

Layers of traditions

Politics of memory and polarisation in
contemporary Ethiopia

Tegbaru Yared



Layers of traditions

Politics of memory and polarisation
in contemporary Ethiopia

Tegbaru Yared

Contents

Executive summaryiv

Acronymsvi

Introduction..... 1

Chapter 1

Memorials for invented traditions..... 7

Chapter 2

Monumentalising the great tradition 11

The Haile Selassie era: asserting legitimacy and projecting continuity 11

The Dergue era: secularising the great tradition and lionising a ‘proletariat king’ 14

Chapter 3

The ‘return’ of the rejectionist-reconstructivist: EPRDF in power 17

Reinventing traditions and platforming vernacular memories 19

Chapter 4

The moderationist approach – a promising start derailed? 27

Appropriating the great tradition in search of equilibrium 27

State of ambiguity: incoherent moderationism on a collision course 29

The revivalists-restorationists revived? From the urge to restore to resentment and grievance..... 33

Chapter 5

Localising vernacular traditions..... 39

Chapter 6

Conclusion and recommendations..... 45

Notes 53

Executive summary

This monograph analyses a crucial factor animating polarisation in Ethiopia – contrasting material representations of competing memories. Anchored in contrasting interpretations of history, the Ethiopian political landscape has been a battleground of memory wars. The monograph identifies three approaches to collective memory often deployed by Ethiopian political elites. The rejectionist approach targets the ‘great tradition’ and competes to deconstruct it. The revivalist/restorationist approach defines the former as ‘instrumentalist’ and appears to yearn to reconfigure the Ethiopian state and society along the ‘unifying’ tenets of the great tradition. The moderationist approach advocates selective deployment of some of Ethiopia’s past and aspires to contain the excesses of the rejectionists. Of the three, the rejectionist approach seems to have embedded its ideals and aspirations in the institutions and structures of contemporary Ethiopian politics.

These competing approaches are both reinforced and animated by four layers of ‘invented traditions’. The rejectionist camp has institutionalised and used the traditions invented federally, regionally and locally. The revivalists, on the other hand, are left with vestiges of the great tradition confined mostly to opposition political parties and popular culture. The monograph argues that inherent contradictions among the three approaches and their interplays with the four layers of invented tradition have resulted in a polarised political space and conflict in Ethiopia.

Anchored in contrasting interpretations of history,
the Ethiopian political landscape has been a
battleground of memory wars

Memory wars and conflict/war are mutually reinforcing. The former undergirds conflict in Ethiopia, which in turn reifies memory wars. As such, the government should make sure that it secures peace. One way of doing that could be to capitalise on and draw lessons from the Pretoria cessation of hostilities agreement with Tigray People’s Liberation Front. Lessons are also available from the negotiation started with the Oromo Liberation Army and negotiations could be expanded to all contending powers with which it is in armed conflict.

To this end, the government and its agencies could formulate a national reconciliation strategy. It should also legislate laws regulating the hitherto unregulated and arbitrary acts of constructing memorial sites, such as monuments, and the naming and renaming of public spaces. The government may use its constitutional 'framework power' to regulate and standardise memorialisation sub-nationally.

Equally, both the government and political elites in the opposition should conduct national listening tours and memory mapping, and fashion their social, cultural and economic outlooks on their findings. Most importantly, the approaches and strategies of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission should be informed by the state of 'memory wars'. Contestations over collective memory should be high on the national dialogue agenda.

Acronyms

EOTC	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPPJC	Ethiopian Political Parties Joint Council
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organisation
SNNPR	Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front

Introduction

On 2 March 2023, the 127th annual commemoration of the victory of Adwa in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian victory over Italy in 1896, was disrupted after a clash between federal armed forces and a youth group attending the commemoration. The violent confrontation was triggered after the attendees reportedly refused the armed forces order to move to Meskel Square. The square was the site of the official Adwa commemoration.¹

Opposition parties alleged that the disruption was caused by the government's use of excessive force to contain what it called disruptive elements. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church (EOTC) was quick to condemn the government and demanded an explanation as to why government forces threw teargas into the St George church compound. This church is next to the Menelik II statue where the annual celebration of the victory of Adwa used to be held. The church alleged that the incident disrupted the sermon and government forces attacked those who took refuge in the compound.

Contradictions in how Ethiopia's past is conceptualised, archived, presented, transferred and remembered have animated competing political elites' rivalry

The EOTC's statement on the event was prompted not by this particular incident alone. It was informed by the historic 'church and state tradition'² and the memory of the role the church played when the Ethiopian forces launched their campaign on the northern front against the invading Italian forces.³ Also instrumental was the sense of ownership and attachment⁴ to the commemoration partly based on memory of the annual celebration that was observed inside the church compound with hymns and liturgy during the time of emperor Haile Selassie.⁵

Contestation over the official commemoration of the victory of Adwa in that particular space, at the vicinity of the church and the Menelik II statue, or Meskel Square, is as much about memory wars⁶ as it is about the alleged defiling of the church's 'sacred ecclesiastical space'. The contestation has already been expanded to identity of 'shared heroes', questioning the representativeness of then-emperor Menelik as the personification of the Adwa victory. This was largely undergirded by

competing nationalisms and the rise of ethno-national mobilisations that eventually galvanised the pre-2018 protest movements across the country.

This was evidenced by, for instance, contrasting and competing framings of Adwa victory commemorations in the Amhara, Oromia and Tigray regions and how the regional state media outlets presented and broadcast these memories. While Amhara region tended to frame the victory in the image of Menelik, Tigray opted for Ras Alula Aba Nega and Oromia lionised Oromo heroes such as Balcha Safo.

Competition and contradictions as to how Ethiopia's past is conceptualised, constituted, archived, presented, transmitted/transferred and remembered have animated competing political elites' rivalry and fuelling political violence since the advent of the Ethiopian Student Movement in the 1960s.⁷ Since then, both history and 'collective memory'⁸ have become a political battlefield for contending political movements and ideologies, erupting at times violently over who makes, preserves, protects, constitutes, presents and transmits history. In short, given the constitutional rights of 'nations, nationalities and peoples' to 'promote and preserve one's history'⁹ collective memory has become a battlefield for the competing political class. Eventually, 'memory won over history'.¹⁰

These contestations over collective memory and memorialisation have been at the epicentre of Ethiopia's political divide both in pre- and post-2018. Many factors signalled the deep-rooted division on and lack of 'shared collective memory' among Ethiopian political elite and society. In 2019, Ras Mekonnen¹¹ statue in Harar was demolished by youth groups. The Twin Red Fox monument¹² in Goba town square, Oromia, met a similar fate, making way for a statue of local hero Haji Adem Sado.

The statue of an elderly man with his head held low and the barrel of his rifle pointing downwards in the Amhara Martyrs compound in Bahir Dar was removed and later replaced by a lifelike monument of a soldier with his rifle held high. Contestations continued over ownership of Meskel Square,¹³ what sort of flag should beautify cities on major religious and public holidays.

These incidents reflect competing political appropriations and meaning-making segments of the Ethiopian political elite and society have assigned to national holidays, heroes, symbols and spaces. Contestations over what Adwa and major events of the Ethiopian past constitute rage on. Similarly, controversy continues on how and where they should be remembered. Contradictions persist over meaning and interpretations of symbols, sites of memory, objects of memorialisation, the country's recent past and present memorialisation projects in the form of monuments and public spaces such as cultural centres, museums, squares and streets.

These contestations used to be framed as competition and rivalry between subscribers to the great tradition – traditional Ethiopianism¹⁴ and proponents of

‘counter histories’¹⁵ and vernacular memories as acts of resistance against the former. Past and recent experiences, however, indicate that both camps are open to a pragmatic and/or instrumentalist oscillation between ideational and political positions as long as their approach helps them use their discourses to advance their political aspirations. This is driven essentially by how they assess their presence or absence vis-à-vis the state and the power that comes with it.

Those who claim to be the civilisational core of the great tradition, some Tigrayans and, more recently, Amhara forces were seen reducing the great tradition to ‘vernacular memory’ of victimhood and grievances. This would enable them to mobilise their ethnic base and contend for their real or imagined fair share of the state, thereby maintaining the great tradition.

The rejectionists, some Tigrayans and, more recently, Oromo forces, equally used their ‘counter-history’ approach in their bid to capture the state. Once they did, they used the state and its institutions to either appropriate the great tradition or invent their version of it anchored in counter-history and vernacular memory. The only constant determining the approach seems to be real or perceived distance from or proximity to the Ethiopian state.

Shared collective memory has become a rare commodity and the political contestation between the Ethiopianist and ethno-nationalist camps still lingers

Elevation of ethnicity and identity politics as the constitutionally recognised principle of conducting politics,¹⁶ and government and the oppositions’ emphasis on the political saliency of ethnicity since the mid-1990s¹⁷ has exacerbated contestations over the Ethiopian past. Since then, shared collective memory has become a rare commodity and the political contestation between the two nationalist camps, the Ethiopianist and ethno-nationalists, still lingers.¹⁸ It has been a key driver of violence, past and present. The interface between competing ‘politics of memory’ so apparent in Ethiopian politics and conflict necessitates policy-oriented research.

This monograph seizes the opportunity of Ethiopia starting national dialogue and transitional justice initiatives to situate competing memories and memorialisation as core agenda items begging for a negotiated political settlement. The research explores politics of memorialisation and examines possible policy options to better mediate competing memorialisation in the Ethiopian (post-)national dialogue and transitional justice constitutional and legal framework.

It examines one variant of the ‘politics of memory’ – the politics of memorialisation – constructing material representations of symbols, ideals, aspirations and sentiments

of memory in memorial sites.¹⁹ It does so by thoroughly analysing major national and sub-national inventions of traditions²⁰ and construction of memorial sites, and the interplay between these acts and ‘mainstream’ (hegemonic) and ‘vernacular’²¹ memory discourses.

The analysis is placed in the historical and at times dynamic great tradition-vernacular tradition spectrum of Ethiopian politics. What explains the rising politicisation of public spaces and memorials? Why are memorial sites contested? And in what ways do competing political elites use (the construction of) memorials to advance their preferred memory discourse?

The monograph explores the contentions and contestations over collective memory and forwards policy recommendations to accommodate and/or integrate them into the Ethiopian national dialogue and post-national dialogue legal-cum-political architecture. It forwards a fresh argument on how contestation over and competition to deconstruct or maintain the great tradition contributed to inter-elite rivalry and polarisation over memorial sites and public spaces. This, in turn, reinforces vertical and horizontal tensions between the state and organised political movements and segments of society.

Contestation among the three camps and the four layers of traditions has fuelled the simmering memory wars, making the polarisation more complex

The research identifies three approaches used by the competing political elites and their followers to interpret and represent collective memory. These approaches are informed by their interpretation of the Ethiopian past and vision for the present and future of the state and society. This monograph argues that the dynamism of the contestations often determines the state of polarisation. These approaches have agency in the political organisations of the competing political elite that often deploy invented traditions to advance their ideological aspirations.

In this framework, the political class, organised or otherwise, seems to subscribe to the rejectionist/reconstructivist, revivalist/restorationist and selectivist/moderationist approaches. The political elites’ approaches often correspond to their affinity with either the pan-Ethiopianist or ethno-nationalist²² camps. This categorisation, however, is not watertight. Through the political time and space continuum, the rejectionist/reconstructivist camp shifted to revivalism and vice versa, often determined by who controls the state and how it is perceived against ideational inclinations. The third category constitutes variants of the selectivist/moderationist camp. However, not unlike the other two camps, this approach has equally been affected by proximity or lack thereof to power.

Competing political elites that subscribe to any of the three approaches, in turn, use four layers of invented traditions for their preferred memory discourses. The first tradition is the pre-1991 great tradition. The second is the post-1991 vernacular tradition that deconstructed the great tradition through institutional mechanisms. This tradition championed the ‘national oppression thesis’ and defined the pre-1991 Ethiopian state as oppressive and exclusionary. This analysis and interpretation would result in the reconfiguration of the state and society along ethnic lines and the adoption of an ethno-linguistic federal system.

The last two traditions are derivatives of the vernacular tradition that were cultivated at the federal level. The regional states invented their respective traditions informed by vernacular memory, cementing a third layer of traditions. Eventually, local-level contestations brought to the fore a fourth layer, with local elites using vernacular memories to maintain ethnic boundaries against a perceived rival or competitor group. The monograph argues that contestation among the three camps and the four layers of traditions has fuelled the simmering memory wars in Ethiopian politics, making the polarisation all the more complex.

Taking the ‘political salience’ of the great tradition-vernacular tradition binary, field research was conducted between June and October 2023 to gather primary data from Addis Ababa, Somali and the newly established southern Ethiopia regions. These included in-depth, in-person and telephone interviews with key informants and an analysis of publicly available data. Data from relevant cases from other regions, such as Amhara and Tigray are included to strengthen the analysis and major findings of the research.

This research is largely interpretive and applies a qualitative ethno-graphic approach. Literature and documents were reviewed. As narrating memory discourses requires optimum social and political consciousness to articulate personal and political experiences, in-depth interviews were conducted with sources selected through purposeful and snowball sampling. The participants comprised government officials, opposition and ruling party officials, elders, academics and opinion leaders. The analysis of the primary was triangulated against relevant documents and publicly available speeches and writings of officials and opinion leaders. The research relied largely on discourse and interpretational analysis.

As it explores past and present tensions, the monograph may inform decision-making processes of federal and regional government policymakers by forwarding evidence-based analysis and policy recommendations. But most importantly, the analysis and findings may contribute to the quality of agenda items and deliberations of the national dialogue process and smooth the way for a negotiated outcome.

The research delves into the pre-1991 Ethiopian state to set the context and highlight patterns of previous regimes’ use of politics of memorialisation, with a

rather extensive discussion of the Haile Selassie regime. However, its main focus is post-1991 'inventions of traditions' by the now-defunct Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the current party-led governments. Thus, it analyses the structural and ideological factors behind the proliferation of producing/reproducing and transmitting/transferring competing and contrasting 'collective memories' through public spaces (monuments, statues, museums, squares, streets, etc).

The author does not claim to provide exhaustive geographic and thematic analysis. The geographic coverage of the research was limited to Addis Ababa, Somali, Southern Ethiopia and Oromia regions due to insecurity in various areas. However, secondary sources and telephone and online interviews were used to incorporate cases from Amhara and Tigray regional states and bolster the analysis and findings.

Secondly, social and/or political memory encompasses multiple components and manifestations too complicated for a single research project. There is also a dearth of policy research on the subject. Accordingly, this monograph focuses on contestations over public spaces and memorial sites as one manifestation of Ethiopia's memory wars and analyses the contrasting ideological and structural factors underlying and reinforcing inter-elite and intercommunal contradictions. Hence, the findings indicate the state of competing politics of memory in Ethiopia.

Chapter 1

Memorials for invented traditions

The recent rise of memory studies as an academic field has revived the debate over the interrelation between official and public history.²³ Public history is often shaped by the interpretation of events and representation of segments of society in a specific event documented in history. As the past and how it is understood, presented and transmitted are intertwined with the present and future, contestation over the past has become a major instrument of resistance against state-sanctioned and allegedly unrepresentative dominant narratives. 'The use of public spaces to represent history, whether in the form of monuments, museums or otherwise [...], leads to fierce political debates and they are certainly not limited to aesthetical values'.²⁴

Contestation over the past and the commemorative values of public spaces incite the proliferation of counter or vernacular memories.²⁵ These memories are often used as modes of resistance and 'boundary maintenance' when the official memory and nationalism either erase or suppress particular cultures. In effect, 'ethnic memory [is] continually generated from the tension that existed between vernacular and official culture and between those with divergent amounts of social and political power'.²⁶ This has been the case especially in conflict-ridden and post-conflict societies.

Because the understanding and presentation of the past
is intertwined with the present, contestation over the
past has become an instrument of resistance

Contestations between those who want to preserve and deconstruct or reject certain aspects of official history are often fought through what scholars call the invention of traditions.²⁷ The term invented tradition is used in a broad but not imprecise sense. It includes traditions actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable way within a brief, datable period – a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves rapidly”.

It is meant to refer to practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and ritual or symbolic, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition. This automatically implies continuity with the past. When possible, they attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.²⁸

Conservatist and traditionalist political elites deploy these invented traditions to claim and maintain the continuity of the identity of the state with the immemorial past. Counter-hegemonic, radical and reformist political elites equally construct their 'relevant past'²⁹ to produce and counter the traditions they contest and consolidate their preferred political discourse. The tradition discussed here is different from the customs and practices in two main ways. Even though most traditions are recent inventions, political elites use them to claim continuity with a historic past. More importantly, they are often driven by and deployed to assert ideological inclinations.³⁰

Invented traditions are communicated partly in memorial sites that immortalise, thereby maintain, ideals, aspirations and sentiments. Memorial sites are often simultaneously symbolic embodiments and parts of the invention of traditions. These material representations of memory or memorial sites and objects are where sentiments may be appropriately and publicly expressed by individuals or groups through rituals, ceremonies and performative commemorations. Thus, they invent and maintain traditions as the coming together of a group both confirms the legitimacy of the sentiments expressed and reinforces their strength in those who gather together to express them.³¹

Memorial sites serve three primary purposes. They symbolise ideals, values, aspirations and sentiments. They add aesthetic values to the location. And they may have utilitarian functions – 'to serve as an instrument for the achievement of certain proximate social purposes and limited ends'.³² Memorial sites that constitute and symbolise sentiments and ideals, such as war memorials, become sacred spaces when and if accompanied by periodic rituals, performatives and inclusive commemorations. Memorials are equally used for utilitarian purposes and remain non-sacred as is mostly the case in what some call 'living' memorials such as schools, buildings, scholarships and museums. What distinguishes the sacred and the non-sacred is purpose. The utility of inventing traditions and immortalising them through memorial sites and objects were taken to heart by successive Ethiopian rulers and the political elite at large. They used invented traditions for decades in their bid to either maintain or deconstruct the identity of the Ethiopian state.

The great tradition and concomitant hegemonic discourse and 'conventional historiography'³³ of Ethiopian history ascribed to the semi-ecclesial myth³⁴ of foundation, immemorial past, continuity and unity, and exceptionalism. This is often advanced as reason for the survival of the Ethiopia state in troubled geographic and political space.³⁵ This version of Ethiopian history was immensely enhanced by

being also the history of a great tradition that can be presented on par with that of ancient civilisations such as China and Persia. Their civilisational attributes include some impressive archaeological remains, a monarch to provide a line of heroic rulers, an ancient Christianity linked to the civilisations of the Mediterranean basin, and most important, writing.³⁶

Such historiography and the conventional history it produced remained long unchallenged. Until the advent of the Ethiopian student movement³⁷ in the 1960s, conventional historiography seemed to have successfully produced a national narrative of the Ethiopian 'self' and collective memory informed primarily by and based on the great tradition. This notion pays homage to Ethiopia's civilisational primacy and antiquity. It also credits its unity through valour and vigilance, heroism and sacrifice against an imagined common enemy in the religious and civilisational 'other' within and without. Exceptionalism based on a myth of the ecclesial foundation of the monarchy is also a factor.

The monarchy is portrayed as the vanguard of the nation's survival and continuity. It was this version of history and 'collective memory' the pre-1991 Ethiopian state³⁸ actively transmitted. This it did through, among others, invented traditions. These included memorialisation through rituals, construction of public spaces (squares, statues, monuments) and periodic commemorations of historic national holidays such as the victory of Adwa³⁹ and the 1941 liberation of Ethiopia from Italian occupation).

The utility of inventing traditions was taken to heart by successive Ethiopian rulers and the political elite

It is through these discourses and narratives that the 'conventional' Ethiopian historiography elevated the great tradition while propelling a version of 'collective memory' anchored in it. This would eventually be critiqued by the intelligentsia of the Ethiopian student movement as a systemic and structural act of 'nation destroying'⁴⁰ for the ethnic communities in the wider south of Ethiopia.

While the great tradition remained the hegemonic narrative undergirding the collective memory of society, the state started constructing material representations of it ostensibly during the reign of emperor Haile Selassie. This was preceded by explicit and implicit constitutional, institutional and policy instruments the Haile Selassie government deployed to reify the great tradition. The 1931 constitution explicitly reaffirmed the ecclesial foundation of the monarchy.⁴¹ Through customs, norms and practices, the state equally reaffirmed the 'church and state' tradition. Eventually, the emperor started to construct physical inscriptions of symbols

through memorial sites to preserve and perpetuate the preferred narrations being constructed in the collective memory of his subjects.

This was in keeping with his predecessors' invention of material representations and spaces to maintain and transmit the symbolic representations of the foundational myth of the monarchy and the personhood of the emperor. Menelik, for instance, incorporated the Lion of Judah, the symbol of the monarchy, into the royal seal and coat of arms. In 1894, he minted a one-birr coin with his image on one side and the lion on the other.⁴²

Haile Selassie continued this tradition by restoring old and constructing new monuments of the lion in major state and public spaces. Some were accompanied by state-sanctioned annual commemorative ceremonies and rituals, while others were constructed to signify the markers the identity of the state and its source – the great tradition.

Chapter 2

Monumentalising the great tradition

The Haile Selassie era: asserting legitimacy and projecting continuity

Haile Selassie was one of the first to construct material representations of the great tradition in public spaces and memorial sites. His earlier constructions were to earn legitimacy as a guarantor of the great tradition and vanguard of the identity of the Ethiopian state. Sculptures of the Lion of Judah monumentalised and sustained the great tradition in the collective memory of Ethiopians. The sculptures were placed on top of the gates of the emperor's palace – later turned into Addis Ababa University – the national palace and across parts of the country.

If Haile Selassie's monumentalisation of the great tradition' early in his reign is seen as consolidating legitimacy,⁴³ post-1941 he cemented the other elements of the tradition: survival and continuity. With the invasion of Italy in 1936, the monarchy faced both a symbolic and physical challenge of continuity, while the emperor's subjects toiled under five years of foreign occupation.

For this reason, among others, the post-1941 period monuments and statues projected and symbolised the victory and continuity of the emperor and the

The Lion of Judah statue at the gate of Addis Ababa University (left) and the old railway station



Source: Visit Ethiopia

monarchy, respectively, and the resistance, sacrifice and tenacity of the society. Hence monuments and statues glorified heroes and memorialised those who sacrificed their lives resisting the Italians.

On his return to the throne, Haile Selassie either restored or constructed public spaces and memory sites largely in Addis Ababa. As mentioned, one endeavour was the Lion of Judah sculpture atop the 14 stairs erected by the Italians in front of the emperor's former palace – Genete Leul – now Addis Ababa University main campus. The steps of the 'fascist stairs' were said to symbolise the number of colonies the Italians then controlled in Africa. The lion denoted the triumph and victory of the monarchy.

The emperor was also quick to restore and reinstall the statue of Menelik II in its original space – in front of St George Cathedral in Addis Ababa. The statue was originally built in 1928 and unveiled by Selassie in 1930. It commemorated the Ethiopia's victory over the Italians in the 1896 Adwa war. During the 1936 to 1941 Italian occupation of Ethiopia, the statue was removed and reportedly hidden in secret places by the Italians. The restoration of the statue in 1941 symbolised not only victory but a collective sense of revival.⁴⁴

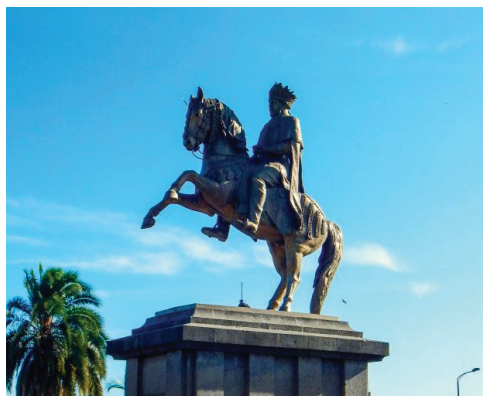
This and the construction of the Victory and Yekatit 12 martyrs monuments served two purposes. The first was to symbolically represent victory and project the continuity of the state. The second, and perhaps more important, was to cease that historic moment of victory and revival and establish the victory of Adwa over Italian forces as a sacred memory by making the memorial place and object sacred through periodic and ritualistic commemoration.

The restoration of the statue of Menelik II in 1941
symbolised not only victory but also a collective
sense of revival

The triumphant emperor and the monarchy interweaved the commemoration with the religious sermons of St George Cathedral accompanied by state-sanctioned ceremonies and rituals. The annual event around the statue of Menelik II in Menelik Square would turn into a space where participants express ideals, sentiments and aspirations of a state and a nation as defined by the state. This in turn reinforced the pillars of the great tradition – civilisational and administrative continuity, ecclesial myth of foundation, agony leading to victory and survival, and Ethiopian exceptionalism.

The monumentalising survival and continuity project continued with the restoration and reinstallation of the Lion of Judah at Lagahar, Addis Ababa in 1964. The monument was unveiled in 1930 by empress Zewditu and then-Nigus

Restored statue of Menelik II (left) and Yekatit 12 martyrs monument



Source: Visit Ethiopia



Teferi (later emperor Selassie) at Liberty and Independence Square in front of Lagahar railroad station.⁴⁵

The Italians would remove the statue and take it to Rome in 1936. After the emperor returned to the throne in 1941, it was repatriated to Ethiopia through negotiations. Haile Selassie unveiled the restored monument at its original site on the day and month of its original unveiling,⁴⁶ again, using the moment to communicate survival and continuity.

That period also saw the monumentalisation of ‘victory through sacrifice’ ideal, a pillar of the great tradition. This project started with the unveiling of the Miyazia 27 (referring to the date of the emperor’s return – 5 May 1941) or the Victory monument at Arat Killo, Addis Ababa in 1942. The 15 m-high structure features the Lion of Judah holding the Ethiopian flag with the speech of the emperor inscribed on the pedestal.

Axumite touches of the monument, the space it was constructed in – between the buildings of the parliament and major government ministries and the Selassie cathedral church, the pedestal pillars with the image of the emperor holding a flag and ‘patriots’⁴⁷ carved on it woven stories of continuity and victory with sacrifices and martyrdom of the great tradition.

This approach is nowhere more apparent than in the construction of the Yekatit 12 martyrs monument and the Abune Petros statue in 1942/1955 and 1946 respectively. The Yekatit 12 monument was constructed in memory of the February 1937 massacre of residents of Addis Ababa in retaliation for the attempted assassination of Rodolf Graziani by Moges Asgedom and Abraha Deboch. This was replaced by a better-designed version in 1955.⁴⁸

The erection of the Petros statue at the place of his execution by Italian forces demonstrated the commemoration of sacrifice. He was executed by Italian forces

The Victory monument (left) and Abune Petros statue



Source: Metropolitan Addis and Top-rated Online

for refusal to submit to the foreigners' administration and for asking the public to follow suit after witnessing the 1937 massacre. The regime unveiled the statue in 1945, marking the use of memorial to monumentalise the sacrifice, glory, rival and continuity discourses of the great tradition. Inscribing continuity at memorial sites reinforced the legitimacy of the monarchy, which claimed an ecclesial foundation, and the state.

The Dergue era: secularising the great tradition and lionising a 'proletariat king'

The invention and maintenance of traditions were disrupted with the overthrow of the emperor and the coming to power of Dergue. This was a committee of 120 military men that later declared the transitional military administration. However, Dergue did not get the time to undertake a fully fledged invention of traditions, achieving secularisation of public spaces and memorial days coupled with selective glorification of one of the rulers the great tradition celebrates.

Dergue portrayed itself as a revolutionary force. It declared communism and later socialism as its core ideology. However, it was also a nationalist regime that ascribed to some elements of the great tradition, such as continuity and unity of the state. Accordingly, it adopted 'adaptation'. As a communist party, it secularised important traditions starting, for the first time, to commemorate the victory of Adwa at the St George Cathedral compound and at Menelik and Meskel squares.⁴⁹

It also renamed Meskel (cross) square Abiyot (revolution). This pattern would extend from Addis Ababa and several Meskel squares in the country were renamed revolution squares. The deliberate disassociation of squares from the ecclesial,

where the EOTC celebrates the annual ‘founding of the true cross’, was Dergue’s way of secularising public spaces and memorial days.

As a revolutionary regime, Dergue had to adapt the great tradition to the ‘proletariat’ class that it claimed to represent. Thus, during the 1977 Ethio-Somalia war, it selectively lionised emperor Tewodros II as a national hero of the working class. This was a calculated move to reconcile its stated goal of deconstructing the aristocratic class that it faulted for the country’s social and political ills and its commitment to the unity and continuity of the state.⁵⁰

The Dergue regime adapted the great tradition,
secularised public spaces and memorials, and
lionised emperor Tewodros II as a ‘proletariat king’

Tewodros rose to power from humble beginnings, the son of a ‘kosso shach enat’ (a woman who trades herbal medicine). His story was repackaged and communicated through a theatre play (written by the famous Ethiopianist Tsegaye Gebremedhin). The play would embed a memory of a proletariat king who fought to modernise and unite the country.⁵¹ Through this, Dergue adapted the great tradition and deployed its altered discourses to motivate the masses in its war effort against both Somalia and later domestic armed resistances.

These adaptations would later be reinforced by the Tiglachin/Our Struggle monument in Addis Ababa in memory of the fallen heroes of the Ethio-Somalia war. However, Dergue was fighting the rejectionist/reconstructivist camp that launched armed resistance against it for much of its rule. Despite adapting the great tradition, secularising spaces and memorials, and lionising Tewodros II as a ‘proletariat king’, Dergue did not get the benefits of extended times of peace to embark on discernable inventions of traditions. It, nevertheless, consistently deployed its adapted great tradition in its war effort against armed groups such as Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) and Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). The latter would eventually topple Dergue in 1991.

Chapter 3

The ‘return’ of the rejectionist-reconstructivist: EPRDF in power

The Ethiopian student movement was the first to express rejection of and a need for the reconstruction of the great tradition and conventional Ethiopian historiography. Inspired by the global Marxist/Communist student movements of the 1960s, it chastised the feudalistic and predatory nature of the Ethiopian state and the monarchy.⁵²

The political, cultural and economic foundations of the Ethiopian state were targets for the students, ushering in narratives deconstructing the great tradition. It started as a class-analysis-driven critique of the state – attacking the feudalistic system in defence of the peasantry as popularised by the famous ‘land to the tiller’ motto. It would later morph into a critique of what they defined as the hegemonic Amhara-Tigray culture.⁵³

Political, cultural and economic foundations of the state were targets for the student movement, ushering in narratives that deconstructed the great tradition

A famous article by prominent student Walleign Mekonnen pierced through the great tradition and its key tenets. The predatory land tenure system, ecclesial Solomonic myth and the Amhara-Tigray/Abyssinia core culture were presented as instruments of exploitation and oppression of the inhabitants of the wider south. These people are said to have toiled under serfdom, subjugation and marginalisation after their incorporation into the Ethiopian state under Menelik.

What were until then the glorified state and nation-building process and its economic, cultural and political structure and systems were resented as instruments of state violence, symbolic or otherwise. This would later popularise the ‘national oppression’ thesis in the Ethiopian political lexicon and space. However, this vibrant

and radical student movement could not topple the Haile Selassie regime. The political awakening and social movements the students inspired were hijacked by the military that overthrew the emperor and instituted a transitional military administration in 1974.

In opposition to the military junta that controlled state power and soon ruled with an iron fist, political organisations inspired by the student movement – coalesced largely around the ideological foundations, started armed resistance. The Tigrean and Eritrean people's liberation fronts evolved into more structured, disciplined and adept political forces eventually overthrowing the Dergue regime in 1991. While EPLF limited its domain and political aspirations to Eritrea, TPLF formed a coalition with ethnic parties the All-Amhara Democratic Movement, Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement to create EPRDF.

The year 1991 was a seminal time and critical juncture in Ethiopian history, bringing a radical shift in the tone the EPRDF-led government registered in interpreting the political history of the state. It began the official remapping and reconfiguration of the state and society following earlier attempts to remap the country for administrative purposes. This, however, was a substantially different project compared to earlier attempts. It was a project determined to counter the great tradition and reconstruct its structures and institutions through a 'counter-history' approach.

The post-1991 constitution was a compromise
reconciling the revolutionary instinct of breaking with
the past, and the reformist sobriety

The hitherto centralised state and power structures were deconstructed into a non-centralised⁵⁴ federation, at least on paper. Ethiopian society was constitutionally reconstituted through the largely Soviet and Stalinist political lexicon of the constitution, into 'nations, nationalities and peoples'. In short, both the state and society were redefined as a consensual conglomeration of 'peoples' of 'historically unjust relationships' – the sort of relationships that needed to be rectified. Despite this radical departure from the hegemonic and governing dictum and shared collective memory of Ethiopia's state and society, the 1994 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution tried to sustain continuity discourses.

The preamble of the constitution alludes to the discourse that the newly reconstituted Ethiopians, nations, nationalities and peoples, 'by continuing to live with [their] rich and proud cultural legacies in territories [they] have long inhabited have, through continuous interaction on various levels and forms of life, built

upon common interest and have also contributed to the emergence of common outlook'.⁵⁵ It proclaims that they are committed to 'building a political community founded on the rule of law capable of ensuring lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order, and advancing [their] economic and social development'.

A close reading of the preamble unveils the entanglement of the 'framers' with history and political memory. It also reveals the political necessity of compromise to reconcile the revolutionary breaking with the past and the reformist instinct to proclaim continuity. However, the version of continuity imagined in the constitution is a demographic, geographic and political economy sense of continuity. This differs from the great tradition proponents' conception of continuity in the context of the state's political history.

Reinventing traditions and platforming vernacular memories

EPRDF coming to power brought to politics the discourse of 'self-determination including and up to secession' of formerly oppressed nationalities. It also introduced 'ethno-cultural justice' and 'politics of difference'.⁵⁶ The Ethiopian state was redefined as 'an oppressive empire'⁵⁷ that needed redemption through reconfiguration of the state into a federation and reconstitution of society along ethnic-cultural and linguistic lines.

This was preceded by the decision to cede Eritrea through a mostly performative referendum and recognise it as an independent state, which was a bold beginning of reconstructing the great tradition.⁵⁸ While for some this was political shock therapy but without the expected outcome – retreat of the political elite from the great tradition – for others it was a revolutionary act of liberating oppressed nationalities and democratising the state.⁵⁹

Through the transitional charter and later the 1994 constitution, the EPRDF-led government institutionalised its preferred traditions. In a total departure from the 1931 and 1955 constitutions, new traditions were introduced. Ethiopians were redefined as nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia with the right to self-determination including and up to secession. They were granted rights 'to protect and preserve their culture and promote their history' and were 'liberated' to their ethno-territorial homelands. The nation's lingua franca, Amharic, was relegated to federal working language status. State and religion were officially divorced⁶⁰ and later Nations, Nationalities and People's Day became a public holiday.

While EPRDF was inventing traditions through the constitution, memory wars between competing political forces, the pan-Ethiopianist and ethno-nationalist camps, reverberated across the country. One manifestation was the OPDO-led 1992 demonstration in Addis Ababa demanding the removal of the statue of Menelik. Then followed a counter-demonstration opposing the removal. However, OPDO's demand was short-lived as its leaders and EPRDF showed

no interest in pursuing the matter.⁶¹ A similar contestation over how and where to celebrate the centenary of the Adwa victory ensued in 1996, pitting EPRDF against pan-Ethiopianist opposition parties.⁶²

However, EPRDF made no significant attempt to dismantle and remove monuments symbolising the great tradition. Rather, its strategy seemed to be to overwhelm and overpower such symbols and memories through parallel inventions of radical traditions.⁶³ For instance, despite its rhetoric, EPRDF did not change the national flag. It just added an emblem reflecting its reading of the country's past and aspirations for its future.⁶⁴ However, it persisted with its parallel deconstruction of the great tradition.

It continued to reconstitute the country into nine regional states and two chartered city administrations, first Addis Ababa and later Dire Dawa city administrations. The regional states adopted their constitutions and their own flags, composed regional anthems and approved regional working languages of their preference. For EPRDF, this was much more than decentring the state and its powers – it was a deconstruction and/or reconstruction of the great tradition to its core.⁶⁵

These processes would later open the way for many vernacular memories, often presented as factual histories, as ethnic communities became empowered by local elites astute enough to produce or revive local narratives and memories. These memory discourses often targeted great tradition narratives. The eventual EPRDF move to monumentalise the version of history and collective memory to which it ascribes validated both prior and future productions of vernacular memories.

The martyrs monuments and museums in Mekelle, Bahir Dar and Adama respectively, reflected resistance and sacrifice. They told a story of resistance by EPRDF fighters and its constituencies and sacrifice against an oppressive state and the great tradition.⁶⁶ More importantly, these monuments cemented the national oppression discourse and told of EPRDF-invented traditions.

At federal level, the EPRDF-led government reappropriated memorial places and objects and annual commemorative events institutionalised by its predecessors to

From left: The Mekelle, Adama and Bahir Dar martyrs monuments



Source: Wikipedia martyrs memorial monuments

advance and maintain the discourses, ideals, sentiments and aspirations it held dear. For instance, the annual Adwa victory commemoration day was reframed as the victory of the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. The invocation of the name Menelik was relegated to passing remarks in the reporting of state media houses and official statements of government officials.

Annual commemorations of the event in Addis Ababa were rarely attended by the head of government. Instead, it became tradition for the government to be represented by the mayors of the city and cabinet ministers. Of late, the president of the republic has started to attend the official event. By so doing, the EPRDF-led government's projected fidelity to its counter-history approach and the ideological foundation of its interpretation in the Menelik era as the origin of 'national oppression' in Ethiopia.

EPRDF's strategy was to overwhelm and overpower
symbols and memories of the great tradition through
parallel inventions of radical traditions

All state-sanctioned processions, ceremonies, rituals and official remarks and the memorial place were used to express and reinforce the EPRDF-led government's ideal of unity in diversity. 'An ideal that underscored the Ethiopian federal state structure, it was presented as the foundational principle ensuring and maintaining the continuity of the state.

EPRDF reinforced this approach by declaring the adoption date of the FDRE constitution, Hidar 29 (29 November) Nations, Nationalities and People's Day. This festival-type public holiday also cemented EPRDF's counter-history approach and revived vernacular memories informed by the unity in diversity ideal. The day was celebrated across the country in selected regional states and Addis Ababa, with government officials' statements urging that the day and constitution be commemorated and celebrated as a day of liberation.

Remedial constitutional provisions informed by the national oppression thesis such as ethno-cultural justice and self-rule and self-determination were proclaimed the glue that held the country together. The mostly performative celebration was televised over the years from regional state stadiums (as it was a rotating public holiday). It was characterised by paraded invented traditions, such as regional flags, appropriated traditional attires and markers of ethnic identities, such as songs, dance and traditional equipment of times of war and peace.

Without declaring a standing place and object for the annual commemoration and intentionally rotating it across regional states, EPRDF socialised its ideals, aspirations and sentiments about the past, present and future of state and society.

The decision to rotate the commemoration further reinforced unity in diversity as it projected nationalities' collective ownership of the event.

Regional states would soon follow cues from the central party and socialise, communicate and maintain revived or produced vernacular memories through establishment of public spaces and memory sites. For instance, Oromia regional government built two major memorials in 2015. One, in Anole, Arsi zone was unveiled by then-regional president Mukhtar Kedir in 2015. The monument depicted a mutilated palm holding a mutilated breast. It is a bold, if not crude, representation of the atrocious massacre locals claim was perpetrated against the Arsi Oromo by the forces of Menelik, who sought to incorporate the areas into his empire.⁶⁷

It was presented as a memorial to the Oromo martyrs who died fighting the forces of the emperor. Some argue that the very space, Anole, represents the collective pain they feel as those who were massacred were allegedly summoned to negotiate a truce between the two forces.⁶⁸ The monument is often presented as an instrument transmitting and transferring to the next generation that their forefathers paid with their lives defending the dignity and honour of the Oromo people against the Abyssinian empire.⁶⁹

Similarly, the second monument was built to convey the resistance and sacrifice Oromos made to defend their honour and dignity. The Chelenko monument and museum, in East Hararge zone, was unveiled by then-regional president Muktar Khedir in 2015.

Both memorials reflected sub-national reinvention of traditions anchored in vernacular memories and against the great tradition and conventional Ethiopian history. It was resistance against and rejection of the dominant narrative that glorified the empire, Menelik and his wars.⁷⁰

The Anole (left) and the Chelenko martyrs memorial monuments



Source: Mereja.com and Maisa Media

The rejectionist/reconstructivist approach was also apparent in the Somali region. One of the major rejectionist public space constructions was the statue of Sayid Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan in Jigjiga in 2013. Sayid Mohamed was perhaps the first pan-Somali nationalist figure who mobilised Somalis to resist the British, Italian and Ethiopian forces.⁷¹ He is revered among Somalis across the Horn of Africa region as an anti-colonial hero who fought valiantly against colonial forces to unify Somalis dispersed across the region.⁷² The construction of his statue not only monumentalised vernacular memory, but was a rejection of the statist political culture embedded in the great tradition and the political elite class that continued defending it.⁷³

Statue of Sayid Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan in Jigjiga



Source: X

The other act of producing traditions and or reviving, maintaining and transmitting Somali vernacular memory was the renaming of the Misrak Dil (victory over East) Junior High School to Ahmed Gurey. The school was originally named Misrak Dil in memory of the victory of Ethiopian forces over the Siad Barre-led Somali forces in the 1977 Ethio-Somali war. However, the war is remembered differently in the Somali region. For Somalis, it was a war of resistance against Ethiopian forces where Somalis of the Ogaden and Somalia fought and died together for liberty.⁷⁴

Ethiopia's victory in the Ethio-Somalia war is not remembered as a victory for Somalis of Ethiopian origin. Rather, it is a dark moment in history when Somalis of the Ogaden were massacred indiscriminately with Somalia forces while Ugases and elders were killed by Dergue for suspected dual allegiance and outright treason.⁷⁵ The renaming of the school to Ahmed Gurey went beyond countering mainstream history to directly confront the great tradition by monumentalising one of its greatest villains. The great tradition blames Ahmed Grang, Ahmed the left-handed, for launching a devastating war against the Christian kingdom of historic Ethiopia.

This was compounded by the recent reversal of decisions made by the region's former president, Abdi Mohammed Omer, on the region's name and the symbols on the regional flag. The de facto name adopted during Abdi Mohammed's administration, Ethiopian Somali Region, was restored to the constitutionally declared 'Somali region'. The triangular yellow base with a camel on the tricoloured green, white and red flag was changed to a triangular blue base with a five-point star. The regional administration assertively declared that Somalis should not hide

that their roots and lineage with the Somalis in the Somalias under pretentious symbols and colours.⁷⁶

On the other hand, the TPLF-led Tigray region, compared to the others, undertook a more structured invention of traditions embedded in vernacular memories since the early 1990s. As a self-proclaimed champion of the national oppression thesis leading the region and simultaneously dominating the national ruling coalition, it was the first, and perhaps only party, to declare regional public holidays, memorial days for Tigrayan martyrs.

Besides national memorial days, two additional days were declared in 1995.⁷⁷ These commemorated the struggle of the people of Tigray and Tigray martyrs. The first was coincided with the founding date of the TPLF, Yekatic 11 (February in the Ethiopian calendar) and the second marked the Hawzen massacre, a massacre resulting from an air strike on marketgoers in Hawzen by the Dergue regime on 22 June 1988 (Sene 15 in the Ethiopian calendar).

The regional government also created ‘living’ memorial sites by naming the airport built in Mekelle in the late-1990s Alula Aba Nega International Airport. This was after a revered historical figure, Ras Alula Engida, affectionately known as Alula Aba Nega. Alula, a Tigrayan military commander, was a prominent and decorated commander who led one of the emperor’s forces against the Italian forces and contributed immensely to the 1996 Adwa victory.

The region was also the first to construct and unveil a Tigray martyrs memorial monument and museum in Mekelle. This would later be accompanied by a statue of and the naming of an airport after major general Hayelom Araya, a TPLF veteran

From left: Statues of Ras Alula Aba Nega, Major General Hayelom Araya and ‘Marta’



Source: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP via Getty Images, James Jeffrey, Lala Kids, Facebook

military commander who was assassinated in 1996 in his hometown Shire. Mekelle also houses a statue of Marta, a woman TPLF fighter who was killed during the 17-year armed conflict with Dergue.

The regional government and TPLF maintained this tradition of constructing and creating public memorial places and objects after the war of 2020 to 2022 with the federal government. Streets in Mekelle were named after three veteran TPLF leaders and founders who were killed during the war: Asmelash Woldeselasia, Abay Tsehaye and Siyoum Mesfin, Ethiopia's former foreign minister and ambassador to China.

One of the major rejectionist public space constructions was the statue of Sayid Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan in Jigjiga in 2013

The monumentalisation of vernacular memories in Oromia, Somali and Tigray regions are similar in their rejection of the great tradition, but different. The differences are in the use of memorial places and objects and institutions they control in their regions and whether the places and objects were transformed into or remained 'sacred or profane/non-sacred', to use Barber's phraseology.

A memorial space widely rejected by the revivalist/pan-Ethiopianist camp is the Anole martyrs monument built by Oromia regional state. Chelenko martyrs monument, too, has been at the receiving end of pan-Ethiopianist political attack. However, Oromia, as the Somali regional state, did not go far beyond reviving discourses of victimhood and resilience as markers of sub-national identities. They used the sites to signify and maintain local identities. The memorial spaces has never been accompanied by declared public holidays. This meant that the memorial did not morph in to spaces where Oromos attend periodic and ritualised events reinforcing the vernacular memory behind the construction of the monuments. Through a conscious decision or otherwise, the regional states kept the places and objects non-sacred. In other words, Oromia and Somali regions seem to use the places and objects as a political statement to assert particular ethnic identities against the great tradition.

Tigray region, on the other hand, has used memorials not only to symbolise vernacular memories but also as spaces for the expression and reinforcement of ideals, sentiments and aspirations through official and periodic commemorations. It interweaved ideals that sprang from vernacular memories, of sacrifice, martyrdom, resilience, survival and eventual victory, with events such as the TPLF founding (resistance) and Hawzen massacre (martyrdom). By convening annual memorial days with detailed rituals, high ceremonial displays and emotive performative

activities, the regional government has sacralised memorial sites, particularly the Tigray martyr monument, thereby promoting TPLF's ideals and aspirations.

The organisation seems to have understood the powers of rituals and socialising its core ideals through discourses of agony, defeat and resilience and resurrection.⁷⁸ Notably, perhaps drawing from its experience of resistance with Dergue and the value in party discipline and messaging, it and the regional government have used the sites to represent and socialise stories of sacrifice, martyrdom and triumph. This is evidenced by the front's ability to mobilise Tigrayans in the war with the federal government. Unlike the Oromia and Somali regions, TPLF have created sacred spaces and deployed vernacular traditions to mobilise its constituency in times of war and peace.

Chapter 4

The moderationist approach – a promising start derailed?

Appropriating the great tradition in search of equilibrium

The moderationist approach subscribes to the argument that the past cannot and should not be the source of all Ethiopia's political ills.⁷⁹ It asserts that, not unlike other world states, Ethiopia's past is a story of both aspiration to greatness and historic injustice committed against segments of society in the name of nation- and state building.⁸⁰ The methodology of the political class that subscribes to this is what some call 'constructive selectivism'.⁸¹ Both the approach and the underlying method can be traced back to 2007/08 and the official preparation to celebrate the dawning of the third 'Ethiopian millennium'.

A couple of years before this celebration, at a speech to commemorate the founding of the city of Harar in 2006, then-prime minister Meles Zenawi introduced the discourse of 'Ethiopian renaissance' to the national political discourse. He argued that Ethiopia's first millennium was one of mastery of civilisation, followed by decline in the second and that they should aspire to reclaim their lost civilisational mastery, greatness and self-sufficiency in the third.⁸²

Meles tapped into the secular civilisational element of the great tradition to sway the masses to his developmental aspirations and consolidate legitimacy to the 'developmental state'. Discourses invoked through Axum, Lalibela and Gondar were brought from the proverbial dustbin of history to develop the hegemonic discourse, which believes that development and prosperity are the sole instruments to bridge Ethiopia's political divide.⁸³

The shift in EPRDF's discourse was inspired partly by the admission that the significant support the pan-Ethiopianist camp garnered in the 2005 elections was due to disenfranchisement of voters with the excesses of its ethno-nationalism.⁸⁴ This shift was compounded by actual and symbolic resuscitation of some elements of the great tradition.

The government continued to invoke the continuity discourse through the civilisational attributes of the great tradition. It also instituted National Flag Day and

revived the symbolic representation of the 'core culture' through, among others, Meles's decision to make his speech at the millennium celebration wearing the white 'shema/hager libs' attire. Thereafter, he would announce the start of construction of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile and the Growth and Transformation Plan-GTP. The moderationist approach soon paid off as the government mobilised the masses to its development projects. This would, however, be interrupted with the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012.

Despite its relative mobilisation success, the front deployed instruments to contain dissent. Following the electoral debacle of 2005, it passed stifling laws and dominated the political space. The increasingly repressive mode of governance after Meles's demise rendered the moderationist approach unsustainable as ethno-nationalist mobilisations would resist EPRDF across regions. However, the moderationist approach would be applied in some regional states, although for a different outcome.

Meles tapped into the secular and material civilisation of the great tradition to sway Ethiopians to the developmental state model

Immediately after Meles's death, then-regional president of Somali region, Mohammed Abdi Omer, brought a pan-Ethiopianist discourse to the fore.⁸⁵ Seen from the Ethiopianist/great tradition standpoint, this was a monumental shift as they suspect Somalis of lacking allegiance to the Ethiopian state and secessionist since the 1977 Ethio-Somalia war.⁸⁶ The regional ruling elite argued that the Ethiopianist camp's suspicion of Somalis as people with allegiance to both Ethiopia and Somalia, informed largely by the memory of the Ethio-Somalia war, was unfounded. The group argued that Somalis of the Ethiopian region made a conscious decision to rejoin Ethiopia in 1946. They repackaged the 'Kali narrative' as a manifestation of Somali loyalty to the Ethiopian state.

The story goes that the British summoned Somali elders to a place called Kali and given the option to join either Somalia or Ethiopia after emperor Haile Selassie was restored to power with British help. The elders opted to rejoin Ethiopia, according to the narrative. The regional elites would escalate this and publish a booklet asserting that Somalis fought for Ethiopia from Adwa to Badme (in reference to the 1998 to 2000 Ethio-Eritrea war).

At the 10th Nationalities Day celebrated in the Somali region capital Jijjiga, the regional elite invited celebrities, elders and officials for a visit to Kali. The regional president then decided on the de facto name of Ethiopian Somali Region.

Not unlike the federal government, the Somali region deployed the moderationist approach to appease the pan-Ethiopianist camp while resorting to repressive

instruments to stifle local opposition. At the time, the region was the most securitised, with abysmal human rights records. Most importantly, the narrative did not enjoy inter-elite consensus, which contributed to the reversal of most decisions to forge unsubstantiated and instrumentalist symbolic attachment with the Ethiopian state.⁸⁷

The failure to adopt the moderationist approach in a negotiated way and the tightening of the political space, both at the federal level and in Somali region, contributed to the eventual discontinuity of the moderationist adaptation of the great tradition. The approach also applies to the post-2018 period but with a different purpose.

Similarly, following the post 2015 proliferation of monuments, murals and statutes, Oromia region also adopted a slightly tailored moderationist approach as a course correction. Some in the regional administration even faulted the zonal administrative structure as they relate it to the construction of zone-level memorials to ‘son-of-the-soil’ hero.⁸⁸ To contain the fragmentation of ‘shared Oromo memories’, they embarked on a project of reconstructing a ‘pan-Oromo’ shared memory through ‘circulating and redistributing vernacular memories of local heroes’ away from their area of origin across Oromia.⁸⁹

A source points to the region’s recent Ifa Boruu schools construction project and the deliberate circulation or redistribution of local hero statues in elite Ifa Boruu boarding schools. Statues were erected of Gudina Tumsa of Wolega in Haramaya, Haile Fida of Jima and Wolega in Dodola, Oenesimos Nesib of Ilibabor in Ambo, Abune Petros (Megersa Bedasa) of Shoa in Ambo Ifa Boruu special boarding schools. This was said to be the regional state’s strategy to inculcate pan-Oromo sentiment among the next Oromo generation.⁹⁰ Whether this could transpire as intended and forges shared collective memory in the region are yet to be seen.

State of ambiguity: incoherent moderationism on a collision course

With the ascent of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power in 2018, the moderationist approach, ambiguous and inconsistent as it has been, has become the governing dictum of the country. The tone was set during his acceptance speech to parliament. He referred to the notions of antiquity, continuity, and victory in defence of the great tradition and appealed for unity.⁹¹

This speech encapsulated a moderationist invention of tradition as he equally attempted to appeal to the rejectionists/reconstructivists in his emphasis on ‘shared sacrifice’. He also adopted an inclusivist rhetoric to the revivalists by referring to and reviving the civilisational-cum-continuity discourse. The moderationist approach was appealing enough for some cities and towns to replicate it. For instance, Arba Minch city administration and the Gamo zone used its memorialisation element

in naming major road in Arba Minch after its founder and first governor, Fitawrari Aemiroselassie Abebe thereby reviving the continuity discourse of the great tradition while actively maintaining local identity against a perceived ethnic rival.

However, the government's subsequent engagements with the highly nationalistic and mobilised masses across town halls right after Abiy came to power suggested a fragile and polarised state of the country. The landscape was anything but a space for political convergence. This was due first to the proliferation of demands for regional statehood in the former Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). Then there were the increasingly assertive political posturing of the pan-Ethiopianist camp and the reaction of the ethno-nationalist camps in Oromia and Tigray.

Nonetheless, the government's moderationist reinvention/adaptation of tradition raged on amid 'well-intentioned but ill-conceived institutional mechanisms'⁹² to contain the polarisation and bridge the political divide. These included the constitution of the national reconciliation and boundaries and identity affairs commissions, which would later be replaced by the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission. What started as a symbolic invocation of elements of the great tradition later mutated into a monumentalisation project. The renovation of the national palace and the storylines inscribed in what became Unity Park were attempts to build a bridge between the rejectionists and the revivalists.

Despite the government's effort to mainstream a moderationist approach, the political landscape didn't allow for politics of convergence

These restored/renovated and newly constructed public spaces embody continuity, among others, in the wax statues of Menelik and Haile Selassie and the wall of images of successive Ethiopian leaders from Menelik to Haylemariam Desalegn and the controversial Mengistu Haylemariam. On the other hand, local cultures are represented in symbols of vernacular architecture and modes of construction of 'nationalities'. The conscious mix of both traditions in Unity Park was meant to speak continuity to the revivalist and multiplicity to the rejectionists. Below is an extract from the statement of the prime minister's office on the eve of the inauguration of Unity Park.

'...the inauguration of Unity Park [...] is a manifestation of the Medemer idea, inviting us to take stock of our positive capital from the past (our historical and cultural assets) and build upon it for future generations. Unity Park symbolises our ability to come together for a common goal and cross the finish line by creating an exquisite lasting print of our collective worth.'

Wall of Leaders (left) and sculpture of ‘a United Africa’ in Unity Park



Source: The author and Where in Addis

Nonetheless, events since then seem to have indicated a moderationist approach in a highly divided and polarised Ethiopian political landscape necessitates a consolidated and ideologically coherent party apparatus and a negotiated approach to the construction of public spaces and memory sites. Despite the attempt to monumentalise ‘politics of convergence’ in these public spaces, polarisation, conflict and eventually war stifled the Ethiopian state and brought immense suffering to the people. One could cite three major factors for the derailment of the post-2018 seemingly moderationist approach.

First, despite the successful merger of the three former ethno-nationalist EPRDF founding members, except for TPLF, and the hitherto Agar-affiliate parties into the Prosperity Party, the party lacked a coherent⁹³ party line on the interpretation of the Ethiopian past. Hence the incoherent and inconsistent approach to the politics of history and memory.⁹⁴ The Prosperity Party would become a space for the moderationists, revivalists and rejectionist/reconstructivists. It continues to this day without mediating the three camps within the party and revitalising the political salience of moderationism to which it claimed to subscribe when it controlled the state.

The contradictions and competition among the competing camps within the party was later cited by detractors as a key factor for violence and conflict in the country. The parties to the post-2018 war and major conflicts in Tigray and Oromia would later point to this ‘non-negotiated’ moderationist approach and construction and restoration of public and memorial sites as a revivalist method. This, they viewed as founded on an aspiration to deconstruct the federal arrangement in favour of a unitary mode of governance⁹⁵ – a political code word often used by the rejectionists to deride the pan-Ethiopianists.

The second factor, which is intractably intertwined with the first – ideational incoherence and institutional fragility – was a failure to strike the right balance on the rejectionist/revivalist spectrum. Some argue that the right balance has never been found and doubt if there was a genuine effort to find it.⁹⁶ The traditions the government invented seemed to have missed the mark and tilted the equilibrium to the revivalists.⁹⁷ Examples, among others, mentioned as symptomatic of the government's revivalist inclinations have been the adaptation of the great tradition manifested in holiday messages – ecclesial, traditional and secular holidays alike.

Other issues are the rechristening of Nationalities Day to 'Ethiopia Day' and the change in Ethiopia Television motto, one of the country's major institutions, from 'the voice of renaissance' to 'for the preeminence of Ethiopia'. There is also the inscription of the word Ethiopia in major recreational projects such as Friendship Square, Entoto Park and Addis Ababa roadsides, and the national identification programme. More important, though, is the declaration by the government that 'Ethiopians are not a conglomeration of peoples as our enemies would have them believe and divided, but one people'. This was a public remark by the prime minister provoking resistance from the rejectionist camp and fuelling tensions.⁹⁸

The Prosperity Party would become a space for the moderationists, revivalists and rejectionists, precipitating intra-party contradictions

The third and equally important factor is the government's ahistorical approach to the construction of public spaces. From Unity Park to the more recent Friendship Park and Entoto Park, from the Abrhot (enlightenment) library to the resorts projects built by the prime minister's personal initiative across the regions, there is less effort to instill and inscribe commemorative values. Yet, the government seems to search for or ascribe commemorative values in spaces that largely project aesthetic values.⁹⁹ In other words, the drive to make aesthetic values national preoccupations is yet to translate into the construction of public spaces and memorials with values symbolising and sacralising negotiated and shared ideals and aspirations.

The government's vacillation between the rejectionist and revivalist approaches would eventually pit it against both camps. For instance, a prominent rejectionist, Jawar Mohamed, a former ally of the prime minister, expressed his disapproval of the government's restoration of the Menelik palace. He travelled to Arsi and visited the Anole monument with veteran Oromo politician Lenco Lata on the day the prime minister inaugurated Unity Park. This strategic move allowed him to make a political statement. The site was deliberately selected because Anole was

Unity Park (top) and Entoto Park



‘the antithesis of the tradition the government tried to revive in the Menelik and Haile Selassie statues’.¹⁰⁰

This was also the case with the revivalists camp as they grew increasingly incensed, claiming the government inconsistency would eventually lead to the rise of rejectionist camps. Andarachew Tsige, a revivalist, former Ginbot 7

movement leader and an ally of the prime minister, strongly condemned the violent clashes at the 2023 commemoration of the Adwa victory in Addis Ababa.



Source: Walta and Reporter

He faulted the government for ceding too much space for the rejectionist camp.¹⁰¹ Soon after, he left the country and started opposing the government and endorsing the ‘Fano resistance’ against the government. These sentiments of the competing elites would eventually be endorsed by their constituencies. These are mere manifestations of the simmering tension and rift between the government and both the rejectionist and revivalist camps that later precipitated discord and armed resistance and war.

The revivalists-restorationists revived? From the urge to restore to resentment and grievance

The revivalist approach subscribes to the political necessity of invoking ‘historic Ethiopia’ and the invented traditions by conventional historiography. Not unlike the other two approaches, this and its political elite devotees are not homogenous. Discernable differences and nuances exist, but they are united in their commitment to the great tradition. This group was muzzled and contained during the EPRDF period in both the political discourse and electoral spaces. In effect, the revivalists were left with vestiges of the great tradition confined mostly to opposition political parties and spaces of popular culture.

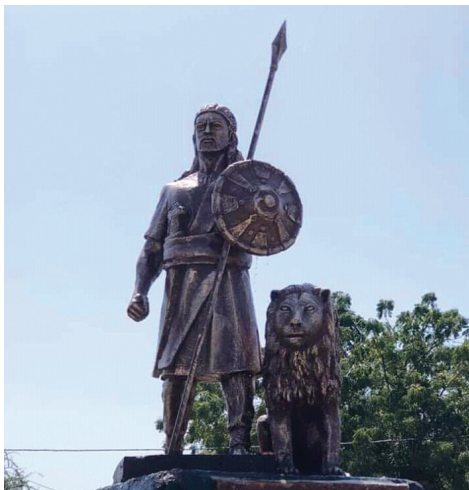
The ascent of the moderationists in 2018 and their insistence and their discourse rallied the revivalists around the government in the early days. The traditional revivalist strongholds, Amhara region, Addis Ababa, urban areas including Adama, Asala and Dire Dawa, and some significant pockets of the former SNNPR state, would support the new administration. Some, mainly Amhara, would reject the hitherto established symbols and discourse of the rejectionist/reconstructivist camp, the TPLF-led EPRDF to be exact, in their area.

Amid the ethno-nationalist resistance against EPRDF and after the Abiy prime ministership, Amhara region revived historic leaders and embodiments of the great tradition. The construction of monuments and statues started in February 2018, two months before his appointment. The regional government unveiled a statute of emperor Tewodros in his hometown Kuara, Gondar. In November 2019, the region and Debreabor University unveiled a Tewodros statue in Debreabor, Amhara. At the event, representatives of the regional government noted that the emperor was the bastion of a united and modernised Ethiopia. They urged the youth to be guardians of Ethiopian unity as he and their forefathers before them defended Ethiopian unity.¹⁰²

The regional elites presented leaders such as Tewodros and Menelik as Amhara heroes, both to manage the ethnically mobilised mass in the region and revive the great tradition and the pan-Ethiopianist discourse alike. This strategy was successful as the Amharas supported the prime minister and his revivalist rhetoric in the early days of his administration.

Nonetheless, perhaps disenfranchised by the inconsistencies of the Prosperity Party as to its approaches, some in the hitherto pan-Ethiopianist camp in Amhara started deploying these heroes in an ethno-nationalist mobilisation against the government.

The Tewodros statues in Gondar (left) and Debre Tabor, Amhara



Source: ENA and Amhara Media Corporation

Nationalist Amhara elites felt betrayed and sensed a shifting alliance after the federal government signed the cessation of hostilities agreement with TPLF fighters after the 2020 to 2022 war.¹⁰³

Amhara region was also the first to contemplate renaming Ginbot 20 airport in Bahir Dar, which was named in memory of the day EPRDF forces entered Addis Ababa in 1991. It ultimately became Dejazmach Belay Zeleke International Airport after a prominent Amhara hero. Amhara region, however, started the tradition of renaming public spaces and memorials at the height of the protest movement and the ascent of Abiy to state power.

In a clear rejection of TPLF-inspired counter-history and the mainstreaming of vernacular memory, sub-city councils in Bahir Dar renamed Gibot 20 sub-city Dagmawi Menelik sub-city (Menelik II sub-city). A park in the sub-city named after the late Meles Zenawi became Eshet Park, and Hidar 11 (11 November) sub-city formerly named after the founding date of Amhara National Democratic Movement, was renamed Dagmawi Tewodros sub-city (Tewodros the Second).

This was an act of reviving major Ethiopian kings who hailed from Amhara, who are synonymous with the great tradition for starting and consolidating Ethiopian state- and nation-building processes. In 2020, after the outbreak of war between TPLF and the federal government, the regional government removed a monument in Amhara martyrs museum in Bahir Dar, alleging its narrative contradicts the 'self-image' and dignity of the Amhara people.¹⁰⁴

The regional government stated that the statue (below, left) of an elderly man with the barrel of his rifle pointing down was a TPLF depiction of the Amhara as a 'defeated people'.¹⁰⁵ After two years, the regional government installed a different statue, (right) of a member of the region's special police. He was captured at the removal of the previous statue with the barrel of his rifle pointing upwards in an offensive position (middle).

A statue in Bahir Dar said to depict Amhara defeat (left) was replaced by one reflecting an offensive position (right)



Source: Facebook and Amhara Media Corporation

The construction of this monument during the height of the war with Tigrayan forces, a war in which Amharas were active participants, was no coincidence. The underlying revivalist discourse can be explained in at least two interrelated outcomes. The first is the rejection of the alleged demeaning TPLF discourse and restoration of Amhara dignity. The other, more consequential outcome was the assertion of the Amhara regional government's position in the war the federal government declared against the Tigray government after the latter attacked the northern command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force. Given the rivalry between the two regions that was revived during the pre-2018 social protests, the newly erected statue projected the Amhara region on a war footing against TPLF.

At the federal level, revivalists were ecstatic about the restored and renovated national palace and saw vindication in the wax statues of historic figures such as Menelik and Haile Selassie. However, the federal government faced stiff resistance from the ethno-nationalist/rejectionist camp within and without. Its attempts to recalibrate and strike a balance were questioned, with doubts as to whether the move was a tactical play to garner their support.¹⁰⁶ The Prosperity Party's insistence on maintaining 'the multinational federal arrangement' while campaigning for the 2021 general election was evidence for the revivalists that the government's moderationist approach could not satisfy their aspirations.¹⁰⁷

Revivalists were ecstatic about the renovated national palace and saw vindication in the wax statues of figures such as Menelik and Haile Selassie

It was amid this tension between these competing approaches to collective memory that the war between the Tigrayan forces and the federal government erupted. This war, shaped by factors including competing memories, saw pure revivalist discourse by both the moderationist and revivalist to rally the public against TPLF forces. TPLF, in turn, tried to stir both Tigrayans and other 'nationalities' in the country by invoking vernacular memories. The competition over contrasting memories was apparent before the war broke out and lingers.

The tactical alliance between revivalist and moderationist started to wither once the Pretoria cessation of hostilities agreement ended the war. The normalisation of relations between TPLF and the federal government was construed by the revivalist as a 'shift to the rejectionist camp'.¹⁰⁸ The government's subsequent invention of traditions further escalated the tension between the two. Other factors exacerbated tensions, including Oromia regional state's announcement that it would build the office of the regional president in Addis Ababa.

In addition, Addis Ababa city's administration plan to adopt the Oromia regional state curriculum in schools adjoining the city with Oromia region, and the federal government announcement of the construction of a new palace and its intention to make the national palace a public park further exacerbated tension between the two camps. As one source stated, with the announcement of a new palace, the revivalists had realised that the palace renovation was the government's cynical move to make the extraordinary space an ordinary park.¹⁰⁹

Simmering tension between the two camps was underscored not only by competing memories but also by structural factors such as the rights of depressed minorities, security dilemmas and socioeconomic grievances. These grievances later transformed into a fully fledged armed confrontation between Amhara forces and the federal government with most revivalists rhetorically aligning with the former.

Chapter 5

Localising vernacular traditions

The aforementioned discussions of the rejectionist/reconstructivist and revivalist/restorationist camps demonstrate the contradiction and uneasy interplay among three layers of invented traditions – the great tradition and vernacular traditions at federal and regional levels. As is the case in those who subscribe to the great tradition, there is homogeneity among those who ascribe to the vernacular memory-inspired tradition sub-nationally. Most ethno-linguistically territorialised regional states in the post-1991 era have been hotbeds of memory-informed inter- and intragroup competitions in the form of regionalism (Awrajaawinet) or clan-based cleavages.¹¹⁰ Often, these sociocultural cleavages evolve into political competitions fuelled by competing intragroup vernacular memories.

The relatively ethnically homogeneous Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and Somali regions, for instance, have been characterised by latent intragroup competitions and tensions. This has been more so in ethnically heterogeneous regions such as the former SNNPR, Gambela and Benishangul-Gumuz regions with intergroup tensions often escalating to violent clashes. Over the years, elites also used their proximity to the state (local, regional and federal) to advance their causes and undertake active ethnic boundary maintenance against a real/perceived rival group paving the way for the fourth layer of invented traditions.¹¹¹

Demands to monumentalise vernacular memories in Ethiopia have continued to date. That Ethiopia does not have a law¹¹² that regulates or standardises the construction of public spaces and memorial sites contributed to their proliferation. Sources across regions argue that a contributor to the trend was the fragility of the hitherto highly centralised EPRDF after the death of Meles Zenawi.¹¹³ Also mentioned were the subsequent nationalist social movements that encouraged local governments (mainly at zone level) to construct memorial monuments and statues to local heroes and events to appease and/or rally their ethnically mobilised constituency.¹¹⁴

This drive to monumentalise heroes also saw rejection of sites and objects marking those deemed agents of the great tradition. This was evident in the June 2020 dismantling of the statue of Ras Mekonnen, Haile Selassie's father and the first governor of Harar, by youths demonstrating against Hachalu Hundessa's murder

Protesters angered by the death of singer Hundess pulled down a statue of Ras Mekonnen, Haile Selassie's father



Source: Global Geography and Addis Standard

and Jawar Mohammed's detention.¹¹⁵ However, localised appropriation of the rejectionist/reconstructivist approach is used largely to represent materially the history, identity and memory of feuding groups in an intragroup memory war. The approach manifests through constructions of memorial spaces simultaneously contradicting the great tradition and signifying group identity or construction of 'living' memorial places such as museums and squares.

Of interest has been the simmering tension between Gamo ethnic groups of the newly established South Ethiopia regional state and the Wolayta. While this tension was limited to the cultural identity markers of the two communities until 2007/08, the timeframe of the celebration of the second Ethiopian millennium would soon turn the competition into political rivalry.¹¹⁶ The two communities are culturally interwoven with mostly similar identity markers. However, they have started competing recently over symbols, notably the *dunguza* – a traditionally woven tricoloured fabric often worn by elders at rituals of traditional conflict resolution and administration ceremonies.

While sources from both sides agree that they share the culture of producing the fabric, they also emphasise the dissimilarity in the weaving of the fabric. While the Wolayta *dunguza* has thinner stripes of the black, yellow and red, the Gamo produce thickly woven stripes.¹¹⁷ However, the Gamos accused the Wolayta of luring weavers from Gamo to Wolayta on the eve of the celebration of the Ethiopian millennium, mass producing *dunguza* and desacralising the fabric.¹¹⁸

It was also claimed that the Wolyatas were making the *dunguza* an ordinary fabric by mass producing jackets and hats of what was traditionally saved for elders and sacred events.¹¹⁹ This later escalated as the Wolaytas started demanding regional statehood in 2019 and made their would-be regional flag using *dunguza* colours. It was then that the Gamos started reclaiming the *dunguza* as their marker of identity, beautifying roadsides with *dunguza* colours. A square and monument in front of the Nech Sar campus of Arba Minch University (named after Nech Sar National Park around Arba Minch) would soon be renamed *Dunguza Square*.

Dunguza Square, Arba Minch



Source: EthioHAQ Tube, public source and the author

Initially, the monument in the square was a wide, white spiralling stair – the white symbolising Nech Sar National Park (white grass). The Gamos prided themselves on owning one of the country's preferred tourist destinations. Between 2019 and 2022, however, both the colour and name of the monument would be changed to Dunguza as Wolaytas' demand for regional statehood gathered steam. First, the top of the spiralling stair was painted in dunguza colours, then the outer circle of the road where the monument stood and finally the whole monument. Soon, the square would be renamed Dunguza Square.

This active maintenance of boundaries of identity continued by renaming the Gamu or Gamo community Gammo, meaning lion. The 'lionisation project' of the Gamo, some argue, is one of the local elite's 'invented traditions' against the 'increasingly assertive and allegedly condescending politics of the Wolayta elites. The latter is accused of an intention to incorporate the Gamos into the regional state they are demanding.'¹²⁰

Between 2019 and 2022, both the colour and name of the monument would be changed to Dunguza as Wolaytas' demand for regional statehood gathered steam

In this horizontal adversarial political relation, the Gamos went on to monumentalise other identity markers, including the monument of the Gose (a traditional cup made of gourd) with a dunguza-dressed Gamo man next to a lion at the main square in the city called Gamo square. Arba Minch University also commissioned a monument of twin banana leaves for the square leading to the main campus. And construction was completed of a Gamo cultural centre in the shape of a banana leaf sheath. The Gamos pride themselves in their tradition of banana cultivation. This (re)active and deliberate boundary maintenance is emblematic of the multiple functions of vernacular memories as reflected in the Gamo-Wolayta competition.

The pre-2018 ethno-nationalist mobilisations and resistance against EPRDF and the political economy of monumentalisation have also galvanised local elites in regional

states to demand more vernacular memorial sites. This was clear in the Oromia region as demands increased for the construction of memorial spaces for intragroup heroes.¹²¹ While the nationalist drive against EPRDF partly fuelled demand, multiple sources alleged that zone-level elites also used it to generate and redistribute rent as the construction enriched them and their clients.¹²²

These sources point to the plethora of murals, monuments and statues of zone-level local heroes across Oromia.¹²³ Brigadier General Tadesse Birru is memorialised in Fiche, Salale, Wako Gutu and Haji Adem Sado in Bale, Sheik Bekri Saphalo in Harar, Onesibos Nesib in Illu Ababora, Abishe Gerba in Wolega and Hachalu Hundessa¹²⁴ in Ambo. These typify the fragmentation of memory and memorials in Oromia.

For instance, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Oromia regional state president Shimeles Abdissa unveiled the statue of Tadesse Birru, a prominent figure of the Mecha-Tulema Self-help Association and a resistance, in May 2019. They also inaugurated the curiously dubbed Selale Oromo Cultural Centre in Fiche. The centre has two halls named after heroic figures from the area – Abebe Bikila Hall and Megersa Bedasa Hall, the latter adopting the secular name of Abune Petros.

The statue of Tadesse Birru and the halls of Selale Oromo Cultural Centre in Fiche



Source: BBC Afaan Oromo



Memorials to Haji Adem Sado (left) and Wako Gutu



Source: The author and public source

This approach is also replicated in Bale, Oromia. A statue of Haji Adem Sado graces the square at the centre of Goba. The short metal fences circling the statue are decorated with images of other resistance figures of the Bale Oromo, such as Wako Gutu, Aliji Chiri and Hussein Bune. Another statue of Wako Gutu, a founder and leader of the Bale uprising against the Haile Selassie regime in the 1960s, stands in neighbouring Robe.¹²⁵ The statues of Tadesse Birru, Haji Adem Sado and Wako Gutu reveal the fragmented memorialisation of vernacular memories and intragroup competition over memories.¹²⁶

The proliferation of local-level memorials shows the depth of intra- and intergroup competition and the rising instrumentalisation of vernacular memories

The proliferation of local-level memorials shows the role of local-level actors and the rising instrumentalisation of vernacular memories. It also reveals the depth of local intra- and intergroup competition and rivalry framed in terms of identity. Local elites deploy vernacular memory and invent traditions for two interrelated outcomes. The first is to maintain group identity markers against a perceived or real rival. As the Gamo-Wolayta case demonstrates, this approach is used to signify difference. The second is to revive a real or imagined glorious past of an identity group.

To this end, folktales of local heroes and martyrs are resuscitated and memorials constructed. Both these outcomes are used to maintain and consolidate inter- or intragroup identities. This is not to say that all local-level use of vernacular tradition and building of memorials is elite-driven and instrumentalist. Much of the data, however, seems to suggest the political economy of memorials and attendant political support as important factors behind the political calculus of elites.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

One of many factors animating political polarisation in Ethiopia has been the competition and at times conflict among the four layers of invented traditions and the three competing approaches to (collective) memory discussed in this monograph. Rejectionists/reconstructivists interpret the Ethiopian past as oppressive and the traditional Ethiopian historiography as state-centred. They argue the mainstream/conventional state-sanctioned Ethiopian past and history should be deconstructed to liberate the oppressed 'nationalities' who, they allege, have been at both political and economic margins of the Ethiopian state. Accordingly, they invented traditions to both deconstruct the great tradition and consolidate their narratives.

Revivalists, on the other hand, contend that the Ethiopian past and the nation- and state-building projects could not be presented any differently from 'conventional' approaches in other parts of the globe. They often subscribe to the famous mantra 'the state makes war; war makes the state'¹²⁷ and contend that Ethiopia's antiquity and civilisational and administrative continuity should not be faulted for the country's ills.

The EPRDF-led government was an equal opportunity authoritarian in that it had an enemy in and managed to contain organised political movements from the rejectionist/reconstructivist and revivalist camps alike. The former camp launched resistance against EPRDF alleging it used the federal arrangement as a façade and an instrument to realise 'TPLF's hegemonic aspirations'.

This camp, in both conventional party politics and armed resistance spaces, advocated complementing the EPRDF-led invented traditions with sub-national political autonomy and democratisation. On the other hand, although systematically stifled, the revivalist camp used the available spaces of contention to put a stop to EPRDF's invented traditions. It conceded over the years, though, that some great tradition core elements could not be revived and should be moderated.

Interestingly, while these camps were in contention for state control, EPRDF-led Ethiopia was gradually becoming a battleground for invented traditions informed by variants of vernacular memories at sub-national, regional, and zonal level administrative structures. These layers of invented traditions, often immortalised

through memorials such as statues, (re)naming of squares, streets and schools, and construction of cultural centres, were used by federal, regional and local elites for multiple purposes. Some were used to counter the foundational elements of the great tradition. Others were used to consolidate sub-national identity or actively maintain ethnic boundary markers against a perceived horizontal ethnic rival. Some of the traditions also focused on reviving local (at zone level) intragroup memories and heroes to appease groups aggrieved by power imbalance in an intra-group competition and consolidate sub-national identity.

Post-1991 invented traditions were institutionalised based on counter-history and vernacular memory. Competition between and contradiction with the great tradition increased. While these two layers competed, another layer arose sub-nationally with the adoption of the FDRE constitution. Eventually, a fourth layer would emerge with intra- and intergroup feuds and competition at sub-national level. As all these layers were informed by selectively deployed and contrasting memories, tension between these contrasting layers and competing approaches ensued that resulted in intractably interwoven contradictions and polarisation.

This memory war escalated over the years as agents of the four layers either restored or constructed memorials, or established and/or used existing or new institutional mechanisms to reinforce their invented traditions. The rejectionist/reconstructivist, selectivist/moderationist and revivalist camps all appear to have stuck with a similar methodology leading to a deadlock with no victor in the decades-long memory wars. Hence, the tension and polarisation across contrasting layers of traditions and their agents rage on.

Nonetheless, the three camps used the four layers for different purposes. The EPRDF-led government and its regional state allies mainstreamed counter-history and vernacular memory and sacralised its unity in diversity ideal. The regional states adopted a similar great-tradition-averse stance with embarked on making vernacular memories and traditions the hegemonic discourse thereby consolidating and maintaining sub-national identities.

Local governments deployed their invented traditions and memorials against local intra- and intergroup competitions by monumentalising mostly cultural identity markers and lionising 'son-of-the-soil' heroes. In a nutshell, they seem to have opted for strategically applied vernacular memories and memorials to build and sustain boundaries of identity while keeping them non-sacred. They are non-sacred due to dissociation with periodic ritualisation through government-sanctioned commemorative events.

Among the rejectionists/reconstructivists, the Tigray regional government is unique in that it has successfully made sacred places and objects that embody counter-history and vernacular memory. The region has socialised and reinforced its vision of unity in diversity by melding historic events into its regional public holidays.

The elite has woven memorial spaces with memories, aspirations and ideals, and, through official and periodic commemorative rituals and performances, has sacralised both memorial spaces and its preferred ideals.

The revivalist and moderationist camps, on the other hand, come across as fragmented and ambiguous. Despite efforts since mid-2005 (during and after the then general elections) to moderate their conception of the great tradition, the revivalists are yet to break free of the yolk of the political container and label the rejectionists/reconstructivists assigned to it. Moreover, the revivalist camp was highly reactive to and emotive about the great tradition when confronted by its rival camp. Evidence was the hostile discourse they often engage in on Adwa commemoration, issues of flags and symbols, and memorial sites such as Anole and Chelenko. All this bolstered the allegation that revivalists cannot moderate themselves sufficiently for the reality of contemporary Ethiopian politics. However, some major post-1991 events, such as the Ethio-Eritrea war, the 2005 election and the 2018 change in government, are evidence that there is sizable constituency for the revivalists. With a refined, updated and moderate revivalism, this camp could still emerge as a formidable force.

Tension between contrasting layers of traditions and approaches to collective memory resulted in interwoven contradictions and polarisation

The post-2007/08 EPRDF-led moderationist approach, a notable shift from the front's previous rejectionism, showed the viability of the approach if and when compounded by aspirational and grand national projects behind which the masses could rally. This would be accompanied by an autocratic state apparatus to contain those who deviate from the state-prescribed national agenda. Although seemingly effective, it proved that tough challenge and resistance could be expected if the state fails to deliver on development projects and democratic progress and earn legitimacy.

With the ascent of one faction of EPRDF to power in 2018, the revivalists' great tradition discourses resurfaced, luring them to coalesce around the government. Facing stiff resistance from layers of invented vernacular traditions and suspecting the government had started to oscillate between the revivalist and the deconstructivist camps, the former has been on a collision course with the state since.

The government's moderationist faction, with all the inconsistencies and incoherence and an undercurrent of politics of convergence, claims to advocate selective glorification, memorialisation and denouncement of Ethiopia's past and

a futuristic outlook. As aspirational as the moderationist approach may sound, this camp appears not to have coherence and consistency in either structures or approach. This contributed to its failure to mediate between the rejectionist/reconstructivist and revivalist camps from within and without. The constant and, at times, violent competition among these camps has created a state of flux and instability in the country.

The post-2018 initially moderationist approach and eventual oscillation between rejectionist/reconstructivist and revivalist stances have elevated polarisation. That the ruling party consisted of and failed to reconcile the rejectionist/reconstructivists, moderationists and revivalists within indicates ideological incoherence and institutional fragility. This seems to have diffused into state structures causing internal contradictions and exacerbating tensions in the country. The longer this remains, the longer it will take to contain and restore the country's peace and security even through extra-constitutional mechanisms such as the national dialogue initiative.

Recommendations

For the government

Desecuritised peacemaking

Memory wars and conflict/war are mutually reinforcing. The former are the basis of conflict in Ethiopia, which, in turn, reifies memory wars. The government should prioritise securing peace. It could capitalise on and learn from the Pretoria cessation of hostilities agreement with TPLF and negotiations with the Oromo Liberation Army, expanding the scope to include all powers with which it is in armed conflict. To do this, the government and its agencies could formulate a national reconciliation strategy informed by, among others, the state of memory wars and competing memorialisations in the country.

Integrated and transformative development policies and legal frameworks

Youth bulge coupled with joblessness contributes to the rise and recurrence of memory-inspired polarisation and conflict. To manage this, the government should, among others, prioritise developing and implementing social, and cultural policies to mitigate the resource and cultural dimensions of conflict and instability and prevent memory wars from remaining a primary conflict driver.

Government social and cultural policies should take into account the political necessity of recognising multiple memories. The language policy reportedly being drafted by the government, and construction of public spaces and memorials should reflect this political reality and focus on reconciling competing memories. This could be achieved by considering 'multilingualism' as a policy framework at both federal and regional levels.

Laws should be enacted regulating hitherto unregulated and arbitrary construction of memorial sites such as monuments, and the naming and renaming of public spaces. The federal government should use its constitutional ‘framework power’ to regulate and standardise memorialisation sub-nationally.

Memory mapping

The ministry of peace recently finalised its peace policy and submitted it to the council of ministers for approval. This draft should be used as a springboard for conflict mapping and, most importantly, memory mapping, which, in turn, should inform the national reconciliation strategy. Identifying the proliferating conflicting memory discourses is essential in bridging both the political and sociocultural cleavages that have for decades spurred conflict in the country.

The government should also construct a negotiated memorial space divested from individuals and dedicated to ideals such as collective sacrifice, martyrdom and Ethiopian resilience. An inclusive national memorial day with standardised rituals and inclusive and predictable performative activities should be initiated in consultation with stakeholders.

For the ruling and opposition parties

Divesting memorial places and objects from controversy

The political class should analyse thoroughly which aspects of memorials and memorialisation have been bones of contention. The national annual commemoration of the Yekatit 12 martyrs or Patriots’ Victory Day, and memorial sites across regional states, with some exceptions, have seldom been as contentious as the commemoration of the victory of Adwa. This is more so concerning the Anole and Chelenko memorials. The underlying factor for this is that the formers are divested from figures and sacralised into events celebrating the sacrifices of nameless, voiceless and faceless Ethiopians.

The last two mentioned are associated with emperor Menelik and reaction and resistance to the personification glory and grief inscribed in the memorials. By challenging each other’s memories and memorials, the rejectionists and revivalists are sacralising what they reject vehemently. Thus, both camps should strive for the moderationist approach of divesting forthcoming memories and memorials from individuals and recognise and keep the existing, even controversial, sites as are.

For opposition parties

National listening tours

Opposition political parties and the Ethiopian Political Parties Joint Council (EPPJC) should recognise growing vernacular memories as both a political reality and key driver of tensions and animosity and conduct strategic national listening

tours targeting key areas where conflicting memories and memorialisation are produced, monumentalised, and transmitted. This should be done before identifying and submitting agenda items for the national dialogue process. This will enable them to recalibrate their interpretations of history, conceptions of the identity of the state and collective memory, and inform their social, cultural, and economic policies.

Based on the findings of the tours, Opposition parties should draft a comprehensive national reconciliation policy options. Their alternative reconciliation strategy options should be rooted in ‘politics of recognition’ and empathy as major pillars to soften both inter-elite and inter-communal tensions that are the root of conflict in the country. EPPJC should lead this and negotiate with the government for a de jure liberalisation of the political space that could both incentivise and reward opposition parties’ commitment to listening tours.

For the National Dialogue Commission

Purposive participant selection informed by memory mapping

The National Dialogue Commission is about to launch the actual dialogue phase of its process. It has already started participant selection from segments of the Ethiopian society. There are also plans to include political parties registered at both the regional and federal levels. The choice of community participants is currently random as the communities select their representatives on assessment of calibre to represent their agenda items.

However, given crosscutting and mostly identity-based competing memory discourses, the commission should also practise purposive selection of participants from both community and competing political elites. This approach should be guided by structured memory mapping across the country.

For the Transition Justice Working Group of Experts

Transitional justice policy informed by memory and memorials mapping

The Transitional Justice Working Group of Experts released a green paper detailing possible transitional justice policy options soon after the Pretoria cessation of hostilities agreement. Following public consultations on the paper, the working group is drafting a policy.

Given the central role of memorialisation in transitional justice policies, the group and ministry of justice should ensure that both the policy and the process are derived and inferred from memory mapping. The policy should accommodate the diversity of memory discourses and memorials. It should also include a mechanism to avoid entanglement with the often-contrasting and -competing layers of traditions determining material representations of memory in contemporary Ethiopia.

For the state media

Accommodationist reporting

The media are a powerful instrument of transmitting and sustaining memories and this has been the case in Ethiopia. Decentralisation of the media along the federal structure has also contributed to the reification and rigidification of competing memory discourses among regional state audiences. A review of the discourses pushed over the last decade by, for instance, the Oromia Broadcasting Network, Amhara Media Corporation and Tigray Television substantiates this. Communications from these media houses are often exclusive and directed against the great tradition or particular vernacular memories.

The exclusivist memory maintenance approach of media contributed to the rivalry and animosity between communities. Thus, these broadcasters should start to become more accommodating in approach. To explore this issue, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority and media should form an interagency forum. Collaboration could then follow with the government, independent institutions and opposition political parties, such as the ministry of peace, the National Dialogue Commission and EPPJC.

Notes

- 1 Reporter, Unwarranted reaction turns age-old celebration violent, www.thereporterethiopia.com/31711/, 4 March 4 2023.
- 2 Taddese Tamrat, *Church and state in Ethiopia*, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1972, 1270–1527.
- 3 The St George Church ‘tabot’ is said to have accompanied the emperor and his forces in their march to the northern front.
- 4 Interview with expert, Addis Ababa, July 2023.
- 5 Interview with source, Addis Ababa, May 2023, Addis Ababa, Also see Biniyam Woldegebriel, Memories of the victory of Adwa: a focus on its commemoration, (1941–1999), MA Thesis, unpublished, 2004.
- 6 Krzysztof Pomian, ‘Memory wars’ in Hannes Swoboda and Jan Marinus Wiersma (edn), Politics of the past: the use and abuse of history, The Socialist Group in the European Parliament, 2009, 81–86.
- 7 Alessandro Truilzi, Battling with the past: new framework for Ethiopian historiography, in Wendy James et al (edn), *Remapping Ethiopia: socialism and after*, James Currey, Oxford, 2002, 297–288.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 21 August 1995, www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5a84.html.
- 10 Alessandro Truilzi, Battling with the past: new framework for Ethiopian historiography, in Wendy James et al, *Remapping Ethiopia: socialism and after*, James Currey, Oxford, 2002, 297–288.
- 11 *Addis Standard*, 23 June 23 2018, News: at least six people killed in Goba, Bale after controversy over monument led to inter-communal tensions, <https://addisstandard.com/news-at-least-six-people-killed-in-goba-bale-after-controversy-over-monument-led-to-inter-communal-tensions/>.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Borkena, A protestant pastor remarks on Meskel Square controversy, January 2022, <https://borkena.com/2022/01/11/ethiopia-pastor-remarks-on-meskel-square-controversy/>.
- 14 Alessandro Truilzi, Battling with the past: new framework for Ethiopian historiography, in Wendy James et al, *Remapping Ethiopia: socialism and after*, James Currey, Oxford, 2002, 297–288.
- 15 Dereje Feyissa, Epistemological debates and ideological fault-lines in Ethiopia, RVI, 2023, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/epistemological-debates-and-ideological-fault-lines-ethiopia>.
- 16 Daniel Kendie, The causes of the failure of the present regime in Ethiopia, *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol 1, No 1, 2003, 177–213.
- 17 Messay Kebede, Radicalism and cultural dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960–1974, Philosophy Faculty Publications, *Paper 112*, 2008, http://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/112.
- 18 Semir Yusuf, Constitutional design options for Ethiopia: managing ethnic divisions, *Institute for Security Studies Monograph 204*, 2020, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/monograph204.pdf> and Dereje Feyissa, Epistemological debates and ideological fault-lines in Ethiopia, RVI, 2023, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/epistemological-debates-and-ideological-fault-lines-ethiopia>.
- 19 Bernard Barber, Place, symbol and utilitarian function in war memorials, *Social Forces*, Vol 28, No 1, 1949, 64–68.
- 20 Eric Hobsbawm, Introduction: inventing traditions, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The invention of traditions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, 1–14.

- 21 John Bodnar, *Remaking America public memory, commemoration and patriotism in the twentieth century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992.
- 22 This dichotomy often used to explain Ethiopian politics should not imply a watertight distinction. Over the years, both camps have registered slight readjustments on major issues such as the interpretation of Ethiopian history, the 'nationalities question' and the political salience and viability of a federal state structure. Accordingly, both the pan-Ethiopianist and ethno-nationalists camps have become big tents for their respective factions. This has recently been a challenge for the pan-Ethiopianists as some opted from appropriating the great tradition as vernacular memory in their fight against the federal government. For a detailed discussion of the emerging nuances and factions within both camps, see Semir Yusuf, *Constitutional design options for Ethiopia: managing ethnic divisions*, *Institute for Security Studies Monograph* 204, 2020, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/monograph204.pdf>.
- 23 David Glassberg, *Public history and the study of memory*, *The Public Historian*, Spring, 1996, Vol 18, No 2, 1996, 7–23.
- 24 Jan Marinus Wiersma and Hannes Swoboda, *Politics of the past: the use and abuse of history*, 2009, 18.
- 25 John Bodnar, *Remaking America public memory, commemoration And patriotism in the twentieth century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992.
- 26 *Ibid*, 76.
- 27 Eric Hobsbawm, *Introduction: inventing traditions*, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The invention of traditions*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- 28 *Ibid*.
- 29 The historic past into which the new tradition is inserted need not be lengthy, stretching back into the assumed mists of time. Revolutions and 'progressive movements' that break with the past, by definition, have their own relevant past, although it may be cut off at a certain date, such as 1789. However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations that reference old situations or that establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetitions, *Ibid*, 2.
- 30 *Ibid*.
- 31 *Ibid*, 1.
- 32 Bernard Barber, *Place, symbol and utilitarian function in war memorials*. *Social Forces*, Vol 28, No 1, 64–68, 1949, 66.
- 33 It is worth quoting one of the prominent political historians of Ethiopia, Christopher Clapham, as he demonstrated precisely the aforementioned critique of Ethiopian historiography. He argues that Ethiopian historiography has been afflicted with methodological flaws as it often chronicles the country's history by ... Starting perhaps with a ritual obeisance to the emergence of possibly the earliest hominids in what is now Ethiopian territory, it will then chronicle the Axumite state and the introduction of Christianity and the decline thereof. The Ethiopian 'dark ages' will be followed by an account of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela and the golden age that followed the Solomonic 'restoration'. At that point Axum outsiders enter the story, with the jihad of Ahmad Gragn and the arrival of the Portuguese, while the Oromo tide flows up from the south into Shoa, Wollo and even parts of Tigray. This results in a further period of decline, lit by the decadent glories of Gondar, until Ethiopia is almost extinguished during the *zà'māna masafant*. However, this proves to be only the darkest hour before the dawn, signalled by the rise of the terrifying Tewodros, before Yohannes and Menilek see off Egyptian and Italian invaders, extend their realm far and wide to encompass the frontiers of today's Ethiopia and set in train the processes of modernisation in the form of Western-style education and the establishment of the beginnings of a bureaucracy. There remains only the brief incident of Lij Iyasu, the relentless rise of Tafari (soon to become Haile Selassie), fascist invasion, the *arbanço* and liberation, the Eritrean federation and the consolidation of a modern centralised state, until the dramatic transformations of the revolution lead to the peripheral nationalisms of Eritrea and Tigray and the overthrow of the Mengistu regime. The rest, as they say, is history, Christopher Clapham, *Rewriting Ethiopian history*, in *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol 18, 37–54, 2002, p 38–39.
- 34 The 'conventional historiography' is often faulted for making the state the sole object of history and employing a linear scope. Critics often challenge conventional historiography for avoiding the stories of the people. This version of Ethiopian history chronicles the history of state (with attributes of the

great tradition) from the Axumite civilisation and Christianity, the Zaguwe dynasty and semi-ecclesial architectural ingenuity, emperor Tewodros and 'Zemene Mesafinet' (the era of princes) to emperors Menelik and Selassie. The recurring theme across this version of history is consolidating the great tradition-civilisational and ecclesial foundation, Christianity and discourse of 'a God-chosen people, antiquity and continuity against a religious or colonial other'.

- 35 Teshale Tibebu. Ethiopia: the 'anomaly' and 'paradox' of Africa, *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol 26, No 4, 1996, 414–430.
- 36 Christopher Clapham, Rewriting Ethiopian history, in *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol 18, 2002, 37–54.
- 37 Alessandro Truilzi, Battling with the past: new framework for Ethiopian historiography, in Wendy James et al, *Remapping Ethiopia: socialism and after*, James Currey, Oxford, 2002, 297–288.
- 38 The pre-1991 state deployed invented traditions to socialise the theocratic element of the Ethiopian state and the supremacy of the monarchy and the great tradition as inextricably linked to the Ethiopian 'self' and national identity. To that end, the state rechristened town, glorified the monarchy and the personhood of the emperor in the national anthem and minted national currencies with the 'Lion of Judah' inscribed on them. On the other hand, the pre-1991 state used material relics and constructs to sustain the great tradition' and the collective memory it helped produce. These material relics – archeological, mythical and architectural – were then presented as evidence of Ethiopia's antiquity and ecclesial and civilisational exceptionalism to forge a 'shared identity' and 'shared collective memory'. Hence, Lucy or Dinkinesh was presented as a piece of archeological evidence that Ethiopia is the birthplace of humanity and ownership of the Arc of the Covenant – brought to Aksum by Menelik, son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon – was evidence that the monarchy had an ecclesial foundation. Equally, the towering obelisks of Aksum, the rock-hewn-out churches in Lalibela and the castles of Gondar were presented as architectural evidence cementing the civilisational and political continuity of the state. See Julia Gallagher et al, The histories buildings tell: aesthetic and popular readings of state meaning in Ethiopia, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 16:1, 2022, 2–24.
- 39 Biniyam Woldegebriel, Memories of the victory of Adwa: a focus on its commemoration, (1941–1999), MA thesis, unpublished, 2004.
- 40 Walker Connor. Nation-building or nation-destroying? *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol 26, No 4, 1996, 414–430.
- 41 Julia Gallagher et al, The histories buildings tell: aesthetic and popular readings of state meaning in Ethiopia, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 16:1, 2022, 2–24.
- 42 Meskerem Asegid, *Public monuments of Addis Ababa, 1930–2014*, Central Printings Press, Addis Ababa, 2014.
- 43 Muluaem Daba Tola, The political and historical representation of statues in three Ethiopian consecutive regimes (1889 – present), *Social Sciences*, Vol 6, No 2, 2017, 35–44.
- 44 Interview with historian, Addis Ababa, July 2023.
- 45 Meskerem Asegid, *Public monuments of Addis Ababa, 1930–2014*, Central Printings Press, Addis Ababa, 2014.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Biniyam Woldegebriel, Memories of the victory of Adwa: a focus on its commemoration, (1941–1999), MA thesis, unpublished, 2004.
- 50 Interview with historian, Addis Ababa, July 2023.
- 51 Ibid,
- 52 Bahru Zewde. The quest for socialist utopia: the Ethiopian student movement 1960–1974, Addis Ababa University Press, Addis Ababa, 2014.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Daniel J Elazar, *Exploring federalism*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 1987.
- 55 Preamble of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 21 August 1995, www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5a84.html.

- 56 Adam James Tebble, What is the Politics of difference? *Political Theory*, Vol 30, No 2, 2002, 259–281.
- 57 Interview with former senior EPRDF member, Addis Ababa, June 2023.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Interview with former EPRDF member, Jigjiga, July 2023.
- 60 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 21 August 1995, www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5a84.html.
- 61 Biniyam Woldegebriel, Memories of the victory of Adwa: a focus on its commemoration, (1941–1999), MA thesis, unpublished, 2004.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Interview with former member of parliament, Addis Ababa, July 2023.
- 64 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 21 August 1995, www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5a84.html.
- 65 Interview with former member of the Oromo Liberation Front, Addis Ababa, August 2023.
- 66 Bridget Conley, Ethiopia's new prison memorial museum, 2018, https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2018/01/16/ethiopias-new-prison-memorial-museum/#_edn1.
- 67 Interview with local elder, Robe, Oromia, September 2023.
- 68 Interview with local elder, Goba, Oromia, September 2023.
- 69 Walta, Chelenko martyrs memorial statue inaugurated, 2015 <https://waltainfo.com/38321/>.
- 70 Interview with university professor, Robe, August 2023.
- 71 Said Samatar, Sayid Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, The case of the mad mullah and the Somali dervish cause, Somali nationalism and Oral Poetry, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982.
- 72 Interview with Somali opposition party member, Jigjiga, July 2023.
- 73 Interview with member of parliament of the Somali regional council, Jigjiga, July 2023.
- 74 Interview with a university professor, Jigjiga, July 2023.
- 75 Interview with local elder, Jigjiga, July 2023. The recent controversy in the region after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed asked the regional president, Mustafa Mohammed, in a live televised event of the launching of the formers book, to build a public space in Kharamarda, a mountainous place in the Somali region often invoked as a site of Ethiopian victory over Somalia forces, to commemorate the sacrifice 'our forefathers' made in defence of Ethiopia' was related to the embedded vernacular memory the Somalis maintained about the war.
- 76 Interview with member of parliament of the Somali regional council, Jigjiga, July 2023.
- 77 ነጋሪት ጋዜጣ ትግራይ አዋጅ ቁጥር 11 የህዜብ ስህላትን ለመመለስ የወጣ አዋጅ, 1987
- 78 Interview with member of Tigray opposition party, Addis Ababa, August 2023.
- 79 Interview with federal minister, Jigjiga, August 2023.
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Tegbaru Yared, Speaking power to 'truth': an outsider's look into the Oromo youth resistance against EPRDF, in Camille L Pellerin and Logan Cochrane, Citizens, civil society and activism under the EPRDF regime: an analysis from below, McGill-Queen's University Press, London, 2023, 208–238.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 For a detailed analysis of the Kali narrative', see Tegbaru Yared, Negotiating the identity of Somali region under Ethiopia's federal system: change in continuity, in Assefa Fisseha and Asnaqe Kefale, Federalism and local government in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, 2015, 110–152.
- 86 Tobias Hagman, Beyond clanishness and colonialism: understanding political disorder in Ethiopia's Somali region, 1991–2004. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol 43, 2005, 509–536.
- 87 Interview with a regional member of parliament, Jigjiga, August 2023.
- 88 Interview with an expert, Addis Ababa, June 2023.

- 89 Interview with a university professor, Robe, Oromia, September 2023.
- 90 Ibid.
- 91 Interview with a senior member of prosperity party, Addis Ababa, July 2023.
- 92 Sources attribute the 'ill-conceived' label to the way the two commissions were established, their composition and their eventual dissolution. Interviews with sources, Addis Ababa, June 2023.
- 93 Semir Yusuf, Drivers of ethnic conflict in contemporary Ethiopia, *Institute of Security Studies Monograph* 202, 2019, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/mono-202-2.pdf>.
- 94 Interview with member of an opposition party, Addis Ababa, July 2023,
- 95 Ibid.
- 96 Interview with senior member of prosperity party, Addis Ababa. July 2023.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Ibid.
- 99 Interview with historian, Addis Ababa, May 2023.
- 100 Interview with member of the Oromo Federalist Party, Addis Ababa, May 2023.
- 101 See Andargachew Tsige's remark, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmDK_FXQ-NA.
- 102 See ENA, 'የዳግማዊ አኢ ቴዎድሮስ መታሰቢያ ሃውልት ተመረቀ', 17February 2019, www.ena.et/web/amh/w/am_68114.
- 103 Interview with member of Amhara Opposition Party, Addis Ababa, June 2023.
- 104 Interview with Amhara opposition party member, Addis Ababa, September 2023.
- 105 See the reporting of the regional state media after the removal of the statue, <https://youtu.be/HWuYkmrAkCo?si=XvHZbUj6bc0Krm9>.
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Interview with senior government official, Addis Ababa, June 2023.
- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Interview with expert, Addis Ababa, May 2023.
- 110 Tobias Hagman, Beyond clanishness and colonialism: understanding political disorder in Ethiopia's Somali region, 1991–2004, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol 43, 2005, 509–536.
- 111 Dereje Feyissa, Playing different fames: the paradox of Anywaa and Nuer identification strategies in the Gambella region, Ethiopia, *Integration and Conflict Studies*, Berhahn Books, 2011.
- 112 Interview with senior expert at House of Federation, Arba Minch, June 2023.
- 113 Some trace this drive to the death of former prime minister Meles Zenawi and the almost competition-like (re)-naming of roads, squares, hospitals, public parks and schools thereafter. Interview with university professor, Goba, Oromia, September 2023.
- 114 Interview with sources in Robe (September 2023), Arba Minch (August 2023), Jigjiga (September 2023) and Addis Ababa (June 2023).
- 115 Addis Standard, <https://twitter.com/addisstandard/status/1277975339285676039?lang=en>.
- 116 Interview with source, Arba Minch, August 2023.
- 117 Interview with university professor and an elder, Arba Minch, August 2023.
- 118 Interview with source, Arba Minch, August 2023.
- 119 Interview with local elder, Arba Minch, August 2023.
- 120 Ibid.
- 121 Interview with university professor, Arba Minch, August 2023.
- 122 Interview with university professor, Goba, Oromia, September 2023.
- 123 Ibid.
- 124 While most monumentalising of vernacular memories is deliberate and strategic, there are also some presentist and reactive memorialisations. Some public spaces were, for instance, constructed in the Oromia region and Addis Ababa in the wake of the murder of the prominent nationalist Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa and the death of the veteran Ali Birra. [Following the murder of the prominent nationalist Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa in 2020, both the Oromia regional

government and Addis Ababa city administration swiftly renamed public spaces after Hundessa. Squares, parks and roundabouts were named after him to memorise his defence of the Oromo people. A statue was unveiled in front of Ambo University and one of the university's campuses was named after him. A statue for the recently departed and veteran Oromo artist Ali Birra was also unveiled to the public in Addis Ababa. The same was true for the construction and unveiling of a memorial to the recently departed chief of general staff of the Ethiopian Defence Force in Addis Ababa. Some of these reactive and presentist acts coincided with previous acts of reviving vernacular memories. A school in Ghinir, Oromia – Dejazmach Mekuria Tesema Junior High School – was renamed Hachalu Hundessa High School. Mekuria is said to be the first governor of Ghinir town appointed by Haile Selassie.]

- 125 Goba used to be the capital of Bale Zone. During the early days of EPRDF, Robe became the capital and recently, the Oromia regional states merged both Robe and Goba into Robe, with Goba being one of the three sub-cities of Robe.
- 126 Interview with university professor, Robe, Oromia, September 2023.
- 127 Interview with member of an Amhara opposition party, Addis Ababa, June 2023.

About this monograph

The Ethiopian political landscape has been a battlefield of 'memory wars' for more than half a century. This monograph analyses a crucial polarising factor in contemporary Ethiopia – contrasting material representations of competing memories. Competition between official and vernacular memories is anchored in and reinforced by contrasting interpretations of Ethiopia's past. The monograph examines the revivalist, moderationist and rejectionist approaches used by political elites to define and institutionalise their preferred memory discourses. These elites use previously 'invented traditions' or invent traditions themselves. The contradictions between these competing approaches and contrasting layers of 'invented traditions' contributed to discord and polarisation.

About the author

Tegbaru Yared is a Researcher with the Horn of Africa Security and Analysis Programme at the Institute for Security Studies in Addis Ababa. His research focuses on ethnicity, nationalism, memory studies, conflict and peace studies, and federalism.

About the ISS

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa's future. The ISS is an African non-profit with offices in South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal. Using its networks and influence, the ISS provides timely and credible policy research, practical training and technical assistance to governments and civil society.

Development partners



Government of the Netherlands

This monograph is funded by the Government of the Netherlands. The ISS is grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.