

# Historical and Legal Identity of the Amhara People: Territorial Disputes and the Implementation Gaps in the Pretoria Agreement

Girma Melese<sup>(Ph.D.)</sup>

*Amhara National Regional State Council Member, Ethiopia*

**ABSTRACT:-** This study critically examines the historical and legal identity of the Amhara people in the context of longstanding territorial disputes with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). It investigates the annexation of regions such as Wolkait, Tegede, Telemite, Wofla, Korem, and Raya-Alemata into the Tigray Region during the transitional federal period and the subsequent marginalization of the Amhara population. The paper highlights both historical records and constitutional frameworks that support Amhara claims to these territories. Furthermore, it analyzes the Pretoria Agreement, identifying key shortcomings in its implementation, particularly the failure to enforce disarmament provisions and the misinterpretation of clauses by the TPLF. The study concludes with a call for legal and constitutional mechanisms—including referenda and federal arbitration—to resolve boundary and identity disputes and achieve lasting peace.

**Keywords:** Amhara identity, Territorial disputes, Wolkait Tegede Telemite, Pretoria Agreement, TPLF, Federal Constitution of Ethiopia, Boundary conflict, Self-determination, Referendum, Indigenous rights

## I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Ethiopia has experienced significant political and social transformations since 2010 E.C., marked by both remarkable progress and persistent challenges. Among the most critical and destabilizing issues has been the armed conflict initiated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the northern regions of the country. The coordinated assault on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces on October 24, 2013 E.C. by the TPLF triggered a nationwide crisis with profound consequences, particularly for the Amhara and Afar regions.

At the core of the conflict lies the TPLF's intent to reverse political reforms and secure its exclusive interests—both as a political entity and as an ethnic group. This has reignited longstanding grievances, especially those concerning the forcibly annexed territories historically inhabited by Amhara communities. These include Wolkait, Tegede, Telemite, Raya-Alemata, Korem, and Wofla—areas that were incorporated into the Tigray Region during the transitional period following the fall of the Derg regime.

The signing of the Pretoria Agreement on November 2, 2022, marked a pivotal moment in the effort to end hostilities and establish a framework for sustainable peace. The agreement included critical provisions concerning a permanent ceasefire, the disarmament and reintegration of illegal armed groups, and mechanisms for addressing the root causes of the conflict through political and legal means. However, while the cessation of open warfare has brought temporary relief, the failure to implement key components of the agreement—particularly the disarmament of TPLF forces—continues to undermine its effectiveness.

This paper aims to explore the historical, legal, and geopolitical dimensions of the Amhara people's identity and territorial claims. It critically assesses the shortcomings in the implementation of the Pretoria Agreement and argues that a sustainable resolution to Ethiopia's internal disputes must be grounded in constitutional law, historical legitimacy, and the will of the people.

## II. HISTORICAL IDENTITY OF THE AMHARA PEOPLE AND THE WOLKAIT–TEGEDE–TELEMIT DISPUTE

The historical identity and administrative continuity of the Amhara people, particularly in the regions of Wolkait, Tegede, and Telemite, have long been central to Ethiopia's complex federal arrangement. These areas, once firmly under the jurisdiction of the historical Begemdir (Gondar) province, became contested following the establishment of the ethnic federalism model in 1991 (1983 E.C.). The adoption of this system,

which sought to organize regions along ethnolinguistic lines, overlooked significant demographic and historical realities on the ground, especially in areas where identities were multilayered and had been suppressed or misrepresented for political gain.

Under the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, the issuance of **Proclamation No. 7/1984** laid out the legal framework for the creation of regional states. Article 4(1) of the proclamation specified that regional boundaries were to be determined based on the settlement patterns and self-identification of the resident populations. Article 2(7) defined a "nation" as a community with a common language, culture, and psychological makeup inhabiting a contiguous territory. This legal structure should have provided a safeguard for the Amhara communities in Wolkait, Tegede, and Telemi to maintain their cultural and administrative affiliation with the Amhara people.

However, political dominance by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) during the transitional period allowed for unilateral decisions regarding regional boundaries. Taking advantage of their disproportionate influence over the federal government and its institutions, the TPLF annexed these territories into the newly formed Tigray Regional State. This move was not only unconstitutional but also in violation of the rights of the local populations, who overwhelmingly identified as Amhara or Agew.

Multiple historical accounts, oral testimonies, and written petitions illustrate the strong resistance of the local population to this forced reclassification. One of the earliest and most well-documented cases was the letter written by **Dagnaw Woldeslasie**, a representative of the Wolkait Amhara Identity Committee, addressed directly to then Transitional Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on November 11, 1984 E.C. In this letter, he cautioned against the historical and political repercussions of severing Wolkait from its Amhara identity and warned that such a move would not only deepen ethnic divisions but also provoke demands for reunification with the Amhara Region in the future.

Despite such warnings and multiple appeals from identity and boundary committees formed in Wolkait, Tegede, and Telemi, no meaningful action was taken by the federal or regional authorities. These communities faced continued marginalization, systematic cultural erasure, and exclusion from development opportunities. The TPLF's administration imposed a Tigrean identity on the local population, changed school curricula, and repressed expressions of Amhara heritage.

This forced assimilation campaign was not limited to symbolic suppression. Many community leaders, activists, and residents who advocated for the restoration of Amhara identity were detained, disappeared, or killed. The historical and legal grievances continued to fester under the surface until 2010 E.C., when a political reform movement, driven in part by resistance within the Amhara region, began to challenge the legitimacy of the existing regional boundaries.

A pivotal moment in this movement was the self-defense effort led by **Colonel Demeke Zewudu** in 2008 E.C. (2015/16 G.C.), who resisted TPLF security operations in the Gondar area. This resistance reignited public discourse on identity and boundary issues and laid the groundwork for broader reforms initiated by the ruling Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), which eventually merged into the Prosperity Party. Under the new political climate, long-silenced issues of identity and boundary disputes, especially those involving Wolkait, Tegede, and Telemi, gained national attention.

It is also crucial to consider the historical basis for the Amhara identity of these regions. Records dating back to the Aksumite era, through the Solomonic dynasty, the Gondarine period, and into the 20th century, consistently place these territories within the cultural and administrative domain of the Amhara. Local oral histories, stone inscriptions, imperial chronicles, foreign travelogues, and ecclesiastical records all corroborate the Amhara identity of these communities.

Geographically, the **Tekeze River** has long been recognized as a natural boundary separating the historical territories of the Amhara and Tigray peoples. This is affirmed by prominent Ethiopian historians and European scholars such as **James Bruce**, **Mansfield Parkyns**, and **Francisco Alvarez**, who documented the distinct administrative, linguistic, and cultural divisions between the two populations. These historical records uniformly identify the Wolkait-Tegede-Telemi region as an extension of the Amhara-inhabited Begemdir province, not Tigray.

Furthermore, the violent annexation and sustained suppression of Amhara identity in these areas constitute a breach of both national and international law, including provisions in the Ethiopian Federal Constitution and the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)**. These instruments affirm the right of communities to self-identification, cultural preservation, and territorial integrity based on historical settlement patterns.

Therefore, the historical identity of the Amhara people in Wolkait, Tegede, and Telemi is not a subject of political negotiation but a well-established fact supported by centuries of evidence. The demand for legal redress, territorial restitution, and recognition of identity in these areas remains a central aspect of Ethiopia's ongoing struggle for justice, unity, and constitutional order.

### III. LEGAL FOUNDATIONS FOR IDENTITY AND BOUNDARY CLAIMS

In addition to the extensive historical record, the legal framework within both national and international systems offers clear validation for the claims of the Amhara people in the disputed areas of Wolkait, Tegede, Telemite, and Raya. These legal principles are embedded in Ethiopia's transitional laws, its federal constitution, and international legal instruments that recognize and protect the rights of indigenous peoples to self-identification, autonomy, and equitable governance.

#### 3.1 National Legal Framework

The foundational legal basis for regional formation in post-Derg Ethiopia is **Transitional Government Proclamation No. 7/1984**, which outlined the criteria for creating regional states based on settlement patterns, language, identity, and the will of the people. According to **Article 4(1)**, the structuring of regional governments must reflect the actual demographic and cultural makeup of the population.

This was reinforced by the **Federal Constitution of Ethiopia (1995)**, particularly:

- **Article 46(2)**: Requires regions to be delimited based on settlement, language, identity, and the consent of the people.
- **Article 39(5)**: Guarantees nations, nationalities, and peoples the right to a referendum if they seek to establish their own region or redefine their political status.
- **Article 48**: Provides mechanisms for settling boundary disputes through negotiation or federal arbitration.

In this legal context, the case for Wolkait, Tegede, Telemite, and Raya returning to the Amhara Region is both constitutionally grounded and procedurally viable.

#### 3.2 Legal Violations by the TPLF

The forced annexation of Amhara-inhabited territories into the Tigray Region, without popular consent or legal basis, constitutes a breach of these constitutional principles. The TPLF's long-standing suppression of the Amhara identity in these areas—including restrictions on language use, representation, and cultural expression—further violates legal protections under Ethiopia's federal system.

Moreover, during the transitional period, identity and boundary committees submitted formal claims under **Proclamation No. 7/1984** and were entitled to responses within legally mandated timeframes. These claims were ignored, further invalidating the administrative actions taken by the TPLF and Tigray Regional State.

#### 3.3 International Legal Support

The **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007)** provides additional support for the Amhara claims.

- **Article 3**: States that indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination, allowing them to freely determine their political status and pursue economic, social, and cultural development.
- **Article 4**: Affirms the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs.

Given the documented presence of the Amhara people in these areas, and the extensive evidence of cultural and historical continuity, the enforcement of these legal principles should result in the restoration of these communities to the Amhara Region.

#### 3.4 The Role of the Federation Council

As per **Proclamation No. 1261/2013** and subsequent regulations adopted in 2014, the Ethiopian Federation Council is tasked with interpreting constitutional disputes and overseeing referenda related to identity and boundary issues.

The council has three clear legal pathways to resolve such disputes:

1. **Negotiation** between the regional governments (Article 48(1)).
2. **Federal arbitration** based on demographic and historical claims (Article 48(2)).
3. **Referendum** based on the will of the people (Article 39(5)).

All three options remain legally available and underscore the legitimacy of the Amhara claim.

In conclusion, the legal argument for restoring Wolkait, Tegede, Telemite, and Raya to the Amhara Region is compelling. It is supported by national law, constitutional principles, and international human rights instruments. Any sustainable resolution to the boundary and identity conflict must be guided by these legal frameworks, ensuring justice and long-term peace.

### IV. SHORTCOMINGS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PRETORIA AGREEMENT

The Pretoria Agreement, signed on November 2, 2022, marked a pivotal moment in Ethiopia's post-conflict trajectory, offering a path to cease hostilities and initiate political dialogue. While the agreement represented a significant diplomatic breakthrough, its implementation has been marred by numerous shortcomings—particularly concerning disarmament, the protection of civilian rights, and the resolution of territorial and identity disputes.

#### 4.1 Failure to Enforce Disarmament and Demobilization

One of the core pillars of the Pretoria Agreement is the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) combatants. **Article 6** explicitly mandates the disbandment of all unauthorized armed groups, recognizing the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) as the sole legitimate military body.

Despite this clear directive, the TPLF continues to maintain a military presence under the guise of the "Tigray Defense Forces" (TDF), with active command structures and access to medium- and heavy-grade weaponry. This violates the spirit and letter of the agreement and creates a volatile security environment, particularly for contested areas like Wolkait and Raya, where local populations remain vulnerable to renewed violence.

The delay and ambiguity in implementing DDR protocols have allowed the TPLF to regroup militarily and politically, undermining confidence in the peace process. It also emboldens secessionist rhetoric and encourages renewed claims over disputed territories.

#### 4.2 Manipulation of Constitutional Clauses

Another critical flaw in the implementation phase has been the **TPLF's strategic reinterpretation** of the Pretoria Agreement's provisions. The TPLF frequently invokes the agreement's reference to the "restoration of constitutional order" in Tigray to justify its demands for control over territories it annexed unilaterally during its rule.

However, this clause was intended to reaffirm Ethiopia's federal system, under which Tigray is one of several regional states governed by constitutional norms—not to legitimize past illegal expansions. The term "restoration" cannot be construed as an endorsement of TPLF-imposed boundaries or electoral outcomes that were conducted outside the national framework.

The TPLF's attempt to reclaim Wolkait, Raya, and other areas under the pretense of legal restoration amounts to a **misrepresentation of the agreement's intent**. It also undermines national sovereignty and the rights of affected populations who have rejected TPLF rule through both democratic channels and public mobilization.

#### 4.3 Suppression of Legal Mechanisms

Instead of advocating for resolution through constitutional mechanisms such as negotiation or referendum, the TPLF has resisted legal pathways. By doing so, it seeks to maintain a political and territorial status quo that benefits its strategic interests.

In rejecting a **referendum**, the most democratic option available under **Article 39(5)** of the Federal Constitution, the TPLF reveals its reluctance to allow the people of contested regions to determine their identity and administrative alignment through lawful means. This is a direct violation of the principles of self-determination enshrined in both national and international law.

#### 4.4 Ongoing Hostilities and Interference

Despite the formal cessation of hostilities, **intermittent acts of aggression** and administrative interference by the TPLF continue to destabilize the Amhara Region. The group has engaged in propaganda campaigns, supported militia incursions, and sought to undermine regional governance structures through covert operations. These actions have worsened ethnic tensions and delayed the reintegration and rehabilitation processes needed to build a durable peace. By resisting the Pretoria Agreement's core mandates, the TPLF has positioned itself as a **destabilizing force**, rather than a partner in peace.

#### 4.5 Institutional Weakness and Lack of Accountability

The Pretoria Agreement entrusts oversight responsibilities to national and continental institutions, including the **National Implementation Commission** and the **African Union Monitoring Mechanism**. However, both entities have so far failed to enforce compliance with the agreement's critical provisions.

This lack of enforcement enables the TPLF to operate with impunity, delays justice for affected communities, and perpetuates insecurity. Without stronger institutional resolve and clear accountability measures, the agreement risks devolving into a symbolic gesture rather than a transformative peace framework.

## V. PATHWAYS TO A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE RESOLUTION

To secure lasting peace and national cohesion, Ethiopia must address the identity and boundary disputes involving the Amhara people through legal, democratic, and historically informed mechanisms. These approaches must ensure that the voices of affected populations are not silenced, and that state institutions uphold their constitutional duties impartially and transparently.

#### 5.1 Constitutional and Legal Pathways

The Ethiopian Constitution provides a clear legal roadmap for resolving identity and boundary conflicts:

- **Article 48** stipulates that such disputes must be resolved either through mutual agreement between the regional states or, if negotiation fails, through federal intervention.
- **Article 39(5)** affirms the right of nations, nationalities, and peoples to a referendum, enabling them to determine their political status.

These provisions establish a constitutional mandate to resolve disputes like those concerning Wolkait, Tegede, Telemit, and Raya through either negotiation, arbitration by the House of Federation, or a public referendum based on the will of the local population.

### 5.2 *The Imperative of a Referendum*

Among the legal mechanisms available, the **referendum** is the most democratic and legitimate option. It ensures that the people directly affected by boundary and identity disputes are empowered to decide their future. In the case of the Wolkait-Tegede-Telemit region, where ample historical and demographic evidence supports the Amhara claim, a referendum would affirm the principle of self-determination and uphold constitutional justice. The federal government and the House of Federation must act swiftly to initiate and oversee a referendum process in line with existing legal procedures and without external interference. Any delay or obstruction of this process only deepens public mistrust and prolongs the conflict.

### 5.3 *The Role of the Federation Council and Independent Institutions*

The **House of Federation**, as the highest constitutional interpreter, must assume a proactive role in adjudicating this matter. It should:

- Facilitate a transparent review of historical and demographic claims.
- Supervise referendum preparations in collaboration with the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE).
- Ensure fair representation of local voices in line with national and international norms.

Independent institutions, including the **Human Rights Commission** and civil society organizations, must also monitor the process to safeguard the rights of all communities involved.

### 5.4 *Regional Dialogue and Reconciliation*

Although legal mechanisms are indispensable, parallel efforts must be made to foster **regional dialogue and reconciliation**. Historical grievances, narratives of marginalization, and mutual suspicions must be addressed through inclusive dialogue platforms that bring together traditional leaders, local communities, and youth organizations.

The federal government, in partnership with international actors such as the **African Union** and **UN agencies**, should support peacebuilding programs, cultural restoration initiatives, and development investments in the affected areas. Only through such holistic efforts can social healing and peaceful coexistence be achieved.

### 5.5 *Commitment to Justice and National Unity*

Ultimately, the restoration of Wolkait, Tegede, Telemit, and Raya to the Amhara Region is not an act of revenge or territorial conquest. It is a demand for justice, identity recognition, and respect for the rule of law. Addressing these issues head-on is essential not only for Amhara communities but for the stability and unity of Ethiopia as a whole.

The Amhara people have consistently demonstrated their commitment to constitutionalism and national integrity. In turn, the Ethiopian state must uphold its legal obligations and ensure that identity-based grievances are resolved through lawful and peaceful means.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The identity and boundary disputes involving the Amhara people and the TPLF's territorial claims represent a deep-rooted historical injustice perpetuated through decades of political manipulation and state neglect. The unlawful annexation of Wolkait, Tegede, Telemit, and Raya, and the sustained denial of Amhara identity within these regions, have caused immeasurable suffering and conflict.

While the Pretoria Agreement offered a critical opportunity to end armed hostilities, its implementation has failed to address the foundational causes of the conflict. The disarmament of the TPLF, the restoration of legal territorial arrangements, and the protection of community rights remain unfulfilled promises.

Moving forward, Ethiopia must commit to a path of justice rooted in its constitution and the aspirations of its diverse peoples. Legal mechanisms, especially referenda and arbitration by the House of Federation, provide the tools necessary for peaceful resolution. Regional reconciliation, transparent governance, and the protection of minority rights must complement these efforts.

By confronting these challenges with integrity and resolve, Ethiopia can transform its painful past into a foundation for national unity, constitutional order, and lasting peace.



## REFERENCES

- [1]. Achamyeleh Tamiru. (2021). *The historical Amhara identity of Wolqayt-Tsegedie*.
- [2]. Alvarez, F. F., & Alderley, L. S. O. (2010). *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia during the years 1520*. Ashgate Publishing Company.
- [3]. Asnake Ali. (1983). *Aspects of the Political History of Wollo: Since 1872–1917*. Addis Ababa University.
- [4]. Bahru Zewde. (1976). *Relations between Ethiopia and the Sudan on the Western Ethiopian Frontier, 1898–1935* (Ph.D. thesis). SOAS, University of London.
- [5]. Bahru Zewde. (1988). Gondar in the early twentieth century: A preliminary investigation on a 1930/31 census. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 31, 57–81.
- [6]. Berhe, M. G. (2020). *Laying the Past to Rest: The EPRDF and the Challenges of Ethiopian State-building*. Hurst & Company.
- [7]. Geddes, M. (1696a, 1696b). *The Church History of Ethiopia*.
- [8]. Getaneh Assefa & A. Russo. (1994). Stratigraphy and age of the rock sequence in Aksum and its surrounding regions. *CV 33*, 1: 36–44.
- [9]. J. Abbink. (1960–1995). *Eritrean–Ethiopian Studies in Society and History*.
- [10]. Mansfield Parkyns. (1853). *Life in Abyssinia*.
- [11]. Pankhurst, R. (1967). *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*.
- [12]. Parkyns, M. (1853). *Life in Abyssinia: Being Notes Collected During Three Years' Residence and Travel in that Country*.
- [13]. Phillipson, D. W. (1998). *Ancient Ethiopia: Aksum, Its Antecedents and Successors*.
- [14]. Sa'dāwī, N. (1985). *God Dies by the Nile*. Zed Books.
- [15]. Tesemma Ta'a. (1994). Oral historiography on Oromo studies. *CV 33*, 1: 981–992.
- [16]. Zewde, B., & Pausewang, S. (2002). *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below*. Nordic Africa Institute.
- [17]. Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995.
- [18]. Pretoria Agreement, Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), November 2, 2022,
- [19]. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007)

**Girma Melese(Ph.D.)**

**Amhara National Regional State Council Member, Ethiopia**