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# The Ethnic Cleansing Policy in Western Tigray since November 2020 : Establishing the Facts and Understanding the Logic

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## DOSSIER

MEHDI LABZAÉ

**THE ETHNIC CLEANSING POLICY  
IN WESTERN TIGRAY  
SINCE NOVEMBER 2020:  
ESTABLISHING THE FACTS  
AND UNDERSTANDING THE LOGIC**

Since November 2020, the zone officially known as Western Tigray has been annexed by the neighbouring Amhara region. Based on observations and interviews with displaced people, this article depicts the administration of the occupied zone. Ten episodes of massacres are listed in the text, showing how mass violence is an integral part of state practices under the Amhara nationalist administration. The text first elaborates on the relationship between social science and law and shows the uses of social science thinking and methodology in dealing with mass violence.

**T**his text is a modified version of a field report written in March 2024 that includes a list of massacres carried out in Western Tigray after it was annexed by the Amhara region in November 2020. Mass violence was not my initial research object: my investigation of the massacres stems from an exploration of the agrarian grounds for Amhara nationalism.

Whereas most Amhara elites had previously rejected ethnicity as a legitimate political framework, there was an apparently massive conversion to ethno-nationalism among the Amhara populations of Ethiopia and the diaspora from 2016 on.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of Amhara nationalist discourses lay new territorial claims, notably to “Wolqayt”, a term used by activists as a metonymy for Western Tigray, which they claimed was forcibly integrated into Tigray in 1991.<sup>2</sup>

Wolqayt refers to the highlands around Addi Remets and the lowlands to the east, towards the Tekezé River. Historically, these areas had economic links with the lowlands along the Sudanese border, where sorghum cultivation peaked in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to abundant land, an available enslaved workforce and rising food prices in colonial Eritrea.<sup>3</sup> Agriculture was mechanised in the 1960s and export crops such as sesame have taken over since that time. Large-scale agriculture was promoted by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)

1. See T. Makahamadze and M. Fikade, “Popular Protests in the Amhara Region and Political Reforms in Ethiopia, 2016-2018”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 16, n° 1, 2022, p. 115-137.

2. See S. Vaughan and M. Plaut, *Understanding Ethiopia’s Tigray War*, London, Hurst, 2023, p. 135-139.

3. See J. C. McCann, “A Dura Revolution and Frontier Agriculture in Northwest Ethiopia, 1898-1920”, *The Journal of African History*, vol. 31, n° 1, 1990, p. 121-134.

regional administration from the 1990s, increasingly so in the 2000s and 2010s. Until the 2010s, peasants from the highlands practised a form of seasonal shifting agriculture in the lowlands known as *mofer zemet*.

I was dissatisfied with the a-historical, essentialist narratives about “historical territories” and “identity” produced by activists that too often made their way into scholarly work,<sup>4</sup> and wanted to dig into the agrarian grounds for Amhara nationalism, believing that claims to territory needed material content in order to mobilise a wider cohort than young, male urban activists. Starting in late 2018, I read nationalist literature and social media content extensively and conducted interviews with activists who endorsed Amhara nationalism, who were first city-based teachers, merchants and civil servants. From 2016, youth groups started to call themselves *fanno*, an Amharic word with powerful nationalist undertones that historically referred to the armed peasants who accompanied the imperial armies on military campaigns<sup>5</sup>. *Fanno* increasingly took up arms between 2018 and 2020, to the point where the word became synonymous with armed Amhara combatants when the war in Tigray broke out.<sup>6</sup>

Amhara activists have hammered home the idea that “Wolqayt is Amhara” and that Western Tigray was forcibly integrated into Tigray by the TPLF in the early 1990s. They built on old maps and historical documents that showed that notably between the late 1940s and 1991, Wolqayt had been administered from Gondar and Dabat, cities that are now located in the Amhara region<sup>7</sup>. This historical distortion was endorsed in 2018 by the Amhara branch of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front and was left unchallenged by foreign analysts, who were undoubtedly complicit in making the violence of the annexation so discreet. Likewise, the idea that Wolqayt and other parts of Tigray “have long been claimed by Amhara”<sup>8</sup> has become normal, including

4. See, among others, Y. D. Yetena, “Discursive Trajectories in the Making of Amhara Identity in Ethiopia”, *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 28, n° 4, 2022, p. 1267-1281, notably p. 1273; S. John, “The Potential of Democratization in Ethiopia: The Welkait Question as a Litmus Test”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 56, n° 5, 2021, p. 1009 *et seq.*

5. See R. Pankhurst, “Fanno”, in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, Wiesbaden, Harrasowitz Verlag, 2005, p. 490.

6. Since the spring of 2022, the federal government has been trying to reassert its control over *fanno* groups, and has dismantled the former regional military police, the Amhara Special Forces. This led to an all-out war in the Amhara region in the summer of 2023.

7. For an example of a highly selective historical study designed to “prove” that Wolqayt was Amhara, see A. Tamru, *The Wolqayt affair. Results of a historical and geographical survey of the borders of Wolqayt, Tegeḍe, Telemt and Humera (from 331 to 1991)* [in Amharic: የወልቃይት ጉዳይ። የወልቃይት፣ ጠገኔ፣ ጠለምትና ሀ-መራ የወሰንና መልከዓ-ምድር ታሪክ ምርምር ውጤት (ከ323 ዓ.ም. እስከ 1983 ዓ.ም.)], Addis Ababa, 2020. For a historical overview of the western boundaries of Tigray from another perspective, see J. Nyssen and B. Demissie, “Administrative and Ethno-Linguistic Boundaries of Western Tigray (Ethiopia) since 1683” [online], *Journal of Maps*, vol. 19, n° 1, 2023, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17445647.2023.2257249>>, accessed on 22 April 2024.

8. T. Lavers, *Ethiopia's “Developmental State”: Political Order and Distributive Crisis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024, p. 293.

in scholarly work and NGO reports<sup>9</sup>. This narrative depicting Wolqayt as a “contested land” normalises the annexation by Amhara forces, and ultimately endorses an extremely violent *fait accompli*. However, it is the speed at which this territorial claim was developed and proposed that should strike us, as no “Amhara claim” to Wolqayt or Western Tigray was made public before the mid-2010s. Even at the time it was formed, the Committee for the Restoration of the Amhara Identity of Wolqayt-Tegedé (CRAIWT), which led the campaign for the annexation of Western Tigray and now rules the area, did not advocate for secession from Tigray, but rather for an autonomous zone within the region.<sup>10</sup>

When I first met members of the CRAIWT, it became clear that agrarian claims were central to a feeling of resentment that they voiced in terms of identity. It is an undeniable fact that the inhabitants of Wolqayt held grievances against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which ruled the region. In the mid-2010s, small agricultural investors who did not reach the threshold of 20 hectares required to qualify for investor status had seen their land taken and given to larger investors from elsewhere in Tigray. Others had been prevented from continuing to practice *mofer zemet*.<sup>11</sup> Some had had their land taken or had been displaced by the Wolqayt Sugar Factory, a major land-thirsty state-led investment<sup>12</sup>.

The development of sugar factories in Ethiopia is closely associated with MetEC, the military-industrial conglomerate that spearheaded the developmental state and is commonly perceived not only as a TPLF-affiliated organ, but also as an institution “dominated by Tigrayans” and as “a means of channeling rents to powerful and well-connected military figures.”<sup>13</sup> Western Tigray was a hotspot of the Ethiopian developmental state where parastatal enterprises structured the sesame and cotton value chain.<sup>14</sup> Young people from all over Ethiopia found seasonal jobs in the agricultural hubs of Humera, May Kadra, Bereket and Dansha. They were employed by local investors who put them to work farming parcels of land that were undeniably larger than is common in most of Ethiopia. They were particularly prone to adopting and spreading the stereotype that Tigrayans were richer, especially since they did not spontaneously distinguish

9. See, for example, the International Crisis Group report “Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia’s North” [online], *Crisis Group Africa Briefing*, n° 156, 12 June 2020, <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b156-bridging-divide-ethiopias-north>>, accessed on 22 April 2024, where “the Amhara” are presented as a single, unified political group. Nationalist claims to Wolqayt are depicted as popular among Amharas, and as having taken root from 1991.

10. Interviews with CRAIWT founding members, Gondar, October 2020.

11. Interviews with investors and Tigray land administration experts, Sudan, December 2022; phone interviews, October 2020 and January 2023.

12. B. Godifay Kabsay, “Socio-Cultural and Economic Impact of Development Induced Displacement on Resettled People: The Case of Welkayt Sugar Factory in Tigray Region, Ethiopia”, *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 12, n° 4, 2020, p. 94-103.

13. See T. Lavers, *Ethiopia’s “Developmental State”...*, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

14. See S. Vaughan and M. Gebremichael, *Rethinking Business and Politics in Ethiopia: The Role of EFFORT, the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray*, London, Overseas Development Institute, 2011.

“Tigrayans” from “Wolqayté”. Many of the Wolqayté who were hiring this migrant workforce voiced support for the CRAIWT after annexation.<sup>15</sup> The CRAIWT brought together wealthy individuals who often come from former landowning families, and it might be seen as the embodiment of discontent towards the developmental state.

Claims connected to agricultural policies revived the resentment that certain historical Wolqayt families might have harboured in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when tens of thousands of returnees from Sudan and Tigrayans from food-insecure areas of Tigray were resettled on former agricultural land along the Sudanese border.<sup>16</sup> The nascent division between these resettled people and people who could claim ancestry in Wolqayt widened, and was used by Amhara nationalists.

However, I was able to see from my incipient research that the “Tigrayan” or “Amhara” labels did not seem to be politically relevant when it came to explaining much of Wolqayt’s history. During the 1974-1991 civil war, as today, Wolqayt families appeared to be divided; in November 2020 and the months that followed, brothers joined opposite sides even though they were supposedly defined by their blood relations. Even according to people who had sided with hardline Amhara nationalists, the politicisation of a distinct “Wolqayté” identity seems to be a fairly recent construction, emerging in the mid-2010s. While territorial claims are framed in terms of “identity” and “history”, my interviews with urban activists and (founding) CRAIWT members led me to the somehow unsurprising conclusion that it was economic prejudice – perceived or real – that had led to the emerging racial hierarchies.<sup>17</sup>

Once the war in Tigray began, I had to consider the evident fact that the nationalists I wanted to study had taken control of large swathes of the state apparatus. This called for an examination of concrete state practices under nationalism.

#### **METHODOLOGY: OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEWS**

Between November 2020 and July 2021, I travelled to occupied Western Tigray several times with research authorisations, with the aim of observing land redistribution and documenting the day-to-day administration of the occupied zone. When direct observation by travelling to Wolqayt became impossible, I began to interview people who had been displaced from there, first in Sudan

15. In interviews, displaced people insisted that all the known CRAIWT members who took up positions in the new administration were locally known investors.

16. See K. Berhanu, *Returnees, Resettlement and Power Relations: The Making of a Political Constituency in Humera, Ethiopia*, Amsterdam, VU University Press, 2000.

17. Interviews, Gondar, October 2020.

in November and December 2022,<sup>18</sup> then in Tigray in June, November and December 2023, and finally in February and March 2024.<sup>19</sup>



**Map 1. Schematic Map of Northern Ethiopia**

(© M. Labzaé)

Qualitative interviews were conducted in Amharic or with the help of an interpreter who translated Tigrigna into Amharic, or a mixture of both. I conducted formal interviews lasting from 20 minutes to half a day with more than 110 people. The interviewees had been displaced from the villages and towns of May Kadra, Humera, Adebay, Mogo, Addi Goshu, Rawyan, Qorarit, May Gaba, Bereket, Delesa Qoqah, May Woini, Ba'éker, May Humer, Ruwassa, Division, Idris, May Qeyh, Dansha, Addi Remets, Tekezé, Bét Mulu and May Cha'é. All of them had left Western Tigray between November 2020 and March 2024. The interviewees included 16 women and 7 Tsellim Bét (although maybe more of them might actually identify as such). Tsellim Bét are Tigrigna-speaking Black people who identify as Tigrayans and live in the Tekezé Valley in the lowlands of Wolqayt.<sup>20</sup>

18. These interviews were conducted in Tunaydba, Um Rakuba, Qariya 8, Babikri, Gedaref and Khartoum.

19. These interviews were conducted in Mekelle, Shire, Enda Aba Guna, Sheraro, Dedebit and Addi Mohammeday.

20. Although the name *Tsellim Bét* (literally meaning "Black House"), which was adopted by these people themselves, is associated with enslavement, it does not have the pejorative connotations of other terms that are usually used by Amhara nationalists, like the insulting *shanqilla*, which

All the interviewees, whether they came from resettlement villages or claimed to be originally from Wolqayt, had spent decades in Western Tigray, except for five young adults who were born there. They were all farmers, agricultural employees, cattle keepers or agricultural investors, apart from six civil servants and two gold panners. Four had been administrators of their *tabia*<sup>21</sup>, and four were priests. Several had been displaced twice, including some who had initially been expelled from the Amhara region in 2016.

Although I was particularly interested in details of the history, agricultural practices and current administration of the zone, extreme violence featured prominently in the stories told by the displaced people. "Leave the history!" several elders told me: they wanted to talk about the current crisis and the violence they had suffered. On many occasions, they insisted that the level of violence was unprecedented. They had "never seen such things".

#### **FINDINGS: FORCED LABOUR, (SEXUAL) SLAVERY, INSTITUTIONALISED RACISM AND MASSACRES**

The fact that all the accounts of violence tallied showed that subjecting an ethnically defined part of the population to extreme violence was central to the administration of occupied Western Tigray, which has now been rechristened the Wolqayt Tegeḍe Setit Humera Zone. An ethnic cleansing policy was carried out under the rule of the CRAIWT and the Prosperity Party, which took control of the administration in November 2020 with the aim of making land available to settlers and supporting new social hierarchies. The massacre of civilians, which is a common warfare practice in the history of the Horn of Africa,<sup>22</sup> served exactly this purpose of enforcing an ethnic hierarchy in which Tigrayans were at the very bottom. These massacres, and particularly the wave of mass killings in the Autumn of 2021 I detail below, had to be included in my investigation of state practices under nationalism.

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encompasses all the lowland black populations who were historically targeted by slave raids. While Tsellim Bét are often said to be descended from enslaved people brought to Wolqayt from Sudan or Southern Ethiopia, Wolbert Smidt has questioned this, and argues that they are most probably related to the Gumuz. See W. G. C. Smidt, "Preliminary Report on an Ethnolinguistic Research Among the Cha'ré People, a Hidden Ethnic Splinter Group in Western Tigray", *Ityopis*, vol. 1, 2011, p. 103-126.

21. The *tabia* in Tigrigna, or *qebelé* in Amharic, is the local administration in Ethiopia. The administrative structure is, from top to bottom: central government>region>zone>*wereda*>*qebelé*. In Tigray, *qushet* refers to a village, and is smaller than the *tabia/qebelé*.

22. See A. de Waal, "Genocidal Warfare in North East Africa", in D. Bloxham and A. D. Moses (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 529-549, especially p. 529-530. See also R. Reid, "Atrocity in Ethiopian History", *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 24, n° 1, 2022, p. 97-108; T. Berhane-Selassie, *Ethiopian Warriorhood: Defence, Land and Society 1800-1941*, Rochester, James Currey, 2018.

I have omitted killings that took place during battles from my list, although some military operations appear to have targeted civilians directly, notably in the lowlands from Dansha to May Gaba, in the early weeks of the war. Some events, including the Tekezé Bridge massacre on 17 January 2021, were documented in the 2022 joint report by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International,<sup>23</sup> which all coincides with my data, even the names of the victims. My interviewees were adamant about reporting the massacres they had witnessed, but they all concluded that the killings of individuals or small groups were too numerous to be fully accounted for. As a former militia commander put it: “We stopped counting when just 3, 5, 8 got killed. There were too many.”<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, sexual violence was mentioned repeatedly, including evidence that indicated sexual enslavement by *fanno*. According to people who had remained in occupied Western Tigray for several years, “rapes are like individual killings”: uncountable. Being a foreign man, I did not try to identify victims of sexual violence and interview them, as my questions might obviously have had a traumatising effect. However, sexual violence was implicit in many stories. Numerous families have been divided, with the women staying in Western Tigray while the men fled in the early days of the war or were deported after spending months in custody. Some men reported that they had to “give” their daughters to *fanno* to be married<sup>25</sup>. Many displaced people mentioned that the kidnapping of women by *fanno* was a common practice.

Among the research results, it appeared from my interviews that forced labour is ubiquitous in Western Tigray in agriculture and to a lesser extent in gold panning. Tigrayans are asked to work for *fanno* leaders, sometimes by the local administration, and are denied a salary. Some who asked about their wages were threatened with jail. All of them had already spent weeks or months in prison since the beginning of the occupation.<sup>26</sup> Some agricultural workers had been released from prison on bail only to be forced to work land that had been appropriated by *fanno*.

New sharecropping agreements are emerging in Wolqayt, largely to the detriment of tenant farmers, who are pushed to agree to keep only a quarter of their harvest. Those who enter into these agreements have no guarantee that they will eventually see their share, as armed landlords can always decide not to give them their due.<sup>27</sup> The development of these sharecropping practices reveals local

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23. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, “We Will Erase you from this Land”: *Crimes against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing in Ethiopia’s Western Tigray Zone*, Amnesty International/Human Rights Watch, 2022, p. 139-146.

24. Interview, Enda Aba Guna, December 2023.

25. I met three of them in Sheraro and Dedebeit in March 2024.

26. Interviews, Sheraro, March 2024.

27. I documented emerging sharecropping deals from interviews conducted in February and March 2024, mostly in Sheraro, with people who had spent two or three agricultural seasons in occupied Wolqayt.



power dynamics in which a *de facto* captive workforce has to accept whatever a violent administration controlled by armed men imposes on them. In addition to having unequal access to land and labour, Tigrayans have not been able to keep their cattle since the annexation. Large herds grazing in the lowlands were appropriated by *fanno* right from the beginning of the occupation. At the time, meat was cheap in Humera, Dansha and other towns, to the point where soldiers were complaining that they were “fed up with meat.”<sup>28</sup>

The racial hierarchy between Tigrayans (and increasingly Tsellim Bét) and Wolqaytés or Amharas in this agricultural production system is constantly recalled by *fanno* and the local administration. A young Tigrayan who had been freed from Addi Remets prison only to be put to work for a *fanno* reported this answer when he tried to ask for the 21 quintals of grain he was supposed to receive, when the *fanno* had only given him one: “Hey, but you’re Tigrayan! Have you forgotten Addi Remets? Do you want to go back there? Tigrayans don’t ask for their due!”<sup>29</sup>

Enslavement, which had been central to the region’s economic set-up for decades, may have returned in Wolqayt’s lowlands, as Tsellim Bét survivors were clearly told by *fanno* from the early days of the occupation that they had come to “buy and sell you like in Haile Sellassie’s time.”<sup>30</sup> Many Tsellim Bét initially tried to stay on by taking advantage of the fact that the *fanno* did not spontaneously identify Black people as Tigrayans. At a meeting where Tigrayans were asked to identify themselves by raising their hands, the Tsellim Bét who complied were told to put their hands down, as according to the racial perceptions of the *fanno* they could not be Tigrayans. Despite this, there are many Tsellim Bét among the people who have recently crossed to the eastern bank of the Tekezé, describing continuous violence and forced labour. As a young Tsellim Bét man put it: “It is now that they are saying that Tsellim Bét are *junta*, now that they don’t have Tigrayans any more”<sup>31</sup>.

This racial hierarchy is not just imposed by brute force; it is also institutionalised and enforced by the local bureaucracy. Tigrayans are denied ID cards, which prevents them from travelling, even locally. Cards are denied to people who are not known to the new authorities or are unable to find a guarantor. In some towns, a temporary “moving authorisation” (*menqeshaqesha wereqet*), which is valid for three months, can be issued. Known as “the white paper”, this document looks like an ID card but is not a real one: it is a “support letter” that displays a photograph of the holder and certifies that she or he lives in a given *qebelé*. On the cards issued in Rawyan, the geographical limits of their validity are

28. Fieldnotes, Dansha, December 2020.

29. Interview, Sheraro, March 2024.

30. As phrased by both Tsellim Bét and Habesha people in three interviews in Sheraro, December 2023 and March 2024.

31. Interview, Sheraro, March 2024. *Junta* is a derogatory term that was adopted to refer to Tigrayans after Abiy Ahmed used it in his televised speech on the night the war began.

specified: “Anybody found with this support letter outside our *wereda* or Humera city will be prosecuted by law”<sup>32</sup>. Holders of an ID card issued by any locality in the Amhara region can circulate freely in the zone. Controlling movement was among the first tasks of the nationalist administration in the early months of the occupation, and administrators were busy issuing *laissez-passer* to merchants who were transporting looted grain to the Amhara region, and to Tigrayan civilians, mostly elderly women, fleeing to the other side of the Tekezé.<sup>33</sup>

#### **MASS VIOLENCE, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND LAW: DOCUMENTING CONTEXTS AND UNDERSTANDING PROCESSES**

Because I am a social *scientist*, documenting, organising and publishing facts about war crimes that might be used for prosecution might raise questions, as it would necessarily take me away from attempting a dispassionate, neutral vision of events. However, trying to produce “balanced research” is neither possible nor desirable, as social scientists are inevitably socially and politically situated, and acknowledging where we stand strengthens our findings.<sup>34</sup>

In the first place, the publication of these results is a way for me to remain faithful to the people I interviewed. All of them were adamant about giving me lists of victims and details of massacres and other crimes because they wanted them to be known. The displaced persons believed that their ordeal had not been paid sufficient attention by “the international community” a foreigner asking questions seemed to them to embody. The second reason why I am publishing these notes is that I share the interviewees’ belief that only justice – potentially including prosecution and trial – can ensure a sustainable peace.

Another important motive is that in a context of intense propaganda from all sides, especially the Amhara occupation forces, who produce negationist content<sup>35</sup>, it seems important to provide evidence that makes it possible to assert that these crimes were indeed committed, and that the Autumn 2021 wave of massacres constituted a *policy* of ethnic cleansing. While it may be that this document cannot be treated as evidence of the type required in a prosecution or trial, it seeks to provide a clear, contextualised view of mass violence and an understanding of these crimes informed by social science methodology and thinking.

32. The template used in Rawyan does not include spaces between words. Ironically, it also contains Amharic errors. I consulted three of these documents in Sheraro in March 2024.

33. Fieldnotes, March and June 2021.

34. See H. S. Becker, “Whose Side Are we on?”, *Social Problems*, vol. 14, n° 3, 1967, p. 239-247.

35. The examples are too many to cite, but a look at any of the reports by the regional TV channel Amhara Media Corporation shows a highly a-historical view of territory, the conflation of all Tigrayans with the TPLF, the demonisation of the TPLF and a lack of attention to the violence committed by the CRAIWT and Amhara forces.

An understanding of the contexts and processes permitted by social science can be used for the purposes of justice. Before a legal judgment can be issued, and before an analysis can be offered, facts need to be established. This is all the more difficult when independent journalists and researchers cannot access the area, when there is a high probability that written archives on the massacres will not be found and when the overall political situation is not conducive to opening comprehensive debates on the crimes that have been committed. There is currently a high degree of risk that any talk about atrocities will be seen as a threat to the fragile status quo following the cessation of hostilities. In this context, social scientists cannot rely on reports by others to provide an understanding of the violence. Data need to be produced using social science methodologies. In return, these data can be made available to others, notably to lawyers and people in search of justice.

This is therefore a way to respond to calls for international academia to “bolster fragile or divided [local] academic communities.”<sup>36</sup> It means providing funding to Ethiopian colleagues, for example through the “Conflict and Politics in Ethiopia” programme that enabled me to carry out this research. It also means producing and sharing data to fuel collective thinking about the war. Furthermore, foreign researchers might face less pressure than their Ethiopian colleagues when it comes to doing fieldwork and touching on questions that are deemed to be politically sensitive.

While the facts must be established, the accounts collected in this text will certainly be met with suspicion by many people, so a few words on why I believe the victims are needed here. Social science implies a level of trust in the people one meets, which does not mean that their statements are exempt from critical scrutiny. Readers must also trust that the author is depicting social facts based on empirical enquiry and rigorous methods. Qualitative methodology, whether using ethnography or interviews, relies on the idea that “others exist, I have met them, and I am asking you to believe what I write about them.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, most of the time the “proof” or “pieces of evidence” produced by social science cannot be treated at the level required for legal prosecution, although representatives of the social sciences are being called to the stand more and more frequently. Our proof does not have to reach the same level of irrefutability, or as Olivier de Sardan puts it: “The truthfulness of our assertions cannot claim to be truth, but rather plausibility.”<sup>38</sup>

Likewise, intentionality cannot be ultimately proved by using the tools of social science, as decades of debate between the reified positions of the “structuralists” and the “intentionalists” in studies of the Holocaust have

36. See R. Ibreck and A. de Waal, “Introduction: Situating Ethiopia in Genocide Debates”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 24, n° 1, 2022, p. 83-96.

37. J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, *La rigueur du qualitatif. Les contraintes empiriques de l'interprétation socio-anthropologique*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Bruylant, 2008, p. 28. The translation is mine.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

shown.<sup>39</sup> But if we persist with a founding principle of social science – at least since Durkheim’s time – that human action is determined by socially constructed norms and contexts,<sup>40</sup> then documenting the processes that form them allows an understanding of violence, just like any other social fact. This is why the elements gathered here matter, as they provide an understanding and contextualisation of the ethnic cleansing in Western Tigray.

On a more practical note, another reason the testimonies I have collected deserve to be believed is that they are consistent in terms of the places, identities of the victims and the perpetrators, *modus operandi*, and numbers of people killed that are mentioned. Different people interviewed in different refugee camps a few months apart gave similar accounts of the events. This triangulation is a validation criterion in social science.

I was not able to interview the perpetrators, however. This is the main blind spot of this research, as the way perpetrators talk about violence, make sense of it and justify their deeds is necessary for the purposes of shedding light on the sociological norms that lead them to act this way. However, my encounters with members of the social groups and institutions that perpetrated the violence (Amhara Special Forces and *fanno*) before the wave of massacres contribute to both giving credit to the testimonies and showing the level of intentionality behind the killings.

#### **THE LOGIC OF MASS MURDERS**

Back in March 2021, some ASF members told me about how they “cleansed” villages. One even showed me a video in which several corpses, including women, lay side by side. There were numerous calls to wipe out Tigrayans, as a policeman claimed in March 2021: “We should kill all Tigrayans over the age of five, then there will be a new generation and it will be better. We can’t live with them!”<sup>41</sup> Declarations like this echo the words reported by survivors three years later. A Tsellim Bét man from the lowlands of Wolqayt remembered a public meeting in the first months of the occupation at which the *fanno* told the inhabitants: “We will kill Tigrayans and take their women; we will kill everyone over five, and the Blacks, we will buy and sell them.”<sup>42</sup> In short, what victims of the late 2021 violence were describing was what the ASF and the *fanno* had been calling for in everyday conversations a few months earlier.

This does not mean that the nationalist forces had mechanically done what they said they would, but it does show that on the side of the perpetrators,

39. See I. Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*, New Haven/Jerusalem, Yale University Press/Yad Vashem, 2008, p. 92-101.

40. See É. Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, New York, The Free Press, 1982.

41. Fieldnotes, Dansha, March 2021.

42. Interview, Sheraro, March 2024.

the political context and the by then high social acceptability of violence – as almost all male adults were *de facto* militiamen – made these crimes possible. The increase in the scale and the repetition of massacres by the Autumn of 2021 seem to confirm how the wider military context has shaped what the nationalists could do. Back then, they had the full backing of the Amhara region and the federal government. The outcome of the war seemed to be uncertain for the government and its allies. The Amhara region, on which the Wolqayt TegeDé Setit Humera zone officially depended, issued a particularly warmongering “emergency call” to counter the TDF’s advance in which all public offices were told to suspend their normal activities and direct all their resources towards the war effort.<sup>43</sup> Official communiqués had a martial tone: “[...] to guarantee their success, the security forces can take any necessary measure against any group or individual who hinders in various ways the struggle and movements of the existential campaign.”<sup>44</sup>

The Amhara nationalists have built on the resentment created by the massacres that targeted Amhara populations in other regions of Ethiopia, which have received intense media coverage, particularly in the weeks preceding the war in Tigray.<sup>45</sup> By doing this, the militants tried to legitimise their violence, portraying it as a mere correction of past injustices or the prevention of future abuses by identified “enemies” – in this case Tigrayans, including civilians. This “rhetorical practice in which one falsely accuses one’s enemies of conducting, plotting, or desiring to commit precisely the same transgression that one plans to commit against them”<sup>46</sup> has been called “accusation in a mirror” by scholars of the genocide against the Tutsis. A few decades earlier, Karl Kraus had called it “persecutory innocence.”<sup>47</sup> The CRAIWT leaders’ and Amhara nationalist combatants’ definition of themselves as victims has involved a re-reading of Ethiopia’s history, which is now centred around an “existential threat” and the alleged targeting of the Amhara, who are thought to embody a certain idea of “Ethiopia”.

The period of late October and early November 2021 can be viewed as one of the climaxes of the war and social polarisation. It is highly probable that orders

43. See “Urgent Call from the Government Council of the Amhara Region” [In Amharic: ከአግራ ክልል መስተዳድር ምክር ቤት የተላለፈ የአስቸኳይ ጥሪ!] [online], *Fana Broadcasting Corporation*, 31 October 2021, <<https://www.fanabc.com/archives/94713>>, accessed on 22 April 2024.

44. *Ibid.* The translation is mine.

45. There were attacks in Mettekel, another area claimed by Amhara nationalists, in September 2020, followed by the 2 November 2020 massacre in Guliso, West Wellega, that left more than 50 people dead in a schoolyard. This massacre ignited a wave of public outrage in Ethiopia. Emotional speeches in Parliament were screened on TV over and over again when the war in Tigray began. In the Amhara region, this boosted the popular sentiment among urban men that armed struggle was necessary to ensure protection.

46. K. L. Marcus, “Accusations in a Mirror”, *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal*, vol. 43, n° 2, 2012, p. 359.

47. See J. Bouveresse, *Les premiers jours de l’inhumanité. Karl Kraus et la guerre*, Marseille, Hors d’atteinte, 2019.

*The Ethnic Cleansing Policy in Western Tigray since November 2020*

to kill and/or deport all Tigrayans were issued at a zone level. The repeated massacres show that these were not isolated events, but rather a coordinated policy implemented all over Western Tigray. Human rights organisations and United Nations agencies reported mass arrests and deportations of Tigrayans to the eastern bank of the Tekezé River over the course of these months.<sup>48</sup> The October 2023 report by the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia concluded that the “forced expulsion of ethnic Tigrayans from Western Tigray by the Amhara Special Forces, with the involvement of *fanno* militias, amounts to the crime against humanity of deportation or forcible transfer of population.”<sup>49</sup> Similar deportations have occurred each time military tensions have risen, including after the signature of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in November 2022<sup>50</sup>.

The ASF and *fanno* were the main perpetrators of the killings, but the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) troops stationed in the area did nothing to protect civilians. Eritrean troops took part in the killings, notably by assisting the *fanno* and the ASF in gathering victims together and transporting them to the execution fields. On some occasions, the Eritreans pushed for the deportation of people the *fanno* had first intended to kill.

Other elements also lead to the conclusion that the killings were planned, coordinated and implemented as part of a wider policy of ethnic cleansing. Between March and July 2021, the ethnic cleansing was visible. Tigrayans, mostly older women, were selling their belongings on the side of roads before asking the administration for *laissez-passeurs* to leave the zone. Like many local officials I interviewed, Sefer Mellese, a prominent *fanno* leader who is among the most popular Amhara fighters, endorsed the deportations when I interviewed him in Humera in July 2021. He depicted forced displacement as a normal lawful measure, while acknowledging *en passant* the level of violence and threat to Tigrayans: “The Amhara government took care of them [...]. For them not to be killed, we provided vehicles to take them back to their country.”<sup>51</sup> The wave of massacres in the Summer and Autumn of 2021 denoted a radicalisation and speeding up of this policy to expel Tigrayans from Western Tigray. Mass killings involve a degree of coordination and preparation, but they are also processes

48. See, among others, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Action situation report, 9 December 2021; Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, “We Will Erase you from this Land”..., *op. cit.*

49. See International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, “Comprehensive Investigative Findings and Legal Determinations” [online], 13 October 2023, p. 81, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/comprehensive-investigative-findings-and-legal-determination-international-commission-human-rights-experts-ethiopia-ahrc54crp3>>, accessed on 22 April 2024.

50. See Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Ethnic Cleansing Persists under Tigray Truce” [online], Human Rights Watch, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2023, <[https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/01/ethiopia-ethnic-cleansing-persists-under-tigray-truce#:~:text=\(Nairobi\)%20%E2%80%93%20Local%20authorities%20and,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today.>](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/01/ethiopia-ethnic-cleansing-persists-under-tigray-truce#:~:text=(Nairobi)%20%E2%80%93%20Local%20authorities%20and,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today.>), accessed on 22 April 2024.

51. Interview, Humera, July 2021.

and the result of processes in which further steps reduce the diversity of possible outcomes, and ratchet effects prevent trends from being reversed.<sup>52</sup>

The *modus operandi* was the same in all the massacres. Victims were called to official meetings before being jailed or taken to the execution fields. The individuals and teams who called them for the meetings were known by all the inhabitants as the new local rulers, whether they were *fanno* or *tabia* (*qebelé*) administrators. Members of the ASF were also present, and sometimes Eritrean soldiers, too. In short, the massacres were carried out by actors who embodied the state. In different locations, within a few days or weeks, people were told the same things by different officials: "Leave/move out", and more commonly, "We don't take any responsibility for what will happen to you if you stay."<sup>53</sup> For the people attending these meetings, these words were clear: they were a death threat.

Even in cases when a direct threat to kill was not expressed as "we will kill you", "not taking any responsibility" also amounted to a death threat, especially when armed men were called on to "take all due measures". During the Red Terror, "taking revolutionary measures" often meant killing, or silencing in some other way. In Rwanda in 1994, "working" was used for "killing Tutsis"<sup>54</sup>. The language used by Amhara militiamen in 2020 and 2021 was replete with such euphemisms, which are nonetheless very clear in the context in which they are used, as when the *fanno* use "escorting" (*meshegnet*) or "ostracise" (*masweged*). We have known since Pierre Bourdieu that political statements are the product of an intersection between an intent to express something and the social environment that shapes reception, creating compromises and euphemisms<sup>55</sup>.

In the meetings, Tigrayans were asked to identify themselves by raising their hands and were then arrested. Some spent weeks in jail before being taken to an execution field. In some locations, people claiming to be "50/50" (Wolqayté and Tigrayan) were allowed to stay, but the *fanno* soon inquired about their origins by asking their neighbours in rural societies where local community ties are very close and where "the same person could be another's neighbour or in-law and a local official."<sup>56</sup>

People were jailed and/or handcuffed in a similar way. A particularly painful handcuffing method known as *yiftign*, high up the arms, was used. Handcuffing dozens of people this way takes time and requires the preparation of ties, places,

52. As C. R. Browning has shown about the Final Solution in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

53. This type of formulation was reported in many interviews by people who had been displaced from different locations of Western Tigray at different times of the occupation.

54. See A. Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*, New York, Human Rights Watch, 1999, p. 317.

55. See P. Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991.

56. L. A. Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2009, p. 131.



and manpower. The perpetrators needed to make sure that before the killings enough soldiers or militiamen would watch over the victims while they were being transported and at the execution field. The use of lorries and excavators also implies planning and preparation. The fact that many villages were burnt to the ground, as online satellite images (most of which were probably taken in late 2021) show,<sup>57</sup> leads to the conclusion that the “freeing” of villages by whatever means was a zone-wide policy.

Despite being ordered to leave, many survivors stressed they were prevented from doing so. Instead, they were arrested and had to pay to be released. Having Tigrayans remain in the zone was a lucrative business for *fanno* and CRAIWT members, who were able to hold them to ransom on a regular basis. The ENDF have also been involved in the business of smuggling Tigrayans out of Western Tigray. The usual price for people who have been displaced most recently is 20,000ETB to cross the Tekezé, while some have paid up to 52,000ETB to cross on military trucks.

#### **A LIST OF MASSACRES**

I have chosen to leave some details unpublished. I have not included the extended lists of the victims including their names, their fathers’ names and sometimes their grandfathers’ names that were compiled by witnesses and relatives, who prepared these lists with the help of IDP camp managers, who are often former *tabia* administrators, and who expected that foreign journalists or investigators would one day take an interest in them. While there is a need to fight the dehumanisation of victims by reporting their names and not hiding them behind numbers, it is not currently possible to predict how this publication might be used in the future. In the context of the extensive division and polarisation of local communities and the considerable capacity of the higher authorities to impose political settlements, it is better not to publish the names of the victims and perpetrators. However, they are being kept at the disposal of future independent legal proceedings.

Likewise, the names of places have sometimes been withheld, as potential pieces of evidence could be altered or destroyed if the precise locations were to be communicated. There are good grounds to believe that attempts have been made to destroy evidence of the 2020-2021 violence. An investigation by Gondar University into massacres alleged to have been committed by the TPLF included the exhumation of bodies and digging up of mass graves that might well have been where victims of the post-2020 massacres were laid – a textbook example of the destruction of evidence. The missions were carried out without independent

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57. See, for example, Matrebel *qushet*, in May Woini *tabia*: 14°08'18.7"N 37°15'31.5"E, retrieved on 29 March 2024.



*Conflits armés dans la Corne de l'Afrique*

observers or members of human rights organisations being present, and speeches by individuals responsible for the “research” were full of unsubstantiated claims attributing the murders to TPLF cadres<sup>58</sup>.

Because of the same concerns about the security of the respondents, their initials have been changed. Events are listed chronologically.

**17 January 2021 (Tir 9, 2013) at the Tekezé River. 52 inhabitants of Addi Goshu killed by fanno and the ASF**

This story was told to me in Sheraro in December 2023 by G, a survivor. On 17 January 2021, *fanno* were going from door to door in Addi Goshu to arrest Tigrayans. G was hauled on to an FSR truck with 60 other people. The truck stopped before the Tekezé Bridge in Adiabo and everyone was instructed to get off and cross the bridge, which they did. Once they were on the other side, they were shot at by *fanno* from both sides of the river while walking on the road. 9 people (7 of whom were injured) survived, while 52 others were murdered. G walked to Sheraro, which was by then under Eritrean occupation.

The Eritrean army had a camp further along the eastern side of the river, at May Hanse on the road to Shire. They had left control of the bridge to the *fanno* for some time, and this is when the massacre took place, on 17 January 2021. Eritrean soldiers later retook control of the bridge. G and his friends, including people from the administration of Semae'tat camp, gave me a list of the people killed, all of whom were from Addi Goshu. They all agreed on the number of dead – 52 – of whom they spontaneously mentioned 23 by name.

**4 August 2021 (Hamlé 28, 2013), at the Tekezé River. 16 inhabitants of Idris killed by fanno and the ASF**

This story was told to me by F in two interviews in Sheraro in December 2023. F is in his early twenties and survived the massacre. On 25 July (*hamlé* 18), the zone administrators organised a meeting in Idris *tabia* at which they told the population that Tigrayans should leave. Belay,<sup>59</sup> the head of the “peace and security” office of the *wereda*, was there. Three days of rioting and confusion followed in and around Idris as Tigrayans tried to flee, while the *fanno* looted.

58. See Amhara Media Corporation, “Gondar University Research Team: ‘We are working to make the massacre of Amharas from Wolqayt, Tegedé and Telemt known to the world’” [online] (in Amharic: “የወልቃይት ጠገዬ እና ጠለምት አማራጭ ጥቅጫ ለዓለም ለማሳወቅ እየሠራን ነው።”, የጎንደር ዩኒቨርሲቲ የጥናት ቡድን), 8 April 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WII517E6Lhk>>, accessed on 22 April 2024.

59. Known as Belay Ayenew or Belay Ayelew. He is mentioned in all the killings and mass detentions that took place in Humera *wereda*. His name has previously been made public in Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, “We Will Erase you from this Land”..., *op. cit.*, p. 174, p. 220.

F and 50 other people (he says there were 51 of them) left together on 28 July (*hamlé* 21), crossing rural areas in an attempt to reach the Tekezé.

They arrived at the river on 1 August (*hamlé* 25), when they were arrested by *fanno* and the ASF. They were detained there on the bank of the river until 4 August (*hamlé* 28), women and men together. That morning, the ASF took 19 men away “to wash” in the Tekezé. They then separated one elderly man and a child, keeping 17 people, including F, on the bank of the river. They tied their arms behind their backs with pieces of cloth. They made them sit in rows of three in small holes that had been dug earlier. They were sitting as if in a rowing boat, each man with another between his legs. F was at the front of his group of three, which was the first one. They were surrounded by armed men, who shot them. F was not hit by the first shot, but he fell on the man behind him. Then, “they checked if we were all dead with another bullet”, said F Luckily, the second bullet only wounded him slightly. It burnt the inside of his leg, but he was able to walk.

After the armed men had left, F got up, but his arms were still tied. He went into a nearby field and found an irrigation pipe on the edge of which he managed to cut off the clothes his arms were tied with. He walked for two days, sleeping in the wild. He reached higher up on the riverbank and tried unsuccessfully to cross the Tekezé. He found himself near the sugar corporation’s plantation, where Eritrean soldiers found him and arrested him. They tied him very tightly to the back of their pick-up truck. This was on 6 August (*hamlé* 30). The Shaabia soldiers asked Desta Tsegaye, the head of security of Wolqayt *wereda* (or rather *one of the heads*), what they should do with F. Desta told them not to kill him, that he knew him. In fact, Desta was with an investor who had no official position but had by chance eaten breakfast at F’s small restaurant in Idris some days earlier, and the investor recognised him. F remembers that this man had even left him a 10 birr tip. The investor told Desta he knew F, and the Eritreans did not kill him, but eventually took him to Addi Remets prison, where he stayed until he was freed “as part of the negotiations”: that is, after the Pretoria Agreement, on 2 December 2022 (*Hidar* 21, 2015), to be precise, with 35 other inmates.

F. gave me the list of the 16 people from Idris who were killed on 4 August 2021.

***5 August 2021 (Hamlé 29, 2013). 17 inhabitants from Qorarit killed by fanno and the ASF at Qaqa***

I met a survivor, N, in March 2024 in Addi Mohammedey camp (which suffers from very harsh living conditions, a high rate of promiscuity, over-population and not enough aid. I met several children who were very malnourished. There are more than 25,000 individuals gathered in a small, dusty lowland gold-panning town). On a day in *hamlé* 2013 he cannot remember, around two weeks before the massacre, N was arrested at home by three men wearing ASF uniforms. He was jailed in Qorarit, where he was beaten regularly and interrogated

by policemen who accused him of being a TPLF member and a former combatant, which he denied. He told me that all the Tigrayan inmates had to face similar beatings and questioning.

On the evening of *hamlé* 28, at around 9 p.m., 18 inmates were taken to a place called Qaqa, which is known for its cliff, on the road between Qorarit and Addi Remets. The 18 men were shot on the spot. All of them were believed to be dead, but N, who was injured in the chest, was able to walk and managed to reach the river below the cliff. With difficulty, he followed the river up to the Tekezé, which he crossed with the help of people who knew the area and knew how to swim.

N gave me a list of the 17 victims that agrees with another list that was communicated to me by G, whom I met in Dedebit in March 2024. G lost two family members in the massacre. The list of victims and some of the perpetrators was later verified with B, a young man from Qorarit who also lost relatives in the massacre, whom I met in Mekelle. He mentioned that one of the perpetrators was also a relative. According to him, one of the militiamen killed his own brother-in-law.

***24 October 2021 (Tiqemt 14, 2014). 82 inhabitants of May Gaba and the surrounding villages killed by fanno, the ASF and Eritrean forces***

This story was mentioned by many witnesses but recounted in greater detail by:

- B, a survivor displaced from May Gaba, whom I met in Shire in December 2023,
- H, a woman displaced from May Gaba town, whom I met in Sheraro in December 2023,

- J, a young man living near May Gaba whose mother had seen the round-up of people while on her way to church in the early morning and warned her son to flee. I met him in Addi Mohammeday in March 2024.

- I also rely on the detailed testimony of two other inhabitants of May Gaba, including a former militiaman, gathered in Mekelle and Enda Aba Guna.

On 24 October 2021 (*tiqemt* 14, 2014), Saint Aregawi's Day, *fanno* started to gather people from May Gaba, Delesa Qoqah and surrounding villages, telling them they had been called to a meeting and loading them into cars. H recalls and mentions local *fanno* leaders:

"It was Saint Aregawi and there was a distribution of injera at the church when they came, at Delesa Qoqah church. They were *fanno*, among them were B, M, M and A, who come from Addi Remets. The locals among them identified who was Tigrayan and told them to come to a meeting."

Eritreans were also seen driving around in cars, but apparently they did not take part in the round-up at this point. ASF and *fanno* members came to

the church. B specified that he knew some of them: “We saw them growing up, they’re from here, their parents are from Tembén. And there were others, thieves from Armarch’ho, but the ones who were saying who was Tigrayan and who wasn’t were the locals.” Among the people who were leading the *fanno* on that day, he named the head of the militia and the new administrator of Addisu *qushet*, a man who is said to have fought in the *derg* army and who later became a TPLF member and was involved in the community police under the TPLF. B also mentioned the godfather of one of his children, a former TPLF fighter who had been appointed as an administrator of Mehret *qushet* at the beginning of the occupation. Other witnesses mentioned this man as well. The administrator of Hagos *qushet* was there, too, with other locally well-known peasants turned militiamen. Two other former militiamen from the TPLF regime were among the *fanno* who supervised the round-up.

A former traffic police officer from May Gaba, who was suspected of being a CRAIWT member before the war and who fled to the Amhara region in 2018, was also among the people who supervised the arrest and gathering of Tigrayans. This man is known to have dragged a man alive behind his vehicle to terrorise the population. He spent the first months of the war in May Gaba before being relocated to May Kadra.

Among the victims arrested on that day was a well-known physician from May Gaba, together with his wife who first tried to hide him, his child, his housemaid and her child. All in all, 86 people, including five women, were gathered by *fanno* and the ASF and taken to detention facilities. H identified one of the buildings where the men were taken as the Enda Teklay, May Gaba’s largest hotel, which is on three floors and has approximately 120 rooms. Enda Teklay was turned into a jail soon after Amhara forces entered the town in November 2020. However, B said he was taken to a warehouse and not to Enda Teklay, which shows that several detention places were used on that day.

From their custody, the men were loaded on to Eritrean pick-up trucks in three rounds, starting at around 3:30 p.m. The first time, two cars came to where B was being kept, but one of them was already full. They went away and returned at about 4:30 p.m., this time with both cars empty. People were loaded into them and they left again, only to return at around 6 p.m. Once the cars were full, they left after 6:30 p.m. B was in one of them. The people were handcuffed using the *yiftign* method, high up the arms. B’s ties were so tight that he remembered being bruised for weeks. Two people were left in the warehouse, and B says another man managed to escape from one of the convoys. The people who had been arrested were taken to a cave outside May Gaba.

The soldiers made the people sit in rows. B managed to take advantage of the darkness to escape. He first slipped slowly between two cars, and then ran once he was on the other side of them. He knew the area quite well, having spent years there, and he hid in another cave he knew. He says, “I heard them say ‘one, two, three’, and then they fired”. Then he saw car lights coming in his direction

and thought the soldiers were looking for him, but in the end, he saw them leave down the road. He took refuge at the home of some nearby peasants, who helped him to cut his handcuffs off. If B's count is right, 82 people were killed, including five women.

After he had escaped, he told all the remaining local peasants to leave. Having had responsibilities at local institutions, B is well-known and trusted: "After I told them, all the people of Maycha [*qushet*, where he took refuge] left – 2,500 people." Other witnesses mentioned that inhabitants of all the surrounding *tabia* fled that day. Some were killed by *fanno* on the roads, others drowned trying to cross the Tekezé and some died falling off cliffs as they escaped. B gave me a list of 32 of the victims, which I completed with other inhabitants I met in Addi Mohammeday in March 2024.

H remembers the massive pile of inmates' shoes left next to the Enda Teklay building. When the *fanno* burnt the shoes and clothes, the remaining inhabitants were scared the whole city would catch fire, as there were dry sorghum sleeves and stacks spread around – it was harvest time.

***29-30 October 2021 (19-20 Teqemt 2014). Around 100 people killed by fanno and the ASF in Delesa Qoqah***

C, a former administrator of Delesa Qoqah *tabia*, told me the story in Addi Mohammeday in the presence of five inhabitants, including a priest, who also gave details. On 29 October (*Teqemt 19*), local *fanno* and administrators rounded up Tigrayans, going from door to door and calling them to a meeting. The people who were arrested were taken to a place on the sugar factory land, and were shot on the spot.

The round-up was supervised by two former teachers who had become the top administrator and vice-administrator of Delesa Qoqah under the occupation. Both had spent years in the *tabia* before the war and were well known. The policeman mentioned in the 24 October massacre is also mentioned in the recollections of the round-up as being seen "with papers" in his hand. These documents could be lists of Tigrayan inhabitants or possibly a written order from the *zone* or *wereda* to give the killings a veneer of bureaucratic legality – something many local administrations have done regarding looting, for example by creating "committees for gathering assets without owners" and issuing letters for stolen vehicles.

Interviewees mentioned that the Eritrean soldiers who were involved in the round-ups "saved many people", by forcing the *fanno* to drive arrested Tigrayans to the Tekezé Bridge rather than kill them. Under Eritrean pressure, the main administrator of Bét Mulu *tabia* eventually gave the order to deport people and not kill them. All of these soldiers took part in the subsequent looting.

Interviewees mentioned that the people who were taken to the Tekezé were told not to take anything on the lorries with them. *Fanno* threatened to “slaughter” anybody who was carrying money or valuable items. At one checkpoint, a woman was found with some jewellery sewn into her dress. *Fanno* beheaded her on the spot.

Other interviewees mentioned that over 600 houses had been burnt over the same period, between 24 and 29 October 2021 (*Tiqemt* 14 and 19) in Delesa Qoqah and May Tete’i. Similar round-ups and burnings of villages occurred in May Humer during the same week. Online satellite imagery confirms this damage.<sup>60</sup>

C had prepared a list of victims, explaining that a small number of them might have been killed in the days following the massacre. The list contained 57 names for Delesa Qoqah’s May Woini *qushet* (including at least 11 clergymen), 26 for May Aye *qushet*, and 17 for May Shetene *qushet*.

***31 October 2021 (Tiqemt 21, 2014). 22 inhabitants from May Cha’e killed by the ASF and fanno***

This story was told in Addi Mohammeday by F, who lost her husband in the killing. People were called for a meeting in the morning by the *tabia* administration, *fanno*, and the ASF, who went door to door in this landscape of scattered dwellings. Only Tigrayan men were arrested. The people who had been gathered were taken to a place near the Zaréma River, in the direction of Waldeba Monastery, in May Cha’e *tabia*. 22 people were arrested, and none seem to have survived. F was able to name 10 victims.

***6 November 2021 (Tiqemt 27, 2014). Around 170 inhabitants from Addi Goshu and surrounding qushets killed by the ASF and fanno***

This story is mentioned in all the accounts gathered mainly in Sheraro by people from Addi Goshu, May Woini (a small town also known as Giits) and May Qeyh. A member of the administration of one of the camps in Sheraro gave me numerous details and insisted on introducing me to two survivors, one from Sheikh Menshel *qushet* and one from May Qeyh *qushet*. At first both seemed worried, so I took care not to ask them their names. As our discussion proceeded, however, they became willing to testify on the condition of anonymity and told

60. Among others, see for example: 13°40’45.5”N 37°46’13.7”E near Waldeba; 13°46’44.7”N 37°40’42.8”E May Gaba condominiums (Mezega town); 13°54’39.8”N 37°37’56.3”E May Humer health post; 13°53’29.3”N 37°36’25.4”E One of the camps at the sugar factory; 13°44’31.2”N 37°47’37.4”E Camp at Zaréma dam.

me their stories at length. One of them was hard to follow, as he would provide numerous details without paying any attention to chronology.

On that day, people from Addi Goshu, May Woini, May Qeyh and Sheikh Menshel were killed in at least three rounds of killings using the same *modus operandi*. *Fanno* and the ASF arrested people at home or on the streets.

13 people were killed in town during the first round of killings in Addi Goshu at around midday. During the second round in the late afternoon, 94 people from Sheikh Menshel were arrested, and 86 were taken to a cattle farm in May Woini. Two escaped, and 84 were killed. I met one survivor, and other inhabitants gave me a list of the 84 victims from Sheikh Menshel, while the first witness who told me the story had already listed 43 victims. The survivor recounted that after the 86 people from the *qushet* had been taken to the farm, *fanno* took him and a group of 16 other people next to a trench they had dug and shot them in the back. The victims fell into the trench. The survivor took a bullet in the jaw, but he survived. He and another man who had been shot in the leg but survived helped each other to get out, each untying the other's bonds. The other 14 people died.

At the third round of killing at 9 p.m., another survivor said that 17 people from May Qeyh were shot at the same cattle farm, together with 38 people from Addi Goshu, and "the rest" from Sheikh Menshel and May Woini. This survivor, himself an inhabitant of May Qeyh, recounted:

"In May Qeyh, they came and started to look for people, door to door. They were *fanno*. I didn't know them before, but I know the head of the area for the *fanno*. His name is H T, and he comes from 'Sola', near Addi Remets. At around 8 p.m., H and his men took us to May Woini."

There, they met people from Addi Goshu as well. The survivor recalls:

"They took a first group of 30 people, whom they brought closer to a kind of trench they had dug. They made us stand in two rows. They told us 'Those who have guns and weapons, tell us, we won't kill you'. I told them 'I don't have anything' and they said: 'Shut up!' and beat me. We had our arms tied behind our backs. They killed the first 30. I told my brother: 'Let's run' but he said no. He was too scared. They took 17 people from May Qeyh aside, including me. I could feel that the bond behind my back was not very tight, so little by little I managed to loosen it to the point where I could take it off. I ran all of a sudden towards the bush. They fired at me with all their weapons. I was already further away when I was hit with a bullet in my left leg, above the knee. So I took the piece of clothing that was tying my arms and used it to put around my leg, on my wound. Then I walked for days and nights in the bush until I crossed the Tekezé and arrived in Addi Aser on *Hidar* 12 [21 November]."

When asked how to identify the place on a map or satellite image, he replied: "There are places that they had dug with their bulldozer! And how many shoes, how many pieces of clothes were left there?"



Inhabitants of these localities communicated lists of the victims, counting 84 from Sheikh Menshel, 29 from May Woini, 14 from May Qeyh and 24 from Addi Goshu.

***29 November 2021 (Hidar 20, 2014). May Woini inhabitants killed at the Tekezé. Unknown number of victims, 39 identified***

The inhabitants of one of the camps in Sheraro and the families of the victims I met in November 2023 were not able to tell me any more about the circumstances of this massacre, but insisted on giving me lists of the victims. People from May Woini's various *qushet* were arrested before being killed at the Tekezé. Their relatives gave me two separate lists of victims, totalling 39 inhabitants killed.

***21-22 August 2022 (Nehasé 15 and 16, 2014) and the following days. Dozens abducted from Adebay***

This round of arrests and killings took place as fighting was resuming everywhere in Tigray. Belay Ayanew (the head of security for Humera/Qafta Humera) and *fanno* went in several cars to arrest Tigrayans in the city of Adebay. They used a 10-year-old to identify who was Tigrayan before killing him. That day, they killed five people and arrested at least 33 others who were never seen again. Four of those killed had been involved in the administration after the war, giving pieces of information and collaborating with the new *tabia* team. Witnesses explained their killing by their former collaboration with *fanno*, who eventually silenced them. The survivors from Adebay named 27 people who were arrested on that day and whose whereabouts are unknown, as well as 17 others who were arrested and disappeared on other days. On all these occasions, civil servants, investors, deacons and clergymen, merchants and cooperative managers were among those arrested. The victims are said to be buried around the town in mass graves.

***10 October 2022 (Meskerem 30, 2015). Dozens of university graduates disappeared among Humera prison (Bét Hintset) inmates***

I was given multiple accounts of this story, although the lack of direct witnesses to the potential killing of these inmates prevents me from concluding that a massacre actually took place. In early October 2021, there was a wave of mass arrests and detentions in Humera, May Kadra and Adebay. Former inmates told me that more than 4,000 people were jailed at Humera prison (locally known



as “*Bét Hintset*”, meaning prison in Tigrigna).<sup>61</sup> To organise life in the prison, a group of men known to be university graduates, “intellectuals”, including many teachers, helped settle disputes and tried to intervene in favour of the weakest by talking to the *fanno* and prison guards.

One of the security agents in charge of the prison, Kassahun, had even begun to negotiate the liberation of older inmates with the inmates represented by H., a teacher working in the Amhara region who was arrested when visiting relatives in town. Although Kassahun had told the older inmates they would be freed, the *fanno* shot H. in front of other inmates. After H’s death, it became clear that the negotiations would not lead anywhere. On *meskerem* 30, 2015, a group of between 60 and 90 of the “intellectuals” were taken away and nobody ever heard about them again. While rumours have spread that they were taken to Adebay, all the witnesses, both inmates and people on the outside, believe they were killed, as only two, who were able to prove they were Wolqayté and not Tigrayans, returned. A journalist I met in Mekelle told me that some of them had been taken to Awash 40 camp and were later freed after the Pretoria Agreement. Inmates separately gave me lists of 16 abducted men in addition to H., who was killed first.

**T**hese accounts describe the most brutal and tangible aspects of the ethnic cleansing that occurred in Western Tigray as part of a deliberate policy implemented by the *fanno*, the Amhara Special Forces, the CRAIWT/Prosperity Party administration of occupied Western Tigray, with the complicity of Eritrean troops and the at least implicit backing of the ENDF.

The context, the *modus operandi* and what the perpetrators told the victims all converge towards the idea that the intentional targeting of civilians served the purpose of freeing up land for the occupying forces. Killing civilians would scare the remaining Tigrayans off and make them flee. My reconstruction of the events in context allows a more definitive conclusion regarding the intentionality behind the killings.

While all the killings indicate the level of violence of the administration of occupied Wolqayt, the events described in points 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 show that at a time when the TDF seemed to be a threat to the central government, the ethnic cleansing policy turned into a systematic killing of Tigrayans. During these months, government media outlets broadcasted hate speech about Tigrayans, who faced waves of arrests in Addis Ababa and other towns,<sup>62</sup> which points to the responsibility of the federal government in the killings.

61. See Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, “*We Will Erase you from this Land*”..., *op. cit.*, p. 171-176.

62. See A. Harding, “Ethiopia’s Tigray Conflict: Mass Arrests and Ethnic Profiling Haunt Addis Ababa”, *BBC News*, 21 November 2021.

In March 2024, many Tigrayans still remain trapped in occupied Western Tigray. More and more of them are calling ENDF soldiers, whose personal phone numbers are circulated, asking to be evacuated – most often in exchange for money. Many of them cannot afford the trip.

In Western Tigray, as elsewhere, ethnic affiliation is not a given. People who were able to claim “Wolqayténess” for some time (like Tsellim Bét) are now being forced to flee as well, accused of spying for the TPLF. Likewise, people who were able to remain there as “50/50” are now crossing the Tekezé.

The return of displaced people, something the federal and Tigray governments seem to agree on, will not bring an end to the division of Wolqayté families. Polarisation has led to relatives killing each other, as mentioned with regard to the Qorarit and May Gaba massacres. There is a high potential for intra-family retaliation. It is also likely that women who were forced to marry *fanno* will not be reintegrated into their families.

The violence may not be over yet. Many witnesses who have fled recently mentioned that thousands of Amhara settlers have been brought to their *tabia* and armed by the *wereda*. In Wolqayt *wereda*, the settlers were told publicly by the administration in meetings that they should “protect the land against any return of the *junta*.”<sup>63</sup> In other locations, the *fanno*, who have now been rechristened “peace enforcers” (*selam askebari*), have threatened the remaining Tigrayans that their names are on lists<sup>64</sup>. Their fate is heavily dependent on announcements by politicians. The presence of the ENDF, which has turned the rescue of Tigrayans into a business, is no guarantee of the safety of civilians.<sup>65</sup> ■

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### Résumé

#### **La politique publique de nettoyage ethnique au Tigray de l'Ouest depuis novembre 2020. Établir des faits, comprendre leur logique**

*Depuis novembre 2020, la zone officiellement nommée Tigray de l'Ouest a été annexée à la région voisine, l'Amhara. Sur la base d'observations et d'entretiens avec des personnes déplacées, cet article décrit l'administration de cette zone occupée. Dix épisodes de massacres sont listés dans le texte, qui montre comment la violence de*

63. Interviews, Sheraro, March 2024.

64. *Ibid.*

65. I would like to thank Mathilde Beaufils, Rodolphe Demeestère, Sabine Planel and anonymous reviewers of *Politique africaine* for their invaluable comments.

*Conflits armés dans la Corne de l'Afrique*

*masse fait partie intégrante des pratiques d'État sous l'administration nationaliste amhara. Le texte détaille d'abord les relations entre les sciences sociales et le droit, montrant les usages de la pensée et de la méthodologie sociologiques face aux violences de masse.*