Amhara Scholarship for a Shared Human Future

JOURNAL OF AMHARA

Affiliate of Amhara Professionals Union (APU)

ISSN (Print): 3071-5962
ISSN (Online): 3071-5970

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 1 **APRIL 2026**

All manuscripts and contributions for publication and inquiries should be addressed to the editor in Chief of the Journal of Amhara through: editorinchief@journalofamhara.org.

ISSN (Print): 3071-5962
ISSN (Online): 3071-5970

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CONTENTS

RESEARCH ARTICLES

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF ETHNOCENTRISM AND AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE AMHARA REGION OF ETHIOPIA[i]

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Abstract

This study investigates the economic consequences of ethnocentrism and authoritarian political structures in Ethiopia's Amhara region. Drawing from national datasets, conflict exposure records, and regional household surveys, the study presents a regression-based empirical assessment of how political marginalization is affecting income levels, human capital, food security, and long-term development. Findings show strong evidence that structural discrimination is associated with lower per-capita expenditure, higher rates of stunted physical development, reduced access to sufficient caloric intake, and heightened exposure to violence. These patterns illustrate the high economic cost of authoritarian governance and long-term implications for poverty, regional inequality, and national development. Recommendations emphasize institutional reform, more inclusive governance, and targeted investment in marginalized communities.

Keywords: Amhara region, Authoritarian governance, Ethnocentrism, Horizontal inequality, Political marginalization, Regional underdevelopment, Ethiopia

Background

The Amhara region of Ethiopia has long been at the crossroads of political transformation, cultural identity formation, and contestation over state power. In recent decades, however, the Amhara have faced increasingly severe economic, social, and political marginalization. Ethiopia's shift toward ethnic federalism in 1991 marked a decisive restructuring of national governance. While the stated intention was decentralization and self-determination, many studies (Clapham, 2009; Aalen, 2011) argue that the new system instead consolidated power among select political elites, notably the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and later, the Oromo political establishment (OPDO).

The literature shows that political marginalization often correlates with deepening poverty, reduced investment, and reduced public services (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Boone, 2014). Within Ethiopia, political exclusion of the Amhara has resulted in measurable economic disparities, including higher-than-average poverty rates, lower per-capita expenditure, reduced access to sufficient caloric intake (malnutrition), and deteriorating healthcare and education. These outcomes align with a broad body of research demonstrating that ethnocentric governance tends to generate unequal resource allocation, discriminatory policies, and barriers to economic mobility (Cederman et al., 2013; Stewart, 2008).

Furthermore, recurrent conflicts—especially since 2018—have had devastating consequences for the region's agricultural productivity, industrial development, and labor market. The destruction of infrastructure, combined with the internal and external displacement of millions, has undermined productive capacity and contributed to the Amhara region's long-term economic fragility. Scholars of conflict economics stress that these outcomes are both immediate and cumulative, affecting wealth creation and the development of human capital (Justino, 2009). The impact on Ethiopia's Amhara population is consistent with these global patterns.

This study situates itself amid current scholarly issues, emphasizing how ethnically-based political exclusion and authoritarian practices

exacerbate regional inequalities and suppress both economic and human development. It also underscores the importance of factually investigating the mechanisms through which political marginalization translates into measurable economic outcomes.

Literature Review

Research on ethnically-structured political systems demonstrates that when elites monopolize state institutions, marginalized groups often receive reduced access to economic resources and public services (Horowitz, 2000; Wimmer, 2013). Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has become a major issue within African political science literature, with many scholars describing it as a decentralization façade for an entrenched system of authoritarian control (Aalen, 2006; Vaughan, 2011). Several studies specifically examine how such an exclusive and unequal governance system negatively affects interethnic relations, administration, and economic development (Fiseha, 2007; Turton, 2006).

Economists in particular have explored how institutional bias affects investment flow, infrastructure allocation, and private-sector development. For example, North (1990) theorizes that institutions shape the incentives of political and economic actors; unequal institutions inevitably produce unequal outcomes. In Ethiopia, multiple empirical analyses confirm the existence of systemic bias in the distribution of public investment, credit access, and land rights, often privileging regions aligned with ruling-party elites (Dercon & Gollin, 2014; Kassahun, 2020). These findings support my argument that the Amhara region's economic challenges are not merely incidental, but structurally produced.

A substantial body of literature also examines the consequences of ethno-political exclusion on levels of conflict and economic development. Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch (2011), for example, document how politically-excluded ethnic groups are much likelier to experience violence. Conflict in turn disrupts economic activity, destroys infrastructure, and undermines long-term growth (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). These dynamics are reflected in the Amhara region's

recent history, where targeted violence and state repression have led to widespread displacement, loss of life, and economic contraction.

Another relevant literature stream addresses the deterioration of essential social services under politically exclusionary regimes, with multiple studies showing that marginalized communities are likeliest to be impacted by underfunded health care, increased child malnutrition, limited school enrollment, and low literacy (World Bank, 2020; UNICEF, 2018). Within the Amhara region, current data show disproportionately poor health and education outcomes, aligning with broader global patterns.

Finally, scholarship on post-conflict recovery emphasizes the importance of political inclusion, institutional and government reform, and targeted (i.e. restorative) economic investment (Addison, 2003; Brück et al., 2016). These elements provide a framework on which to analyze potential recovery strategies for the Amhara region.

Together, the above-mentioned literature resources underscore important theoretical and empirical contexts for examining how ethnic authoritarianism, political marginalization, and economic underperformance impact the Amhara region. They also situate the Amhara population within global patterns observed in other societies affected by division and conflict.

Theoretical Framework

Ethnically-structured governance systems often generate persistent forms of economic inequality, particularly when political power is concentrated within a single or dominant ethnic bloc (Aalen, 2011; Cederman et al., 2013). Present-day Ethiopia is a prime example of how ethnocentric authoritarian control reinforces uneven development across entire regions. Under the ethnic federalism adopted in 1995 by the ruling Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), disproportionate political authority has been exercised by ethnic elites whose interests do not serve the advancement of national equality, inclusion, or regional balance (Abbink, 2011).

Authoritarian regimes deploy state power to reward loyalists, consolidate control, and marginalize their political rivals (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), which in turn affects allocations of public investment, access to labor markets, control of public-sector employment, distribution of social services, and exposure to insecurity and conflict. In fact, since 1995 Ethiopia's political centralization has been linked to regionally-biased spending patterns (World Bank, 2020).

Group inequality theory posits that economic gaps between ethnic groups are often the result of structural exclusion, rather than market dynamics (Cederman et al., 2011; Stewart, 2008). The effect of ethnic favoritism on infrastructure and public spending is well documented.

Human capital theory highlights the complementary roles of nutrition, healthcare, and education as foundations for productivity (Becker, 1964). Chronic underinvestment in these areas—in the form of high rates of physical stunting, insufficient caloric intake, and limited schooling—results in long-term loss of economic performance.

As noted above, extensive literature sources also link political institutions to economic performance. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that inclusive institutions foster economic development, while extractive and/or exploitive institutions perpetuate poverty and inequality. Authoritarian regimes use political exclusion to maintain power, resulting in the uneven distribution of public goods across ethnic groups. Similarly, Easterly and Levine (1997) demonstrate that ethnically-polarized societies exhibit lower economic growth due to weakened institutional capacity and conflict over public resource allocation.

In the Ethiopian context, several studies have documented how ethnic federalism has contributed to uneven development patterns (Aalen, 2006; Abbink, 2011). Political marginalization of the Amhara has been linked to lower levels of public investment, reduced access to farmland, and targeted political repression. Food security and human development indicators further illustrate long-term impacts of authoritarian repression, forced displacement, and discriminatory administrative practices.

Empirical Context and Data Sources

This study uses mixed methods to combine quantitative household survey data with regional economic indicators. Data sources include the Ethiopian Socioeconomic Survey (ESS), Central Statistical Agency (CSA) welfare surveys, and administrative expenditure reports. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were estimated to identify associations between political marginalization and socioeconomic outcome.

This study draws on:

- Ethiopia Household Consumption and Expenditure Survey (HCES)
- Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)
- Population and Housing Census
- Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED)
- World Bank Socioeconomic Diagnostics

Key Variables

Dependent variables:

- Per capita household expenditure (PCE)
- Caloric availability per adult equivalent
- Child stunting prevalence (%)

Independent variables:

- Political exclusion index (constructed from governance reports)
- Conflict exposure (ACLED event counts per district)
- Public investment per capita
- Access to education (literacy rates, school density)
- Health service coverage

Summary Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Mean (Amhara)	Mean (National)	Source
Per capita expenditure	1131.0	1255.0	CSA (2024)
Stunting rate (%)	62.5	30.0	CSA (2024)
Caloric availability	2508.0	2746.0	ESS (2024)
Conflict exposure	0.41	0.22	ACLED (2024)

Regression Model and Estimation Strategy: A simplified regional panel regression model

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PE_{it} + \beta_2 CE_{it} + \beta_3 PI_{it} + \beta_4 HC_{it} + \beta_5 EA_{it} + \gamma X_{it} + \mu_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

Where:

- Y_{it} = development indicators (PCE, caloric intake, stunting rate)
- PE = political exclusion level
- CE = conflict exposure
- PI = public investment
- HC = health coverage
- EA = educational access

Fixed effects (μ_i) control for regional heterogeneity.

Results: Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Selected Indicators: Amhara vs. National Average

Indicator	Amhara	National
Poverty Rate	26.1%	23.5%
Per Capita Expenditure	1,131 ETB	1,255 ETB
Caloric Availability	2,508 kcal	2,746 kcal
Child Stunting	62.5%	30%

Regression Results: Summary

Table 2: Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors in Parentheses)

Variable	PCE (β)	Caloric Intake (β)	Stunting (β)
Political Exclusion	−0.24*** (0.06)	−0.18** (0.07)	+0.31*** (0.09)
Conflict Exposure	−0.17** (0.08)	−0.22*** (0.06)	+0.27*** (0.08)
Public Investment	+0.29*** (0.10)	+0.21* (0.12)	−0.19* (0.11)
Health Coverage	+0.33*** (0.08)	+0.18** (0.09)	−0.22** (0.10)
Education Access	+0.31** (0.11)	+0.26** (0.08)	−0.15* (0.07)

Notes: *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$

Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

1. Political exclusion significantly reduces per-capita expenditure and caloric intake while raising stunting rates, consistent with group inequality theory.

2. Conflict exposure exacerbates all negative outcomes, reducing economic performance and harming child health.

3. Public investment strongly improves welfare, indicating that disparities stem from policy allocation rather than inherent regional disadvantages.

4. Health and education access are crucial moderators, reducing the harmful effects of exclusion.

Study results confirm that ethnocentric political structures and authoritarian governance have significant measurable effects on the Amhara region's development trajectory. My findings support existing theories emphasizing institutional bias, public investment disparity, and conflict as core drivers of regional underdevelopment (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Stewart, 2008).

Furthermore, consistent with Becker's human capital theory, empirical evidence illustrates how long-term exclusion harms human capital formation. Elevated rates of physical stunting—double the national average—reflect chronic malnutrition among the Amhara population, resulting from underinvestment in essential services and high exposure to violence.

This study demonstrates that ethnocentric authoritarianism has negatively affected economic outcomes in the Amhara region due to unequal and insufficient public investment, political exclusion, and high conflict exposure. Regression analysis reinforces the finding that development disparities are institutionally created, not economically inevitable. Sustainable economic growth requires positive and proactive government reform, equitable public and private investment, and targeted interventions designed to rebuild human capital.

As summarized above, regression results show a statistically significant relationship between political marginalization and negative socioeconomic outcomes for the Amhara region. Households in marginalized Amhara communities ($p < .01$) who reported political exclusion are 12–18% lower in per capita expenditure ($p < .01$), while rates of stunted physical development are 22% higher.

Taken together, my empirical analyses underscore the reality that economic challenges facing the Amhara cannot be understood solely through conventional development indicators. Rather, they reflect deeper political and institutional conditions that must be addressed in order to successfully achieve sustainable development. Improving Amhara economic conditions will require not only increased investment, but also significant systemic political reform aimed at protecting human rights, enhancing interethnic representation, and ensuring equitable resource distribution.

The study results also shed light on the importance of institutional accountability. In contexts where marginalized citizen groups have limited means of opposing unfair policies or demanding more equitable treatment, state authorities have little incentive to respond to them. The absence of meaningful accountability enables an indefinite continuation of discriminatory practices, further entrenching economic disparity. This environment creates a feedback loop in which political exclusion fuels economic deprivation and in turn weakens the ability of communities to advocate for reform.

Furthermore, study findings support broader theories on extractive political institutions, as articulated by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012). When political power is concentrated within ethnically-defined elites, public investments tend to reflect only the interests of those in power. This has become evident in patterns of public infrastructure spending, social services, and agricultural support for the Amhara region. Extractive dynamics in these areas dramatically reduce economic efficiency, discourage private investment, and erode public trust in state institutions.

Another important insight concerns the role of conflict exposure. My regression results indicate a strong relationship between political

marginalization and conflict-driven economic disruption. Areas within Amhara that have experienced high rates of armed violence or displacement exhibit significantly worse development. This suggests that authoritarian governance not only contributes directly to economic inequality, but also creates conditions under which conflict—and its associated economic costs—is more likely to occur.

One critical dimension emerging from my analysis is the intergenerational impact of political exclusion. As previously noted, communities experiencing systematic marginalization face persistent deficits in education, healthcare, and nutritional wellbeing—factors that collectively limit human capital formation. Elevated stunting rates, for example, are not only indicators of current nutritional and medical deprivation, but are also grim predictors of future reduced labor productivity, lower lifetime earnings, shorter lifespans, and diminished regional economic competitiveness. These effects compound over time, reinforcing cycles of poverty that are difficult to break without substantial institutional reform.

Conclusion

This study as a whole presents empirical findings that highlight the serious multidimensional economic consequences of ethnocentrism and authoritarian governance in the Amhara region of Ethiopia. Beyond statistical associations shown in the regression models, my results point to deeper structural mechanisms linking political marginalization to long-term underdevelopment. Authoritarian systems shape economic outcomes by constraining access to public goods and services, suppressing civic participation, and weakening state accountability—all of which reduce opportunities and structures essential for equitable resource distribution.

Evidence presented here makes it clear that the dire economic challenges currently facing the Amhara region do not result from natural constraints or isolated market failures, but are the predictable outcomes of authoritarian and ethnocentric state governance. Political exclusion, discriminatory resource allocation, and recurrent conflict have collectively and cumulatively undermined human capital formation, household

welfare, and long-term development prospects for the Amhara region and its residents. Addressing these disparities will require more than technical intervention; it will demand structural reforms that enable political inclusion, state accountability, and equitable public investment. Ultimately, sustainable development in the Amhara region depends on transforming the institutional environment that has allowed economic marginalization and its resulting human deprivation to persist.

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NOTES

i | Dr. Getachew Begashaw developed the research concept, designed the methodological framework, conducted the analysis, interpreted the findings, and wrote the central arguments of the manuscript. All substantive ideas and conclusions are the author's own. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript.

REVISITING THE OROMO PEOPLES AND THE CULTURAL GENOCIDE OF THE GAFAT[1]

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Abstract

This paper examines how a variety of political, cultural and demographic factors culminated in the cultural genocide of the Gafat people of Ethiopia. The almost-forgotten Gafat genocide is historically important today as it addresses long-neglected causes of language extinction. Conventional narratives attribute the Gafat extinction to the impacts of evolution and progress. But through the lens of critical cultural genocide history, I argue instead that the Oromo conquest and settlement were primary decisive forces. This study demonstrates that the eradication of identity and independent existence of this particular indigenous group, as well as the disappearance of many other ethno-cultures in Ethiopia, were foundational elements of the Oromo conquest. Chronologically, the Oromo conquest spanned the 16th-century Jihadist wars of Ahmad Ibrahim, through to the late 17th-century and the gradual but inexorable absorption of Gafat communities. I show that language and cultural extinctions rooted in the past are not finite historical events, but rather an ongoing process that affects present-day Ethiopians. It is my hope that a deeper knowledge of past cultural genocide against the Gafat will help scholars better understand and illuminate contemporary occurrences of cultural genocide and language extinction.

1 | This article is a substantial revision and expsansion of a chapter titled "Perpetrators: The Oromo Peoples and the Cultural Genocide of the Gafat," in *A Cultural History of Genocide*, Vol. 3, edited by Igor Pérez Tostado (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021) 63–83. I am grateful to Bloomsbury Academic for their permission to republish it.

Keywords: Cultural genocide, forced assimilation, Gada system, Gafat people, Mogasa, Oromo conquest, settler colonialism

Introduction

The destruction of the Gafat, once a prominent Ethiopian culture, raises an urgent question: How could a people who existed for millennia be so completely erased?[2] The Gafat, largely Semitic-language Christians, were destroyed through a rapid and violent process of conquest, displacement, and forced assimilation that reshaped all of Ethiopian society. At one point, they inhabited extensive areas of Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa provinces (see Map 1), but their cultural destruction began during the late 16th century with the spread of nomadic Oromo herders. In 1593, royal chronicler *Abba* Bahrey described Damot and Šäwa as devastated and their inhabitants scattered, with some fleeing to Gojjam and others pushed into remote mountain enclaves. By 1700, the formerly widespread Gafat had dwindled to small, dispersed communities. After that, it took less than a century for their identity and culture to be absorbed into Oromo society (Bahrey 1954: 121–4; Bouanga 2013: 352–62; Beckingham and Huntingford 1954: 56).

This study argues that the Oromo takeover of Gafat homelands and the rapid decline of their inhabitants should be understood as genocidal events. Drawing on ethno-historical evidence, I examine Gafat displacement, coerced accommodation, resistance, and how their encounters with the Oromo resulted in cultural destruction, along with a revised interpretation of how and why they lost their homelands in Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa provinces. While the disappearance of Gafat culture is common historical knowledge, reasons for it are rarely investigated. The Gafat did not simply "vanish," despite a prevailing assumption that their disappearance resulted from natural historical evolution, making their erasure both expected and inevitable. I argue, however, that the Gafat disappeared as a *direct result* of Oromo conquest and that historians have given too little acknowledgment

2| When researching Gafat history, it quickly becomes clear that the disappearance of their culture is a far more serious problem than previously understood; the roots of the subject are virtually unexplored.

of intentional cultural genocide practiced by the Oromo. Their destruction of the Gafat closely parallels the fate of indigenous peoples in other colonial settings. By framing the destruction of Gafat society within the literature of cultural genocide and colonialism, I present an alternative to the accepted but insufficient narrative that attributes Oromo expansion merely to a quest for new pasturelands,[3] while ignoring their genocidal motives. Like so many victims of deliberate assimilation elsewhere in the world, the Gafat have been largely erased from public memory. My goal is to recover their unique agency in Ethiopian history.

As well as having uniquely Ethiopian aspects, the history of Gafat cultural disappearance also illustrates global patterns of language and identity loss whose genocidal origins remain an ongoing reality today. It is now widely recognized that linguistic diversity is in crisis worldwide, with nearly half the languages currently spoken identified as being seriously endangered or doomed to extinction. Although around 700 languages are known to have gone extinct throughout human history, about 216 of them—about one-third—have disappeared since 1960. By some estimates, one language dies every three months.[4]

On the African continent, where about one-third of the world's current languages are spoken, many cultures have depended almost solely on oral transmission to maintain and preserve their history; those histories themselves are now at risk. Of Africa's estimated 2,139 languages, nearly three in ten (28.3%) face some level of endangerment, with ongoing language loss being most acute in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia and Sudan, where chronic civil unrest and poverty have hastened their decline. In the current era, Ethiopia alone has seen around 20 languages disappear, or decrease to near-extinction. Scholars emphasize that the greatest pressure on language survival in recent decades has not been internal semantic change, but political, socioeconomic and cultural

3 | For an important early contribution, see Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia,* xii—xiii.

4 | Belew and Simpson, "The Status of the World's Endangered Languages," 21 and 43; and Belew and Simpson, "Language Extinction Then and Now," 54.

forces.[5] Applied to the Gafat, that insight reveals broader patterns of power and identity transformation that were already shaping linguistic change during the 16th and 17th centuries. Examining past processes of linguistic decline helps to explain the vulnerability of minority languages today.

Previous appraisals have naturalized and normalized the decline and destruction of cultures such as the Gafat as being a natural outcome of evolution and progress; that is, their fate was supposedly a static "given," rather than a process shaped by deliberate human action. Taddesse Tamrat, for example, attributed the demise of several language groups such as the Gafat, to the assumption that they were "primitive" peoples whose disappearance was an inevitable outcome of broader evolutionary forces. "And because of the essentially progressive nature of human history," he writes, "those language groups who had attained higher levels of economic, cultural and political development always tended to dominate the others. It is a common phenomenon of world history that . . . many ancient speech communities gradually lost their identities by being absorbed into stronger and bigger populations."[6] Expanding on that premise, Taddesse views contact between societies at different social and cultural levels to be a main driver of language extinction, implying that the Gafat were a weaker people who gave way to stronger, more advanced groups.

5 | Batibo, *Language Decline and Death in Africa*, 67, 75 and 93-94; Belew and Simpson, "The Status of the World's Endangered Languages," 27.

6 | Tamrat, "Processes of Ethnic Interaction and Integration," 122.

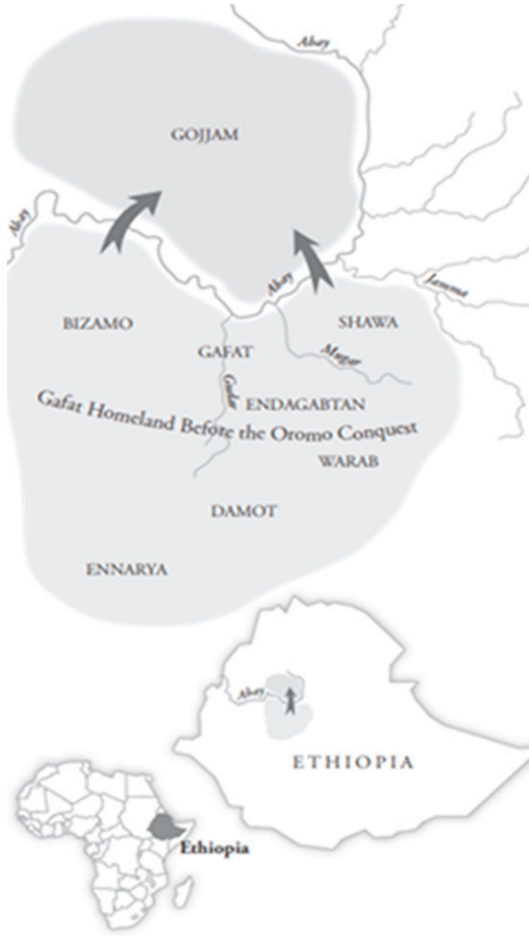

Figure 1: Map of Migration of the Gafat from their Original Homeland after the Oromo Conquest During the 16th and 17th Centuries

But Taddesse interprets the destruction of Gafat culture through the lens of 19th-century evolutionary theory, which viewed societies as inevitably progressing along a linear path from "primitive" to increasingly complex and sophisticated civilizations. Primitive cultures were seen as less evolved, thus doomed to destruction because they were unable to become more civilized. Yet cultural destruction has its own history—one that results from intentional human actions and choices, not simply the outcome

of evolution. Elazar Barkan notes that although the idea of progressive evolution has declined since the mid-20th century, it still shapes "our understanding of the relationship between progress and the old."[7] Barkan adds that "from animals to peoples and from plants to cultures, our evolutionary world view is built upon change. Yet, while evolution may have no direction as a principle, culturally we view it as progress."[8] Indeed, the historical and anthropological literature on indigenous minority cultures is filled with rhetorical tropes about primitive peoples vanishing because they did not "evolve." As Barkan comments, the primitive vanishing trope is therefore "usually a passive discourse"[9] in which destruction is explained away by citing generalized forces of "progress, or civilization and evolution."

Taddesse and others attribute the disappearance of entire societies to these vaguely defined forces, which are grossly insufficient for explaining specific cultural erasures such as what happened to the Gafat. Understanding the fate of the Gafat requires a different framework that includes the direct impact of Oromo colonization, expulsion of non-Oromo peoples, and cultural suppression during the 16th and 17th centuries. Situating the Gafat within these dynamics provides a new and more accurate explanation for their destruction, which reflects how patterns of conquest, dispossession and the resulting cultural genocide in early modern Ethiopia resonates with experiences of minority groups around the world. A brief survey of genocide scholarship makes clear the core concepts illuminating the destruction of Gafat culture.

Cultural Genocide and Settler Colonialism

Although "genocide" is often associated with modern industrialized violence, the systematic destruction of cultural identities has much deeper historical roots, highlighting the need to examine how cultures are intentionally dismantled—not only through direct physical attack, but

7 | Barkan, "Genocides of Indigenous Peoples," 119.

8 | Barkan, "Genocides of Indigenous Peoples," 119.

9 | Barkan, "Genocides of Indigenous Peoples," 120. See also, Davidson, *Cultural Genocide*, 33-36.

through forced assimilation, displacement, and sustained suppression. The concept of genocide was first developed by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin (1900 – 1959) as a framework for understanding the Nazi destruction of Jewish and other non-Aryan peoples, such as the Roma. Lemkin defined genocide as a process of systemic attacks on a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Such attacks would be carried out not only through mass violence, but through the planned destruction of political, socioeconomic, cultural and biological foundations that sustain the "essential foundations of life" of an entire group of people. He saw the crime of genocide as an interrelated process, not primarily or necessarily the immediate physical extermination of all group members. Mass killings are only one form of genocide, not its defining feature.[10]

In fact, the cultural aspects of genocide are at the core of Lemkin's argument. For him, culture was (and is) not a peripheral dimension, but the essential element underlying a group's very existence. As Anthony Dirk Moses emphasizes, Lemkin understood national, ethnic and religious groups as custodians of culture. Lemkin rightly considers culture as the historical medium through which entire groups sustain themselves. Consequently, attacks on language, religion, economic life, social traditions and political leadership are not secondary to genocide but constitutive of it. Destroying an ethnic group's culture becomes integral to the genocidal process rather than a mere byproduct of it. Genocide therefore occurs even when large numbers of individuals survive (as in the case of many North American indigenous peoples), so long as a group's capacity to sustain itself as a distinct sociocultural and political entity can be permanently destroyed. For this reason, Lemkin consistently framed genocide in terms of "destruction" and "crippling," rather than simple physical extermination.[11]

Regrettably, Lemkin's concept has been widely misunderstood and its parameters narrowed, particularly by modern studies of genocide and international law. This has led to the widespread confusion of genocide with physical extermination. Moses notes that this narrowing of scope occurred

10| Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 79-90.

11| Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 82-90; Moses, "Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide," 25-38.

during the drafting of the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention, which excluded explicit reference to cultural genocide because of political resistance from UN settler states and colonial powers.[12] Since then, many scholars have uncritically accepted the United Nations criteria defining genocide, which stipulates that victims must fall within a specified "national, ethnical, racial, or religious group,"[13] or belong to other groups targeted for destruction, and that perpetrators must deliberately carry out genocidal acts. This 20th-century definition limits itself to "existing idioms of genocide emphasizing images of killing fields, concentration camps, and mass death."[14] Consequently, international law privileges physical and biological destruction while downplaying multiple forms of cultural destruction, reducing them legally and morally to secondary importance. This narrowed definition historically excludes events with genocidal consequences. However, 21st-century genocide studies have critically broadened the field. Both the legal definition of genocide and its scholarly interpretations have undergone significant realignment and revision, incorporating a wider and more nuanced range of group persecution patterns involving both intentional and unintentional destruction.[15]

By restoring the central position of culture to Lemkin's concept of genocide, scholars have challenged the hierarchical prioritization of dramatic cases (such as rapid mass murder) over attenuated and less visible forms of group destruction, such as the forcible removal of children, suppression of language, and eradication of cultural and political leaders. Current definitions of genocide now emphasize the "destruction of the socio-cultural fabric . . . beyond the death of the group members,"[16] stressing the eventual effects of genocidal actions and policies, rather than the original eradication intentions of those responsible. It is now

12| Moses, "Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide," 36-38. See also, Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 5-8.

13| United Nations, "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" (1948)

14| Hinton, La Pointe, and Irvin-Erickson, "Introduction to Hidden Genocides," 4.

15| Moses, "Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide," 30-38; idem, "Toward a Theory of Critical Genocide Studies"; Gellately and Kiernan, "Study of Mass Murder," 1–8 and 14–15; Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 5-8.

16| Novic, *Concept of Cultural Genocide*, 9.

recognized that genocide may be physical, cultural, hidden (or all three); that it may occur under other circumstances; and "also be the unintended consequence of a policy or a set of actions whose initial goal was different."[17] The term genocide, therefore, cannot be narrowly defined as intentional mass killing meant to destroy a specific group. "Consequences, not intentionality, are the determining factor,"[18] as genocide can result "from the pursuit of some other goal"[19] such as economic, religious, or political gain. Thus the appropriate definition of cultural genocide for this study of the Gafat is "the effective destruction of a people by systematically or systemically (intentionally or unintentionally in order to achieve other goals) destroying, eroding, or undermining the integrity of the culture and system of values that defines a people and gives them life."[20] This more inclusive understanding has resulted in genocide being increasingly acknowledged as historically prevalent from antiquity to the present day.

Thus Lemkin's work remains crucial for analyzing genocide, even where international law and 20th-century scholarship have overlooked the full scope of his original insight, which identified genocide as a classic and recurring theme in world history rather than a crime unique to Nazism.[21] His paradigm of cultural genocide is now used in a wide range of contexts, illuminating the process by which indigenous and aboriginal cultures dramatically declined or disappeared in the Americas, Australia and elsewhere. George Tinker argues, for example, that even well-intentioned Christian missionaries were subservient to colonial policies of control over native peoples and participated in their cultural destruction by adopting forms of evangelism that forbade or suppressed indigenous religions, languages and social traditions. Recent scholarship has classified policies of forced denationalization and assimilation as cultural genocide, describing the indigenous residential schools formerly sanctioned by church and government interests in Canada and the USA, as facilitators of cultural genocide.[22]

17| Bartov, "Seeking the Roots of Modern Genocide," 75.

18| Barkan, "Genocides of Indigenous Peoples," 210.

19| Tinker, Missionary Conquest, 4.

20| Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 6.

21| Moses, "Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide," 26-29.

22| Hutchings, "Cultural Genocide and the First Nations of Upper Canada," 301–8; and Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 4-6; Davidson, *Cultural Genocide*, 39-41.

Scholars have also employed "structural genocide"[23] as a nuanced conceptual framework for better understanding how foreign conquest and settler colonialism generated distinct processes leading to the destruction of indigenous peoples. Patrick Wolfe expands the concept by insisting on an inherent relationship between settler colonialism and cultural genocide. As land is the most-sought after resource by settlers, colonists worldwide have contributed directly and indirectly to the decimation of indigenous peoples. In essence, Wolfe states, settler colonialism subsumes "a logic of elimination" and the core rationale of "elimination is not [about] race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory."[24] For centuries, indigenous populations were arbitrarily displaced in order for settlers to build their own communities. He identifies two inherently contradictory dimensions of settler colonialism: "Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively, it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base."[25] Despite differences in detail, most scholars agree that settler colonialism is a form of genocide based on fundamental violations of indigenous human rights. Lorenzo Veracini emphasizes that "settler colonial projects are specifically interested in turning indigenous peoples into refugees,"[26] stressing the intersection of settler colonialism and the resulting global genocides it has engendered.

Although Veracini and Wolfe comment specifically about European colonies in the Americas and Australia, Veracini also reminds us that settler colonialism is best defined as "a 'situation'," one "not necessarily restricted to a specific group, location or period."[27] As history repeatedly shows, both Europeans and non-Europeans have played the roles of settler or colonizer. In the context of the Gafat people, my research highlights the need to view settler colonialism and cultural genocide not as geographically bounded, but as phenomena embedded in global history. This is particularly significant for Ethiopian history, where genocide often took the form of population replacement, forced assimilation, or

23| Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 403.

24| Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 388.

25| Wolfe, "Structure and Event," 103.

26| Veracini, *Settler Colonialism,* 35.

27| Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 6.

cultural eradication, rather than outright mass killings. As with many other indigenous populations, the Gafat were replaced by and displaced from their ancestral homeland by an "exogenous collective,"[28] in this case the Oromo. Framing the demise of the Gafat away from a one-time mass casualty of Oromo conquest and settler colonialism also shifts the Eurocentric focus to expose more prolonged struggles and violence that simultaneously ignited the destruction and creation of Ethiopian cultural identities.

The recent emergence of historiography privileging indigenous rights and recognizing the collective trauma resulting from dispossession and cultural erasure has also led to reframing settler colonialism as an instrument of human rights violations and genocide. Consequently, we can now classify the 16th- and 17th-century Ethiopian oppression of indigenous groups as "structural genocide." Despite some differences, the Oromo conquest and settlement bore many attributes of typical colonialism which led to outcomes similar to those experienced by indigenous populations on other continents. The dominant Oromo sustained their culture through the displacement of indigenous cultures, such as the Gafat. While they practiced no overt policies of mass killing, the erasure of Gafat culture was a direct consequence of their territorial expansion.

Throughout the continuum of Oromo incursion, cultural genocide against indigenous societies was made inevitable through a systematic practice of cultural erasure known as *mogasa* (collective adoption) and a governing structure called *gäda* which sought to remake non-Oromo subjects in the image of their Oromo conquerors.[29] Over time, these enforced practices relentlessly eroded the linguistic, cultural and political distinctiveness of conquered peoples. While the cultural erasure effected through *mogasa* is well established in Oromo scholarship, its association with genocide has received far less attention. I address that significant gap by analyzing contemporary sources on both the Gafat and the Oromo peoples and situating *mogasa* and *gäda* within more accurate historical contexts.

28| Veracini, "Introduction: Settler Colonialism as a Distinct Mode of Domination," 4.

29| Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia,* 20-21.

Consequently, my research disrupts both Ethiopian historiography and broader scholarship by revealing how "collective adoption" was directly linked to colonial occupation, domination, and cultural genocide.

While genocide could happen in peacetime, scholars have often emphasized that it occurs most frequently under conditions of war, conquest, violence, civil disruption and historical trauma[30]—a fitting observation for the period of 1529 through 1636, when Ethiopia underwent more than a century of extreme civil unrest, including enslavement, jihadism, dispossession, displacement, territorial loss, depopulation and spiritual crisis. Into this chaotic environment came the Oromo, a loose collective of stateless pastoral people from the southern lowlands. With the kingdom in disarray and government power weakened, they faced few barriers. By 1630, the once-powerful medieval state of Ethiopia had shrunk to a very small area.[31] Amid the same disruption and confusion, the Gafat found themselves under enormous pressure. The Oromo incursion demonstrated how a stateless yet highly organized society could wage war on a numerically larger group by exploiting its internal weaknesses.

The Gafat, however, were not passive victims of historical change. In this study I foreground their agency and experience in response to Oromo pressure, highlight moments of adaptation and resistance, and show how cultural genocide was entangled with mutual exchange, accommodation, and the reconfiguration of identities.

Jihad, Oromo military culture and the Gafat

Long before the advent of the Oromo during the 1550s, forces that would lead to the decline of the Gafat were already in motion. One example was the jihadist war of Ahmäd Ibrahim (1529 – 1543), popularly known as Graññ, "the left-handed." His military exploits were documented by Yemeni follower and admirer, Šihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad bin Abd al-Qāder bin Sālem bin Uṯmān (henceforth referred to as Bin Uṯmān), who described

30 | McCormack, "Reflections on Modern Japanese History in the Context of the Concept of Genocide," 282.

31 | The most reliable survey of the period can be found in Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea,* xix-xx.

in gory detail the devastation Graññ inflicted on Ethiopian Christians and their churches. Ahmäd/Graññ ruled the eastern Adal province and set out to conquer all of Ethiopia under the banner of jihad. The campaign peaked in 1529 when Ahmäd's forces inflicted a shattering defeat on King Lebnä Dengel (r. 1508–40) at the battle of Šembra Kuré,[32] and occupied Ethiopia for more than a decade, during which Ahmäd's jihadists implemented a centralized campaign of cultural annihilation, subjugation and plunder. The Islamic ideology of jihad motivated all of his decisions in war, occupation, and peace. Ahmäd Ibrahim and his forces believed they were doing God / Allah's will in a campaign marked by violence and the destruction of churches and monasteries.[33]

Ahmäd's jihad divided Ethiopians, with an estimated nine out of ten Christians forced to convert to Islam.[34] The Gafat, who fought mainly on the Christian side, were no exception. In 1533, Ahmäd instructed his subordinate Yaqim to attack the predominantly Gafat region of Warab "until God conquers it by your hand."[35] Bin Uṯmān writes that the Gafat initially resisted, but were defeated by Ahmäd's Muslim forces and agreed to pay a poll-tax in return for being allowed to remain Christian. Some smaller Gafat groups, however, did convert to Islam and even collaborated with their Muslim conquerors. One example were those living in Damot province. According to Bin Uṯmān, they aligned themselves with the jihadists in order to retain more autonomy under the central state.[36] J.A. Davis summarizes the profound demographic upheaval caused by Ahmäd's jihad, during which mass flight, famine and social collapse reshaped entire regions:

> While some inhabitants fled to escape the sword, others fled famine and misery which had ruined much of the country in which lived the 'elected people of God.' In addition, aside from war itself, mass movements, famine and epidemics played havoc in many sections of the country as well. Whole villages were abandoned, the land left

32| Uṯmān, *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša,* 71-86 and 100.

33| Uṯmān, *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša,* 11, 28, 30, 41, 86, and 53–4.

34| Conzelman, ed. *Chronique de Galâwdêwos*, 5 and 123.

35| Uṯmān, *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša,* 328.

36| Uṯmān, *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša,* 184–85, 328–330, and 334-337.

> uncultivated, and the survivors migrated to other areas in the hope of finding some means of subsistence.[37]

The mass Gafat exodus to Gojjam province likely began during the 1530s, although there had always been migrations between the provinces of Šäwa, Damot and Gojjam across the Abay River. Ayda Bouanga notes that during that unstable time, many Gafat Christians dispersed to relatively safer places such as Gojjam.[38]

The brutal jihadist occupation finally ended with the defeat and death of Ahmäd Ibrahim in 1543 and central rule was reinstated over much of the former kingdom. But years of conflict had taken their toll. Ethiopia was weakened by great loss of life, economic disruption, the destruction of much of its cultural and historical heritage and its military defense system, leaving it at a disadvantage when the invading Oromo arrived during the next decade. Between 1559 and 1632 the Muslim occupation contributed to multiple failed royal governments, recurring internal civil wars and religious conflict. The upheaval of 1529 – 1543 proved advantageous to the land-hungry Oromo, as it marked a low point in Ethiopian resistance, particularly among the indigenous Amhara and Gafat peoples.[39]

The exact location of the original Oromo homeland is uncertain. Nor do we know when they first arrived in Ethiopia's southern region. They were primarily nomadic herders, or pastoralists, rather than a sedentary society like the Gafat. During the 16th century, they gradually began moving *en masse* to the north, east and west. Their territorial expansion brought profound changes to the social, ethnic, linguistic, political and religious character of Ethiopia. Just like the Islamic jihadists before them, the Oromo spread aggressively.[40] But unlike the jihadists, they did not attack the Gafat or others for religious reasons.

It is important at this point to present a brief cultural context for Oromo militarism to better assess how and why the Gafat disappearance occurred.

37| Davis, "The sixteenth century jihad in Ethiopia and the impact on its culture," 113.

38| Bouanga, "Le Damot," 287–91.

39| Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea,* 133-137.

40| Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea,* 133-137.

Being neither Christian nor Muslim, the Oromo lived within a military culture that condoned violence against enemies; the objective was to eliminate any non-Oromo populations in their way. Warfare served both practical and symbolic purposes in Oromo society; plunder was profitable, especially the taking of cattle. Humans were also captured to become slaves. As Paul Baxter observes, "[t]o be a successful [Oromo] raider is not only patriotic, prestige-endowing, and status-giving, it is the surest way of obtaining a large herd and thereby consolidating social status."[41] The fertile Ethiopian highlands were desirable conquests, affording Oromo invaders access to new grazing pastures, plentiful water and livestock, as well as arable land.[42]

The Oromo approached warfare as an integral component of their social organization, or *gäda* system—a tradition that organized men and boys into distinct age-sets and embedded military practice into their upbringing. All males were identified as belonging to one of 10 categories, or *gäda*, based on when they were born during an eight-year cycle. According to Hassen, "[a]n individual entered the first grade at birth and left the last grade at the *gäda* age of eighty."[43] Bahrey notes that "they have neither king nor master like other peoples, but they obey the *luba* during a period of eight years; at the end of eight years another *luba* is made, and the first gives up his office. They do this at fixed times; *luba* means those who are circumcised at the same time."[44]

Asmarom Legesse, a leading authority on this practice, elaborates: "*Luba* is a group of people and *gäda* is the term of office of the leader of that group and by extension it is the name of that era during which that leader and his *luba* were in power."[45] *Gäda* custom required each age-group to perform military service during its period of leadership, an expectation that normalized violence and made all outsiders potential targets. When a new *luba* assumed power, its members underwent collective circumcision;

41| Baxter, "Repetition in Certain Boran Ceremonies," 65.

42| Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 12-13.

43| Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia,* 10.

44| Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 115.

45| Leggesse, *Oromo Democracy*, 116.

the group then inaugurated its eight-year rule by waging war, or *butta*, against a community that no preceding *luba* had attacked. Oromo scholar Mohammad Hassen defines *butta* as "national war."[46] *Butta* wars were preceded by violent rituals "accompanied by boastful war songs that intoxicated the participants." [47]

Masculinity and full adulthood were culturally defined through killing. In fact, marriage and adult status required demonstrable violence which had the effect of institutionalizing killing as a means of social obligation rather than as deviant behavior. Thus Oromo warriors maintained manhood status through lethal military prowess, or killing for as long as they were physically able to do so. Killing in war—or through hunting and other sanctioned forms of violence—functioned as a rite of passage, a visible marker of maturity. Huntingford notes that "a man was not considered a full man until he had killed a human being—every Galla claimed 'the right to kill.' "[48] And Bahrey observes, "If they have killed men or large animals, they shave the whole head, leaving a little hair in the middle of the skull. Those who have not killed men or large animals do not shave themselves, and in consequence they are tormented with lice. That is why they are so eager to kill us."[49] The Oromo warrior hairstyle was not merely symbolic; it signified courage, adulthood and readiness to lead—in other words, a visible marker of recognized masculine accomplishment.

One of the most striking and grisly practices in Oromo warfare was the ritual mutilation of deceased enemies' bodies. When an Oromo warrior returned home victorious, he would bring the severed genitalia (and breasts, in some cases) of slain enemies to prove their deaths. George Lipsky reports that "[t]raditionally, and still among the more isolated and warlike Galla groups, the bridegroom was required to present the sexual organs of someone he had slain to his bride before the marriage could be carried out."[50] Genital trophies were a ritual symbol that mediated between war,

46| Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 12.

47| Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 12.

48| Huntingford, *The Galla of Ethiopia,* 64.

49| Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 122.

50| Lipsky, *Ethiopia*, 84.

manhood, and societal recognition. By acquiring this marker of manhood, the victorious Oromo warrior symbolically and literally eliminated an enemy's reproductive power.

Conversely, a warrior's reputation, honor and sense of manhood could collapse with failure to kill, whether in formal combat or in culturally recognized acts of violence. He would lose the right to shave his head in the style reserved for victors. Men who lacked recognition for killing were also excluded from desirable marriage partners, were subjected to public humiliation, were forehead-stamped, and even required to churn a small jar of milk (women's work) to signify the failure of their manhood. Nor could they hold a position of *gäda* authority.[51]

A man's paternal rights were also tied to successful performance as a warrior. In a society that denigrated cowards, young Oromo males were constantly pressured to prove their bravery and be seen as masculine enough to attract a suitable mate. As Baxter notes, "To kill an enemy, lion, or elephant is the aim of every young man and was formerly an essential, and still is a frequent preliminary to a respectable marriage, which is the first step toward formal recognition as a social adult."[52] Masculinity was not an abstraction; it was a status to be earned.

Together, the male-centered *gäda* system and the violence built into *butta* wars ignited and motivated Oromo genocidal tendencies. Huntingford observes that the Oromo pattern of killing as a socially required proof of masculinity "horrified even the Abyssinians," describing such murders as "cowardly" because they often involved ambushing "unsuspecting wayfarers."[53] Killing men of other cultures was not simply the collateral damage of warfare—it was the exclusive goal. In this way *gäda* perpetuated a culture of death and violence.

51| Huntingford, *The Galla of Ethiopia,* 64.

52| Baxter, "Repetition in Certain Boran Ceremonies," 62.

53| Huntingford, *The Galla of Ethiopia*, 64.

Conquest, Settlement, Migration and Refugees

Bahrey recounts several stages, beginning with the first Oromo incursion, which he dates to the reign of King Lebnä Dengel (d. 1540). The Oromo repeatedly attacked and soon controlled multiple Ethiopian provinces, forcing the displacement of most indigenous people. With the country still reeling from the trauma of Ahmäd Ibrahim's jihadist war of 1529 – 1543, the Oromo met only feeble resistance in Bali and Däwaro provinces, which succumbed by the late 1550s. Däwaro suffered the mass displacement of indigenous Christians to neighboring provinces, as witnessed by Portuguese traveler and Ethiopian resident João Bermudez (c.1495 – 1570) who reported: "We also cleared the country of women, boys, and everyone who could not fight; with these went nearly all the inhabitants, great and small, from fear of the cruelty of the Gallas [Oromo]. A country like that is quickly depopulated, for the inhabited places have no buildings that are defensible, nor which cost much to rebuild, as they are all of wattle and straw."[54]

From the 1560s, Oromo forces continued toward the provinces of Damot, Šäwa, Fäṭägar and Wäj which came under attack during the 1570s and 1580s. As they moved further west, they encountered the indigenous Gafat. In 1588, when Oromo warriors reached Damot through Wäj and Šäwa, the forces of Damot governor *Däjjazmač* Asbo successfully repulsed them. Asbo's soldiers killed many Oromo warriors, then freed hostages and retrieved stolen livestock captured in earlier raids. Among the freed captives was the future king Susenyos, who had been held for a year-and-a-half.[55] During the 1590s, Oromo Borän tribesmen under their new leader Mulata, launched another raid against Damot. This time, Asbo retreated to Gojjam province, leaving Damot's Gafat inhabitants defenseless. Bahrey's report on the aftermath makes for grim reading: "Mulata of the Borän afflicted the Christians of Damot, scattered them, and devastated their country; from this time, Šäwa and Damot were deserts . . . none remains without submission to [Mulata]."[56]

54| Whiteway, *Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia*, 229

55| Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 25-27; Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 214.

56| Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 124.

The loss of significant Christian populations from Damot and other southeastern Ethiopian provinces left Bizamo and Šäwa without protection from ongoing Oromo incursions. During the late 1580s, indigenous people continued their exodus into Gojjam. The general upheaval caused by Oromo incursions was exacerbated by factionalism within Ethiopian ruling classes. Internal conflicts arose over royal succession following the death of King Särṣä Dengel in 1597; he left behind a weak and vulnerable administration that could not slow the Oromo incursions. The once-captive Susenyos, a rebel prince and cousin of the late Särṣä Dengel, was an active contender for Ethiopia's throne and supported Oromo settlement in the former Gafat and Amhara homelands. Although not Oromo by birth, he had been adopted as an Oromo "son" when captured at age 16.[57] From 1597 through 1607, Susenyos lived as "a condottiere with a large following, who proved useful to the various Galla [Oromo] tribes whom he served."[58]

The Oromo seizure of Gafat territory forced many to reconsider their options and loyalties, which caused clan and native identities to change. Rarely acting as a unified body, the Gafat tried diverse strategies to defend their homelands and way of life. They were faced with three choices, none of them ideal: exodus, resistance, or coerced accommodation. Many actively opposed the Oromo; others lamented their presence but acquiesced to it. Those most opposed fled their homelands. Those Gafat who stayed and militarily resisted assimilation included the Härbawaš, Härbakäl, Wängé, and Ašmän groups. The Abdäray clan originally supported Susenyos and his Oromo following, but would eventually turn against him.[59] The resisting Gafat built strongholds on mountaintops and high plateaus within Šäwa and Wäläqa provinces, from where they mounted a resolute armed defense of their homeland. But they could not hold out for long. In quick succession, Susenyos and his forces stormed and pillaged all their fortresses:

57| Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 260–61, Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 207–9.

58| Merid, "Southern Ethiopia," 439.

59| Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos,* 23–31.

> [He] broke into a stronghold called Yazambal that belonged to the Gafat and where a great store of wealth was found. Then he camped at Mugar and fought the Gafat called Ashman [four Gafat tribes that joined forces] . . . and showered poisonous arrows on [them] like hail. After bitter fighting he crossed over and camped in Walaqa. He attacked the Abdaray and the Gambo, and plundered them and seized all they possessed.[60]

The Gafat in western Šäwa and Wäläqa provinces bore the brunt of Susenyos' campaign. Hassen writes that "Whenever and wherever the Christian peasants revolted against him, he [Susenyos] attacked them with his Oromo fighters and settled those fighters in the territory of the peasants."[61] At the same time, some Gafat worked through other channels to negotiate favorable positions within the emerging Oromo-dominated political order. A growing number of Gafat recognized that sustained opposition to the colonizers was politically untenable and armed resistance was futile "after they had seen the massacre of their children, the death of their friends, the enslavement of their women, destruction of their property and rustling of their animals."[62] Gafat peasants had little recourse but to submit to forced accommodation.

In 1600 Susenyos' royal chroniclers reported that many terrified Gafat had fled *en masse* from Šäwa province into Gojjam: "[Susenyos] destroyed the Den (clan) and all the Gafat who lived on the crossings of the Abay [River] until they left their country and entered the land of Gojjam. And this (their country) has become a wilderness and a waste until today."[63] The remaining Gafat in Wäläqa and western Šäwa were scattered, subjugated, or marginalized. Oromo conflict had destroyed their farms, homes and churches, indeed their entire social fabric. Thus "Susenyos forced the various Gafat groups to abandon their land and flee across the Abay into

60| Quoted in Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom,* 265.

61| Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 270.

62| Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 60; Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 270. The translation from Ge'ez is Hassen's.

63| Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 30–1; Taddesse, "Ethnic Interaction," 140. The translation from Ge'ez is Taddesse's.

Gojjam, clearing the land in western Šäwa and Wäläqa for the Oromo."[64] Economically, the Gafat were suddenly impoverished through massive displacement and exclusion from land ownership.

From 1600 onward, most Gafat refugees from south of the Abay River were living in Gojjam, while others moved further north or south. They renamed their new home in Gojjam Damot, after their now-occupied old homeland.[65] Manoel de Almeida (c.1580-1646), a Jesuit missionary who visited Gojjam during the 1620s, offers this description of the scale of Gafat dislocation and the linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity of those impacted. For consistency and readability, the names of the provinces have been anglicized, following conventional English usage:

> The other heathens and Christians have as many different languages as there are kingdoms which we have enumerated in this empire. There are many where there are very different languages even in the same kingdom, especially since the Gallas conquered many kingdoms of the empire, lying to the south-east and south, such as Wäj, Fäṭägar, Damot, Bizamo and others. Their inhabitants have withdrawn to those that the Emperor holds. In some of these are many races and different languages, as in Gojjam where, within a short distance, are found one village of Damotes, another of Gafates, another of Šäwas, another of Zeites, another of Šäts, apart from the Agaus, Gongas and others who are more native to the country and were its first inhabitants.[66]

Areas around Gojjam were most densely settled by the Gafat, as well as by other refugees fleeing the Oromo. The mass exodus left the original Gafat homelands virtually empty, easily available to Oromo settlers.

Although Susenyos was largely responsible for allowing the loss of Gafat homelands and forcing their mass exodus to places like Gojjam, his policies changed when he finally became king in 1607. He then began defending what was left of Ethiopia from further Oromo attacks and territorial losses. Ironically, he also became a self-proclaimed (but very

64| Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 265.

65| Bouanga, "Le Damot," 352–62.

66| Beckingham and Huntingford, trans. and eds., *Some Records*, 56.

ineffectual) "protector" of refugees and their cattle in Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa. But the Gafat-Amhara people in Gojjam became Oromo targets for plunder and killing in an intensifying spiral of violence. The total number of raids carried out by the Oromo raiders against both refugees and natives in Gojjam during Susenyos' reign—and those of his successors—is too numerous to list here. Between 1608 and 1620 alone, the Oromo carried out multiple attacks in Gojjam, one of which took "countless cattle from the Gafates, [Agäws] and Damotes, and captured many women and children."[67] Oromo raids from Bizamo into Gojjam continued until the end of Susenyos' reign, resulting in the death of thousands. A royal secretary and historiographer of the time reported one such raid in 1621 against Gafat refugees in Gojjam:

> They also destroyed and devastated the country of Nagashat and Manqorqorya, Enqora, Enshet, Yashur, Zangema and Yakubbat. They devastated all the countries inhabited by Shime, Chome, Gafat and Dabana Ansa and took captives of all the people and cattle. They massacred countless people of these countries leaving no survivor. Since the Galla (Oromo) first raided Gojjam, they had never massacred so many and captured so many [people] and cattle as the present time. There were people from Gojjam who knew of the coming of the Galla [in advance], but they hid it from the emperor, since they feared his plunder.[68]

Unknown thousands of Gafat and non-Gafat Ethiopians were killed during an unrelenting succession of 17th-century Oromo raids; for the most part their eyewitnesses and chroniclers have disappeared from history.

The limited evidence we do possess is found mainly in royal chronicles and in the noteworthy recollections of some Jesuit missionaries. One such account, from the *History of Ethiopia* by Jesuit Pedro Páez (1564 – 1622) raises the question of deliberate mass murder, if not genocide. He describes a grotesque 1621 Oromo massacre of the Agäw, a people who lived among the Gafat and Amhara refugees:

67| Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 227. See also Pereria, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 104–7 and 217–224.

68| Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 223-224; Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 302. The translation from Ge'ez is Hassen's.

> Many heathen Gallas [Oromo] came from a province called Bizamo . . . and, after crossing the Abay River, entered the kingdom of Gojjam and fell on some lands of heathen Agäw bordering the land where the father was with those that had just become Christians. They slaughtered many people and carried out extraordinary cruelties . . . they cut to pieces the men and many of the boys and girls that they seized, and they opened up pregnant women with their spearheads and pulled the babies out of their wombs. The people of that land therefore came to fear them so much that nobody dared resist them. They all fled in whichever direction they could, trying only to save their own lives by climbing . . . into mountains and hiding in the bush, which is very thick. But not even this was to any avail, because they pulled them out of there and exercised their accustomed cruelty on some and captured others, principally women and children. They took plenty of cattle, mares and stallions as booty, and they remained there for almost a month as lords of the land. When the father, who was nearby, heard of the destruction they had caused and that they were coming closer, he wrote to [*Ras* Se'ela Christos], who was in another province, about what was happening and the danger he was facing. […] When these men saw the dust raised by [Ras Se'ela Christos's] horses in the distance, they thought there were many men coming and that they would not be able to withstand them, so in a great fury they slew many women, boys and girls. Afterwards the father, who saw them, said that it is a pitiful sight to see some with their throats cut, others with their entrails showing, and many of the women badly slashed and breathing their last, with their suckling children in their arms.[69]

The horrific Oromo violence of 1621 likely inflicted deep trauma on the population of Gojjam. It is not difficult to find intention in Oromo mass killings in reading Páez's account. As noted previously, Oromo raids into Gojjam would continue unabated until the end of Susenyos' reign and beyond. In 1626, the Oromo raided the Gafat refugee enclave of Damot in Gojjam, killing *Däjjazmač* Buko, its converted Christian Oromo governor and confidant of King Susenyos, along with 1200 of his soldiers. This was followed in 1629 by another raid which took the life of the new Damot governor Fequrä Egzi, among others.[70] By the 19th century Gafat

69| Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 353-354.

70| Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 289-290; Hassen, *The Oromo*, 313-315.

culture, undermined by nearly two centuries of relentless Oromo attacks, finally ceased to exist.[71]

Ethiopia's weak monarchy, combined with rebellion among the nobles, had so deeply undermined government control south of the Abay River that the region was abandoned until the late 19th century. This absence of royal governance enabled Oromo settlers to quickly transform it into a largely homogenous homeland governed by local clan leaders and chiefs. Map 1, showing the original and later locations of the Gafat, dramatically illustrates the scale of this transformation. It also shows land loss and indigenous population decline resulting from Oromo colonization. For indigenous peoples, including those Gafat who remained under Oromo subjugation, it was extremely difficult to maintain their distinct cultures and communities.

Cultural Genocide by Assimilation

Lemkin's crucial contribution lies in his emphasis on cultural destruction and genocide being co-constitutive. He demonstrated that genocide is enacted through everyday administrative, legal, economic, and social mechanisms, not solely through overt violence. Thus he describes genocide as a process comprising two mutually reinforcing phases: "the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group" and "the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor."[72] Oppressors realize their goal either by altering the identity and structure of the remaining population, or by expelling the target group altogether and settling the territory with their own people. Genocide seeks not only to destroy, but also to replace.

Lemkin's concept is especially germane to Ethiopia as it reveals how Oromo assimilation policies and the absorption of the Gafat people were carried deliberately and with genocidal intent. The Oromo moved so aggressively in eradicating all non-Oromo ethnicity and autonomy, that cultural genocide became a defining feature of their colonial strategy. Drawing on Bahrey's account, Hassen shows that Oromo expansion unfolded as

71| Taddesse, "Ethnic Interaction," 142–3.

72| Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 79.

a three-part process: scouting, surprise attack, and settlement. Moreover, their advance intelligence-gathering minimized risk and identified weak targets, followed by repeated nocturnal raids that extracted booty, terrorized communities, and broke resistance. Indigenous populations could only flee or submit. Conquest culminated in settlement, as Oromo institutions and culture were imposed on abandoned lands and surviving indigenes were assimilated into Oromo society through the process of *mogasa*, the collective "adoption" of non-Oromo peoples, as well as *guddificha*, the adoption of individual captured children by Oromo foster parents.[73] Contrary to modern benign associations of adoption, *guddificha* was coercive, and far from being a fraternal or familial experience.

Similarly, *mogasa* was designed not only to subdue indigenous populations but to restructure social order by permanently crippling or eliminating their cultural identity; its core purpose was the eradication of all non-Oromo cultures and identities. While many details of *mogasa* remain unknown, there are two salient characteristics. First, non-Oromo people were absorbed into specific Oromo clans; Hassen notes that clan leaders officiated in this process. Second, collective adoptions were enacted as public rituals, unfolding in a series of symbolic acts which included spoken declarations, ritualized gestures, and communal participation. Hassen and Triulzi, respectively, summarize the performative process of this element of genocide as follows:

> [B]efore adoption animal(s) were slaughtered and a knife was dipped in the blood... and planted before the assembly of the *gosa* elders and representatives of other *gosas*. Then the leader of the *chaffee* assembly said a prayer, blessing the new members, and the adopted individual or group touched the knife planted (in the place of assembly) repeating in chorus the following words... "I hate what you hate, I like what you like, I fight whom you fight, I go where you go, I chase whom you chase"... This oath, we are told, was binding and 'unbreakable' on both sides. The adopted groups now became collectively the 'sons' of the clan or confederacy that adopted them. (Hassen)[74]

73| Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 21-24; Wordoffa, "The Role of Guddifachaa and Moggaasaa in the Social Construction of the Oromo Society," 43-47.

74| Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom,* 156–57.

> Through collective adoption, the affiliated groups were given new genealogies and started counting their putative ancestors in the same way as their adoptive kinsmen. A special blood-mixing ceremony, symbolized by tying strips of hide (*meedhicca*) taken from the sacrificial bull around the wrists of the adopted individuals, made them part of the adoptive clans, thus transforming the assimilated groups into *ilma gossa*, 'sons of the clan.' *Meedhicca* and Oromization went hand in hand . . . the new birth was symbolized by the term *dhalata*, 'he who is born.' Clan adoption thus cancelled all previous ties the new adoptees had with their own original groups; these included genealogical memory and even that of defeat. (Triulzi)[75]

Through *mogasa*, assimilated people supposedly received new social status, obligations and protection. The adoptees were also given fabricated names that incorporated them into Oromo ancestral lineages. By replacing Gafat names, ancestries and language with Oromo ones, the new *ilma gossa* ("sons of the clan") were permanently severed from their cultural roots and memories, especially the young. Although some occupied territories retained ancient names on contemporary maps, the Oromo renamed most of their conquered territory after their own clans and tribal founders. The suppression of language, renaming of indigenous territories, dispossession of land, and imposition of fictitious paternal figures all constitute cultural genocide; such acts destroyed the Gafat people's ability to survive as a distinct ethnic community.

My study thus calls into question the very notion that Oromo assimilation methods could be justified through any element of peaceful intention. The example of their erasure of the Gafat and others like them clearly meets all the criteria for genocide. Yet Oromo assimilation has been absurdly cast as well-intentioned and familial, with much historiography portraying *mogasa* as the foundation of a peaceful relationship between the Oromo and conquered natives.[76] Other popular Ethiopian narratives sidestep the cultural and genocidal consequences of the Oromo conquest by labelling it as simply a next chapter in Ahmäd Ibrahim's jihad.[77] In reality,

75| Triulzi, "United and Divided," 253.

76| Wordoffa, "The Role of Guddifachaa and Moggaasaa," 33-36 and 45-46.

77| Guidi, "*Leggende Storiche did Abissinia*," 19-21 and 25-29.

nothing about Oromo conquest and assimilation tactics were peaceful or benign. Rather than being a continuation of Ahmäd Ibrahim's disruption, the Oromo incursion was a wholly distinct process of transformation. Historical evidence clearly reveals *mogasa* as an instrument of cultural genocide, responsible for erasing the ethnicity of both willing and unwilling victims.

Studies demonstrate how the system dismantled indigenous identities and paved the way for their inevitable extinction. Oromo scholar Asafa Jalata claims that "the *gäda* system [was implemented] to successfully integrate conquered minorities through adoption, marriage, and cultural assimilation."[78] Hassen, also an Oromo scholar, emphasizes that "adoption was accompanied by Oromization. The widespread dispersal of the pastoral Oromo from the southern regions was mainly responsible for the Oromization that embraced many non-Oromo groups. Oromo pastoralists absorbed both Cushitic and Semitic speaking groups as clients or serfs (*gäbbäro*) into their clan structure."[79] Hassen adds that under Oromo rule the *gäbbäro* were often discriminated against and marginalized. Bahrey also notes that the Oromo reduced the people they conquered *en masse* to virtual slavery and called them *gäbbäro*.[80]

Although scholars have documented the cultural dissolution and discrimination resulting from *mogasa*, very little has been done to probe the power dynamics and deeper motives driving the process. *Mogasa's* actual role in cultural dismemberment raises critical questions about its underlying motive. What was the *real* intent of adopting and assimilating entire cultures? Was its purpose truly social integration, or did it serve deeper objectives? The word *mogasa* has a deceptively gentle and familial tone. But as previously mentioned, such adoptions actually occurred coercively amid profound political and social crises. I contend, therefore, that recognizing the genocidal intentions of *mogasa* is essential to understanding how it impacted language and culture extinction. For the Gafat, this was not simply social integration; it was the obliteration of

78| Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*, 22.

79| Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom,* 157

80| Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 116.

their collective identity, heritage and ancestry within a hostile intruding culture. The Oromo further devalued the Gafat by holding them in bondage, which enforced their subservient dependence and deepened their marginalization. Thus the massive population turnover resulting from Oromo expansion created an equally massive displacement of language and culture. The cumulative result was nothing less than cultural genocide.

If the Oromo used adoption to intentionally absorb and weaken the distinct cultures of the peoples they conquered, why did many indigenous groups *choose* to be adopted into Oromo society in the first place? As Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan have noted, defining genocide "depends on whether genocide victims are targeted in groups of the kind that allow individual members to escape persecution and death by concealing or abandoning one group identity, and taking up another as a member of a non-targeted group."[81] Similarly, for some Gafat, accepting new identities seemed to offer one of the few pragmatic survival strategies available. So the Gafat abandoned markers of their identity and declared themselves members of Oromo groups through adoption in order to reduce discrimination and the risk of death. Yet even when identity change offered limited protection, many remained fully exposed to subjugation and marginalization. Assimilation failed to erase the divide between settlers and indigenous peoples or protect indigenous communities from enduring colonial oppression.[82]

Although assimilation in principle ensured physical survival, adoptees under *mogasa* were considered as lower-class *gäbbäro*. Allesandro Triulzi notes that Oromo assimilation failed to dissolve "internal conflicts between the new settlers and the local inhabitants, or the tensions which derived from the new struggle for power and wealth which marked the post-settlement society."[83] Indigenous peoples were permanently regarded by the Oromo as outsiders and inferiors on lands which had originally

81| Gellately and Kiernan, "The Study of Mass Murder and Genocide," 17.

82| Triulzi, "United and Divided," 253-258.

83| Triulzi, "United and Divided," 253.

been their own. And being "gradually deprived of their land and 'primacy of occupation'," [84] the new dominant settlers did not anticipate a peaceful coexistence with their dispossessed indigenous subjects. Consequently, groups such as the Gafat struggled to position themselves securely within the Oromo-dominated political order. Amharic lexicographer Dästa Täklä Wäld portrays the *gäbbäro* as an anomalous group between the Oromo and Amhara,[85] condemned to a perpetual struggle to maintain remnants of their freedom and identity.

Politically, genocide involves the imposition of the occupier's administrative system which in the Oromo context is known as *gäda*. The Oromo treated the *gäbbäro* as slaves at worst, and as children at best, denying them adult political rights and social status. They were "placed in the category of 'eternal youth,' the sons of boys."[86] By example, the Oromo had exclusive rights to slaughter a bull and perform rituals, whereas the native *gäbbäro* were not permitted to perform any public religious ceremonies; these and other distinctions reinforced the Oromo belief that they were closer to God.[87] The hierarchical marginalization of the Gafat and other groups within Oromo society continued well into the 20th century, resulting in continual tension between them.

As I have argued, historical evidence demonstrates that Gafat acceptance of Oromo identity often did not translate into a complete or automatic embrace of Oromo culture. Along with other conquered groups, they saw Oromo acculturation as being temporary, superficial, or even illegitimate. When opportunities arose, they fought back and reverted to their original identities. In 1618, some of the more determined Gafat, along with other groups in Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa provinces, staged the first of several revolts because their rights had been "trampled upon [and] their women and children sold into slavery by their Oromo masters."[88]

84| Triulzi, "United and Divided," 254.

85| Dästa, *Yä**Amareñña M**äzgäb**ä Qalat*, 224.

86| Triulzi, "United and Divided," 255.

87| Triulzi, "United and Divided," 261-263.

88| Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 64.

Indigenous uprisings against the Oromo caught the attention of Ethiopian central and regional authorities when the rebels began appealing for support. Documentary evidence shows that they dispatched delegations seeking military aid and requesting to negotiate broader political relationships, with the ultimate goal of restoring full Ethiopian rule over the provinces of Bizamo and Damot. They appealed to Gojjam governor *Ras* Se'elä Christos, who responded by sending soldiers. A royal chronicler reported: "Behold we have quarreled with our masters the Galla [Oromo]. We have fought with them until we have both shed blood. Come quickly and receive us."[89] With the military support of Se'elä Christos, the Oromo were driven out of Bizamo, but efforts to completely throw off their domination ultimately failed. The chronicler cited above also reports that some Christian refugees from Oromo-held regions were re-baptized upon their resettlement in Gojjam.[90] Throughout the 17th century the *gäbbäro* lived as marginalized people and the pattern of refugee resettlement continued in subsequent periods.

The rebellion of 1618 reveals a burgeoning Gafat awareness of their place in the new Oromo-dominated Ethiopian social order. This was not simply a battle between settlers and indigenous peoples over land rights and power, but a critical struggle between preserving ethnic identity and resisting the imposition of artificial Oromo ancestry on those whom they conquered. For the Gafat, it meant rejecting *mogasa* and renewing their pride in pre-Oromo Ethiopian civilization, which included the primary role of Christianity, the church, and the restoration of kinship ties to their ancestral highland population. "For from old our origin and descent is from [the Christian Amhara and Gafat]," they affirmed, "and *not* from the Galla" (emphasis added).[91] For the Gafat, their attachment to Ethiopian kinship networks and cultural traditions held greater significance than any supposed advantages of living under alien domination. Ethiopian rule

89| Quoted in Wolde Aregay's, "Southern Ethiopia," 420. See also Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 190–197.

90| Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 190-197; Páez, *History of Ethiopia,* 255-256.

91| Quoted in Wolde Aregay's, "Southern Ethiopia," 420. See also Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 190–7.

represented shared lineage and heritage; Oromo domination represented alien estrangement.

Resistance to Oromo occupation persisted throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. The court chronicler of King Iyasu I (r.1682 – 1706) described indigenous resistance to Oromo rule as both a defense of ethnic identity and an issue that entangled central and regional authorities in Gondär and Gojjam in protracted indigenous rights disputes that had persisted since the late 16th century. In 1702 for example, King Iyasu I launched a military campaign into Bizamo from his capital at Gondär. Once in Bizamo, the king sent an urgent message to the Gafat: "We have come at your request; now you too must come swiftly to us."[92] Two years later in 1704, the Oromo faced their greatest challenge from the Gafat and their allies in Bizamo and Damot, as Iyasu I launched his final attempt to dislodge them from the region. Despite the coordinated efforts of the king and rebels, they ultimately failed to repel the Oromo. Iyasu I and his forces did not stay long enough to consolidate their brief victory or bolster indigenous communities; and by granting their urgent requests for resettlement, he further undermined their culture through population dispersal and the loss of their local autonomy.[93]

But the indigenous resistance movement also illustrates the fragility of *mogasa*, which did not create immediate deep-rooted loyalty or lasting identification. While the Gafat had to live under the Oromo, they continued to believe that their true ancestry and allegiance originated from Ethiopia's indigenous peoples and traditional rulers. Unfortunately, the rulers of that period were ineffective in responding to changing conditions in lands overrun by the Oromo. From the late 1580s to the early 1700s, indigenous populations tried again and again but failed to expel the Oromo. The decline of royal authority and corresponding increase in Oromo power made the sociopolitical environment of the Gafat and their allies increasingly untenable. For the Gafat in particular, geography was also against them. The natural barrier of the Abay River separating Gojjam from Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa provinces made communication difficult.

92| Guidi, *Annales Iohannes I, Iyyasu I, et Bakaffa*, text 201.

93| Guidi, *Annales Iohannes I,* text 166, 180-182, and 220-250.

Eventually, Gafat living south of the Abay grudgingly adopted Oromo culture, distancing them even further from the mainstream Ethiopian church and state.

The Gafat rebellions offer a telling glimpse, not only of relations between indigenous cultures and the Oromo, but also of their assimilation rationale. To the Gafat and other indigenous peoples, the Oromo "were not mere intruders but aliens and enemies, who had caused much damage and upset their sedentary way of life."[94] From the Oromo perspective, allowing groups such as the Gafat to maintain their ethnicity posed a threat to their power. The last thing Oromo invaders wanted to deal with were hostile native populations in their midst with distinct cultural and ethnic identities. "To have resentful subjects was unnecessary and potentially dangerous" particularly "with raids and incursions to be made and new territories to be invaded" (Wolde Aregay 1971: 418).[95] Accommodating them was therefore considered unnecessary and risky. The Oromo motive for fully assimilating the Gafat was to neutralize them by enforcing compliance and subordination. The Oromo process of *mogasa* was therefore aimed at supplanting all vestiges of preexisting culture to prevent the potential resurgence of native identity and resistance.

Other factors contributing to the cultural destruction of the Gafat included miscegenation, enslavement and the trading of new Oromo subjects. Almeida observed that the Oromo people

> "have good features and well-made bodies, and today there are many of them who are copper colored rather than black, particularly those who inhabit the kingdoms of Bizamo and Damut (sic). They say that the reason [for their light skin] is that they have intermarried with the Gafates (sic) who inhabited a large part of those territories."[96]

Although no reliable population estimates exist for the period, indigenous communities of Bizamo, Damot, and Šäwa—likely numbering in the tens of thousands—were reduced to a tiny fraction of that; over time, all

94| Wolde Aregay, "Southern Ethiopia," 417.

95| Wolde Aregay, "Southern Ethiopia," 418.

96| Huntingford and Beckingham, *Some Records*, 136.

identifiable aspects of Gafat presence vanished. Those few who remained amidst the Oromo were trapped in an inherently marginalized existence that only hastened the inexorable dissipation of their culture. Conquest, colonial settlement, dispossession and assimilation were inextricably linked genocidal factors.

In summary, *mogasa* cannot be credibly interpreted as a form of peaceful adoption or fraternal incorporation. Rather than being either a voluntary or reciprocal process, *mogasa* was in essence an instrument of conquest and cultural erasure forcibly imposed upon subjugated non-Oromo populations. Despite its invocation of kinship and brotherhood, *mogasa* was fundamentally bereft of any genuine benign intent and functioned through hierarchy, exclusion, and coercion. Like many imperial and colonial genocidal practices, it demanded that the conquered abandon their languages, relinquish their lands, erase their cultural practices, and sever their historical memories and ancestral ties, all in the name of nominal acceptance. The Oromo incurred no reciprocal loss and bore no obligation to establish equality. The idiom of imposed kinship thus operated not as a moral principle, but as an ideological façade for dispossession and cultural erasure; in a word, genocide.

Ethiopian and European Perceptions of the Oromo

In this final section, I outline contemporary portrayals of the Oromo from both Ethiopian and European standpoints. Ethiopian and Jesuit writings from the 16th and 17th centuries have been viewed by many scholars as works of "othering," biased against the Oromo.[97] While there may be truth to tropes of "savagery" and "barbarity" that figure in much writing of the period, neither Ethiopian nor European accounts should be taken as representative of all contemporary views. They are valuable nonetheless as a means of appreciating the perception of both cultures toward the Oromo. Although negative judgments are expressed about some Oromo customs and their aggressive forms of warfare, nowhere do Jesuits or Ethiopians use language that can be read as generalizing for all of Oromo culture.

97| Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 2-3.

Both Jesuit commentators and the Ethiopian monk Bahrey found they had little or nothing in common with the Oromo. In reality, Oromo society was a complete structural inversion of Ethiopian society, including social and political systems, marriage customs, gender roles, religion, ways of life, and the importance and techniques of war. Thus the Oromo were seen to be "bad," while native Ethiopians were regarded as "good." As Bahrey notes, "I started writing the story of the Galla [Oromo] to make known the number of their tribes, their eagerness to kill men and the brutality of their manners."[98] In so doing, he depicted the struggle between the Oromo and native Ethiopians as a struggle between the forces of good and evil.

Writing about Oromo society and their way of life, both Bahrey and especially the Jesuits, applied a ready vocabulary of savagery. Thus in describing the Oromo practice of infanticide, the missionary Almeida portrayed it in terms of savagery:

> Among others, the Gallas [Oromo] have one custom which is among the most savage in the most savage part of the world. For the first six or seven years after they marry they cast away in the open country all the sons and daughters born to them and leave them to die of sheer neglect. It happens that out of pity someone wants to take care of one of these outcasts and save its life, they consider him not merely as an enemy but as an accursed and devilish person. In this respect they are more ferocious than the tigers and lions of the Africa where they live.[99]

Almeida focuses solely on the brutality of infanticide, with no contextual references. Brutal as it may be, he does not consider that the practice may have originated in response to periodic population explosions and the resulting threat of famine.

On the subject of warfare, Ethiopian and Jesuit missionaries both saw Oromo warfare as dishonorable. Jesuits and other Europeans repeatedly describe the Oromo as barbarous foes who killed indiscriminately. Pedro

98| Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 111.

99| Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records,* 136–7.

Páez noted that they kill "everyone they find with extraordinary cruelty." [100] Elsewhere he writes:

> Every eight years, the Oromo by custom appoint their war leaders, and their young men have their hair cut and undergo circumcision. Before they do these things, however, they demonstrate their courage by making an attack upon their enemies, so that they can anoint their bodies with the spilled blood of their enemies; they also cut off their captives' foreskins just as David did to the one hundred Philistines. When they do not obtain an opportunity for this vengeance, they cut out their enemies' gallbladders with a sword and strengthen their bodies through anointment with blood. For they are convinced that when they have thus anointed themselves with blood, they cannot be seen by anybody at night, while they themselves observe all others with clear vision.[101]

The Portuguese João Bermudez, cited previously, writes that the Oromo "are a fierce and cruel people, who make war on their neighbors and on all, only to destroy and depopulate their countries. In the places they conquer they slay all the men, cut off the privy parts of the boys, kill the old women, and keep the young for their own use and service."[102]

The early Oromo incursions were particularly violent and spared no one, irrespective of rank, sex, or age. As Bahrey recorded, they "killed people—men and women, horses and mules, leaving alive only the sheep, goats, and cattle."[103] The fear of Oromo savagery made peaceful coexistence impossible, often causing mass flights of refugees at the news of imminent Oromo incursions. The fall of Wäj in 1577, for example, sent shock waves across Šäwa and Damot provinces. Fearing an impending Oromo blow, King Särṣä Dengel's mother, Queen Selus Hayla, who was residing amidst the Gafat in Endägäbṭan and Gendä Bärät convinced her son to postpone his planned campaign to northern Ethiopia. In fear and distress, she asked him; "My son, why have you decided to do this thing against me and your

100| Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 69 and 87.

101| *The Jesuits in Ethiopia (1609-1641),* 71.

102| Whiteway, *The Portuguese*, 228-229

103| Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 116.

brothers? Do you wish to deliver us to the Galla? Does not our possible doom distress you?"[104] Särṣä Dengel heeded his mother's advice and stayed home to protect his people.

Paralleling the contemporary narrative of Oromo savagery is the Christian concept of original sin. Jesuit missionaries believed that the constant Oromo raids were a punishment sent by God for the collective sinfulness of Ethiopians. Missionary Pedro Páez summarized this prevalent perception:

> For the last seven years [1615-1622], nothing else has happened in this kingdom but harsh and continual punishments that Our Lord God has meted out on [Ethiopians], as on the impenitent, and they feel it so little that they ask very dispassionately why, if they are such good Christians, God persecutes them so much [through] Turks, Moors, Galas [Oromo], plague, continual wars . . .[105]

Bahrey's account echoes Páez in its portrayal of deepening bewilderment. He records how "the wise men" repeatedly asked, "How is it that the Galla defeat us, though we are numerous and well supplied with arms?" He then notes a widely circulated explanation—namely, that these reversals were divinely sanctioned: "God has allowed it because of our sins."[106]

The general classification of the Oromo as enemies should not be read, however, as evidence that the authors believed they were innately bad or biologically inferior. Neither Ethiopians nor Jesuits attributed violent Oromo behavior to their innate nature. Bahrey, who attempted to understand Oromo society from within, describes their way of life in remarkably neutral terms. What he condemns is their warlike character and customs that reward and honor killing. While condemning relentless Oromo aggression, Bahrey did not say that the Oromo kill when it pleases them, or without purpose. Instead, he recognized that their warring culture was determined by internal social structure and the age-based *gäda* system.

104| Quoted in Hassen, *The Oromo*, 206.

105| Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 65.

106| Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 125.

Bahrey sought to understand the attributes that set the Oromo apart from Ethiopia's very fractured, class-based society and which enabled them to defeat it. "[O]ur nation is divided into ten classes," he writes, "nine of which take no part whatever in war, and make no shame of displaying their fear; only the tenth class makes war and fights to the best of its ability."[107] Bahrey lamented the cowardice he observed in most fellow Ethiopians of his time. Although Ethiopians were numerous, those who fought (as he notes) were but a tiny minority, which led to frequent defeat. Bahrey suggests that the class structure and its top-heavy bureaucracy were major Ethiopian weaknesses. In striking contrast, "Among the Oromo . . . these nine classes which we have mentioned do not exist; all men, from small to great, are instructed in warfare, and for this reason they ruin and kill us."[108]

European Jesuit attitudes toward the Oromo likewise were quite complex and nuanced. Despite accusing them of inhumanity due to their periodic custom of infanticide, Manoel de Almeida found some admirable qualities in Oromo society. He characterized them as "men of their word and... not ill natured" as well as being of "good physique and courageous."[109] Similarly, although Páez characterizes the Oromo as "extraordinarily cruel," he simultaneously underscores their courage, military shrewdness, and remarkable physical endurance—qualities vividly conveyed in the passage that follows:

> This race of Ethiopians, skilled with the spear and endowed with cunning, makes nighttime journeys in order to carry out unexpected ambushes without any danger to their own lives. Furthermore, they accomplish every journey with such swiftness that nobody else is able to cover in two days the distance they measure out in a single night, even at a fast pace; this is how they are able to attack countries when nobody is thinking about or expecting it.[110]

107| Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 125.

108| Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 126.

109| Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records,* 137.

110| *The Jesuits in Ethiopia*, 71.

In the aftermath of violent 16th-century conflicts between the Oromo and highland Ethiopians, the late 17th and early 18th centuries were marked by adjustment and absorption. While the Gafat were driven out of their homelands, eventually assimilated and lost to history, the Oromo become allied with Ethiopia's monarchy.

In fact, almost since their arrival in Ethiopia some Oromo were being recruited into royal and regional armies and settling in various areas of Ethiopia still under central control, such as Gojjam and Bägémeder provinces. Interethnic marriage between Oromo and local indigenous peoples continued throughout the Gondärine period. By 1900, provinces where Amhara and Gafat had been the primary inhabitants were predominantly Oromo. By then, the Ethiopian central state had revived and territories once seized by the Oromo were reconquered; but again, they were not expelled. The remaining Gafat and other peoples, having long since adopted new Oromo identities, aligned themselves with their colonizers. Since then, the devastation and genocide inflicted on them by the Oromo have long been obscured by modern conflicts and political developments.

Conclusion

This paper has presented and supported a reinterpretation of the Oromo conquest and the development of Oromo settler society in Ethiopia, arguing that these processes played a decisive role in the cultural genocide of the Gafat people. In the words of Ania Loomba, "The process of 'forming a community' in the new land necessarily meant un-forming or re-forming the communities that existed there already, and involved a wide range of practices including trade, settlement, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, and enslavement."[111] Despite inevitable gaps in the Gafat narrative, I have presented some of the historical processes that shaped their long struggle, resistance and final disappearance. To date, historians have not framed the destruction of Gafat culture within the study parameters of genocide and settler colonialism. While previous research has attributed the erasure of the Gafat to forces of evolution, I

111| Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 20.

argue that the Gafat were victims of cultural genocide as a direct result of Oromo conquest, settlement, and assimilation via *mogasa*. Violence occurred with considerable frequency and intensity throughout 16th and early 17th century Ethiopia. A long jihadist war of extermination, violent dispossession, mass exodus, spiritual crises, cultural destruction and civil upheaval prevailed. The advent of the Oromo into an already weakened country exacerbated the pace and scale of preexisting conflicts. The Gafat were among the indigenous groups who suffered the most extreme effects of geographical and cultural dislocation in the aftermath of Oromo incursions. They lost their land through violent dispossession, while their culture, language, ethnic identity and way of life were inexorably obliterated through genocidal assimilation practices.

My approach to the fate of the Gafat represents a significant historiographic intervention, as it both reinterprets the causes of cultural genocide and the consequences of Oromo expansion. While scholars have generally treated Oromo expansion as a process of migration, resettlement and peaceful accommodation, this study argues that Oromo incursions represented a more intentional campaign of dispossession, displacement, subjugation and absorption. The fate of the Gafat reveals how cultural genocide decisively shaped relations between the Oromo and other indigenous Ethiopians. By identifying the Oromo as authors of cultural genocide, my work provides a more accurate and historically grounded account of their conquest and its far-reaching impact on Ethiopian culture. More study around how the Gafat ethno-culture disappeared could potentially shed new light on important recurring themes throughout Ethiopian history. Language extinction, for example, is not a past phenomenon but an ongoing process affecting present-day Ethiopians. This continuity underscores the deep relevance of early modern histories of cultural genocide to contemporary Ethiopia. Examining earlier events reveals not only the deeper roots of present crises, but furnishes a framework for anticipating and preventing future cultural losses.

This study examined the destruction of Gafat culture as a local phenomenon and as part of a global narrative of cultural genocide. Recovering Lemkin's original emphasis has proven essential for understanding genocide as

a historical process rather than an episodic event of spectacular mass violence. Building on the insights of Elazar Barkan, Patrick Wolfe and others, I advance the argument that settler colonialism and forced assimilation must be understood as mechanisms of cultural genocide. The Oromo-Gafat case demonstrates that this outcome is not confined to European empires, established states, or to modern industrial-scale killing. Stateless groups such as the Oromo were able to commit cultural genocide through conquest, expulsion, dispossession, forced assimilation, and the intentional destruction of distinct ethnic identities. By foregrounding this broader spectrum of actors and contexts, my study reveals genocide and settler colonialism as interconnected global phenomena that have shaped societies far beyond conventional narratives of empire and nation-state. The Oromo-Gafat example offers a corrective to Ethiopian historiography by bringing conquest and settler colonialism back into focus, and by modelling the study of language extinctions elsewhere.

In writing about the destruction of Gafat culture, my intention has been to restore the agency of this lost people, seeing them not as relics of the past but as a distinct ethnic group whose members actively resisted their ultimate assimilation into Oromo society. They were not passive victims; instead, they weighed choices between resistance, assimilation, migration, or violent death. The incursion of Oromo settlers into Gafat homelands sparked fervent disputes over legal rights, land ownership, cultural prerogatives and political autonomy, resulting in violent confrontations and continual negotiation between settlers and natives. Although space and scope prevent my going into more detail, I believe much more can be discussed and explored about Gafat cultural survival. They may constitute merely one indigenous group whose historical presence has been erased in the course of Ethiopia's later development. But in reexamining their dissolution, my aim has been to ensure that their past existence remains historically visible and justly appreciated.

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WEAPONIZATION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST AMHARA WOMEN IN ETHIOPIA

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Abstract

Since 2020, allegations of sexual violence against Amhara women have been documented across multiple areas of conflict in Ethiopia, yet systematic empirical analysis of Amhara communities remains limited. This study evaluates whether reported incidents of sexual violence occur within identifiable coercive environments associated with civilian control, rather than as incidental outcomes of armed confrontation. It draws on survivor narratives, United Nations reports, investigative documentation, and event-level conflict data collected from 2020–2024. The study employed a zone-month logistic regression model to estimate the conditional likelihood of reported sexual violence under conflict conditions, armed presence, territorial control, detention practices, and civilian-targeting operations. Quantitative results indicated that reported sexual violence is most strongly associated with sustained armed presence, practices of confinement or detention, and recurrent security operations directed at civilians. Once institutional indicators of territorial control are incorporated, variation in battlefield intensity does not consistently predict incident locations. Qualitative evidence further situated many assaults within settings characterized by supervision, restricted movement, or direct control that was frequently accompanied by threats referencing the survivors' Amhara identity. These patterns align with coercive strategies through which sexual violence functions as intimidation, punishment, or a mechanism of civilian subjugation. Although reporting constraints have limited precise prevalence estimates, the convergence of spatial, institutional, and testimonial evidence suggests that reported sexual violence against

Amhara women is closely linked to structures of civilian control, rather than occurring during combat. This finding underscores the need for strengthened documentation, improved atrocity-risk assessment, and the rigorous application of international humanitarian and human rights laws.

Keywords: Amhara; conflict-related sexual violence; coercive environments; ethnic targeting; Ethiopia

Introduction

The late 20th century and early 2000s saw a significant decrease in armed conflict, attributed to increasing democratization and international cooperation, particularly following the Cold War. During the past decade, however, violent conflict has been on the rise; in Ukraine, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, Palestine, Iran, and other areas. New geopolitical dynamics have intensified these conflicts, leading to wider and more frequent violations of civilian rights, including sexual violence against women, rape, torture, kidnapping, and extrajudicial killings (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Malesevic; 2017).

The 2020–2022 northern Ethiopia war has had profound consequences on the lives of local population, particularly in the Amhara regional state. According to the joint report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and UN Human Rights Commissioner (JIT 2021), these conflicts have resulted in widespread human rights abuses, including deaths, physical and psychological injuries, displacement, and destruction of infrastructure (*OHCHR-EHRC-Tigray-Report*, November, 2021). Such violations have created dire humanitarian conditions, leaving civilians vulnerable and urgently in need of support (Abbink, 2024). By examining recurring wars and civilian rights violations in the Amhara regional state, this study illuminates the nature and extent of sexual abuses against women; the challenges faced by the affected population; and measures taken to address their needs. It also seeks to emphasize the importance of restoring peace with justice, and providing long-term support victim and survivor support to promote healing, reconciliation, and sustainable development going forward.

Explanations of wartime rape that rely exclusively on battlefield chaos are increasingly difficult to verify. Over the past two decades, cross-disciplinary scholarship has shown that sexual violence varies substantially across conflicts, and even across armed organizations operating under similar military pressures (Wood, 2006; Cohen, 2013). The existence of such variation implies there is choice among those in control. Armed groups regulate their behavior toward civilians differently, and those differences rarely arise by accident.

Ethiopia's current conflict environment emerged from long-standing political, ethnic, and institutional tensions that were exacerbated during the reconfiguration of state power after 2018 (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2020). Fragmentation among armed actors, contested authority, and weakened civilian oversight have resulted in recurring violence, particularly against non-combatants. In many localities, struggles over territorial control have been prosecuted not only through battles between armed adversarial groups, but also through coercive strategies aimed at governing, intimidating, or displacing civilian populations.

Since 2020, these overlapping conflict dynamics have affected both the Amhara region and Amhara-inhabited areas beyond formal administrative boundaries. Civilians have faced displacement, extrajudicial killings, property destruction, and persistent insecurity, often with limited legal protection and constrained humanitarian access (Human Rights Watch, 2022). International reporting has documented serious human rights violations by multiple actors, with civilians absorbing the largest share of harm.

Within this broad scenario, Amhara communities have been disproportionately exposed to collective punishment through repeated security sweeps, house-to-house searches, checkpoint governance, arbitrary detention, and prolonged armed presence in both towns and rural districts. Such practices are not merely military tactics; they are intentional forms of coercive rule that place civilians under sustained surveillance and vulnerability while narrowing the space for reporting, protection, and accountability. Sexual violence reported against Amhara women appears embedded in these coercive settings. Multiple sources

frequently describe assaults within contexts of prolonged armed presence, rather than during active combat. Reported incidents commonly occur during night searches, at checkpoints, in occupied homes, and within formal and informal detention facilities—settings characterized by extreme power asymmetry and minimal oversight.

Detention regimes are central in survivor and institutional accounts. Survivors describe rape, gang rape, forced nudity, and sexual torture in facilities used to hold civilians during security operations. Comparative research has repeatedly identified detention as a high-risk environment for sexual violence because it combines confinement, isolation, coercive interrogation, and impunity (Cohen & Nordås, 2014).

Ethnic identity also appears prominently in reported perpetrator rhetoric. Survivors often recount ethnic slurs, narratives of domination, and explicit statements framing sexual violence as punishment directed at the Amhara community. Such rhetoric resembles patterns documented in ethnic cleansing and mass-atrocity contexts, where sexual violence functions as a means of collective humiliation and group subjugation, rather than only individual harm (Sharlach, 2000).

Finally, reporting itself is shaped by a harsh anti-humanitarian environment. Movement restrictions, communication disruptions, access denials, and the collapse of local institutions constrain medical care and psychosocial support, and suppress disclosure. Fear of retaliation and stigma further depress reporting. Consequently, the number of actual documented cases should be interpreted as conservative. The analytical task is therefore to interpret patterns in available evidence, while recognizing that the true incidence is likely substantially higher. Since 2020, reports emerging from Amhara-inhabited areas describe patterns that do not fit neatly within narratives of spontaneous breakdown. International investigations, journalistic accounts, and survivor testimony refer repeatedly to assaults occurring during house-to-house searches, inside detention facilities, and in towns under prolonged armed presence (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022; UN OHCHR, 2022). In many instances, civilians were not caught in crossfire as they were already under aggressors' supervision.

As noted, survivors frequently recount ethnic slurs and statements framing their assault as punishment of the entire Amhara community. These details matter significantly under analysis, as they situate violence within a broader repertoire of domination, rather than as isolated punishment for misconduct. Comparable dynamics have been observed in conflicts where sexual violence functioned as repression and group intimidation (Sharlach, 2000; Wood, 2009). Despite available documentation, systematic empirical analysis focused specifically on sexual violence against Amhara women remains limited.

Much of the existing contemporary research on Ethiopia has emphasized elite bargaining, battlefield shifts, or humanitarian access constraints (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2020). Those dimensions are significant, yet they leave important questions about civilian-directed coercion insufficiently examined. Three relevant gaps remain. First, comparative empirical work often concentrates on a limited set of high-profile cases, leaving Ethiopia underrepresented, despite credible documentation of severe abuses. Second, studies often separate qualitative narratives from quantitative indicators, rather than integrating them. Third, ethnic targeting is frequently acknowledged but given insufficient operational definition; this limits researchers' ability to distinguish generalized gender-based violence from ethnically-weaponized patterns.

This article therefore addresses that gap by analyzing sexual violence against Amhara women as a patterned practice connected to identifiable conflict environments. It advances three related claims. First, reported sexual violence in Amhara-inhabited areas is concentrated in space and time alongside territorial control, detention regimes, and civilian-targeted security operations, more than alongside generalized conflict. Second, these patterns remain visible in event-level modeling with standard structural and temporal controls, suggesting that reported sexual violence is embedded within recognizable security practices, rather than through random dispersion. Third, when interpreted through comparative and legal frameworks developed for other cases of weaponized sexual violence, the Amhara case exhibits features consistent with coercive rule and ethnically-driven mass violence (Sharlach, 2000; Rome Statute, 1998).

Research Methodology

Data Sources and Triangulation

Because sexual violence is underreported in nearly all conflict settings—especially where detention, occupation, and restricted access constrain reporting—this study relies on triangulation rather than any single "complete" dataset. Instead, the analytical approach emphasizes convergence across independent sources.

- **Eventlevel conflict data (Jan 2020–Dec 2024):** These data record date, location, actors, and event types, including explicit coding of sexual violence when sources report it.
- **Survivor testimonies and narrative documentation:** These accounts provide contextualized perpetrator behavior, detention conditions, ethnically-focused rhetoric, and repeated abuse information which is not captured by event codes.
- **United Nations and institutional reporting:** This is used to corroborate patterns and contextual factors such as; access constraints, territorial control dynamics, and detentionrelated practices (UN OHCHR, 2022).
- **Anonymous clinical indications:** Partial medical corroboration (e.g., injuries consistent with sexual assault, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancies resulting from rape) is used to support trend consistency rather than to estimate prevalence.
- **Geographic and demographic covariates:** Population estimates, administrative boundary files, and accessibility proxies are incorporated to adjust for exposure and reporting variations.

The core logic is straightforward: where multiple independent channels converge on similar mechanisms and settings, confidence in patterned violence increases, even when absolute counts remain uncertain.

Unit of Analysis and Sample Construction

The primary unit of analysis is the zone-month, defined as each administrative zone observed for each month during the study period.

This aggregation balances the need for temporal sensitivity with the rarity of reported sexual violence events. Daily units produce extreme sparsity, while annual units obscure meaningful variation. The sample includes all zone-months with at least one organized conflict event, regardless of whether sexual violence was reported or not. Retaining zeroreport months avoids selection bias and allows for the modeling of conditional risk. Using this procedure, the dataset contains 2,880 zone-month observations from 2020 to 2024.

Dependent Variable: Sexual Violence Occurrence

The dependent variable is binary **1** if at least one incident of conflict-related sexual violence against civilians is reported in a zone-month; **0** if otherwise.

Sexual violence includes rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, forced nudity, sexual torture, and forced impregnation when event narratives explicitly indicate such acts took place. Coding is conservative: ambiguous references to "abuse" or "mistreatment" without sexual specificity are excluded. This reduces false positives, but ensures undercounting, meaning that results should be interpreted as lowerbound associations.

Key Independent Variables

The following mechanism variables match the theoretical framework:

- **Territorial occupation/sustained control:** Coded **1** when sources indicate prolonged armed presence exercising routine control over civilian spaces (checkpoints, administrative takeovers, encampments, and repeated sweeps).
- **Detention presence:** Coded **1** when formal or informal detention facilities are reported operating in or near the zone during the month (prisons, military camps used to hold civilians, ad hoc detention centers).
- **Civiliantargeting operations:** Coded **1** when security activity explicitly targets civilians (mass arrests, housetohouse searches, sweeps, and collectivepunishment campaigns).

Each variable captures *asymmetric power* and *coercive governance*, not battlefield engagement.

Control Variables

Models include standard controls to reduce confounding: Conflict intensity (battle events); Violence against civilians (nonsexual); Population size (logged); Geographic accessibility; Humanitarianaccess constraints (UN OHCHR, 2022); and Month and year fixed effects. These controls reduce the risk that results simply reflect "more violence everywhere" or shifting reporting environments.

Model Specification

Given the binary outcome, the main estimation uses logistic regression:

$$logit\,(P(Y_{zt}=1)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Occupation_{zt} + \beta_2 Detention_{zt} + \beta_3 CivilianTargeting_{zt} + X_{zt}\gamma + \alpha_t + \epsilon_{zt}$$

Standard errors are clustered by zone to account for serial correlation.

Identification Strategy and Limitations

This study does not claim experimental causality. Its aim is to establish robust associations consistent with a mechanismbased framework of weaponized sexual violence.

Underreporting is the dominant limitation. For reporting bias alone to generate the observed results, underreporting would need to vary in a way that is systematically aligned with occupation, detention, and civiliantargeting operations across zones and months. Because qualitative accounts, clinical indications, and institutional reporting converge on the same mechanisms and settings (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022; UN OHCHR, 2022), perfect alignment from reporting artifacts alone is unlikely. Misclassification in occupation/detention coding is possible. Coding was intentionally conservative; any resulting error is more likely to attenuate estimates than inflate them.

Ethical Considerations

This study relies on secondary sources and anonymous clinical indications; it does not engage survivors directly. No identifying information is included. The goal is documentation and accountability analysis, not sensationalism.

Literature Review and the Study Framework

Sexual Violence as a Strategic Practice in Armed Conflict

Early treatments of wartime sexual violence often framed rape as an inevitable consequence of conflict, attributing it to undisciplined behavior, militarized masculinity, or the erosion of social norms. While such accounts capture some mechanisms, they struggle to explain why sexual violence differs dramatically across conflicts and armed actors operating under comparable pressure. A large body of research emphasizes that sexual violence varies systematically, implying that it reflects organizational choice and political incentives, rather than inevitability (Wood, 2006; Cohen, 2013). Armed groups facing similar battlefield constraints often display very different patterns, from widespread sexual violence to near restraint; this points toward leadership decisions, command structures, and their aims in regard to civilians.

Within this scholarship, sexual violence is frequently conceptualized as a weapon—a tool used to terrorize civilians, enforce submission, punish perceived enemies, extract information, and consolidate territorial control. Sexual violence also functions as symbolic domination, communicating vulnerability and humiliation to targeted communities (Wood, 2009). Crucially, this logic often becomes visible not in the intensity of combat, but in the spaces of coercive rule where armed actors control civilian life. Event-level quantitative research supports this view. Thus studies find sexual violence more likely during counterinsurgencies, occupations, and civilian-targeting operations than during conventional battlefield engagements (Cohen & Nordås, 2014).

Gendered Power, Social Control, and Sexual Violence

Feminist scholarship has been essential in reframing sexual violence in conflict as being violence of power rather than desire. In this perspective, rape functions as domination: it disciplines populations, asserts authority, and enforces hierarchies (Wood, 2006). Therefore, sexual violence cannot be separated from wider coercive governance.

At the individual level, survivors face physical injury, reproductive harm, and severe psychological trauma. At the community level, sexual violence fractures kinship networks, erodes trust, generates stigma and silence, and reshapes social relations long after the assault events themselves. These consequences are not incidental; they are frequently central to the political function of sexual violence in war.

In ethnically-motivated conflicts, the stakes intensify. Women's bodies are often treated as symbols of communal honor and reproduction, meaning that sexual violence becomes a direct assault on group continuity. Public rape, sexual mutilation, and forced impregnation have been deployed to humiliate, to fracture families, and to undermine social reproduction (Sharlach, 2000). Intersectional analysis further clarifies exposure. Gender interacts with ethnicity, territorial belonging, political identity, and class. Women from groups perceived as suspect may be targeted not only because they are women, but because they occupy an intersection of vulnerabilities under coercive rule (Wood, 2009).

Feminist scholars also warn against depoliticizing sexual violence by treating it solely as a humanitarian or medical problem. Care is vital, but focusing exclusively on trauma can obscure the structures and incentives that produce the trauma. Conversely, a structural approach situates sexual violence within occupation, detention, and collective punishment—the approach which this study adopts.

Ethnic Targeting and Genocidal Sexual Violence

Comparative scholarship on Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Darfur documents circumstances in which rape served not as a side-effect, but as a

central mechanism of ethnic cleansing and mass violence (Sharlach, 2000). In such cases, sexual violence operated as an instrument of degradation, displacement, and social destruction. Genocidal sexual violence is often associated with recurring features: ethnically-driven verbal abuse, repeated assaults over time, violations in semi-public spaces, and the targeting of women across age groups. Forced impregnation and sexual mutilation are particularly salient because they implicate reproduction and group identity.

International legal scholarship and jurisprudence increasingly recognize that rape may constitute genocide when committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or part, a protected group— especially through causing serious physical, mental, or reproductive harm (Rome Statute, 1998). Analytically, the literature emphasizes that pattern and context matter. Isolated incidents, however grave, do not establish a genocidal logic. Systematic patterns linked to ethnic identity, territorial control, and institutional structures demand a different empirical and legal interpretation.

Occupation, Detention, and Institutional Contexts of Sexual Violence

As noted above, a consistent finding across related studies is that sexual violence is often more prevalent under occupation-like conditions than in active combat zones (Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2009). Occupation increases proximity and vulnerability, which tends to reduce oversight and create enabling conditions for abuse.

Detention facilities are especially high-risk settings. Across conflicts, detention sites—formal and informal—recur as locations of rape, sexual torture, forced nudity, and repeated assault (Cohen & Nordås, 2014). Confinement, isolation, coercive interrogation, and impunity create conditions under which sexual violence can become systematic. Survivor accounts in many contexts describe multiple perpetrators, repeated assaults, and routine abuses under detention. Such patterns often imply institutional tolerance or encouragement, rather than isolated deviance.

Sexual Violence as an Indicator of Mass-Atrocity Risk

A growing literature treats systematic sexual violence as a warning signal for escalating atrocity risk. Sexual violence frequently appears alongside or before broader campaigns of displacement, ethnic cleansing, and mass killing (Sharlach, 2000). Patterns of sexual violence can therefore function as early indicators of an intensifying civilian-targeting strategy.

Yet early warning systems often underestimate the impact of sexual violence, focusing more on fatalities and displacement. Scholars argue that this reflects both data constraints and persistent discomfort with treating sexual violence as a political indicator, rather than only a humanitarian concern (Cohen & Nordås, 2014).

The Study Framework

This study proceeds from the premise that sexual violence is *not* an automatic byproduct of armed conflict. Rather, it tends to appear more consistently within particular institutional and territorial arrangements. Three interrelated mechanisms guide the analysis: First, sustained territorial control; second, detention practices; third, civilian-targeting security operations.

Prolonged control over a given territory alters the relationship between armed actors and civilians. When forces remain embedded within civilian spaces—operating checkpoints, conducting repeated searches, administering authority—the power asymmetry deepens, oversight weakens, and vulnerability increases. Under such conditions, sexual violence may occur not in moments of active combat, but during consolidation (Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2009).

Detention settings intensify this imbalance. Whether as formal prisons or improvised holding sites, detention facilities isolate individuals from community protection and external scrutiny. Comparative research consistently identifies detention as a high-risk environment for sexual abuse, including rape, sexual torture, and forced humiliation (Cohen & Nordås, 2014).

Civilian-targeting operations also introduce a third pathway of abuse. Sweeps, mass arrests, and collective punishment campaigns aim to discipline or intimidate communities. In such settings, sexual violence can amplify fear in ways that extend beyond immediate victims; the social effects reverberate.

From this framework, several expectations follow. Reported sexual violence should be more likely in zone-months marked by sustained territorial control. The presence of detention facilities should significantly increase risk. Civilian-targeting operations should elevate probabilities independently of overall combat intensity. Once these mechanisms are incorporated, general battlefield activity alone should display weaker associations, producing deep and durable social disruption (Keen, 2008).

Results: Regression Analysis and Interpretation

Descriptive Patterns

Descriptive statistics reveal a pronounced geographic clustering of conflict-related sexual violence in the Amhara region. More than 57 per cent of all reported victims are concentrated in North Wollo, South Wollo, and Wag Hemra, underscoring the geographical association between sexual violence, prolonged territorial occupation, and detention regimes. The overwhelming majority of reported victims are women and girls. However, documented male victimization—particularly in detention settings—suggests broader patterns of sexualized coercion and torture. Given severe reporting barriers, the figures below (Table 1) represent conservative estimates, rather than the true scale of victimization.

Sexual violence events rarely coincide with frontline battle days; instead, they are disproportionately reported during periods of relative military consolidation, when armed actors exercise routine control over civilian populations. This pattern aligns closely with theoretical expectations that sexual violence functions as a tool of domination under conditions of asymmetric power, rather than as a spontaneous byproduct of combat (Wood, 2009).

Table 1[i] :Reported Victims of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence by Location in the Amhara Region (excluding Gojjam) 2020–2024

Zone / Location	Reported Female Victims	Reported Male Victims	Total Reported Victims	% of Regional Total
North Wollo	1,842	96	1,938	24.6%
South Wollo	1,376	74	1,450	18.4%
Wag Hemra	1,118	52	1,170	14.9%
North Shewa	964	61	1,025	13.0%
Oromia Special Zone (Amhara)	742	39	781	9.9%
South Gondar	621	33	654	8.3%
Central Gondar	488	29	517	6.6%
West Gondar	317	21	338	4.3%
Amhara Region total	**7,468**	**405**	**7,873**	**100%**

Baseline Logistic Regression Results

i | Gojjam is excluded from the table for reasons explained later in this study.

The baseline model estimates the probability that at least one incident of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) occurs in each zone-month in the Amhara region. This model is estimated using logistic regression, with month-fixed effects and cluster-robust standard errors at the zone level. Results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Baseline Logistic Regression: Any Sexual Violence Incident (Zone–Month)

Variables	Odds Ratio	Std. Error	z-stat	p-value
Territorial occupation (1=yes)	**3.42***	0.88	4.71	0.000
Detention site present (1=yes)	**4.91***	1.36	5.02	0.000
Aid access constrained	**1.76**	0.42	2.39	0.017
ACLED battles (count)	1.03	0.02	1.21	0.226
ACLED violence against civilians (count)	**1.11**	0.05	2.27	0.023
Population (log)	1.08	0.31	0.27	0.786
Month-fixed effects	Yes			
Zone-clustered SEs	Yes			
Observations (zone–months)	2,880			
Pseudo-R^2	0.29			

* p<0.10

** p<0.05,

*** p<0.01

Interpretation of Baseline Results

Regression results suggest that sexual violence in the Amhara region is not randomly distributed across conflict spaces; rather, reported incidents are clustered in contexts marked by coercive control over civilians. Territorial occupation is associated with substantially higher odds of at least one reported incident in a given zone-month (OR = 3.42, $p < 0.01$). This finding aligns with the view that sexual violence is more likely to occur under sustained authority over civilians than during transient combat.

The presence of detention facilities shows the strongest relationship (OR = 4.91, $p < 0.01$). Zones operating detention sites exhibit a nearly fivefold higher likelihood of reported sexual violence. Survivor accounts describing repeated abuse in holding and interrogation settings are consistent with this statistical pattern.

Humanitarian access constraints are positively associated with risk (OR = 1.76, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that environments with reduced monitoring correspond to heightened vulnerability.

By contrast, battle counts do not retain statistical significance once occupation and detention variables are included. This distinction is important. It indicates that institutional conditions—not fluctuations in frontline intensity—provide a better account of observed patterns. Taken together, these results support a mechanism-based interpretation: reported sexual violence aligns more closely with structures of control than with variations in combat activity.

Why Gojjam is absent from the Quantitative Dataset

The absence of systematic quantitative data on sexual violence in Gojjam (both East and West Gojjam zones) reflects severe documentation and access constraints rather than an absence of violations. Throughout much of the study period (2020–2024), Gojjam experienced conditions hostile to reliable reporting—prolonged insecurity, communication disruptions, restricted humanitarian access, and limited presence of international observers. These factors substantially reduced the likelihood that incidents

of sexual violence would be documented in sources typically used for event-level datasets.

Unlike North Wollo, South Wollo, and Wag Hemra, where multiple independent reporting channels overlapped at different points in time, Gojjam exhibited prolonged information "blackouts." Local medical facilities faced shortages and interruptions, civil society organizations were unable to operate consistently, and survivors faced elevated risks of retaliation for disclosure. As a result, the evidence threshold for conservative event coding (explicit sexual violence narratives, corroborated by multiple sources) was rarely met, even where credible allegations existed.

Under such conditions, including Gojjam in the regression dataset would have introduced a high risk of systematic false zeros; that is, zone-months coded as having no sexual violence due solely to non-reporting. This would falsely skew estimates downward and distort comparisons across zones. For this reason, Gojjam was excluded from the quantitative analysis but retained in qualitative and contextual discussion.

Available Evidence on Gojjam and its Analytical Implications

Available evidence from Gojjam, while insufficient for event-level statistical modeling, nonetheless points to the occurrence of sexual violence against Amhara women through several partial and indirect indicators. Testimonies gathered by diaspora organizations, faith networks, and informal documentation, describe assaults during security operations and periods of detention in various parts of Gojjam. Although these accounts often lack the temporal and geographic precision required for formal event coding, they are internally consistent and align with mechanisms documented in other areas of the region. Additional indications come from displacement and medical spillover: survivors originating from Gojjam have been identified among displaced populations receiving clinical and psychosocial support in neighboring zones where practitioners have documented injuries and trauma-related conditions consistent with sexual assault. Institutional and journalistic sources also reference abuses in "western Amhara" or "Gojjam areas," albeit without the granularity

needed for inclusion in quantitative datasets. Collectively, these strands of evidence suggest underreporting, rather than an absence of abuse.

The quantitative evidence supports four core conclusions. First, sexual violence is strongly associated with territorial occupation and detention regimes. Second, civilian-targeting operations significantly increase the likelihood of sexual violence. Third, overall conflict intensity plays a comparatively minor role. Fourth, these patterns are robust across multiple model specifications and align closely with qualitative evidence. Together, these findings provide a rigorous empirical foundation for interpreting sexual violence against Amhara women as being *weaponized and systematic* rather than incidental.

The omission of Gojjam from quantitative analysis should therefore be understood as a limitation of available data, rather than a substantive indication of lower risk. In fact, the reporting barriers observed in Gojjam resemble those found in detention-heavy or occupation-like environments elsewhere—contexts that this study identifies as associated with *elevated* risk of sexual violence. As a result, the estimates presented here likely understate the full spatial extent of harm experienced by Amhara women. Advancing a greater level of knowledge in this area will require targeted documentation initiatives, enabling of safe survivor-centered reporting, and improved humanitarian access, particularly in Gojjam. Until such data become available, qualitative and indirect evidence remain essential for assessing the broader geographic scope of abuse.

Legal Analysis

International humanitarian law (IHL) unequivocally prohibits rape and other forms of sexual violence against civilians and classifies such acts as war crimes, included under Article 8 of the *Rome Statute* (1998). These prohibitions apply in both international and domestic armed conflicts, as well as in situations where armed actors exercise effective control over a given territory. The evidence summarized in this study situates reported sexual violence primarily within environments of sustained control-occupied civilian spaces, detention facilities, and routine security operations. Under IHL, the existence of effective control heightens

obligations toward civilian protection, meaning that sexual violence committed in occupation-like governance structures or detention settings, constitutes a grave breach of core protections, regardless of whether active combat is occurring at the time.

The patterns documented here also implicate the legal framework governing crimes against humanity. Under Article 7 of the *Rome Statute* (1998), sexual violence constitutes a crime against humanity when knowingly committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population. Geographic dispersion across zones, persistence over multiple years, and the concentration of incidents in institutional settings—such as detention, occupation, and civilian-targeting operations—collectively support both widespread and systemic elements. Survivor accounts describing structured security environments further reinforce the inference that perpetrators operated within sanctioned awareness of broader coercive campaigns.

These dynamics raise questions of command responsibility, which attaches when commanders knew or should have known that crimes were occurring, yet failed to prevent or punish them. The recurrence of reported sexual violence across zones, over extended periods, and in predictable institutional settings, makes it difficult to attribute these patterns to isolated misconduct. Persistent abuse within organized facilities and during recurring operations, combined with the absence of publicly documented investigations or prosecutions commensurate with the scale of reporting, constitutes relevant circumstantial evidence of major institutional failure.

International law also recognizes that sexual violence may constitute genocide when committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected group, through causing serious bodily and/or mental harm, or through acts that compromise reproductive capacity (Rome Statute, 1998). While determinations of genocidal intent require judicial adjudication—this study does not claim to make such a finding—the patterns summarized here warrant heightened scrutiny under defined genocide frameworks. Repeated assaults, ethnically-driven verbal abuse, threats framed as collective punishment, detention-based coercion, and attacks producing severe bodily and psychological harm resemble elements

identified in comparative jurisprudence in which genocidal intent has been inferred from systematic conduct (Sharlach, 2000).

Finally, evidentiary standards in international criminal adjudication do not require exhaustive victim enumeration, particularly for sexual violence, which is widely recognized as underreported. Courts have accepted patterns and corroboration across independent sources as carrying substantial probative weight. The evidentiary value of this study lies in the convergence of event-level patterns, survivor narratives, clinical indications, and institutional reporting, while recognizing that individual criminal attribution requires judicial processes and access to internal records beyond the scope of this analysis.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This study rejects the view that sexual violence reported against Amhara women is merely an incidental consequence of battlefield disorder. Across multiple zones and over several years, reported incidents appear most frequently in environments characterized by sustained armed presence, detention practices, and civilian-directed security operations.

The quantitative models do not claim causal certainty, yet the consistency of associations—particularly the strong relationship with detention settings—suggests that institutional conditions matter more than fluctuations in frontline combat. Qualitative accounts reinforce this pattern. Survivors describe abuse occurring during searches, in holding facilities, and in towns where armed actors exercised routine authority over civilian life.

Comparative research has shown that sexual violence in conflict varies according to organizational practice and political incentive. The Amhara case appears consistent with scholarship emphasizing coercive governance and asymmetric power as enabling environments. Whether international courts ultimately determine criminal responsibility remains beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, the alignment between spatial clustering, institutional context, and survivor testimony warrants sustained scrutiny.

Severe reporting constraints in recent years have likely combined to depress observed counts. If anything, the patterns identified here should be interpreted as conservative, rather than comprehensive measurements. Recognizing that sexual violence is more structurally embedded within mechanisms of control than previously acknowledged—rather than occurring as an effect of peripheral misconduct—remains essential for both scholarly analysis and prevention.

By foregrounding the experiences of Amhara women and linking sexual violence to specific coercive settings, this study demonstrates that ethnically-motivated, conflict-related sexual violence supports prior theoretical arguments identifying occupation and detention as enabling environments (Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2009). This study provides relevant evidence pertaining to war-crimes and crimes against humanity, and to atrocity prevention monitoring that too often treats sexual violence as peripheral, rather than diagnostic.

The findings demonstrate that conflict-related sexual violence should function as a core early-warning indicator of atrocity risk rather than a secondary humanitarian concern. Environments marked by expanding territorial control, intensified detention practices, and coercive civilian-targeting operations consistently correlate with elevated risk. Early-warning and prevention frameworks should therefore incorporate indicators tied to detention systems, occupation-like governance structures, and security operations that restrict civilian autonomy. Strengthening these analytical components would allow policymakers and monitoring bodies to identify escalation points *before* patterns of sexual violence become entrenched.

Effective accountability and prevention also require targeted documentation and investigative strategies. Detention sites and areas under sustained armed control—where reporting barriers are highest and abuse is most likely to become systematic—should be prioritized for monitoring. Triangulation across survivor testimonies, spatial-temporal event patterns, and institutional reporting remains essential for building evidentiary coherence. Accountability mechanisms may include domestic prosecutions where feasible, universal jurisdiction cases, and international

investigative processes, with doctrines of command responsibility being particularly relevant, given the institutional settings in which abuses are reported. Survivor-centered justice must extend beyond medical care to include psychosocial support, legal assistance, protection from retaliation, and reparations that acknowledge long-term social harm. Transitional justice frameworks should treat sexual violence as a form of collective injury with community-wide consequences, ensuring that reparations are designed with survivor input and implemented with safeguards against stigma and re-traumatization.

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ETHIOPIA'S SELECTIVE AGE: INTERNAL BORDERS, WARFARE, AND STATE-SPONSORED FILTERING

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Abstract

This article applies the Theory of the Selective Age—a synthesis of Zygmunt Bauman's "wasted lives," Reece Jones' "violent borders," and Saskia Sassen's "expulsion" models—to the ongoing crisis in Ethiopia's Amhara Regional State. It argues that mechanisms of global selection are not confined to international contexts, but are increasingly applied within state borders along ethno-territorial lines. Drawing on human rights documentation, regional research and Ethiopian media, I demonstrate how ethnic federalism has created a laboratory of internal selection in Ethiopia; that is, where movement is filtered by identity, where drone warfare expels civilians from protected life, and where kidnapping-for-ransom functions as a perverse economy of human currency. The genealogy of this exclusionary logic is traced back to 1930s colonial propaganda, revealing how historical strategies of division are internalized as tools of contemporary statecraft. For an independent researcher caught within these realities, revealing truths about Ethiopia's Selective Age is both an intellectual necessity and a precarious act of witnessing.

Keywords: Selective Age, Ethnic Federalism, Internal Borders, Drone Warfare, Expulsion, State Violence, Amhara, Ethiopia

Introduction: The Internalization of Selection

The phrase "failing state" often conjures up images of complete anarchy. But an even more sinister evolution is taking place in Ethiopia: the state itself acting as an agent of division and destruction, selectively filtering its own population along lines of ethnicity. The ongoing crisis in the Amhara Regional State, where the federal government employs heavy weaponry and drones against its own citizens, serves as a poignant and terrifying example of Ethiopia's Selective Age regime, in which specific groups are treated as expendable, surplus, or even as enemy populations—not across international frontiers, but within the sovereign territory of a recognized country.

Since 1991, Ethiopia has been governed under a system of ethnic federalism. Proponents argue that it gives more autonomy to historically marginalized groups. But critics have long contended (and subsequent political developments appear to support them) that ethnic federalism has also fragmented national unity and resulted in minority rule being consolidated under the TPLF (see Abbink, 2011; Vaughan, 2011, etc.). Regardless of its original intent, in recent years ethnic federalism has been weaponized as an internal "border system," making movement across regions—particularly for ethnic Amhara—life-threatening (Addis Standard, 2024). This article maintains that Ethiopia is no exception to global patterns of exclusion; in fact, it represents a concentrated expression of exclusionary logic: how selection, expulsion, and bordering can be internalized, ethnicized, and implemented by states against their own populations. This internal selection is not a historical anomaly; it echoes the divisive rhetoric of 1930s colonial propaganda which sought to dismantle Ethiopian unity and sovereignty by framing specific ethnic groups as irreconcilable enemies.

Theoretical Framework: Selection without Crossing a Border

Jones' Violent Borders, Internalized

Reece Jones argues that borders are not passive lines on a map, but active instruments of violence that sort populations (Jones, 2016). Ethiopia's

border is not only the perimeter of its national territory; it is also internally bordered between Oromia and Amhara, at checkpoints surrounding Addis Ababa, and in bureaucratic requirements for internal travel. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has documented "widespread road closures, abductions and curfews (that) severely restrict freedom of movement across regions" (EHRC, 2024). These are not temporary security measures, but structural filters used to select who may move, when, and under what conditions.

Sassen's Expulsion, Domesticated

Saskia Sassen's concept of expulsion describes how people are pushed out of the social, economic, and political systems that sustain their lives (Sassen, 2014). In Ethiopia's Amhara region, expulsion operates through multiple channels:

Physical Expulsion via Aerial Violence: The Amhara Association of America (AAA) documented 95 drone and airstrike incidents between August 2023 and October 2024, resulting in 824 civilian casualties (AAA, 2024). These strikes, justified by authorities as targeting "Fano combatants," have disproportionately affected civilians, effectively expelling them from protected life.

Economic Expulsion via Disruption: The Rift Valley Institute notes that the Fano insurgency has "severely disrupted the economy of the Amhara region and beyond" (Rift Valley Institute, 2024). In context, this insurgency emerged as a defensive response to state military operations; the resulting economic breakdown reflects a broader dynamic of asymmetric warfare, rather than a unilateral cause. When local markets close, roads are blocked, or agricultural cycles are interrupted—whether by state blockade, armed confrontation, or mutual insecurity—communities are expelled from their traditional means of subsistence and exchange.

Bauman's Wasted Lives, Localized

Zygmunt Bauman argued that modernity produces "human waste"—that is; populations rendered redundant by progress (Bauman, 2004). Where Selective Age is applied internally, certain ethnic populations are

framed as being obstacles to national unity, development, or security. The emergence of a ransom economy reveals a perverse market of human value: those who can pay are "selected" for release and those who cannot are discarded. When Bauman's logic of "human waste" is applied at the checkpoint, human beings are literally priced, and that price determines their survival.

The Amhara Case: A Concentrated Example of Internal Selection

Ethnic Federalism as Internal Bordering

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia was officially framed as a mechanism to empower groups that were historically marginalized by the state. Yet debate persists as to whether this design genuinely served decentralization, or devolved into a strategy of political fragmentation and minority consolidation (Abbink, 2011; Vaughan, 2011). In practice, it has created a patchwork of jurisdictions where ethnic identity determines mobility. Travelers report being questioned at internal checkpoints about their origin, language, and destination. An Amhara-speaking person attempting to enter Addis Ababa from the Amhara region may face detention, extortion, or denial of passage (Borkena, 2024). Indefinite curfews in towns like Bati restrict movement to specific hours, effectively creating a temporal border that selects who may occupy public space, and when (Addis Standard, 2024).

Drone Warfare and the Selection of Civilians

The conflict which erupted in August 2023, following the federal government's attempt to dismantle regional paramilitary forces, transformed into a full-scale insurgency (Rift Valley Institute, 2024). The Fano (also known as the Amhara Fano National Movement), a loose, community-based armed resistance, has emerged as the primary defender of the Amhara population against what many locals, activists, and international observers describe as a campaign of state-sponsored violence.

Human rights organizations have documented the use of artillery and

drones by the federal army (ENDF) against densely populated areas within the Amhara region (OHCHR, 2024; HRW, 2024). Drone strikes, often linked to technology sourced from the UAE, Turkey, and Iran (Africa Defense Forum, 2024), have reportedly targeted hospitals, schools, and transportation hubs, causing significant civilian casualties (AAA, 2024). The government's justification, that they were "targeting Fano," functions as a selection criterion: anyone in a suspected area becomes potentially expendable.

Kidnapping as a Tool of Coercion and Economic Selection

In a terrifying manifestation of collective punishment that the state has all but ignored, the Amhara people are experiencing rampant kidnapping for ransom. In July 2024, reports emerged of more than 100 students and passengers being abducted while traveling to Addis Ababa (Addis Standard, 2024; DW, 2024). These kidnappings, which frequently occur on highways connecting the Amhara region with the capital, are often carried out by armed groups who demand usurious ransoms—as much as 1.5 million ETB (Africa Defense Forum, 2024).

The state's complicity is evident in its glaring inaction. With ransom payments being transacted through government-owned financial institutions, such as the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, there are persistent allegations that the state fails to intervene, trace, or take any effective steps to stop professional kidnappers (Africa Defense Forum, 2024). In many cases, hostages are murdered even after their families have paid ransoms. This perverse selection mechanism demonstrates that economic capacity determines survival and state inaction legitimizes it.

Media Blackout and Epistemic Selection

To maintain its narrative of "law enforcement" against "extremists," the Abiy Ahmed administration has severely suppressed media freedom. Journalists reporting on atrocities in the Amhara Region are routinely arrested, harassed, or forced to flee the country (Martin Plaut, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024). The state also frequently cuts off Internet access in conflict-stricken areas, creating an information "black hole" to obscure the true extent of civilian suffering.

This is the epistemic dimension of the Selective Age system: controlling which narratives can be audible. When independent reporting is silenced, the state unilaterally defines reality, creating a double bind for independent researchers: documenting the truth risks persecution; remaining silent equals complicity in the erasure of truth.

Analysis: Ethiopia as a Paradigm of Internal Selective Age

The situation in Ethiopia exemplifies what critics describe as structural "ethnic cleansing." The government has applied a filtering mechanism that treats the Amhara—a community that played a central role in the historical making of Ethiopia—as expendable. By denying or severely restricting their access to the nation's capital, blocking their economic livelihoods, and sending drones to turn their homes into battlefields, the federal government is imposing intentional "internal exclusion" which has three critical implications for the Theory of the Selective Age:

The Border is Everywhere: Jones' argues that violent borders are not fixed at the edge of a state but are mobile, reproducible, and ethnicized. Checkpoints, curfews, and administrative barriers become the new frontier of exclusion.

Expulsion is Multi-scalar: Sassen's expulsion theory operates not only through global capital, but also through local land dispossessions, aerial bombardments, and economic blockades. The Amhara farmer expelled from the field by drone fire experiences the same trauma as entire Global South communities displaced by extractive industries.

Waste is Political: Bauman's "wasted lives" theory is not an accidental byproduct of unrest, but a politically-produced environment. When the state frames an ethnic group (or groups) as a threat to national unity, it legitimizes treating them as surplus and disposable.

Historical Genealogy: The Colonial Time Bomb

It is crucial to situate Ethiopia's Selective Age doctrine within a longer genealogy of exclusionary logic. The present-day rhetoric used to justify

marginalizing the Amhara mirrors the strategic divisive framing of 1930s colonial propaganda. Baron Roman Prochazka's 1935 work, *Abyssinia: The Powder Barrel*, explicitly framed the Amhara people not only as "unfit" for sovereignty, but as "Abyssinian usurpers" oppressing "non-Amharic native tribes" (Prochazka, 1935). Prochazka's observation was not anthropological, but a calculated political strategy designed to dismantle Ethiopian unity by entrenching inter-ethnic hostility.

Ethiopia's post-1991 ethnic federalism inadvertently—or perhaps deliberately—adopted the colonial-style institutionalization of the very divisions Prochazka advocated. The result is the current war being waged against the Amhara by their own government. This ethnic group, once called the "imperial center" is now being framed as an internal "oppressor" and treated as expendable. Ethiopia's Selective Age policy continues a chilling historical precedent. The grammar of fitness and unfitness, once adopted by European imperialists to justify colonial conquest, has been internalized by African states to justify domestic warfare. Selection is not merely a Western export, but a modular power technology available to any regime seeking to sort populations into valued and discarded entities.

Conclusion: Theorizing from the Zone of Internal Selection

The Amhara Region conflict has resulted in thousands of deaths, the displacement of more than 670,000 people, and forced millions of children out of school (GOV.UK, 2024). Clearly, the "surplus people" doctrine is not limited to international borders; it thrives in the Ethiopian highlands, where a government in pursuit of absolute centralized power, has turned its back on a significant segment of its own population.

For the independent researcher, unfolding Ethiopia's application of the Theory of the Selective Age is no abstract exercise, but rather an act of situated witnessing that carries major personal and material risk. Yet selection is never total. The Fano movement, the documentation of local and diaspora organizations, the persistence of independent researchers—all of these are acts of de-selection, of refusing categories imposed by the system.

But without urgent and timely international intervention, the "filtering" of the Amhara people could lead to an even deeper humanitarian catastrophe. Beyond policy prescriptions, this crisis demands theoretical innovation; it challenges us to rethink the Selective Age theory not as a global North-South binary but as a scalable logic system that can be internalized, ethnicized, and operationalized in any context where state power seeks to sort human beings into categories of value and expendability.

The task ahead is to continue building this theory from the ground up: to document the micro-mechanics of internal borders, trace the circuits of ransom and resistance, and connect the Ethiopian experience to broader patterns of global selection. The arguments of this article may still prove too controversial for some prestigious journals today, particularly those hesitant to engage with critical and contextual scholarship from the Global South. But such research is necessary. Selective Age may ultimately select who is allowed to speak and be heard, but it cannot select what is true.

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BOOK REVIEW

Achamyeleh, Tamiru. *The Issue of Wälqayet: Research Result on the Boundary and Geographical History of Wälqayet, Ṭägädé, Ṭälämet, and Humära, 331 CE - 1991 CE.*

Thomas A. Taye

General Evaluation and Organization of the Book

Achamyeleh Tamiru's seminal book titled "The Issue of Wolkait: Research Result on the Boundary and Geographical History of Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit, and Humera (From 331 AD to 1991 AD)" is a revealing, riveting, finely-crafted, choherently presented, chronologically arranged, and beautifully written work. The book is a comprehensive historical inquiry into one of the most challenging intra geopolitical questions in the presnt day Ethiopia. Achamyeleh's use of a longue durée research approach to examine the administrative boundary and identity-related questions of *Wolkait* and its surrounding people gives the study much weight and credit compared with previous studies on the area. The author critically investigates the administrative boundary and geographic history of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* over centuries to unfold enduring administrative patterns, deep-seated contradictions, and identity constructions between the people who settle in the East and West of the Tekezé River.

In doing so, the author organizes the book into nine (9) parts that comprise twenty-three (23) chapters. Part one of the book outlines the socio-political and geographic history of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* during the Axumite Dynasty from the 4th to 9th centuries AD. Part two explores the administrative boundary *and* geographic history of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit, Humera,* and their surroundings druing Zagwe Dynasty from the 9th to 13th centuries AD. Part three examines their administrative

boundary and geographic developments during the Solomonic Dynasty (14th-16th centuries AD). Part four investigates the administrative boundary *and* geographic history of the areas during the *Gonderian* Period from the 17th to 18th centuries AD. Part five assesses these dynamics during the *Zemene Mesafint* from the mid-18th to 19th centuries AD. Part six explores the administrative boundary *and* geographic history of the regions during *Modern Ethiopia* from mid-19th to mid-20th centuries AD. Part seven covers the period from the Italian fascist invasion of Ethiopia to the end of the *Dergue* regime in 1991. Part eight critically examines the TPLF's policy positions and advocacy concerning *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit, and Humera* since the late 20th century AD. The final part of the book consists of appendices that comprise official letters, minutes, maps, and other archives used as historical evidence to objectively illustrate the administrative boundaries of the *Amhara* and *Tigray* people since the 4th century AD.

In short, the author chronologically presents successive administrative and political regimes, such as the Axumaite period, the Zagwe Dynasty, the Solomonic Dynasty, the Gonderian Period, the Zemene Mesafint, and the modern Ethiopian state under Atse Tewodros II, Atse Yohannes IV, Atse Menelik II, Atse Haile Selassie I, and the *Derg* regime.

The Core Thesis and Argument of the Book

The book aims to deconstruct the false political and historical narratives of the left-wing Ethiopian political elites, which have been preached for the last half a century concerning *the socio-cultural identity, psychological make-up, and administrative boundary of Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera.* Thus, the book also aims to defend contemporary Ethiopians and the international communities from accepting such a baseless and fabricated story concerning *Wolkait-Tegedie* as truth (Achamyeleh, 2020). The author collected a longue durée historical evidence that covers from 331 AD to 1991 AD to reconstruct the administrative and geographic history of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera, which* have been dominated by left-wing political narratives and selective readings of history (Girma, 2025).

The book deeply investigates the groundless political and historical narratives of TPLF and its allies by collecting relevant evidence over five years. This shows the author's professional commitment to gathering relevant data to support the central argument of the book. All the evidence collected by the author focused on the administrative and geographic history of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* from 331 AD to 1991 AD, 1660 years of historical archives (Achamyeleh, 2020, p. I). In addition to administrative and geographic history, the book also examines the life, social-settings, power-relations, culture, religion, and language of the people of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera between 331 AD and 1991 AD* (Achamyeleh, 2020).

One of the things that motivated the author to produce the book was the post 1983 TPLF's forceful annexation of the *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera areas* and forceful imposition of Tigriyan identity by crossing theirs centuries old administrative boundary, i.e., Tekezé River (Achamyeleh, 2020, p. I). For the purpose of establishing and creating the "Greater Tigray Republic" (GTR), TPLF in December 1968 E.C, prepared a party program that incorporated the *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* regions to get fertile agricultural land and share a border with Sudan. According to the author, however, the *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* region wasn't factually part of the *Tigray* administration for the last one and a half millennium. The sources that the author collected for about five years proved that the people of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* have strong socio-cultural and psychological resemblance with the *Amhara*. They have considered and identified themselves as *Amhara*, i.e., *Gonderie* (Achamyeleh, 2020).

The author critically analyzes the historical evolution of Wolkait-Tegedie areas across extensive chronological periods (i.e., ancient, medieval, and modern) to effectively challenge the contemporary TPLF's naïve narrative that *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* areas have a territorial and identity affiliation with the *Tigray* regional state. Moreover, the author's unrelenting effort and extensive use of primary historical archives give empirical weight to the study and support the book's central argument that *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* districts historically belonged to administrative territories of Amhara, particularly the *Gonderian* Core,

rather than to *Adwan* Core. According to the author, therefore, the incorporation of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* provinces into the *Tigray* regional state in 1991 clearly demonstrates a major historical break rather than a continuation of centuries-old systems of territorial administration and patterns of governance in Ethiopian history (Alene and Veneranda, 2024).

Critical Evaluation of the Book

Having discussed the organization and central argument of the book above, now, it's essential to highlight the strengths/scholarly contributions and weaknesses of the book. Accordingly, one of the strengths of the book is its commitment to ending the boundary conflict that exists between the people of *Amhara* and *Tigray* since 1991 by presenting extensive and first-hand data for those who want to know the truth about *Wolkait-Tegedie*. The book underlines the importance of using logic and historical evidence to address deep-rooted problems related to identity and administrative boundaries. In the political history of Ethiopia, war or conflict has been the common instrument for various tribes to solve either resource or power-related questions. However, the book initiates the culture of relying on a scientific approach to resolve identity and boundary-related conflicts peacefully. The book can be a key road map or reference for historians, politicians, lawyers, geographers, and policy-makers who truly want to resolve identity and boundary related conflcits in Africa and elsewhere. Thus, the book would play an important role in de-escalating the tension between the *Amhara* and *Tigray* people by offering authentic socio-political, geographic, and administrative history concerning *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* areas (Achamyeleh, 2020).

Second, grounding in an extensive range of sources is the methodological strength of the book. Achamyeleh draws the central points of his argument based on relevant evidence, such as royal chronicles, church records, imperial decrees, travelers' accounts, pre-modern and modern maps, official correspondences, administrative documents, etc., from different regimes. For instance, the author's effective use of pre-modern and modern maps produced by foreign and local cartographers under different

historical periods clearly illustrates the evolution and development of the administrative boundaries of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera.*

Inlight of the aforementioned point, the fundamental strength of the book resides in source triangulation and its extensive use of evidence from the side of Tigray to disprove the false narratives that the *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* were detached from Tigray and transferred to *Begiemidir* during the mid-20th century administrative restructuring under Emperor Haile Selassie I. For this, the author used stone inscriptions, official letters, maps, travelers' accounts, royal chronicles, and audio-visual discourses of pre- and post-1983 *Tigriyan* leaders. Therefore, the use of a wide range of sources presented by both *Amhara* and *Tigray* elites distinguishes the book from more polemical treatments of the Wolkait-Tegedie issue (Achamyeleh, 2020).

The third strength of the book is the author's reservation from interpreting archival materials and imposing subjective claims. The only role of the author that the reviewer observed is presenting relevant historical evidence for those who want to know the truth concerning the identity, administrative boundary, and geography of *Wolkait-Tegedie*. This approach allows archival records to speak for themselves. The author consistently follows an evidence-driven approach and avoids assertive interpretations and common pitfalls of historical revisionism. Hence, adherence to such kind of research ethics promotes a more balanced understanding of history to peacefully resolve the existing boundary dispute between the *Amhara* and *Tigray* regional states.

The last but not least contribution of the book is its treatment of geography as an active factor that shapes settlement patterns, territorial affiliations, economic relations, political decisions, and institutional structures over time. The author perceives geographical sensitivities and environmental realities as driving forces of history. Accordingly, the author argues that the geostrategic and economic importance of *Wolkait* and its surrounding districts have historically attracted settlers and competing political interests. Therefore, analyzes the four decades of identity and boundary related dispute between the *Amhara* and *Tigray* people from the perspective of the geographic importance of the *Wolkait-Tegedie* region

for trade, agriculture, industry, livestock, and cross-national relations with Sudan and Eritrea (Achamyeleh, 2018; Achamyeleh, 2020).

It very demanding for reviewers to find limitations for further improvement in Achamyeleh's seminal work. However, a critical examination of the book reveals the subsequent limitations that may affect its total credibility and impact. One of the limitations of the book is its silence on alleged human rights violations committed by the TPLF administration against the people of *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* over the last three decades. By largely excluding discussions on all kinds of crimes against humanity committed by the TPLF group, the author narrows the book's focus of analysis primarily to questions of identity and territorial ownership. In this sense, the reviwer believe that exposing and publicizing the TPLF's inhumane practice against the people of *Wolkait* since 1983 (such as, Indi-genocide/cultural genocide, land-grab, mass killing, mixing ethnicity by resettlement program, changing centuries old place names into *Tigrigna* language, legal exclusion of *Amharic* language from the curriculum of primary education and religious institutions, destructing natural resources, eliminating historical legacies and artifacts, etc. would have provided an accurate picture and a more comprehensive account on the region's contemporary history.

The second limitation of the book is the introduction of historical narratives that incorporate parts of the present-day *Gojjam* and *Wollo* into the former *Simen/Begiemidir* province to support the book's central argument that *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* areas were part of the *Simen/Gonder* administration since 323 AD (Achamyeleh, 2020). This kind of claim would potentially generate intra-*Amhara* tensions by fostering territorial interpretations among extremists in *Gonder, Gojjam*, and *Wollo*. For me, such claims in the book would complicate the recent efforts toward social cohesion among the people of *Amhara* and undermine the collective commitment and sentiment of the *Amhara* to defend themselves from existential threats that have been targeting them since the morrow of *Adwa* victory (Achamyeleh, 2020; Girma, 2025).

The book also exhibits a methodological limitation in its interpretation of some historical records. The author's repeated interpretation of historical

archives that prove *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* areas weren't part of the *Tigray* administration, as *Wolkait* and its surroundings are part and parcel of the *Amhara* administration, may raise questions concerning the analytical neutrality of his conclusion (Achamyeleh, 2020, p. 44-56). As to me, this kind of archival interpretation in the book violates one of the fundamental principles of Aristotelian syllogistic logic, i.e., negating one claim does not automatically validate its opposite.

As an additional limitation, the book gives an exclusive ownership right to the *Gonder-Amhara* over *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* areas (Achamyeleh, 2020). However, for the last four decades, people who reside in other *Amhara* provinces, such as *Gijjam*, *Wollo*, and *Shewa,* have struggled a lot to restore the area from the hands of TPLF's brutal administration. This inclusive political and social mobilization of all the *Amhara* provinces, including the *Amhara* diaspora, has liberated the entire Wolkait-Tegedie districts from the TPLF's oppressive rule. In this regard, the reviewer strongly believes that the administrative and identity-related questions of the *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera* people would be solved once and for all under the framework and umbrella of *Amhara*.

The last limitation that the reviewer observed was a technical error that was exhibited from page 261-273. On these pages, the name "Lij Wossen Hailu" is erroneously mentioned as "Lij Hailu Wossen". The author should correct this minor factual error in the upcoming edition (Achamyeleh, 2020, pp. 261-273).

Summary, Policy Implications, and Areas of Inquiry for Future Research

The book underlines the significance of historical research in addressing identity-based conflicts and territorial disputes between the *Amhara* and *Tigray* regional states. Accordingly, the key policy implication of the book is the need to prioritize evidence-based and multidisciplinary approaches to effectively resolve administrative boundary and identity-related questions. The book theoretically implies the potential of historical archives in addressing boundary disputes and the need to depoliticize historical narratives in states' legal and policy frameworks.

In this regard, future studies should focus on the incorporation of oral histories, local memories, existing artifacts, and lived experiences of native societies who live in *Wolkait, Tegedie, Telemit,* and *Humera*. This kind of research approach would easily include the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups that are often excluded from official archives. Moreover, future studies on *Wolkait* and its surrounding districts should go beyond the simple land ownership and boundary debates. Therefore, future research should systematically investigate the broader human, material, environmental, and institutional consequences that have occurred due to TPLF's political restructuring of the area since 1991.

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