The Revivalist-Restorationist Motives of the Great Tradition

Mnemonic intent and actor dynamics in Ethiopia

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November 2026

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The Revivalist-Restorationist Motives of the Great Tradition: Mnemonic intent and actor dynamics in Ethiopia

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The Ethiopia Peace Research Facility

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF), as part of its Knowledge for Peace (K4P) series on 'The Politics of Memory and Memorialization'. Shimelis Bonsa Gulema served as advisor to this series. The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute and funded by the UK government.

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Design/Layout

Sue MacDonald, SMD Design

Cover image

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Summary

Tracing the genealogy and current state of revivalism and restorationism of the Great Tradition (GT) within the memory landscape in Ethiopia reveals dynamic mnemonic strategies and vocabularies that evolve across successive historical regimes and various state and non-state mnemonic agents.

Contemporary memory politics in Ethiopia is contested through the current administration's selective revival of the GT. Utilizing frameworks like *Manserarat* ('revival') and *Abwara Maragef* ('dusting off'), state-led nationalizing efforts physically reshape collective memory through transformative urban initiatives in the capital, such as the Adwa Victory Memorial Museum, the National Palace renovation and large-scale corridor developments, alongside the rhetoric of 'nautical revival' for sea access. These are memory projects that spark tensions among groups.

While influential social institutions adapt sacred rituals to meet contemporary existential anxieties, as seen through the lens of the 'invention of tradition' in the emergence of *Ye'Aelafat Zimare* ('Melody of the Myriads') within the revivalist verve of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, modern pop culture, including music and social media, also play their role. They serve as an arena where the state's retrospective projections find mnemonic convergence with popular yearnings for the return of a glorious past, manifested in mantras such as *Tilik Neberen, Tilik Enhonalen!* ('We were great, we shall be!'), which has also been adopted by the government. Regional actors also engage in mnemonic re-engineering, selectively reviving elements of the GT while practising strategic amnesia regarding traumatic relations with previous regimes.

The Ethiopian memory landscape is characterized by mnemonic complexity. Distinct historical layers, including thirteenth century divine legitimacy (*Kibre Negest*), nineteenth century state sovereignty narratives and twentieth and twenty-first century unionist and ethno-nationalist motives, merge into a single messy memory battle. The competing and polarized memory blocs are not monoliths, however, but are shaped by intra-group and inter-group tensions, negotiations and contestations over interpretations of the past and present and competing visions of the future.

Successive regimes have gravitated toward the GT. Though they take power rejecting it as hegemonic and oppressive, the pragmatic demands of governing an ancient polity appear to force a turn to embracing, reviving and appropriating its symbolic repertoire. Consequently, the state's engagement with the GT is often an ambivalent entanglement, concurrently delegitimizing the tradition to signal reform while drawing upon it to bolster state continuity and sovereignty.

An ingrained revivalist *habitus* appears to exist within the DNA of the Ethiopian state such that regimes consistently leverage the spatial and symbolic grandeur of historical Ethiopia for survival and pragmatism rather than ideological consistency.

Navigating divergent and contested memories in Ethiopia requires a transition toward mnemonic convergence and national individuation, allowing the nation to mature by integrating its historical shadow (both grandeur and traumatic grievances) to forge a resilient, pluralistic future. Moving toward national maturity requires a radical re-reading of the GT, transitioning it from a monument or target for destruction into an evolving, multi-vocal and accommodative framework of negotiation.

Outgrowing current memory battles necessitates shifting from the zero-sum logic of ethnic victimhood versus victorhood toward a negotiated national consciousness where historical pride and discomfort are recognized as inseparable aspects of the national experience. Thus governing divergent memories requires moving away from state-led monopolies and cycles of erasure toward institutionalizing a deliberative mnemonic project that embraces both a fragmented present and a complex, traumatic past.



Introduction

Making sense of revivalism and the revivalist actors

Tilik Neberen, Tilik Enhonalen! ('We were great, we shall be!')

The political landscape in contemporary Ethiopia is defined by contestations over historical interpretation. Collective memory serves as a key weapon utilized by elites and ethnic groups to assert identity, contesting over the historically dominant Great Tradition (GT)[1] and to reshape social and political realities. As a recent Peace Research Facility (PRF) study[2] notes, the actual events of the past appear to be less significant than how they are remembered, transforming, for example, public events and constitutional rights into memory battlegrounds for competing narratives.

For decades, the major contestations[3] in the memory politics in Ethiopia seems to unfold between the Pan-Ethiopian bloc, which views itself as the bastion of the GT and the ethno-nationalist camp, which seeks to subvert those narratives. This study contends, however, that these categories should not be viewed as rigid, internally cohesive binaries; rather, both are composed of diverse and fluid strands that coalesce or fragment in response to shifting alignments.

Moreover, far from being static, each group is defined by a constant state of intra-group divergence and convergence, where counter-narratives appear to mirror the very logic of the dominant systems one aims to dismantle. Thus, the relationship between these camps is characterized not just by confrontation per se, but by a complex entanglement of negotiation and compromise, which in turn makes the boundaries fluid between remembering and

1 The GT refers to the long-standing narrative of Ethiopia as a unified, ancient, sovereign and largely Christian civilization, rooted in a shared yet contested historical consciousness. See Christopher Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', *Annales d'Ethiopie* 18 (2002).

2 Dalaya Ashenafi Esayiyas, 'Politicizing Public Events in Addis Ababa', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025.

3 See Dereje Feyissa, 'Epistemological debates and ideological fault-lines in Ethiopia', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023; Tegbaru Yared, 'Layers of traditions: Politics of memory and polarisation in contemporary Ethiopia', Monograph 210, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, November 2023; Sara Marzagora, 'History in twentieth-century Ethiopia: The "Great Tradition" and the counter-histories of national failure', *Journal of African History* 58/3 (2017).

forgetting. Still a third force, namely the state,[4] seems to adopt a pragmatic and moderationist[5] stance, aiming to appropriate the GT, while continuing to deploy ethno-nationalist discourses, signs and symbols. Furthermore, this appropriation is not the exclusive domain of the state. Instead, various regional elites, religious institutions and emerging mnemonic entrepreneurs appear to be appropriating the GT to negotiate their own legitimacy within these changing dynamics. As such, one may assume that in contemporary Ethiopia the battle over memory appears to centre on various political actors' inevitable 'urge to remember',[6] on the one hand and the imperative to forget, on the other. Between these two poles, however, there is a complex process of reconfiguration, where memory is not merely retrieved or erased but selectively reconstructed. Thus, before any narrative is established, it appears to undergo a process of reinterpretation that identifies which element is worth reviving and which aspect should be reframed to fit to current political exigencies.

Since the politics of memory, therefore, is essentially mediated by selective remembering and strategic forgetting, no single camp can be deemed purely revivalist or rejectionist. Specifically, while the rejectionist group seeks to restore its own marginalized past, it often does so by appropriating and adopting the very logic, frameworks, signs and symbols of the GT it opposes. This creates a paradox where the counter-narrative, despite its liberating intent, replicates the structural exclusionary patterns of the dominant narrative. Eventually, through the tools of the system it seeks to subvert, it risks ending up just as oppressive and disempowering as the hegemony it jettisons, creating a pattern across regimes in Ethiopia.

Similarly, the revivalist-restorationist camp engages in its own form of rejectionism when it vehemently opposes the Counter History[7] and its memorializations and narratives that the former deems revisionist. More recently, the complexity of memory politics in Ethiopia appears to be compounded even more as political discourses and alliances evolve, leading to an apparent ideological shift within groups, such as those once defined as Pan-Ethiopian. To wit, a seemingly revivalist-restorationist group, notably the Amhara diaspora and the Amhara

4 In Ethiopian political history, the boundary between the ruling party and the state is heavily blurred and the ruling party often uses formal state institutions as a vehicle to operationalize its ideological agenda and memory politics.

5 Tegbaru, 'Layers of traditions'.

6 Judy Barsalou and Victoria Baxter, 'The Urge to Remember: The Role of Memorials in Social Reconstruction and Transitional Justice', Stabilization and Reconstruction Series No. 5, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2007; Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

7 For an extensive discussion of the GT and Counter History, see Dereje, 'Epistemological debates'.

Fano, appear to have recently[8] adopted an ethno-nationalist position.[9] The rejectionist camp is also not a monolith. A case in point is the internal diversity and divergent interpretations that have emerged in the celebration of the *Irrecha* Oromo thanksgiving festival in recent years.[10] Therefore, the case study duly noted that while memory politics in Ethiopia appears to project a semblance of homogeneity for political ends, the blocs discussed above remain mere tentative categorizations. Practically, the reality is defined by deep complexity and multiplicity, where internal divergence and fluid intergroup relationships agitate and destabilize the apparently coherent narratives that political projects seek to maintain.

On the other hand, in this study, the revivalist-restorationist framework encompasses actors such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the Amhara/urban elites.[11] Yet these entities, as noted above, are regarded not as monolithic or rigid collectives, but rather as internally diverse entities shaped by evolving alignments. The urban elite, in particular, comprises a heterogeneous mix of intellectuals, professionals and artists as well as the mercantile class whose identities are often defined more by a trans-ethnic, cosmopolitan Ethiopianism than by narrow ethno-nationalism.

Moreover, within this group, there is significant intra-group divergence between seemingly traditionalists and younger, neoliberal generation that envisions a modernized greatness through such mantra as *Tilik neberen, Tilik enhonalen*[12] ('We were great; we shall be'), which itself is subject to varied interpretations. This is because the greatness of the past—or 'Glorious Past' (*Tilik neberen*)—often associated with imperial or ecclesiastical glory, may not necessarily equate to the 'greatness' envisioned for the future—or 'glorious future' (*Tilik enhonalen*)—which may mean economic growth and state strength instead of or in addition to the restoration

8 Although it has gained momentum in recent years, Amhara nationalism is not a recent phenomenon. It dates back at least to 1991, driven by 'political othering and resultant security threats'. See Yared Debebe and Tezera Tazebew, 'Amhara: Emerging Ethnic Nationalism and Insurgency', in *Ethiopia's Insecurity Complex: Protest, Transition and War*, eds. Yonas Tariku and Fana Gebresenbet, London: Routledge, 2025, 144–164.

9 Mastewal Bitew, 'Transnational Amhara nationalism: from discourse transformation to placemaking in Ethiopia', *African Identities* (2025); Yared and Tezera, 'Amhara'.

10 Dalaya, 'Politicizing Public Events'.

11 While the 'urban elite' includes non-Amhara elites who denounce ethno-nationalism, it is also important not to regard the Amhara–urban elite, or the Amhara National Regional State itself, as a monolithic bloc. There is intense internal dissensus, marked by a tension between traditional pan-Ethiopianism and an emergent Amhara nationalism that appears to mirror the ethno-nationalist frameworks it once opposed, not to mention the historical sub-regional identities (Wollo, Gondar, Gojjam, Shewa). Thus, the 'revivalist-restorationist' perspective is not unified but a fluid and often contradictory set of political alignments. Messay Kebede, 'Fano and the New Amhara Nationalism: A Review', *Ethio-Panorama*, 17 September 2024.

12 This evocation of the GT gained more traction with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's rise, though it began earlier, notably with the naming of the dam on the Abay River as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which linked a development narrative of 'defeating poverty' with the revival of Ethiopia's cherished historical greatness.

historical grandeur. In view of this, the support for the GT can be less of a rigid ideological commitment and more of a fluid consensus, where diverse actors appear to negotiate a shared "Make Ethiopia Great Again" identity to counter the perceived fragmentation of the post-1991 era.

Another complex aspect is that the Amhara revivalist motive appears to be navigating a fundamental tension characterizing modern Ethiopian politics, i.e., the conflict between ethno-nationalism and the legacy of the GT, including that of the EOTC. This dynamic introduces a significant internal complexity regarding the position of Amhara Muslims, for whom the shared history is often viewed through a dual lens of cultural pride and historical victimhood. For instance, the Fano's reification of exclusive Christian iconography, such as the emblem-free flag and cross amulets, may exacerbate this schism.

Still another actor that constitutes a highly influential and often uncompromising segment of the restorationist-revivalist bloc is what Terrence Lyons calls the 'conflict-generated diasporas' which 'are characterized by traumatic memories and important symbolic ties to the homeland'.[13] Especially certain segments[14] of the diaspora[15] who seek to drive the ongoing memory battles from afar appear to push the revivalist and the hitherto Pan-Ethiopian discourse toward explicit Amhara nationalism,[16] further complicating efforts toward consensus or convergence on collective memory.

Therefore, this case study sought to:

- Explore the core dynamics of ideological evolution, institutional or elite (discursive) mobilization, contestations, confrontation as well as the rare currency of convergence regarding memory and memorialization of the Ethiopian GT.

13 Terrence Lyons, 'Conflict-generated diasporas and transnational politics in Ethiopia', *Conflict, Security & Development* 7/4 (2007).

14 There is intense polarization within the Ethiopian diaspora regarding politics at home. For a discussion of the history and evolution of the Ethiopian diaspora's online and offline engagement with socio-political affairs at home, see Shimelis Bonsa Gulema, 'Interrogating Ethiopia: Diaspora, Social Media and Partisan Discourses', in *The Global Ethiopian Diaspora: Migrations, Connections and Belongings*, eds. Shimelis B. Gulema, Hewan Girma and Mulugeta F. Dinbabo, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2024, 279–302.

15 For a discussion of how diaspora Ethiopians, notably in Canada, use contested historical and cultural symbols, such as topography and heritage, to shape and express their identity in a new country, see Nassisse Solomon, 'From "Lega Harar" to Adowa to Haile Selassie: The Evocation of Popular and Contested Symbols of Ethiopian Topography, Culture and History in Self-Representations of Ethiopia and Ethiopians in Canada', in The Global Ethiopian Diaspora: Migrations, Connections and Belongings, eds. Shimelis B. Gulema, Hewan Girma and Mulugeta F. Dinbabo, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2024, 50–79.

16 Mastewal, 'Transnational Amhara nationalism'.

- Analyse how public spaces, historical figures, monuments and various other politically salient symbols of the GT and its narratives are articulated, defended, appropriated, revived or propagated both against the rejectionist counter-memories and vis-à-vis the state's tacit or official governance of the memorialization of the GT since 2018.

This report is organized into five main sections, following this introduction which also sketches the analytical and conceptual framework of the research and includes a methodological note. The empirical analysis starts in the next section, historicizing what is termed as the '*restoration habitus* of the Ethiopian state' and tracing the evolution of the mnemonic strategies across regimes and mnemonic agents. The subsequent sections examine specific thematic arenas of mnemonic contestation and revival, starting with the GT in the *Manserarat* ('revival') and *Abwara Maragef* ('dusting off') discourses of the current administration and the mnemonic agency thereof. This section examines the apparent state-led nationalizing efforts in collective memory, as manifested in the Adwa Victory Memorial Museum, the renovation of the National Palace and broader urban (re)development and historical site restorations, while highlighting the resultant discursive mnemonic tensions. The following section scales this analysis by zeroing in on regional level mnemonic re-engineering through both the strategic amnesia of regional actors and the counter-narratives of local dissident voices. The next section shifts the focus to religious and cultural institutions, analysing the advent of *Ye'Aelafat Zimare* ('Melody of the Myriad') as an invention of tradition within the apparently revivalist verve of the EOTC. The report then synthesizes these threads through the examination of pop culture, the state and points of mnemonic convergence. Finally, the study concludes with a summary of the core arguments, which is followed by some policy suggestions.

Conceptual and analytical framework

As part a broader study examining Ethiopian memory politics, this case adopts the Overton window,[17] a conceptual framework that describes the degree of political acceptability of policies or ideas. Categorizing ideas along a spectrum such as from unthinkable and radical to sensible and popular, the framework shows how the boundaries of discourse shift, allowing a once-marginalized narrative to become an institutionalized norm. This framework is employed as a heuristic device instead of a rigid, six-stage predictive frame to trace how the GT re-emerges from rejection and marginality. Catering instead to the complexities of the Ethiopian memory context, the analysis views memory projects across regimes as a multidirectional and often chaotic process. Accordingly, a narrative may occupy multiple positions simultaneously and across time, appearing popular in one memory camp or intra-group perspectives while remaining radical or contested in another, or even shifting roles within the same group across different political episodes.

17 Developed by Joseph Overton (1960–2003) of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, the Overton window is a theory of socio-political change with a six-stage spectrum running from unthinkable through radical, acceptable, sensible and popular to policy. Joseph G. Lehman, 'An Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibility', Mackinac Center for Public Policy, April 2010.

While, for instance, the post-1974 era is framed as a period when the GT's institutional legitimacy became unthinkable, this did not mean a total erasure of its foundations. The window helps map how the GT narratives survived despite being sidelined as the fundamental principles of the Ethiopian state underwent transformations. Navigating the complexity and messiness of this journey, the study examines how the 'Ethiopia project'[18] composed of imperial legacies and Judeo-Christian 'mythologisation'[19] re-negotiates its position to be rendered as a sensible remedy for national fragmentation and, eventually, claimable within contemporary memory projects and state policy.

The analysis thus traced the mnemonic evolution of the GT through three interrelated dimensions:

- *discursive normalization*: examining how revivalist actors reframe politically stigmatized narratives as sensible responses to national fragmentation;
- *material and spatial interventions*: analysing contests over monuments, public spaces and symbolic renovation as mechanisms for embedding memory directly into lived environments; and
- *strategic agency*: focusing on how political, religious and intellectual elites act as memory entrepreneurs who exploit crises, media visibility and selective compromise to accelerate shifts in public acceptability.

These dimensions were used in the study to interpret memory not as static inheritance but as a politically mobilized project that seeks to redefine what forms of the past are thinkable, respectable and governable in the present and to shape the nation's collective memory and memorialization going forward. This perspective assumes that memory is not only an object used by actors but also a force that sets the boundaries of what actors can achieve. On the one hand, actors engage in the politics of memory, selecting parts of the past to suit their objective. On the other hand, memory also provides the 'social frameworks'[20] for public belief within which a leader cannot simply invent a past that contradicts established narratives. Accordingly, the 'narrative identity',[21] say of the GT, creates a mnemonic playing field that shapes the very actors who try to manipulate or tap into it. The study thus avoids viewing memory as just an object but rather sees it also as a powerful force that shapes what is socio-politically possible in the realm of memory politics.

18 Fana Gebresenbet and Tezera Tazebew, 'Prisoner of the Political Past? Ethnonationalism and the Difficulty of Imagining a Common Future' in *Ethiopia's Insecurity Complex: Protest, Transition and War*, eds. Yonas Tariku and Fana Gebresenbet, London: Routledge, 2025, 17–33.

19 Fana and Tezera, 'Prisoner of the Political Past?', 21.

20 Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

21 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Methodological note

The study employed a qualitative and multiple case study approach to achieve an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of a complex phenomenon. While each case serves as a distinct unit of analysis, collectively the insights address the objectives of the research. Accordingly, the four cases selected were i) the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, a crucial case due to its historical and socio-cultural significance, representing a powerful institutional and religious mnemonic actor; ii) urban elites,[22] individuals with influence over policy development and public discourse; iii) the diaspora,[23] a geographically removed yet politically engaged group whose perspectives and resources shape domestic dynamics and debates; and iv) political actors, both formal and informal.

While the study employs categories such as diaspora and urban elite, it recognizes them not as bounded, cohesive collectives, but as heterogeneous actors characterized by internal diversity. It treats such group as fluid alignments of actors that coalesce or fragment based on political circumstances.

Data was collected from three strategically selected urban sites, each of which offer a distinct but interconnected political and historical context. Bahir Dar, Amhara's capital, provided several reconfigured urban elements of significance to the revivalist-restorationist framework, while Gondar, a historical city, provided a unique perspective on the intersection of history and contemporary development and monument-restoration debates. On the other hand, as a city undergoing rapid change, Addis Ababa offers a crucial perspective in the revivalist memory discourse of the GT.

In each city, research participants were selected through snowball sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with knowledge, influence or direct experience relevant to the research. Accordingly, 19 key informant interviews (15 male and 4 female) and two FGDs were conducted in the three cities. Participants included six key categories: EOTC (affiliates and clergy), activists/influencers, political actors, urban planners/heritage managers, media personalities/journalists and academics. Moreover, a considerable amount of data was generated through extensive digital ethnography from social media platforms and websites that provided insights on public discourse as well as critical data on government communications, officials' remarks and diaspora perspectives.

22 As noted above, the urban elite comprises a heterogeneous mix of intellectuals, professionals, technocrats and the mercantile class, whose identities are often defined more by a trans-ethnic, cosmopolitan Ethiopianism than by narrow provincialism. Within this group, there is significant divergence between seemingly traditionalist members and a younger, neoliberal generation that envisions a modernized greatness through popular mantras such as *Tilik Neberen, Tilik Enhonalen*.

23 This study considered the views of members of the Ethiopian diaspora with diverse political outlooks, including Oromo secessionists, Amhara nationalists, EOTC-affiliated individuals and social media influencers.

The restoration *habitus* of the Ethiopian state and the evolution of mnemonic strategies

Ethiopia's memory landscape can be best understood through the shifting articulations of actors across regimes, each leveraging the Great Tradition (GT) to validate their specific political project. For instance, the EOTC employs the notion of *YeEthiopia Tinsa'e* ('The resurrection of Ethiopia') as a spiritual inevitability rooted in prophetic tradition. Conversely, the Derg used militarized memory, which refashioned the nation's history of heroism into a celebration of the fallen patriot. It transformed the GT, using historical figures such as emperors Tewodros II and Yohannes IV, to construct its Ethiopia project as *YeJegnoch Enat* ('Motherland of Heroes'), which served its revolutionary Marxist-Leninist state.

Following this, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), 'using federalism as tool of mnemonic governance'[24] attempted a strategy of institutionalized amnesia, utilizing the concept of *Hidase* ('Renaissance'). Through anchoring memory in 'deep time', for example the narrative of Lucy, EPRDF sought to construct a developmental state. As Sara Marzagora comments, 'In a reinvention of the GT's ideas of continuity and antiquity, Ethiopia was celebrated as the "birthplace of humanity". After shortening Ethiopian history by a thousand years, the EPRDF lengthened it again by several million years.'[25]

This strategy of anchoring memory in deep time is not attributable only to EPRDF. Rather it is part of the lineage of political imagination that extends back to the Derg era and beyond. While the Derg attempted to erase imperial memory, it did not shy away from emphasizing ancientness and a multi-millennial history of the state to promote national pride within a radical socialist ideology. Thus, EPRDF seems to only build on and (re)appropriate the notion of deep time, transitioning from the Derg's emphasis on a revolutionary-nationalist ancientness to an ethno-federalist yet paleontological narrative that could bridge the gap between Ethiopia's diverse ethno-national identities and shared civilizational continuity.

Today, the Prosperity Party appears to have shifted toward strategic re-appropriation, framing its project as *Manserarat* ('revival'). Notably through the discourse of 'dusting off' neglected treasures of the past, the administration seeks a mnemonic cleansing to reclaim an aesthetically glorious and supposedly unifying foundation. This state-led revival seems to have found a

24 Fana and Tezera, 'Prisoner of the Political Past?', 21.

25 Marzagora, 'History in twentieth-century Ethiopia', 25; Fana and Tezera, 'Prisoner of the Political Past?', 23; Tegbaru, 'Layers of traditions', 27–28.

powerful mnemonic resonance in popular culture, where a nostalgic sentiment of *Tilik Neberen, Tilik Enhonalen* ('We were great; we shall be') transforms complex history into an emotional commodity that fuels a broad restorationist pride. The following table presents the shifting paradigms of Ethiopian statehood and social identity by examining how diverse actors and eras have leveraged the GT to legitimize their political projects.

TABLE 1: Summary of the articulation of the 'Ethiopian Revival' across eras and actors

Actor	Articulation	Foundational Narratives	The Politics of Memory Lens
Imperial Ethiopia & EOTC	Continuity of Solomonic Dynasty & Rise of Ethiopia	Divine anointment, sacred myth, Ethiopian exceptionalism and prophetic tradition	Memory as a divine decree: Resisting secular forgetting by framing Ethiopia's existence as transcending political regimes 'mythologisation model'.[26]
Derg	Motherland of martyred heroes	Patriotic tradition and Marxist-Leninist ideology	Mobilize history to serve a revolutionary state, presumably sacralizing the soil through the fallen patriots.
EPRDF	Renaissance	Scientific tradition (Lucy) and the developmental state	Bypassing the GT (seen as oppressive) by anchoring memory in deep time (pre-history/Lucy) to build a New Ethiopia.
Prosperity Party	Revival	Epistemic ambiguity, 'dusting off' and prosperous renewal	Through discursive acts of 'dusting off', reclaiming the glory of the past as a modern, unifying foundation.
Popular culture	'We were great; we shall be'	Glorious past	Mirroring dominant state narrative and simplifying memory into a nostalgic commodity that fuels collective pride and restorationist sentiments.

In the context of the GT memory politics, loss and the concept of restoration or reunification[27] appear to serve as a historiographical tool that reframes the territorial claim-making.[28] For instance, the southward campaigns by Emperor Menelik II are portrayed as the recovery of lost territories rather than the acquisition of new ones.[29] Beyond an internal justification, the pursuit

26 Fana and Tezera, 'Prisoner of the Political Past?', 21.

27 Messay Kebede, 'Menelik and Southern Ethiopia: Colonialization, Reunification, or Expansion?' *Borkena*, 17 April 2015. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://borkena.com/2015/04/17/menelik-and-southern-ethiopia-colonialization-reunification-or-expansion-messay-kebede-phd/.

28 Christopher Clapham writes that 'the "GT" approach to Ethiopian historiography conceives of the development of the Ethiopian state after 1855 as a kind of restoration of an ancient empire – analogous in its way to the "Solomonic restoration" of the thirteenth century'. Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', 53–54.

29 Achamyeleh Tamiru, 'My perception of and reflection on the state of Ethiopia', *Ethioreference*, 14 May 2019. Accessed 18 February 2026, https://ethioreference.com/archives/17583.

of restoration appears to have informed Ethiopia's external diplomacy. In his correspondence with European leaders, Menelik invoked a providential and historical claim to the restoration of the ancestral territories of his forefathers, including the sea.[30]

In addition, during the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie I, the 1962 annexation of Eritrea was not presented as an expansion, but as a reunion of a territory controlled by Italy, thus a restoration of the empire's territorial integrity. Similarly, despite the revolutionary discontinuity, the Derg maintained this national zeal, framing the defence, for example, of the Ogaden and Eritrea as a non-negotiable duty to the motherland. Under the EPRDF, the revivalism morphed into the Ethiopian Renaissance (*Hidase*), where the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) was presented as a reclaiming of Ethiopia's rights to use the Abay (the Blue Nile River).

Today, the Prosperity Party has synthesized these threads into pursuing the existential goal of access to the sea, not as a new ambition, but as a reclaiming of a historical greatness. By doing so, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed echoes his predecessors. His post on X following the controversial 2024 agreement with Somaliland, 'What can one say except thanking God'[31], echoes Menelik II's invocation of divine intervention for reclaiming 'lost' ancestral territories.

In short, the restoration habitus suggests that the Ethiopian state, regardless of ideological variation across regimes, appears to be tied to view of history where current progress and projected prosperity are validated through the reclamation of a glorious past.[32] The Ethiopian state consistently uses loss and revivalist-restorationist narratives as a quintessential mnemonic element of statecraft. This tendency also speaks to the structural weakness and ambivalence of the post-imperial Ethiopian state.

To wit, while each regime legitimizes its mandate by claiming a clean break from the past, often demonizing the previous regime, the actual habitus of governance reveals a persistent return to

30 Samuel Emaha Tsegai, 'Is Ethiopia indulging an imperialist fantasy for the Red Sea?' *African Arguments*, 13 December 2023. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://africanarguments.org/2023/12/is-ethiopia-indulging-an-imperialist-fantasy-for-the-red-sea/; Menelik II, 'Circular Letter by Emperor Menelek to the Heads of European States in 1891', 10 April 1891, *SomaliTalk.com*. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://www.somalitalk.com/abdirisaq/circular.html.

31 The prime minister also used the same phrase, 'What can one say except thanking God?', in an interview with his social affairs advisor, Daniel Kibret, at Guba, where the GERD is located, upon the dam's completion. He added that, compared with the thousand-year quest to harness the Abay, 'the Red Sea loss, which happened only 30 years ago, is simple and corrigible' (author's translation). **'የኩሰመና ታሪክ ማብቂያ፣ ቆይታ ከጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ (ዶ/ር) ጋር፣ ሕዳሴ'** ('The end of the history of degradation: A moment with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Hidassie, GERD'), interview with Daniel Kibret, YouTube, 1 September 2025, 33:00–35:00. Accessed 24 February 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5Sbz2xPdb4.

32 The past is chosen because it appears to give authenticity to the state. John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993, 38–40.

ancient repertoires. Eventually, the very history that has been rejected remains as an essential source for the state's legitimacy, illustrating a tension where the state is both repelled by and attracted to the GT.

The GT in *manserarat* and 'dusting off' discourse and mnemonic agency

Since 2019, under the Prosperity Party government, there has been a notable shift toward strategic appropriation and a discursive cleaning of history. Through the metaphors of *abwara maragef* ('dusting off'[33]) and *megelet*[34] ('revealing'/'unveiling'), the administration expands the Overton window by, for instance, framing urban development as an act of stewardship that uncovers buried imperial glory by reviving the symbols of the Great Tradition (GT). The rhetoric that the administration employs merits a closer examination. Notably, the language of revealing appears to mirror New Testament imagery (*epiphania*) and that of the vocabulary of the Prosperity Gospel, an ideology that purportedly informs the administration's political and aesthetic framework. As such, through the rhetoric of *Ethiopiawinet*[35] and via the removal of the literal and symbolic dust of the Derg and EPRDF eras, which had left historical sites as 'closed, militarized no-go zones',[36] the government utilizes a theologically coated rhetoric to present historical restoration as a providential unveiling. In this context, the Prosperity Gospel arguably serves as a linguistic bridge, where the act of reopening public spaces is presented as a spiritual and national transformation into a new era of institutional and cultural abundance.

Nevertheless, this approach was met with critiques from both the Amhara, who appeared to be initially content, as well as Oromo and Tigrayan quarters.[37] Whereas these two camps represent the primary ideological poles in the contested memory landscape, other ethnic and regional

33 Mayor Adanech Abebie, speaking at the unveiling of the riverside project, said, 'ገነባነው እንጂ ከጀርባ የነበረው ታሪክ ጥንታዊ ነው። አስማማነው፣ የትላንትናውን መልካምና ጥሩ ነገራችንን፣ ከፍ አርገን፣ አልቀን፣ እሴት ጨምረንበት እንጠቀምበታለን፣ የጎደለውን እንጨምራለን። አፀራ የለበሰውን አፀራውን አናራግፋለን፣ አዳዲሶች ደግሞ በአዲስ አሳቢ፣ እይታችንን ምናባችንን ከፍ አድርገን አይተን እንገነባለን።' Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), 'የአዲስ አበባ ወንዞች ትንሳኤ ክፍል ሁለት' ('The resurrection of Addis Ababa's rivers, part two'), YouTube, 13 January 2026, 09:04–09:27. Accessed 19 January 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8doGSEGM9E.

34 'የኢትዮጵያ ዕሴቶች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ሀብቶች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ዕቅሞች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ክንዶች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ውበቶች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ክብሮች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ከፍታዎች - እየተገለጡ ናቸው። ... የኢትዮጵያ የመገለጥ ዘመን መጥቷል።' Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, message on the occasion of *Timket* (Epiphany), Office of the Prime Minister, 18 January 2026, https://www.pmo.gov.et/statements/.

35 On how the notion of *Ethiopiawinet* was used as a tactical alignment for Oromo and Amhara elites during the protests that led to the 2018 reform, see Fana and Tezera, 'Prisoner of the Political Past?', 26.

36 Melese Kebede Belay and Emmanuel Akwasi Adu-Ampong, 'The state, political trigger events and path creation in tourism destination in Ethiopia', *Tourism Geographies* (2023): 12. DOI:10.1080/14616688.2023.2217537.

37 Fana and Tezera, 'Prisoner of the Political Past?', 27.

groups across the country hold critical stakes in these developments. But for the two camps, the revival of the GT is more often than not viewed with caution, as they navigate the tension between a resurgent national narrative and the continued relevance of their distinct historical and political narratives. For instance, for Amhara intellectuals, diaspora[38] and political elites, who view themselves as the primary inheritors of the GT, the administration's dusting off of heritage is perceived as a political hijacking of historical agency.[39] This resentment seems to be rooted in a shifting political landscape where the wartime alliance between Amhara forces and the federal administration during the conflict with Tigray's forces eventually fractured. A subsequent federal decision to disband regional special forces and the military confrontation that followed in Amhara transformed symbolic disputes into kinetic confrontation.

At its most extreme, the critique toward federal state-led restoration of the GT frames the transformation of such places as the royal palace into a public park as a form of sacrilege, arguing that the state has not only defiled a revered symbol of ancestral sovereignty of its mnemonic sanctity—such as the replacement of the Lion with the Peacock[40]—but also reduced it to a mere place of leisure. Still others, notably diaspora critics, label such grand renovation projects of the administration as vanity[41] or 'vainglory projects'[42] that prioritize image-building over the urgent political–security crises, a sentiment shared by informants in Bahir Dar regarding the corridor development project in the city.[43]

Perhaps predictably, the administration's dusting off of imperial symbols and spaces provoked a fierce counter-critique from hardline Oromo ethno-nationalist groups, who view such act of restoration as a betrayal of the 2018 movement's aspirations.[44] This rejectionist camp with secessionist-leaning in its ideological orientation fiercely rejects the GT. To these actors, the

38 Neamin Zeleke, 'Vanity Over Vision: How Abiy Ahmed's Palace Projects Betray a Starving Nation', *East African Review*, 16 May 2025. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://eastafricanreview.com/2025/05/16/vanity-over-vision-how-abiy-ahmeds-palace-projects-betray-a-starving-nation/.

39 Interview with political science academic, Bahir Dar, 26 December 2025.

40 Asebe Regassa Debelo and Rony Emmenegger, 'The emperor, the lion and the peacock: Monuments and contested state sovereignty in contemporary Ethiopia', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 41/5 (2023).

41 'Prosperity Party Fiscal Policy Puts Vanity Before Essentials', Zehabesha, 1 August 2025. Accessed 10 January 2026, https://zehabesha.com/prosperity-party-fiscal-policy-puts-vanity-before-essentials/.

42 'Ethiopia turned Emperor Menelik's palace into a tourist attraction park', *Borkena*, 10 October 2019. Accessed 13 February 2026, https://borkena.com/2019/10/10/unity-park-ethiopia-emperor-meneliks-palace-tourist-attraction/.

43 A focus group discussion (FGD) held in Bahir Dar on 26 December 2025, involving journalists, an activist, academics and public servants, mirrors this sentiment. While participants generally did not oppose the restoration and urban development projects themselves, they viewed them either as distractions from the ongoing security crisis or as misaligned priorities that ignore the severe security and economic hardships facing the Amhara region. Tegbaru, 'Layers of traditions', 31–32. Tegbaru, 'Layers of traditions', 31–32.

44 Tegbaru, 'Layers of traditions', 31–32.

restoration of the National Palace and the recasting of statues of Emperor Menelik II and Emperor Haile Selassie I are part of a morphing into a 'neo-*neftenga*'[45] state,[46] which they associate with historical subjugation. The turn toward the GT led such radical critics to accuse Prime Minister Abiy of abandoning his Oromo roots in favour of a unitarist, Amharized identity. In their view, Abiy's use of memory is not an inclusive revival, but a strategic retreat into a nostalgic pan-Ethiopianism that ignores the grievances of the Oromo and other marginalized groups by 'glorifying Amhara nationalism disguised as Ethiopianism'.[47] It is worth noting, however, that this kind of reaction is not universal as there are moderate groupings within the Oromo nationalist camp that appear to negotiate with or support the project. Such divergence once again underscores that the Oromo collective is not a monolithic bloc, but one characterized by intra-group diversity.

Not only the transformation of the palace into a park, but the restoration of Fasil Ghebbi and the rapid corridor development projects in Addis Ababa and in regional capitals are met with competing visions of heritage and political legitimacy. For certain segment of the diaspora, for instance, these projects represent a mnemonic assault on Ethiopia's living history. No sooner did renovation work begin in Gondar than critics expressed outrage over the whitening of the seventeenth century castles, questioning the use of modern lime mortar as an 'ahistorical' renovation.[48] Such a nominally technical complaint is in fact inseparable from the political and religious fallout that has defined the relationship between the Amhara regional interests, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and Prosperity Party since 2023.

In view of this, memory acts as both a political instrument as well as an agent. While, for example, the state utilizes urban redevelopment to rewrite the national narrative, Fasil Ghebbi changes became a symbol of a perceived existential threat within the shifting alliances that have transformed heritage sites into contested battlefields over identity and survival.

Parallel to this, the corridor development projects are denounced as 'bulldozer modernization'.[49] Diaspora activists highlight the demolition of historic neighbourhoods, arguing that the state is cleansing the city by destroying the very communities and vernacular architecture that

45 Asafa Jalata, 'Abiy's regime is a modern version of the Ethiopian empire-state', *Ethiopia Insight*, 25 April 2022. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2022/04/25/abiys-regime-is-a-modern-version-of-the-ethiopian-empire-state/.

46 Mekonnen Tesfaye, 'The Political Economy of the Emerging Neo-Neftegna State in Ethiopia', *Tigrai Online*, 18 July 2020. Accessed 19 February 2026, https://www.tigraionline.com/articles/emerging-neftegna-state.html.

47 Asafa, 'Abiy's regime'.

48 Sisay Sahlu, 'Restoration or Erasure? The debate over Fasilides castle and Ethiopia's urban identity', *The Reporter*, 1 February 2025. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/43540/.

49 *Addis Insight,* an online outlet, ran a sarcastic headline, 'Gazanchis', likening the demolition in Kazanchis to bombarded Gaza. 'Gazanchis: The Gentrification of Addis Ababa Disguised as Urban Renewal', *Addis Insight*, 7 February 2025. Accessed 21 January 2026, https://addisinsight.net/2025/02/07/gazanchis-the-gentrification-of-addis-ababa-disguised-as-urban-renewal/.

constitute the living memory of the city. To these critics, the project is an elitist facelift that alienates residents in favour of a state-sponsored aesthetic. Moreover, they point out that the government is not just changing the physical appearance, but also upsetting the socio-economic status quo, building top-down legitimacy through state-led urban beautification. According to a research participant, the 'urban redevelopment project or the restoration initiatives involving historical heritages is all about reconstructing the urban landscape and the country at large in the administration's own idealized image'.[50] Moreover, 'beyond aesthetics', another interviewee argues, 'the project disenfranchises specific groups, uprooting them from historical neighbourhoods and social networks. Through such displacement the state facilitates a predatory transfer of prime land and properties to state-favoured elites and wealthy developers under the guise of modernization.'[51]

The interpretations show that the state's handling of competing memories in urban spaces operates in a complex environment. The government, on the one hand, must defend its narrative against rejectionist counter-memories that view the GT as a source of oppressive hegemony. On the other hand, it seeks to harness the mnemonic power found in popular culture to frame its Ethiopia as a revived state that embraces an imperfect past. This calls to mind Richard Rorty's remark on the two faces of the history of the United States:

> [...] America has never been a morally pure country. There has been a history of extreme violence and the projection of democratic ideals. But if one focuses exclusively on the intense shame of past (and current) horrors then there is no possibility of encouraging ordinary citizens to work for reform ... to persuade and mobilize citizens [...] remind the country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of. ... tell inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation's past–episodes and figures to which the country should remain true.[52]

In his 9 December 2025 speech[53] on the twentieth Nations and Nationalities Day in Hosanna, capital of Central Ethiopia Region, Prime Minister Abiy aimed at bridging Ethiopia's fractured historical narratives. The address can also be read as a direct rebuttal to the infamous position attributed to former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi that the Axum Obelisk holds no relevance to the Wolayta people. While the Meles-era narrative provincialized history as ethnic property,

50 Interview with political science professor, Bahir Dar, 26 December 2025.

51 Interview with urban planning expert, Addis Ababa, 8 January 2026.

52 Richard Rorty, Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, 3–4.

53 Office of the Prime Minister, 'ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ በ20ኛው የብሔር ብሔረሰቦች ቀን ላይ ያደረጉት ንግግር' ('Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's speech on the 20th Nations and Nationalities Day'), YouTube, 9 December 2025. Accessed 18 January 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrt3pX-dGoQ.

Abiy appears to have introduced a model of reciprocal psychological ownership, asserting that 'the Axum Obelisk is the history of the Hadiya' and 'Fasil Castle is their wealth'.[54]

On the other hand, the prime minister's remarks and the urban modernization projects suggest that the administration seeks to nationalize vernacular heritages, including those that represent the GT. There is an attempt at mnemonic integration, transitioning heritages from symbols of specific ethnic identity into a shared national asset. By doing so, the federal government appears to be, on the one hand, 'reasserting central authority'[55] through reclaiming national icons from vernacularization by regional actors. On the other hand, this counters the increasing tendency to parochialize shared heritages, exemplified by the regional framing of the Axum Obelisks in Tigray or the Gondar castles and Lalibela in Amhara.

It is worth noting that the extent of parochialization of symbols is further evidenced by the possessive claiming of the otherwise supposed pan-Ethiopian figures, such as 'Saint Yared, whom some now provincially frame as a Tigrayan saint'.[56] This act of mnemonic intervention by the state strips such figures and symbols of their narrow, provincial associations to instead reposition them as the foundations of a national memory project. This, however, is not an unprecedented shift as such as it appears to pursue a trajectory of nationalization of historical icons, most notably during the Derg era.

One can argue that the transition from EPRDF's notion of *Hidase* to Prosperity Party's discourse of *maneserarat* ('revival') signals an incremental continuity in the Overton window of the GT. In another speech[57] regarding the restoration of Fasil Ghebbi, Prime Minister Abiy implies a strategic shift from 'preservation' to 'rebirth', moving beyond conservation to the resurrection of a political narrative. Characterizing the site as '*yerekese werk*' ('devalued gold'), due presumably to historical neglect, the prime minister justified federal intervention as a necessary corrective to past carelessness. Here the rhetoric of rupture, which portrays previous regimes as reckless and historical sites as abandoned, serves to create a vacuum that the incumbent fills through the appropriation of the GT for new ideological agenda. Thus, the use of *dagim teweled'e* ('reborn') instead of *tetegene* ('repaired'), in memory studies, is a clear instance of instrumentalizing heritage, i.e., using the seventeenth century Gondarine glory to anchor a modern vision of Ethiopianism that seeks to bypass recent ethnic fragmentation. This rebirth rhetoric mirrors the symbolic framework of the GERD and its reservoir, which Abiy recently inaugurated and

54 'የአክሱም ሃውልት ለሀዲያው ታሪኩ፤ ... ፋሲል ቤተ መንግስት ለሀዲያው ሀብቱ' ('The Axum Obelisk is the history of the Hadiya; ... Fasil Castle is their wealth'). Office of the Prime Minister, 'ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ በ20ኛው የብሔር ብሔረሰቦች ቀን ላይ ያደረጉት ንግግር'.

55 Interview with academic, Bahir Dar, 24 December 2025.

56 Interview with EOTC priest, Bahir Dar, 25 December 2025.

57 Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, 'ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ (ዶ/ር) በጎንደር ያስተላለፉት መልዕክት' ('Message delivered by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (PhD) in Gondar'), in EBC, 'ዳግም የተወለደው የፋሲል ጊቢ' ('Fasil Ghebbi reborn'), YouTube, 7 November 2025. Accessed 8 January 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP8RplnPa2Q.

dubbed '*nigat*' ('dawn'), framing state-led restoration as a 'generational victory' that awakened the nation from a 'deep sleep' of poverty.

As noted above, the administration is leveraging a discourse of dusting off and revelation or uncovering to frame its urban corridor developments as a restoration of Ethiopia's hitherto hidden gems or 'devalued gold'[58] that have been neglected. While the balance of what has been preserved versus what has been demolished is hard to assess, the administration's recasting of the GT appears to be a response to scholarly warnings that urban heritage was being sacrificed to growth.[59] In response, the state seems to position itself as a champion of rediscovering a buried glory. For instance, in his speech at Fasil Ghebbi, the prime minister critiqued a 'wicked obsession'[60] with not giving due credit and value to what we already possess, arguing that the country's poverty is a product of failing to follow the 'footsteps of our fathers' who built such structures. Consequently, projects in Addis Ababa's Piassa or Gondar are not presented as mere modernizations. The restoration discourse is framed as an essential act of reckoning with the country's glorious yet painful past.

Evidently, the prime minister's rhetoric emphasizes that recognizing the greatness of past leaders is the prerequisite for adding 'one's own brick'[61] to the national project. Through dusting off sites like Fasil Ghebbi and integrating them into modern corridors with standardized lighting and green plazas, the administration bypasses the entanglements of contemporary ethnic politics in favour of a civilizational continuity. Yet, this pivot divided the Oromo constituency, sparking a shift from liberation politics to a governing narrative such as that while pragmatists embrace the state's aesthetic as a sign of Oromo-led hegemony, others nationalists such as Asafa Jalata condemn[62] the restoration of imperial symbols as a surrender to what Yadessa terms the 'Menelik Syndrome'.[63] This phenomenon represents a 'selective revival of an idealized imperial past as a solution to present crises', designed to 'elevate symbols of unity, strength and state consolidation while downplaying the coercive foundations on which that unity was built.'[64]

58 Abiy, 'ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ (ዶ/ር) በጎንደር ያስተላለፉት መልዕክት', delivered at the official unveiling of the restored and renovated Fasil Ghebbi.

59 Seble Samuel and Biruk Terrefe, 'Can Addis Ababa stop its architectural gems being hidden under high-rises?' *The Guardian*, 10 February 2021. Accessed 15 February 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/10/can-addis-ababa-stop-its-architectural-gems-being-hidden-under-high-rises.

60 'ፋሲል በእጃችን ስለሆነ የረከሰ ወርቅ ነው። ብንዞር ብንዞር በቀላሉ የማናገኘው፣ እኛ በእጃችን ያለ የማርከስ ከፉ አባዜ ስላለብን የረከሰ ታላቅ ወርቅ ነው።' Abiy, 'ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ (ዶ/ር) በጎንደር ያስተላለፉት መልዕክት'.

61 Abiy, 'ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አሕመድ (ዶ/ር) በጎንደር ያስተላለፉት መልዕክት'.

62 Asafa, 'Abiy's regime'.

63 Yadessa defines the 'Menelik Syndrome' as 'a political and psychological attachment to an idealized imperial past, particularly one that overlooks its coercive foundations. It is not simply admiration for history; it is the selective remembrance of history'. Yadessa Guma, 'Ethiopia Forward to the Past: The Politics of Nostalgia and the "Menelik Syndrome"', Oromia Today, 28 April 2026. Accessed 5 May 2026, https://oromia.today/ethiopia-forward-to-the-past-the-politics-of-nostalgia-and-the-menelik-syndrome/.

64 Yadessa, 'Ethiopia Forward to the Past'.

He argues that framing these restorations as civilizational milestones, the administration utilizes nostalgia as a political lens to shape national identity, a move that Yadessa warns may, paradoxically, 'intensify fragmentation rather than resolve it'.[65]

Figure 1. A wall in Gondar with a name of Dejach Gebrye, a confidant of Emperor Tewodros II (Photo: Assefa Alemu).



On the other hand, beyond the physical renovations and the invocation of Ethiopia's glorious past, the politics of memory relies on what scholars term 'mnemonic entrepreneurship',[66] i.e., the active effort of framing these state projects as a tangible commitment by the current administration to return to national greatness. In this regard, the government's strategy of instrumental restorationism appears to have found its most vocal echoes within the intellectual circles of the diaspora. One can find a notable case in the writings of Professor Al Mariam, whose platform[67] arguably serves as a primary bridge between Western political tropes and the Ethiopian GT. Through the adoption of the 'Make Ethiopia Great Again' (MEGA) slogan, he does not just borrow a populist acronym. He re-contextualizes the Abiy administration's urban and heritage projects and the popular 'We were great, we shall be' mantra[68] as a fulfilment of Ethiopia's historic destiny. In this narrative, sites like Unity Park[69] are transformed from imperial symbols of autocratic power into a 'City Upon a Hill'[70] that belongs to all citizens.

65 Yadessa, 'Ethiopia Forward to the Past'.

66 According to Martin, mnemonic entrepreneurs 'include translators, people and institutions that intervene in discursive positions and, in so doing, determine what is to be remembered and forgotten'. Jocelyn S. Martin, 'Mnemonic entrepreneurship and trans(articu)lation of the Philippine national anthem', in The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Memory, eds. Sharon Deane-Cox and Anneleen Spiessens, London: Routledge, 2022, 138–154.

67 Al Mariam, almariam.com, https://almariam.com/.

68 On the occasion of the 130th anniversary of the Victory of Adwa, while this study was underway, the Office of the Prime Minister released a message officially adopting this popular revivalist mantra in the form '**ታላቅ የነበርን፤ ይበልጥም ታላቅ እንሆናለን**!' ('We were great; we shall be even greater!'). Office of the Prime Minister, '**ከዐድዋ ተራሮች እስከ ጉባ፤ ዐድዋ በልኩ ሲዘከር**!' ('From the mountains of Adwa to Guba: Adwa commemorated as it deserves!'), 2 March 2026, via Tikvah Ethiopia.

69 Al Mariam, 'Unity Park Addis Ababa: The Story of All of Us in the City Upon the Hill', almariam.com, 3 February 2020, https://almariam.com/2020/02/03/unity-park-addis-ababa-the-story-of-all-of-us-in-the-city-upon-the-hill/.

70 Al Mariam, 'Unity Park Addis Ababa'.

Furthermore, the administration is attempting to synchronize imperial memory with modern geopolitical strategy through shifting the national narrative from a 30-year[71] acceptance of being landlocked back to (i.e., Aksumite and imperial) memories of the Red Sea to which the GT seeks to connect Ethiopia.[72] The access to the sea narrative taps into a deep-seated historical wound, especially within the Pan-Ethiopianist bloc, which frames sea access as necessary to secure a prosperous future. In this context, the prime minister's recent[73] remarks on the lack of dialogue culture in Ethiopia, including regarding those who oppose his vision of gaining maritime access, highlights the dissonance of those who claim a right to Ethiopia's lost coastlines but oppose the state's current efforts to secure them. His remarks suggest that his government and his critics converge[74] on the goal but not on the method of achieving it.[75]

While the 'nautical revival'[76] discourse, according to pro-government voices, has already undergone a significant transformation within the Overton window, evolving from a 'don't ask' topic under the EPRDF regime to a key 'generational question'[77] and national priority, there are critical voices[78] that view the government's focus on it as a strategic distraction, designed to obscure internal instability and the erosion of regional agency. Still others[79] critique the quest

71 Institute of Foreign Affairs, 'PM Abiy: Red Sea Access Lost in 30 Years of War – Won't Take 30 More to Reclaim it', 29 October 2025. Accessed 21 February 2026, https://www.ifa.gov.et/2025/10/29/PM-Abiy-Red-Sea-Acce/.

72 Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', 48.

73 አንዳንድ ፖለቲከኞች ነን የሚሉ ሰዎች ... የአሁኑ የቀይ ባሕር ጥያቄ ትክክል አይደለም፤ እኛ ስንመጣ ግን እንጠይቃለን ይላሉ' ('Some who claim to be politicians ... say that the current Red Sea question is inappropriate; however, they claim they will pursue the matter once they come to power', author's translation). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, responding in a question-and-answer session with academics on the seventy-fifth anniversary of Addis Ababa University. Office of the Prime Minister, 'የምሁራን ሚና ለሀገር ብልጽግና - ክፍል ሁለት' ('The role of academics in national prosperity, part two'), YouTube, 5 January 2026, 34:16–34:21. Accessed 21 February 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JUwBIh5IrQ.

74 Indeed, the government's access-to-the-sea discourse appears to have pulled disparate political groups, who may otherwise be at odds over other political issues, into what seems to be a common memory field centred on a glorious, seafaring past.

75 Habte H., 'Ethiopia Needs Access to the Sea – But should and could Never be the Abiy Way', Borkena, 5 September 2025. Accessed 21 February 2026, https://borkena.com/2025/09/05/ethiopia-needs-access-to-the-sea-but-should-and-could-never-be-the-abiy-way/.

76 Anteneh Getachew, 'Ethiopia's Nautical Revival: A Journey for Shared Vision', Institute of Foreign Affairs, 20 January 2026. Accessed 15 February 2026, https://www.ifa.gov.et/2026/01/20/ethiopias-nautical-revival-a-journey-for-shared-vision/.

77 Biruk Hailu, 'From "Don't Ask" to "A Generational Question": Ethiopia's Push for Sea Access', EBC, 22 August 2025. Accessed 19 January 2026, https://www.ebc.et/english/Home/NewsDetails?NewsId=854.

78 Mengistu Musie, 'The Abiy Ahmed Propaganda and the Question of a Port: A Historical and Political Reflection', Borkena, 29 October 2025. Accessed 21 February 2026, https://borkena.com/2025/10/29/the-abiy-ahmed-propaganda-and-the-question-of-a-port-a-historical-and-political-reflection/.

79 Yohannes Woldemariam, 'Ethiopia's Imperial Ambitions Are Making the Horn of Africa Chronically Dangerous', Democracy in Africa. Accessed 21 February 2026, https://democracyinafrica.org/ethiopias-imperial-ambitions-are-making-the-horn-of-africa-chronically-dangerous/.

as expansionist. This is despite the fact that in his addresses to the African Union and in a pre-Ramadan message in Arabic, Prime Minister Abiy emphasized that Ethiopia's pursuit of sea access is a 'vital existential necessity' for Ethiopia's 130 million people, not 'an expansionist intention'.[80]

Simply put, the government appears to be attempting to synchronize popular historical nostalgia with contemporary geopolitical strategizing, transforming state-led restoration into a narrative of national destiny. As a bold rebranding of GT symbols forces a mnemonic reintegration between rejectionist and Pan-Ethiopianist blocs, the state's audacious quest for access to the sea is increasingly winning over some of its detractors. The efforts seem to be gradually forcing a consensus on the objective of regaining a coastal foothold, leaving the legitimacy of the mnemonic agent and the mechanisms of restitution up for debate.

The recent urban and memorial initiatives, most notably the renovation of the National Palace and the expansive redevelopment of the capital, appears to represent a nationalization of the GT as a collective memory. While these government-led projects have a semblance of democratization, on the grounds that they open historically closed spaces and arguably monopolized narratives, incorporating a more diverse array of figures, a closer examination suggests a rather deeper shift toward the nationalization of collective memory. Through the integration of peripheral figures and even historically controversial ones[81] into the national pantheon, the state appears to be dismantling the perceived monopoly of victory long held by the highland centre. According to informants, however, this approach instead functions to selectively co-opt the GT into a state-sanctioned nationalist project. Building on the analysis of recent studies[82] that view the Adwa Victory Memorial Museum as a tool for crafting new narratives of collective victory, the participants in the current research highlight a subtle but deep instrumentalization of the site through its physical design.

In their recent study, Fana and Tezera note the inclusion of grandfathers' names to apparently emphasize Oromo ancestry among the twelve war generals. Research participants' insights in the current study suggest that this inclusion is paired with a visual homogenization of the statues. A history and heritage scholar[83] from Gondar observed that by rendering Emperor Menelik II at a

80 'Ethiopia's premier says "no expansionist intentions" in pursuit of sea access', Anadolu Agency, 16 February 2026. Accessed 21 February 2026, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/ethiopia-s-premier-says-no-expansionist-intentions-in-pursuit-of-sea-access/3831231.

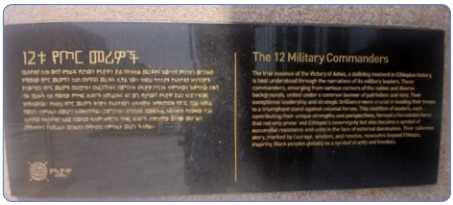
81 The inclusion of Emperor Menelik, Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam and Meles Zenawi is a bold decision by the Abiy administration in view of the tradition of politics of obliteration in Ethiopia by previous regimes.

82 For an extensive discussion of the contestations over the celebration of the Adwa Victory and the diverse perspectives on the Adwa Victory Memorial Museum, see Dalaya, 'Politicizing Public Events'. Fana and Tezera, 'Prisoner of the Political Past?'.

83 'ታሪኩን እንደገና (revise) ሲያደርጉት ግን የጦር መሪዎቹን ሚና ዝቅ የማድረግ ወይም የማመጣጠን (አቻ የማድረግ) ነገር ይታያል። ለምሳሌ እነ ደጃዝማች ባልቻ አባ ነፍሶን እና ዳግማዊ አፄ ምኒልክን እኩል አድርጎ የማቅረብ ሥራ ይሠራል።' Interview with historian and heritage conservationist, Gondar, 8 January 2026.

scale equal to his subordinates, the museum appears to perform a symbolic downsizing of his historical stature. This aesthetic trimming effectively flattens the imperial hierarchy, rebranding a victory historically centred on the emperor as well as the role of the EOTC into a decentralized, modern administrative narrative that prioritizes ethnic parity over historical precedence. This aligns with Abiy's recent address at Addis Ababa University's seventy-fifth anniversary where he remarked that hierarchical labelling for Ethiopians has no place in today's Ethiopia.[84]

Figure 2: A plaque on the gate of Adwa Memorial Museum about 'The 12 Military Commanders' (Photo: Author)



Furthermore, the Adwa Victory Memorial Museum in Addis Ababa marks an apparently deliberate shift in Ethiopia's commemorative landscape, moving away from a traditional narrative centred on Emperor Menelik II toward a more inclusive history. Focusing on the '12 Military Commanders', the state-led project appears to frame the 1896 victory not as the achievement of a single monarch or king, but as the result of a 'coalition of leaders' who hail from 'various corners of the nation and diverse backgrounds' (Figure 2). Recent PRF research[85] argues that while traditional Adwa narratives glorify Menelik at the expense of Oromo contributions, the 2018 appointment of the first Oromo prime minister has empowered the community to reclaim their history and due role in the victory.

The plaque makes the case that the 'true essence of the victory' is best understood through these varied narratives, emphasizing that this diverse group 'united under a common banner of patriotism and duty'. Still through a state-led restoration of the GT, the memorial appears to have transformed Adwa from a monarchical triumph into a presumably more inclusive national monument. Through the presentation of the strategic acumen of these commanders as a symbol of unity, the state appears to emphasize the diverse ethnic and regional contributions to the victory, most notable of which is a conspicuous reintegrating the Oromo agency into the Adwa narrative. In so doing, while the state appears to project a more expansive and inclusive historical cast, it seems to have made a selective expansion centring on specific identities that were purportedly sidelined. Such state-sanctioned version of unity may, however, still obscure as much as it reveals the essence and potential of Adwa as a truly unifying object of memory in Ethiopia.

Moreover, while appreciative of the long-overdue monumentalization of the victory of Adwa, study participants also pointed to the museum's strategic placement, which, they argue, reflects 'a deliberate neutralization of a contested space'.[86] Indeed, occupying 3.3 hectares of land

84 Office of the Prime Minister, 'የምሁራን ሚና ለሀገር ብልጽግና - ክፍል ሁለት', from 1:20:59.

85 Dalaya, 'Politicizing Public Events', 19.

86 Interview with academic, Addis Ababa, 5 January 2026.

immediately adjacent to the iconic equestrian statue of Menelik II and St. George's Cathedral, spaces of political tension in recent years,[87] the massive scale of the new construction means it dwarfs these older landmarks while also creating an ecosystem of heritage sites between the church, the equestrian statue and the new museum, presumably underpinned by the notion of *medemer* ('synergy'). Participants, however, view this as a sanitization strategy in that by physically overshadowing the original symbols of the imperial era, which were sites of conflict and contestation, the administration arguably mutes their previous potency and associations. In this sense, the museum does not merely fill the silence of the EPRDF era, but actively reconfigures the urban landscape by subordinating old icons to a new state-sanctioned collective narrative, on the one hand and by elevating peripheral figures to the centre, on the other.

Both of these strategies still represent a state-managed memory, not a negotiated one that seeks to transcend the friction over the past. Yet such state-management of memory should not be mistaken for a monolithic project. Rather it is the reflection of a state where power is not dispersed among competing actors and the inclusion or omission of the national memory project is neither the result of contestation nor consensus. Thus, any claim that the memory configuration of the Adwa Victory Memorial Museum presents a neutral or democratic space only conceals the need for a more consensual national memory project.

87 Dalaya, 'Politicizing Public Events'.

Regional mnemonic (re-)engineering

Revival of the GT and strategic amnesia by regional actors

While the instrumentalization of memory has almost always been the character of the Ethiopian state, the post-2018 period appears to have particularly seen a more localized and aggressive form of selective forgetting and corrective memorialization in various parts of Ethiopia, notably more so in Amhara. Needless to say, as the politics of memory is defined as much by what is deleted as what is highlighted, this is most evident in the strategic decoupling of monuments, memorialization and symbols from their original contexts to apparently unload, so to speak, the 'weight of the past'[88] with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). For instance, by renaming from "Martyrs' Memorials" into "People's Memorials" (Figure 3), the Amhara region engages in a form of strategic amnesia that would enable 'distanciation from the "other"'.[89] Although interrupted due to the northern war and subsequent conflict in the region, Amhara conducted a public poll to change its regional flag,[90] which carries a shameful memory of subservience for the Amhara National Democratic Movement elites in their pre-2018 relations with the TPLF. One of the driving reasons for the change reads:

> As the current flag in use in the Amhara National Regional State fails to represent the historical, political, social and economic values of the region's people, it is necessary to revise it and prepare one that represents the people and government of the Region.[91]

Such manoeuvres, while in the case of the museum largely preserving the physical infrastructure of memory, embody a mnemonic act of correcting past associations, stripping the sites and symbols of their TPLF/EPRDF-era connotations. In addition, the psychological impact of such a shifting memory landscape is captured in yet another object of memorialization, namely, the 'psychology of the raised rifle'. As noted in a previous study,[92] the transformation of a

88 Fana and Tezera, 'Prisoner of the Political Past?', 20.

89 Fana and Tezera, 'Prisoner of the Political Past?', 20.

90 Amhara Media Corporation, 'የአማራ ክልል መንግሥት የሕዝቡን ሁለንተናዊ ማንነት የሚወክል ሰንደቅ ዓላማ እንዲኖር በቀረቡ የማሻሻያ ሐሳቦች ላይ አስተያየት እንዲሰጥ ጠየቀ' ('Amhara regional government calls for comments on proposed amendments for a flag representing the people's comprehensive identity'), Facebook, 3 September 2021. Accessed 10 January 2026, https://web.facebook.com/100064438011044/posts/1624778817697106/.

91 'አሁን በሥራ ላይ የሚገኘው የአማራ ብሔራዊ ክልላዊ መንግሥት ሰንደቅ ዓላማ የክልሉን ሕዝብ ታሪካዊ፣ ፖለቲካዊ፣ ማኅበራዊና ኢኮኖሚያዊ እሴት የማይወክል በመሆኑ ማሻሻልና የክልሉን ሕዝብና መንግሥት የሚወክል ሰንደቅ ዓላማ ማዘጋጀት አስፈላጊ ሆኗል።' Amhara Media Corporation, Facebook post, 3 September 2021.

92 Tegbaru, 'Layers of traditions', 39.

figure of a sorrowful elder into a militant young man signals a shift from the cost of war (martyrdom and sorrow) to the glory of war (heroism and assertiveness). This mobilization of memory for resistance and rebellion has altered the symbolic landscape of the region so much that, as one research participant in Bahir Dar noted, 'It would have been better if the rifle stayed down. As it rose, peace disappeared',[93] suggesting that the symbolic rise of the gun augured the narrowing space for peace in the region. It is important to note that this shift was not a top-down order by the political elite. Rather it represents a convergence and at times collision between vernacular and official memories.

Figure 3: The Amhara People History Memorial Center, Bahir Dar (Photo: Gulilat Menbere)



Particularly in the wake of the 2018 national political developments, the regional administration had minimal agency in the renaming of sub-cities, airports and other public landmarks. According to an academic informant, much of this mnemonic engineering was a grassroots process (sub-city rather than city or regional level decisions[94]) spearheaded by politically active youth, referred to as '*Fano*', who enjoyed broad popular backing. In this context, the regional political leadership had little option other than to respond to these bottom-up pressures. This apparent submission to popular demands also allowed the leadership to prove to the public that they were free from EPRDF hegemony.

As noted, a prime example of this intra-regional dynamic is the corrective measure taken to raise the gun of the previously 'sorrowful' elderly man at the then Martyrs' Memorial. Such a modification to a monument reflects a transition where vernacular demands forced the hands of the elite, who had to accommodate local-level Great Tradition (GT) restorationist motives and maintain their alignment with the federal government, which was keen to restore GT symbols. Paradoxically, as one informant noted, while the leadership was pressured into these changes, the act of 'restoring historical identities on their own turf ultimately provided the region with a newfound [mnemonic] agency'[95] at least in view of the previous regime.

The extent to which these symbolic gains allowed the region to project a more assertive and culturally authentic regional identity remains debatable. That is, the Fano and grassroots actors might have initially successfully engineered, for example, the naming of places, but the physical

93 Conversation with Bajaj driver, Bahir Dar, 25 December 2025.

94 Yilkal Ayalew Workneh, 'Changing Urban Place Names in Post 2018 Amhara National Regional State: The View from Bahir Dar City', LoGov – Local Government and the Changing Urban-Rural Interplay, 2021. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://zenodo.org/record/5718748/files/LoGov_Ethiopia_CR5.1.pdf.

95 'ከዚህ ቀደም ያላደረጉትን፣ በራሳቸው ክልልና ሜዳ ላይ ታሪክ ቀመስ ስሞችንና ማንነቶችን ለስያሜነት ማዋላቸው ኤጀንሲ የሰጣቸው ይመስለኛል።' Interview with academic, Bahir Dar, 26 December 2025.

and structural transformation of the urban landscape, such as in Bahir Dar and Gondar, tells an apparently different story of power relations. Take the case of the recent corridor development projects and the restoration of historical sites. While aligned with the revival of the GT, according to interviewees, they are directed by the federal government.

As an urban planning expert notes, 'the recently completed Structural Plan of Bahir Dar city now barely matters in the current corridor projects'. This points to the erosion of autonomy, similar to the EPRDF era, and to the level of deference the local authorities show to the federal government, which contrasts with previous interactions. The expert cites a compelling example of this discrepancy in agency:

> When we [the planners] suggested a passage of about 25 metres wide to open up the city to Lake Tana, the city administration was reluctant, often citing fear of public backlash over demolitions. However, when the federal-led corridor development project arrived, they did not flinch. They ruthlessly cleared out [a] massive quarter of the inner city to open up a 40-metre boulevard.

This suggests that while the regional and local political leadership may have reclaimed a symbolic level of mnemonic agency such as in restoring GT symbols to appease the grassroots demands, they appear to have surrendered their development and administrative agency to the federal government. In this sense, the rise of the gun and the renaming of the landscape appear to be a façade of temporary regional assertiveness that masks structural dependency on the federal government's homogenizing urban vision, including memory projects.

While Bahir Dar[96] is one of the most notable places that has seen mnemonic acts of correcting since 2018, the current study has also identified a presumably exceptional mnemonic act of correcting in the shape of a spelling because the previous version was viewed less as *Amharic* and more *Tigrigna*. That is, Gondar Airport, which was used to be spelled as ቴድሮስ (Tedros) has been corrected to ቴዎድሮስ (Tewodros) (Figure 4). Such minor corrections reveal a prior serious lack of mnemonic agency and a new sense of regional mnemonic empowerment that was exercised yet again as an act of forgetting, thus distanciation from the TPLF legacy in the region.

Figure 4: Hotel name corrected as ቴዎድሮስ/ Tewodros, Gondar (Photo: Assefa Alemu)



96 Since Tegbaru's 'Layers of traditions' addresses the significant mnemonic corrections involving changes to place names in Bahir Dar, there is no need to rehash them here, except for new developments such as the rebranding of the former Martyrs' Memorial, which is discussed above.

On the other hand, the prevailing sense among research participants, especially in Bahir Dar, suggests that the heritage renovation projects by the federal government are a 'theatrical substitute for actual safety'[97] when the roads leading to it, such as the Gondar–Bahir Dar corridor, remain active conflict zones. This leads to a critique that the federal government's focus on medieval grandeur is viewed as a sanitized version of history that bypasses the traumatic memory of the ongoing conflict. In short, research participants acknowledge[98] the government's efforts to revive local and national heritage or develop urban corridors. Many though fear that these projects are distractions, leading to a sense that their current suffering is ignored.[99]

Revival of GT in the counter-narrative by local dissident voices

In the recent Amhara political landscape, history appears to be not just remembered, but actively ethnicized and weaponized. Figures like Belay Zeleke and Emperor Tewodros II have been utilized as the faces of the Fano insurgency, serving as a symbolic bridge between ancient tradition of resistance and modern grievances. Belay Zeleke represents the grassroots rebel and a betrayed national patriot, whereas Emperor Tewodros II appears to give the movement a vision of unity. Unsurprisingly Tewodros is widely regarded as the architect of unity who sought to end the fragmentation of the *Zemene Mesafint* ('Era of the Princes'). For a political science professor informant from Bahir Dar, the invocation of Tewodros' vision of unity by Fano is a direct challenge to the current system of ethnic federalism, a system that has fractured the nation.[100]

It is Belay who seems to resonate most with the rank-and-file Fano fighters, notably those from Gojjam. As a peasant-warrior who fought the Italian occupation only to be executed by the very empire he defended, Belay provides a historical mirror for the Fano's narrative. That is, according to a historian informant, as Belay is the ultimate 'betrayed patriot',[101] current Fano fighters see themselves in his image. It follows from this that Fano's view of Emperor Haile Selassie may be characterized by an apparent mnemonic tension in that while the emperor is revered as a custodian of the GT and national sovereignty, he may equally serve as a cautionary symbol of centralization.

97 Interviews with academic, journalist and member of the clergy, Bahir Dar, 26 December 2025.

98 'በጣም ቆንጆ አካሄድና ኢትዮጵያዊነትን መልሶ ለማስራት የሚቻልበት መንገድ ነው። እነዚህ የታደሱ ቦታዎች ሕዝቡ ትናንት የነበረችውን ኢትዮጵያ የሚያይባቸው mirrors (መነጽሮች) ናቸው። እያንዳንዱ ሐውልት ወይም ቤተመንግሥት ለትውልድ የሚተላለፍ ደብዳቤ ነው። እኛም ለሚቀጥለው ትውልድ ምን አይነት ደብዳቤ እንተዋለን ከሚለው አንጻር ነው ማየት ያለብን።' Interview with academic, Gondar, 6 January 2026.

99 FGD with academics, Bahir Dar, 25 December 2025; interview with journalist, Bahir Dar, 24 December 2025; interview with academic, Gondar, 6 January 2026.

100 Interview with political science professor, Bahir Dar, 25 December 2025.

101 Interview with historian, Bahir Dar, 27 December 2025.

One can imagine that for the Fano, this phenomenon represents the state's historical and archetypal tendency of instrumentalizing provincial forces during existential crises, only to marginalize them once stability is restored, a sentiment echoed by a heritage expert interviewee from Gondar.[102] In connection to this, the memory of Emperor Haile Selassie probably serves more as a mirror of the Fano's grievances and less as a nostalgia for monarchy, whereas the emperor's post-war friction with patriots like Belay provides a historical lens through which they interpret their own perceived betrayal by the current administration.

This is to say that local volunteers who fought in support of the state during the 2020–2022 war in northern Ethiopia saw themselves as targeted by the federal government once the immediate threat of the TPLF had passed following the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022 and more so with the April 2023 arrest of Fano fighters.[103] Such resonance is evident in the use of his name for military divisions[104] in Gojjam, while his legacy is widely invoked in the *shilela* and *kererto* war chants sung by *azmaris* as well as by popular Fano songs. In connection to this, the lyrical imagery used by Dagne Walle, an Amhara vocalist known for his patriotic songs, that serves as a vehicle for mnemonic engineering, effectively transforming the Amhara identity from one of perceived dormant stoicism into a mobilized force of resistance. Invoking the metaphor of 'the bull awakened at the cliffs of the Abay',[105] the music taps into a collective historical consciousness that frames the Fano insurgency not as a new phenomenon, but as the revival of an ancestral defensive instinct.

This cultural signalling reconstructs the narrative of recent grievances of displacement, marginalization and systemic assault as the catalysts that forced a peaceful giant to reclaim its warrior heritage. In this context, the song acts as a mnemonic anchor that synchronizes regional pride with the exigencies of modern insurgency, validating the transition from quiet endurance to active defiance. One might conjecture that for the Fano, the present political order is not merely a modern federal administration, but is reimagined as a contemporary manifestation of an existential threat to the Amhara.[106] Through the invocation of these specific historical traumas, the movement appears to frame its defiance not just as a political struggle,

102 Interview with history and heritage management expert, Gondar, 11 January 2026.

103 Adane Tadesse, 'A Reflection on the Conflict in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia', Wilson Center, 29 September 2023. Accessed 18 February 2026, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/reflection-conflict-amhara-region-ethiopia.

104 For a discussion of the origins, structure and divisions of the Fano, see Atrsaw and Yared, 'Understanding the Fano Insurgency in Ethiopia's Amhara Region', Peace Research Facility briefing paper, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, February 2024. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://riftvalley.net/publication/understanding-the-fano-insurgency-in-ethiopias-amhara-region.

105 Dagne Wale, 'Wendlij Korete', YouTube, 2024: 'ዐባይ አፋፉ ላይ የተኛውን በሬ፤ / ቀስቀሰው፣ ቀስቅሰው አደረጉት አውሬ', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwOzBq8snm8.

106 This perception seems to be heavily reinforced by the influential rhetoric of the late General Asamnew Tsige, whose warnings of a looming existential threat more dangerous than that of the sixteenth century serve as a modern bridge between medieval trauma and current political anxieties.

but as a restorative defence against perceived Oromo hegemony. For those who maintain this interpretive view, the current regime is regarded as a successor to those historical forces that sought to alter the demographic and cultural landscape of the Ethiopian interior, thereby transforming modern grievances into existential struggle.[107]

In short, the corrective memorialization in Amhara, notably in Bahir Dar and Gondar, on the one hand and the invocation of historical figures by insurgent forces, on the other, reveals a fundamental shift toward an assertive regional identity. For Amhara regional state actors, rebranding landmarks or changing place names with historical figures appears to serve 'to remove the ideological scars of the TPLF-led era and to make room for a sanitized and populist revival of the GT at regional level'.[108] This seems to have allowed the regional elite to oscillate between broader historical nostalgia and a specific Amhara-centric restoration. One might argue that such oscillation reflects a deeper tension between the classical state-centric GT and a more recent Amhara-centric identity. Through the invocation of distant historical memories, such as the medieval era of the Amhara or the Gondarine period or other notable Amhara national figures (as the rebranded museum in Bahir Dar seeks to curate), regional elites appear to be reviving the GT. Yet this memory project is complicated by a shift in mnemonic focus in that whereas the older GT looked toward a centralized, pan-Ethiopian unity, the current restorationist motive appears to 'prioritize the survival of the Amhara as a distinct political community'.[109] Thus, the rebranding of landmarks may not merely be a nostalgic return to empire, but a strategic navigation and re-imagining of Amhara heritage in contemporary politics of memory spearheaded by the federal government as well as local actors.

However, the physical manifestation of this strategy, i.e., the regional state's decision to replace, for example, the 'sorrowful elder' with the 'young man with a raised rifle', seems to have unmasked the aggressive psychological core of this project. For the Fano insurgency, who have had considerable public backing, at least initially, the mnemonic engineering signals a shift from a memory of suffering to a memory of mobilization. This in turn led, according to an academic research participant, 'the [Amhara] Region to no longer be a place for mourning, but a site of regional assertiveness and resilience as a means of political survival'.[110] Here, one might also view the raised rifle as the defensive manifestation of that very trauma, where the unresolved grief of political discontent is channelled into a narrative of defiant and protective militancy. The use of these symbols thus reveals a widening schism between formal regional structures and the insurgency. That is, while the regional administration may employ the GT imagery to

107 Desalegn Birara, 'On The Ethiopian War: Existential Struggle Of Amhara People Against Genocide – OpEd', Eurasia Review, 30 July 2024. Accessed 12 May 2026, https://www.eurasiareview.com/30072024-on-the-ethiopian-war-existential-struggle-of-amhara-people-against-genocide-oped/.

108 Interview with political science scholar, Gondar, 13 January 2026.

109 Interview with academic, 26 December 2025, Bahir Dar.

110 Interview with academic, 26 December 2025, Bahir Dar.

foster state-aligned stability, the Fano appear to have appropriated this same mnemonic toolkit to highlight the perceived failures of those very institutions.

Conversely, the apparent mnemonic engineering in the regional capital, Bahir Dar, suggests a nuanced navigation between vernacularization and intra-regional integration. This is evidenced by the renaming of sub-cities in Bahir Dar after Atse Tewodros and Menelik II, heroes hailing from Gondar and Shewa, respectively. This seems to be an intentional effort to promote a sense of mnemonic transcendence across traditional provincial boundaries in the region. Furthermore, the transformed 'Amhara People History Memorial Center' (Figure 3), which houses icons and figures ranging from Belay Zeleke to artistic and literary national giants such as Afework Tekle, Haddis Alemayehu, as well as notable Amhara nationalist figures such as Asrat Woldeyes appears to be an effort at creating a comprehensive and unified regional identity that vernacularizes the hitherto national figures.

This intra-regional mnemonic integration effort, however, seems to be overshadowed by and faces critical scrutiny and resentment from regional sub-groups. A Muslim Amhara informant argues that, never mind the historical image of what it means to be Amhara, the current projection of Amhara nationalism remains largely 'centred on a narrow identity that is reluctant to practically embrace Muslims and other sub-groups within the region.'[111] Despite the Memorial Center's efforts to curate Islamic history within the region, such a critique suggests that a perceived hierarchy persists where the GT is articulated in a way that yet to fully accommodate communities as it attempts a unified regional identity.

It is also important to situate the critique of the GT in this region within the long-standing criticism harboured by Ethiopian Muslims in general regarding the exclusionary memory politics in Ethiopia. That is, the critique is not merely regional phenomena but is embedded in the national historiographical framework. Critics point out that the traditional GT narrative that constructs Ethiopia as a "Christian Island" as well as its restorationist motive either neglects or systematically marginalizes the Islamic presence by treating it as a peripheral or migrant entity rather than a foundational pillar of the state. In his recent sermon, Ustaz Yasin Nuru underscores that:

> ... national erasure [of Islam in Ethiopia] is achieved through one or more of the following three acts: a deliberate process of selection, omission and demonization... You select the Axum Obelisk and forget the Wall of Harar. You pick Lalibela and neglect Sof Omar Cave... But because Sof Omar is followed by *Ahmed*, you don't want to make that part of your history... While you glorify Menilik, you demonize Imam Ahmed by labelling him as *Gragn* ['left-handed']... You can't build a nation this way... by selecting, erasing, omitting, demonizing... [112]

111 Interview with member of Islamic Council of the Amhara Region, 26 December 2025, Bahir Dar.

112 Ustaz Yasin, YouTube, 2026, 12:00–14:00 (author's translation). Accessed 2 May 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_owZaF5C84.

Still relevant to memory politics in Ethiopia, the Ustaz underscores the exclusion of Islam through a conspicuous topographic invisibility. That is, despite Bilal al-Habashi's deep ancestral ties to the land, Yasin points to the lack of national monuments, streets or museums dedicated to him as a potent mnemonic grievance, especially when compared to the honours that Bilal receives in other nations such as Turkey. These nationalized memories have consequences today, creating exclusionary sacred geographies where, as Yasin argues, the branding of cities like Axum as a Second Jerusalem results in the denial of basic civil rights, such as burial rights, for local Muslims who were born and bred there and speak same language.[113] Such counter-memory discourse suggests that the attempt to achieve inclusion requires a mnemonic reintegration that caters for intra-regional, inter-regional and national memory nuances as part of forging a future based on a harmonious understanding of the past.



113 Ustaz Yasin, YouTube, 14:02–15:00.

Ye'Aelafat Zimare: An invention of tradition and the revivalist verve of the EOTC?

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) has functioned as the foundational architect of Ethiopia's Great Tradition (GT), asserting 'ownership of the foundational myths of the Ethiopian nation through its exceptionalist grand narrative of divine election'.[114] Its standing since the fall of the monarchical rule, however, has been in decline. In recent times its unity is being tested by internal ethnic tensions and the increasing suppression of its public identity. Yet it remains critical to trace the lineage of the modern revivalist verve of the EOTC. The institutional response of the EOTC across shifting political regimes since 1974 cannot be fully understood without reflecting on the role of *Mahibere Kidusan*, an organization that has been instrumental in ensuring the Church did not lose its national standing. Established in the 1980s as a strategic response to the secularizing pressures of the late twentieth century, *Mahibere Kidusan* has functioned as an organization that synthesized traditional ecclesiastical authority with 'time redeemer'[115] organizational structures. It particularly mobilizes the educated urban youth and the professional class, spearheading a revivalist awakening while particularly countering 'heretic' teachings, 'ideologies, pseudo narratives directed at the Church',[116] from other Christian sects, notably from evangelical Protestant movements. It has thus been serving as an institutional vanguard that not only preserves the church (and by extension the GT) against state-led marginalization and assaults from others, but also 'enhance [s] the economic, social and political participation of orthodox [followers].'[117]

In recent years, during which the church claims considerable pressure has been directed at it by internal and external forces, there emerged a contemporary 'invention of tradition' in the shape of *Ye'Aelafat Zimare* ('Melody of the Myriads'), which bridges the gap between ancient liturgy and the spiritual aspirations of a new generation. *Ye'Aelafat Zimare* appears to serve as a modern revival of the church, targeting the youth and linking liturgy and public presence. Mobilizing thousands of youth to sing hymns on the eve of *Ghenna* ('Ethiopian Christmas') in

114 Diego Maria Malara, 'Ethnographies of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity: Sacred Histories, Changing Identities and the Politics of Religious Pluralism', Northeast African Studies 22/2 (2022): 19.

115 Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Sunday School Department, Mahibere Kidusan, 'About Mahibere Kidusan: Objectives'. Accessed 1 May 2026, https://eotcmk.org/e/#about-mk.

116 Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Sunday School Department, Mahibere Kidusan, 'ስለ ማኅበረ ቅዱሳን መሠረታዊ መረጃዎች፡ ዓላማዎች' ('Basic information about Mahibere Kidusan: Objectives'). Accessed 1 May 2026, https://eotcmk.org/a/#top.

117 Mahibere Kidusan, 'About Mahibere Kidusan'.

massive, choreographed public displays, the church, through its affiliates, reasserts its cultural dominance and makes its presence felt in an increasingly secularized urban landscape. Beyond a once-in-a-year event, it can be viewed as a political reclamation of space and a symbol of resilience,[118] and a collective religious moment that refuses to be sidelined by contemporary political shifts.

While key figures like Deacon Henock Haile, who is a leading figure of the umbrella initiative called *YeJanderebaw Tewlid*[119] describe *Ye'Aelafat Zimare* as a return to a spiritual moment, its execution, by his own admission,[120] fits the classic definition of an 'invented tradition'.[121] This invention seems to be a strategic response to the (perceived) erosion of Orthodox influence in a pluralistic and often polarized Ethiopia. In what is more relevant to the discussion of memory politics, the political weight of this moment of revival is most apparent in the contest for public space. It is to be noted that the event had been, for the first two years, restricted, reportedly denied permission to gather at Meskel Square. It was thus confined to the grounds of the Bole Medhanealem Cathedral. This confinement was viewed by many as a physical manifestation of the state's attempt to ghettoize the church. The tension, however, has roots in recent years when the renovated Meskel Square, with a vast underground parking space, became a site of contestation involving other religions. While the EOTC asserted its historical right of inheritance over the space, the Addis Ababa administration positioned the square as a secular and multi-confessional space accessible to all, allowing pastoral and worshiping events for Protestants and *Iftar* programmes during the month of Ramadan for Muslims.[122]

118 In response to critics and conspiratorial remarks, Deacon Henock Haile emphasized that the Church persists in its melody even under persecution. His remarks also respond to those who sought to wear black garments during the melody sessions as a sign of grievance. Drawing on biblical examples, he asserts that, like the early martyrs, the Church maintains its faithful character, symbolized by white, even in the face of suffering. @kidu12119, TikTok, https://www.tiktok.com/@kidu12119/video/7592222941685779730.

119 Jandereba, the name of a community of predominantly young EOTC followers led by Deacon Henock Haile, refers to the Ethiopian eunuch, a high-ranking official (treasurer) of the Queen of Ethiopia (Candace), who was baptized by Philip the Evangelist after travelling to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:26–40). The community's YouTube channel, which carries sermons, song rehearsals and other services, is at https://www.youtube.com/@janderebaw_media.

120 In a post that went viral on TikTok, Deacon Henock said, **'ሳናስበው አዲስ ባህል፣ አዲስ ትውፊት ፈጠርን'** ('Before we knew it, we ended up inventing a new culture, a new tradition'). TikTok, https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMDMENmVU/.

121 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 1–14.

122 For an extensive discussion of the contestation over Meskel Square involving Protestants, Muslims, the EOTC and the government, see Dereje Feyissa, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Post-2018 Ethiopia: Navigating Church–State and Inter-Religious Dynamics', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, March 2025, 16–18; Dalaya, 'Politicizing Public Events', 34–38.

Such a shift sparked a public debate on whether the square remains an Orthodox landmark or should be redefined as a neutral venue for a multi-faith nation. The debate subsided in recent times with the exception of social media debates around *Ifthar* events. It is amid such limbo over the ownership claim by the EOTC that the eventual reclaiming of Meskel Square on the eve of *Ghenna* (6 January 2026) for the 'Melody of the Myriads' was celebrated as a sign of revival, signalling that the EOTC would not be relegated to the invisible sphere but would continue to occupy the symbolic heart of the nation and its capital city. It is important to note that the annual Meskel (the finding of the true cross) has still been colourfully celebrated in the same square. What makes the *Ye'Aelafat Zimare* significant is its revivalist novelty (invented tradition) within the church, on the one hand and its maximalist, visual performance on the other, which appears to reclaim the space, as if announcing that the EOTC has made a 'comeback in style',[123] as an academic colleague remarked.

This mnemonic innovation was not without an internal controversy regarding the appropriate display of the sacred in the public sphere and related etiquettes. As noted above, its revivalist motives seem to have driven the maximalist invention, deploying large-scale stage spectacles, signifying a defensive *tour de force* to assert the church's presence. This has sparked a sharp critique from a traditionalist bloc within the church, who view such events as a radical departure[124] from the church's established liturgical memory. They point to a fundamental friction between these modern, stage-centred performances and the ancient kinetic tradition of outdoor celebration where the presence of the Holy Tabot, or the procession of clergy bearing holy crosses and sacred vesture, moves from the sanctuary into the world as in *Timket* ('Epiphany') or *Meskel* ('Finding of the True Cross'). For traditionalists, the shift toward a centralized, performance-based spectacle risks imitating secular or even evangelical models, potentially diluting the Tewahedo essence.

Those who opposed this new tradition also added another layer of accusation marked by the classic 'hermeneutics of suspicion'[125] and conspiratorial claims. Some, especially online, argued that the government eventually permitted the return to Meskel Square as an instrument to cover the plight of the church and its followers. These critics hint at a clandestine motive intended to Westernize the church.

The apparent tension surrounding these revivalist efforts can be analysed as a clash between two competing memories; namely, the "exiled church" and the "resurgent church". From the point of view of the diaspora, the mnemonic focus seems to be one of existential defence and external advocacy, marked by profound scepticism of institutional visibility at home. For instance, they suggest these spectacles are used to project a false image of religious harmony

123 Interview with an academic, 7 January 2026, Addis Ababa.

124 @ayuti.efoy, TikTok, https://www.tiktok.com/@ayuti.efoy/video/7592905583716502802.

125 Henok Mekonin, 'A Sense of Pride and Suspicion: Ethiopia's Habitus and Its Impact on Interactions with Foreigners', Anabaptist Historians, 27 April 2023. Accessed 30 June 2025, https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2023/04/27/a-sense-of-pride-and-suspicion-ethiopias-habitus-and-its-impact-on-interactions-with-foreigners/.

to the international community, acting as a sedative to distract from reports of persecuted Christians in the country. In this exiled framework, the distance from the local context appears to necessitate a conspiratorial lens to interpret state–church relations.

Notably, digital influencers such as Zemedkun Bekele fuelled these controversies, going to the extent of linking Deacon Henock's reported visit to the Vatican to the launch of these formats and accusing him of 'receiving [an] agenda from Abiy to hide the persecution of the Church'.[126] Conversely, the resurgent church memory, maintained by local affiliates within Ethiopia, frames these same events not as a sedative, but as a bold reclamation of the GT.

Thus, the debate is less a doctrinal schism but more a geospatial divergence, where the same act of revival is simultaneously celebrated at home as resurgent strength and condemned from abroad as betrayal. This apparent tension, however, reveals that the interpretation of revival is not a neutral endeavour. Rather, the diverging mnemonic framings we have seen above are mediated by the actors' proximity to the state, where one's alignment with or opposition to the government determines whether a spiritual event is celebrated as a genuine religious act or questioned as an instrument of political theatre.

Finally, as this new tradition is likely to scale to accommodate millions of followers in the years to come, the new tradition's survival may depend on its ability to equally accommodate and navigate the tension between its *Jandereba* youth-driven energy and the traditional group's demand for liturgical authenticity.

In short, the *Ye'Aelafat Zimare*, more than just a liturgical revival, seems to represent the church's and its affiliates' strategic navigation of an increasingly polarized religious–political landscape in Ethiopia. Especially during an administration where the boundary between the secular and the religious is more often than not blurred,[127] the EOTC appears to utilize such invented traditions to assert its public presence in response to the perceived encroachment as well as neglect of the state and its alleged alignment with Prosperity Gospel ideologies.

Such resurgence also demonstrates a broader shift toward a politicized religiosity to counter the influence of competing Evangelical and Protestant denominations, on the one hand and the revivalist fervour of Islam, on the other. This complex interplay of faith, state power and the rise of defensive narratives is a phenomenon that merits further exploration.[128]

126 Zemedkun Bekele, 'ሄኖክ ከአቢይ አጀንዳውን ተቀብሏል! - ዛሬ እንዴት መስቀል አደባባይ ተፈቀደ! - Zemedkun Bekele ኖው ነጫንን' ('Henock has accepted the agenda from Abiy! How was Meskel Square permitted today!'), YouTube. Accessed [author's date], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85qSIkWh-_o (since removed).

127 Jörg Haustein, Abduletif Kedir Idris and Diego Maria Malara, 'Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia: History, Politics and Inter-Religious Relations', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023.

128 In a forthcoming study, 'Conspireligiosity and EOTC–State Relations in Post-2018 Ethiopia', the author explores how shifting dynamics and righteous indignation drive a religious (re)turn, redefining the relationship of the EOTC and its followers with the state and other religions in Ethiopia.

Pop culture, the state and mnemonic convergence

A number of popular vocalists have sung on the glorious past and the nostalgic yearning for the 'return' of Ethiopia's glorious history and civilization. While there are many of them, we can take the case of three artists, namely Tsehaye Yohannes,[129] Hailye Tadesse[130] and Tewodros Kassahun (Teddy Afro), who have been selected for the thematic density and explicit nostalgic yearnings in their lyrics. The selected songs of these artists consistently advocate for the 'return' of Ethiopia's glorious status while employing biblical imagery to frame the country as a covenant nation. In their songs, recurring motifs of *YeKalkidan Hager* ('covenant country') and *YeEthiopia Amlak* ('the God of Ethiopia') function as key mnemonic anchors that activate the Great Tradition (GT). Tsehaye Yohannes' lyrics, alongside the works of Hailye Tadesse and Teddy Afro,[131] construct a sacred memory where Ethiopia's past glory is framed as a divine promise (covenant)[132] that is only temporarily delayed but is destined for inevitable rebirth.

Through the invocation of the *kalkidan* ('covenant'), these artists seem to relocate Ethiopia's legitimacy from the contested realm of modern ethnic federalism to a sacred antiquity. In this 'teleological narrative',[133] the current state of national shame in poverty and migration is interpreted not just as a political failure, but as a spiritual trial, i.e., a delay that precedes an inevitable rise. Such a restorationist nostalgia is not an isolated sentiment. It rather finds its historical roots in Ethiopia's medieval millenarian traditions, particularly in such apocalyptic literature as the *Fikare Eyesus*, which established the anticipation of a messianic saviour figure that would bring a new

129 Tsehaye Yohannes, 'Ruk Ayedelem', 2007, YouTube. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxbMoRDQWQI.

130 Hailye Tadesse, 'Ethiopia Amlak' ('The God of Ethiopia'), Nahom Records, 2022, YouTube. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZhlh3GQYvo.

131 Teddy Afro, 'Ethiopia', 2017, YouTube. Accessed 19 October 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VNvWghJJFs. For a recent rendering of GT-related content by Teddy Afro, see his latest album, Etorika (2026), notably the tracks 'Das Tal (Ansaw)' and 'Tsion Mushraye', which show the artist's persistent appeal to the GT (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCydlocDyvRtFmMffKytKqgQ). In this album, too, Teddy Afro leverages historical nostalgia, motifs of sacred covenant and references to classical Solomonic and national symbols to lament modern fragmentation while evoking a yearning for Ethiopia's past imperial and cultural glory. While a comprehensive textual analysis of Etorika falls outside the scope of this study, its thematic framework underscores the power of non-state mnemonic actors in the revivalist-restorationist motives of the GT.

132 Teddy Afro's album Ethiopia (2017) uses the rainbow and the green-yellow-red flag as symbols of *tinsa'e* ('rise' or 'resurrection').

133 Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History'; Julia Gallagher et al., 'The histories buildings tell: aesthetic and popular readings of state meaning in Ethiopia', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 16/1 (2022).

era of righteousness and national glory.[134] It also advances the 'teleological progression of the state',[135] where the God of Ethiopia serves as the ultimate guarantor of national continuity. But most importantly it is a direct challenge to the rejectionist narratives of ethno-nationalists who seek to debunk and deconstruct such a portrayal of a glorious past.

It is striking how Prime Minister Abiy's remarks[136] at the inauguration of the Denbi Eco Lodge in January 2026 validate and instrumentalize this popular narrative that aligns closely with the GT. Through his assertion that the description of Ethiopia as a 'covenantal, blessed and chosen country' is not a myth but a 'truth', he effectively bridges the gap between secular governance and sacred myth-making. His critique, i.e., that the problem lies not in a lack of resources but in 'our failure to perceive', echoes the devalued gold metaphor he used for Fasil Ghebbi. In both instances, he appears to position himself as the visionary who unveils a pre-existing divine glory that had been obscured by the blindness of previous generations or modern political predicaments.

Again, in his holiday message[137] for the 2025 *Ghenna* ('Ethiopian Christmas'), Prime Minister Abiy underscored a turning point in the national journey, declaring that the country has entered a new era of revival:

> [...] The days of our suffering are behind us, never to return. Today, we stand firmly in the dawn of a new era of renewal. [...] Positioned between the past and the future, we honour yesterday through our efforts today, while laying the beautiful foundations for our tomorrow [...] May the Creator bless Ethiopia and her peoples.[138]

If his above Christmas message is about revival, his lofty but fitting message to the essence of the *Timket* ('Epiphany') holiday is that of *megelet* ('revelation' or 'uncovering'):

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134 Sven Rubenson, *King of Kings: Tewodros of Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University in association with Oxford University Press, 1966.

135 Gallagher et al., 'The histories buildings tell'.

136 'ኢትዮጵያ የቃልኪዳን፣ የተባረከች፣ የተወደደች፣ የተመረጠች ሀገር የሚባለው ውሸት አይደለም፤ እውነት ነው ... እኛ ነን ማስተዋል፣ ማየት ያቃተን እንጂ ኢትዮጵያ ውስጥ የሌለ ውበት፣ ፀጋ፣ ሃብት የለም።' Prime Minister Abiy, speaking at the inauguration of Denbi Eco Lodge, 19 January 2026. Addis Maleda, 'ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ የውጭ ጎብኚዎች ከኢትዮጵያ "የከፋ ነገር እንዳይወስዱ፣ በቅርብ ርቀት መከታተል እንደሚያስፈልግ" አስጠነቀቁ' ('Prime Minister Abiy warns that foreign visitors must be closely monitored so that they do not "take anything harmful" from Ethiopia'), 19 January 2026. Accessed 20 October 2026, https://www.facebook.com/addismaleda/posts/pfbid02VonepDaohWgqZSiJLfJUBUMe7hPriZ2sNB9DDwauFFmc1huJPkWdXLtu8uF4DnbHl.

137 The religious-political blend of the prime minister's messaging reinforces his status as a leader who reflects the nation's piety. As Dereje argues, Abiy 'nurtured this image in public speeches, which frequently make religious references', effectively bridging the gap between political authority and the 'religious character of Ethiopia'. Dereje, 'Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church', 11.

138 'የፍዳው ዘመን ላይመለስ ተሸኝቶ፣ የማንሠራራት ዘመን እንደመጣ በልበ ሙሉነት መናገር እንችላለን ... እኛ የቆምነው በትናንት እ በነገ መካከል ነው። ትናንትን በዛሬ ሥራችን ዋጋ እንዲያገኝ እናደርገዋለን። ነገን ደግሞ በዛሬው ሥራችን አሣምረን እንገነባዋለን ... ፈጣሪ ኢትዮጵያንና ሕዝቦቿን ይባርክ!' Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopian Christmas message, Office of the Prime Minister, 6 January 2026 (author's translation), https://www.pmo.gov.et/statements/.

> [...] Ethiopia's values, her riches, her capacities, her strengths, her beauties, her honours and her heights are being revealed. Since the reform began, we have spent the past few years building the foundation. We were renewing the old era while sketching the blueprint for the new. We were clearing the debts of the past while seeking the rewards of the future. We were breaking the bonds that held us back and tearing down the walls that divided us. We waited for the dawn to break into full light and for our visions to reach fruition. We granted time for those who did not understand to grasp the path and for those who did to begin their journey.
>
> Now, all that has passed and Ethiopia's era of *megelet* ('revelation') has arrived. Her agricultural potential is being revealed to feed her people. Her mineral wealth is being revealed to accelerate her growth. Her tourism potential is being revealed to amaze the world. Her technological capacity is being revealed to streamline her development. Her diplomatic power is being revealed to solidify her influence. Her manufacturing capability is being revealed to compete in the global market.[139]

Such alignments between the sacred, the popular and the official transform the prime minister and his administration from a political executive into a restorer of the covenant, suggesting that the mega infrastructure projects are physical manifestations of a divine mandate. Framing his message in what Sorenson calls 'retrospective projection'[140] that taps into historical glory and socio-cultural psyche, the revelation discourse appears to serve at once both a fulfilment of Ethiopia's inevitable prophetic rise and a policy roadmap.

This vision appears to be shaped by the Prosperity Gospel, an ideology that arguably constitutes a component of the repertoire of ideologies influencing policy prescriptions and executive practice. The vocabularies and imageries the administration used and the persistent reference made to the secular and the clerical blurs the boundaries between the two. It also suggests that the nation's material success, i.e. in the realms of agriculture, minerals and industry, etc., are the manifestation of a divine mandate finally being realized under the current administration. According to one study, the prime minister leverages the shared belief in Ethiopia's divine exceptionalism to promote national unity over ethnic identity, often framing political events as spiritually significant,[141] and conversely, he also often frames religious events as politically significant, as seen in his religious holiday messages.

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139 'የኢትዮጵያ ዕሴቶች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ሀብቶች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ዐቅሞች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ከንዶች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ውበቶች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ክብሮች፣ የኢትዮጵያ ከፍታዎች እየተገለጡ ናቸው። ... ለውጡ ከመጣ ጀምሮ ላለፉት ጥቂት ዓመታት መሠረቱን ስንሠራ ነበር። ይብሉዩን ዘመን ስናድስ፣ የሐዲሱን ዘመን ሰንረስስ ነበር። የኦሪቱን ዕዳ ስንደመስስ፣ የሐዲሱን ምንዳ ስናስስ ነበር። የያዘንን ትብታብ ስንበጥስ፣ የለያየንን ግንብ ስናፈርስ ነበር። የፈነጠቀው እስኪፈካ፣ የተወጠነው እስኪሳካ ጠብቀን ነበር። ያልገባቸው እስኪረዱ፣ የገባቸው እስኪራመዱ ዕድል ሰጥተን ነበር። አሁን ያ ሁሉ አልፎ የኢትዮጵያ የመገለጥ ዘመን መጥቷል። የግብርና ዐቅሟ ተገልጦ ሕዝቦቿን ይመግባል። የማዕዳን አቅሟ ተገልጦ ዕድገቷን ያዳጥናል። የቱሪዝም አቅሟ ተገልጦ ዓለምን ያስደምማል። የቴክኖሎጂ ዐቅሟ ተገልጦ ልማቷን ያቀላጥፋል። የዲፕሎማሲ ዐቅሟ ተገልጦ ተጽዕኖ ፈጣሪነቷን ያጸናል። የአምራችነት ዐቅሟ ተገልጦ የዓለምን ገበያ ይሻሻል።' Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, message on the occasion of Timket (Epiphany), 18 January 2026 (author's translation).

140 Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia*.

141 Haustein, Abduletif and Malara, 'Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia', 24.

Conclusion

The Ethiopian memory landscape is characterized by a complex mnemonic density where distinct historical layers appear to collapse into a simultaneous and overlapping battle of memory where a sacred memory rooted in the thirteenth century narrative of divine legitimacy in *Kibre Negest*, the divergent narratives in the nineteenth century focus on state sovereignty and territoriality and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries unionist and ethno-nationalist motives all come together like an avalanche, each competing in the contemporary mnemonic field. This results in multidimensional contestation in which teleological glories and modern-day political grievances, each with their own nuances and internal divergence, claim equal immediacy. This turns the public sphere into a messy mnemonic field full of competing narratives and visions.

While the competing and polarized memory blocs in Ethiopia appear a monolith from outside, each is shaped by tensions, where intra-group and inter-group contestations engender multiple interpretations of a complex past and present with implication for the future as well. Thus, in the Ethiopian mnemonic field, the past is not a settled account defined only by a clash between rival blocs, but it is an active site shaped by and subject to continuous internal as well as external tensions, negotiations and contestations.

There appears to be an inevitable gravitation[142] of the state toward the Great Tradition (GT). Although successive regimes initially enter power by deconstructing and rejecting the GT as feudal or oppressive, the pragmatic demands of governing an ancient polity appear to force a pivot to at least selectively embrace, revive and (re)appropriate it. However, this engagement of the state with the GT should be understood as a state of entanglement[143] and ambivalence rather than as a sequential transition between two fixed poles. That is, rejection and appropriation function as deeply interwoven categories of practice in that the state may not favour one over the other in a linear progression. It may instead instrumentalize elements to perform a balancing act. For instance, it can delegitimize the GT to signal rupture and embrace ethno-nationalist reform, while it can also concurrently draw upon the same tradition's symbolic repertoire to bolster state continuity and sovereignty.

Memory politics in Ethiopia, while defined by a tension between a state-led mnemonic monopoly and vernacular agency, it is excessively state-led and is largely determined by the political will

142 Clapham writes that 'the enduring power of the GT is most strikingly indicated by the envy and emulation that it has attracted from its opponents, who have in turn sought to establish their own rival traditions'. Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', 42.

143 Teshale argues that modern Ethiopian leaders are 'entangled' in the very tradition they claim to move past. Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia: 1896–1974*, Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995.

of the ruling class. In the current administration, the federal government appears to purse mnemonic integration through what looks like a curated regime of history that is reinforced by urban corridor development, which imposes an apparent homogenization in regional centres. But generally, beyond the immediate seizure of power lies a mnemonic monopoly, i.e., a regime of state-led curated memory that traps both the victor (the powerful) and the victim (the dispossessed) in a repetitive dialogue. These actors seem to whisper in a grim exchange to one another, 'What you are, we have been. What we are, you will be'.[144] Such a vicious cycle of memory politics, driven strictly by the state, fails to achieve the institutional, negotiated and transcendental agency required for a cross-generational collective memory project in the country.

There seems to be a revivalist *habitus* in the DNA of the Ethiopian state, an ingrained institutional verve that asserts itself the moment an actor assumes power. Regardless of their ideological background, every regime appears to experience a gravitational pull toward the GT, seeking legitimacy by selectively restoring the spatial and symbolic grandeur of historical Ethiopia. This magnetic appeal reveals a state that oscillates between rupture (often revolutionary) and an imperative to leverage the GT repertoire to survive, suggesting that its memory project is less about ideological consistency and more about pragmatism. This in turn is a reminder that the GT is not a static historical given but a contested as well as evolving body of memory that can be redefined and repurposed to suit contemporary political exigencies.

Policy considerations

To navigate the revivalist or rejectionist motives of the GT toward a sustainable 'Ethiopia project', a transition toward mnemonic convergence, a process akin to Jungian national individuation, is required. Such individuation refers to a collective maturation where the nation outgrows its predicaments through integrating its shadow (the traumatic and rejected aspect of history) embracing both its historical grandeur and grievances toward forging a resilient future. Such a transition would necessitate a move beyond viewing the GT and counter-histories as rigid and internally cohesive silos but as national companions whose relationship is better understood as a complex entanglement and reflexivity.

This requires first authenticity and courage to embrace the unacknowledged traumas, which both the state and its critics appear to suppress, so that the Ethiopian body politic moves toward a necessary maturity. This shift allows the nation to outgrow its narrative and memory entanglements rather than remaining captive to them. As Carl Jung[145] observed, life's most profound problems are not always solved through logic or force but are instead outgrown as one attains a higher level of consciousness. Similarly, when embracing an imperfect past and a fragmented present,

144 Norbert Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York: Continuum, 2001, 14.

145 C.G. Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, Collected Works vol. 13, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Ethiopia should and can transcend the zero-sum nature of its memory battles to forge a genuinely accommodative and pluralistic future. As such the following policy considerations are forwarded:

Re-reading of the GT

The move toward national individuation requires a radical re-reading of the GT (as a foundational but imperfect past), transitioning it from a static monument into both sacred and scarred repositories of a shared and evolving heritage. Instead of viewing the GT as an untouchable monolith or a target for wholesale deconstruction, one should see, as Christopher Clapham notes, its 'allure' as well as 'deficiencies',[146] treating it to be a site of potential integration. This allows the tradition to serve not as a tool for hegemony, but as a foundation of Ethiopia's complex but multi-vocal story. This, in other words, is a call for the GT to be regarded not as a static repository to be periodically mined for political utility, but as a living, recursive process of cultural negotiation. Such a shift in perspective moves beyond conceptualizing the tradition as a relic of the past, but instead as an evolving framework that itself is continuously replenished and rearticulated. An attempt to actively re-appropriate it should also be recognized not as a malicious utilitarian intent but as that which is aimed at meeting the evolving demands of the present and the anticipated vision for the future. This will in turn help to shape the GT as an accommodative force for contemporary collective imaginaries rather than as a mere historical inheritance that is to be protected by a single group.

Dialogue for a collective mnemonic agency

Outgrowing current memory battles takes courage to shift the focus from the competitive validation of grievances toward a mnemonic convergence that acknowledges the legitimacy of the other as a key component of the whole. This perspective moves beyond the zero-sum logic of ethnic victimhood versus victorhood that has long debilitated and impoverished civilized political discourse[147] in the country. When the mnemonic pride and discomfort, say toward the GT, are recognized as inseparable aspects of the national experience, the fragmented present could gradually cease to be a source of existential threat. It can rather become a building block for a more negotiated national consciousness. Consequently, the reification (memorialization and monumentalization) of a collective identity and memory will no longer require the obliteration of the particular or vice-versa.

Institutionalizing memory

Governing divergent memories toward a mature memory politics necessitates a framework that unabashedly embraces a fragmented present and a glorious as well as traumatic past. This further requires a move away from the cycle of the politics of erasure and of misappropriation of memory through a monopolistic and state-led mnemonic agency toward a genuinely deliberative mnemonic project.

146 Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', 38.

147 Shimelis, 'Interrogating Ethiopia', 297.

Glossary of acronyms, words or phrases

abwara maragef	*Amharic:* dusting off
azmaris	*Amharic:* traditional musician/bard
dagim teweled'e	*Amharic:* reborn
EOTC	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
Ghenna	*Amharic:* Ethiopian Christmas
GT	Great Tradition
hidase	*Amharic:* Renaissance
Irrecha	*Afan Oromo:* Thanksgiving festival
Kibre Negest	*Amharic:* The Glory of the Kings (Ethiopian manuscript)
manserarat	*Amharic:* revival
medemer	*Amharic:* synergy
megelet	*Amharic:* revealing/unveiling
Meskel	*Amharic:* Finding of the True Cross
nigat	*Amharic:* dawn
tetegene	*Amharic:* repaired
Tilik Neberen, Tilik Enhonalen	*Amharic:* We were great, we shall be!

timket	*Amharic:* Epiphany
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
Ye'Aelafat Zimare	*Amharic:* Melody of the Myriads
YeEthiopia Amlak	*Amharic:* the God of Ethiopia
YeEthiopia Tinsa'e	*Amharic:* The resurrection of Ethiopia
YeKalkidan Hager	*Amharic:* covenant country
yerekese werk	*Amharic:* devalued gold
Zemene Mesafint	*Amharic:* Era of the Princes



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