape the behavior of the people in directing and restoring the enmity attitude to a previous healthy relation.

Even if it cannot be concluded that the Amhara and Tigray communities are in a state of complete hatred toward each other, the overall trend points to growing animosity and suspicion. This is evident in the actions of individuals from both communities. Tigrayans, who had been targeted before the civil war and feared future vulnerability due to their ethnic identity, chose to leave the area by selling their immovable properties. Similarly, Amharas residing in Tigray fled to their places of birth for safety (Youth FGD, 12 November 2023, Kobo).

During the war, informants reported that many Tigrayans who left Woldia and Raya Kobo returned alongside the Tigray fighters and resettled in the area. Additionally, some Tigrayans who remained in the NW welcomed the fighters and provided various forms of support, including offering shelter and sharing information about the movements of government forces. Informants noted that some Tigrayans reportedly rejoiced at the approach of Tigray fighters, and, as a consequence, some were allegedly arrested for providing information and disseminating propaganda that instilled fear among residents (Youth FGD, 06 October 2023, Woldia). As a result, the two communities became locked in a bitter rivalry, increasingly perceiving each other as enemies.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the long-standing cordial relations and geographic proximity of the Amhara and Tigray communities in NW, their relationship gradually deteriorated at the local level due to ethnic-based elite politics. In particular, before the Ethiopian civil war reached NW, the relationship between these communities worsened due to both national and local factors

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1 Mr. Getachew Reda made a historic visit to Bahir Dar, capital city of Amhara region, on June 11, 2023 after the end of the civil war. The Reporter <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/34653/>

directly linked to the ethnic-based administration. The 2015/16 nationwide anti-TPLF protests and the 2017/18 local violence in NW were key events that contributed to this deterioration.

Overall, the three-decades-long practice of ethnic-based federalism, promoted by Tigrayan elites, fostered ethnic-based affiliation among younger generations, encouraging primary identification with ethnic identity. This development ultimately contributed to the decline of Amhara–Tigray relations, influenced by local violence in NW, the 2018 political reform, and the Ethiopian civil war. The civil war, primarily a political conflict driven by elites, transformed local communities into adversaries. It resulted in a loss of trust, halted social interactions, and caused members of the Amhara and Tigray communities to view each other with suspicion.

Therefore, genuine people-to-people reconciliation—engaging government authorities, community elders, and spiritual leaders—is essential for healing the rift between the two communities, which was exacerbated by elite-driven politics and the ethnic-based dynamics of the Ethiopian civil war.

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