

POLITICIZING PUBLIC EVENTS IN ADDIS ABABA

Dalaya Ashenafi Esayiyas

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DESIGN/LAYOUT

Maggie Dougherty

CONTENTS

Summary	5
Introduction	7
Competing narratives of Ethiopian identity	7
Methodology	8
Public events and contestations in Addis Ababa	10
Addis Ababa: Why it matters	10
Adwa celebrations: beyond battlefield glory	13
Past celebrations and contestations	13
Adwa Zero KM Project	18
Great Ethiopian Run	21
A platform for civic expression	22
Dynamic narrative interplays	24
From margins to centre stage: Irrecha	26
A platform for political expression	27
Debates about government involvement	30
Irrecha and Oromo identity	32
Layers of meaning in Meskel Square	34
Intensifying controversies	35
More than a place	38
Staging the past and present in Addis Ababa	40
Conclusion	42
Policy considerations	42
Glossary of acronyms, words and phrases	43
Bibliography	44

SUMMARY

- The political landscape in Ethiopia since 2018 exemplifies how historical interpretations rooted in collective memory can shape political alignments. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's initial embrace of great tradition narratives clashed with the historical perspectives of his core constituency, the Oromo, who are deeply invested in challenging this dominant narrative. Combined with political rivalries among elites, this dissonance has created fertile ground for intense contestation over historical interpretations.
- Historical memory has become a weapon in these contestations. Diverse actors wield it to solidify identities, assert power, reclaim lost narratives and challenge dominant interpretations. These contests are often linked to broader struggles for ethnic and cultural recognition.
- Competing narratives and their subjectivity play a central role. Different communities are shaped by unique experiences and hold distinct perspectives on the past. This subjectivity reflects the multifaceted nature of history, with interpretations constantly evolving through dialogue and critical engagement. Understanding this subjectivity is crucial to deciphering contested narratives in Ethiopia.
- Contestations and politicization around public events are not mere squabbles. They are battles between elites for narrative control. These competing historical narratives serve as powerful tools to shape social and political realities. Four public events in Addis Ababa offer insight about these conflict dynamics: Adwa Victory Day celebrations; the annual Great Ethiopian Run; Irrecha (Oromo thanksgiving ceremony and festival); and recent contestations over Meskel Square.
- Constitutional rights encourage groups to preserve and promote their history, effectively turning collective memory into a contested landscape for political groups. Therefore, in contemporary Ethiopia where history holds such political significance, what matters is not so much what happened in the past but how those events are remembered.
- The official narrative surrounding the Battle of Adwa, often disseminated through the great tradition narrative, glorifies the leadership of Emperor Menelik II and portrays the victory over Italian imperialism as a triumph for all Ethiopians. This narrative, however, overlooks the experiences and contributions of marginalized groups such

as the Oromo, whose ancestors also fought alongside the Menelik II forces in 1896.

- The 2018 appointment of the first Oromo prime minister, Abiy, created an opportunity for the Oromo community to retell their history and claim their place in the Adwa narrative. This counter-history highlights the role of their ancestors in the battle, while also addressing the historical trauma associated with Menelik II's expansion of imperial Ethiopia into traditional Oromo lands.
- The Great Ethiopian Run has grown from its sporting roots to become a symbol of civic expression and peaceful protest in Addis Ababa. Although it extends across Ethiopia with more than 100 local races, the impact of this event as a platform for dissent is particularly strong in its place of origin, Addis Ababa. Participants leverage the festive atmosphere surrounding this event to voice grievances and advocate for political change.
- The Irrecha festival is central to Oromo cultural identity and spiritual practice but has faced suppression and marginalization for centuries. While a sense of shared cultural heritage forms a unifying thread, closer examination reveals significant internal diversity in how Irrecha is interpreted and experienced. The cultural significance of Irrecha centres around thanksgiving and enjoys broad acceptance in the Oromo community. The traditional rituals, festivities and celebration of unity resonate with many. In terms of the political staging and religious elements of Irrecha, however, divergent interpretations and tensions emerge.
- The history of Meskel Square complicates contestations over its ownership. Name changes and repurposing under multiple regimes reflect the evolving social and political fabric of Ethiopia. While the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) emphasizes its long association with the space, others point to periods when the square held broader secular significance. This highlights the need to navigate conflicting historical perspectives. It also reveals the need for all stakeholders to acknowledge the multifaceted identity of this space. The contestation goes beyond practical issues relating to legal rights and usage. It touches upon deeper issues of religious sensitivity, anxieties over cultural dominance and the desire for inclusivity.
- Seeking remedies to ease these various contestations means going beyond symbolic gestures. It demands tackling the root causes of historical injustices in order to prevent their recurrence. For Adwa, this might involve dismantling imperial legacies and fostering equitable relations. For Irrecha, it could entail addressing systemic inequalities and promoting genuine inclusivity. While these threads connect Irrecha and Adwa, recognizing their distinct contexts and meanings is crucial.



INTRODUCTION

An analysis of the multifaceted dynamics of the politicization and contestations surrounding public events in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, reveals how diverse political forces utilize them as platforms to express their ideologies, claim dominance and voice dissent. Four public events are of particular interest: Adwa celebrations; the Great Ethiopian Run; Irrecha; and contestation over Meskel Square. Examining these public displays offers valuable insight into the evolution and various manifestations of the national political landscape in Ethiopia. The controversies surrounding these public events also contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between memory, identity and political power in contemporary Ethiopia.

COMPETING NARRATIVES OF ETHIOPIAN IDENTITY

The historical identity of Ethiopia lies at the intersection of two powerful narratives: the great tradition (GT) and counter-histories (CHs).¹ Championed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) as the main actor, the GT paints a picture of Ethiopia as an ancient civilization with a long-standing sense of national identity rooted in religious stories. This narrative emphasizes the unique status of Ethiopia as the only African nation to resist European colonialism. The GT often overlooks or downplays the experiences of ethnic groups outside the northern highlands, however, creating a hierarchy that deems some people more historical than others. Originally influenced by European ideas, this narrative became the cornerstone of nation building under imperial rule from the thirteenth century and continued to be used (with some variations) by subsequent governments up until 1974. In response to the dominance of the GT, ethno-nationalist movements developed an alternative narrative: the CHs. These counter-narratives criticize Ethiopian studies for focusing heavily on the Semitic languages, Orthodox Christianity and state formation in the north.² The CHs emerged partly from the same Eurocentric ideas that underpinned the GT but were reinterpreted through a socialist lens.

Both the GT and CH narratives have served as influential tools for various Ethiopian governments,

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- 1 For further reading on this topic, see: Tegbara Yared, 'Layers of tradition: politics of memory and polarization in contemporary Ethiopia', Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2023; Dereje Feyissa, 'Epistemological debates and ideological fault-lines in Ethiopia', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023; Asafa Jalata, 'Ethiopia and Ethnic Politics: The Case of Oromo Nationalism', *Dialectical Anthropology* 18/3-4 (1993); Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian borderlands: Essays in regional history from ancient times to the end of the 18th century*, Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997; John Markakis, *The Last Two Frontiers*, Boydell & Brewer, 2011.
 - 2 Dereje, 'Epistemological debates'.

including the imperial regime, the Derg, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the current Prosperity Party. These narratives fuel the ongoing debate about the ethno-federal political system, with Ethiopian nationalists finding support in the GT and ethno-nationalists drawing upon the CHs. Recognizing the influence and contestations surrounding these competing narratives is crucial for understanding contemporary Ethiopian politics. The GT and CH narratives exist in a dynamic interplay. Amplification of GT glorification of the Ethiopian past often sparks stronger reactions from CH proponents. Both narratives are deeply embedded in political struggles. A closer look reveals that political pragmatism has often taken precedence over rigid ideologies, as evidenced by the evolving positions of these governments in the GT–CH framework.

The role of competing memory narratives is crucial in fuelling Ethiopian polarization.³ Ethiopian elites tend to fall into three distinct categories when invoking either one of these two narratives: 1) rejectionists, those who seek to deconstruct the established GT by directly challenging it; 2) revivalists or restorationists, those who view the GT as manipulative and aim to reshape state and society by resurrecting the unifying values in this narrative; and 3) moderationists, those who advocate selective use of the Ethiopian past in their quest to mitigate the extremes of the rejectionists. While these approaches represent a spectrum of historical interpretation, the four public events (case studies) demonstrate a dynamic interplay between these three theoretical perspectives. Thus, this framework serves as a guide rather than a definitive categorization. By embracing the salient issues represented in each perspective, a richer understanding of the contestations, fault lines and political dislocations in Ethiopia becomes evident. This combined approach leads to a more comprehensive and inclusive analysis of the forces shaping present-day Ethiopia.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a triangulation approach, using qualitative primary and secondary data from multiple sources. Primary data is based on 15 key informant interviews (13 men and 2 women living and working in Addis Ababa) with experts, political party leaders, representatives of religious groups and policy advisors, offering deeper understanding of the motivations and perspectives behind these public event contestations. Secondary data is drawn from articles, newspapers, mainstream media analysis and social media data from platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube, which provide valuable insight into public perception and public discourse.

Case studies in the form of the four public events—Adwa celebrations, the Great Ethiopian Run, Irrecha and controversy over Meskel Square—are also used to explore the complex ways contestations unfold in Addis Ababa. Especially during the post-2018 era, which is marked by significant political shifts and social activism, these public events offer insight into the urban, cultural, religious and political landscapes of the capital city. Relevant examples from the pre-

3 Yared, 'Layers of tradition'.

2018 period are also included to both provide deeper context and identify potential patterns.

Each case study offers an opportunity to examine various aspects of the multifaceted phenomenon of politicization in the public sphere in Addis Ababa. From the Adwa victory celebrations, where marginalized communities seek to reclaim their role in history, to the Irrecha festival showcasing the interplay of cultural expression, religious practice and political power struggles, each event intersects with the daily realities shaping the city. The Great Ethiopian Run reflects the changing political climate and how public spaces become tools for dissent, while the contestation over Meskel Square exposes the relationship between public spaces and identity politics.



PUBLIC EVENTS AND CONTESTATIONS IN ADDIS ABABA

Addis Ababa is the political and economic heart of Ethiopia and pulsates with the rhythm of history. Beyond its ancient monuments and bustling streets, another drama often unfolds. This is one in which public events morph into battlegrounds for contested narratives, ideological clashes and power struggles. Public events in Addis Ababa transcend mere celebrations. They become vibrant stages for expressing identities, ideologies and grievances by diverse groups. From religious observances such as *Meskel* (cross)⁴ and *Irrecha* to historical commemorations such as the Adwa celebrations and sporting events such as the Great Ethiopian Run, public events transform into platforms for political contestation. Rival political factions vie for visibility, asserting their presence and claiming dominance. Public dissent is also present at these events, with groups protesting against competitors and opponents, the government or prominent individuals.

ADDIS ABABA: WHY IT MATTERS

Understanding the complex currents, public sentiments and political struggles in Ethiopia requires looking at Addis Ababa. As the historical and political capital city of the nation, it offers unique access to power, diverse perspectives and amplified expressions of public discourse. There are several reasons why it is important to consider public events in Addis Ababa. First, the significance of Addis Ababa as the seat of government and the former imperial capital gives it immense symbolic weight. Second, public events and political actions here resonate with the urban elite, shaping both public opinion and policy. The assumption is that engaging in protests, demonstrations or gatherings in this central hub allows for direct interaction with the authorities and offers the potential to influence decision-making at the highest levels. Third, the media landscape in the city amplifies these expressions, garnering national and international attention. Fourth, the strategic location of Addis Ababa, especially its centrality to transportation networks and major public squares, facilitates the spread of information and the impact of political actions. Finally, the historical legacy of social activism, coupled with the ongoing post-2018 political reforms and power struggles, creates a fertile ground for public contestations and political expression in the city.

The Ethiopian political landscape is demonstrably elite centred. Addis Ababa serves as a stark

4 Meskel is an EOTC holiday commemorating the discovery of the True Cross by the Roman Empress Saint Helena of Constantinople in the fourth century. Meskel Square is named after this holiday.

physical manifestation of this dynamic. While undeniably the capital, its outsized political and economic influence stands in stark contrast to the reality of a nation in which more than 80 per cent of the population resides in rural areas.⁵ This disproportionate advantage raises critical questions about the representativeness of political power in Addis Ababa. The notion of the capital city serving as a barometer for the political pulse across the country requires careful calibration. The urban elite, concentrated in and around Addis Ababa, may not accurately reflect the concerns and aspirations of the vast rural majority. This geographic disconnect between the seat of power and the lived experiences of most Ethiopians underscores the elitist nature of the political system. While it is important to understand dynamics in Addis Ababa, a critical lens also acknowledges the limitations of this perspective.

Throughout history, the Ethiopian state has played a crucial role in shaping, curating and constructing collective memory.⁶ This has had a significant impact on the formation and exacerbation of fault lines in the political landscape of the nation. For instance, the state has promoted specific historical narratives that glorify a particular ethnic group or downplay the contributions of others. This has created feelings of resentment and exclusion among marginalized groups, ultimately fuelling political tensions. Ethiopian history has been shaped by a singular state-sanctioned narrative that actively alters memories by elevating past empires and rulers to unchallenged positions of authority, truth and national identity. This narrative presents state reconstruction of the past as absolute truth, using it to justify its own legitimacy. This official history acts as the foundation for national identity and the very reason for the existence of the state.

This state-centred narrative is not, however, all encompassing. Historians have selectively focused on the experiences of militarily and politically powerful groups.⁷ This has resulted in a reductionist portrayal of Ethiopian history, whereby writing history becomes a tool for the state to alter and promote its own version of the past. This dominant narrative excludes marginalized populations, ethnicities and religious groups, altering their place in the historical record. While the state strives to centralize all aspects of history around its core power, state discourse simultaneously pushes these excluded groups to the periphery. This highlights the crucial need to challenge the one-sided historical perspective (historiography) of the state with more critical and inclusive approaches to understanding the past in Ethiopia.⁸

In Ethiopia, history is a powerful political tool. Competing narratives shaped by diverse

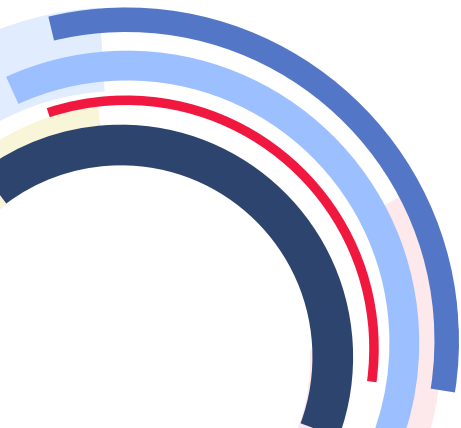
5 Ezana Weldeghebrael, 'Addis Ababa: City Scoping Study', African Cities Research Consortium, June 2021.

6 Christopher Clapham, 'Controlling space in Ethiopia', in *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, edited by Wendy James, Donald Donham, Eisei Kurimoto and Alessandro Triulzi, 9–30. Oxford: James Currey, 2002; Pietro Toggia, 'History writing as a state ideological project in Ethiopia', *African Identities* 6/4 (2008).

7 Toggia, 'History writing'.

8 Toggia, 'History writing'.

ethnic, religious and regional groups battle for dominance. Traditionally, the state has crafted a monolithic narrative, emphasizing imperial glory and national unity, while marginalizing alternative perspectives. This GT narrative is challenged by CH narratives from marginalized groups seeking recognition and historical justice. These opposing views create a complex and often contentious landscape, where memory more than fact shapes political identity and social cohesion. The struggle over the past directly influences the present, with implications for power dynamics, social justice and national unity.



ADWA CELEBRATIONS: BEYOND BATTLEFIELD GLORY

Adwa Victory Day is a celebration marking the victory of Ethiopia over Italy in 1896. It symbolizes African resistance against colonial forces. It is historically celebrated on 2 March with festivities that include parades, artistic performances and tributes to the then Ethiopian army, showcasing the rich culture and historical pride of the nation. Embedded in the Adwa celebration is the Menelik II monument, which serves as the memorial site for the Adwa victory. Built by his daughter Empress Zewditu in 1928 and unveiled in 1930, the monument is an equestrian statue showing the king on a horse holding a sword and the Ethiopian flag. Memorials serve multiple purposes, acting as symbols, beautifiers and even tools for social change.⁹ They can embody ideals, values and aspirations, adding aesthetic value to their surroundings. Some memorials such as war memorials become sacred spaces as a result of the rituals and commemorations held in their presence. These sacred memorials often represent ideals and sentiments, while other buildings—such as administrative offices, public libraries or community centers—remain non-sacred and serve practical purposes. The key difference lies in their primary goal.¹⁰

Throughout history, Ethiopian rulers and elites have understood the power of creating traditions and immortalizing them through memorials. For decades, they have used (and continue to use) these memorials to enforce narratives that shape and reshape the identity of the Ethiopian state.

PAST CELEBRATIONS AND CONTESTATIONS

The Adwa commemorations in Ethiopia are more than a mere celebration of a historical victory. Rather, they are shaped and reshaped by prevailing political interests. Each government, with its distinct ideology and priorities, has left its mark on the Adwa festivities. From lavish displays emphasizing imperial power to subdued ceremonies focused on national unity, the form and tone of Adwa celebrations mirror the political climate of a given time. Leaders have used the

9 Yared, 'Layers of tradition'.

10 Yared, 'Layers of tradition'.

event to bolster legitimacy, promote specific narratives and even settle scores with rivals.¹¹

For example, after ousting the Italians in 1941, the imperial government (1930-1974) prioritized erasing occupation memories and rebuilding national pride. Newspapers played a key role, highlighting the victory and resistance struggle. The imperial government even designated 5 May as a national holiday, although commemorations remained religiously tinged due to the closeness of the regime to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). To further shape collective memory, Emperor Haile Selassie reinstated the statue of Menelik II, which had been destroyed by the Italians.

Established with a coup overthrowing the emperor in 1974, the Derg regime (1974-1987) had a complex relationship with the Ethiopian past. While criticizing the pre-revolution era as exploitative and capitalist, the Derg also sought to find national pride in the history of the country. They renamed streets and squares after Adwa heroes, highlighting the victory against fascism. Notably, they continued celebrating Adwa Victory Day, although it was stripped of its religious elements to instead emphasize its secular significance. This marks a shift from the church-centred commemorations of the imperial era. The Derg used Adwa Victory Day both to erase memories of the previous regime and to bolster national identity through a secularized interpretation of the past.

The 1984 book by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), *History and Criticism of Revolutionary Ethiopia*, challenges the traditional narrative of Ethiopian history. The authors argue that the expansionist wars of Menelik II inflicted suffering on various groups, especially Tigrayans, who were marginalized under Amhara rule. They downplay the contribution of other actors in building the nation, instead emphasizing Tigrayan sacrifices in national defence. This perspective has fuelled animosity towards Menelik II and challenged the legitimacy of the Ethiopian state, in particular its historical boundaries.

During its early ruling years, the uncertain stance of the EPRDF regime on the past of Ethiopia fuelled tensions. The then Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), a party in the EPRDF, staged a demonstration demanding the removal of the statue of Emperor Menelik II. They viewed him as a colonial oppressor who inflicted large-scale suffering on the Oromo and Southern peoples. This move sparked immediate opposition, however. The Ancient Ethiopian Patriotic Association and the Emperor Menelik II Memorial Organization organized counter demonstrations, attracting hundreds of thousands of protesters and emphasizing the role of Menelik II as a nation builder. They argued that removing the statue would erase history and harm national unity.

11 For a detailed review of how various governments commemorated Adwa see Biniam Weldegebriel, 'Memories of the Victory of Adwa: A Focus on Its Commemoration (1941-1999)', MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, 2004. Most of the data related to the contestation of Adwa during the early EPRDF years is documented with first-hand information from individuals who were present such as the late former president of Ethiopia, Negasso Gidada. The following historical overview draws heavily on Biniam's thesis.

Faced with opposing viewpoints, the EPRDF government endorsed neither. Officials in the office of the prime minister assured the pro-Menelik demonstrators that the statue would remain untouched. Ultimately, the OPDO dropped its demand, tacitly acknowledging the historical significance of the statue. This episode highlights the sensitive nature of interpreting and commemorating the past in Ethiopia, especially regarding figures such as Menelik II and events such as the Adwa victory.

The contestation around Adwa celebration primarily targets Menelik II himself. Seen by many as the embodiment of the victory, rather than the battle itself, the legacy of Menelik II remains contested. He is revered as a national hero for unifying Ethiopia and expanding its territory, earning him the respect of many across Africa. In Ethiopia, however, his actions are seen as more provocative. Critics argue that his expansion of Ethiopian territory came at the cost of subjugating various ethnicities, creating the foundation for present-day tensions.¹² Some accuse external forces of manipulating this narrative to diminish both the victory and the role of Menelik in it.¹³ Some also say this is a false narrative that is fabricated for political gain and mobilization, claiming the current political climate advocates hatred for Menelik II.¹⁴ The ongoing tension even put pressure on Oromo city mayors to avoid official celebrations to escape scrutiny by their constituency.¹⁵

The change in political landscape after 2018, perceived more as an Oromo victory that brought forward the first Oromo prime minister, drew in various actors to contest both the space and the narrative of celebrating the Adwa victory. Adwa Victory Day celebrations in 2019 are notable. For the first time, the Oromo who fiercely contested the narrative of the history of Adwa were led by Oromo equestrians on horseback and Oromo youth to celebrate in Meskel Square, moving away from the traditional location in Menelik II Square. This Adwa celebration included a horse parade led by the prominent Ethiopian musician, the late Hachalu Hundessa, who is of Oromo descent.¹⁶ The Oromo equestrians rode into Addis Ababa, singing and honouring Oromo martyrs at Adwa.¹⁷ The event also featured a concert at which Hachalu emphasized that Adwa

12 Awol Allo, 'How a major anti-colonial victory divided Ethiopia', *Al-Jazeera*, 1 March 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/3/1/how-a-major-anti-colonial-victory-divided-ethiopia>.

13 Interview, senior leader of Mahiber Kidusan, Addis Ababa, 23 January 2024.

14 Interview, Enat Party high-level leadership, Addis Ababa, 24 January 2024.

15 Interview, Addis Ababa city council member, Addis Ababa, 26 January 2024.

16 'Haacaaluu Hundeessaa: Adawaa 123ffaa OBN Gurr 23, 2011' ('Adwa 123rd OBN Date 23, 2011'), OBN Oromiyaa (*Oromia Broadcasting Network*), 4 March 2019. Accessed 20 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2Kx3Xfek6c>.

17 Seenaa Gadaa, 'Haacaaluu Hundeessaa New Vidio Yeroo #Fardaan #Finfinnee kessaa garmamu! #Oromoo#Ethiopia#ADWA' ('Gadaa History, 'Haacaaluu Hundeessaa New Vidio #horse #Honorly presented in Addis Ababa #Oromo #Ethiopia #Adwa'), *YouTube*, 13 April 2021. Accessed 20 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jOWDfg9Uow>.

belongs to the Oromo.¹⁸ During the event, the singer stated that Ethiopia is built on Oromo blood and bone, urging the youth not to forget and convey this fact to everyone.¹⁹

Concurrently, there was an Adwa Victory Day celebration in Menelik II Square, which showcased the traditional celebrations and glorified figures such as Menelik and Tayetu.²⁰ In contrast to the Oromo narrative advocated by Hachalu and a large group of youth supporters that focuses on the mid-level leadership of the Menelik era, the event in Menelik II Square focused the narrative on the king and his leadership skills. In efforts to counter the long-held and more traditional Adwa narrative, the Oromo narrative disaggregates the victory into the units of the Menelik II forces to better highlight the role played by Oromo army officials in the battle. Hence, contestation is also between those who try to grant primary credit to the king, as the army chief, and those who understand the victory as a collective effort of military officials and the larger public.²¹

In 2020, the Adwa Victory Day celebrations took place in a more securitized environment. In particular, people were banned from wearing t-shirts with printed images of the tricolour flag and former emperors, including Menelik II. Despite these and other security restrictions, the turnout was one of the highest compared to previous years.²² A government-sponsored celebration also took place in Adwa, in the Tigray region, with the Ethiopian president, Sahele-work Zewde, in attendance.

The fact that the government-sponsored celebration happened in Tigray could be a sign of federal government intentions to distance itself from the Ethiopian nationalist narrative and an attempt to propagate the counter-narrative through a locational action. By taking the celebration to where the victory happened, however, the government also distanced itself from the Oromo narrative, adding another layer to the contestation.²³ Importantly, not all Oromo people participate in the ongoing narrative contestation related to historical events in Adwa. While there is a significant group of Oromo who would like to see themselves as part of Ethiopian history, not all Oromo fight to correct prevailing narratives. There are also many Oromo who do not want to see themselves in Ethiopian history at all.²⁴

In 2021, protests and opposition against the government were evident, with participants marching from Piasa to Adwa Bridge, where people were chanting slogans stating that there

18 OBN *Oromiyaa*, 'Haacaaluu Hundeessaa'.

19 Gadisa Ali, 'HAACAALUU HUNDESSAA- ADWA CELEBRATIONS', *YouTube*, 2 March 2019. Accessed 20 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Gnj4-lWK1E>.

20 *Sheger ሽግር Online*, 'Adwa Victory celebration 2019', *YouTube*, 4 March 2019. Accessed 20 February 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWtlf6EKO_E.

21 Interview, political analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 January 2024.

22 'Adwa victory 124 anniversary massive turn out', *Borkena*, 2 March 2020. Accessed 20 February 2025, <https://borkena.com/2020/03/02/ethiopia-adwa-victory-124-anniversary-massive-turn-out/>.

23 Interview, political analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 January 2024.

24 Interview, Oromo activist and analyst, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

is no alternative to the traditional green, yellow and red Ethiopian flag.²⁵ In 2022, Adwa Victory Day celebration participants protested against the government and the Addis Ababa city administration.²⁶ The 2023 celebration faced opposition and protests, prompting the government to take measures such as using tear gas.²⁷ Opposition parties and the EOTC strongly condemned government handling of the celebration, alleging excessive use of force and disrespect for religious spaces.²⁸ They claim that the disturbance allegedly disrupted the church service at St George’s Church, located near the Menelik II statue.²⁹ The EOTC accused the forces of attacking individuals seeking refuge in the church compound, raising concerns about freedom of assembly and religious sanctity.³⁰ This incident resonated deeply with the EOTC, not just as an isolated event. It triggered memories of the historic church–state tradition, and the vital role the church played supporting Ethiopian forces during the battle of Adwa against Italy.³¹ In addition, the EOTC has a sense of ownership and attachment to the Adwa commemoration, in part due to the past tradition of incorporating hymns and liturgy into the annual celebration, which was held in the church during the Selassie regime. The EOTC statement demanded an explanation from the government and called for a more respectful approach to future celebrations, ensuring that they reflect the historical significance of the

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- 25 ‘Ethiopia: ከፒያሳ እስከ አዳዋ ድልድይ የአዳዋ ድል በዓል አከባበር ተቀዋጠ’ (‘From Piasa to Adwa Bridge Adwa Celebration vociferating’), *Channel 7 Ethiopia*, 2 March 2021. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hy3wLXsFDS0>.
 - 26 ‘ሰበር ፣ የሚኒሊክ አደባባይ የአዳዋ ድል በአል አከባበር ወደ ተቃውሞ ተቀየረ፣ ከንቲባ አዳነች አቤቤ ከስልጣን እንድትወርድ ትጠይቋል’ (‘Breaking: Minilik Square celebration Adawa Celebration turns into a protest, Mayor Adanech Abebe requested to resign’), *TNews*, 2 March 2022. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldS5thkmlF4>; ‘አርቲስት ሚካኤል አና የአዲስ አበባን ህዝብ አስቆጥቶ የነበረው የአዳዋ ድል ክብረት በዓል በከፊል|kebron tube|Amazing Adwa Victory Event’, *Kebron Media*, 8 March 2022. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RX5WRd3oVQE>.
 - 27 ‘Police tear gas kills a believer during the St. George Church’s Adwa Day victory in Addis Abeba’, *Fidel post*, 3 March 2023. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://fidelpost.com/police-tear-gas-kills-a-parishioner-during-the-st-george-churchs-adwa-day-victory-in-addis-abeba/>.
 - 28 EHRC, ‘Regarding 2023 Adwa Victory Day celebration related incidents EHRC calls for implicated law enforcement officials to be subject to accountability’, Press Release, March 3, 2023 . Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://ehrc.org/regarding-2023-adwa-victory-day-celebration-related-incident-ehrc-calls-for-implicated-law-enforcement-officials-to-be-subject-to-accountability/>; የአዲስ አበባ ሀገረ ስብከት ሚዲያ/ Media of Addis Ababa Diocese, Facebook post, 2 March 2023. Accessed 20 March 2025, https://web.facebook.com/AddisAbabaDiocese/posts/pfbidoFZxnNCjVtJWVvYYVrVKKE9ZDhDDEprEFEj9NzY6ahzixh3ibABN1JxLRKvnmwMI?_rdc=1&_rdc.
 - 29 ‘Deadly Adwa day shows Abiy’s struggle to shift focus from divisive Ethiopian emperor’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 16 March 2023. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2023/03/16/deadly-adwa-day-shows-abiy-struggle-to-shift-focus-from-divisive-ethiopian-emperor/>.
 - 30 Media of Addis Ababa Diocese, ‘ከመንግሥት የጸጥታ ኃይሎች በተወረደው አስለቃሽ ጭስ በመናገሻ ገነተ ጽጌ ቅዱስ ጊዮርጊስ ቤ/ከያን የነበረው ክብረት በዓል ሳይጠናቀቅ መቋረጡ ተገልጿል!’, *Facebook*, 2 March 2023. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/1QEnaazTSE/>.
 - 31 ‘Adwa Victory Celebration marred as government forces attack Addis Ababa residents’, *Borkena*, 2 March 2023. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://borkena.com/2023/03/02/adwa-victory-celebration-marred-as-government-forces-attack-addis-ababa-residents/>.

event and the role of the diverse groups involved.³²

In 2023, the official venue for the Adwa Victory Day celebration was changed to Meskel Square, with the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) taking responsibility for the parade.³³ Other actors were banned from celebrating in any other space in Addis Ababa for fear of disruptions and protests. Non-state groups who were interested to celebrate through poems and arts were denied permission by the city administration.³⁴

Memory interpretations also see individual actors attempting to re-create the Adwa walk through the *Guzo Adwa* (journey to Adwa). Undertaken by 31 young Ethiopian nationalist advocates, this annual pilgrimage retraces the historic march of Ethiopian forces, starting from the capital Addis Ababa and ending at the 1896 battleground in Adwa, more than 1,000 km away. The *Guzo Adwa* takes more than a month, demanding physical and mental resilience from its participants. In 2021, the eighth (and last) *Guzo Adwa* had added significance as it marked the 125th anniversary of the battle. This celebration, however, occurred amid a backdrop of unprecedented political turmoil. The country was grappling with a growing internal conflict between the federal government and the Tigray regional government, which dampened the usual celebratory mood across the country.³⁵ The group was advised by the Ethiopian military that there will be a security risk to do the walk past Alamata.³⁶

ADWA ZERO KM PROJECT

The Adwa Zero KM Project, also known as the Adwa 00KM Project, is a ground-breaking mega project that includes multipurpose units such as the Adwa Memorial Museum, an amphitheatre, libraries and youth centres, and is poised to become the largest of its kind in the country.³⁷ Valued at ETB 4.6 billion (about USD 35 million), the facility is being constructed on 3.3 ha of land in the middle of Addis Ababa.³⁸ The land was previously slated for the construction of a

32 Yared, 'Layers of tradition'.

33 'የዓድዋ ጸል በዓል በመስቀል አደባባይ ፣ የካቲት 23, 2015, What's New, March 2, 2023' ('Adwa Celebration in Meskel square, Yekatit 23, 2025'), *EBS TV*, 2 March 2023. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbXxhOJOWBM>.

34 Interview, pan-Ethiopian artist and poet, Addis Ababa, 21 January 2024.

35 Fana Gebresenbet and Yonas Ashine, 'Performing Guzo Adwa: Power, Politics and Contestations', *Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities* 17/1 (2021).

36 'There might come a time when we will not celebrate the Battle of Adwa', *Tghat*, 20 March 2021. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.tghat.com/2021/03/20/there-might-come-a-time-when-we-will-not-celebrate-the-battle-of-adwa/?amp=1>.

37 Adanech Abiebie Fans አዳነች ለቤቤ አድናቂዎች, Facebook post, 27 January 2024, https://www.facebook.com/100076166022660/videos/902942471238690/?__so__=permalink.

38 'Adwa Zero Km Project will be completed and put into operation in coming October, City says', *Fana Broadcasting Corporate*, 27 January 2023. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/adwa-zero-km-project-will-be-completed-and-put-into-operation-in-coming-october-city-says/>.

skyscraper by MIDROC Construction, a firm owned by the Saudi–Ethiopian business mogul, Mohammed Al-Amoundi.³⁹ Although some initial work on the building foundation was done, in 2018 the Addis Ababa city administration repossessed the land through an enforcement action based on an argument that the firm was not proceeding with the construction as planned.

Scheduled for completion during the Adwa Victory Day celebration in 2024, this large-scale project aims to commemorate the African victory at Adwa and serve as a platform for the revitalization of pan-Africanism.⁴⁰ This mega project is a significant endeavour focused on preserving history and fostering a sense of unity and pride. With monuments being built for 12 prominent battle figures,⁴¹ the museum also showcases artefacts that attempt to create a sense of ownership for the battle among all Ethiopians.

The official narrative surrounding Adwa, often disseminated through the GT narrative, glorifies Menelik’s leadership and portrays the victory as a triumph for all Ethiopians. In the process, however, this narrative overlooks the experiences and contributions of traditionally marginalized groups such as the Oromo, whose ancestors also fought alongside Menelik’s forces. The selection of the first Oromo prime minister in 2018 created an opportunity for the Oromo community to retell their history and claim their place in the Adwa narrative. Giving voice to previously marginalized experiences, this counter-history narrative seeks to acknowledge the role of their Oromo ancestors in the battle.

Some claim that this retelling process⁴² aims not to erase Menelik’s contribution but rather to create a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the Adwa victory, one that acknowledges the diverse experiences and perspectives of all Ethiopians.⁴³ In contrast, for others, this attempt to build a collective memory of Adwa that appeals to the varying elites in both camps and focuses on Adwa as a source of African pride appears to reduce contestations through re-constructing monuments and symbols that evoke emotions of marginalization and oppression.⁴⁴

39 ‘Gov’t repossesses MIDROC land in Piassa, Mexico’, *Capital*, 1 October 2018. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://capitalethiopia.com/2018/10/01/govt-repossesses-midroc-land-piassa-mexico/?amp=1>.

40 ‘Addis Ababa’s Adwa Zero Km Mega Project 75pct Completed’, *Addis Walta TV*, 1 March 2022. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://walmartinfo.com/addis-ababas-adwa-zero-km-mega-project-75pct-completed/>.

41 These 12 figures are: 1) Wagshum Guangul Biruu Gebre Medihin (Aba Merekeb); 2) Dejacj Balcha Safo Roba (Abba Nefso); 3) Ras Bitwedded Mengesha Atikimo Biterif (Abba Gedib); 4) Leul Ras Mekonnen Molde Mikale Gudissa (Abba Qagnew); 5) King Michale Ali Liben (Abba Shanqo); 6) King Tekle Hymanot Tesema Goshu (Abba Tena); 7) Ras Abate Buayalew Nigusu (Abba Yitref); 8) Fitawrari Gebeyew Gebo Gurumu (Aba Goraw); 9) Fitawrari Habte Giyorgis Dinegde Hundaul (Aba Mechal); 10) Ras Alula Engeda Qubi (Aba Nega); 11) Ras Mengesha Yohanis Mircha (Abba Gitem); 12) Ras Wele Bitul Haile Mariam (Abba Tetawe).

42 Not everyone thinks this restorative effort will continue. For example, a high-ranking leader in the Enat party indicates that history is history and it cannot be changed to appease a specific political constituency; Interview, Enat Party high-level leadership, Addis Ababa, 24 January 2024.

43 Interview, Oromo activist and analyst, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

44 Interview, Oromo activist and analyst, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

Memorialization plays a significant role in shaping how history is remembered and understood. In Addis Ababa, the traditional GT historical memory seems at odds with the pain evoked by CHS memories, as is evident in ongoing contestation surrounding the Adwa Victory Day celebrations. As such, the retelling of the story of Adwa to include the untold story of the Oromo people also sheds light on a crucial aspect of urban contestation. That is, the critique goes beyond simply adding the Oromo perspective and points to a deeper challenge related to the very nature of the celebration and its associated memorial. First, the GT narrative is seen as incomplete and selective, neglecting both the contributions and the sacrifices of marginalized groups; notably, the Oromo. Second, the contestation reflects a struggle for power and representation in the national narrative. Who gets to tell the story, and whose perspective is prioritized? The challenge lies in finding ways to commemorate historical events that acknowledge both the triumphs and the complexities of the past.

The celebration of Adwa in Addis Ababa also offers further insight on urban contestation. In this case, diverse groups grapple for influence and access to public spaces, shaping the meaning and significance of this pivotal historical event for Ethiopian identity. Adwa transcends its battlefield location and becomes a focal point for contesting national narratives in Addis Ababa. Public spaces such as Menelik II Square and Meskel Square are consequently transformed into battlegrounds of memory. The government celebration at Menelik II Square reinforces the GT narrative, whereas Oromo social movements utilize Meskel Square to challenge this dominant narrative, demanding a more inclusive historical perspective. This contestation reflects struggles for power and control over urban spaces, with each group aiming to inscribe their version of history onto the city landscape.

As with other actors, the federal government attempts to use urban spaces to promote its preferred historical narrative. This aligns with the concept of ‘state spatial restructuring’, where the state utilizes urban development and interventions to consolidate power.⁴⁵ The Adwa oOKM Project exemplifies this strategy, aiming to shift some focus away from Menelik II, while still honouring the victory. This has not been fully successful, however. The contestation surrounding Adwa also reflects struggles for the right to the city as the right to participate in shaping the character and future of Addis Ababa.⁴⁶

45 Brenner and Elden, eds., *State, Space, World*.

46 Henri Lefebvre, ‘The right to the city’, in *Writings on cities*, edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996.

GREAT ETHIOPIAN RUN

The Ethiopian Great Run is a prominent annual 10 km road running event that attracts both international and national participants. Representation from various regions across the country highlights the nationwide appeal of this event.⁴⁷ Initiated by the long-distance runner Haile Gebreselassie in 2001, this annual event is more than simply a race. It is a platform for civic expression.

During the 23 years that this popular annual event has taken place, the Great Ethiopian Run (often simply called the Great Run) has had close to a total of 707,500 participants, expanding its footprint beyond Addis Ababa to host races in locations such as Hawassa, Bekoji and Entoto Natural Park.⁴⁸ Great Ethiopian Run Plc, the event management company behind the initiative, has staged more than 100 mass participation running events across Ethiopia.

The Great Run has transcended its athletic origins. It has been transformed into a symbol of civic expression and peaceful protest. Some even go so far as call it ‘Freedom Day’, signifying the event as a day when people can ‘breathe their true political voices’.⁴⁹ While its reach extends beyond the capital, the resonance of the Great Run as a platform for protest and dissent is especially notable in Addis Ababa, where it first began. Against the backdrop of the festive atmosphere, participants have found a unique opportunity to express their grievances and advocate for political change.

As the Ethiopian government stance on dissent began to tighten in the 2000s, the Great Run emerged as a space where voices can be raised and demands for change articulated.⁵⁰ It has become almost the only public space to voice concerns related to national politics.⁵¹ The number of participants and the charged atmosphere of the event create a powerful collective energy that proves difficult to ignore. Participants harness this energy to voice concerns, advocate for change and even engage in peaceful demonstrations against the government.

The growing politicization of the Great Run does not, however, sit well with the federal

47 Interview, staff at Great Run communications office, Addis Ababa, 9 January 2024.

48 Interview, staff at Great Run communications office, Addis Ababa, 9 January 2024.

49 Interview, Addis Ababa city council member, Addis Ababa, 26 January 2024.

50 Interview, Enat Party high-level leadership, Addis Ababa, 24 January 2024.

51 Interview, Addis Ababa city council member, Addis Ababa 26 January 2024.

government.⁵² Increasingly uncomfortable with the political and social platform the Great Run provides, the city administration has taken tacit actions to relocate dissent and protest away from its power centres. This includes alteration of running routes, specifically diverting them away from the presidential palace, a symbolic location where runners often pause to chant political messages.⁵³ By controlling the route, the government has aimed to restrict access to these symbolic government spaces and curtail the effectiveness of the Great Run as a platform for dissent and protest. Despite these efforts, the Great Ethiopian Run remains a significant platform for civic expression.

A PLATFORM FOR CIVIC EXPRESSION

The cause advocated during the Great Run is contingent on the political circumstances and situation of the country at the time of the race. A noteworthy example of the Great Run serving as a platform for civic expression occurred in 2005 during the post-election period, which was marked by allegations of electoral irregularities and protests against the government.⁵⁴ During the 2005 Great Run, participants in Addis Ababa seized the opportunity to demonstrate against perceived injustices. Athletes and citizens alike donned colours that symbolized their political affiliations, with supporters of opposition parties (notably Qinijit, also known as the Coalition for Unity and Democracy) also wearing specific colours to represent their movements.⁵⁵ As a result, the Great Run turned into a visually striking manifestation of political dissatisfaction. Runners also carried banners and signs with slogans such as 'Fair Elections, Fair Run', echoing the sentiments of city residents about the political climate in 2005.⁵⁶ During the run, participants called on the government to release prisoners. They also expressed their dissatisfaction and frustration towards the then prime minister, Meles Zenawi, and his administration.⁵⁷

Another example is from 2014, when Muslim scholars such as Ustaz Abubekr and Ustaz Ahemedem Jebelu were apprehended by the government on suspicion of terrorism.⁵⁸ Participants

52 'Young people who participated in Great Ethiopian Run arrested for allegedly inciting violence', *Borkena*, 25 November 2023. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://borkena.com/2023/11/25/ethiopia-young-people-who-participated-in-great-ethiopian-run-apprehended-for-allegedly-inciting-violence/>.

53 Interview, executive director of local NGO, Addis Ababa, 18 January 2024.

54 mamoz000, 'Great Ethiopian Run Video', *YouTube*, 18 January 2007. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqkjcXnMtDU>. The information in the remainder of this paragraph is derived from this source.

55 Qinijit is a coalition of Ethiopian social democratic and liberal political parties formed in 2005 with the goal of competing in the general elections. The party was dissolved in 2007.

56 mamoz000, 'Great Run'.

57 Examples of chants: *Yifetu...yefetu...* (Release... Release); *Leba... lebaaa Hedi heade...* (Go thief! Go thief!); *Na na Kinijet Na na Kinijet...* (Come... Come ... Qinijit come); *Besadam bota Melese Yiseke* (Hang Meles instead of Saddam Hussein!).

58 Human Rights Watch, 'Ethiopia: Prominent Muslims Detained in Crackdown', 15 April 2012. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/15/ethiopia-prominent-muslims-detained-crackdown>.

in the 2014 Great Run, especially Muslims, seized the opportunity to advocate for their release and justice. Although 2015 saw little worth noting, in 2016, the Great Run again merged with political activism and took place under heavy security where a state of emergency was declared as a result of the ongoing unrest in Oromia Region.⁵⁹ Runners carried signs, wore symbolic colours and used the race as a platform to raise awareness about the socio-political challenges facing the nation. In 2017, social media activists also issued a call to leverage the Great Run as a platform for expressing the dissatisfaction of Addis Ababa residents toward federal government. Due to stringent security measures, the protest did not unfold as the activists had envisioned. Consequently, there was notable discontent expressed on social media by the activists, directed towards Great Run participants for not utilizing the platform to protest.

In 2019, as the country navigated political shifts and regional unrest, Great Run participants leveraged the event to advocate for unity and peace. Runners sung songs that spoke about unity and Ethiopia.⁶⁰ This was not, however, without controversies. During the race, Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo politician and political activist, used social media to raise alarm, claiming government forces were surrounding his home to arrest him. Employing the hashtag #tekebebalew (I am surrounded), he sought help from his followers. A group of participants in the Great Run responded mockingly on social media, chanting 'kebebush... kebebush' (the surrounded).⁶¹ This, along with other derogatory chants such as 'qero serteḥ gereḥ bela...' (loosely translated as 'Qerro [Oromo youth activists] work hard so you can eat'), drew strong opposition from some Oromo activists.⁶² They felt as if urban culture in Addis Ababa continued to lean towards the GT narrative, punishing those who stand against this.⁶³ Therefore, the 2019 Great Run brought to the fore the cleavages of political narrative across the country, with the GT narrative still unable to appreciate the points raised by the counter-histories narrative, and vice versa.

In 2021, the Great Run yet again became a focal point for dissent. Amidst escalating ethnic tensions, the Northern Ethiopia conflict⁶⁴ and prevailing political challenges, participants in the event utilized the platform to advocate for national unity and social cohesion. In 2022, as the Northern Ethiopia conflict persisted, some participants in the Great Run continued

59 Addis Getachew, '43,000 take part in Africa's largest race in Ethiopia', *Anadolu News Agency*, 11 November 2016. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/43-000-take-part-in-africas-largest-race-in-ethiopia/689302#>.

60 *Hiber Radio*, 'ታላቁ ፍጫ ዘንድሮም ብሰት መግለጫ እዝቡ የሚተነፍሱበት መድረክ ሆኗል', Facebook post, 18 November 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/HiberRadio/videos/1422353454596503/>.

61 'ታላቁ ፍጫ በኢትዮጵያ ቀውጡት' ('Great Run in Ethiopia-vociferating'), *Orthodox 24*, 18 November 2019. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSp1VrjR1TU>.

62 Interview, Oromo activist and analyst, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

63 Interview, Oromo activist and analyst, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

64 The Northern Ethiopian conflict was an armed conflict between Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF which began in November 2020.

to demonstrate their support for and in solidarity with the ENDF.⁶⁵ During the 2023 race, some participants expressed solidarity with the Amhara Fano (militia) and conveyed their dissatisfaction⁶⁶ with the federal government conflict in the Amhara region.⁶⁷

DYNAMIC NARRATIVE INTERPLAYS

Using the GT-CH framework as a lens through which to view the Great Run as a platform for civic action, a dynamic interplay emerges between the dominant state narrative, on the one hand, and the voices seeking to challenge or redefine this narrative, on the other. The rise of the EPRDF in 1991 marked a victory for the CHs narrative, with the EPRDF constitution enshrining the right to self-determination for all nationalities. The TPLF, a dominant force in the EPRDF, embraced the CHs narrative and restructured Ethiopia as a federal state based on ethnicity. This is in contrast to the long-standing GT view of a unified Ethiopia, as defined by a dominant and exclusive narrative. The EPRDF even foreshortened the traditionally perceived timeline of national history, instead focusing on the formation of the modern state, further distancing itself from the GT narrative.

The EPRDF was the government when the Great Run was first launched. The EPRDF was seen to be firm in its support of the CHs narrative but also conveniently invoked the GT narrative when there was need for national mobilization. For example, while initially hostile to the GT, the EPRDF regime softened its stance in the face of war and economic development needs.⁶⁸ The GT narrative and its vision of a unified Ethiopia has a strong influence on urban residents, especially in Addis Ababa.⁶⁹ This was evident in the early years of the Great Run, when participants viewed the newly established ethnic federalism under the EPRDF regime as divisive, diminishing the historical stature of Ethiopia by emphasizing ethnic identities over national unity.⁷⁰

65 emugifttube4186, 'The 22nd Great Run in Ethiopia', *YouTube*, 22 November 2022. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/brxdnQTiZdM>.

66 Semonun - ሰሞኑን, 'የፋኖ ትግል በታላቁ ፍጫ ላይ ታየ('Fano expression of struggle during the Great Ethiopian Run') | Amhara fano ትግል | great run 2023', *YouTube*, 19 November 2023. Accessed 11 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCbFdOr1-Dc>.

67 *EthioTube*, 'በትናንትናው ላለት በአዲስ አበባ በተካሄደው ታላቁ ፍጫ ላይ የተቃውሞ ድምጾች የተሰሙ ሲሆን?', Facebook post, 20 November 2023. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/EthioTube/videos/1331077370874487/>; አልሞጥ አና አልግጥ, 'ካላሽ አማረኝ 🙄 የአሁን ስጋ ሸገር ላይ NO!', Facebook post, 19 November 2023. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/AlemetandAleget/videos/1643837522773033>.

68 The EPRDF government strategically deployed the GT narrative during key events, including the 1998 Ethio-Eritrea war, the 2006-09 intervention against the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and Al-Shabaab, and the launch and construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). See also Leenco Lata, 'The Ethiopia-Eritrea war', *Review of African Political Economy*, 30 (2003). DOI: 10.1080/03056244.2003.9659772.

69 Dereje, 'Epistemological debates'.

70 Interview, political analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 January 2024.

The 2005 Great Run exemplifies these conflicting narratives. Protests during the race overwhelmingly supported the Qinijit party, which opposed the ethno-federal system. Over time, the political landscape and messaging at the Great Run have evolved. Between 2017 and 2021, the platform mirrored broader political confusion across the country. Specific group agendas emerged, such as the concerns of Muslim community in 2017. At the same time, the primary focus of dissent remained on criticizing the government and demanding change. While most Great Run participants agreed on the need for an EPRDF departure from government, there was little consensus on the desired future political system.

The emphasis on ethnicity in Ethiopia's political structure has driven the emergence of ethno-national movements, reshaping the political landscape. The Amhara, despite their historical support for pan-Ethiopianism, are now displaying a growing tendency towards ethno-nationalism.⁷¹ The 2022 Great Run and the conflict in the Amhara region underscored this shift, demonstrating a departure from previous ideological alignments and a contested political arena.



71 Tezera Tazebew, 'Amhara nationalism: The empire strikes back', *African Affairs*, 120/479 (2021) 297–313. DOI: 10.1093/afraf/adaa029; Abbi Clark, 'The rise of Amahra Nationalism in Ethiopia', *Grey Dynamics*, 7 November 2021. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://greydynamics.com/the-rise-of-amhara-nationalism-in-ethiopia/>.

FROM MARGINS TO CENTRE STAGE: IRRECHA

Steeped in the Oromo religious tradition of *Waaqeffannaa* (Indigenous Oromo faith) the Irrecha festival has historically served as an expression of gratitude and hope. This ritual centres around *Waaqa*, the name of God in the monotheistic Oromo belief system, offering thanks for blessings such as peace, health, fertility and bountiful harvests for both the people and their lands. Beyond a mere thanksgiving festival, Irrecha also incorporates acts of reciprocal exchange, acknowledging past blessings while simultaneously raising prayers and aspirations for the future. Held in symbolically significant locations such as hilltops, riversides and by sacred trees, Irrecha rituals are a cornerstone of Oromo cultural identity and spiritual practice.⁷²

For centuries, the Irrecha festival faced suppression and marginalization. Following the military conquest by Menelik II in the late nineteenth century, the imperial regime imposed its cultural and religious dominance. Irrecha rituals were heavily restricted and labelled as devilish worship by the state-backed EOTC.⁷³ This suppression aimed to undermine Oromo traditions and consolidate the imperial power structure.⁷⁴ Established in 1974, the Derg regime initially appeared more tolerant of diverse cultural practices. Its communist (and later socialist) ideology and emphasis on modernization, however, clashed with the fundamental rights of Ethiopian peoples. Traditional practices such as Irrecha were deemed backward and incompatible with development goals, leading to a complete ban of the festival after 1974. This suppression continued throughout the Derg regime, further marginalizing Oromo cultural expression.⁷⁵

Following decades of systemic suppression, 1991 marked a turning point for the Irrecha festival. The new Ethiopian constitution enshrined cultural and religious rights, paving the way for its revival. In the mid-1990s, the Macha-Tulama Association spearheaded the return of the festival in Hora Arsadi in Bishoftu symbolically challenging the dominance of the ruling EPRDF regime.

72 Samuel Leykun, “‘Irreecha’ Ceremony among Shoa Oromo”, *Journal of Science and Sustainable Development* 2/1 (2014).

73 Oromo Legacy Leadership & Advocacy Association, ‘Irreecha: A Story of Oppression and Resistance’, 3 October 2022. Accessed 11 March 2025, <https://ollaa.org/irreecha-a-story-of-oppression-and-resistance/>.

74 Madeline Jaye Bass, ‘Understanding the Politicization of Oromo Identity in the Diaspora: Re/ Locating the Bones of the Oromo’, MA thesis, Portland State University, Portland, 2019.

75 Asebe Regassa, ‘Irreecha: From Thanksgiving Ritual to Strong Symbol of Oromo Identity’, *Advocacy for Oromia*, no date. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://advocacy4oromia.org/resource/irreecha-from-thanksgiving-ritual-to-strong-symbol-of-oromo-identity-republication/>.

This annual gathering, particularly the Irrecha Birraa (‘spring’), became a powerful symbol of unity, drawing Oromo people from across the region to participate in the traditional rituals.⁷⁶

A PLATFORM FOR POLITICAL EXPRESSION

Over the years, Irrecha evolved beyond its religious roots. Celebrations expanded in scope and representation, encompassing diverse groups such as youth or the educated.⁷⁷ Oromo youth increasingly utilized Irrecha to express their views to the regime. The powerful combination of tradition and dissent during Irrecha celebrations contributed to the rise of a reformist faction in the EPRDF, ultimately leading to a change in leadership in 2018.

Initially simply a thanksgiving ritual, Irrecha is now a space for marginalized groups, particularly Oromo youth, to voice their grievances against the state. In response, the state has consistently used repressive tactics to suppress dissent during Irrecha celebrations. The 2016 stampede and massacre where 52 were killed highlight government willingness to use violence to quell peaceful protests.⁷⁸ The Irrecha festival has also played a significant role in mobilizing opposition to the government. The 2016 incident marked a turning point, as the festival became a rallying cry for those seeking political change.⁷⁹

In 2017, the Ethiopian government tightened security measures at the Irrecha festival, deploying armed forces to prevent unrest, despite official assurances of unarmed security.⁸⁰ The event again turned into a large-scale anti-government protest. In 2018, sentiments among Oromo youth shifted from discontent with TPLF to growing criticism of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, also of Oromo ethnicity. Abiy’s ambiguous views on Ethiopian history and changing stances

76 Asebe, ‘Irreecha’.

77 Asebe, ‘Irreecha’.

78 ‘Ethiopia: Dozens killed in Oromia festival stampede’, *Al-Jazeera*, 3 October 2016. Accessed 15 March 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/3/ethiopia-dozens-killed-in-romia-festival-stampede>.

79 Afeta Galata Gamachu, ‘The quest of democratic governance for sustainable peace in Ethiopia: the case of Oromo Protest of 2014–2018’, *International Journal of Peace and Development Studies* 14/1 (2023); Serawit Bekele Debelele, *Locating politics in Ethiopia’s Irreecha ritual*, Studies in Religion in Africa 49, Leiden: Brill, 2019; ካሳሁን ደምሴ, ‘የዛሬን አያድረውና አሬቻ 2009 እንዲህ ነበር የተከበረዉ!!!’, Facebook post, 3 October 2020. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/100007686134427/videos/2716154691984042/>; Grazmach Shafi, ‘ደህን ግፍፍ ከፈፀሙበን ሀወሃት ጋር ሀብረት ፈጥራችሁ እንዴት ነው የእርሞን ትግል ማግኘው????’, Facebook post, 7 July 2021. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/100002428101009/videos/3185805581510347/>.

80 ‘Protests broke out during Irreecha celebration in Ethiopia’, *Borkena*, 1 October 2007. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://borkena.com/2017/10/01/protest-irreecha-celebration-ethiopia/>.

on key issues has contributed to his fluctuating popularity in the Oromia region.⁸¹

The 2019 Irrecha celebration in Addis Ababa at Hora Finnfine, the hot springs in Finnfine (which is the Oromo name for Addis Ababa), was marked by a combination of joy and continued tensions, reflecting the complex political and social landscape of Ethiopia at the time. This was the first time after 100 years that Irrecha was officially celebrated in Addis Ababa, with heavy state backing. The restoration of Hora Finnfine signaled a significant shift after years of primarily being held in the town of Bishoftu at (lake) Hora Arseddi. For many, this move seemed nothing more than an artificial creation to demonstrate federal government power and dominance in Addis Ababa.⁸² For example, the state constructed an artificial lake and mobilized hundreds of thousands of people, predominantly Oromo, to participate in the festivities.⁸³ According to the Oromia Cultural and Tourism Bureau, about 3 million people from all corners of Addis Ababa and surrounding towns took part in the 2019 celebration.⁸⁴ Participants wore traditional attire and joined in traditional singing and dancing, as well as threw grass into the water as a symbol of prosperity.

During the festivities, Shimelis Abdissa, the Oromia regional president, delivered a controversial speech touching upon historical grievances experienced by the Oromo people under the *neftegna* (gun bearer) system in imperial Ethiopia.⁸⁵ This spurred social media debate from which diverse perspectives emerged. Many expressed disapproval, questioning the appropriateness of the rhetoric Shimelis used in the celebratory context of Irrecha.⁸⁶ Concerns were also raised about

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- 81 'Oromo "Irrecha" festival 2017 celebration and protest', *Tube251*, 2 October 2017. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh9BIhdGLHM>; Anii Sifa Hamid, 'Irreechaa 2017 is celebrating peacefully at Horaa Arsadi Bishoftu, Oromia', Facebook post, 1 October 2017. Accessed 15 March 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/100001800808486/videos/1669380166465327/](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=691519804375142&set=a.185034501690344;Tsfaye Amina Abdikoo, Facebook post, 8 October 2017. Accessed 15 March 2025, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1457701824325477&set=pcb.1457702017658791; Beknan Rabira, 'Down Down Weyane from Irreechaa 2017', Facebook post, 2 October 2017. Accessed 15 March 2025, <a href=).
- 82 Interview, high-ranking leadership in the Freedom and Unity Party, Addis Ababa, 29 January 2024.
- 83 Interview, Addis Ababa city council member, Addis Ababa, 26 January 2024.
- 84 Borati Reality, 'Shimalis Abdissa: Waggaa 100 booda irreechi Finfinneetti ni kabajama (Shimalis Abdissa: irrecha will be celebrated in Finfine after 100 years)', *YouTube*, 14 July 2019. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWcnNB-377s>; 'Obbo shimallis abdissa errecha finfinne irratihasawagodhajir' (Mr Shimallis Abdissa speaking at irrecha Finfinne), *Ethio Yutube*, 4 October 2019. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yu7lEseH4Ho>; Gold, 'Irrecha in Ethiopia 2019 hachalu hundesa', *YouTube*, 1 October 2020. Accessed 21 February 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QO7_1N_38kg; Olyad Gadisa, 'Historical Irrecha festival at Finfinne 2019', *YouTube*, 2 March 2020. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDaikLmoVaQ>.
- 85 The term '*neftegna*' is historically associated with the Amhara ruling class and the oppression they imposed during imperial rule.
- 86 'Shimeles Abdissa sees "Oromo borken" in the way Irreechaa is celebrated', *Borkena*, 20 September 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://borkena.com/2019/09/20/irreechaa-shimeles-abdissa-sees-oromo-victoryin-the-way-it-is-celebrated/>.

the potential for inciting division and reinforcing historical tensions.⁸⁷ Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (ECSJ), a liberal political party formed in 2019, alleged that the then Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) misused the festival for political purposes.⁸⁸ Claiming that the ODP was in alignment with the Shimelis speech, the ECSJ accusation implied that the ODP aimed to leverage Irrecha as a platform for partisan gain, potentially exploiting historical sensitivities.

Underlying tensions between various ethnic groups remained. The Oromo claim to ownership of Addis Ababa was particularly contentious, and it was met with opposition from political parties such as Balderas party led by Eskinder Nega.⁸⁹ EOTC religious teachers also taught their followers about the pagan nature of Irrecha and rebuked them for celebrating the festival, especially church members in the Oromia region.⁹⁰

In 2020, growing political tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic limited the Irrecha celebration in Addis Ababa to 5,000 attendees.⁹¹ Although significantly scaled-down, anti-government protests occurred during the event, which led to the arrest of 502 individuals, including journalists known for their critical voices.⁹² In 2021 and 2022, the traditionally celebratory Hora Finfinne gatherings in Addis Ababa once again took a decidedly political turn.⁹³

Amidst the usual Irrecha rituals and heavy police presence,⁹⁴ protesters demanded the release of political prisoners, chanting for the downfall of Abiy and praising Jaal Marroo, the commander of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). Slogans of ‘*Jawar! Jawar! Jawar!*’⁹⁵ were chanted alongside

87 ‘The Controversy Surrounding Shimelis Abdisa Speech’, *Ezega*, 9 October 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7301/The-Controversy-Surrounding-Shimelis-Abdisa-Speech>.

88 ‘The Controversy’, *Ezega*.

89 ‘Ethiopia: Eskinder Nega Speech Addis Ababa’, *EthioTimes*, 10 March 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, https://youtu.be/B_15WFRDY0?si=U EsXFQz7a_2zv_7g.

90 Interview, Oromo activist and analyst, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

91 ‘In Pictures: Ethiopia’s Oromo hold Irreecha festival’, *Al-Jazeera*, 4 October 2020. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/gallery/2020/10/4/in-pictures-ethiopia-s-oromo-hold-thanksgiving-festival>.

92 AMN-Addis Media Network, ‘የሆረ ልንፊኔ አና የሆረ ሀርሰዬ ኢሬቻ በዓል በሰላም አንዲከበር ቅድመ ዝግጅት ማጠናቀቅን የአርሜያ ፖሊስ ኮሚሽን አስታውቋል።’, Facebook post, 1 October 2020. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/Amnaddstv/videos/2641873059456323>.

93 ‘Irreecha Harvest Festival: Ethiopia’s Oromos Mix Celebration with Protest’, *News Central TV*, 4 October 2021. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vn34mz1oLN4>.

94 ‘Protests break out at Irreecha Hora Finfinne festival in Ethiopia’s capital’, *Addis Standard*, 2 October 2021. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.addisstandard.com/news-protests-break-out-at-irreecha-hora-finfinne-festival-in-ethiopia-s-capital/>.

95 This chant refers to Jawar Mohammed. Milkiisaa W, ‘Irreecha 2021’, *YouTube*, 2 October 2021. Accessed 21 February 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5ww_Z97GSo.

'Down! Down! Abiy!',⁹⁶ reflecting support for opposition figures and dissatisfaction with the prime minister. Chants backing the OLA armed resistance movement became increasingly common, highlighting a growing undercurrent of political dissent.⁹⁷ T-shirts and banners commemorating the late Oromo political activist and singer, Hachalu Hundessa, served as reminders of ongoing grievances. Unfolding in the sacred space of Irrecha, these charged demonstrations underscore the volatility of the political landscape in Ethiopia. Traditionally focused on thanksgiving and cultural expression, Irrecha has become a platform for voicing political discontent and expressing underlying tensions.

DEBATES ABOUT GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

In addition to government support for hosting Irrecha festivities in the capital city for the first time in 2019, another move also aimed to enhance the public profile of the Irrecha festival. That is, the Oromia regional government, with purported support from the federal government, introduced an Irrecha street run programme in Addis Ababa in 2019.⁹⁸ Inspired by the Great Ethiopian Run, this new initiative intended to add a contemporary element to the traditional festival. Promoted as a run for peace, approximately 50,000 people were expected to participate in the first Irrecha street run.⁹⁹ Instead of fostering unity, however, the Irrecha street run created controversy. For example, several politicians and activists voiced concerns, alleging that the run was not simply a cultural celebration but a politically motivated tactic.¹⁰⁰ They accused the ruling ODP of exploiting the Irrecha festival to advance its claims of ownership of Addis Ababa, a sensitive issue in city politics.¹⁰¹

Analysts claim the sense of uneasiness felt by Addis Ababa residents is related to not knowing or understanding what the Irrecha celebration is. A perception that large numbers of Oromo youth

96 foolleentertainment9969, 'Irrecha eve 2021', *YouTube*, 2 October 2021. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/FRR1nmYNSCo>.

97 Isaaq Zeenu Tube, 'Baalli Gichaa Oromoon Tokkicha Jawaartu nu bulcha! Irreecha Bishooftuu 2021', *YouTube*, 3 October 2021. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QGRCWvj6vo>.

98 'Shimeles Abdissa sees', *Borkena*.

99 Dawit Tolesa, 'Irreecha Great Run to take place in Addis', *The Reporter*, 21 September 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/8664/>.

100 Interview, political analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 January 2024.

101 Diree Oromoo, 'አስከንድር ነጋ የአውነት ስለ ኢሬቻ አስተያየት የመስጠት ሞራል አለህ? ስለ ህዝቦቹ አኩልነት የማያምን ሰው አንዴት አስተያየት መስጠት ይችላል?', Facebook post, 11 October 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/BTStechs/videos/762271190877030>; Habtamu Ayalew, 'የዳክተር አብይ አዲፓ ምን ይዞብህ አየመባ አንደሆነ ተመልከት?', Facebook post, 3 October 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/HabtamuAyalewT/photos/a.524759281197540/942338419439622/>; Eskinder Nega, 'አስከንድር ነጋ ለአዲሱ ኢሬጋ ይቸን አቀመሳት?'; Facebook post, 23 September 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1092204607837117&set=a.704847409906174>; Matti Post, 'አስከንድር ነጋ ለአዲሱ ኢሬፍቁው ነበርኩ?', Facebook post, 23 September 2019. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2440931229331693&set=a.415348028556700>.

moving to the city from other parts of Oromia may also make some city residents feel they are being overrun by outsiders.¹⁰² In contrast, not everyone thinks this is a deliberate political action. Some people believe these dynamics are simply due to a lack of understanding that leads to fear, indicating further that this fear is decreasing as the traditional Irrecha celebration is held year after year (creating greater familiarity and understanding).¹⁰³

The Ethiopian government decision to organize the Irrecha festival in Addis Ababa in 2019 has given rise to intense debate, exposing deep divisions about cultural ownership, political representation and the very identity of the capital city.¹⁰⁴ Some view this move as long overdue recognition of the Oromo community and its cultural heritage. They argue that Irrecha, historically marginalized and oppressed, requires significant investment to flourish, with government involvement providing much needed support. The Meskel celebration rooted in centuries of state-EOTC collaboration, needs less advocacy than Irrecha.¹⁰⁵ Others see government support for Irrecha festivities as a cynical ploy: an abuse of power and state resources aimed at advancing a specific political agenda.¹⁰⁶ They argue that the government is exploiting a sacred cultural event to gain favour with the Oromo population, potentially at the expense of other groups. They also see Irrecha as alien to the city, claiming that Addis Ababa residents do not join the festivities. Instead, Irrecha is celebrated by people who come from outside of Addis Ababa. Consequently, city residents feel that the Irrecha festivities are imposed upon them simply because the event has strong federal government backing.

While the Oromia regional government is responsible for preserving and promoting Oromo culture in its regional borders, the involvement of the Addis Ababa city administration in planning Irrecha festivities creates further controversy. Some argue that this revives the sensitive debate about city ownership and its complex ethnic composition.¹⁰⁷ Disagreement about both city ownership and the purpose of city administration engagement casts a long shadow over the Irrecha festivities, transforming a purely cultural celebration into a battleground for competing narratives and political aspirations. Depending on where an individual stands in these debates, the celebration itself becomes contentious. This highlights the underlying social and political fault lines in city politics. Some even question whether Irrecha celebrations would continue without federal government support.¹⁰⁸

102 Interview, Oromo activist and analyst, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

103 Interview, associate professor, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, 13 January 2024.

104 Throughout Addis Ababa, especially in outlying areas, numerous banners and promotions sponsored by sub-cities line the streets, many highlighting sub-city involvement in Irrecha festival.

105 Interview, Oromo activist and business owner, Addis Ababa, 6 February 2024.

106 Interview, Enat Party high-level leadership, Addis Ababa, 24 January 2024. The remaining information in this paragraph is derived from this source.

107 Interview, Addis Ababa city council member, Addis Ababa, 26 January 2024.

108 Interview, Enat Party high-level leadership, Addis Ababa, 24 January 2024.

IRRECHA AND OROMO IDENTITY

The Irrecha festival reveals the multifaceted nature of Oromo identity. While a sense of shared cultural heritage forms a unifying thread, closer examination uncovers significant internal diversity in how Irrecha is interpreted and experienced, especially in terms of its political, religious and even personal dimensions. The core cultural significance of Irrecha, centred around thanksgiving and expressing gratitude, has broad acceptance in the Oromo community. The traditional rituals, festivities and celebrations of unity resonate with many. At the same time, both the religious or spiritual elements and political staging of Irrecha give rise to divergent interpretations and tensions.

Religious groups such as the EOTC, Protestant and Evangelical churches, and Muslim communities have strong reservations about participating in Irrecha.¹⁰⁹ Their leaders often cite theological reasons, claiming Irrecha clashes with their core beliefs and doctrines.¹¹⁰ With two central locations for celebrating, the Irrecha festivities in Bishoftu appear to have a more religious tone and the celebration in Addis Ababa has a more cultural and political tone. This highlights the interplay between traditional Oromo practices and religious influences.¹¹¹

As a platform, Irrecha also reveals existing internal political divisions in the Oromo community. After decades of struggle, the Oromo community remains divided on its relationship with the Ethiopian state. Abiy's rise to prime minister initially offered hope but internal factions and unresolved historical realities quickly surfaced. Analysing events such as Irrecha, the chants and slogans that are used and festival symbols can shed light on the competing power discourses shaping Oromo politics in Ethiopia and among the Oromo themselves.¹¹² In terms of the complex dynamics of Oromo politics in Ethiopia, applying the lens of the great tradition (GT) narrative versus the counter-histories (CH) narrative, the factors that have contributed to Abiy's swift decline in popularity among Oromo elites and activists become more apparent.

The long-term marginalization of Irrecha fuelled a strong CH narrative among the Oromo, emphasizing their historical grievances and the need for self-determination. As the first Oromo leader, Abiy was first seen in terms of the potential for reconciliation and recognition. His efforts to navigate the complex political landscape in Ethiopia by trying to balance competing GT and CHs narratives ultimately led to a decline in support. In his speeches, for example, expressing his desire to return Ethiopia to its glorious past has not resonated with the CHs narrative championed by Oromo activists, who say that was not a glorious past but a history of oppression.¹¹³ Opposing views often emerge when the aspirations of a marginalized group,

109 Interview, Oromo analyst and activist, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

110 Interview, Oromo analyst and activist, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

111 Interview, Oromo analyst and activist, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

112 Terje Østebø and Kjetil Tronvoll, 'Interpreting contemporary Oromo politics in Ethiopia: an ethnographic approach', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14/4 (2020).

113 Sara Marzagora, 'History in twentieth-century Ethiopia: The "Great Tradition" and the counter histories of national failure', *Journal of African History* 58/3 (2017).

in this case the Oromo, clash with perceived attempts to maintain a unified national identity under the GT narrative. Oromo activists critical of Abiy view his focus on national unity as a subtle continuation of past policies that marginalized the Oromo people.¹¹⁴

The Irrecha festival exemplifies this clash. Although traditionally a religious celebration, Irrecha festivities have become a platform for Oromo activists to voice their grievances and aspirations for greater recognition. While Abiy may have initially attempted to bridge the gap between the Oromo people and the Ethiopian state, his perceived embrace of the GT narrative ultimately alienated a significant number of Oromo elites and activists.¹¹⁵ His attempts to use both the GT and the CHs narratives as was convenient for his purposes backfired. In particular, this was seen by some as overlooking the need for specific recognition of Oromo grievances and other marginalized groups.¹¹⁶ The Irrecha festival is, then, a microcosm of the broader ongoing struggle in Oromo politics. The clash between the GT and CH narratives reflects the tension between national unity and the recognition of distinct cultural identities. Abiy's perceived loss of support demonstrates the challenges of navigating these complexities.

114 Interview, political analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 January 2024.

115 Asebe D. Regassa and Rony Emmenegger, 'The emperor, the lion and the peacock: Monuments and contested state sovereignty in contemporary Ethiopia', *Politics and Space*, 41/5(2023): 903–921.

116 Interview, Oromo analyst and activist, Addis Ababa, 5 February 2024.

LAYERS OF MEANING IN MESKEL SQUARE

Meskel Square is as a prominent public square in Addis Ababa with a rich history and great cultural significance—simultaneously a sacred place and a public square. In the early 1950s, the square underwent a name change from Estifanos Square to become Meskel Square, deriving its name from the renowned Meskel Festival this is celebrated at this location each year. In 1974, the Derg regime renamed it Revolution Square, increasing the size of the square to host annual Revolution Day and May Day parades. Despite these alterations, Meskel Festival bonfires persisted until 1988, when the officially secular government relocated the celebration to a smaller square near St George Cathedral. After the political shifts in 1991, the EPRDF reverted to the name Meskel Square, and it became a hub for various secular events such as concerts, parades and government functions.¹¹⁷

The controversy surrounding the Meskel Square upgrade in mid-2020 raises key issues regarding governance, public consultation and cultural sensitivity.¹¹⁸ The Addis Ababa city administration decision to proceed with the upgrade created concerns on the part of various stakeholders, particularly the EOTC and the Association of Ethiopian Architects. The selection of a Chinese contractor in the absence of open bidding, which the city administration justified by the use of local currency, became a focal point of criticism.¹¹⁹ The lack of public involvement, especially in terms of potential alterations to the image of the square, exacerbated tensions with the EOTC.¹²⁰ Eskinder Nega, president of the Balderas Party, emerged as a vocal opponent of the project.¹²¹

His critiques—in particular on social media—framed the issue as part of a broader agenda aimed at undermining the cultural and historical identity of Addis Ababa and the EOTC. He challenged

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- 117 Rahel Shawl, 'Meskel Square in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia', *The Architectural Review*, 15 August 2024. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/revisit/revisit-meskel-square-in-addis-ababa-ethiopia>.
- 118 The understanding was that the idea and plan to renovate was there, so the then mayor of Addis Ababa took the initiative to launch the project.
- 119 Maya Misikir, 'Public in the dark as Meskel Square Rehab commences', *Addis Fortune*, 9 May 2020. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://addisfortune.news/public-in-dark-as-mesqel-square-rehab-commences/>.
- 120 Maya Misikir, 'Meskel Square Undone', *Addis Fortune*, 9 May 2020. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://addisfortune.news/mesqel-square-undone/>.
- 121 Barkot Ze Ethiopia. 'Eskinder Nega Meskel Square Meskel Adebabay', *YouTube*, 10 May 2020. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://youtu.be/9sqmur91Tas?si=8BatAVMFntCYpwmM>.

government actions, implying that the Addis Ababa city administration, which he labelled ‘*Balegize*’ (‘current political establishment’),¹²² was attempting to replace the traditional cultural heritage of the city with a new one. Eskinder’s assertion that the square belongs exclusively to the church, along with his resistance to the construction plan, resonated strongly with sections of the Orthodox community.¹²³

In contrast, the city administration emphasized that the renewal project was intended purely for the beautification so all religions can use it. In an effort to ease tensions, representatives of the city met with church officials to clarify the situation.¹²⁴ A joint site visit by Adanech Abebe, the then deputy mayor, and the EOTC patriarch, Abune Mathias, played a significant role in addressing concerns, assuring that the square would continue to serve as a venue for the Meskel Festival celebrations.¹²⁵

INTENSIFYING CONTROVERSIES

In 2021, the controversy over Meskel Square intensified, as religious tensions came to the forefront. The EOTC had long claimed historical and spiritual authority over the square, generating concern among other religious communities. When Muslim leaders planned a large public *iftar* (fast-breaking evening meal during Ramadan) on 9 May 2021 at Meskel Square, the event became a flashpoint for religious disputes. There was a change of plans concerning the gathering. Though it was initially approved, online discussions brought up the site’s religious importance, which likely played a role in the subsequent security measures.¹²⁶ The cancellation sparked frustration among the Muslim community.¹²⁷

122 This term refers to people or communities whose social standing is perceived to be elevated due to their alignment with the current political system.

123 የጉራጊ ወጣቶች ማህበር (Gurage youth association[not official]), ‘አስከንድር ነጋ!!!!’, Facebook post, 2 May 2020. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/100021632266113/videos/636696717061398/?mibextid=Nif5oz%3A>; Haymanot Asefa, ‘የመስቀል አደባባይ የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋህዶ ቤተክርስቲያን ከማዘጋጃ ቤት የተሰጣት የይዘታ ማረጋገጫ ካርታ!’, Facebook post, 10 January 2022. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/zgEcF46fY7eKVHMq/?mibextid=2JQ9oc>.

124 ‘Ethiopian church demands apology from Addis Ababa City Administration’, *Borkena*, 1 May 2020. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://borkena.com/2020/05/01/ethiopian-church-demands-apology-from-addis-ababa-city-administration/>.

125 Adanech Abiebie Fans, ‘#Ethiopia በወቅታዊ የ “መስቀል አደባባይ” ውዝግብ የተሰጠ መግለጫ በክብርት ከነገብ አዳኝ አበበ’, Facebook post, 11 February 2022. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://fb.watch/p6XeAVTBdZ/?mibextid=Nif5oz>.

126 ‘የቤተ- ክህነት ሰዎች ተስማምተው ነበር’ (‘The church leadership had agreed’), *Arts Tv World*, 10 May 2021. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFGU-krBHAs>.

127 Bileh Jelani, ‘News Analysis: Muslim Clerics demand accountability after security crackdown on participants of planned “Grand Iftar”; Deputy Mayor apologizes’, *Addis Standard*, 10 May 2021. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-muslim-clerics-demand-accountability-after-security-crackdown-on-participants-of-planned-grand-iftar-deputy-mayor-apologizes/>; Interview, high-ranking leadership in the Freedom and Unity Party, Addis Ababa, 29 January 2024.

Muslim leaders swiftly reacted to the cancellation by seeking dialogue with the city administration. The EOTC maintained that due to its historical importance, Meskel Square should not host the *iftar*. The church proposed an alternative venue at Addis Ababa Stadium, underscoring their concern that allowing the event would disrespect their religious sensitivities.¹²⁸ Against this view, others argued that Meskel Square is a public space, renovated with taxpayer money, and therefore should be accessible to all communities.¹²⁹

The situation escalated further when rumours spread that Meskel Square would be renamed Eid Square, reinforcing church fears and anxieties.¹³⁰ Despite the friction, a resolution was reached, allowing the *iftar* to proceed on 11 May 2021, with conditions that respected the sacred areas in the square.¹³¹ This event is a significant milestone for interfaith relations in Ethiopia and in Addis Ababa. Although it marks progress in religious dialogue, the event also reveals the complexity of navigating religious dynamics in shared public spaces.

Protestant denominations in Addis Ababa also face their own tensions with the EOTC regarding Meskel Square. One controversy stems from a sermon delivered by Apostel Zelalem, a Protestant pastor, on 10 January 2022. During his sermon, Pastor Zelalem used the phrase ‘አንወርሰዋለን’ (enversewalen), which translates to ‘we will inherit it’ when he was talking about Meskel Square.¹³² This statement initiated a debate. Many Orthodox believers interpreted the phrase literally, fearing that Protestant churches were plotting to claim ownership of Meskel Square.¹³³ Social media became a battleground, with Orthodox followers expressing their outrage and demanding the protection of the sanctity of the square.¹³⁴ In response, Protestant communities also used social media platforms to explain Pastor Zelalem’s statement from a biblical perspective.¹³⁵ They argued that his words were meant metaphorically, signifying a

128 At the time, holding *iftars* in public spaces was a new cultural phenomenon in Ethiopia. Traditionally, large-scale gatherings for Muslims to attend Salat (prayers) have taken place at Addis Ababa Stadium.

129 Shawl, ‘Meskel Square in Addis Ababa’.

130 Misinformation was circulated alleging an announcement of the name changing to Eid Square by the deputy mayor of Addis Ababa, Adanech Abebe. For example, see: Ethiopian DJ የኢትዮጵያን ሙዚቃ, Facebook post (deleted), 7 May 2021. User profile: <https://www.facebook.com/ethioDJMusic/>. Screenshot on file with the author.

131 Interview, high-ranking leadership in the Freedom and Unity Party, Addis Ababa, 29 January 2024.

132 ‘የመስቀል አደባባይ አወገት ይህ ነው! አናጎተዉ ፍራዳ+++[MESKEL SQUARE] MIHRETAB ASSEFA| ZEBENE LEMA| APOSTLE ZELALEM!’ (‘This is the truth about Meskel Square, make your own judgement’), Meznagna Entertainment, 10 January 2022. Accessed 21 February 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjW621W4_zE.

133 ‘A Protestant Pastor remarks on Meskel Square controversy’, *Borkena*, 11 January 2022. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://borkena.com/2022/01/11/ethiopia-pastor-remarks-on-meskel-square-controversy/>.

134 Kesis Dejene Shiferaw, “የመስቀል ዐደባባይ ማለት ምን ማለት ነው?” Facebook post, 11 January 2022. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://web.facebook.com/photo?fbid=469435977876015&set=a.290077362478545>.

135 Christian ሜማ Tube, “#መምሀር_ምሀረትአብ_ግን_አስከመኹ...?” Facebook post, 8 January 2022. Accessed 20 March 2025, <https://web.facebook.com/share/p/16EwxG3xKr/>.

spiritual claim on the space, not physical ownership.¹³⁶ This explanation struggled to calm the anxieties of the Orthodox community.¹³⁷

Further disputes arose in January 2022 when a local Protestant church, Zetseat Apostolic Reformation Church, organized a fundraising programme in Meskel Square, leading to confrontations with the EOTC and its supporters.¹³⁸ Ownership of the square again became a point of contention, but this time Orthodox religious figures rejecting discussions with the city government.¹³⁹ Instead, social media emerged as a key battleground in the contestation, amplifying existing controversies and fuelling tensions. Mayor Adanech Abebe's statements about the planned fundraising event served as a particular flashpoint, drawing sharp criticism from some EOTC factions.¹⁴⁰ Some observers expressed a deep sense of suspicion and perceived that the church was being deliberately targeted.¹⁴¹ They accused Muslims and Protestants who worked for the city administration of intentionally provoking tensions and undermining church influence and traditions.¹⁴² These concerns were also shared by the *Mehibre Kidusan*,¹⁴³ an Orthodox association the members of which are mostly educated Orthodox youth, who see this contestation over the square as an attempt to sideline the EOTC from making decisions about its own property.¹⁴⁴

This feeling of persecution stems from several factors. First, it seems centuries of dominance and recent political shifts have created anxieties about diminishing church power and influence. Second, the long association of Meskel Square with the EOTC and its rituals imbues it with profound religious and cultural significance for the church, rendering any perceived encroachment especially sensitive. At the same time, the EOTC approach to sharing Meskel Square differs based on the religious groups involved. During the *iftar* controversy, for example,

136 Interview, Protestant church leader, Addis Ababa, 13 May 2024.

137 These tensions, in particular following the Timket programme and the response to the formation of the Oromia Synod, are connected Meskel Square dispute. Connecting these issues highlights the broader impact of the dispute.

138 'የግድያ ዛጅው ለምን? | ስለተፈጠረው ውዝግብ ፖስተር ፊትለፊት ወጥተው ተናገሩ | Ethiopia |' ('Why death threats? The pastor speaks about the confusion'), Yegna TV, 10 January 2022. Accessed 21 February 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6D_twu8RZc&t=106s.

139 'A Protestant Pastor remarks on Meskel Square controversy', *Borkena*, 11 January 2022. Accessed 21 February 2025, <https://borkena.com/2022/01/11/ethiopia-pastor-remarks-on-meskel-square-controversy/>.

140 'Systemic pressure on Ethiopian Orthodox Church mounting', *Borkena*, 3 February 2022. Accessed 15 March 2025, <https://borkena.com/2022/02/03/ethiopian-orthodox-church-under-attack-from-government-authorities/>.

141 Interview, senior leader of Mahibre Kidusan, Addis Ababa, 23 January 2024.

142 Interview, senior leader of Mahibre Kidusan, Addis Ababa, 23 January 2024.

143 Established in 1983, Mahibre Kidusan is a student association under the Sunday school department of the EOTC, the goal of which is to promote spiritual growth.

144 Interview, senior leader of Mahibre Kidusan, Addis Ababa, 23 January 2024.

the EOTC position seemed to be one of absolute ownership. Church leaders vehemently opposed the use of the square for other religions, viewing it as a sacred space solely for their own observances, even though they ultimately conceded through negotiation. During the dispute with Protestant denominations, however, the EOTC claim shifted. While they still asserted their primary role in the square, they demanded consultation on any issues surrounding its use. This suggests a potential willingness to consider shared access, albeit with the EOTC retaining a significant degree of control. This difference in approach may reflect EOTC perceptions of the potential threat posed by each religious group. For example, the EOTC might view the Protestant claim as less existential compared to the perceived challenge from Muslims during the *iftar* controversy. Third, social media can be a breeding ground for misinformation and the amplification of one-sided narratives, potentially exacerbating existing fears and distrust.

It seems several factors point towards deeper anxieties and concerns in the Orthodox community. That is, the rapid growth of Protestant and Muslim communities in Ethiopia might be perceived as a threat to the historically dominant position of the EOTC. Consequently, concerns about changes to traditional practices and rituals associated with Meskel Square, even if unintentional, can fuel anxieties about cultural obliteration.

Recent Orthodox religious celebrations, marked by a more assertive tone, have become platforms for young people to showcase their religious devotion.¹⁴⁵ This fervour stems from a feeling that their faith is not receiving due respect from the government and other influential actors. The perception of Protestant groups enjoying favour due to perceived closeness to the prime minister, who is an evangelical Protestant, has exacerbated this sense of marginalization, increasing anxieties in the Orthodox community about a decline in their power.¹⁴⁶

During Timket, an Orthodox event akin to Meskel, the extensive display of flags, carpeted roads for Tabots (replicas of the Ark of the Covenant), and road closures suggests a deliberate effort to emphasize the church's power and presence. These actions can be interpreted as displaying symbols and rituals as a powerful way for believers to express their devotion and connect with their faith. In the face of perceived threats, such displays can reaffirm the presence and importance of the EOTC in Ethiopian society. The recent shift to decentralized celebrations, where individual churches provide financial sponsorship, has yielded several advantages for the church. It allows the EOTC to reach a wider audience in different communities, fostering a stronger local presence, and it has alleviated the logistical challenges of holding massive celebrations in central locations, particularly in a rapidly growing city such as Addis Ababa.¹⁴⁷

MORE THAN A PLACE

145 Interview, senior leader of Mahibre Kidusan, Addis Ababa, 23 January 2024.

146 Interview, senior leader of Mahibre Kidusan, Addis Ababa, 23 January 2024; Interview, Protestant church leader, Addis Ababa, 13 May 2024.

147 Interview, pan-Ethiopian artist and poet, Addis Ababa, 21 January 2024.

Meskel Square is an apt example of the complex and shifting dynamics in the religious and political landscape in Ethiopia. Analysts say it is an expected process for a secularizing state to face fierce opposition from a traditionally dominant group such as the EOTC.¹⁴⁸ As an integral part of the great tradition narrative, the EOTC views Meskel Square as intricately linked to its identity and history. The name itself reflects the annual Meskel Festival traditionally held there. The church emphasizes its historical association with the square, citing documents and highlighting the sanctity of the space for its religious practices. This narrative underscores both the position of the church as a cornerstone of Ethiopian society and its claim to cultural and historical ownership of the square. Observers see this contestation as a result of the oppressor–oppressed narrative, a fabricated historical narrative that fails to provide a contextual analysis of the role the EOTC played in Ethiopian history.¹⁴⁹

The history of Meskel Square further complicates the ownership debate. While the EOTC emphasizes its pre-existing association, others point to periods when the square held broader secular significance.¹⁵⁰ This highlights the need to both navigate conflicting historical perspectives and acknowledge the multifaceted identity of the space. Contestation over Meskel Square goes beyond legal ownership. It touches upon deeper issues of religious sensitivity, anxieties over cultural dominance and the desire for recognition.

The controversies surrounding Meskel Square also highlight a broader struggle for religious equality in Ethiopia. Marginalized religious groups, including Protestants and Muslims, are challenging the claims and influence of the EOTC. By demanding space to conduct their rituals in this historically Orthodox-dominated public square, these groups are asserting their place in Addis Ababa. Hence, contestation of Meskel Square goes beyond a perceived slight against the EOTC. While some Orthodox followers might view it as a government attempt to weaken their church by empowering Protestants and Muslims, the underlying issue is a long-held desire for recognition and equal treatment. These groups are contesting the historical dominance of the EOTC to demand greater religious freedom in Ethiopia.

148 Interview, political analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 January 2024.

149 Interview, Enat Party high-level leadership, Addis Ababa, 24 January 2024.

150 Interview, political analyst, Addis Ababa, 15 January 2024.

STAGING THE PAST AND PRESENT IN ADDIS ABABA

Public events in Addis Ababa are framed as stages upon which competing historical narratives and political agendas play out. For instance, the Adwa Victory Day celebration portrays divergent interpretations of the event—one that promotes a centralized state-approved narrative emphasizing unity and national pride under Emperor Menelik II and one that promotes counter-narratives highlighting the contributions of marginalized groups. Similarly, the Irrecha festival, once marginalized, symbolizes the struggles for cultural recognition, while contestations over Meskel Square showcase tensions between religious and historical identity. The Great Run, once just a run, has now become a venue for political expression. These events become platforms where historical memories are actively contested, reflecting broader power dynamics in Ethiopian society.

Historical events often become battlegrounds for memory, where interpretations are shaped by political alignments and socio-economic realities. This is especially the case in Ethiopia. Since the post-2018 political shift, contestation over historical narratives has intensified. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's embrace of GT narratives clashes with the desire of his political base to dismantle structures associated with the imperial past. Coupled with political manoeuvring, this dissonance has created fertile ground for intense debate and conflict. Memory, fuelled by diverse motivations such as the consolidation of identity, the assertion of political power, and the reclamation of lost narratives, becomes a weapon in the staging of these contested public events. These contestations are often situated between broader struggles for ethnic and cultural recognition, and the search for a collective national identity.

Competing narratives and the inherent subjectivity of historical interpretation play a pivotal role. Diverse communities hold distinct perspectives on the past that are shaped by their unique experiences and positions in society. This subjectivity is not a flaw but rather a reflection of the multifaceted and unfixed nature of history, whereby interpretations evolve through ongoing dialogue and critical engagement.

Contested narratives have both positive and negative impacts. Engaging with competing narratives can foster critical dialogue that prompts individuals and communities to re-examine their assumptions and challenge previously held beliefs. This process can lead to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the past, fostering empathy and understanding across diverse groups. In contrast, when historical narratives are manipulated for political gain or to incite resentment and conflict, they can exacerbate existing social tensions and hinder reconciliation and healing.

The Battle of Adwa, a pivotal victory against Italian colonial forces, holds immense symbolic significance in Ethiopian national identity. The interpretation of this historical event is not, however, monolithic. On the one hand, the GT narrative emphasizes Ethiopian unity and national pride, crediting Menelik II with strategic leadership. This narrative reinforces a centralized vision of history and national identity. On the other, the counter-histories (CHs) narrative challenges this perspective, highlighting the contributions of marginalized groups, which played a crucial role in the battle but were excluded from official accounts.

The contestation of historical narratives in Ethiopia can also be understood as a search for restoration. This restoration can be multifaceted, encompassing efforts to reclaim lost narratives, acknowledge historical injustices and heal collective wounds. This is a process that requires balance and the participation of all concerned. This is a process in which communities seek to ensure their voices are heard and their experiences are acknowledged.

Analysing the controversies that surround the staging of public events in Addis Ababa highlights the delicate relationship between memory, identity and political power. Public events are not just commemorations; they are also spaces in which historical memory is weaponized to serve political agendas. The selective portrayal of history by dominant groups fosters exclusion and resentment among marginalized communities, while contestation over these narratives can either foster critical dialogue or exacerbate social tensions. By examining these dynamics, it is possible to better understand how collective memory is shaped, how identity is negotiated and how political power is asserted or challenged in Ethiopia.

CONCLUSION

There is a dynamic interplay between public events, historical memory and urban contestation in Addis Ababa. Examining public memory, historical narratives and urban contestation offers an opportunity to explore how these public events serve as platforms for diverse political forces to advance their agendas. This also reveals the various actors who leverage these complexities to gain political legitimacy and mobilize support. These include the state, political elites, religious institutions, activist groups and media outlets. In the process, it is important to acknowledge the evolving nature of the frameworks and the contested issues that surround the staging of public events in Addis Ababa. Defined by core issues related to the nature of the Ethiopian state—equality and historical grievances remain central political tensions—the controversies surrounding public events are likely continue to adapt and evolve over time.

Since 2018, the Ethiopian government has shifted between the great tradition narrative and the counter-histories narrative. Although Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, the first Oromo leader of the country, belongs to the CHs narrative context, he has enthusiastically embraced the GT narrative. This move reflects his attempt to build a new political legitimacy and establish a party (the Prosperity Party) distinct from the previous ruling party, the EPRDF. These narratives have limitations, however. The GT-CHs framework offers a useful lens for understanding the origins of political struggles in Ethiopia but, over time, it is increasingly difficult to neatly categorize political ideologies and contestations based solely on this framework and the competing narratives that delimit it. To secure political advantage, both factions have selectively used these narratives, emphasizing certain memories while deliberately obscuring others.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Current national processes in Ethiopia such as the National Dialogue, transitional justice initiatives and national rehabilitation programmes must carefully consider the role of historical power imbalances in shaping collective memory and grievances. These factors can significantly influence the success or failure of such processes in fostering reconciliation and sustainable peace. By understanding the historical context and addressing past injustices, these initiatives can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive society. This requires a nuanced approach based on acknowledging that these processes are more political than technical in nature, and that they carry with them centuries of unresolved social tensions.

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

CHs	counter-histories
ECSJ	Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
EOTC	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church
EPRDF	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
<i>Guzo Adwa</i>	<i>(Amharic)</i> Adwa Walk
GT	great tradition
<i>iftar</i>	<i>(Arabic)</i> fast-breaking evening meal during Ramadan
<i>Irrecha</i>	<i>(Afan Oromo)</i> thanksgiving celebration and festival celebrating the end of winter and the beginning of a new year
<i>Meskel</i>	<i>(Amharic)</i> cross
<i>neftegna</i>	<i>(Amharic)</i> gun bearer
ODP	Oromo Democratic Party
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
OPDO	Oromo People’s Democratic Organization
<i>Qinijit</i>	<i>(Amharic)</i> Coalition for Freedom and Unity
<i>Timket</i>	<i>(Amharic)</i> Baptism
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front

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