"Only Amharic or Leave Quick!": Linguistic Genocide in the Western Tigray Region of Ethiopia

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Abstract

Language is a powerful tool that enables communication and shapes our identity and cultural practices. The right to choose one's language is a fundamental human right that helps preserve personal and communal identities. In a multilingual nation like Ethiopia, language goes beyond communication to define administrative boundaries. Consequently, depriving Ethiopians of their linguistic rights becomes a more complex punishment than food embargoes. This research investigated the motives and means by which the Amhara Regional State-enforced a monolingual and monocultural language education policy in western Tigray through the lens of linguistic genocide. The study involved interviews with ten teachers, selected using a snowball sampling method, and document analysis to reinforce the result. Political and economic factors and a desire to promote the assimilation of Tigrayans into Amhara culture and language, a process known as "Amharanization", appear to have impacted the implementation of the language education policy in western Tigray. Authorities have implemented a variety of measures, including bans, restrictions, penalties, enforcement, forced relocation, and even heinous acts, which have caused the Tigrayan community severe physical and psychological distress. Collectively, these policies, actions, and outcomes constituted an act of linguistic genocide. This study sheds light on the severe repercussions of such policies, examines their implications, acknowledges the inherent limitations, and offers valuable recommendations for future research in this crucial area.

Keywords Mother tongue · Medium of instruction · Linguistic genocide · Western Tigray

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1 Introduction

Ethiopia adopted a federal system of government in 1994, with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) playing a pivotal role in its establishment [1]. This party led the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of four parties that took control of the country after the Dergue military regime ended in May 1991 [2]. During the leadership of the EPRDF, despite undemocratic practices, Ethiopia experienced significant and inclusive economic growth. [1]. The country achieved an impressive average annual growth rate of 9.9% from 2007/08 to 2017/18, which surpassed the regional average of 5.4% [2].

Following widespread calls for change in 2018, Abiy Ahmed Ali was appointed Ethiopia's Prime Minister. He has taken significant steps to reform the country, including releasing political prisoners, liberalising the media, and implementing anticorruption measures [3]. In recognition of his efforts to resolve the dispute with Eritrea, Abiy was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 [4]. However, Tigray leaders have criticised his reforms as too centralising and undermining Ethiopia's federal structure. Additionally, critics have raised concerns about the transparency of Abiy's association with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki.

In September 2020, Tigray conducted its regional elections despite the central government's decision to delay periodic polls due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This led to tensions with Abiy's administration. The federal government deemed these elections invalid, resulting in both sides labelling each other as "illegitimate". In response to alleged attacks by Tigrayan troops on army sites, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initiated a "law enforcement operation", which began on 4 November 2020. On 28 November, the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Eritrean Defence Force (EDF), and Amhara Regional troops captured Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. Although Abiy declared the operation over, the formation of the Tigray Defence Force (TDF) led to continued resistance. In May 2021, the Ethiopian government labelled the TPLF a terrorist group. The TDF declared that they would fight until the invaders were expelled. On 28 June 2021, TDF retook Mekelle. However, they have not reclaimed some Occupied Tigrayan Territories (OTT), such as western and southern Tigray and parts of northwest and eastern Tigray.

Following a devastating two-year civil war that displaced millions of people and resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives [5], the Ethiopian government and TPLF signed a long-lasting peace agreement. The initial deal was signed in Pretoria, South Africa, on 2 November 2022 and in Nairobi on 12 November 2022. The Pretoria Agreement emphasised stopping hostilities and restoring the pre-conflict constitutional order, while the Nairobi Agreement called for withdrawing foreign and non-ENDF troops from the Tigray region [6].

Despite the agreement, the Amhara regional state, supported by the Ethiopian Federal Government and Eritrea, occupied western Tigray by citing historical claims [4]. Although historical claims are irrelevant in the current federal structure, historical and geographical evidence shows that Welkait (part of western Tigray) has always been part of Tigray [7–10]. The armed struggle against the Dergue regime aimed to secure self-administration rights for the Ethiopian people and their national

identity. After the EPRDF took power in 1991, people throughout Ethiopia began removing imposed leaders and replacing them with native and local administrators. As part of this transformation, Tigrayans in western Tigray, previously led by central government-imposed leaders, started adjusting their identity and administration to align with Tigray's linguistically and culturally similar people. Until the ratification of the Ethiopian constitution in 1995, western Tigray was entirely inhabited and administered by Tigrayans. The 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) [11], prioritises factors such as settlement patterns, language, identity, and local consent in determining the administrative structure [11]. As most Tigrayans already lived in western Tigray, it was incorporated into the Tigray region in 1991–1994. Furthermore, according to the Constitution of the FDRE [11], each region in Ethiopia is expected to enact and enforce its state constitution and other laws. The Amhara National Regional State Constitution (ANRSC) provides additional evidence. According to Article 2 of the ANRSC, the Amhara region shares its borders with Tigray to the north, the Afar region to the east, the Oromia region to the south, and the Benshangul-Gumuz region and Sudan to the west [12]. Based on this constitutional provision, Western Tigray is a part of Tigray, as the Amhara region shares its border solely with Tigray to the north, not Eritrea.

The annexation of western Tigray and its incorporation into the Amhara region have raised concerns about preserving the indigenous Tigrayan language and culture. Considering this, the present study aims to investigate the monolingual and monocultural language education policy implemented in the occupied western Tigray elementary schools. Specifically, the researchers examine the reasons behind this policy, the methods used to implement it, and whether it constitutes linguistic genocide. Our investigation is based on the Skutnabb-Kangas [13] notion of linguistic genocide and is guided by the principles outlined in Articles 2(b) and 2(e) of the 1948 Genocide Convention [14]. By analysing the contextual elements, underlying motives, and lasting consequences of this policy, the study aimed to shed light on its impact on the Tigrayan language and culture. In particular, the study aimed to answer the following research questions.

1. What were the reasons for implementing the Amharic-only education policy in western Tigray elementary schools?
2. How was the exclusive Amharic language education policy put into action?
3. Did the acts, intentions, and outcomes amount to linguistic genocide?

2 Review of the Literature

2.1 Language Education Policy and Practices in Ethiopia

The formulation and implementation of language policy is a crucial undertaking that requires establishing a comprehensive framework of principles, regulations, and decisions [15–17]. Government institutions implement these measures to effectively address and manage various language use, administration, and regulation aspects

within a particular region or context. The formulation of policies includes the crucial task of establishing designated languages for official use in government, legal, and administrative contexts [17]. Additionally, it involves the development of comprehensive language education curricula that include proficiency benchmarks and instructional methodologies. Furthermore, it requires implementing language planning strategies specifically designed to protect or advance languages or dialects [17]. Moreover, language policies play a crucial role in fostering and upholding a society that values and embraces multilingualism [16]. These policies focus on promoting the use of multiple languages and safeguarding individuals' fundamental linguistic human rights. This includes ensuring everyone can access education and public services in their native language, thus eliminating language-based discrimination [15, 17].

Policy decisions related to language are complex and multifaceted, often extending beyond the realm of language itself. These decisions are not always rational or objective. Still, they are frequently influenced by underlying ideologies and shaped by various factors embedded in the intricate web of sociolinguistic, political, and historical contexts [17]. In the context of the Language in Education Policy (LEP), it becomes evident that these policies are not only concerned with language and education but are intricately tied to the dynamics of power within society through the medium of the educational system [16, 17]. This means that language policies can serve as tools to exert and maintain power, privilege, and control over specific linguistic groups or communities, perpetuating inequalities and shaping the social fabric of a given society. Therefore, language policies are intertwined with societal power structures and play a crucial role in addressing social justice and equity issues, beyond just promoting effective communication and educational goals.

Policy decisions regarding language in Ethiopia have consistently considered factors beyond the language itself [17]. This implies that decisions, choices, or plans related to language or language varieties have consistently lacked rationality and objectivity. Language policy decisions in Ethiopia have been carefully designed to align with specific ideologies and are influenced by various factors within diverse sociolinguistic, political, and historical contexts [16, 17]. The language in education policy in Ethiopia encompasses language and education and extends to the intricate dynamics of power within society as manifested through the education system.

Ethiopia is a multicultural nation with more than 80 distinct languages of the Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic, and Nilo-Saharan language families [16, 17]. In addition, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church uses Ge'ez, a traditional written language of Ethiopia with no native speakers. Muslims in Ethiopia speak Arabic, which is essential for them as their spiritual language [18]. Prior to Haile Selassie's reign (pre-1930), Ethiopia lacked an official written language policy [2]. Prominent scholars, such as Yohannes [17], have comprehensively analysed language policy and planning in Ethiopia, delineating it into two distinct periods: pre-1991 and post-1991. Furthermore, Ado [15] has contributed to this discourse by proposing a tripartite categorisation of language policy and planning in Ethiopia, encompassing three significant epochs. These epochs are identified as follows: (1) the Geez era, spanning until the nineteenth century; (2) the Amharic era, extending from the nineteenth century to 1991; and (3) the post-1991 era. According to Ado [15], the first period, which dates

to ancient times until the nineteenth century, is commonly called the era of Geez. During this time, Geez served as the predominant language of communication and cultural expression within the Ethiopian context [15].

The second period, beginning in the nineteenth century and extending until 1991, is known as the era of the Amharic. Amharic emerged as a prominent language, assuming a central role in various domains such as governance, education, and literature. During this period, Ethiopia witnessed the widespread adoption and utilisation of Amharic as the primary means of communication and the official language of Ethiopia. With the introduction of modern education in Ethiopia in 1908, foreign languages such as Italian, French, Arabic, and English were also incorporated as subjects and mediums of instruction [15, 17]. Throughout this historical period, Emperor Haile Selassie and the socialist Dergue significantly influenced the promotion and institutionalisation of the Amharic language [17]. The language policy of Emperor Haile Selassie (1930–1974) formally proclaimed Amharic as the exclusive MOI for primary education in 1955. Although ideologically motivated, the imperial system's policy change was advantageous since it freed Ethiopia's educational system from the linguistic and cultural predominance of the English language [17]. The nationwide adoption of a single ethnic language under this monolingual policy also aimed to modernise, centralise and integrate society [16]. To that goal, the nation-building idea of "one nation, one language" was further institutionalised. As a result, Amharic became one of Ethiopia's most prominent official languages and emblems of national cohesion [16]. It began as a checkpoint for any career, education, or political path [17]. During this time, this monolingual policy in a bilingual, multi-ethnic, and multicultural Ethiopia was seen as an internal imposition of language and culture. When parents are forbidden from teaching their children in their native language, it indicates that they view their culture and its people with disdain. Large-scale protests were held in Addis Ababa over various social and political issues, including the government's insistence on using Amharic as MOI and the outright ban on mother tongue education [17].

The military junta Dergue took control after the emperor was deposed in 1974 amid widespread opposition. The language policy during the socialist Dergue regime (1974–1991) was influenced by the question of nationality and took socialism as its political programme and ideology [17]. Dergue recognised all nationalities' linguistic rights and equality and implemented a multilingual language policy to address language-based problems and promote educational equity and quality for all [16]. This policy had empirical and ideological factors, as it was aimed at resolving language-based issues while also perpetuating the ideology of socialism [17]. Although Dergue claimed to uphold socialist principles that advocated for equal rights among different ethnic groups, its policies and actions still reflected the same monolingual nation-building ideology as its predecessor. One of the primary criticisms levied against the language policy implemented by the socialist Dergue regime is its perpetuation of a monolingual approach, in which Amharic was exclusively used as the medium of instruction within primary education [16, 17]. This critique is particularly significant given the regime's purported commitment to a multilingual policy. The apparent contradiction between the professed ideology of embracing multiple languages and the observed prevalence of a monolingual approach has led to widespread scepticism regarding Dergue's underlying motives

and objectives. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge Dergue's notable shortcomings in effectively executing its explicitly stated multilingual language policy within the confines of the formal education system. This inadequacy has inevitably raised concerns about Dergue's steadfast dedication to upholding linguistic diversity and safeguarding the fundamental rights of marginalised minority language communities [17]. As a result of implementing monolingual Amharic policies in the multilingual nation of Ethiopia during the imperial and military eras, Amharic became the de facto national language, and all other Ethiopian languages were devalued in the educational setting.

Lastly, the post-1991 era marks a significant shift in Ethiopia's language policy, as it embraces a more inclusive approach that promotes a diverse array of Ethiopian languages. After the fall of the Dergue regime in May 1991, the EPRDF established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) [1]. The initial development of the charter by the TGE primarily focused on the recognition and protection of the rights of various nations and nationalities [16]. The charter and policy guidelines of the TGE in 1991, as well as the Constitution of the FDRE, clearly articulate the fundamental right of all nations and nationalities to use, protect and improve their respective languages and cultures [15, 17]. This implies that individuals possess the prerogative to employ their respective languages as MOIs and within other official and public spheres. In 1994, the FDRE's Ministry of Education (MoE) took a significant step forward by formulating the new Education and Training Policy. This policy encompasses various aspects of language and education, thus addressing crucial policy matters. The policy stipulates that primary education shall be provided in the languages of the respective nationalities, with due regard to the pedagogical benefits associated with acquiring knowledge in one's mother tongue, as well as the imperative of upholding the rights of various nationalities to promote the utilisation of their respective languages [16, 17]. Furthermore, this innovative approach facilitates the acquisition of knowledge by enabling nations and nationalities to engage in educational endeavours utilising their native language or by selecting from a curated array of languages that have been carefully chosen based on their national and country-wide prevalence. Furthermore, it is imperative to note that the linguistic medium employed in teacher training programmes for kindergarten and primary education should align with the national language prevalent in the respective region [19].

Among the three distinct eras under consideration, it is noteworthy that the post-1991 era has witnessed a substantial surge in language planning and policy endeavours. This period recognises and encourages using all Ethiopian languages, acknowledging their cultural significance, and fostering linguistic diversity within the nation [17]. A significant number of diverse languages, more than 50, have been transcribed into written form [15]. Furthermore, it is pertinent to note that approximately 34 languages have reached the status of being used as MOI or designated as subjects within the realm of primary education [15].

2.2 Cultural and Linguistic Human Rights

Language is a vital part of human communication and everyday life. It enables us to express thoughts, emotions, and ideas through words, sounds, and body language. Language is not just a means of communication but also shapes our identity and

reflects the diversity of cultures. Learning in one's mother tongue has educational benefits and is recognised as a fundamental human right. International organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) promote and preserve linguistic human rights.

UNESCO [20] recognises the crucial role of protecting and promoting language and cultural rights. The organisation firmly believes that the seeds of war are sown in the minds of men and, hence, the defences of peace must be constructed in the same place. UNESCO considers language and culture essential to human diversity, and their preservation and promotion can foster social cohesion and sustainable development. In pursuit of this goal, UNESCO strives to promote multilingualism and linguistic diversity, protect endangered languages, and preserve cultural heritage. In addition, the organisation advocates for recognising cultural rights as human rights and works to ensure that cultural diversity is celebrated and respected globally. The Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity of UNESCO emphasises that the protection, promotion, and maintenance of cultural diversity are indispensable for sustainable development, which benefits both the present and future generations. Article 5 of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions recognises the unique cultural activities, goods, and services as vehicles of identity, values, and meaning and calls for the promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions for the present and future generations.

The UNDRIP [21] was adopted in 2007, stating the fundamental rights of indigenous groups to life, liberty, and security. The declaration unequivocally condemns all forms of genocide, including forced removal or assimilation. Specifically, Articles 7 and 10 protect individuals and communities against forced removal from their lands without their consent. The significance of Article 10 lies in its explicit emphasis on the requirement of free, prior, and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned before any relocation can be considered. Moreover, the parties involved must come to a mutually agreed-upon, just and equitable compensation. Additionally, the option of returning to the original location should be available where feasible. Article 8 serves as a safeguard against cultural destruction and assimilation by establishing mechanisms for prevention and redress. Furthermore, Articles 9 and 11 emphasise the fundamental rights of indigenous communities to practice their traditions, customs, and cultural heritage without discrimination. Any violation of these rights can be considered genocide and must be addressed accordingly [21].

The ICCPR [22] recognises the fundamental right of individuals to embrace their cultural heritage and use their native language. Article 27 of the ICCPR mandates that individuals belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities must be granted the right to enjoy their culture, freely practice their religious beliefs, and use their language without prejudice. The ICCPR put it as follows:

> In those States in which ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their religion, or to use their language [22:14].

The Ethiopian Constitution, considered the supreme law of Ethiopia, was adopted on 21st August 1995 by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia. The 1995 EFDR constitution [11] is a comprehensive legal document that enshrines various fundamental rights and freedoms for the Ethiopian people. Specifically, Article 39 (2) of the constitution recognises and addresses linguistic human rights by providing nations, nationalities, and peoples in Ethiopia with the right to speak, write and develop their language. This article also acknowledges the right of these groups to express, develop and promote their culture, as well as preserve their history [11].

2.3 Genocide

Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer, coined the word "genocide" and the ideology behind it in his 1944 book "Axis Rule in Occupied Europe". According to Lemkin [23], the word genocide is a 'hybrid consisting of the Greek *'genos'* meaning race, nation or tribe, and the Latin suffices *'cide'* meaning killing' [23:147]. Lemkin's conceptualisation of genocide extends beyond the immediate destruction of a nation to encompass a coordinated plan aimed at eroding the essential foundations of national life. This strategy targets political, social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and economic elements to destroy national groups and jeopardise individuals' security, liberty, health, dignity, and life.

2.3.1 Types of Genocide

Lemkin [23] distinguished eight aspects of genocide. Physical, political, social, cultural, economic, biological, religious, and moral. Physical genocide, characterised by the intentional destruction of a group's members, can manifest itself through various means [23]. The initial approach may involve measures like controlling food supplies and limiting access to healthcare, gradually escalating to more extreme actions that ultimately result in widespread attacks [24]. The gradual progression illustrates the multifaceted nature of physical genocide, which includes covert and overt strategies to undermine the survival and well-being of the targeted group. Political genocide is a type of genocide that occurs when the ruling or occupying group enforces its governance and administration structures against the local population [23]. This can result in limitations on using the native language in public spaces, with signage and information standardised to the dominant group's language.

Social genocide is a deliberate and systematic effort to challenge and dismantle the social structures and relationships of a specific group [23]. For instance, in several nations, there have been concerted efforts to impose forced assimilation policies on indigenous peoples to eradicate their unique social identities and customs. Such policies are designed to impose dominant cultural norms and values on targeted groups, thus eroding their cultural heritage and subjugating them to the mainstream. These practices are often justified under the guise of promoting social cohesion and national unity but can have enduring and devastating effects on the targeted communities.

Cultural genocide, as defined by Lemkin [23], encompasses the eradication of indigenous languages from public communication, rigorous control, and censorship of journalists and artists in areas such as visual arts, music, and literature. This also

includes the theft and destruction of artistic works, such as books and sculptures, and the destruction of historical archives.

Economic genocide occurs when access to specific jobs is restricted, leading to a rapid decline in living standards for those who are targeted [23]. Consequently, individuals are forced to focus on basic survival needs, which in turn leads to malnutrition and health problems, ultimately resulting in biological genocide. Meanwhile, the dominant nation thrives economically, contributing to the disparate birth rates observed between oppressors and oppressed populations [23].

Acts that undermine religious well-being, such as targeting religious leaders, secularisation, and the destruction of places of worship, can be seen as a form of religious genocide [23]. The intentional focus on religious beliefs frequently results in persecution, coerced conversions, or devastation of religious institutions. Finally, moral genocide is an effort to undermine a community's moral foundation and shift its focus from collective goals to individual pleasure [23]. This can have a detrimental effect. For instance, it is encouraging alcohol consumption and allowing gambling houses as tools of distraction and control over the population.

Four years after the 1944 book "Axis Rule in Occupied Europe by Lemkin", the notion of genocide became an essential aspect of international human rights legislation, leading to the 1948 ratification of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide [14]. The final draught of the 1948 Genocide Convention primarily focuses on actions aimed at annihilating groups, detailed in Article 2:

(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physicaldestruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

2.3.2 Stage of Genocide

The ten stages of genocide, developed by Stanton [25], offer a comprehensive framework to comprehend the unfolding of such horrifying atrocities. Classification is the first step in the process, where individuals are sorted into different groups, laying the groundwork for future discriminatory actions. Symbolisation occurs when these groups are given symbols or names, which help them identify and target. From a linguistic perspective, the symbolisation stage involves the labelling process. Dehumanisation amplifies the process by portraying the targeted group as less than human, creating a climate that encourages violence. As such, the language used in hate speech disseminated through official media outlets is a critical factor in promoting killing despite natural human hatred [24, 25]. Organisation entails careful planning and coordination of the genocide, whether carried out by individuals, groups, or the state. Polarisation intensifies conflicts between different groups, often driven by the spread of propaganda and manipulation through the media. Preparation involves the process of identifying

and segregating a specific group of people, which ultimately results in the establishment of ghettos or concentration camps. Persecution ensues, marked by systematic acts of violence, prejudice, or harassment directed at the specific group. The stage known as extermination is an alarming phase characterised by widespread killings carried out through various means, such as mass shootings, forced labour, or the establishment of genocide camps. The subsequent phase is called denial, where individuals in charge try to conceal or manipulate the facts by destroying evidence or promoting alternative versions of events. In this stage, individuals might engage in shifting blame, downplaying responsibility, or outright denying the occurrence of the genocide [25].

2.4 Linguistic Genocide

Scholars have used the terms "linguicide" and "linguistic genocide" to describe the loss and marginalisation of language [13]. Linguicide refers to the natural decline of language due to social changes. At the same time, linguistic genocide involves the deliberate elimination of a language through official policies that prioritise one language over another in politics, culture, and education [13]. In essence, linguicide represents the natural death of a language, while linguistic genocide signifies the intentional suppression or proscription of a language, particularly within the educational system. In an academic context, linguistic genocide comprises discriminatory measures that restrict or prohibit the use of a language, devaluing it and denying people the opportunity to learn and communicate in their native tongue [13]. UN recognised linguistic genocide as part of cultural genocide during the development of the 1948 Genocide Convention [13, 26]. Article 3 of the Convention defines cultural genocide actions, including language bans, publication prohibitions, and destruction of cultural institutions and objects. Still, this concept was not included in the final text of the convention due to the belief that physical elimination was more profound [13].

Scholars such as Skutnabb-Kangas [13] argue that the UN Convention on Genocide, specifically Articles 2(b) and 2(e), addresses linguistic genocide in educating indigenous and minority groups. Article 2(b) considers causing severe mental and physical harm as genocide, which may include physical punishment, discrimination, and language-based trauma that affects cognitive growth and academic success, potentially leading to emotional distress, identity problems, and lower academic performance [13]. Article 2(e) defines the forced transfer of children to another group as genocide. In an educational context, linguistic genocide can manifest itself in two ways: by forcing indigenous children to attend majority-language schools, effectively erasing their native language, and by forcing indigenous or minority students to environments where the dominant language is spoken, disrupting the intergenerational transfer of language and culture and disconnecting them from their linguistic and cultural heritage [13, 27]. Moreover, the utilisation of a dominant language as the Medium of Instruction (MOI) for minority children poses several challenges that have linguistic, pedagogical, and psychological implications [13, 27, 28]. Linguistic barriers arise when students are required to learn academic content in a language they are not proficient in. This can lead to comprehension difficulties, expression challenges, and reduced academic achievement. Pedagogical barriers result from educational materials and approaches designed for the majority

language, neglecting the unique needs of minority students, which could impede their engagement with the curriculum. Psychological barriers impact self-esteem and identity development since students feel isolated when their mother tongue and cultural heritage are not recognised in the educational context.

2.5 Instances of Cultural and Linguistic Genocide Throughout History

Throughout history, ethnic groups have faced the issue of linguistic genocide, which involves cultural suppression and linguistic assimilation. Various communities, including those under Japanese colonial rule in Korea, the Kurdish population in Turkey, and the Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang province, have been the victims of this pervasive problem. The suppression of language and culture is a grave violation of human rights and can cause irreparable damage to affected communities. During the period of Japanese colonialism in Korea (1910 to 1945), the Japanese authorities enforced cultural assimilation and linguistic suppression [29, 30]. They designated Japanese as the official language for educational and communicative purposes while marginalising the Korean language. This significantly impacted literature, art, and historical records, erasing Korean cultural artefacts and suppressing Korean names and traditions [29]. Furthermore, education policies were manipulated to undermine local cultural heritage and promote Japanese assimilation, leading to the loss of Korean identity and history [29, 30]. The Kurdish population that resides primarily in Turkey has been subjected to linguistic assimilation and cultural suppression [28, 31]. The establishment of Kurdish medium schools was prohibited, thus denying Kurdish children the right to education in their native language and excluding their mother tongue from the curriculum. The Kurdish population has faced assimilation efforts aimed at erasing their language and history, leading to significant loss of life and internal displacement [28, 32]. The Uyghurs of Xinjiang, China, have been subjected to assimilationist measures that could result in linguistic and cultural genocide. Due to its location and natural resources, Xinjiang is strategically important for China [33]. The Chinese government's policies prioritise acquiring the Chinese language while suppressing using the Uyghur language. Uyghur children are exposed to Han-Chinese culture in educational institutions [33]. These coercive measures aim to eradicate the culture and heritage of the Uyghurs, affecting Uyghur children, intellectuals and the broader community. Cultural genocide and the erasure of the linguistic and cultural heritage of Uyghurs are ongoing consequences of these policies [33, 34].

3 Methods

3.1 Context of the Study

Ethiopia is renowned for its exceptional ethnic diversity, boasting more than 80 distinct ethnic groups that contribute to its cultural richness. These groups are organised into ethnolinguistically based regional states and city administrations, such as Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Harari, Oromia, Sidama, Somali, South Ethiopia

Region, Central Ethiopia, Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' Region, Tigray, Addis Ababa, and Dire Dawa. These administrative councils are designed to recognise and promote their respective populations' unique identities, languages, and cultures, strengthening the country's cultural heritage and diversity and serving as a source of pride for the Ethiopian people. Tigray is a regional state located in northern Ethiopia and shares borders with several neighbouring countries. Eritrea lies in the north, Sudan in the west, the Afar region in the east, and the Amhara region in the south. According to the constitutional framework of the Tigray Regional State [35], the region comprises three distinct nationalities: Tigray, Irob, and Kunama. Each of these nationalities has its own language: Tigrigna, Saho, and Kunama. The Constitution designates Tigrigna as the official working language of the region [17, 35]. The Tigray region boasts a well-structured administrative framework, characterised by a division of its territory into distinct zones. These zones include Westen Tigray, Northwestern Tigray, Central Tigray, Eastern Tigray, Southern Tigray, Southeastern Tigray, and the Mekelle City special zone. The western Tigray zone is predominantly inhabited by two main ethnic groups, Tigrayan (92.28%) and Amhara (6.48%). Only a tiny percentage of the population (1.24%) belongs to other ethnic groups, according to the Ethiopia Central Statistics Agency [36] report. The predominant language spoken in the region is Tigrinya, used by 86.73% of the population, followed by Amharic (12.18%) and other languages (1.09%) [36]. West Tigray, the setting of the study, is geographically divided into nine administrative units called woredas. These woredas are Kafta Humera, Awora, Welkait, Dansha Town, Korant, May Gaba, Setit Hemera, Tsegede and May Kadra.

4 Research Design

The present study used a qualitative research design to comprehensively explore and gain a detailed understanding of the participants' perspectives, lived experiences, and actions [37, 38].

4.1 Participants' Sampling and Other Data Sources

The study aims to gather comprehensive information on the central topic using purposeful sampling of participants, site selection, and documents. Researchers often differ in defining optimal sample sizes for qualitative studies, but justification is crucial [37]. This study employed a snowball sampling technique [32], beginning with a few "seeds" referring to similar individuals until the target sample size was met. This approach allowed access to hard-to-reach populations, building trust, and exploring sensitive topics. Ultimately, ten teachers aged 32–45 and eight documents were selected based on data saturation principles.

4.2 Instrument of Data Collection

In this study, the researchers used a combination of telephone interviews and document analysis to collect data. This approach was designed to strengthen the

credibility of our findings, validate primary data, identify future research possibilities, and deepen our understanding of the research topic [37]. Security concerns influenced the choice of telephone interviews over in-person meetings. We used six open-ended questions in Tigrigna language during telephone interviews to allow participants to express their perspectives freely. In addition to the interviews, we also used written and visual materials as supplementary data sources, which helped us better understand the research topic. This integrated approach contributed to a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the topic.

4.3 Data Collection Procedure

The researchers have closely monitored the ongoing armed conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region, particularly in the western Tigray zone, since November 4, 2020. Our research has been conducted to bridge the gap between academia and the community, utilising our deep local knowledge and access to provide valuable insights. As impartial researchers, we have maintained objectivity and followed ethical research practices, using a meticulously crafted interview protocol to ensure consistency and fairness in the interview process. This protocol includes an introduction, informed consent, demographic information, research objectives, and interview questions designed to obtain detailed information. In December 2021, we had meetings with an offline gatekeeper who facilitated the recruitment of the first participant. To address concerns regarding diversity in snowball sampling, we carefully selected initial participants to ensure the representation of diverse backgrounds and perspectives, thus ensuring inclusion in the study. Data was collected through interviews, beginning with an initial participant nominating others. Data collection was continued iteratively until saturation was achieved, which did not result in new insights. However, two potential participants raised security concerns and were excluded from the study. In addition to the interviews, we systematically gathered public and private documents from 2020, including reports from governments, human rights organisations, and news articles. We collected 15 human rights reports, 24 news articles, and seven government statements about the Tigray conflict. From this collection, we selected four human rights reports, two news articles, and two government statements specific to western Tigray for a comprehensive examination.

4.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected for analysis were meticulously organised into tables. A table was created to display the responses to the first two research questions, followed by a critical analysis. The third research question was then addressed based on the findings of the first two research questions. Due to the small database size and the researcher's desire for a deep connection with the data, the qualitative data was subjected to manual analysis [37]. The transcripts were read repeatedly to understand the interviews before segmenting them. A systematic coding process condenses the data into themes and eliminates overlaps. The results were situated within the current scholarly framework by utilising pertinent literature, theories, and concepts to

increase comprehension and highlight the significance of the research's results. To enhance and validate the information through triangulation, the analysed documents were presented and discussed with the relevant interview responses.

4.5 Validation Strategies

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, various validation strategies, including triangulation, member checking, and independent audit [37], were implemented to ensure the integrity and reliability of the findings. The application of triangulation, which involves the use of multiple sources or methods, was a vital feature of the research methodology, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Member checking was also used, involving a review of the findings with the study participants to validate accuracy and relevance. Independent individuals conducted the audit to enhance further the quality and trustworthiness of the research process and the results. These techniques significantly contributed to the validity and credibility of the research findings, ensuring that the results were robust and reliable [37].

4.6 Ethical Considerations in Collecting Data

To ensure ethical data collection practices, researchers obtained permission from Aksum University College of Social Sciences and Languages (AKU/CSSL/419/11/21). In addition, the researchers obtained informed consent from all participants involved in the study, explaining in detail the purpose and procedures of the research. To maintain confidentiality and privacy, measures such as anonymity and secure data storage were implemented throughout the study. These practices ensured participants' rights and autonomy were respected during the research process.

5 Findings, Discussions, and Conclusions

In this study, the researchers examined the reasons behind Amharic-only policies in Western Tigray's elementary schools, analysed their implementation methods, and examined whether they constitute linguistic genocide. Researchers began by creating a Table 1 that summarised the findings for the first two research questions. This made it simple to compare the results. After that, the researchers analysed and explained the findings and thoroughly examined the third research question. Lastly, the researchers provided a detailed summary with limitations and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Findings

Table 1 Segments and themes for findings of RQ 1 and RQ 2

Segments	Broad themes	No. of replays
RQ 1: What were the reasons for implementing the Amharic-only education policy in western Tigray elementary schools?		
Power dynamics	Political Motive	10
Demographic Change		10
Geopolitics		6
Ideological expansion		5
The 'tit for tat' approach		5
Suppression of Resistance Movements		4
Exploitation of natural resources	Economic motive	10
Access to markets and trade routes		6
Land for settlement		5
RQ 2: How was the exclusive Amharic—only language education policy implemented?		
Banning the Tigrigna language	Prohibition	10
Ban on Tigrayans' sociocultural activities, events, and holidays		7
Exclusion of Tigrigna Content from Signage		6
Burning Tigrigna Teaching and Reference Books		5
Erasure of Historical and Public Records		9
Punishment for communicating in the Tigrigna language	Restrictions and Punishments	7
Restrictions and Punishment for Tigrigna Media Consumption		7
"Only Amharic" campaign	Imposition	10
Amharic as an official language		10
Amharic as the sole medium of instruction in schools		10
Imposing Amhara-centric sociocultural norms, customs, and events in schools		6
Forced displacement	Forced displacement and settlement	10
Settlement		
Job Displacement		10

Table 1 (continued)

Segments	Broad themes	No. of replays
Torture	Atrocities	10
Arrest		10
Mass murders		10
Looting and destructions		

5.2 Discussions

This section critically analyses the main findings of each research question in their respective order.

RQ1: What were the reasons for implementing an Amharic-only education policy in western Tigray elementary schools?

As part of an investigative study, ten teachers were interviewed to examine the ban on using the Tigrigna language and the subsequent adoption of Amharic in elementary schools in western Tigray. The study aims to explore the underlying reasons for implementing such policies. During the interviews, participants were asked about their views on implementing these policies and what factors contributed to the decision-making process. We categorised participants' responses into political and economic motives for implementing the language education policy.

1. **Political Motive**

These factors include power dynamics, demographic change, geopolitics, ideological expansion, the 'tit for tat' approach, and suppression of resistance movements. As part of our research, we conducted interviews with ten teachers to investigate the reasons behind the ban on the Tigrigna language and adopting Amharic as the primary language in elementary schools in western Tigray. All ten teachers unanimously agreed that this change was influenced by a shift in power dynamics, particularly the decrease in Tigrayan power and the resurgence of Amhara in Ethiopian politics. During the interview, one of the participants provided additional information on this matter.

> *During the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, the Welkait area, presently known as western Tigray, was transferred to the Amhara region, specifically Gondar-Begemidr. However, after 1991, the EPRDF returned to its original region, Tigray. Unfortunately, due to the Tigray war, the Amhara region gained control over* western Tigray, *taking advantage of Tigray's weakened political power at the federal level. Under Tigrayan administration, the medium of instruction in schools in western Tigray was Tigrigna. However, after the Amhara region took control, the instruction medium was changed to Amharic. (T1)*

Based on the interviewee's perspective, the decision to ban Tigrigna and adopt Amharic as the primary language in schools in western Tigray was distinctly influenced by power dynamics within Ethiopia. The language education policy during the reigns of Haile Selassie and Mengistu Haile Mariam was primarily geared toward assimilation and centralisation. The policy aimed to promote national unity and consolidate power through a uniform Amharic-dominated culture and language [15, 17]. However, with the end of Mengistu's regime in 1991, the EPRDF introduced a constitution granting linguistic and cultural rights, including using the mother

tongue in primary education and self-determination. Article 46/2 of the FDRE's constitution prioritises regional administration based on language and local consent. Accordingly, the integration of western Tigray into the Tigray region between 1991 and 1994 aligned with this constitution, owing to the area's Tigrayan majority. Abiy Ahmed Ali took office as the prime minister in 2018 and demonstrated a preference for a unitary system of government that excluded Tigrayan political leaders from key positions. This left Tigray without representation and allowed Amhara politicians to spread misleading information about the Tigray region led by the TPLF. These politicians aimed to incite conflict and influence the Abiy Ahmed administration to advance their agenda. In 2020, the devastating war on Tigray allowed Amhara to assert control over western Tigray and enforce its monolingual and monocultural policies.

The ten teachers emphasised that demographic changes were the primary motivation behind implementing this language policy, and one teacher clarified further.

The Amhara authorities that took over western Tigray are enforcing the use of the Amharic language and culture in the region. This move aims to change the area into an Amharic-speaking community. It is a significant tactic because it gives them an advantage when they claim the area later. (T2)

According to the respondent, the language policy aims to establish a homogeneous community of Amharic-speaking people in western Tigray by relocating Tigrayan schoolchildren. This systematic approach also serves the long-term objective of claiming territorial control over the region. In Ethiopia, language plays a vital role in defining administrative boundaries, and Amhara nationalists recognise that historical ownership claims have less relevance. They aim to strengthen their legal and constitutional basis for asserting control over Western Tigray by strategically altering the region's demographic composition.

Six teachers' testimonials suggest that the language policy was driven by a desire to create a border with Eritrea, which is strategically important due to its proximity to the Red Sea. One of the teachers explained this rationale further:

Because the area is close to Eritrea and Sudan, Amhara troops in western Tigray want to integrate the Tigrayans and take control of a road to these countries. (T3)

According to the teacher's assessment, the western Tigray region, which shares borders with Eritrea and Sudan, is strategically important. This has led to a cultural and linguistic assimilation policy similar to China's approach in Xinjiang, where the suppression of the Uyghur culture and language is driven by the strategic geography and resources of the region [33, 34]. The location of western Tigray in proximity to trade routes and borders makes it strategically valuable, potentially serving the geopolitical interests and influence of the Amhara region. The west Tigray annexation may be seen as establishing a pathway to Eritrea and Sudan, thus aligning with regional goals.

Five teachers claim that the language policy advances Amhara's political ideology. A teacher explains this claim.

I believe the Amhara individuals prefer a unitary government rather than a federal one. They argue that the federal system was primarily crafted by Tigrayans. Therefore, they believe that weakening Tigray would harm Ethiopia's federal structure. (T4)

The attempt to impose the Amharic language and integrate western Tigray into the Amhara region is an effort to extend Amhara's political ideology and governance into the western territories of Tigray. The EPRDF-TPLF held political power in Ethiopia from 1991 until 2018 and introduced a multiethnic federalism framework. Western Tigray had deep linguistic, cultural, historical and ideological ties with Tigray, and integration into the Tigrayan community has been facilitated due to a majority of Tigrayan and the use of the Tigrigna language; see [36]. However, this framework has faced strong opposition from Amhara nationalists who fear losing more territory to other ethnic groups such as Tigray, Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Afar regional states in a multi-ethnic federal government. Instead, they advocated for a unitary system, like past Ethiopian administrations such as Emperor Menelik, Emperor Haile Selassie and the Dergue military junta, which favoured the "one nation, one language" nation-building principle, with Amharic as the exclusive national language and neglecting ethnolinguistic diversity [17]. The forceful inclusion of western Tigray into the Amhara region and the language change can be attributed to the desire to preserve their ancestral unitary ideology.

Five teachers cited the "tit for tat" approach as a key factor in changing the language policy in western Tigray. A teacher explained this issue as follows:

In our daily interactions with local leaders and schoolteachers, they talk about what they think the TPLF did in western Tigray to change the demography of western Tigray. This indicates they believe their actions mirror TPLF's actions during the past 27 years. (T5)

The response suggests that the Amhara nationalists are firm believers that the TPLF deliberately sought to change the demographics of western Tigray by implementing a language education policy aimed at assimilation. The Amhara nationalists perceive the present situation as an opportunity to respond strategically similarly, viewing their actions as revenge.

Four teachers testified that the Amhara regional authorities had a political objective to suppress resistance movements. Throughout Ethiopian history, resistance movements in Tigray have faced consistent suppression, often through a strategy of dividing and ruling [7, 17, 39]. This policy has unfairly targeted the Tigrignan-speaking population, as their language symbolises their struggle for resistance, revolution, freedom and independence. A teacher explained that the Amhara authority decided to prohibit Tigrigna and enforce the use of Amharic.

I take great pleasure in studying the rich history of Ethiopia and Tigray. Over the years, a pattern of suppressing the Tigrayan people has emerged, with the Amhara authorities banning the Tigrigna language as a means of weakening them. Recent events in my city continue this historical trend, with the suppression of Tigrigna and its speakers still being prevalent. (T6)

The Battle of Adwa in 1896 is significant in Ethiopian history, demonstrating the country's resilience against foreign invasion. Ethiopian forces emerged victorious during this battle against the Italian army near Adwa in the Tigray region. However, while the area underwent a liberation process, people who identified as Tigrigna speakers in Eritrea did not receive the same degree of liberation as their counterparts in other parts of Tigray due to logistical constraints and food shortages. Some historians believe this decision intentionally weakened potential opposition by dividing the Tigrigna-speaking population [39]. Historical evidence also suggests that territorial manipulation was used to suppress the resistance of the Tigrayan people [39]. The region of western Tigray, a historically acknowledged part of the Tigray territory [9], underwent administrative alteration during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. Wolkite and Tsegede, now known as western Tigray, merged with Gondar-Begmidir, and the Tekeze River was designated as the boundary of Tigray [7, 8]. This decision was made as retribution towards Tigray for the first Woyane rebellion in 1943 [8]. The purpose was to weaken Tigray's strength and act as a deterrent against potential future threats to the emperor's authority. Today, the Ethiopian federal government and the Amhara regional government are implementing similar measures in western Tigray. They are taking coercive measures to discourage using the Tigrigna language, creating a physical and psychological separation between Tigrigna speakers and their Tigrayan heritage and culture. The objective is to diminish the potential for coordinated opposition among Tigrigna-speaking individuals by isolating them from their relatives residing in various parts of Tigray.

2. **Economic motive**

Insights from interviews have revealed that economic factors, including the exploitation of natural resources, securing trade routes, and acquisition of land for settlers, have played a significant role in the historical occupation of western Tigray. These factors have also led to linguistic and cultural assimilation in the region. All ten teachers unanimously agreed that the root cause of current problems in western Tigray is exploiting the region's abundant natural resources, including minerals, fertile land, and water. While these resources hold significant economic value, their exploitation has adversely impacted the indigenous population. To illustrate this point, one of the teachers shared a personal anecdote.

We used to own a farm in May Kadra. However, when the war broke out in 2020, my mother and siblings migrated to Sudan, while my father was displaced to central Tigray. I was not forced to leave because I am married to an Amhara woman. In 2021, when I tried to engage in my parent's farm, the local Amhara authorities did not allow me. They had given our land to the Amhara people, most likely from Gondar. Sadly, all Tigrayan farmlands and homes have been taken by the Amhara. (T7)

The responses revealed a disturbing pattern in which the settlers forcibly seized Tigrayan land, including valuable agricultural and mineral-rich areas. The Tigrayan community in western Tigray has suffered enormously, as they were denied the right to cultivate and use their lands, thus depriving them of their means of livelihood. Consequently, many Tigrayans were forced to leave their ancestral lands and move to areas within Ethiopia and neighbouring Sudan.

According to six educators, the occupation of western Tigray was motivated by more than just economic exploitation. It was driven by the desire to create links with global markets. The strategic location of west Tigray, which borders Sudan and Eritrea, was a critical factor in this decision. The Amhara authorities saw it as a vital link for economic relationships and resource transport, such as China's Xinjiang strategy for resource control [33]. The linguistic and cultural assimilation process in western Tigray aimed to improve connectivity with international markets, similar to the strategy observed in Xinjiang.

In addition to the previously discussed economic motives, five teachers have identified another factor that could be driving settlement in western Tigray. The abundance of land in the region, which is well suited for both agriculture and residential purposes, could attract Amhara settlers with intentions that could be considered invasive. One teacher explained that there is a possibility that the Amhara settlers are interested in acquiring land for settlement purposes.

The Amhara region exerts influence on the population by integrating and transferring its language, and there are several reasons why this is happening. One possible explanation is that it provides space for people who wish to settle in new areas. In my city, Rawyan, numerous Amhara individuals are being relocated and placed in houses that Tigrayan individuals previously owned. These Tigrayan individuals have been forced to leave and go to Sudan or other areas of Tigray (T8).

Since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed office in 2018, Ethiopia has seen an increase in ethnic confrontations and ethnic cleansing, displacing approximately 4.38 million people, with conflicts accounting for more than half of displacement [40]. The Amhara people, who are scattered across Ethiopia, have also been forced to flee their homes due to conflict and unrest. As a result, many of them have sought refuge in the Amhara regional state. The sudden influx of internally displaced people and existing economic and political challenges have created significant difficulties for local authorities in finding appropriate resettlement areas. The western Tigray region has become strategically substantial for the Amhara region due to its abundant land suitable for residence and agriculture. They believed this area could help them address their economic and political issues in the short and long term. Thus many Amhara settlers were relocated to western Tigray as part of their strategy, taking over Tigrayan homes, resources, and agricultural lands. The objective was to increase the Amhara population in the region and potentially shift the demographic composition in favour of Amhara interests.

RQ2: How was the exclusive Amharic language education policy implemented?

The second research question explored how the Tigrigna language was prohibited in favour of using Amharic as the sole medium of instruction in schools. We categorised teachers' responses into five groups: prohibition, restrictions and punishment, imposition, forced displacements and settlements, amd atrocities

1. **Prohibition**

The research revealed a noteworthy policy action by the Amhara regional state, where they officially prohibited using Tigrigna as a teaching language in elementary schools in western Tigray. The ten teachers confirmed this ban, indicating a shift from Tigrigna's previous role as the primary language of instruction in the region. According to a teacher, the situation was explained as follows:

The occupation had a devastating impact on the Tigrayan community. The oppressors not only devalued the Tigrigna language but also went further to prohibit its use by Tigrayan teachers and students both in schools and in daily life. This deliberate attempt at cultural erasure not only caused immense difficulties for the Tigrayan community but also stripped them of their identity and cultural heritage. (T3)

It is disheartening that Tigrayan teachers and schoolchildren were not allowed to learn and study their native language as a subject and as an MOI in the educational curriculum. The decision to prohibit using the Tigrigna language as an MOI in primary education in western Tigray directly contradicts the Ethiopian constitution and international human rights agreements. It is well established that the Ethiopian constitution advocates for primary education in national languages, promoting linguistic rights and mother tongue instruction [11, 19]. In addition, international human rights organisations such as UNESCO [20], UNDRIP [21] and ICCPR [22] endorse mother tongue education as a fundamental linguistic human right and an effective means of improving academic performance. Therefore, the recent decision to ban the use of the Tigrigna language in primary education in western Tigray is not only unconstitutional but also goes against the fundamental principles of human rights.

Studies conducted by [27, 28, 41–43] consistently indicate that the use of a familiar language for instruction promotes effective communication, comprehension, and cognitive development. Furthermore, early instruction in one's native language establishes a strong foundation for learning other subjects [41, 42]. Denying the use of the Tigrigna language in education could deprive Tigrigna-speaking students of the benefits of mother tongue learning and potentially marginalise them. Prohibiting the use of the Tigrigna language has far-reaching consequences for preserving the Tigrigna language, culture, and tradition. Language is a medium for transmitting historical knowledge, values, and customs within a society beyond just communication [42]. Therefore, excluding Tigrigna from educational settings can result in

decreased language proficiency, weakened social connections, and a reduced sense of belonging. This approach mirrored the circumstances in Turkey, where the Kurdish community was forbidden from creating educational institutions that provide knowledge in the Kurdish language. Consequently, Kurdish children were denied their inherent right to receive education in their mother tongue [28, 32].

According to seven teachers, the ban in Tigray goes beyond language. It includes the prohibition of sociocultural activities and important festivals such as Ashenda on August 22, TPLF Foundation Day on February 18, and the overthrow of the Dergue government on May 28, all of which hold significant cultural and historical importance. One female teacher expressed her concern about this issue.

> *As a Tigrayan girl, I used to look forward to the annual Ashenda celebration on August 22. This traditional and religious festival held immense significance as it symbolised the freedom of Tigrayan girls to wear traditional dresses and celebrate on the streets. However, since the Amhara occupation, we can no longer celebrate Ashenda or wear our traditional clothing. (T2)*

The imposition of cultural bans can generate both immediate and long-term effects. In the short term, such bans can lead to the erasure of cultural identity and the loss of social cohesion. In the long term, they can lead to the decline of cultural diversity, intergenerational disconnection, and the gradual erosion of shared heritage and traditions. Such cultural bans on the Tigrayan community go against Article 5 of the 2001 Declaration of Cultural Diversity of UNESCO [20], which states that individuals have the right to participate in cultural activities. Furthermore, Although ICCPR [22] Article 27 ensures cultural, religious, and linguistic freedom for minority groups, these restrictions prevent the Tigrayan community from honouring its cultural heritage and make preserving and transmitting its traditions to future generations challenging.

Six teachers pointed out the lack of Tigrigna language on school signage, exacerbating language marginalisation. One teacher emphasised this concern.

> *After taking control of our city, the Amhara wasted no time removing all Tigrigna writings. The welcoming boards and signs in the town and schools previously in Tigrigna were replaced with the Amharic language (T3).*

The exclusion of the Tigrigna language was made evident through the removal of written materials and the intention to reduce its presence within schools. This exclusionary approach was similar to the linguistic assimilation practices that were enforced during Japanese colonialism in Korea. Korean names were prohibited in Korea, and Japanese customs were enforced [29, 30]. The removal of Tigrigna from the signage conveys a linguistic hierarchy, erases visibility, and undermines the value of the language and culture. This exclusion can negatively impact Tigrigna-speaking students' sense of belonging and participation in education.

According to the accounts of five educators, Tigrigna language instructional materials and books have been destroyed as part of assimilation efforts. A teacher has recalled a specific instance of this occurrence and explained it as follows.

The Amhara security forces visited schools, courts, churches, agricultural offices, municipal buildings, and other government and public places. They collected many documents written in Tigrigna and then burnt them all. Our library had books written in the Tigrigna, Amharic, and English languages. However, the Amhara authorities quickly removed all the Tigrigna books, which included important information about Tigray's history, references, and fiction. They were replaced entirely with Amharic books that promote Amhara superiority and its role in state building. We consider these books to contain false narratives. (T4)

Upon assuming control, the Amhara authorities undertook the erasure of Tigrayan culture and history by removing and burning Tigrigna books. These were replaced by Amharic books that amplified Amhara's superiority and their contribution to state-building. The interviewee expressed concern over these books, which, in their view, promote false narratives, perpetuating a worrying historical and cultural erasure that marginalises Tigrayan identity. Furthermore, the destruction and burning of public records can have profound implications. These documents are crucial for legal proceedings, governance, and the continued provision of public services. Due to their deletion, people may encounter significant difficulties when seeking government services, as their public records have been erased. In addition, the destruction of these materials threatens the preservation of cultural and historical heritage. This action reflects the Korean experience of Japanese colonialism (1910–1945), where cultural repression and linguistic assimilation were imposed, destroying cultural artefacts [29, 30].

2. **Restrictions and Punishment**

The ten interviewed teachers mentioned possible disciplinary action, monetary penalties, and job instability as consequences of speaking Tigrigna despite the ban. One teacher recounted his challenges.

My friend and I talked in Tigrigna during our free time when two teachers from the Amhara region interrupted us. They accused us of rebellion, made us ashamed, and instructed us to visit the principal's office. We were left feeling uncertain and afraid. Finally, the school's head gave us an oral warning (T5).

The suppression of the Tigrigna language and Tigrayan culture described in this situation is deeply concerning. The teachers' interruption and accusations suggest that this is not an isolated incident but a systematic effort to suppress Tigrayan's identity within the school system. This type of suppression can have devastating psychological effects such as fear, uncertainty, and emotional distress. Additionally, it limits the diversity of ideas and perspectives within the school community and hinders open dialogue. The oral warning given by the school's head reveals a deeply entrenched institutionalised discrimination against Tigrayan culture, particularly the Tigrigna language.

In addition, eight teachers reported imposing strict consequences for using Tigrigna media. A teacher recounted a specific incident in which such consequences were enforced.

> *Access to Tigrigna media, including news, music and movies, is currently prohibited. The Amhara security forces are conducting house-to-house checks to locate Tigrai-related content, such as Tigrai Television, Dimtsi Weyane Television and Tigrai Media House. If caught in possession of any of these media, you could face arrest or be fined a significant amount of money. (T10)*

The respondents revealed a disturbing reality of calculated cultural repression and information control unfolding in the western Tigray region. The occupiers employed strategic measures to prohibit media outlets such as Tigrai Television (Tig TV), Dimtsi Weyane Television (DW TV), and Tigray Media House (TMH) with the explicit aim of manipulating information, shaping narratives, and suppressing any form of dissent. This oppressive restriction disrupts the preservation of the Tigrayan language and culture and obstructs access to independent reporting, thereby preventing a comprehensive understanding of the situation on the ground. Hence, the occupiers evade international scrutiny and accountability for their actions. The implications of these measures are extensive, with a culture of silence perpetuating and Tigrayan communities being marginalised and isolated. At the same time, fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and cultural identity are being violated. Moreover, prohibition profoundly impacts the Tigrigna language, traditions, and artistic expression, thus limiting individuals' ability to engage with their cultural heritage. House-to-house checks, the fear of arrest, or steep fines fuel self-censorship, creating an atmosphere of apprehension and inhibiting free expression. Consequently, cultural diversity is stifled, the flow of information is hindered, and biased narratives prevail.

3. **Imposition**

Based on the accounts provided by ten teachers, the Amhara regional state has implemented the "Only Amharic" campaign in western Tigray, requiring all Tigrayan students and teachers to use only the Amharic language in their academic and daily activities. One teacher recounted the campaign in the following manner:

> *In April 2021, the Amhara authorities and local Fano militia circulated flyers in our urban area with the heading* አማርኛ ብቻ ወይም ለቀህ ዉጣ/*Only Amharic or leave quick!" The brochures were distributed in schools and surrounding areas. (T4)*

Flyers distributed beyond the precincts of schools seem to carry a message of linguistic coercion. This was not just about language; it was about the suppression of linguistic and cultural diversity. The enforcement of a language mandate could lead to the erasure of unique cultural identities and practices. The language used in the flyers is loaded with an undercurrent of coercion, indicating a more significant effort to enforce a language mandate in various aspects of daily life

and communication. These flyers and their wide distribution beyond schools signify a disregard for the linguistic and cultural diversity present in the area. The message is clear: the local population must conform to a specific language mandate. This development can be seen as an attempt to assert control or influence over the local population through language. A teacher recounted an experience in which this campaign was effectively executed in the classroom.

In class, some students struggled with lessons taught only in Amharic, impeding their understanding. To help the students better understand, I temporarily changed the instructional language from Amharic to Tigrigna, but the principal warned against it after an Amhara student reported it. (T5)

The situation clearly violated the human right to choose language, with significant pedagogical implications for teachers and students. It is imperative to recognise that students have the right to access education in a language they understand and feel comfortable with [20]. The school has ignored this right by teaching exclusively in Amharic, leading to comprehension difficulties for some students. From a pedagogical point of view, the decision to switch to Tigrigna as an instructional language was a step in the right direction. It recognised the importance of using a language that is familiar to students to enhance their understanding and participation [42, 43]. However, the principal's warning against using Tigrigna represents an apparent infringement on language choice, potentially limiting the effectiveness of instruction and hindering the students' educational experience. The approach mirrored Japan's colonisation of Korea in that the official language was Japanese, which aimed to eradicate Korean aspects and encourage assimilation into Japanese society [29, 30].

During the interview with teachers, additional questions were asked about student characteristics and academic achievements about classroom assessments and national exams. The teacher responded with laughter.

The limited understanding of Amharic among students affects their academic performance, leading to decreased self-confidence and motivation. During the grade eight regional exams, Tigray students unfamiliar with the Amharic language struggle to comprehend the questions, further adding to their stress. It was recommended that exam questions be translated to Tigrigna and additional marks be offered for non-criteria meetings to aid their progress. The school administration, invigilators, and teachers collaborated to assist students in responding to the questions of the grade 8 exam. (T7)

During the period of occupation, the language of instruction and exams in the Tigray region was changed from Tigrigna, which was the native language of the students, to Amharic, which is a non-native and non-indigenous language. This abrupt change resulted in several academic challenges for Tigrayan students, including reduced self-confidence, motivation, and overall academic achievement. Amhara authorities systematically collaborated with school leaders and invigilators to address language barriers, offering support to Tigrayan students through translation, interpretation, and exam guidance. These actions, though initially helpful, concealed

ulterior motives. The intention was to manipulate the results of the exams and create a distorted image of the student population. This manipulation was intended to convince the federal government that most of the students in the region were Amhara-assassins and proficient in Amharic, which would shape perceptions to fit political interests and narratives. As a result, this data manipulation influenced the educational landscape on a federal level, causing a significant impact on Tigrayan students.

A teacher explained that the imposition of Amhara culture in schools, including its norms, customs, events, and music, was clear evidence of the intention to enforce Amhara culture in Tigrayan communities.

As teachers, we were forced to comply with the cultural norms of Amhara about hair, clothing, and grooming, with a heavy emphasis on Gondar dress and traditional dances. School events relentlessly promoted Amhara's history, culture, and heroism, which, in my opinion, amounted to nothing more than harassment, exaggeration, and the dissemination of false narratives. (T9)

The responses suggest that the educational system lacks diversity and inclusivity, which can marginalise people from Tigray cultural backgrounds and make them feel excluded. The focus on promoting the culture of Amhara may lead to a biased representation of history and hinder the ability of students to gain a comprehensive understanding of various cultures. This can limit critical thinking and reinforce stereotypes, which has significant consequences. Tigrayan students may feel disconnected from their culture and have low self-esteem, while Amhara students may develop a sense of superiority. This hinders the development of a multicultural society that values diversity and promotes inclusivity, which is essential in today's globalised world.

A teacher recently spoke out about the requirement to communicate exclusively in Amharic and listen to Amharic music in schools.

"A lot of the music played in schools and public events belittles and undermines the Tigrigna language while glorifying the Amhara people and the language. For instance, a song entitled "እናታለም ዳንሻ ወልቃይት ጠገዴ (Our mother, Dansha Welkait Tegede)" which says "አጫውቶኝ ባማርኛ የምን ትግርኛ" (Let's speak and play in Amharic, not in Tigrigna) is frequently played before class or during break time, which further exacerbates the situation. (T10)

The interviewee revealed that the requirement to communicate solely in Amharic and listen to Amharic music in schools has had significant consequences within the Tigrayan community. This mandate has caused concern and discomfort, as it belittles and undermines the Tigrayan community while glorifying the Amhara people and language. The playing of a song titled "እናታለም ዳንሻ ወልቃይት ጠገዴ (Our mother, Dansha Welkait Tegede)" with the central meaning "አጫውቶኝ ባማርኛ የምን ትግርኛ (Let's speak and play in Amharic, not in Tigrigna)" which explicitly promotes speaking and playing in Amharic, not Tigrigna, further exacerbates the situation. UNESCO's [20] Article 5 guarantees the right to freely express and create art in one's preferred language, emphasising native tongues. Furthermore, Articles 9 and

11 of the (UNDRIP) [21] prioritise the fundamental rights of indigenous communities to exercise their traditions, customs, and cultural heritage without prejudice or discrimination. However, these actions contribute to the marginalisation and erasure of the Tigrayan language and culture, strengthening the message that the Tigrayan community is inferior and its language is not worthy of recognition. It is worth noting that Dansh, mentioned in the song's title, refers to one of the occupied Tigrayan territories in the west Tigray region. The song conveys that everyone must speak in Amharic and should not talk in Tigrigna. Interestingly, the interviewee shared a YouTube link to this song, performed by a traditional musician named Abebe Kassie and released in 2022 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvM-j0bUpqI).

4. **Forced displacement and settlement**

Forced displacement occurred in western Tigray, causing people to be displaced both within the region and as refugees in Sudan. The ten interviewed teachers reported witnessing Tigrayans being forced to relocate from their ancestral homes and communities. One of the teachers, who was of a diverse ethnic background, provided an account of the relocations.

I was untouched due to my multi-ethnic ancestry, with an Amhara mother and a Tigrayan father. Unfortunately, Amhara officials forcibly evicted my Tigrayan father and many others from our hometown of Maykadra. Experienced Tigrayan teachers were forced to relocate to Sudan or other parts of Tigray. (T1)

The western Tigray region has witnessed forced relocation of the Tigrayan population based on their ethnicity, which has compelled many to flee to Sudan or migrate within Tigray. Amhara settlers have taken over their homes and agricultural lands, resulting in disconnection from their ancestral territories. The extent of this displacement has been documented by the Office of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations (OCHA), which reports that more than 1.2 million Tigrayans have been forced to relocate within Tigray, and more than 70,000 have sought refuge in Sudan since November 2020 [5]. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) ensures protection against forced displacement without consent. It requires that prior informed consent is obtained, fair compensation is given, and the possibility of returning to the original lands is considered. However, the Tigrayans experienced forced eviction without any compensation and were subjected to torture and violence. The strategy of forced displacement, driven by a desire for linguistic assimilation, draws parallels to the situation of the Kurdish minority in Turkey, who have been displaced within their country due to discrimination against their cultural and linguistic identity [32]. The consequences of forced displacement include disrupting the intergenerational transmission of language and culture due to limited access to educational and media resources. This exacerbates marginalisation and assimilation pressures, eroding linguistic heritage and cultural identity [28, 30].

5. **Atrocities**

Due to their ethnicity, thousands of Tigrayans were tortured, arrested, and killed, according to the ten teachers. A teacher of mixed family, who has firsthand knowledge of the situation, explained how Tigrayan teachers, specifically those from Makadara, were subjected to torture, arrest, mass killing, and forcibly displaced between November 10th and 15th, 2020.

> *During November 2020, from the 10th to the 15th, I was there in Maykadra and observed horrible acts. The activities included the execution, detention, and forcible relocation of Tigrayan intellectuals from Maykadra, particularly teachers. After taking over May Kadra on November 10, 2020, a scary series of events happened as Amhara special forces, Fano, and Amhara armed groups went door-to-door. Folk who was thought to be ethnic Tigrayans tragically lost their lives because of this. They were brutally killed by stabbing with knives and machetes, stoning, and shooting with handguns. (T7)*

Maykadra, located in northeastern Ethiopia near the Sudanese border, is a crucial district within the western Tigray region. It has gained recognition for its significant contributions to the agricultural sector. The district is renowned for its vast sesame and millet farms, where seasonal labourers from different parts of Ethiopia come together to participate in harvesting activities. These labourers bring their skills and experience to ensure a successful harvest. Historically, Maykadra was characterised by a strong sense of hospitality, love, and peace. The community welcomed visitors with open arms, fostering a harmonious environment. However, the outbreak of the Tigray War on 4 November 2020 has disrupted this once peaceful district. The conflict has profoundly impacted people's lives, leaving behind a trail of destruction and suffering. Subsequently, on 10 November 2020, Maykadra was seized by a terrible turn of events that marked the start of horrible ethnocentric violence and disaster in the area during the Tigray War. Tragically, this region became the site of the worst slaughter observed throughout the conflict. Despite repeated demands from international human rights organisations requesting Ethiopia's government to undertake a thorough and impartial inquiry into the Maykadra massacre, these requests were sadly ignored. Instead, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) was tasked with investigating.

There were concerns about the credibility of the EHRC investigation from November 14 to 19, 2020. These concerns were based on two primary factors: the composition of the investigative team and the methodology used during the investigation. First, there were doubts about the impartiality and objectivity of the investigative team due to its composition. During the investigation, it seemed that everyone in power, from the highest levels of government to local officials, was against the people of Tigray. All Tigrayans who held positions in the federal government were systematically removed from their responsibilities. Most of the investigative team comprised individuals who shared this same view, raising concerns about possible bias in the investigation process. Second, there were concerns about the methodology used during the investigation. The process of

gathering information, interviewing witnesses, and analysing evidence were not conducted in a way that ensured a comprehensive and unbiased understanding of the Maykadra events. The EHRC report, released on 20 November 2020, was inspected due to the selective nature of the information provided by the individual, which consisted primarily of people of the Amhara ethnicity. Almost all Tigrayans who used to live in Maykadar were killed, arrested, or forced to flee central Tigray and neighbouring Sudan during the investigation. Although a few Tigrayans were included to provide information, their ability to witness events or share experiences freely was compromised because they were under strict control by Amhara security forces. Any testimony against these forces could have had dire consequences.

All 10 questioned teachers reported abuses, including one's 18-month detention in western Tigray before moving to the northwest region of Tigray.

I was imprisoned for 18 months for being Tigrayan, and speaking Tigrigna was prohibited. We rejoiced as the TDF advanced in June 2021, but the spies reported it. Masked security officers arrived and assaulted us forcefully, resulting in the kidnapping and execution of three people to cheer in Tigrigna (T6).

The distressing situation in western Tigray, as described by the interviewees, involved widespread detentions, torture, and loss of life with Amhara security forces that primarily targeted Tigrayans. This resulted in physical anguish, dread, and psychological distress, bearing a resemblance to the circumstances that occurred in the Kurdish community in Turkey. Efforts to assimilate them were met with persecution, apprehension, and executions, estimated millions of whom perished [28].

Another teacher, who claims to be from Welkait, exposed the looting and destruction of private houses and government offices, infrastructure, since 2020.

I am confused by their deeds. Why do they loot and destroy infrastructure if they think this area is theirs? I always see trucks with heavy loads carrying unknown materials going to Gondar. Fano destroyed everything they could not carry in our city. (T9)

The spate of looting and destruction in western Tigray has several implications. The actions of the Amhara authorities appear to indicate a disavowal of Western Tigray as a historical and legal part of their territory. A legitimate claim to an area would typically involve preserving infrastructure, heritage, and homes, not their destruction and looting. The systematic destruction of homes and government property primarily aims to leave. Their homes and infrastructure have been systematically destroyed and looted, making their rehabilitation practically infeasible. This destruction serves as a warning to those who forcibly displaced Tigrayans from the region that returning is not an option. The economic dimension of this campaign is perhaps the most insidious aspect. By reducing the wealth and assets of the Tigrayan population, the perpetrators aim to create a vulnerable and impoverished community. This economic vulnerability can then

be exploited to gain control over resources, trade, and infrastructure, reinforcing their dominance over the Tigrigna-speaking community.

5.2.1 Documents analysis

While conducting the document analysis, the researchers encountered publications from international media outlets and human rights organisations that support the account provided by the interviewees. CNN revealed unsettling events in Ethiopia's western Tigray area in September 2021, implying a new phase of ethnic cleansing inside the current civil conflict. The inquiry uncovered evidence of torture, detention, and murder. Bodies were discovered floating on the Setit River, proving massive detentions and executions in Humera. The soldiers of the Amhara militia forced the Tigrayan inhabitants to flee. A total of 60 corpses, tied hands and traces of brutal killings were found near the Setit River in Sudan, raising concerns about probable genocide under international law [44]. The research by Amnesty International, published on December 16, 2021, revealed significant human rights violations committed by Amhara security forces in western Tigray, northern Ethiopia. The report was based on telephone interviews with 31 witnesses, survivors, and victims' families and an analysis of satellite images. Tigrayan civilians who fled the conflict experienced assaults, while inmates endured torture, malnutrition, and inadequate access to medical treatment [45].

Following this, the US Department of State has expressed deep concern about the widespread detentions, killings, and forced expulsions of ethnic Tigrayans in western Tigray, Ethiopia, which have been attributed to Amhara security forces. In a statement released on 17 December 2021, they called for immediate global action and an impartial inquiry to ensure that everyone's safety is guaranteed, regardless of their ethnicity [46].

The UN Human Rights Council issued a resolution in December 2021 calling for an impartial inquiry of all parties involved in the violence. Reports of attempts to destroy evidence of crimes in western Tigray arose shortly after a fund for the investigation was authorised. Lucy Kassa's BBC piece from 2022 cited 15 eyewitnesses who described the purposeful disposal of human remains. It accused Amhara security personnel of digging mass graves, burning victims, and transporting remains from numerous areas in western Tigray, including the nearby Hamele Hamushte school in Humera town, the Humera Agricultural Institute, the Adebay St Abune Argawi church, and Baeker town [47]. According to Kassa [47], experts from Gondar University in the Amhara region supervised eliminating evidence using chemicals.

On 6 April 2022, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International jointly published a report documenting extensive and systematic abuse against civilians in western Tigray, Ethiopia. The report focuses on the Tigrayan population and covers events from November 2020. The researchers used a comprehensive data set that included 427 interviews and research spanning December 2020 to March 2022. Interviews were conducted with diverse individuals from various backgrounds and locations, with confidentiality and safety prioritised. The researchers

used multiple sources for verification, including satellite imagery, medical records, and social media. Participants were given the option of anonymity. The study uncovered a well-coordinated attack involving regional security forces in Amhara and possibly Ethiopian federal forces, which constitutes crimes against humanity and war crimes. The range of violations includes acts such as murders, disappearances, physical abuse, relocation, sexual assault, unfair incarceration, possible mass killings, and cruelty [48].

Testimonies, along with data from CNN, BBC, Human Rights Watch, the US Department of State, Amnesty International, and OCHA, collectively confirm widespread human rights abuses in western Tigray. Incidents of torture, mass executions, sexual assaults, and other misconduct were widespread, with detainees held in various facilities, including military camps, police stations, warehouses, and schools in locations such as Rawyan, Adebay, Maykadra, Hummera, Addi Remets, and Dansha. The institutionalisation of crimes against Tigray in western Tigray was revealed through the involvement of institutions of the regional state of Amhara in widespread abuses. Detainees experienced physical and mental suffering and inadequate food and medical care, leading to decreased health. Overcrowding and poor conditions exacerbated these problems and increased disease transmission. Fundamental rights, such as fair trial, legal representation, and protection against unfair imprisonment, were consistently denied.

RQ3: *Did the acts, intentions, and outcomes amount to linguistic genocide?*

The Genocide Convention of 1948, under Article 2, defines actions that constitute genocide. According to Skutnabb-Kangas [13], the notion of "linguistic genocide" is subsumed in articles 2(b) and 2(e), despite the absence of any explicit reference to it. In other words, linguistic genocide involves the intentional and systematic elimination of a language through the privilege of one language over others in politics, culture, and education. One of our primary objectives was to perform a meticulous analysis to ascertain whether the actions and intentions previously discussed in the regional state of Amhara can be characterised as linguistic genocide. The framework proposed by Skutnabb-Kangas [13] served as the foundation for this analysis, which is also under the principles outlined in Articles 2(b) and 2(e) of the 1948 Genocide Convention.

In her seminal work of 2000, entitled "Linguistic Genocide in Education, or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?", Skutnabb-Kangas [13] explores the criteria that constitute linguistic genocide. She underscores the importance of a comprehensive assessment of contextual factors, the nature of the act, its intentions, and its consequences for classifying an act as linguistic genocide. This approach ensures a thorough and nuanced analysis of the issue and can serve as an effective tool to understand and address linguistic genocide.

The Western Tigray Zone in Ethiopia is closely related to the Tigray community, both linguistically and culturally. It boasts abundant natural resources and productive agricultural land, making it an economically important region. Its strategic location makes it ideal for commerce and transportation. However, historically, it

has been a disputed area between the Tigray and Amhara communities [4]. Amid the 2020 armed conflict, Amhara nationalists exploited the situation to take control of western Tigray. They imposed their governance and administration structures on the local population, effectively becoming the ruling authority in the area. According to the classification made by Lemkin [23], a type of action can be specifically referred to as a political genocide. In this context, political genocide occurs when the dominant or occupying group forces its system of governance and administration against the native population. This forces the local community to follow political structures, policies, and administrative frameworks designed to control and suppress their autonomy. In essence, the term political genocide describes actions aimed at undermining the political sovereignty and self-determination of a targeted group, ultimately leading to the suppression of their unique political identity.

The Amhara regional state prohibited the Tigrigna language and culture and imposed the Amhara language and culture on western Tigray elementary schools. In alignment with Lemkin's [23] comprehensive understanding of genocide, this act can be aptly classified as a manifestation of social genocide. According to Lemkin's [23] conceptualisation, social genocide refers to a systematic and intentional effort to dismantle the social fabric of a particular group. This includes a coordinated campaign aimed at imposing policies of forced assimilation on indigenous communities, with the explicit goal of erasing their unique social identities and traditions. Such policies intentionally impose the dominant group's cultural norms and values, eroding the targeted communities' cultural heritage and forcing them to conform to mainstream ideals. Despite being justified as promoting social cohesion and national unity, these practices can have long-lasting and significant negative impacts on the communities affected by them. The actions showed a deliberate attempt to eliminate the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Tigrayan community in western Tigray. This erasure has led to the marginalisation and alienation of Tigrayans, which has resulted in the erosion of their cultural identity and heritage. According to Skutnabb-Kangas [13], education in the dominant language can cause physical or mental harm and be considered an act of genocide according to the 1948 Genocide Convention Article 2(b) and (e). The proscription of the Tigrayan language and culture, coupled with the imposition of the Amharic language and culture, can seriously harm the Tigrayan community. Erasing the Tigrigna language from public spaces and educational institutions denies Tigrayans access to their language, thus forcing them to adopt a dominant language, Amharic. This enforced assimilation can lead to psychological trauma, causing individuals to experience a loss of identity and disconnection from their cultural heritage. Furthermore, when indigenous children are forced to receive education exclusively in the dominant language, their languages and cultures are marginalised and neglected. This can result in the destruction of their languages and erasure of their cultural practices over time. The transfer of children from their linguistic and cultural group to another group, as in the case of imposing the Amharic language and culture on Tigrayan children, can further exacerbate their erosion of cultural identity.

The restrictions on Tigrigna language and cultural practices and media consumption have significant and detrimental effects on the linguistic and cultural rights of Tigrayans. Punishing Tigrayans for speaking in Tigrigna and limiting access to

Tigrigna media creates a hostile environment that hinders the exercise of freedom of expression in Tigrigna. From a broader perspective, such actions can be classified as cultural genocide. This term, as defined by Lemkin [23], includes eradicating native language from public life, strict control, censorship of cultural activities, and theft and destruction of cultural artefacts. It involves controlling journalists, artists, and various forms of cultural expression. Such action, in turn, can lead to both physical and psychological harm, as individuals can experience stress, anxiety, and trauma due to the fear of punishment and constant surveillance. These actions align with the Skutnabb-Kangas [13] definition of linguistic genocide, which includes any actions that prevent the natural development or use of a language. Furthermore, according to Article 2(b) of the United Nations Genocide Convention, genocide refers to any action that causes significant bodily or mental harm to a targeted group [13, 14]. This includes inflicting substantial mental distress on individuals belonging to a particular linguistic group or their language within an educational setting. The harm may also include physical punishment and discrimination against teachers and students who use their native language. The restrictions and punishments on using the Tigrigna language can be seen as attempts to suppress and discourage its use by Tigrayans.

Tigrayans were subject to forced displacement, whereas Amhara settlers were intentionally resettled in western Tigray to alter the region's demographics. The settlers in western Tigray monopolised government and private job opportunities, agricultural land, and other economic activities. As a result, Tigrayans were left economically vulnerable, forcing many to flee their homes. This phenomenon, as described by Lemkin [23], is known as an economic genocide. It occurs when access to specific jobs is restricted, resulting in a rapid decline in living standards for those targeted. This, in turn, forces individuals to prioritise their basic survival needs, often leading them to seek out new jobs and food sources elsewhere. On the other hand, according to Article 2(e) of the 1948 Genocide Convention [14], the act of coercing the relocation of children to a different group is classified as genocide. In the realm of education, linguistic genocide can manifest itself through the enforcement of indigenous children's attendance at schools where the majority language is spoken, resulting in the erasure of their native language. Another form of linguistic genocide is the relocation of these children to environments where the dominant language is spoken, effectively severing their ties to their linguistic and cultural heritage [13, 27]. In this case, Tigrayan teachers and learners were forced to use Amharic as the medium of instruction, while those who were displaced to Sudan either did not have access to education or were forced to learn in Arabic. The use of a dominant language as MOI for minority children presents linguistic, pedagogical, and psychological challenges [13, 28, 31, 32, 42, 43]. Linguistic barriers include difficulties in understanding, expressing and achieving academic success in a language in which students are not proficient. Pedagogical challenges arise from materials and methods designed for the majority language, neglecting the needs of minority students and affecting their participation in the curriculum. Psychological obstacles impact self-esteem and identity development, as students can feel isolated when their mother tongue and cultural heritage are not acknowledged in the educational context.

Torture, arrest, mass killings, looting and destruction of public and government properties are among the atrocities committed by the Amhara regional state and its

security forces against Tigrayan natives in western Tigray, specifically targeting elementary school teachers and students. This form of behaviour, according to Lemkin [23], the legal scholar who originated the word "genocide," fits into the broader category of physical genocide. Physical genocide, according to Lemkin, includes premeditated and systematic actions aimed at eradicating a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Killing, causing severe bodily or emotional pain, imposing harsh living circumstances, or purposefully preventing births within the targeted population are examples of destructive actions. Lemkin's definition of physical genocide became a critical component of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide by concentrating on measures that directly and physically obliterate the group. The actions appear to have varied intent, potentially serving political and ethnic goals aimed at suppressing the Tigrayan community and eradicating their cultural and linguistic identity. The perpetrators carried out these acts to exert control, instil fear, and cause terror in the Tigrayan community. As a result, the consequences have been devastating, leading to loss of life, physical and psychological trauma, displacement, and destruction of infrastructure. Additionally, these actions may have contributed to linguistic genocide. Linguistic genocide, as defined by Skutnabb-Kangas [13], refers to the deliberate eradication of a language spoken by a particular linguistic group. This includes the destruction of its psychological and social foundations through various methods such as physical violence against group members, forcing them to adopt other languages, dismantling linguistic institutions such as schools, and prohibiting the use of the language in legal proceedings, media, and public discourse. Within this framework, the use of force and relocation to oppress Tigrayan educators and learners hinders the transmission of the Tigrigna language between generations, which can ultimately result in the gradual loss of the Tigrayan linguistic and cultural legacy. Article 2(b) of the 1948 Genocide Convention specifically addresses actions that result in significant physical or psychological damage to individuals belonging to a particular group. The acts described above of torture, detention, and mass executions unquestionably come within this classification.

5.3 Conclusion, Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

Our study aims to thoroughly examine the Amharic-only policies implemented in elementary schools in western Tigray. We investigated the reasons behind the policies, analysed their execution methods, and evaluated whether they could be considered linguistic genocide using the framework established by [13].

The multifaceted motivations behind these actions encompass a variety of factors, including economic interests, geopolitical considerations, and demographic changes. The occupation of western Tigray and the exploitation of its natural resources, in conjunction with the desire to establish a strategic border with Eritrea, have played a significant role in driving these policies. During our study, we discovered that the Amhara regional authorities have implemented several strategies to implement their modern linguistic eradication and assimilation policy in western Tigray. These strategies include a prohibition approach which restricts the use of the Tigrigna language in schools by

prohibiting its use as an official language and medium of instruction and banning Tigrayans' sociocultural activities, events, and holidays. In addition, Tigrigna content has been excluded from signage and teaching and reference books have been burnt. Historical and public records of the Tigrigna language and culture have also been deliberately erased. The authorities have also enforced restrictions and punishments to suppress the use or listening of the Tigrigna language and imposed limitations on Tigrigna media consumption. An imposition strategy has also been employed, as demonstrated through the "Only Amharic" campaign, which has made Amharic the sole official language and medium of instruction in schools. This strategy has also imposed Amhara-centric sociocultural norms, customs, and events within educational institutions. We finally documented a wide spread of forced displacement and atrocities against the residents of western Tigray. After a thorough evaluation of the surrounding circumstances, the characteristics of the actions, their motives, and their results, the researchers definitively determine that the illegal takeover of western Tigray and its integration into the Amhara region, along with the continued implementation of a policy aimed at eradicating and assimilating the Tigrigna language, amounts to linguistic genocide. The conclusion is bolstered by the ample data offered throughout the research.

The conclusions drawn from the study serve as a basis for holding the responsible authorities accountable. In addition, they can be used effectively to promote justice, call for investigations, and prompt interventions by international bodies, governments, and human rights organisations. The study emphasises the importance of initiating dialogue, negotiation, and applying international pressure to combat human rights violations and linguistic genocide that take place in western Tigray. It is crucial that the Ethiopian government and regional authorities recognise and address these issues, protect linguistic and cultural rights, and work toward reconciliation and healing within the community. One possible solution to combating the ongoing linguistic genocide is to uphold the principles of self-government and return the occupied western Tigray territory to the Tigrayan people, as outlined in the Ethiopian constitution.

Establishing a truth and reconciliation commission can go a long way in addressing historical grievances and human rights violations in western Tigray. The commission can provide a safe space for victims to share their experiences, hold perpetrators responsible, and promote healing and reconciliation within the community. The international community, including international organisations and foreign governments, can also play a crucial role in addressing the linguistic genocide in western Tigray. Diplomatic pressure and advocacy efforts can be exerted to urge the Ethiopian government and the Amhara regional authorities to respect linguistic rights, end human rights abuses, and restore linguistic and cultural rights in western Tigray.

Language serves as a fundamental element of cultural identity, and its devastation can have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences for the survival and well-being of a community. In the present study, the classification of the situation as linguistic genocide was based on the framework established by Skutnabb-Kangas [13], which also depended on the limited space in Articles 2(b) and 2(e) of the 1948 Genocide Convention. This underscores the importance of adhering to international legal standards when evaluating and addressing such heinous acts. To effectively combat linguistic genocide, member states of the United Nations must arrive at a consensus

on the matter and negotiate an amendment to the convention. We strongly advocate for the recognition of linguistic genocide to ensure that the international community is equipped with the necessary tools to prevent and respond to such atrocities. This recognition would enable the development of specific measures and interventions aimed at safeguarding endangered languages and protecting the cultural heritage of communities affected by linguistic genocide.

The present study identifies several limitations that must be considered in future research. The first limitation relates to the small sample size of only ten teachers from western Tigray, which may constrain the generalisability of the findings. To address this limitation, future studies should consider a more extensive and diverse sample to comprehensively understand the problem. Furthermore, the study focused solely on the perspectives of teachers. It did not incorporate the direct participation of students affected by language policy, limiting the richness and complexity of the data. Therefore, future research should integrate student voices to provide a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and the language policy's consequences on their education and well-being. Furthermore, the study relied primarily on qualitative data obtained through interviews and anecdotal evidence, which may not provide a complete picture of the problem. Including quantitative data, such as surveys or assessments of academic performance, would strengthen the analysis by providing a more objective and comprehensive understanding of the language policy's effects. Lastly, the study focused solely on acts and intentions related to linguistic genocide, constraining the scope of the investigation. In the future, it would be prudent to adopt a broader perspective and investigate these acts and intentions from a more comprehensive genocide viewpoint to gain deeper insight into the processes and their broader consequences.

Declaration

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