

Webinar

Voices from Tigray

Brutalities against Religious Leaders,
Holy Places and Heritage in Tigray

Alula Tesfay

8 June 2021

EEPA

Brutalities against Religious leaders, Holy Places and Heritage in Tigray—
Heritage Elements of the Tigray Genocide and Appeal to the Global Community.

A long history of statehood, religious traditions, and excellence in literature, art, and architecture contribute to the rich cultural heritage of Tigray. A large section of Tigrayan history, culture, and religions dominated the mainstream heritage narration in Ethiopia mainly through appropriation without recognition.

Since the beginning of the war on Tigray, in early November 2020, multiple massacres of civilians were recorded that can only be explained as a coordinated genocide against Tigrayans. Many of these massacres were perpetrated within compounds of religious institutions. Religious leaders were among the main targets of these killing. Several rapes against nuns were reported. These people are guardians of heritage and at the core of community cohesion. Most Tigrayans are devoted believers that commute to religious sites several days a week. As a result of this, many of the old aged heritage sites are living heritage and in their original function. People seek refuge in these institutions in times of crisis. Axum UNESCO World Heritage Site hosted a brutal massacre while preparing for the site's most significant festival. This festival was not celebrated this season for the first time in the living memory spanning several centuries.

The complete communication blackout makes the current assessment of damage just a beginning of a long list of cultural dimensions to the genocide. Here are some of the core patterns of heritage destruction repeatedly observed in this war.

1. Appropriation of heritage through ethnic cleansing. The heritage sites in the western and southern occupied territories of Tigray were systematically depopulated and appropriated. Many heritage objects are reported to be looted and displaced to other places.
2. Heritage as a hostage. Heritage sites are bombarded and looted as a hostage to get information or other resources from the public. The shelling of Debre Damo monastery, one of the oldest in the country, is an example. The public were asked to give information on the whereabouts of the local defending army or lose their valuable heritage.
3. Depopulation of the area through destruction of the public good. Many religious sites in Tigray are traditionally places of refuge and safety to civilians during conflict. Many sites were directly hit to scare the public and depopulate these areas. This was done in major cities of Tigray and occupied territories.
4. Intentional destruction of markers of Tigrayan identity. The destruction of statues, obstruction of traditional site names, burning villages, and other markers of Tigrayan identity are conducted in all occupied territories of Tigray.

How can the international community help to stop the brutalities against religious leaders, holy places, and heritage in Tigray?

1. Pressure for ending the war and removal of alien forces from Tigrayan territories. Restoration of all communication means for damage assessment and coordination.

2. Financially and materially support traditional institutions in Tigray like religious institutions to strengthen themselves.
3. Liturgical or other heritage articles found in the global market should be flagged and reinstituted to their original locations. This includes many heritage objects to be found in other parts of Ethiopia.
4. Start planning and mobilization for the reconstruction of Tigray by supporting local institutions of the heritage sector. Local universities in Tigray should be supported and their human resources should be developed through training, collaborations, and assistance. The global academic community is urged to support in training the next generation of Tigrayans to rehabilitate the nation from the wounds of this genocide.

VOICES FROM TIGRAY

EPA EUROPE
EXTERNAL
PROGRAMME
— AFRICA
Webinar Series



BRUTALITIES AGAINST RELIGIOUS LEADERS, HOLY PLACES AND HERITAGE IN TIGRAY

Registration Link - <https://bit.ly/3fvRhDA>

**8TH
JUNE 2021**

14:00 - 16:00 EAT

13:00 - 15:00 CET

07:00 - 09:00 US EST



TOPIC

14:00 - 16:00 EAT
13:00 - 15:00 CET
07:00 - 09:00 US EST

**BRUTALITIES AGAINST RELIGIOUS
LEADERS, HOLY PLACES AND
HERITAGE IN TIGRAY**

PROGRAM SCHEDULE

CHAIR

Dr. Reginald Nalugala, Tangaza University College

MODERATOR

Paddy Maguinness

OPENING ADDRESS

His Eminence Archbishop Angaelos, Coptic Orthodox
Church UK

TESTIMONIES

OPENING BY

Helen Berhane, a former prisoner of Conscience and Campaigner
for Human Rights in Eritrea

SPEAKERS

- **Alula Tesfay Asfha**, Post-doctoral Researcher at the University of Tsukuba, Japan and Lecturer, Mekelle University, Ethiopia
- **Dr. Hagos Abrha Abay**, Researcher of Philology and Ge'ez Manuscript Culture
- **Fr. Mussie Zerai**, Roman Catholic Priest from Eritrea in Italy
- **Fisseha Tekle**, Amnesty International Researcher for Ethiopia and Eritrea
- **Dr. Wolbert Smidt**, Ethnohistorian Jena University and Adjunct Prof Mekelle University
- **Benoit Lannoo**, Ecumenical, Interfaith & Interreligious Dialogue
- **Dr. Khataza Gondwe**, Head of Advocacy and African Middle East Team Leader at Christian Solidarity Worldwide