

## Everyday Narratives on the Ethiopian Civil War (2020-2022): Insights from North Wollo

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### Abstract

*This study examines the everyday narratives and experiences of local communities in North Wollo during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), utilizing insights from theories of ethnicity. Using qualitative data, the study findings indicate that the narratives surrounding the war were influenced by a variety of factors, including ethnicity, contested land rights, identity issues, the impact of the conflict, and elite mobilization. These dynamic elements led local communities in North Wollo to perceive the war not merely as a confrontation with the federal government and Tigrayan forces, but rather as a direct attack on their ethnic identity, thus framing their resistance as a collective defensive act against the Tigrayan forces. The findings suggest that ethnicity serves as a crucial lens through which local communities construct narratives of victimization. This perspective is significantly shaped by an ethnic-based framework and elite mobilization, which influence their collective identity and responses. The paper concludes by emphasizing that addressing ethnic grievances and perceptions of existential threats through inclusive dialogue and reconciliation is essential for fostering lasting peace.*

**Keywords:** civil war, Ethiopia, ethnicity, ethnic mobilization, everyday narratives

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## **Introduction**

The Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) was characterized by intricate political narratives, ethnic mobilization, and polarization, and remains a deeply divisive issue (Fana & Yonas, 2023). The war was caused by complex factors involving historical, political, economic, and identity-related issues, and enabled the Tigrayan forces—the self-proclaimed ‘Tigrayan Defense Forces (TDF)’—to control parts of the Amhara and Afar regional states. The war significantly affected Tigray, and its territorial expansion also affected the Afar and Amhara communities and severely weakened Ethiopia’s social fabric.

Political power competition between the post-2018 administration and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) was the main driving cause of the war (Pellet, 2021; Vaughan, 2023). Widespread political protests leading up to the 2018 reforms, sparked by opposition to the long rule of the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), deepened divisions among its member parties. Subsequently, the tactical coalition between the Oromo and Amhara wings of EPRDF successfully relegated TPLF and brought the 2018 reform (Semir, 2019).

The post-2018 administration was initially known for its sweeping measures that garnered popular support (Semir, 2019). Nonetheless, the reforms taken were not without odds (Záhork & Ylönen, 2025). For instance, the investigation into crimes allegedly committed by TPLF officials, the Ethio-Eritrea rapprochement that excluded TPLF elites, the merger of EPRDF member parties with which the TPLF disagreed, and the postponement of the 2020 national election all strained relations between the TPLF and the new administration. Later on, when the TPLF conducted a unilateral regional election defying federal dictates, TPLF’s relations with the new administration were formally broken, leading to the civil war (Tronvoll, 2024). These factors led to the development of contradictory narratives. While the new administration asserted the reform as a process of democratizing the state and making fair power-sharing arrangements, the TPLF viewed the move as an attempt to centralize power, marginalize Tigray, and destroy Ethiopia’s federal system (Assefa, 2023).

Existing studies on the Ethiopian civil war have tended to focus on the actions and decisions of political and military elites (See Abbink, 2021; Assefa, 2023; de Wall, 2023; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023), leaving a gap in our understanding of how the civil war was viewed and navigated by local communities. In particular, conversations on the war largely focus on the severe humanitarian catastrophe inside Tigray (Plaut, 2023; Plaut & Mulford, 2023; Plaut & Teka, 2023), giving little to no emphasis on how it affected the local communities of Amhara, who

were exposed to violence. Indeed, the primary focus on elites' actions in the war reflects the broader trends in how Ethiopian politics has traditionally been discussed. Recently, however, scholarship challenging this paradigm has emerged (Daniel, 2020; Howard, 2018; Yates, 2020). These emerging studies showcased how the everyday practices of people are crucial for understanding Ethiopian politics. In alignment with these strands of literature and building on our previous work (Theodros & Bamlaku, 2025), this study prioritizes forwarding local perspectives on the civil war. Hence, this study broadens the discussion on the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) in two ways: by focusing on the less discussed areas affected by the war, and by bringing forward local communities' perspectives.

This article explores everyday narratives of North Wollo local community members using insights from theories of ethnicity. In doing so, the paper delves into answering how community members experienced and responded to the conflict, what local narratives they developed, and what factors shape the construction of their narratives. The article argues that the recent dynamics of political conditions in Ethiopia contributed to the rise and proliferation of ethnic-based identification and motivated individuals to develop narratives of victimhood, interpreting events primarily through the lens of ethnic identity, leading up to the civil war. Ultimately, the ethnic federal system, coupled with pervasive ethno-nationalist narratives, has shaped the construction of Amhara identity, resulting in feelings of marginalization and victimhood (Admassu, 2010; Yared, 2022). This construction of ethnic identity, coupled with the impact of the civil war, has led local community members in North Wollo to rally under an Amhara identity, perceiving the civil war as a threat to their ethnic identity.

### **Conceptual and theoretical frameworks**

Conflicts are frequently framed through elite-driven narratives that emphasize political competition and ideological differences as the primary drivers of violence. However, the exclusive focus on high-level political processes risks obscuring how community members on the frontlines experience and interpret conflict, including local grievances, everyday insecurity, and local-level social dynamics. This gap underscores the importance of centring everyday narratives, which provide a more grounded account of how violence unfolds and is understood by ordinary people (Autesserre, 2021; Mac Ginty, 2021).

Everyday narratives are “produced, shared, and reformed through the everyday interactions within and between social groups” (Lee, 2022). Everyday narratives can be best studied through micro-level studies of civil war, which

emphasize the importance of studying everyday activities and actors at the local level (Mac Ginty, 2021). Such studies contribute to civil war scholarship by explaining phenomena and providing rich qualitative data. This strand of study has been part of the critical research agenda on civil wars that seeks to acknowledge the agency, influence, and role of individuals and communities in contrast to analysis that emphasizes solely macro-structural factors (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2016). Since everyday life consists of thousands of local stories and perspectives (Carrer, 2022), emphasizing the everyday activities of ordinary people provides rich data for understanding why local communities support or resist conflict.

Everyday narratives in the context of this study refer to the views and narratives of local community members in North Wollo about the civil war, its dynamics, and their involvement. While existing studies on the war (Abbink, 2021; Assefa, 2023; de Wall, 2023; Plaut & Vaughan, 2023) have largely focused on elite-level political dynamics and the humanitarian crisis in Tigray, the perspectives of local communities in other affected regions, such as North Wollo, remain underexplored, despite experiencing direct effects of the conflict. Focusing on this area allows for an in-depth examination of everyday narratives. This focus addresses a clear gap in conversation on the war and contributes to understanding how ordinary people interpret and experience the conflict.

As far as ethnicity is concerned, it is “an affiliation or identification with an ethnic group” (Yang, 2000, p. 40), denoting ethnic group membership, ethnic affiliation, and ethnic identity. It is also “the outcome of subjective perceptions based on objective characteristics such as physical attributes, presumed ancestry, culture, or national origin” (Yang, 2000, p.40). Ethnicity has played a significant role in incentivizing and providing opportunities for ethnic groups to mobilize and engage in civil wars (Denny & Walter, 2014). It is one of the most effective instruments for political mobilization in many parts of Africa (Tegegne, 1998). Ethnicity has “a singular capacity for social mobilization” (Young, 2003, p. 9). Since 1991, ethnicity has been given primary value in the political system of Ethiopia, and regional states were organized based on ethnic identity. Following the full flourishing of ethnicity, not only regional states but also political parties, the Media, and financial institutions emerged to represent and serve the interests of one’s ethnic group.

Ethnicity can be explained through three interlinked theories: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism. On one hand, primordialists view ethnicity as a natural and innate aspect of human identity, grounded in fixed, deep attachments—such as blood ties and common ancestry—to a particular group or culture (Yang, 2000). In contrast, instrumentalists regard ethnicity as an instrument

or strategic tool for acquiring resources (Yang, 2000). Constructivism, on the other hand, posits that ethnicity is not a natural or fixed identity but rather a social construct built through interactions and relationships between individuals and groups. Overall, the three theories of ethnicity cannot be exclusively explained. Whether ethnicity is debated as a created or manipulated phenomenon for calculated gain, its ancestry and innate behavior are the springboard employed by constructionists and instrumentalists.

This study integrates theories of ethnicity with the everyday narratives to explain how conflict is experienced and interpreted by local communities. While theories of ethnicity provide the conceptual framework for understanding how ethnic categories structure perceptions of belonging and threat, the everyday narrative offers the empirical reality through which these processes are examined. By analyzing how members of the Amhara community narrate events during the war, the study demonstrates how ethnic identity informs attitudes and interpretations of violence.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative approach is best suited for investigating people in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Therefore, employing a qualitative approach, the study focused on exploring and understanding people's experiences and narratives related to the conflict and its influence on the actions of local communities in North Wollo. North Wollo is specifically selected for a couple of reasons. First, it remains one of the least studied areas in scholarship on the Ethiopian civil war, despite being directly affected by the conflict. Examining this area, therefore, generates important empirical insights into how the war was experienced outside Tigray. Second, North Wollo was fully controlled by the TDF during the war's expansion, placing local communities under the control of an ethnically distinct armed group. Such control reshaped everyday life, making North Wollo suited for examining how civilians interpreted and narrated their experience of conflict.

The study employed purposive sampling to identify participants. Purposive sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups knowledgeable or experienced in a specific issue (Creswell, 2014). In this context, community members who had active involvement in local social and administrative processes were purposely selected with the support of pre-existing relationships and local networks. To ensure diverse perspectives are captured, the sample deliberately included youths, women, elders, local government officials, and religious leaders, reflecting diversity in age, gender, and social position. Informants were drawn

from diverse age categories. For instance, the sample included youths aged 20-35, adults, and elderly individuals aged 55 and above, for the context of this study.

The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Field data collection was conducted in Woldia and Raya Kobo from September to November 2023. During this period, we engaged in 45 in-depth individual interviews and 5 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Of the total 45 interview participants, 18 were women, and 27 were men, ensuring gender participation. FGDs were conducted with youths, women, and elders who were selected following a homogeneous group to facilitate easy communication. The study brought together people with relatively common views and experiences, in which they shared and constructed information through group cooperation. Furthermore, the study was guided by semi-structured interviews and FGD guides. Questions focused on participants' lived realities, including how they narrate their exposure to violence in everyday life, associating with ethnic identification and elite mobilization, and how these shape the construction of everyday narratives.

In a qualitative study, researchers are expected to continue recruiting informants and collecting data until the investigation reaches a point of saturation (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011). In this study, saturation was considered reached when recurring themes such as ethnic identity, elite mobilization, and everyday narrative construction became consistent across informants, and subsequent searches for data yielded repetition. Furthermore, to ensure credibility, varied data sources were consulted. Secondary data were also gathered through consulting studies on the war to corroborate the findings.

The study utilized thematic analysis to analyze the data. Field notes and interviews were transcribed and coded to identify themes and patterns. While initial themes were identified directly from informants' narratives, the analysis was also informed by theories of ethnicity. Identified themes were further refined through an iterative review process, enabling the findings address the research questions. The research also adhered to key ethical principles, including voluntary participation, participant well-being, and the honest reporting of findings (Vanclay et al., 2013). Given the sensitivity of conducting research in a conflict-affected setting, particular attention was paid to safeguarding informants' well-being. All informants received verbal information about the study and provided informed consent, with the right to decline questions or withdraw at any stage.

To ensure that the data reflected the participants' experience, we also critically evaluated our positionality and engaged in ongoing reflexive practice. Our ethnic identity and cultural background align with those of informants, which could lead to uncritically affirming certain claims. For instance, the extensive

suffering experienced by Amhara communities during the war, as well as prevalent local perceptions of Tigray fighters as existential threats, may have predisposed us to accept informants' claims as valid without further triangulation. To mitigate this risk, we systematically scrutinized our interpretative decisions, remained attentive to potential biases, and triangulated data across interviews and FGDs.

### **Everyday narratives on the Ethiopian civil war in North Wollo**

Everyday narratives surrounding the conflict in North Wollo are not merely distinct from political or elite narratives; they are instead the result of the intricate interplay of elite mobilization, ethnic-based politics, contested land and identity issues, and the war's impacts. While local narratives often reflect elite narratives, they are grounded in lived experiences and everyday realities, capturing how broader political and structural dynamics affect ordinary communities. Studying these narratives is therefore essential, as it illuminates the micro-foundations of conflict, including community responses, patterns of support or resistance, and the localized consequences of political mobilization (Autesserre, 2021; Kalyvas, 2006). The everyday narratives of local communities in North Wollo were shaped by interrelated factors discussed below.

#### **Elite mobilization**

When elites compete for power, they frequently try to outbid each other by promoting nationalist views to gain popular support (Byman, 2002). Likewise, leaders of both the federal government and TPLF defamed one another to secure their political positions and attempted to garner popular support by mobilizing the public. While the TPLF mobilized Tigrayans and garnered strong support in its region and from the diaspora, the federal government was also able to mobilize the non-Tigrayan Ethiopians against the TPLF. Indeed, the government also mobilized Tigrayans outside the Tigray region in a bid to get support from TPLF's constituency. Nonetheless, Tigrayans in Addis and the rest of Ethiopia were largely viewed as TPLF sympathizers (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). Hence, the mobilizing effort of the two groups was mainly attributed to the ethnic identity of the people.

As Stewart (2008) observed, when mobilization fits with group identity lines, it becomes an important source of violent conflict. Similarly, the TPLF's mobilization of Tigrayans rested on the idea that the Ethiopian and Amhara governments were working on dismantling Tigray (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). Being mobilized with this sentiment, apart from other factors such as grievances during the reform period, as well as due to the destruction brought in Tigray during the

initial phases of the war, Tigrayan fighters and their supporters expanded territorially to fight with the federal, other regional, and Amhara forces (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). On the other hand, grievances against the TPLF enabled local communities in North Wollo to follow the government mobilization. It also instigated a sense of urgency to push back against the Tigrayan forces to ensure their safety. This sentiment emerged from collective experiences, including past grievances related to the Raya identity question and the TPLF's persecution of the identity committee (Sisay & Alemu, 2020), as well as atrocities committed by Tigrayan forces during their control of North Wollo (Theodros & Bamlaku, 2025a).

Everyday narratives in North Wollo were partly shaped by elite politics and mobilization. The confrontation between the TPLF and the new administration during the time of the reform was interpreted by local community members in North Wollo as the TPLF's resistance to the changes in the reform process due to its loss of political power. Observing the initial pledges and promises of the new Prime Minister (PM), along with measures taken to democratize the state, led community members to legitimize the government's narrative and strongly condemn the TPLF's alleged ungovernability through public demonstrations, reflecting elite influence on popular mobilization. In line with this, Mac Ginty and Firchow (2016) noted how top-down narratives of conflict have a significant impact on nurturing bottom-up narratives.

Aside from elite mobilization, the impacts of the war further solidified local community members' alignment with the elites' narrative. As war is linked with destruction, the territorial expansion of the war into the North Wollo resulted in severe destruction (AUF, 2022). The atrocities committed in the area led community members to legitimize elite narratives, prompting them to support the government both directly and indirectly during the war. The following quote, taken from one elderly informant, portrayed how the TDF's ill-treatment led community members to support the government.

Following orders from their seniors, the Tigray fighters put derogatory graffiti, verbally abused residents, and issued threats against the Amhara. Beyond indiscriminate violence, their actions involved systematic looting, infrastructure destruction, and sexual violence, causing severe economic and psychological harm and pushing the local community to side with the government (IDI-15, 16 October 2023, Woldia).

The dynamics of the war revealed how both conflicting parties mobilized their constituencies, relying heavily on ethnic identity. While the TPLF mobilized its constituency and built the “TDF” (Fana & Yonas, 2023), labeling the Amhara elites<sup>3</sup> and the federal government as threats to Tigray’s survival, the new administration and the Amhara regional government, on the other side, were making propaganda to the Amhara community. “The enemy has trespassed on your territory; you should not let him leave—kill him while he is in your area. They have killed you, raped your children, and come to avenge you...” were part of the everyday propaganda disseminated by the government’s mainstream media against the Tigrayan fighters (Addis Standard, 2022; Amhara Media Corporation, 2021). As a result, the government was able to mobilize the Amhara community to support the war aims by whatever means, ranging from fighting in the war zones with their personal weapons to providing logistics. This mobilization shapes community members’ narratives of the war primarily as a threat to their survival.

### **Contested land and identity questions**

One of the factors that pulled the Amhara to join the fight against the TDF was the contested land and identity issues in Raya, Wolkayt, and T(s)elemit, where the TPLF demarcated these areas under the Tigray region following the ethno-federal arrangement (Pellet, 2021). The demarcation of the Raya and Wolkayt areas under the Tigray Regional State sparked discontent from the Amhara side for losing “historical ancestral lands” (Sisay & Alemu, 2020). There are contending arguments between TPLF and Amhara elites regarding when and how these areas were annexed into the Tigray region. Without diving into historical analysis, while TPLF’s stand is rooted in the criteria of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia constitution for demarcating regional boundaries, such as ethnolinguistic identity, the Amhara elites and community members argue that the area was annexed forcefully into Tigray before the constitution was enacted in 1995.

Informants of this study noted how community members harbored grievances over losing Raya, which had been part of Wollo province until it was transferred to Tigray in 1991 during the height of the TPLF’s power. Aside from losing the land, the Raya question encompasses broader issues of justice, identity, and the right to self-administration. These grievances, marred by elite mobilizations, made the war more brutal, inspiring local communities to join the

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<sup>3</sup>In this study, “Amhara elites” refers to those belonging to the Amharic-speaking group, rather than individuals labelled as such solely for supporting a pan-Ethiopian identity or opposing ethno-nationalist ideologies.

war. Following the start of the war, when Raya came under the control of the Amhara administration in mid-November 2020, some community members viewed this shift as legitimate (IDI-11, 11 October 2023, Woldia). Despite the Pretoria agreement bringing temporary relief (de Wall, 2023; Fana & Yonas, 2023) to the communities of both Tigray and Amhara, the dispute between the two regions over Raya land and identity remains unresolved, which deepens the narrative of losing historical land and identity.

### **Ethnic-based politics**

Ethnic-based administration has been employed as the sole state organizing principle, representation, and political mobilization in Ethiopia since the early 1990s (Yared, 2022). The ethnic-based administration gradually taught ethnic consciousness and attachment to one's ethnic fellows. The generation, especially those who had grown up under ethnic federalism, was taught primarily to identify themselves with their ethnic identity, which forced them to seek an enclave and protection from a particular ethno-national group. The Ethiopian civil war also manifested this scenario when Tigrayans were mobilized to fight to defend the interests of Tigray, and the local Amhara communities resisted Tigrayans organizing under the banner of Amhara. The fruits of ethnic federalism, thus, facilitated the emergence and development of "Amhara nationalism" (Admassu, 2010; Yared, 2022), which was manifested in the war when community members in the North Wollo aligned themselves with the Amhara identity and interpreted the war as an attack against their ethnic identity.

Since its adoption, the Ethiopian ethnic federal system has received two polarized views between its proponents and opponents. On the one hand, proponents of the system—ethno-nationalists led by TPLF—insisted that the historical injustices and marginalization of Ethiopian nationalities could be rectified by recognizing ethnic identity and the right of each nationality to self-determination (Assefa, 2006). On the other hand, pan-Ethiopian nationalists criticized the politicization of ethnicity for its potential to create ethnic boundaries, leading to suspicion of one group over another (Berihun, 2023). These competing debates have been the core of Ethiopian politics since the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM).

The politics of Ethiopia's post-1991 brought to the fore the ethno-nationalist assumptions. Earlier, the ethno-nationalists have largely accused pan-Ethiopian nationalists of "domination and suppression," and "internal colonization" (Jalata, 2009), which permeated the flourishing of many ethnic-based liberation fronts. But the reality was that neither the Derg nor the Imperial regime of Haile Selassie I

entirely represented Amhara, except that Amharic was used as an official language. It can be argued that pan-Ethiopian nationalists represent a diverse range of groups, with an increasingly smaller portion identifying as Amhara. While Amhara belong to this camp, others who often refuse to categorize themselves within any ethnic group because they come from mixed ethnic backgrounds or reject ethnic identity altogether also belong to this camp. Hence, placing blame on the Amhara due to the alleged Amhara-dominated pan-Ethiopian stance facilitated the rise of Amhara nationalism.

The recognition of ethnic groups' rights to self-governance, the protection of their cultural practices, and the development of their language were central demands of the ESM, and can be regarded as achievements of the EPRDF regime (Mulugeta & Feseha, 2020; Takele, 2022). However, the path the EPRDF followed in organizing the state along ethnolinguistic identity later opened room for a new kind of conflict among communities of various ethnic groups (Aalen, 2002; Abbink, 2006). Following the EPRDF's takeover of power and its new organizing principle, inter-communal conflicts mainly based on ethnic identities filled the political space throughout the country. Despite many of these conflicts not solely rooted in ethno-linguistic differences, the states' organizing principle permeated various groups to get into conflict over resources and regional boundaries, with a claim of their ethnic identity (Abbink, 2006).

Many of the post-1991 inter-communal conflicts were characterized by ethno-linguistic identity, as access to land and political power became tied to ethnic identity. The ethnic federal system granted ownership rights to resources in some regional states primarily to "indigenous groups" while labeling others as "settlers,"<sup>4</sup> generating exclusion and violence. Over time, this arrangement deepened ethnic boundaries, fostered insecurity, and made movement and settlement across regional states increasingly difficult.

Given the current political turmoil in the country, it is reasonable to argue that the ethnic organization of the state adds fuel to the fire. Despite the complexity of factors, including economic, historical, and governance-related issues that contributed to political instability, the ethnic organization of the state adds another layer to the problem. Since the organization of the state by ethnic arrangement,

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<sup>4</sup>See the Preamble of the 2001 Revised Constitution of Oromiya Regional State, the phrase 'we the people of Oromo...' implies the ownership of the constitution is for the Oromos only. Benishangul Gumuz Regional Constitution, Article 2 stipulates that Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo as the Owner of the region implicitly making other nationalities such as Amhara and Oromo non-owners.

there have been various ethnic-based conflicts, and even after the reform, ethnic-based violence reached its apex (Semir, 2019).

The ethnic-based administration in Ethiopia made all to think that membership in the enclave of one's ethnic identity could guarantee one's safety. In line with this, when disagreements emerged between the TPLF and the new administration during the post-2018 reforms, the TPLF retreated to its base, condemning the new administration's efforts to sideline senior TPLF officials from key positions. Despite the TPLF being aggrieved by the unexpected loss of federal power and targeting of their members for alleged crimes of corruption and human rights violations, they played their ethnic card to resist the new administration. Gathering in Mekelle, the TPLF officials repeatedly condemned the federal government and expressed their readiness to defend the rights of Tigrayans. They associated all the efforts of the new administration with a direct attack on preventing Tigrayans from a fair share of power. They framed the arrest of senior TPLF officials for corruption as an insult to ethnic Tigrayans.

Despite the war having roots in the national political contests (Pellet, 2021), there were local events that had an indirect role in strengthening the ethnic element of the war. Locally, there was unrest in Woldia and Raya Kobo that preceded the war (Theodros & Bamlaku, 2025b). On a football match held on 3 December 2017 in Woldia, "a confrontation between the football fans of Woldia and Mekelle Football Clubs turned into violence and ethnically based insults were exchanged from both sides" (IDI-3, 30 September 2023, Woldia). Following the incident, Tigrayan-owned properties were burned and destroyed in Woldia and Raya Kobo, and some targeted Tigrayans were also displaced to Tigray. Furthermore, violence on 20 January 2018 further intensified the targeting of Tigrayans (IDI-10, 07 October 2023, Woldia). Due to this reason, local community members in Woldia and Raya Kobo perceived that the Tigrayans had focused more on capturing North Wollo for vengeance during their advance in July 2021 (IDI-12, 14 October 2023, Woldia).

Influenced by ethnic federalism, the nexus between ethnic identity issues and elite politics has severely affected local community members' views of the dynamics of the civil war. All the Tigrayan fighters advancing to North Wollo, as well as other ethnic Tigrayans, were termed as "Junta" in the study area. The name "Junta" was ascribed to ethnic Tigrayans following the PM's official designation of TPLF as "criminal Junta" through the government's mainstream media. Both the Tigray fighters and local community members acted emotionally to defend their ethnic identity and engaged in violence. The narrative of being targeted by the Tigrayans has taken root among the communities in North Wollo, as their ethnic

identity, shaped by the state's organizing principle of ethnic federalism, framed how they interpreted and responded to the war.

The war was, thus, a manifestation of the grievance of ethnic identity, as the Tigrayans' and Amhara's views and engagement in defending their identity demonstrated (Theodros & Bamlaku, 2025b). The Amhara and Tigray were aggrieved by the injustice perpetrated against each other's ethnic identity. The TPLF argued, even before the start of the war, that the reform process was directed at attacking ethnic Tigrayans. After the onset of the war, TPLF continued to advocate that the allied federal and Amhara forces waged a genocidal war against the Tigray, which made many ethnic Tigrayans determined to fight back and overthrow the government (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). Similarly, from the Amhara side, there was a grievance that the TPLF designated the Amhara nation as its enemy since its inception, due to the TPLF's advocating of the "Amhara oppressor" narrative, which made ordinary Amhara vulnerable to attack across the country (Sisay & Alemu, 2020).

Being influenced by the three-decade-long ethnic-based administration, community members in North Wollo viewed TPLF's advance as one tactic of weakening and destroying the Amhara. As one informant from Raya Kobo narrated, "The war was aimed at directly impacting ethnic Amhara because many people were killed just for being ethnic Amhara" (IDI-29, 16 November 2023, Kobo). Similarly, another informant added: "The war had a direct impact on Amhara identity because the Tigray fighters and supporters intentionally terrorized the people, pillaged resources, and destroyed infrastructures of the Amhara people" (IDI-28, 15 November 2023, Kobo). Overall, the war's impact on local communities, combined with the prevailing ethnic-based politics, largely led community members to develop a narrative of labeling the war as a direct threat to their survival, ultimately driving them to participate in the war.

### **Resisting the TDF as a strategy to defend ethnic identity**

During the territorial expansion of civil wars and the result of control of territories by armed groups, communities will have two primary options: leaving or staying. Some individuals or groups may choose to leave their areas to enter refugee and displacement camps or migrate to safer areas in fear of violence. Some others may not have options to leave their homes and stay in conflict areas (Justino, 2009). These groups of individuals who choose to stay in their area will try to survive violence by either participating in the armed groups seeking protection from the armed groups or by remaining neutral (Justino, 2009). In North Wollo, many civilians remained in their vicinity, fearing retaliation by the advancing force for

three main reasons: past destruction and displacement of Tigrayans in 2017/18, community members' visible support for the new administration, and ethnic differences that heightened fears of being targeted.

Fearing the Tigray forces would spite the Amhara, community members in Raya Kobo fought against the TDF with their private firearms. They stood by the government side, responding to various calls (IDI-3, 30 September 2023, Woldia). There were several factors that motivated community members to support the government. First, they view the war as an ethnic-induced war, though ethnic differences were not the cause. Community members view that many of the Tigrayan fighters were fighting because they were mobilized by the TPLF based on their ethnic identity. Second, the TPLF was regarded as having anti-Amhara sentiment since its establishment in 1975 by many members of the Amhara community. Third, during the initial government's "law enforcement operation," the Amhara forces were involved in the war, and the TPLF echoed as the Amhara forces were committing heinous crimes in Tigray (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). Before advancing south to the Amhara region, Tigray forces threatened Amhara elites, claiming they would retaliate for the actions of Amhara forces in Tigray, alongside federal and Eritrean forces. Fourth, members of the community were determined for the continued administration of Raya under the Amhara administration.

As a community would stand to defend itself when an enemy comes to attack, the Raya Kobo people stood to safeguard themselves when they assumed the TDF would attack them. Community members in Raya Kobo fought against the TDF. Despite several youths in North Wollo being enlisted in the army to engage in combat, the fight by the Raya Kobo people was an effort to defend themselves against an imminent attack as civilians. With the available weapons, the Raya Kobo people tried to protect themselves from Tigrayan fighters. Nonetheless, as elders noted in the FGD, the TDF was well-organized, and it was difficult to stop them by the government forces, let alone by the Raya Kobo farmers, who were fighting with personal weapons (Elderly FGD, 18 November 2023, Kobo).

Collectively, however, there were rural Kebeles that halted the TDF's advance in Raya Kobo, such as Worke, Yaya, Gedemeyu, Dibi, and Zobel. Residents of these Kebeles fiercely fought the TDF. Community members in Worke Gebeya, for instance, strongly resisted the TDF and are known for halting the TDF's advance into their kebele. While the TDF reached up to North Shoa—around 120 miles away from Addis—controlling several areas, Worke Gebeya was not controlled. Informants noted how community members of Worke Gebeya are armed, culturally warrior-like, and battle-hardened fighters. As a border kebele of

Raya Kobo adjacent to the Afar regional state, the Worke Gebeya community members are an agro-pastoral society that has experienced repeated conflicts with neighboring Afar communities. Due to their local culture and ongoing tensions, all herders are personally armed. Furthermore, the Worke people know each other, and they could easily identify newcomers, so the TDF was unable to infiltrate the kebele to gather military information. As one youth FGD discussant noted, due to their bravery and halting of the TDF, the fighters in Worke are locally known by the name “ባለ ሸርጡ ኮማንዶ” (a farmer commando) (Youth FGD, 12 November 2023, Kobo). There was also strong resistance fighting in other kebeles of Raya Kobo, though they were later controlled by the TDF, such as Bereha Mariyam, Jemedo, and Tekulesh (Elderly FGD, 18 November 2023, Kobo).

All the communal resistance and fighting against the TDF in Raya Kobo demonstrated how past and present grievances against the TDF, and elite-induced ethnic mobilization, shaped local communities’ views into legitimizing elite narratives and taking sides with the government to defend themselves. Community members’ response to the Amhara regional government’s call for war also depicts how ethnicity can be effectively harnessed to mobilize people for war. Despite the war stemming from a struggle for political power among elites, however, both the warring elites in Tigray and Amhara leveraged ethnic identity as a means to secure power. The utilization of ethnicity as a strategic tool aligns with the existing literature, which suggests elites often employ ethnic affiliations for instrumental mobilization (Stewart, 2012). In conclusion, community members’ engagement in resisting the TDF can be understood through the lens of ethnicity theories, which emphasize how ethnic identity is socially constructed and politically instrumentalized. According to Horowitz (2000) and Brubaker (2002), elites activate ethnic categories to generate solidarity and justify collective action. In the research site, TPLF’s war was partly framed by elites as a direct danger to the community’s ethnic identity, instilling a shared grievance and motivating community members to participate in defence efforts.

## **Conclusion**

The roots of the Ethiopian civil war trace back to the ethnic-based administration and the political reform of 2018. The ethnic-based administration exercised in the country had a significant impact on creating grievances by the Amhara for being a target of ethnic-based attacks, which subsequently led the Amhara to develop a narrative that views TPLF as the primary source of the challenges faced by the Amhara community in the post-1991 period. The nexus between ethnic-based elite manipulation and ethnic-based administration shaped the views of local

community members in North Wollo to primarily view the war as a direct attack on Amhara identity. The Amhara ethnic identity was gradually constructed by the three-decade-long exercise of ethnic federalism and by specific ethnic-based attacks, which maintained local communities' ethnic identification and compelled them to view their involvement in supporting the government forces during the civil war as a means of defending their ethnic identity.

The Ethiopian civil war has pitted political elites. Yet, together with the entrenched ethnic-based politics, the war turned out to be seen through the lens of ethnic identity. Community members in North Wollo interpreted the war through the lens of ethnic identity grievance. As the Tigray fighters advanced south, local communities in the North Wollo perceived the Tigray fighters' movement as a threat to Amhara interests. Consequently, they resisted the TDF in defending their Amhara identity. The experience of the North Wollo communities in this war depicted how ethnic-based mobilization aggravated elite conflict and turned local communities into echoing the elites' narratives.

Overall, the everyday narratives surrounding the war in North Wollo are shaped by the intricate interplay of elite mobilization, ethnic-based politics, contested land, and identity questions in Raya, and the war's impact. This complex dynamic suggests that unless the underlying issues of elite manipulation and ethnic tensions associated with the ethnic politics in play are genuinely addressed, the reproduction of narratives that label out-groups as threats to in-groups will continue to worsen ethnic relations. The study broadens the discussion on the Ethiopian civil war by focusing on the less-discussed areas affected by the war and bringing forward local communities' narratives. The effort to bring everyday narratives to the fore has implications for further studies. A potential future research agenda could involve a comparative investigation of how community members in the war-affected areas of Tigray, Amhara, and Afar construct narratives about the civil war, and what potential similarities and variations may imply for peacebuilding policy design. Yet, given the study's exclusive focus on North Wollo, we acknowledge the existence of alternative narratives from the Tigrayan perspective and recommend a thorough investigation of these narratives to address gaps and promote solidarity and reconciliation between members of the two communities. Finally, the paper suggests that addressing ethnic grievances and perceptions of existential threats through all-inclusive dialogue and reconciliation is critical to fostering lasting peace. This could be achieved by setting an agenda that could balance the interests of elites who have the power to influence local communities' production and reproduction of everyday narratives.

**Disclosure statement**

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