The Politics of Memorialization in Ethiopia

Insights from Oromia, Somali and Tigray

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The Politics of Memorialization in Ethiopia: Insights from Oromia, Somali and Tigray

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Sayid Mohammed Abdulle Hassan statue, Jigjiga, Ethiopia. Photo by authors.

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Summary

Memory politics in Ethiopia is shaped not only by competing interpretations of history, but also by struggles over political authority, recognition and belonging. Drawing on case studies from Oromia, Somali and Tigray regional states, this report examines how collective memories are produced, contested and transformed across different political settings. It explores how mnemonic agency, state power and access to resources shape which histories acquire public visibility and institutional recognition, and which are marginalized or silenced.

Through flags, anthems, public-space naming, monuments, museums and commemorative practices, the report traces how historical narratives are continually reworked in response to regime changes, conflict and changing relations between the centre and regions. Rather than treating memory as a settled account of the past, the report approaches it as an ongoing political practice through which actors continually negotiate narratives on the past, legitimize authority and advance competing claims to belonging.

The report develops a selective memory regime framework to explain the political, ideological and institutional processes through which particular memories are revived, authorized, ritualized and circulated while others are suppressed. Political parties, regional governments and other influential actors operate as memory entrepreneurs, selectively accommodating or contesting historical narratives as their access to power changes. This approach moves beyond a binary tradition between the "Great Tradition" and regional counter-memories, and reveals selective shifting combinations of resistance, accommodation and appropriation within these traditions.

The three regions occupy distinct historical positions within this selective contested memory landscape:

- Tigray combines memories of participation in the imperial polity with narratives of subsequent marginalization, armed struggle and conflict with the centre.
- Oromo nationalist memories foreground conquest, contested incorporation and resistance, although different local experiences complicate any unified regional account.
- Somali regional state memories draw on colonial partition, contested incorporation, struggles for self-determination and repression under successive administrations.

These historical experiences provide resources for political mobilization, but their public expression depends on changing political conditions and internal struggles.

Among the commonalities, access to state power and regime changes are major drivers of these memory transformations. The report describes this relationship as the Arat Kilo syndrome:

When regional elites gain influence at the centre, there is a tendency toward moderation, silencing confrontational or victimhood narratives and reconfiguring rejectionist memories into more integrative stories, while exclusion or deteriorating relations reactivate memories of victimhood, marginalization and resistance. Regime-based change of memorials, renaming of public spaces and shifts in the emphasis of particular memories illustrate how successive governments reorder what is celebrated, normalized or silenced to fit changing projects of authority and legitimacy. Memory politics therefore reflects not only ideological commitments but also changing governing interests and struggles for legitimacy.

Flags and anthems condense these competing historical projects into publicly recognizable symbols. Across the three sites, the Ethiopian tricolour carries divergent associations, including religious and historical continuity, imperial domination and contemporary exclusion. Its meanings also change and became increasingly politicized in different parts of the country. Regional flags are similarly contested tending to regional political dynamics.

Naming and renaming of public spaces translate political authority into everyday landscapes. Changes to the names of towns, streets, schools and hospitals establish whose histories and languages receive public recognition. The restoration of Afaan Oromo place names and the commemoration of Somali historical figures challenge earlier symbolic orders associated with imperial authority and centrally imposed narratives. Conversely, naming institutions after federal leaders or revolutionary martyrs can reinforce political allegiance and ruling-party legitimacy. In post 1991 Tigray naming and renaming is mainly associated with TPLF armed struggle, ideology and political orientations.

Monuments and museums give selected histories material durability while exposing the exclusions underpinning official remembrance. Across the sites, commemorative landscapes combine narratives of resistance, revolutionary sacrifice, imperial heritage and cultural identity. Selection operates through the figures commemorated, their inscriptions and access to central power. Conflict and unresolved suffering further transform memory landscapes. The Tigray Martyrs' Memorial Center has shifted from emphasizing revolutionary struggle toward recent civilian suffering framed through genocide remembrance, demonstrating how new violence can overshadow and reorganize earlier commemorative narratives. At Anole, declining official attention has not displaced community memories of historical violence. The Obole memorial similarly illustrates how state-centred remembrance can privilege military sacrifice while marginalizing wider civilian suffering and local memories. Memorial sites therefore remain politically active even when their official visibility diminishes, and the elevation of particular histories can reactivate counter-memories rather than produce shared recognition.

While political actors have greater power to institutionalize selective narratives through anthems, flags, monuments, museum, public space, official memory does not fully determine how people understand the past. Unofficial memories within and across the three regions remain diverse, sometimes fragmented and often contested—and they continue to inform everyday understandings of events and figures even when they are silenced in official memories and

commemorative practices. Community memories persist beneath changing commemorative priorities and remain available for renewed mobilization.

Without durable institutional pathways, disputes over symbols and historical suffering are negotiated primarily through political power rather than inclusive deliberation. The report calls for democratizing political authority and memory production, establishing consultative and transparent frameworks for memorialization, and addressing unresolved injustices through dialogue, reconciliation and transitional justice. Moving beyond recurrent cycles of symbolic exclusion requires institutions through which divergent histories can be acknowledged and negotiated without making recognition dependent on proximity to power.

Introduction

In Ethiopia, collective memory serves as a political arena in which authority, legitimacy and inclusion are negotiated.[1] Memory politics—the ways in which political actors, institutions and social groups shape how the past is remembered, narrated, commemorated or suppressed—has intensified during periods of regime transition, conflict and legitimacy crisis, often revealing underlying tensions in centre-periphery relations.

This study investigates the politics of collective memory through three regional case studies: Somali, Tigray and Oromia. These regional states were selected to illustrate the distinct but interconnected patterns of contestation over national history, state legitimacy and symbolic representation in Ethiopia. This is not to say, however, that these regions all have the same relationship with the centre and role in Ethiopia's dominant historical narrative, sometimes referred to as the 'Great Tradition'.[2] While the regions' experiences have differed in intensity and form, they also reveal common patterns in the ways that political actors use memory to legitimize or delegitimize authority, mobilize constituencies and contest state narratives.

The three regions have featured predominantly leftist vanguard movements grounded in liberation ideologies. Following the Ethiopian Student Movement of the 1960s, Tigray and Oromia produced or hosted rejectionist–reconstructivist movements such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), while Somali region produced a series of such rejectionist movements from sixteenth century conflicts led by Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi to a nineteenth century resistance struggle spearheaded by Sayyid Mohammed Abdille Hassan and more recent resistance by Nasrullah in the 1960s and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in, respectively, the 1970s and 1980s.

1 Pietro Toggia, 'History Writing as a State Ideological Project in Ethiopia', *African Identities* 6/4 (2008): 319–43; on the TPLF and memory of the past see John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975–1991*, Cambridge: *and Ethiopia*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020; Sara Marzagora, 'History in Twentieth-Century Ethiopia: The 'Great Tradition' and the Counter-Histories of National Failure' Cambridge University Press, 1997. See also Asafa Jalata, *The Oromo Movement and Imperial Politics: Culture and Ideology in Oromia, The Journal of African History* 58/3 (2017): 425–44; Christopher Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', *Annales d'Éthiopie* 18 (2002): 37–54.

2 The 'Great Tradition' is widely discussed in the literature and, accordingly, refers to the dominant historical narrative that presents Ethiopia as ancient, continuous and exceptional. To use Marzagora's terms, 'a teleological vision of history based on the prophecy of Ethiopia's earthly glory and eschatological victory, and, second, by an essentialist, transcendental, and unicentric conception of national, subnational, and individual identities'. See Marzagora, 'History in Twentieth-Century Ethiopia', 432. Dereje Feyissa, 'Epistemological Debates and Ideological Fault-Lines in Ethiopia', PRF Think Peace, Ethiopia Peace Research Facility/Rift Valley Institute, April 2023.

In Tigray and Oromia, two of these political traditions gained access to state power, while in Somali Regional State (SRS) there are indications since 2018 that the region is becoming more integrated with the centre. This trajectory is important for understanding the relationship between memory and power as movements that once challenged the 'Great Tradition' acquire the capacity to reshape and institutionalize collective memory from the centre.

The case studies in this report allow us to examine how collective memories are produced, contested and transformed across and within different political environments, and how mnemonic agency, state power and control of resources shape the trajectories of memory production. Focusing on issues related to public spaces—including debates over monuments, commemoration events and names—these cases illustrate how memory politics interacts with regime changes, conflicts and historical understanding. Instead of treating memory as a static interpretation of the past, the case studies show how historical narratives are reshaped in response to shifting political dynamics.

The paper addresses three research topics. First, it examines what these collective memories are and their manifestations in public spaces and other commemorative practices. The second addresses the drivers of the formation and evolution of collective memories and the change over time in the three regions. The third assesses the impact of collective memories on political behaviour and how actors mobilize and instrumentalize memories.

Based on this, the report is organized into the following sections. After the introduction, the second section outlines the research methodology while the third outlines the conceptual framing situates the three case studies in their regional contexts. The fourth section situates the three case studies in their regional contexts, and the fifth presents the empirical findings by examining data from the principal sites and practices through which memory politics are produced, performed and contested. These include flags and anthems; naming public spaces; monuments and museums; and rituals and commemorations. The section also analyses the drivers of collective memory, particularly how memory shapes political behaviour, mobilization and narrative construction. The sixth highlights patterns of contestation within the three regions that shape memory politics. The final section provides a comparative synthesis of the three case studies, draws conclusions and offers policy recommendations.

Research methods

The study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine the politics of collective memory in Tigray, Oromia and SRS. This approach allows a detailed examination of how memory is constructed, manifested, contested and mobilized. The three case studies enable analysis of similarities and variations given different historical experiences and political trajectories. Within each region, research sites were selected based on their political significance, intensity of memory making and shaping (the presence of monuments and memorials) and evidence of symbolic contestations over the identity of the Ethiopian state and the peoples of each region. For this purpose, field research was conducted in Mekelle and Abiy Adi in Tigray, while Jigjiga

and Gode were selected in SRS. In Oromia, field visits were conducted in Addis Ababa, Fiche, Nekemte, Adama and Anole.

Site selection was designed to capture areas where memory politics occurs and is contested and major cities of regions where there are museums and monuments and the naming and renaming of public spaces occurs. Data collection was conducted from December 2025 to January 2026. Interviews were conducted with political elites, academics, media workers, social media activists, historians, religious actors, traditional elders and civil society representatives. Field observations were used to document monuments, museums, public commemorations, naming practices and symbolic performances. The study also analysed policy documents, public speeches, media coverage and historical publications.

Data were analysed using thematic and comparative approaches. Interview, observation and documentary data were coded according to analytical themes: symbolic representations and flags; public spaces naming; monuments and memorialization; historical event commemorations; and cross-cutting historical narratives. Comparatives analysis was then used to identify patterns of continuity and divergence across the case studies. The research did not attempt to verify historical facts.

Conceptual framework

The literature on collective memory provides an important starting point for this study but does not on its own adequately explain the dynamics of Ethiopian memory politics. Maurice Halbwachs' conception of collective memory is useful because it shows that memory is socially framed. He states that: 'The individual calls recollections to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory'.[3] This insight is central to this study because it draws attention to the social locations through which the past is remembered, interpreted and given meaning. Memory, in this sense, is not simply an archive of inherited recollections but a socially mediated process through which communities define themselves, identify historical reference points and distinguish their experiences from those of others.

At the same time, the Ethiopian case requires moving beyond the social framing of memory to consider how memories acquire public authority, institutional force and symbolic permanence. Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory is relevant here as it helps to explain how memories move from interpersonal circulation into more durable public forms.[4]

3 Maurice Halbwachs, On Collective Memory, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 181.

4 According to Assmann, cultural memory refers to 'cultural meaning … [that] is both handed down and brought to present life … [though] symbols, icons, representations such as monuments, tombs, temples, idols and so forth.' See Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, trans. David Henry Wilson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 7–8.

Yet in this context, institutionalization is never neutral. Memory is not merely preserved but selected, reconstructed and authorized through state ideology, ruling party projects, regional elite narratives and struggles over national belonging. For this reason, scholarship that explicitly connects memory to political power is particularly relevant. Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger's concept of the 'Invention of Tradition' is especially valuable because it demonstrates that traditions are not merely inherited from the past, but are selected, formalized and ritualized to serve political needs.[5] This perspective highlights the process through which particular histories become authoritative while others remain peripheral.

The perspective of memory as a political production is further strengthened by approaches that foreground the relationship between power and historical narration. Michael Trouillot's work on power and silencing advances the argument that power operates within the production of history itself in what is narrated, institutionalized, celebrated and silenced.[6]

Collectively, these perspectives shift the analytical focus from memory as a simple record of the past to memory as a field of struggle over legitimacy, authority and historical representation. This broader literature, therefore, provides the conceptual foundation for examining memory not only as an interpretive process but also as a political practice that is embedded in public institutions and symbolic forms.

Ethiopia-focused memory scholarship also provides an important bridge between these broader theories and the empirical concerns of this research. Tegbaru Yared's discussion of layers of traditions and approaches to collective memory is relevant because it recognizes that Ethiopia's memory landscape is neither singular nor stable but structured through competing narratives and multiple registers of historical reference. His identification of restorationist, rejectionist and moderationist approaches offers a useful starting point for organizing Ethiopia's highly contested memory landscape.[7] The restorationist approach emphasizes continuity with a 'Great Tradition'; the rejectionist foregrounds histories of conquest, marginalization and resistance and questions the inclusiveness and legitimacy of dominant state narratives; and the moderationist seeks a middle ground by selectively using elements of the inherited national story while acknowledging past injustices and incorporating counter-memories. The value of this framework for the present study lies in its recognition that memory politics in Ethiopia is constituted through competition among different historical projects rather than through a single hegemonic narrative.

5 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

6 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

7 Tegbaru Yared, 'Layers of traditions: politics of memory and polarisation in contemporary Ethiopia', ISS Monograph 210, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2023.

At the same time, the study suggests that these approaches are best treated as flexible tendencies rather than fixed categories. Across the regions, memory actors rarely reject or embrace the past in absolute terms. Rather, they selectively reject certain historical memories while appropriating others, and actors occupying state power may revive previously marginalized memories while silencing others. What matters, therefore, is not simply whether an actor is restorationist, rejectionist or moderationist, but how and under what political conditions different aspects of the past are selected, accommodated, authorized or contested. This is where the study seeks to develop previous works.

Building on these debates, this research develops a dynamic selective memory regime framework. A selective memory regime refers to the political, ideological and institutional process through which certain memories are revived, authorized, ritualized and circulated while others are silenced, marginalized and forgotten amid power reconfigurations. The framework is intended to capture the fact that memory politics in Ethiopia, especially in the documented cases, is neither coherent nor settled. It unfolds through the changing relations between the centre and the regions, through the strategic repositioning of political actors and through ongoing negotiation between official and vernacular memory.

The framework is operationalized through three interconnected analytical propositions. First, memory politics is shaped by changing relations between the centre and regions. The proximity to power—whether one remains a marginalized periphery, a regional ally or a core governing force—influences whether actors present themselves mainly through narratives aligned with the centre, or through narratives of conquest, victimhood, exclusion and resistance.

Second, political parties, state institutions, regional government social movements and other influential actors are treated as memory entrepreneurs. They move between contrasting memory narratives and selective commemoration as they pass through phases of armed struggle, regional governance and participation in or exclusion from federal power. Their changing positions shape how sites of memory are organized and reinterpreted, which episodes of history are brought to the fore or pushed into the background.

Third, the framework stresses that official memory does not fully determine how people remember the past. Unofficial memories within and across the three regions remain diverse, sometimes fragmented and often contested, and they continue to inform everyday understandings of events and figures even when they are silenced in official memories and commemorative practices.

In this way, the conceptual framing uses the selective nature of memory politics to guide the empirical analysis of the report and focuses on when and how different actors selectively accommodate or contest a certain aspect of the past, and what these choices reveal about authority, inclusion and the evolving relationship between the Ethiopian state and its constituent parts.

Regional memory contexts

Tigray, Oromia and SRS occupy distinct yet interconnected positions within Ethiopia's landscape of historical memory and identity formation. While their historical trajectories differ, all three have been shaped by experiences of state formation, conflict and contestation that continue to inform contemporary memory politics. These memories are neither static nor homogeneous but are reworked by political movements based on competing interpretations of the past. Understanding these dynamics requires attention not only to regional specificity but also to the broader processes through which historical experiences are transformed into political memories.

Historical grievances and memory formation

Across the three regions, collective memory is primarily anchored in narratives of grievance, resistance and contested incorporation into the modern Ethiopian state. Tigray occupies a complex position within Ethiopia's landscape of memory politics and identity formation partly as it has the most experience of conflict with the central government.[8] Since the 1943 Weyane revolt, Tigray participated in two more wars against the central government, the 17-year armed struggle (1974–1991) and the 2020–2022 conflict between Tigray and federal authorities.

Prior to the rise of Emperor Menelik II in the late nineteenth century, the region was not a peripheral territory but an integral pillar of the imperial Christian polity. The province commanded its own centre of power and competed for control of the Ethiopian throne, producing leaders such as Emperor Yohannes IV from 1871 to 1889.[9]

Because of this longstanding participation in imperial statecraft, many Tigrayans today do not reject the pre-Menelik imperial period; rather, they share much of its civilizational and religious memory with the Ethiopian centre. For example, scholar Adhana Haile Adhana claimed that 'Tigray formed not only a durable component of the Ethiopian nation but was also part of the backbone of the Ethiopian state'.[10]

8 Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan, *Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War*, London: Hurst & Company, 2023.

9 Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia: 1896–1974*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995; John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, Woodbridge: James Currey, 2011.

10 Adhana Haile Adhana, 'Tigray: The Birth of a Nation within the Ethiopian Polity', in Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa, ed. Mohammed Salih and John Markakis, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1998, 42–49

The point of divergence seemed to emerge with the advent of a centralized state under Emperor Menelik II.[11] After shifting the political centre to Shoa, Emperor Menelik II expanded southward through conquest while pursuing a policy of containment in the north. This produced a paradoxical situation in which Tigray, unlike the southern regions, was not subjected to a programme of cultural assimilation and symbolic restructuring. No statues, imperial monuments or state-sanctioned symbols celebrating southern conquest were erected in the region. Tigray still celebrates the story of the Ethiopian state, particularly the Axumite period, which has monuments, schools, airports and other symbols named after it, but also figures such as Emperor Yohannes IV and *Ras* Alula, a military leader form Tigray who fought against foreign powers. As a result, Tigray has developed a dual memory structure: A shared imperial memory grounded in the pre-Menelik II era, and a regional memory of marginalization shaped by post-Menelik II containment and conflict.

While Tigray's experience reflects a shift from imperial centrality to marginalization, Oromia's historical memory is structured solely around incorporation through conquest. Collective memory relates to contestation over the formation of the modern Ethiopian state and the 'Great Tradition' narrative. The southward imperial expansion is typically articulated not simply as state consolidation but as occupation.[12] This developed into what became known as the 'colonial thesis' that characterizes Ethiopia as an 'empire state' and positions the Oromo experience within a discourse of subordination and 'national oppression'.[13]

A comparable but distinct trajectory can be observed in SRS where regional memory politics draws on the legacy of colonial boundary-making and contested incorporation. Ethiopian historiography has long marginalized the Somali-inhabited lowlands of eastern Ethiopia, the area that is now SRS,[14] treating them as anthropological footnotes to the imperial project.[15] Yet SRS stands as a critical arena for contesting and often rejecting these dominant narratives.

11 In the 1975 TPLF Manifesto, memory politics was largely associated with the formation of the modern Ethiopian state. At the same time, despite variation in emphasis, nationalist political parties in Tigray predominantly framed memory around the nineteenth century. See also Alemseged Abbay, *Identity Jilted or Re-Imagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998.

12 P. T. W. Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi, eds., Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996; Asafa Jalata, Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868–1992, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993; Donald Donham and Wendy James, eds., The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. See also numerous articles published in The Journal of Oromo Studies since its establishment in 1993.

13 Merera Gudina, 'Ethnicity, Democratisation and Decentralization in Ethiopia: The Case of Oromia', *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review* 23/1 (2007): 81–106.

14 Throughout this report, 'Somali region' and 'Somali Regional State (SRS)' are used as shorthand for the Somali-inhabited territories currently administered as the SRS, acknowledging that formal status and boundaries have shifted over time.

15 Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History'.

Memory politics in the region draws on layers of experience and struggle, going back to the late nineteenth century treaties through which colonial powers partitioned Somali-inhabited territories. In particular, the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1897, which ceded Somali-inhabited territories to Ethiopian control and was revealed to locals only decades later.[16] This treaty paved the way for the incorporation of Ogaden and Haud—an important dry season grazing area in eastern and northern SRS—into Ethiopia in, respectively 1948 and 1954, which triggered rebellions for self-determination. Taken together, these trajectories illustrate how distinct historical experiences produced differentiated regional memory frameworks.

Counter-mobilization

The historical grievances described above were institutionalized and transformed through political movements that produced counter-narratives. In Tigray, over the last 50 years, this dual structure has been reshaped through the rise of TPLF, the 1974–1991 armed struggle and TPLF's central role within the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF),[17] followed by the post-2018 fallout and the 2020–2022 war. Post-1970s memory politics in Tigray has not been static. Narratives and commemorative priorities shifted between the armed struggle period, the years of federal dominance and the post-2018 and post-war phases, reshaping how imperial legacies, revolutionary struggle and recent atrocities are remembered in Tigray's monuments, museums and public events.

A similar process of institutionalization can be observed in Oromia where nationalist consciousness and political organization played a central role in shaping collective memory. The 1960s represented a turning point in Oromo nationalist consciousness. While earlier resistance traditions existed,[18] the formation of the Macha and Tulama Self-help Association and the Bale Oromo resistance are widely regarded as the institutional beginnings of modern Oromo nationalism.[19] These developments later gave rise to the OLF and other political movements in the region.[20]

16 I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*, rev., updated and expanded ed., Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988.

17 The 1975 TPLF manifesto shaped memory in terms of exclusion, economic and political peripherality and territorial issues with the centre.

18 Ezekiel Gebissa, 'The Italian Invasion, the Ethiopian Empire, and Oromo Nationalism: The Significance of the Western Oromo Confederation of 1936', *Northeast African Studies* 9/3 (2002): 75–96.

19 Asafa Jalata and Mohammed Hassen called the *Macha-Tulama Association the fulcrum of Oromummaa, liberation and democracy*. See Asafa Jalata and Mohammed Hassen, The Macha-Tulama Association, and Its Importance in Oromo History, Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Printing Press, 2014.

20 Mohammed Hassen, 'The Development of Oromo Nationalism', in *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries*, ed. P. T. W. Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996, 67–80.

In SRS, the institutionalization of memory unfolded through successive counter-hegemonic movements for self-determination. These include Maktal Dahir's armed resistance (Nasrullah) in early 1960s;[21] the WSLF in 1973, who, together with Siad Barre's regime, fought the Ogaden War in 1977–1978 with Ethiopia; and the ONLF formed in 1984 by former WSLF members.[22]

Since the 1990s, two dominant actors have shaped memory politics in Oromia: OLF and the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), an EPRDF member party. The OLF sustained the colonial and empire-state thesis, framing Oromo history as a narrative of subjugation and resistance. In contrast, OPDO operated within EPRDF's doctrine of class and national oppression, recognizing Oromo grievances but situating their resolution within a restructured and nominally democratic Ethiopian state. During the transitional period, the OLF participated in shaping the federal system, including the transitional charter, before rebelling in June 1992. Thereafter, OPDO governed Oromia in the EPRDF-controlled federal structure, creating a layered memory regime in which state-linked narratives coexisted with resistance-oriented counter-narratives.

A parallel dynamic unfolded in SRS following EPRDF's 1991 takeover in Addis Ababa, briefly elevating ONLF leaders to regional power. In the first regional elections in 1992, they secured a landslide victory. Gode was selected as the capital, and Somali Regional State was agreed to be the official name of the region. Relations between EPRDF and ONLF soon soured, however. ONLF leaders announced plans for a referendum on self-determination, which prompted EPRDF intervention and renewed conflict.[23] This initiated more than two decades of ONLF insurgency.

Intra-regional fragmentation and memory contestation

While these movements contributed to the consolidation of powerful regional narratives, memory politics in all three regions remained fragmented and contested. Since the 1990s, memory politics in Oromia have evolved through a struggle between OLF resistance narratives and OPDO's state-centric discourse. From 2014, there was significant anti-government youth mobilization that led to the 2018 transition. This reopened space for the public recognition of Oromo nationalist memories.

In SRS, these contestations were further shaped by state intervention and internal political restructuring. Following ONLF's demand for self-determination, EPRDF swiftly removed the regional president, Hassan Jire Qalinle, on allegations of corruption and shifted its backing to politicians with clan affiliations outside the Ogadeni. EPRDF then promoted the creation of the

21 Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*.

22 Aleksi Ylönen, 'The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Dilemma of Liberation', in *Routledge Handbook of the Horn of Africa*, ed. Jean-Nicolas Bach, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022, 21–31.

23 Tobias Hagmann, *Talking Peace in the Ogaden: The Search for an End to Conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia*, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2014.

Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL), which it presented as a non-Ogadeni alternative to ONLF.

ESDL was formed as a coalition of ten parties, mainly from non-Ogaden clans, with Abdulmajid Hussein serving as its president. It won the majority of seats in the 1995 national elections (76 out of the 139 seats in the regional council).[24] The administrative capital was moved from Gode to Jigjiga. These shifts resulted in a form of patron–client relationship that has characterized regional politics since then.[25] After ruling the region for almost four years with limited credibility among the population, who saw them as EPRDF clients, and limited access to most parts of the region, it merged with an ONLF faction to form the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) in 1998.[26]

While secessionist sentiments persisted, especially among ONLF supporters, efforts to 'Ethiopianize' the region intensified around 2008.[27] These included prefixing 'Ethiopia' to the region's name and also changing the party's name to Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party (from SPDP or ESPDP), replacing the regional flag's blue triangle and star with a yellow one featuring a camel, changing the regional anthem and heavy securitization through the *Liyu* Police. These measures continued until 2018 when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's rise led to the ousting of regional President Abdi Mohamoud Omer (known as Abdi Iley), and appointment of Mustafa Omer as his replacement, ushering in a reconfiguration of regional memory politics.

Since 1991, these trajectories of colonial boundary-making, self-determination struggles and 'Ethiopianization' efforts under EPRDF have structured how the region engages with history. First, from 1992–1994, an ONLF-led regional government marked the beginning of inclusion of local memories into the region's official discourse. Then, under neo-patrimonial rule from 1994–2018 the central government had a strong influence on the region's official memory, suppressed resistance narratives and supported revisionist versions; and finally there have been the post-2018 efforts to recentre local histories and struggles, as explored in section five.

These patterns of contestations are also evident in Tigray where the dual memory structure has generated competing interpretations across different periods, particularly regarding the place of imperial legacies, the meaning of armed struggle and the representation of recent conflicts.

24 Tobias Hagmann and Mohamud Hussein Khalif, 'State and Politics in Ethiopia's Somali Region since 1991', *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 6/1 (2006): 25–49.

25 Tobias Hagmann, 'Beyond Clannishness and Colonialism: Understanding Political Disorder in Ethiopia's Somali Region, 1991–2004', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 43/4 (2005): 509–36.

26 Abdi Ismail Samatar, 'Ethiopian Ethnic Federalism and Regional Autonomy: The Somali Test', *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 5 (2005): 44–76.

27 We use the term 'Ethiopianize' to indicate practices of federal and regional identity construction and security governance rather than an organic or consensual process of national integration.

The context of the three cases demonstrates that memory politics in Ethiopia is structured through dynamic interplay between historically grounded grievances, their institutionalization and their ongoing fragmentation and contestations. While the cases differ in their historical trajectories, they converge in the ways these experiences are transformed into competing narratives of identity, legitimacy and political claims. These narratives are neither fixed nor unified but are reworked by political actors, which produces layered and at times contradictory memory regimes. It is this interplay that underpins contemporary contestations over memory and commemorative practices.

Drivers of memory: Transformation and selective memory regimes in practice

Flags and anthems

Literature on memory politics highlights national flags and anthems as central symbolic instruments through which states construct, institutionalize and reproduce collective memory and shape national identity.[28] At the same time these symbols can also be sites where historical narratives and power relations are negotiated. Particularly in divided societies like Ethiopia, flags and anthems turn into areas of contestation as different groups attach historical meanings to them. As a result, regime changes have typically been accompanied by changes in flags and anthems to reflect the aspirations and ideological orientation of the new rulers.

Within Ethiopia's federal arrangement, this occurs at national and regional levels. Following the introduction of multinational federalism, the national flag has become a focal point of contention, while the federal structure empowers regional states such as Oromia, Somali and Tigray to have their own regional anthem and flag.[29] Controversy has frequently centred on opposition to the federal flag and to flags composed of the green, yellow and red tricolour without the federal emblem. For some, the emblem is associated with tradition and resistance, while for others it symbolizes oppression. The opposition to the tricolour flag is because of its association with a coercive imperial state.

Following the adoption of the constitution in 1995, the federal government enacted Proclamation No. 16/1996 which defined the official flag and national emblem yet did not criminalize the use of the tricolour flag without the emblem. To address this, it was later repealed and replaced by Proclamation No. 645/2009 which penalized the use of tricolour flag without the emblem

28 Anne Wagner and Sarah Marusek, eds., *Flags, Color, and the Legal Narrative: Public Memory, Identity, and Critique*, Cham: Springer, 2021.

29 The Tigray Regional State Flag Establishment Proclamation No. 2/1996 states that the yellow star at the centre represents international relations and solidarity with the international community. Similarly, the Oromia Regional State Flag Proclamation No. 9/1996 states that the *oda* (sycamore tree) with two major branches symbolizes the tradition of unity, administration under the law, peace and democracy, wealth, fertility and centralism.

and introduced a national flag day.[30] The introduction of the national flag day was a part of the EPRDF and Prime Minister Melez Zenawi's attempt to respond to public backlash following Meles's remark that '*bendira cherk new*' ('the flag is a mere sheet of cloth'), and to reassert commitment to national unity. The criminalization of the use of the flag without its emblem and the imposition of rigorous imprisonment as punishment illustrate the depth of symbolic contestation surrounding the flag.[31]

These national tensions play out differently across the three regions where the tricolour has distinct and often conflicting meanings. The flag without the emblem is associated with historic grievances and dissent from the federal order in SRS and Oromia. It is also viewed as a rejection of the secular state in SRS.

In Tigray, by contrast, the tricolour was not a major political issue; it was widely used at community level and in churches, where it carried religious and cultural meanings rather than overtly political ones. After 2015, as harassment and discrimination against Tigrayans increased in other parts of the country, movements emerged encouraging people to avoid use of everyday objects (from coffee cups to T-shirts) displaying the three colours. In the post-war period, especially in areas controlled by the Tigray Interim Regional Administration (TIRA), the federal flag is not displayed. This suggests that symbolic contestation over the flag intensified in reaction to increasing discrimination against Tigrayans and 'revivalist Ethiopiansm' became perceived to be an ideological orientation of the centre, which further politicized the tricolour and associated symbols

The contestation and debates over flags extend beyond the centre-region dynamic, and unfold within the regions themselves through competing interpretations of symbols and their meanings. In Oromia, there are three competing flags: The regional flag, the *Abbaa Gadaa* flag and the OLF flag. The OLF flag is a symbol of a resistance movement whereas the *Abbaa Gadaa* flag is now becoming a shared symbol in the region.[32] The regional flag, derived from the *Abbaa Gadaa* flag with the O*da* tree at the centre, is presented as representing Oromo culture.[33] Yet debates between OLF and OPDO have occurred over the symbolism of the O*da* tree, particularly whether its representation as a single trunk or branching form reflects unity or division.[34]

According to research participants, the flag and associated symbols became contentious when the Addis Ababa city leadership attempted to display the Oromia flag in school compounds

30 While this law introduced a national day to be celebrated in *Meskerem* (September), due to work and school calendars, it was later amended by Proclamation No. 863/2014, which shifted the date to the first Monday of *Tikemt* (October).

31 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Flag Proclamation No. 654/2009, article 23.

32 Interview with an Oromo historian, Addis Ababa, 25 January 2026.

33 Interview with a member of the House of Peoples' Representatives who participated in framing the regional anthem, Addis Ababa, January 2026.

34 Interview with an Oromo historian, Addis Ababa, 25 January 2026.

and violence ensued.[35] Debates also extend to the regional anthem. While the Oromia regional anthem does not generate widespread opposition according to interviews conducted, the line '*Xurii bara dhibbaa dhiigaan sirraa dhignee*' ('We removed the hundred-year blood stain from you') has generated criticism, particularly among those aligned with the 'Great Tradition'.[36] This illustrates how the meaning of symbols can remain contested across different audiences even when they are institutionally consolidated.

In Tigray, the regional flag and regional anthem are associated with TPLF, as both originated during the armed struggle and later became official regional symbols.[37] The regional anthem does not explicitly refer to Tigray's history, culture or aspiration, rather it has themes of sacrifice, people's power (ህዝቢ ሓይልና) and principles (መስመር) aligned with TPLF's ideology. While there has been some controversy over the regional flag and anthem, respondents argue that they do not represent Tigray's culture, tradition or historical aspirations, and instead reflect socialist ideological influences.[38] In response, alternative flag and anthem proposals aligned with the region's historical and cultural heritages, including that of Emperor Yohannes IV's flag, are circulating.[39] These debates are linked to broader critiques of TPLF's ideological orientation, including references to the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT), placing TPLF as a Marxist movement rather than a Tigrayan nationalist one.

A similar dynamic of symbolic restructuring, but with stronger federal intervention, is observed in SRS. Following the first regional elections in 1992, the newly established regional parliament adopted a tricolour featuring a blue triangle with a white star (Figure 1), and anthem whose melody mirrored that of neighbouring country Somalia's former anthem. Following Gode's selection as the capital, the regional flag was first raised there on 18 March 1993.[40] Yet this flag was changed in 2008 as part of regional politicians' efforts to 'Ethiopianize' the region.[41] The blue triangular base with a white star was replaced with a yellow triangular base featuring a camel. The official name of the region was changed from the *Dawlad Deegaanka Soomaalida* (Somali

35 'Analysis: Unrest, Violence in Addis Schools Ignite Blames of 'Illegally Enforcing' Oromia Flag, Anthem; Leads to Security Crackdown', *Addis Standard*, 13 December 2022. Accessed 9 September 2026, https://addisstandard.com/analysis-unrest-violence-in-addis-schools-ignite-blames-of-illegally-enforcing-oromia-flag-anthem-leads-to-security-crackdown/.

36 'Nazi Youth Songs and the Oromo Regional Anthem: Abiy Ahmed's Regime Spreading Hate and Ethnic Apartheid', Amhara Professionals Union (Amba), 25 January 2023. Accessed 27 August 2026, https://www.ambapu.org/node/62; 'Wondimu Ibsa Argues Oromo Was Never Oppressed, What Is the 'Hundred Years' Dirt Narrative?'', *Borkena*, 19 December 2022. Accessed 27 August 2026, https://borkena.com/2022/12/19/wondimu-ibsa-argues-oromo-was-never-oppressed-what-is-the-100-years-dirt-narrative/.

37 Interview with former TPLF leadership, 18 December 2026.

38 Interview with Tigray regional political parties, 20 December 2026.

39 Interview with Tigray regional political parties, 20 December 2026.

40 Interview, former politician and parliament member, Jigjiga, 30 December 2025.

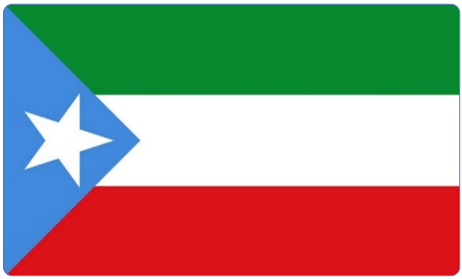
41 Although Abdi Iley, then head of security, introduced the flag issue to the regional cabinet prior to parliamentary approval, the flag change took place under the presidency of Daud Mohamed Ali.

Regional State) to *Dawlad Deegaanka Soomaalida Itoobiya* (Somali Regional State of Ethiopia), and the ruling Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) also underwent the same rebranding to become the Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party (ESPDP).[42] A new anthem explicitly linked the 'Ethiopianization' to the attainment of rights: *Hubaal kii Itoobiya, Xaqa noo horseedee, Horyaal nooga dhigayoow* (loosely translated as 'the flag that guided us to justice/rights and raised us to the forefront in Ethiopia').

Figure 1. Somali region flags



Regional flag from 2008-2018



Regional flag from 1993-2008, and since 2018

Several research participants interpreted these changes as an EPRDF-backed project designed to align the region symbolically with the Ethiopian centre. As one regional politician put it, they were 'designed especially to mimic the Tigrayan and Amhara flags'.[43] This was reversed in 2018, however. On 18 September 2018, under new regional President Mustafa Omer, the regional parliament restored the 1993 flag, anthem and official designation, while introducing a modified melody of the anthem. Building on this symbolic reorientation, Somali Region Unity Day was first observed as 'Somali Region Flag Day' in 2024 and 2025, and officially approved as 'Somali Region Unity Day' in February 2026.[44] It is celebrated on 23 January to mark the establishment of the first regional administration, flag and constitutional recognition in 1993. The commemoration seeks to construct a narrative of shared symbols and memory that unify Somali region rather than glorify the struggle of the government as in the case of *Ginbot 20*.[45]

42 Interview, author and academic from Jigjiga University, Jigjiga, 29 December 2025.

43 Interview, head of an SRS opposition party, Jigjiga, 25 December 2025.

44 Proclamation No. 253/2018.

45 Since the 1990s, *Ginbot 20* (28 May), marking the fall of the Derg, has been commemorated in the Somali region as a national public holiday. Following the 2018 political transition, this commemoration was discontinued in the Somali region and others, except Tigray. Since 2024, 23 January has been celebrated as 'Somali Region Unity Day'. Interview, civil society organization member, Jigjiga, 27 December 2025.

This shift reflects a reconfiguration of memory politics that both re-centres local histories and articulates dual belonging: Ethiopian by nationality and Somali by ethnicity.[46] Research participants emphasized that the restored blue triangle and white star symbolize shared culture with Somalis in the Horn of Africa, rather than support of Somali irredentism, as the previous administration had claimed.[47] Moreover, the current regional administration also views this reframing as embedded within Ethiopia's broader agenda of advancing regional integration.[48]

Across the three regions, flags and anthems thus function not merely as symbolic markers of identity but as arenas in which competing histories, political projects and claims to belonging are articulated, negotiated and contested. Seen through the lens of selective memory regimes, these symbols condense shifting struggles over which the past is revived, authorized and ritualized, and which are pushed to the margins or rendered dangerous under changing centre–region power configurations. While the federal framework provides space for symbolic differentiation, it also intensifies struggles over meaning, as national and regional narratives intersect, overlap and at times conflict, enabling parties, regional governments and social movements to recalibrate their alignment with the centre or foreground narratives of conquest, victimhood and exclusion. In this sense, symbolic politics around flags and anthems exemplify how memory is not a stable archive but a contested political practice through which authority, belonging and the relationship between the Ethiopian state and its regions are continually renegotiated.

Public spaces

Public spaces are arenas in which states and political actors institutionalize collective memories. Compared to Oromia and Somali where pre-1991 naming and renaming often reflected the ideological orientation of each regime, Tigray experienced less centre imposed renaming prior to 1991. As a result, public spaces retained their local names. In the pre-1991 period, while some school names were associated with the Derg (like Fre Abiyot School in Mekelle), most schools in the region were named after regional heroes and heroines, such as Hatse Yohannes, Nigiste Saba and Menelik II. In Oromia, however, there have been attempts to rename cities in accordance with regime ideology, particularly that of the 'Great Tradition'. Renaming has also extended to schools and streets. For example, a poem in *Afaan Oromo* reflects resistance to the renaming of Adama to Nazreth that occurred during the Emperor Haile Selassie I era, interpreting it as an attempt to Christianize the city and so alter its Oromo identity.

46 Upon restoring the regional flag, the regional president, Mustafa Omer, tweeted: 'There is no contradiction between our Somali nationality and Ethiopian citizenship. We proudly uphold symbols of *Somalinimo* without abnegating our national responsibility … The original flag returns.'

47 Interview, former politician and a local elder, Gode, 4 January 2026; interview with an author and academic from JJU, Jigjiga, 29 December 2025.

48 Interview, former politician and parliament member, Jigjiga, 30 December 2025.

Hadaamaa gurrarraan yaasee, yaasee,
Dabalaa rabbiitu baasee,
Haylasillaseen kunumti ni maraatee ?
Akka namaatti, lafa kiristinnaa kaasee

(Adama poured out of our ears, poured out,
Lord saved Dabala,
Is Haile Selassie crazy?
He baptized [Christianized] the Land like a human being.)

In the same pattern, the pre-1991 SRS memory landscape was largely shaped by Ethiopian regimes with commemorative practices in the region reflecting state narratives and figures from the centre. Under Emperor Haile Selassie I, public spaces such as schools and hospitals in the region bore names of the emperor and member of the royal family such as Jigjiga's Ras Mekonnen School, Tafari Mekonnen School, Afawark Wolde Semayat Hospital and Gode's Leul Mekonen School.[49]

The Derg continued this top-down practice of renaming and extended the use of place names and symbols associated with its own military victories and narratives of the Ogaden war in 1977–1978 to public institutions in the region, for example naming Misrak Dil (Victory of the East) school, and changing Jigjiga's Afawork Wolde Semayat Hospital to Karamara Hospital. Overall, pre-1991 memory politics tended to sideline vernacular memories—local narratives, histories, heroes and struggles—and privileged the official commemorative practices of national regimes.

In the three regional states, the landscape of memory changed after 1991. In Oromia, the introduction of the federal system and establishment of Oromia Regional State transformed the politics of naming public spaces. Regional laws empowered city councils or relevant authorities, with approval from the regional council, to change and assign names to cities, *kebeles* and sub-cities.[50] Cities, *kebeles* and towns were changed to what respondents described as their original names: For example, Nazreth became Adama[51] and Debre Zeit became Bishfotu.[52]

49 Interview, former politician and a local elder, Gode, 4 January 2026.

50 See a recent law, A Proclamation to Revise Oromia Regional State Cities Establishment, No. 195/2015, which allows for naming changes 'on the interest and agreement of the residents of the city submitted to the concerned city administration council and decided when deemed necessary'.

51 Its original name comes from the Afaan Oromo term *adaamii*, meaning a cactus-like tree (specifically *Euphorbia candelabrum*). In 2000, the city officially reverted to its Oromo name, Adama, reflecting local identity and language.

52 Many residents continued using 'Nazareth' out of habit, nostalgia or personal attachment. This created quiet disagreements, especially among older generations and long-term residents. For many people, the issue became politically sensitive, so they preferred not to talk openly about it, especially in mixed ethnic or religious settings. Some groups viewed the change as restoring justice, while others felt it erased shared or imperial-era history. These debates were often framed politically rather than personally. There were isolated and symbolic acts, such as resistance to changing signboards or continued informal use of 'Nazareth'.

Respondents link these changes to the historical names of the localities. In Adama for example, *kebeles* previously identified in numerical nomenclatures were renamed with culturally and linguistically meaningful names such as Migiraa, Gaara Luugoo, Dhaddacha Araaraa, Dagaagaa, Gurmuu, Badhaatuu, Odaa, Irreecha, Biiqqaa, Barreechaa, Abba Gadaa, Caffee and Angaatuu. School names were changed to reflect the language or local heroes. These changes are closely linked to culture, identity and language. Renaming appears as a deliberate effort to construct local historical narratives and achieve linguistic visibility in urban governance. These practices symbolically reassert cultural ownership, address perceived historical marginalization and embed regional identity in public life. Compared to Tigray, where naming is more closely associated with TPLF ideological and political orientation, naming in Oromia is more aligned with cultural identity and correction for historical injustices.

The post-1991 SRS reflects three patterns of memory politics. From 1992–1994, the relative autonomy introduced by the federal system allowed memory politics to make greater space for local struggles and histories.[53] Public spaces started to be renamed after local heroes for the first time, thereby incorporating local memories into the region's official memories: 'In our third parliament meeting, we discussed renaming all of our schools into Somali and replacing the *Habesha* names.[54] Our local elders and other heroes started to be named then.'[55]

The same research participant noted that in Jigjiga, Ras Mekonnen School was renamed Wiilwaal School and Tafari Mekonnen School became Sheikh Abdisalam School, while Mesrak Dil school was renamed Ahmed Guray School; in Gode, Leul Mekonen School was renamed Sayyid Mohammed Abdille Hassan School.[56] This period is also characterized by limited exclusion of the local histories and commemorations embracing local struggles and heroes, cultural leaders, and figures, including individuals who have worked with the previous regimes in Ethiopia and others involved in resistance struggles against the same regimes.[57]

The second period, 1994–2018, started when relations between ONLF and EPRDF soured, ushering in heavy interference of the federal government in the regional affairs. Frequent presidential changes stemmed from this tight control over regional decisions, especially between 1994–2010 where nine regional presidents were replaced. Clientelism became the

53 Several research participants characterized the 1992 election as having been a free regional election, especially when compared with subsequent elections marked, in their view, by heavy interference of the federal government in the region's electoral processes. Interview, former politician and parliament member, Jigjiga, 30 December 2025; interview, former politician and a local elder, Gode, 4 January 2026.

54 *Habesha*, in Somali contexts, is colloquially used to refer to non-Somali, Christian, Amharic-speaking highland Ethiopians, irrespective of their ethnic background.

55 Interview, former politician and parliament member, Jigjiga, 30 December 2025.

56 Interview, former politician and parliament member, Jigjiga, 30 December 2025.

57 In Gode, for example, local notables such as Ugas Mashkoke, who had worked with the Haile Selassie regime, were commemorated alongside anti-colonial figures such as Sayyid Mohammed Abdille Hassan.

political norm[58] and memory politics mirrored this pattern: While many local names given to public spaces by the previous parliament remained in place, new names and therefore the official memory started to honour figures from the centre, including those who masterminded human rights abuses in the name of securitization in Somali.[59] Abdi Iley's commemoration of the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi via Jigjiga's referral hospital and a short-lived downtown statue exemplify this.

Similarly, Kaali, a site where Ogaden elders allegedly agreed with British authorities to accept the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1948—adorned key public spaces under Abdi Iley, including presidential compound meeting halls, business centres and Jigjiga's main north–south artery road.[60] Despite evidence of Somali reluctance including 1944 and 1947 petitions, Jigjiga and Degahbur riots and grudging incorporation of the region to Ethiopia, regional leaders promoted a revisionist narrative of voluntary accession.[61] One research participant dismissed it as lacking evidence: 'Abdi Iley was selling that narrative in general to Ethiopianize the region'.[62] With the ONLF insurgency ongoing, references to its struggles, the WSLF or earlier resistance became taboo. Overall, this period marked a renewed assertion and influence of the central government over the official commemorative practices of the region, while vernacular memories were silenced and pushed to the margins.

Figure 2. Meles memorializing in Jigjiga



Former name of JJU referral hospital (2016-2018 (Source: Authors)



A statue of Meles Zenawi in Jigjiga (Since 2018)

58 Hagmann, 'Beyond Clannishness and Colonialism'.

59 Human Rights Watch, *'Collective Punishment': War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden Area of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008; Human Rights Watch, *'We Are Like the Dead': Torture and Other Human Rights Abuses in Jail Ogaden*, Somali Regional State, Ethiopia, New York: Human Rights Watch, 2018.

60 Interview, historian and academic from Jigjiga University, Jigjiga, 26 December 2025.

61 I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*, 4th ed., Eastern African Studies, Oxford: James Currey, 2002; Abdirahman A. Muhumed and Mohamed A. Siraj, 'Somali Region in Ethiopia: Historical Developments during the Period 1884–1995', *Somali Studies: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Journal for Somali Studies* 2 (2017): 60–75.

62 Interview, civil society organization member, Jigjiga, 27 December 2025.

Third, in the post-2018 period, Abdi Iley's removal and the EPRDF–to–Prosperity Party transition brought relative freedom from central influence on official memory. Memory politics significantly recognize vernacular memories with public spaces increasingly renamed for local heroes and autonomy struggles (Figures 2 and 3). The 2018 ONLF peace deal and its return as a political party accelerated this. Gode General Hospital honours Sheikh Ibrahim Abdalla, ONLF chair from 1991–1998; Badal Sagal School is named after another ONLF figure; Gunagado Boarding School recalls Garad Maktal of the 1960s Nasrullah resistance; and Kebridahar high school bears Dr. Mohamed Sirad Dolal's name, another prominent ONLF leader. In Jigjiga, the Meles Zenawi Memorial Hospital was renamed after cultural–political leader Sultan Sheikh Hassan Yabaree, while Kaali presidential meeting hall was renamed after Sultan Odowa Liban, an elder executed by the Derg in the aftermath of the Ogaden war.

Memory politics not only unsettles the centre's revisionist narratives in the official memory, but also manifests contesting oral memories of the region—memories of local struggles against the Ethiopian state and memories of those who worked with the Ethiopian state itself—and brings these divergent accounts into the official mnemonic landscape.

While there are significant shifts in memory politics during this period, continuities persist alongside these changes, particularly in the official historiography's enduring silencing regarding the region's history. This was evident in the recent university-level history module (Hist 102)

Figure 3. Post-2018 Jigjiga memorialisation updates



JJU referral hospital renamed after Sultan Hassan Yabare



Kali meeting hall renamed after Sultan Odowa



Jigjiga Garaad Wiil Waal airport



Gode Ugas Miraad Airport (Source: Authors)

drafted in 2019, which largely omits Somali regional history and frames it through dominant perspectives.

Moreover, the federal government's rhetoric on contested histories reinforces this pattern. For instance, during the 2023 launch of Abiy's second book, *The Medemer Generation*, he urged Mustafa Omer to use the funds generated from the book to erect a statue on top Karamara Mountain for the 1977 Ethiopian victory in the Ethio-Somali (Ogaden) war. While this shows continuities of contestations and federal government's disregard for local memories and understandings, a regional backlash to the request led instead to the construction of Shabeely Resort near Jigjiga.[63]

Memory politics in this phase encapsulates a contested memory-scape in which histories of armed resistance and collaboration, loyalty and dissent sit side by side. It accommodates and juxtaposes divergent pasts, and reveals how local struggles and alignments with successive regimes remain entangled in the region's politics of memory. This accommodation is partly driven by the post-2018 reforms and context of relative peace and expanded regional autonomy that has created political space to claim and curate these diverse—and often ambivalent—histories as part of a shared regional past

In post-1991 Tigray, naming practices have largely aligned with the aspiration and orientation of TPLF. Legally speaking, decisions regarding the naming and renaming of schools, *kebele*, *kushet* (the lowest administrative unit in Tigray) as well as streets are made by the relevant local administrative bodies (Figures 4 and 5). Although initiatives to name or rename may originate from the local community, practically it is closely associated with the orientation and aspirations of TPLF. The most common terms used are *hadinet* (unity), *kisanet* (tranquillity), *selam* (peace), *semaetat* (martyrs), *limat* (development) and *weyane* (revolt) whereas applying the name of martyrs is also common. This pattern continued after the outbreak of the 2020–2022 Tigray war with streets named after new martyrs, though exclusively those from the senior party leadership and who fought in the 17-year armed struggle. Still, there were few attempts to change names and schools associated with the 'Great Tradition' or religion, probably to avoid a clash with local memorial practices.

Streets and squares in Mekelle, Tigray's capital, are primarily named to commemorate the political figures, military victories and collective suffering linked to TPLF's armed struggle. It is difficult to find streets or squares commemorating heroes or incidents prior to 1974, except those built or commemorated before 1991. One exception is the change after 2018 when a street was named after Blata Hailemariam Reda, the leader of the first *Weyane* revolt in the 1940s.

63 Shabeely Resort, named after Shabeley district, is one of several major luxury eco-resorts and tourist destinations developed under the federal government's 'Dine for Ethiopia' and 'Dine for Generations' initiatives to enhance tourism infrastructure and expand green spaces. Other projects in the same initiative include Wenchi Eco Lodge in Oromia, Hayk and Gorgora resorts in Amhara and Niin Lee Palm Spring Lodge in Afar.

Figure 4. Mekelle memorialisation street names



New Street names in Mekelle, June 2023, (Source: Authors)

Overall, the pattern suggests relative silencing of the imperial period historical memory during a period of stable relations with the centre and instrumentalization of memory during times of crisis. One recurring observation among the research participants is that vernacular memory dominates everyday practice with many residents unaware of official street names and instead still using informal or older names.

The approach to naming public spaces reveals several recurring patterns across the three case studies. First, changes in regime are consistently accompanied by changes in the symbolic landscape. Governments seek to redefine public memory in a way that reflects their ideology and priorities. Second, periods of regional autonomy and reduced intervention from the centre are generally associated with the revival of local and regional memory. Regional governments increasingly restore indigenous names, commemorate regional historical figures, rename schools, streets and administrative units to reflect local histories and identities.

Third, official renaming does not necessarily transform oral memory. Across the three regions, local communities may continue to use former place names and local narratives when naming and renaming does not confirm local memories. Finally, the evidence demonstrates that naming is not governed by fixed ideological commitments. Political actors frequently abandon earlier commemorative positions and selectively revive previously marginalized local names when political circumstances change. Thus, the politics of naming and renaming is a dynamic process in which shifting political authority, ideological projects and centre-periphery relations continually reorganize the symbolic memory landscape.

Figure 5. Mekelle memorialisation



Alula street, Blata Hailemariam Reda Street and Kedmay Weyane market (Dif'o) (Source: Authors)

Monuments and museums

Monuments and museums provide curated and institutionalized historical narratives. At the same time, as these memories are constructed by the government, they may infer what is silenced, memorized and forgotten.[64] Field observations in the three regions show that these memorial structures are designed to commemorate past struggles, leaders, heroes and collective experiences of violence and resistance with the purpose of shaping public understanding of history, identity and legitimacy.

SRS has a different memory landscape of museums and monuments because figurative monuments of people are rarely used to commemorate heroes, largely due to Islamic prohibitions against depictions of human or animal figures.[65] A notable exception, however, is the statue of Sayyid Mohammed Abdille Hassan in Jigjiga (Figure 6). Erected during Abdi Iley's administration, the statue honours a figure revered not only as a prominent Somali hero but also as the progenitor of Somali nationalism.[66] His resistance struggles targeted British, Italian and Ethiopian imperial forces over the Somali territories they controlled. Although it is contested in both Ethiopian historiography and regional narratives whether Ethiopian imperial forces should be understood as colonial, Sayyid's struggle nonetheless encompassed armed resistance against Ethiopian forces as well as against European powers.[67]

The contemporary discourse regarding his monument, however, predominantly frames it as a symbol of his fight against 'white' colonial rule. Research participants interviewed claimed that

64 Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico, 'The Meanings of Monuments and Memorials: Toward a Semiotic Approach', *Punctum: International Journal of Semiotics* 2/1 (2016): 28–46.

65 Interview, head of an SRS opposition party, Jigjiga, 25 December 2025.

66 Said S. Samatar, 'Genius as Madness: King Tewodros of Ethiopia and Sayyid Muhammad of Somalia in Comparative Perspective', *Northeast African Studies* 10/3 (2003): 27–32.

67 Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 128–35.

the statue was not a regional initiative,[68] rather it was a suggestion from the federal government to commemorate Sayyid's anti-colonial resistance, in part as it aligned with Ethiopia as an African nation that held off and defeated colonial powers.[69] More recently, the statue was relocated and renovated under the Jigjiga corridor project, officially to reduce traffic congestion and enhance visitor access. This reflects selective commemoration based on the interests of the centre which foregrounds Sayyid's resistance against the British, French and Italian colonial forces while downplaying his struggles against Ethiopian powers.

Another monument that illustrates this selective commemoration is the Obole memorial (Figure 6), located near Obole where ONLF attacked Ethiopian military forces and Chinese oil workers in 2007.[70] While the region experienced intensified brutality and widespread human rights abuses by federal forces and the Liyu Police in the aftermath of the incident, the memorial was erected to commemorate the fallen soldiers.[71] In doing so, it foregrounds a state-centred narrative of sacrifice and security, while marginalizing alternative local accounts of violence and suffering. The monument thus operates not only as a site of remembrance but also as an instrument for consolidating official memory, privileging certain histories over others. Yet local populations continue to sustain and circulate counter-narratives that recall the broader spectrum of violence experienced in the region. In response to this long history of conflict, trauma and largely silenced abuses in official memory, the region passed Proclamation No. 251/2025, designating 6 April as the as the official day to honour past human rights violations in Somali, with each zone and district commemorating abuses committed against their communities by successive Ethiopian regimes and regional authorities.[72]

Figure 6. Sayyid Mohammed and Obole monuments



Relocated monument of Sayyid Mohammed Abdille Hassan



Obole monument (Source: Authors)

68 Interview, author and academic from Jigjiga University, Jigjiga, 29 December 2025.

69 Interview, author and academic from Jigjiga University, Jigjiga, 29 December 2025.

70 'In Rebel Region, Ethiopian Forces Accused of Abuses', *The Guardian*, 25 April 2007. Accessed 27 August 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/apr/25/ethiopia.

71 Human Rights Watch, *'Collective Punishment': War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden Area of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008.

72 Interview, former Jail Ogaden inmate and civil society organization member, Jigjiga, 7 January 2026.

In Oromia and Tigray, monuments and cultural centres can be categorized into three interconnected types: Resistance and revolutionary memories, imperial and historical heritage sites and cultural identity institutions.

Resistance and revolutionary memories are the dominant category in both regions. The Anole and Chelenko monument and General Tadesse statue in Selale commemorate resistance against historical domination and political marginalization.[73] Similar monuments across Oromia represent local heroes or resistance movements against the centre. In Tigray, memorial sites such as the Tigray Martyrs' Memorial Center (*Hawelti Semaetat*), Kedemay *Weyane* Memorial (*Dif'o*) and the Hawzien monuments commemorate armed struggle, martyrdom and civilian suffering in conflict.

Linked to the 'Great Tradition', Emperor Yohannes IV Museum and Palace, Abrha Castle, Monument at Axum and Mekelle airport and monuments in Abiyadi refers to earlier political and cultural traditions. In Oromia, the Kumsa Moroda palace in Nekemte and the Abba Jifar palace in Jimma preserve the political and architectural histories of the nineteenth century. By contrast, the more recently constructed monument of Kumsa Moroda in Nekemte is a contemporary commemorative.

Post-1991 dynamics show a similar pattern where a new regime brings a change of memory landscapes. Two main approaches can be identified in Oromia. The first consists of memorials that commemorate local heroes and events The second reflects a broader regional narrative centred on Oromo heroes and the political history of the Oromo people. For the second group, selection depends on the ideology of the regional as well as federal centre. Because OPDO was part of EPRDF, its approach to monuments was shaped by the grand narrative promoted at the centre. At the same time, memory politics in the region was shaped by competing narratives from OLF and OPDO.

As part of these frameworks, memorials and monuments were built to commemorate atrocities associated with imperial expansion (Figure 7). This approach aligned with EPRDF ideology opposing the imperial past, and was also part of OPDO's understanding of the past.[74] There was little attempt to include Oromo nationalists as their cause was framed as 'narrow nationalism' and figures associated with it were sidelined. Figures from the imperial past were treated the same. Senior OPDO figure Abadula Gemedea confirmed the reason for exclusion was that 'figures such as *Ras* Gobena and *Fitawrari* Habtegiorgis were recognized, a new class of Oromo elites emerged who, in pursuit of power, became traitors to their own people and facilitated the severe oppression of the Oromo people'.[75] The 2012 death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi seemed to

73 Abadula Gemeda, **የኦሮሞ ህዝብ ትግል ከየት ወዴት** ('The Struggle of the Oromo People: From Where to Where'), Finfinne, 1996 E.C., 21.

74 According to Abadula (1996), these two incidents and similar others are considered part of the Oromo people's struggle and atrocities of the imperial past.

75 Abadula, 1996 E.C., 25.

create space for OPDO to more openly promote Oromo nationalism. Respondents from Fitche noted that around 2008 there was no opportunity to construct a monument for General Tadesse Biru. But in 2012–2013, there was an initiative to build a museum and monument in his name. This shift suggests that when the legitimacy of the centre is tested, regional actors lean more strongly towards ethno-nationalism and vernacular memory. Taddesse Biru's monument reflects careful framing. The inscription beneath it is a neutral statement attributed to him. It reads: 'Everyone must be educated, because an educated person demands their rights'.

Figure 7. Monumental inscriptions



Abune Pertros monument and inscription beneath the monument and Abune Petros Hall at the Selale cultural Center



General Tadesse Biru monument and Selale Cultural Center, Dr Haile Fida monument inscription in Nekemte (Source: RVI)

Within the cultural centre, halls are dedicated to figures such as General Tadesse Biru, Megersa Badasa (Abune Petros)[76], Abebe Bikila, and Wesenu Dido. In Fitche, while the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church uses Abune Petros's religious title, the cultural centre refers to him by his birth name, Megersa Badasa. Although Abune is often associated with the 'Great Tradition', the emphasis on his ethnic background brings his Oromo identity to the forefront. Unlike the church monument, which mentions Hailemariam as his pre-ecclesiastical name, the cultural centre inscription foregrounds his birth identity, reflecting a deliberate framing within regional memory politics that shows the selective appropriation of monuments. This also reflects how different actors address an individual based on their own memory narrations and political orientations.

In Tigray, the post-1991 monument and museum memory landscape is dominated by TPLF's ideological orientation and political aspirations.[77] Many noted that memorials associated with the 'Great Tradition' or pre-1974 memorials have been largely silenced or selectively remembered. One respondent stated that if someone is asked about memorial sites in Mekelle, they are more likely to mention *Hawelti Semaetat* than *Hatse Yohanes* museum or palace. Another explained that when the Tigray Writers' Association began commemorating Emperor Yohannes in 2013, organizers reportedly faced intimidation from the regional leadership.[78] The act was interpreted as narrow nationalism and retrogressive. The situation changed later when TPLF's legitimacy became contested in the centre and the regional leadership began attending and delivering speeches at the annual commemoration. This pattern suggests that while multiple historical narratives exist in Mekelle, their visibility and official recognition fluctuate over time in relation to political dynamics and legitimacy concerns.

Tigray and Anole Martyrs memorial centres: evidence of change in the memory landscape

Both Tigray Martyrs Memorial Monument Center (*Hawelti Semaetat*) in Mekelle and the Anole Martyrs Memorial and Cultural Center in Arsi show how the politics of memory changes across time. The *Hawelti Semaetat* was established to commemorate the 17-year armed struggle and the sacrifices made during that period. The four pillars represent social groups in Tigray and their participation in the movement. The western side of the monument depicts the insurgency while the eastern side illustrates the atrocities committed against the people of Tigray. At the bottom of the western section, a broken cannon from a tank symbolizes victory and transition toward

76 The emphasis on christening name or the reversal to an older name signifies an attempt to return individuals who perceived themselves or were perceived by others within a broader national context to a more localized and localizing perspective. This involves asserting ethnic ownership over individuals whose formative lives were less defined by their purported ethnic origin which at the end serves as instrumentalizing memories of the past and shows the changing dynamics of memories over time.

77 In Tigray, there is no regional museum.

78 Interview with members of Tigray Writers Association, Mekelle, December 20, 2025. The respondent mentioned that such actions were to distract the programme and it was part of the ideological orientation of the TPLF towards the past.

Figure 8. Tigray museum



Banner indicating 'Genocide Corner' at the entry gate of the museum and TPLF emblem at the entrance (Source: Authors)

development after the war (Figure 8). At the base of the monument, it says: 'We will never yield to any form of oppression or serfdom or wish any such suffering for any other people. We will never kneel down to any aggressor of yesterday, today and beyond. Let these words be our covenant to you.'

The museum attached to the monument reinforces similar narratives. Before the most recent war, the museum primarily depicted the armed struggle while including a brief reference to Emperor Yohannes IV, *Ras* Alula and the Axum Obelisk to show the civilization of Tigray during the Axumite period.

Following the recent war, the character of the museum shifted significantly.[79] At the entrance the TPLF emblem is displayed alongside a large banner referring to 'genocide memory' (Figure 8). According to the museum guide, much of the heritage material was damaged or burned by federal soldiers in 2021. The museum now displays writing allegedly left by the soldiers, along with instruments described as tools of torture, clothing associated with sexual and gender-based violence and wall inscriptions characterized as dehumanizing and ethnically targeted (Figure 9). The museum guide disclosed that certain inscriptions have been written in the blood of victims.[80] As a result, the museum's narrative has shifted from a focus on the previous armed struggle to an emphasis on the recent war and civilian suffering during it.

The banner at the entrance and the guide's explanation now focus primarily on these recent events while earlier sections of the museum are damaged and more peripheral. The museum has thus transitioned from a memorial of revolutionary struggle to a site framed around genocide remembrance. This demonstrates that memory is not merely preserved from the past, it is re-

79 The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement is an agreement signed between the TPLF and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in Pretoria, South Africa, on 23 October 2022, to end the Tigray war.

80 Interview with a museum guide at the Tigray Martyrs' Memorial Center, 25 December 2026.

Figure 9. Federal soldiers in Tigray museum



Instruments of 'torture', ENDF members timesheet and inscription at the walls of the museum by members of the ENDF. (Source: Authors)

authored by the political and emotional demands of the present. At the same time, it shows the temporal layering of memory where older memories are overshadowed by recent violence and where war itself becomes a powerful producer of memory.

A comparable pattern of memory politics emerges from the Anole Martyrs Memorial Monument and Cultural Center in Oromia. This is a controversial historical episode where parties interpret it in different ways while for victims it represents lived experience.[81] The focus here is not to examine the dispute itself, but instead how memories have been framed and constructed. For official narrative purposes, the Oromia Tourism Bureau describes the Anole monument as designed to reflect the resistance against the armies of Emperor Menelik II from Arsi Oromos. It says that '*Harmaaf harka muraa Anolee*' ('*The mutilation of hand and breast at Anole*') was built in order to inform future generations of this inhumane episode and should serve as a

81 For detailed accounts of the Anoole incident see Abbas H. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880–1974: The Case of the Arsi Oromo*, Leiden: Brill, 2014; Mulualem Daba Tola, 'The Pro and Counter Narratives of Anoole Memorial Monument in the Ethiopian Polity', *Advances in Sciences and Humanities* 3/5 (2017): 43–49.

research center of Oromo history and culture.[82] The monument therefore functions as a symbol of resistance and of atrocities commuted during the imperial expansion and has served as a mobilizing symbol of Oromo nationalism.[83] For some, it is also interpreted as part of the state formation project under Emperor Menelik II.[84] During the Oromo youth protests (2014–2018), however, Anole was not central to the movement because anger was directed primarily at the TPLF-led centre.

After 2018, research participants indicate that there was limited interest from the regional administration in highlighting Anole and similar memorials. Two explanations were given: First, the regional leadership promoted an approach focused on looking forward rather than victimhood narratives. Second, some respondents suggested that with Oromo elites now present at the centre, questions of grievances became politically sensitive, raising the issue of who would claim responsibility and who would respond. Some asked what purpose the government would have for mentioning these monuments when they hold power at the centre.[85]

Despite shifts in official narration, local respondents emphasized that victimhood memory remains embedded within the community. They argued that while government narratives may change over time, memory at the grassroots level persists and can re-emerge when political conditions allow unless it is addressed through reconciliation or transitional justice.[86] Two historical monuments illustrate how Anole memory has been activated. During the Oro-Mara alliance[87] period, monuments such as Anole were invoked to criticize the regime at the centre. Later, when Emperor Menelik II's statue was prominently displayed during the 2019 inauguration of Unity Park, Oromo politicians visited Anole to present a counter-narrative.

82 Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau, 'Anole Oromo Martyrs' Memorial Monument'. Accessed 9 September 2026, https://www.oromiatourism.gov.et/index.php/tour/historical-attractions/historical-heritages/anole-oromo-martyrs-memorial-monument.

83 Mulualem Daba Tola, 'The Political and Historical Representation of Statues in Three Ethiopian Consecutive Regimes (1889–Present)', *Social Sciences* 6/2 (2017): 35–44.

84 The controversy surrounding the memory of Anoole is rooted in the broader contestation over the history of Menelik's southern expansion and the incorporation of Arsi areas into the Ethiopian state. As Ayele Tariku shows, the debate is often structured around two competing interpretations: the 'reunification' perspective and the 'colonial' perspective. Beyond these general divides, the controversy also concerns the role of regional elites, the nature of the conflict, and the scale and form of violence. See Ayele Tariku, 'The Annole Monument and Negus Menelik's Expedition towards Arsi: A Bibliographic Essay', *The Ethiopian Journal of Social Sciences* 4/1 (2018): 1–21. See also 'Dr Abiy Ahmed and Elders Spoke to Amhara Mass Media Agency', *Borkena*, 6 November 2017. Accessed 9 September 2026, https://borkena.com/2017/11/06/dr-abiy-ahmed-amhara-mass-media-agency/.

85 Interview with elders from Anole and academics from Arsi University, Assela, 29 December 2025.

86 Interview with an academic at Arsi University and elders from Anole, 28 December 2025.

87 Referring to the tactical alliance of Oromo and Amhara elites during the period around the political transition that led to Abiy Ahmed's emergence as prime minister in 2018.

Oromo opposition politician Jawar Mohammed posted the following on social media during that visit:

Har'a Obbo Leenco Lataa, Abbaa Gadaa duraanii Bayyanaa Sanbatooo, qabsaa'aa ABO gameessaa Atoomsaa Tumsaa waliin taanee siidaa wareegamtoota Aanolee daaw'anne. Minilik Oromoofi saboota cunqurfamoof malllattoo tokkummaafi itti boonan osoo hin taane bineensa hamaa akka ta'e yaadachuuf Aanole goruun gahaadha.[88]

(Today, together with Obbo Lencho Leta, former Abba Gadda Bayana Sanbato and the OLF fighter Atomsa Tumsa, we visited the Anole Martyrs' Monument. Visiting Anole shows that Menelik was not a symbol of pride and unity for the Oromo and other oppressed peoples but rather a brutal beast.)

These episodes demonstrate two related dynamics. First, memorial sites such as Anole retain real significance for local communities even when they are officially silenced. Second, the more the centre elevates certain historical figures in its narrative, the greater the likelihood that counter-narratives will be activated at the local level.

In addition to these developments, post-2018 Oromia has witnessed notable changes in its memory landscapes. One shift concerns the previously dominant nationalist framing that emphasized exclusion from the Ethiopian state. This is gradually being reconstructed with increasing recognition that Oromo elites were also part of state formation. Likewise, the earlier emphasis on victimhood has begun to evolve with some acknowledging Oromo participation in the historical process rather than viewing the past solely through the lens of oppression. References to Oromo actions in earlier centuries are used to challenge narratives of moral exceptionalism rather than to relativize suffering.

This shift has fostered a pragmatic approach that recognizes that Oromo elites would likely take similar action if they were in a position of central authority. This reflection does not seek to justify repression or exclusion but rather to highlight the power dynamics and state structure related to the 'Arat Kilo syndrome' that is explained below. The presence of regional elites at the centre can generate a 'benefit of the doubt dynamic' where critical issues may be interpreted not as deliberate exclusion by the centre but as matters of pragmatic limitation. This is a fundamental aspect of the functioning of power and the state in Ethiopia. Thus, symbolic representation at the centre can reduce immediate confrontation even when substantive issues remain unresolved. Another dynamic of the post-2018 period is the regional government's attempt to move away from the politics of victimhood toward a more forward-looking and progressive narrative. Memory politics are shaped by these approaches.

88 Jawar Mohammed, Facebook page, 10 October 2019.

Moreover, there is a noticeable tendency toward a more moderate approach in memorial construction. The monument of Haile Fida in Nekemte and those at schools and regional institutions illustrate the post-2018 approach to memorialization. The inscription beneath the Haile Fida monument is selected to emphasize Ethiopian unity and nation-building: 'Students and scholars; join farmers and workers, learn from them, teach them back, together let's build Ethiopia. – Dr. Haile Fida.' The Oromia government's monuments have the stated aim of ensuring that 'today's generation knows the history of the past Oromo heroes and intellectuals.'[89]

These monuments represent figures from different strands of Oromo history. Some are associated with Oromo nationalism, others with religious and intellectual movements and more moderate elites. Some were controversial. The monuments are generally built near the figures' birthplaces or the locations with which they are most closely associated. Accordingly, monuments have been constructed for Haile Fida in West Arsi Zone; Qees Gudina Tumsa in East Hararghe Zone; Dr. Sheikh Mohmammed Rashad in East Shewa; Magarsa Badasa (Abune Petros) in Guji Zone; Laureate Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin (Qawweessaa) at the Oromia Regional Leadership Academy; General Tadesse Birru in West Wollega; Onesimos Nasib (Abba Gammachis/Hiikaa) in West Shewa; Sheikh Bakri Sapalo in Borana Zone; and General Waqo Gutu in Bunno Bedele Zone. Respondents described this as a new approach of the regional government to construct a shared regional memory by integrating diverse heroes into common symbolic frameworks across Oromia.

In conclusion, the post-2018 memory sites in Oromia show a moderate approach toward the centre and bring together diverse Oromo figures to create shared regional narratives that contain different local memories.

In Tigray, after the outbreak of the war, memory politics significantly changed and is encapsulated within the discourse of the 'Tigray genocide'. The war was taken as further evidence of the historical tension in the relationship between the centre and Tigray. Parties that were affiliated with less radical political positions have changed their ideology and incorporated the right to self-determination in their manifesto. The war has also brought a new phase for TPLF, which has dominated memory politics in the region. Elites questioned TPLF's hegemony, but all respondents agreed that nothing parallels the atrocities committed during the war and say it has profoundly altered the social, religious and political fabric of relations with the centre.

In SRS, centre-periphery dynamics, despite improvements since 2018, retain familiar contours in decision-making and implementation. Research participants perceive Abiy's nominally unitary Prosperity Party as a move away from a decentralized federal system and regional autonomy. One said: 'In the past, the regional party could decide to remove the president, but now it is

89 OBN Afaan Oromo Facebook page, 9 July 2022. Accessed 9 November 2026, https://www.facebook.com/OBNCYBERMEDIA/posts/pfbid02PkakWS72c8G4k4DF7LZja2APU91SUP1YYfRY9k24BsSxr4YuPQVZTge3UFBCE6dgl.

PP at the centre.'[90] There is also a lack of systematic and organized effort to shape memory politics, evident in the process of naming public spaces. Although the current administration has recently started to mark formal commemoration days, no regulations or processes for naming public spaces were reported by interviewees.[91]

Across the three cases, a pattern emerges: A shift in regime, centre-periphery relations and regional-federal power dynamics reshape memory landscapes both at the centre and the local level. This supports the claim in memory studies that public memory is not a fixed inheritance from the past but something that is reorganized in response to changing power relations.[92] Monuments and museums became sites where historical narratives are selectively revived, reconstructed, silenced or contested. Thus, the three case studies show that memory politics is shaped not only by identity-based claims over history but also by changing access to state power, the ideology of regimes and shifting relations between the centre and regional actors.

90 Interview, head of an SRS opposition party, Jigjiga, 25 December 2025.

91 Interview, regional government official, Jigjiga, 17 January 2026.

92 Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 1992; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 1995; Dereje Feyissa, 'Epistemological Debates'. See also Ann Rigney, 'Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change', *Studies on National Movements* 9 (2022): 7–41.

Intra-regional memory contestations

While memory politics in Ethiopia is often framed through dynamics between the centre and the regions, the findings show that it is equally shaped by intra-regional contestation. Across Oromia, SRS and Tigray, disputes reveal that memory is neither unified nor internally coherent but is instead negotiated across local histories, political alignments and social divisions.

One important dimension of the intra-regional contestation relates to the variations in historical experiences and modes of incorporation into the Ethiopian state. In Oromia, there are significant intra-regional disputes regarding memory and monument politics, particularly shaped by different experiences of the imperial expansion.[93] Some areas negotiated and accommodated the central state with limited confrontation, while others resisted and experienced violent incorporation. As a result, local memory narratives vary across the region, and the heroes of one locality may not be recognized in the same way elsewhere. This divergence is reflected in contemporary contestation. As one research participant summarized, 'when the youth in Harar removed *Ras* Mekonen's monument in Harar, other elites were constructing *Ras* Mekonen's monument in Finfinnee at the Adwa museum.'[94]

Figure 10. Mekonnen monuments



Ras Mekonnen statue toppled in Harar (Source: @etagngehu on X.com) and Ras Mekonnen monument in Adwa Museum (Source: RVI).

93 Brian J. Yates, *The Other Abyssinians: The Northern Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia*, 1855–1913, Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2020, provides a good reading on the role of Oromo elites.

94 Interview with a political and conflict analyst, Addis Ababa, 25 December 2026.

This illustrates how the same historical figure may be interpreted differently depending on locality and the political context. In some areas, *Ras* Mekonnen is remembered as a conqueror as shown in the toppled monument; in others, he is incorporated into a national narrative. Similarly, figures who collaborated with the centre during the imperial expansion may be considered traitors in one locality while viewed more favourably in another. A respondent noted that it remains inconsistent to treat Gobena Dache and Kumsa Moroda differently, as both submitted to the centre, yet their commemorative treatment varies across the region. This may imply contestation between oral memory and political actors' memories and the approach of the elites in the centre toward the issue. Thus, vernacular and elite memories are not internally cohesive or bounded; rather they are fluid and porous, converging, negotiating and at times confronting each other.

These divergences are closely tied to the shifting political power and changing relations between the centre and regions which shape how memory is institutionalized. Political actors' contestation is closely linked to power dynamics at the centre and to differences in historical exposure to central authority. During the 27 years of EPRDF rule, regional autonomy and expressions of nationalism were tightly managed. The approach to memory in the centre influenced regional memorialization practices. Actors regarded as ethnonationalists or associated with ethnonationalist movements were largely excluded from the region's memory landscape, consistent with the EPRDF's approach where 'narrow nationalism' was portrayed as a threat to the federal system.

Post-2018 developments altered the dynamics of memory politics in the region. For example, Kumsa Moreda's commemoration moved from a museum space to the centre of Nekemte town, and controversial elites began to occupy more prominent positions in public memorialization.[95] Research participants said that the current approach to monument construction and memory politics from the centre emphasizes moderates with the purpose of discrediting rejectionist narratives and highlighting the role of Oromo elites in state-building.[96] It is important to note the symbolic stick (*Aba Gada* Stick) in the Kumsa monument, where he is not associated with the *Gadaa* system, rather departing from it, and the moderate inscription beneath the Haile Fida monument (Figure 11). These elements reflect an effort to culturally frame the monuments and to emphasize the moderate aspects.

The centre's current approach to memory and memorization can also be discerned through public intellectual discussions. Some recent academic writings have begun to engage with and take moderate positions on some of the contested histories in the region, moving away from

95 According to research participants, there is no street or school named after Kumsa Moreda by the regional government in the region.

96 Interview with academics from Nekemte, Arsi and Selale Universities, January 2026.

Figure 11. Nekemte monuments



Relocated Kumsa Moreda's monument Infront of the museum and Dr Haile Fida monument in Nekemte (Source: Authors)

condemnatory narratives. Dechasa's three books on Ras Gobena, Emperor Menelik and Oromia[97] can be read within this moderate intellectual trend that has been developing since 2018.[98] Some research participants described these academic writings as contributing to or being encouraged by a broader government effort to promote more moderate interpretation of memory.

A comparable dynamic of selective inclusion and exclusion, though structured differently, can be observed in SRS. One key driver of memories in the region is related to the selective exclusion of certain struggles and recognition of others, a pattern evident across successive regimes. Under the monarchy and Derg, local struggles and memories were excluded from the official

97 Dr Dechasa, author of *Gobena: Military and Political Life* (1810–1881), recounts a conversation with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, which he cited as the starting point for writing his book ከ'ኦሮሚያ ሪፐብሊክ' እስከ 'ኩሻዊት ኢትዮጵያ' የታሪክ ትርጉምና የፖሊቲካ ዓላማ (1965–2010), in which the prime minister reportedly stated, 'No one questioned my identity until I came to this office', and asked, 'Why is it that when an Oromo rises from being a hero of his own people to a hero of all Ethiopians, he is said to have betrayed his people? Where does this accusation of betrayal come from? It needs research.' In response, Dr Dechasa claims he wrote the book to answer this question, and at its end concludes that 'Oromo never betray their children and are proud when they rise to become Ethiopian heroes', attributing the accusation to the OLF's 'colonial thesis' interpretation of the Ethiopian state. Dechasa's three new books were written after 2018.

98 In his work on Emperor Menelik, Dechasa portrays him as neither an angel nor Satan, but a king like other kings. Similarly, in his book on Ras Gobena, he gives attention to Gobena's role in the formation of the Ethiopian state rather than reducing him simply to a collaborator or a traitor. In *From 'Oromia Republic' to 'Cushitic Ethiopia'*, he also criticizes the OLF and similar political actors for what he considers their mistaken embrace of secessionist ideology. Instead, he emphasizes the historical role, ambition and contribution of the Oromo within Ethiopia. See Dechasa Abebe, ነበና: ወታደራዊ እና ፖለቲካዊ ሕይወት, Tsehay Publishers, 2020; Dechasa Abebe, ከ 'ኦሮሚያ ሪፐብሊክ' እስከ 'ኩሻዊት ኢትዮጵያ' የታሪክ ትርጉምና የፖሊቲካ ዓላማ (1965–2010), Addis Ababa: Samket Printing, 2016; Dechasa Abebe, ዳግማዊ ሚኒሊክ እና የታሪክ ፖለቲካ, 2017.

memory.[99] Under EPRDF, however, the region's memory landscape began acknowledging local histories, albeit selectively. Official memory selectively mirrored the oral memory only when these memories align with EPRDF's interests.

Following the 2018 change of administration, the memory landscape has expanded to capture previously silenced and contested histories into official memory. Numerous local elders, politicians, leaders and members of armed struggles such as ONLF, WSLF and Nasrullah have been commemorated through public space naming. Yet these efforts reveal internal cleavages structured by clan affiliation and political alignment. Nearly all the naming of public spaces in Somali bear a clan imprint,[100] with public spaces often named after prominent local figures. Sultan Sheik Hassan Yabarree of Yabaree for Jigjiga referral hospital, Cali Dhadac of Bartire for Jigjiga Health Science College, Ugas Miraad Leyli of Tolomoge sub-clan of Ogaden for Gode Airport, and Sheikh Ibrahim Abdalla of Tolomoge sub-clan for Gode General Hospital are cases in point.

In this sense, memory politics in SRS does not only challenge the dominant 'Great Tradition' but also reveals an intra-Somali dynamic around memory politics, political allegiance and the meaning of a shared past. Many of those commemorated are not seen as heroes by everyone; rather their status is sometimes contingent on clan and sub-clan narratives. Someone remembered as a hero by a group may be remembered by others within the region as having fought against them.[101] This is evident in contested figures such as Sayyid Mohammed Abdille. While memorialized in Somali for his resistance struggle, the sub-clans he raided within the Ogaden, as well as significant segment of the Isaaq, remember him for the violent campaigns he waged against them.[102]

Similar patterns of contested memory can be observed among the figures who worked with Ethiopian regimes in the region. This is evident in the commemoration of Ugas Mashkoke who worked with the imperial regime in Gode; Sheikh Hassan Yabarree and Sultan Abdilahi Bade who worked, respectively, with the imperial and Derg regimes in Jigjiga; and more recently Abdimajid Hussien, Cali Dhadac and others who held positions under EPRDF. These figures are now commemorated in public spaces, yet many people in the region remember them as collaborators with an oppressive order. At the same time, memory politics in the region is deeply gendered: women's contribution to the resistance movement and their role in wider

99 Rony Emmenegger, 'Unsettling Sovereignty: Violence, Myths and the Politics of History in the Ethiopian Somali Metropolis', *Political Geography* 90 (2021): 102476.

100 One exception is the naming of Gode Polytechnic College after Sultan Abdilahi Bade of the Jidwak clan, despite the local population being largely Ogaden. This decision was influenced by the fact that Sultan Abdilahi Bade, who was serving as governor of Hararghe Province at the time, was mysteriously assassinated in Gode in 1977.

101 Interview, civil society organization member, Jigjiga, 27 December 2025.

102 Rashid Sheikh Cabdillaahi, *Qaran iyo Qabiil: Laba Aan Is Qaban*, Hargeisa: Ponte Invisibile/Redsea-Online, 2018.

community development is often silenced in official memory. This is rooted in patriarchal social structures that are partly reinforced by the region's political order.

While Oromia and SRS illustrate how local variation and social structure shape memory contestation, intra-regional dynamics in Tigray highlight ideological boundaries and their transformation. One area of contestation within Tigray concerns commemoration of the imperial past. TPLF's struggle was framed around class struggle and national oppression as core principles, resulting in limited accommodation of imperial history regardless of the ethnic origin of historical figures.[103] As one respondent stated, 'history remembers kings and not soldiers but in Tigray history remembers soldiers, not kings', referring to TPLF's class-based orientation. According to this view, figures such as *Ras* Alula were promoted over emperors like Yohannes IV.[104]

The boundaries were not static, however. While TPLF maintained power at the centre, elements of the 'Great Tradition' were largely silenced in the region. After the 2012 death of Meles and growing issue of legitimacy at the centre, there was a gradual re-emergence of interest in earlier historical figures and a questioning of TPLF's memory framework. This shift both opened space for vernacular memory and contributed to Tigrayan nationalism, with figures such as Emperor Yohannes IV increasingly invoked as symbols of regional pride.[105] Practical disputes emerged around monument construction of heroes of the imperial time, such as Emperor Yohannes IV in Mekelle and both Alula and Yohannes in Abiy Addi.[106]

While some respondents mentioned religious objections to the construction of Yohannes's monument,[107] a significant number of research participants believed that resistance stemmed from the ideological orientation of TPLF rather than religious concerns. A respondent from Mekelle City Administration the fate of the initiative was unclear as there had been no

103 John Young, *Peasant Revolution*, 82.

104 Interview with a historian and academician at Mekelle University, 15 December 2025. Haggai Erlich even went on to say: 'Meles Zenawi saw Alula as a son of a Tigrayan peasant who defied the nobility and enabled Tigray to lead Ethiopia in a most formative period.' He called the force which liberated Addis Ababa from Mengistu 'the Ras Alula division'. See Haggai Erlich, 'Ras Alula and Tigray: Revisiting Modern History', *Ityopis: Northeast African Journal of Social Science*, Extra Issue II: Regional History and Culture of the Horn (2016): 307–30, 307.

105 Research participants indicated that Emperor Yohannes IV was promoted not primarily as an imperial figure but as a symbol of Tigrayan nationalism. He was associated with the return of political power to Mekelle after centuries and with the idea of a greater Tigray (sometimes referred to as *Midre Tsion*), reinforcing contemporary nationalist aspirations.

106 Former students of Hatse Yohannes School in Mekelle organized an initiative to construct a monument to Emperor Yohannes at Romanat, in the centre of the city. During the process, compensation was paid and land was allocated for the project. The regional tourism office even placed a pillar marking the beginning of the monument's construction. However, according to research participants, the pillar was dismantled the following day, and no formal explanation was provided.

107 Interview with a former member of Abiy Addi town council, Mekelle, 19 December 2025.

explanation.[108] Some questioned whether the issue would have arisen had it occurred after 2015 when TPLF's legitimacy at the centre was increasingly contested. In Abiy Addi, a similar contestation occurred, and the dispute was eventually resolved by constructing a monument that included Ras Alula, Emperor Yohannes IV and Amora, a hero of the armed struggle. Even in this compromise, respondents noted that Emperor Yohannes IV remained the central point of controversy. Several regional politicians argued that the party's historical narrative in effect restricted Tigray's history to the post-1974 period only.

A related controversy involved the construction of Alula school and museum in Abiy Addi. According to a former member of the city council:

> *Upon the initiation of residents and volunteers, there was a plan to build a school, without an agreed name, and a museum for Yohannes, under a committee named after Alula. Due to budget issues, the museum plan was cancelled, and the committee continued. After some years, the school construction was finalized and set for inauguration coincidentally on the day when the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi passed away. As a result, the inauguration was postponed to November 2013, and later the city council decided to name it Meles Preparatory School. This created contestation among residents and became a debatable concern.*[109]

Respondents agreed that the issue was not opposition to naming a school after Meles *per se,* but rather the shift from the original initiative associated with Alula.[110] They argued that if the intention had been to build a school in Meles's name, it could have been done independently. It is officially known as Meles Preparatory School, but it is still commonly referred to as Alula school.

Intra-regional disputes in the three regions demonstrate that memory politics operates through layered and intersecting cleavages: local historical experiences, shifting centre–region relations, ideological projects and internal divisions such as clan and political affiliation. Rather than expressing coherent regional memory or fixed positions, actors move between them, selectively incorporating, reworking or silencing different episodes of the past as they reposition themselves vis-à-vis federal authority, regional rivals and vernacular constituencies.

These dynamics reveal fragmented and negotiated selective memory regimes in which official projects of commemoration never fully determine how the past is remembered; oral and unofficial memories remain diverse, porous and often contested, and continue to inform everyday understandings of figures and events even when they sit uneasily within state-sanctioned narratives. In this way, the intra-regional patterns traced in Oromia, SRS and Tigray show memory politics as a field of ongoing struggle over legitimacy and historical representation, rather than as a settled opposition between a 'Great Tradition' and regional rejectionism.

108 Interview with Mekelle city administration leadership, 20 December 2025.

109 Interview with a former cabinet member of Abiy Addi, Abiy Addi, 3 January 2026.

110 Interview with the cabinet member cited above; interview with Abiy Addi city administration leadership, Abiy Addi, 3 January 2026.

Conclusion

Memory politics in Ethiopia is structured by power dynamics at the centre whereas oral memories remain embedded within local communities. These memories may be silenced, muted, instrumentalized or strategically reactivated depending on power shifts, yet they are not erased; victims' memories remain socially stored and politically available.

Across the various regimes, memory does not simply reflect a stable inheritance but operates as a selective memory regime: political, ideological and institutional processes through which certain pasts are revived, authorized and ritualized, while others are marginalized. Regime-based change in memorials, renaming of public spaces and shifts in the emphasis of particular incidents—from Adwa to 5 May, from Ginbot 20 (28 May) in the Somali region to 23 January, or from the suppression to the accommodation of imperial figures in Tigray—illustrate how successive governments reorder what is celebrated, normalized or silenced to fit changing projects of authority and legitimacy.

Yet regime change is not the only driver of memory transformation. Shifts in proximity to the centre alter how regions construct their own narrative and how elites position their memories. When regional elites gain influence at the centre, there is a tendency toward moderation, silencing confrontational or victimhood narratives and reconfiguring rejectionist memories into more integrative stories, while loss of power can trigger renewed emphasis on exclusion and marginalization. This pattern, which we refer to as the 'Arat Kilo syndrome', reveals memory politics as a barometer of centre-periphery relations, where the closer the elite feels to the centre, the less confrontational official memory tends to be, and vice versa.

Within this dynamic, actors at both centre and region operate as memory entrepreneurs, moving as their position in the political field changes, rather than occupying fixed ideological camps. Entangled memories of resistance and collaboration show that commemorative practices routinely juxtapose figures of armed struggle with those who worked with oppressive regimes. This underlines that the core question is less whether actors reject or restore a singular tradition, and more who gains the power to select, reframe or revisit the past.

Post-2018 developments in SRS and Oromia further demonstrate how selective memory regimes reconfigure local landscapes of commemoration. In SRS, the restoration of the former flag and anthem, the expansion of naming and renaming practices, as well as days marked to commemorate local historical experiences have brought local narratives to the fore. These changes remain structured by clan, political alignment and, to some extent, continuing centre–region contestations over memories such as the Karamara and Obole commemorations. In Oromia, the shifting visibility of narratives like Anole, the reordering of monument politics and the move from museum-based commemoration to central town spaces indicate how

moderation and confrontation are recalibrated as Oromo elites move closer to or further from central authority.

In Tigray, the gradual re-emergence of imperial figures and disputes over monuments and school naming highlight how ideological boundaries around class struggle, nationalism and imperial heritage have been selectively relaxed or reinforced in response to changing legitimacy at the centre. Across the cases, actors at the centre and in the regions alike elevate some features of the past while muting others, shifting emphasis as their position in the political field changes.

The findings also reveal that institutional and legal attempts to manage memory contestations are intermittent and unstable. Proclamations regulating flags, ad hoc responses to monument disputes and region-specific renaming initiatives have sought to domesticate memory struggles, yet there are no durable institutional pathways for addressing contested histories through structured dialogue, reconciliation mechanisms or shared historical institutions. As a result, contestations over monuments, flags, anthems and commemorations are negotiated through politics rather than through inclusive processes, producing cyclical reactivation in which historical grievance remains fertile ground for future mobilization.

The oscillation between silencing and mobilization reflects deeper uncertainties about belonging, recognition and ownership of the state, and points to the limits of viewing memory solely as an interpretive record of the past; instead, it operates as a materially embedded political practice through which authority and inclusion are renegotiated.

Policy implications

Ultimately, the research suggests that democratizing the centre and democratizing memories would likely pluralize memory politics in more inclusive and constructive ways. Where political authority is broader, more representative, and institutionally mediated, memory contestation is less likely to remain monopolized by specific group and more likely to be opened up to diverse voices, interpretations, and historical experiences. In such a context, memory becomes not a tool of exclusion or silencing, but a public arena in which competing narratives can be acknowledged, negotiated and politically recognized. The findings of this research suggest the following policy recommendations:

Democratize the political centre and pluralize memories, making official memory more inclusive

The case studies reveal that official memory in Ethiopia is highly centralized. Whosoever controls the centre (regional or federal) largely determines which histories are commemorated, silenced or institutionalized. Democratizing the centre through plural political representation, and inclusive symbolic practices would reduce the perception that memory belongs to a specific ethnic or political group. Plural access to narrative production reduces the cyclical recalibration of memory positions whenever power shifts. These can be addressed through inclusive cultural

and education policy as well solving contentious memories through national dialogue and expanding memories symbolic practices that are publicly acknowledged specially by the centre. It could also be addressed through regular revision of history text books to include new evidence and interpretations widely agreed by historians.

Develop consensual legal and policy frameworks on naming and memorialization

The absence of comprehensive legal or policy or institutional frameworks allows naming, renaming or construction of monuments and memorial centres to reflect shifting political alignments rather than structured deliberation. Regional and federal governments should formalize public space governance through legislation or clear policy frameworks that institutionalize consultation processes, ensure documentation and transparency, create review mechanisms for contested memorials and prevent political arbitrariness.

Close historical victimhood through structured dialogue and transitional justice

Silencing memory when elites control the centre or regional power does not resolve historical grievances. Local memory persists at the community level and re-emerge during the legitimacy crisis or is utilized as a mobilizing factor. Structured and inclusive political dialogue among elites is necessary to address conflicting historical interpretations. At the community level, reconciliation initiatives, acknowledgment of past misdeeds and transitional justice mechanisms should address unresolved historical injustices particularly those linked to war and mass violence. Breaking the memory–conflict cycle requires institutional acknowledgment rather than temporary political moderation.

Decouple the centre from ethnic affiliation

The tendency to equate control of the centre with ethnic affiliation intensified memory recalibration in the regions. Symbolic and structural neutrality in national commemorations and inclusive representation in federal memory projects can reduce the interpretation of the centre as affiliating to one group. When the centre is perceived as an institutional neutral umpire, rather than ethnically captured, memory politics become less reactive and less mobilizational.

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