

“Your Womb is Our Enemy!” The Rape of Tigray as Genocidal Rape

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Abstract

War crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide were committed in the war in Tigray. This article focuses on the use of sexual violence as an instrument of war. It narrates the scale, nature, and intentions of the sexual violence perpetrated on Tigrayan women, girls, men and boys. It showcases the extreme cruelty, dehumanization and intent to sterilize and inflict maximum damage from stories of victims and witnesses. It compares them with the rape crimes committed in other cases and concludes the nature of the crime was genocidal.

Keywords: Tigray Genocide, Reproductive Violence, Genocidal Rape, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Amhara.

Introduction

The war in Tigray has seen a range of atrocity crimes including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing. Over a million citizens killed as a result of direct violence and other war related situations including those over 200,000 citizens that died as a result of hunger and treatable diseases. Over 2.2 million citizens were displaced out of their places of origin and ended in either IDP camps inside Tigray or refugee camps in Sudan. Estimates for reported and unreported numbers of rape victims exceed half a million. Additionally, hundreds of thousands were wounded, and the economy, society, and infrastructure were severely damaged. The totality of these crimes provides reasonable evidence to support the claim that genocide was perpetrated in Tigray. The focus of this article is on the use of rape as a weapon for genocide in the Tigray war.

The UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as an attack on a racial, national, ethnic, or religious group with the intent to destroy it in whole or in part. This includes acts such as killing, causing physical and psychological harm, creating conditions for the group’s extermination, preventing births, and forcibly transferring children. The crucial element in this definition is the “intent” and the ability to carry out such intent (UNGA, Dec. 9, 1948). However, the scale of harm is also significant in establishing the gravity of the crime. Furthermore, the Rome Statute of the ICC expands the list of actions driven by genocidal intent to include the use of rape as an instrument for genocide. Article 6(d) of the Rome Statute criminalizes reproductive violence as an act of genocide, reflecting the language of Article II(d) of the Genocide Convention in the context of crimes against humanity and war crimes. The convention further explains that the context, perpetrators, and process are essential dimensions in establishing genocidal intent and the impact of rape (Borda, 2022).

The process of genocide involves various stages, including the formation of intent, organization, preparation, execution, and denial. While not all genocides follow these stages sequentially, elements like dehumanization and persecution can persist throughout. The objective manifestation

of the genocidal process is evident in the actual crimes committed, such as the killing of a racial or ethnic group, either in whole or in part (ICC, 2013.). For instance, the Holocaust targeted European Jews and resulted in the extermination of 6 million individuals. Similarly, genocides in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda utilized methods like killing, torture, displacement, and sexual violence to destroy targeted groups (ICTY, May 25, 1993.; ICTR, Nov. 8, 1994).

This article presents empirical evidence of the rape crimes in Tigray, examining the nature and intent of the rape committed with the aim of demonstrating that the crimes were not simply the use of rape as an instrument of war, but rather with genocidal intent, constituting genocidal rape. The article shares stories of rape victims to illustrate the crime and the intent behind it. While a comprehensive research engagement is necessary to address all elements of the crimes of genocide committed in Tigray, this article contributes by providing empirical evidence linking the rape crimes to the genocidal intent of the perpetrators. It also offers a brief comparative perspective by discussing similar crimes committed in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Darfur.

The data for this article was collected through surveys, survival testimonies, and investigative reports from international human rights advocacy groups and media outlets. The dataset, obtained in three phases of the war, involved qualitative surveys of 4,000 households, interviews with key informants, and focus group discussions in all districts of Tigray during the first phase (November 2020 up to June 2021). The survey tools were designed to focus on collecting evidence related to victimization and the coping mechanisms of victims, and the qualitative aspects of this dataset are utilized in this article.

The second phase of data collection occurred after the regional capital was captured by TDF (June 2021 to December 2021), providing access to previously inaccessible areas and allowing for the recording of additional stories from families, victims, survivors, and witnesses. The third phase took place after TDF's return from other regions during the period of siege, blockade, and war (December 2021 to the signing of the Pretoria agreement in November 2022), during which additional data was collected through interviews and FGDs. The authors had exclusive access to media recordings, and primary data was collected across all phases, with detailed data available at public institutions such as The Tigray Institute for Policy Studies (TIPS) and the Commission for Inquiry of genocidal crimes in Tigray, as well as several national and international media outlets and the personal archives of the authors. The lead author was a member of TIPS during the first eight months of the war, leading the research on crimes committed in Tigray. Secondary data from various sources, including government and non-governmental reports, media statements, and social media posts, are used to support victim testimonies, with witness identities kept anonymous for their protection unless they have already made their stories public voluntarily.

The article is organized into five parts including this introduction. Section two provides a brief background to the war in Tigray. Section three examines the analysis of the stories and intents of the rape of Tigray based on evidence from victims, witnesses, responders, and perpetrators. Section four presents the types, nature, manner, consequence, and impact of the rape in Tigray. Section five compares the rape of Tigray with genocidal rapes committed in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Darfur. Section five concludes that the rape of Tigray women, girls, boys, and men is genocidal and should be designated as such.

Background to the Tigray war

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) failed to address public demands, leading to three years of consecutive riots and the resignation of PM Hailemariam, paving the way for Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Abiy's inauguration speech and rhetoric resonated with the public,

including in Tigray, where he promised that “Ethiopia without Tigray is a car without an engine” (Addis Getachew and Seleshi Tessema, 2018).

However, it became evident that Abiy was adaptable in his approach, tailoring his rhetoric to suit his audience. When sensing anti-TPLF and anti-Tigrayan sentiment, such as at the gathering of diaspora Ethiopians in Washington DC, his tone changed. He blamed the TPLF and Tigrayans for the suffering of Ethiopians, portraying the 27 years of EPRDF’s rule as an “Era of Darkness” and using terms like *Andinet* (homogenizing unity) and *Ethiopiawinet* (an Imperial Ethiopian notion) to appeal to opposition sentiment against the idea of a multinational Ethiopia. He also utilized the ambiguous term *Medemer* (Synergy) in his rhetoric, which was widely propagated by the media (Atakilt, 2020). Abiy positioned himself as a promoter of the revival of imperial Ethiopia and aligned with political groups opposed to the multinational federal system, while scapegoating the TPLF for the EPRDF’s shortcomings.

In his bid to consolidate power, Abiy manage to dissolve the EPRDF and its coalition member parties into a unified Prosperity Party with the exception of the TPLF that declined to liquidate itself and join the Prosperity Party (Aidi, August 2021; Ezega-Staff Reporter, 2019). Seizing this opportunity, he initiated a campaign to vilify the TPLF, commissioning documentaries accusing Tigrayans of corruption and undemocratic practices, which were continuously televised to fuel anti-Tigrayan rhetoric.

Months after coming to power, Abiy formed an alliance with President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea, the longtime adversary of the Tigrayans and signed a secret peace agreement which was internationally acclaimed and contributed to his Nobel Prize. However, the details of the agreement with Isaias were vague at the time. However, it became clear later of its anti-TPLF and anti-Tigraian alliance following the closure of the border that was only opened for one month and the continued anti-Tigraian rhetoric coming out of Asmara and Addis Ababa. This alliance was expanded later to include the then Somali President, Mohamed Abdullahi (a.k.a. Formajo). This anti-TPLF nature of the alliance was later admitted by Isaias's Special Advisor in his tweet on July 2021.

In pursuit of his objective, Abiy formed an alliance with a segment of the Amhara elite opposed to the multinational federation (Plaut, 2023) and stoked anti-Tigrayan sentiments among Ethiopians dissatisfied with the EPRDF government (Sarah Vaughan and Martin Plaut, 2023). Initially perceived as a reformist by Western interlocutors, he garnered their full support, including a premature Nobel Peace Prize (Harry Verhoeven & Michael Woldemariam, June 2022). Encouraged by the silent backing of Western POWers and his unholy alliance with Isaias Afewerki against the Tigrayans, Abiy initiated the war on Tigray in November 2020 (Harry Verhoeven & Michael Woldemariam, June 2022).

The two-year war in Tigray involved a tripartite alliance comprising the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), regional special police forces, and the Amhara Special Forces (ASF) and the Fano Militia, alongside the Eritrean National Defense Force (EDF) and soldiers of Somali trained in Eritrea, with arms supply and drone support from the UAE, KSA, Turkey and China, and the passive backing from Western capitals. The war resulted in over a million soldiers and combatants killed or wounded, several hundred thousand Tigrayans killed by systematic war-violence, famine and related diseases due to a blockade, and over 150,000 reported rape victims. This article will focus on investigating the nature of the rape crimes, as detailed in the following sections.

Stories and Analysis of the Rape of Tigray

This section will summarize the nature, scope of the rape crimes and the intent and organization in committing the crimes. The first sub-section describes the nature of the rape and the second analyzes the intent of the rape of Tigray highlighting the genocidal nature.

Summary of the nature of the rape crimes unveiled

This section reveals the reality of the Tigray rape through the testimonies of survivors, eyewitnesses, and responders within their respective categories. These accounts encompass instances of rape and execution, forced sterilization and womb torture, various forms of sexual abuse, sexual torture and mutilation, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, obstruction of breastfeeding, destruction of fetuses, deliberate transmission of HIV, perpetrated by the ENDF, EDF, ASF, and Fano Militia against civilian Tigrayans during the war.

Rape and Killing: Starvation, Torture and Execution

Based on the testimony of the Tigray Disabled Women Associations (TDWA), rape was systematically employed as a means to cause fatalities in numerous reported cases involving women and girls.

“...Amhara and Eritrean soldiers crowded us together in a warehouse on the outskirts of Humera town. There were 20 of us, including underage girls and women as old as 87. They subjected each of us to hours of gang rape, taking turns and cruelly targeting the virgin and teenage girls. The elderly women were also violated when the soldiers took breaks. We pleaded with them to spare the young and old, but they insisted that all Tigrayans should suffer this fate. After ten days of enduring gang rape, beatings, and being deprived of food and water for the first four days, only five of us managed to survive. We were given a piece of dried bread after ten victims had already passed away” (Humera Rape Victim, 2021).

A social worker narrated a survivor mother’s story, revealing how rape was utilized to inflict psychological harm on the women of Tigray and to systematically eliminate males from the community:

“...The woman is a survivor of sexual slavery including gang rape. She was kept for weeks in the military barrack of Eritrean soldiers. She had a mentally ill child with her and she was begging the perpetrators to at least save the life of her son, but to no avail. The soldier told her that they were there to destroy Tigray by killing all men and making the women sick and insane of rape. The rapist told her blatantly, ‘You think you will be sane after this. Never! You will not be the same again!’. (FGD-Women CSOs, 2023).

Even disabled women in wheelchairs were subjected to a combination of rape, torture, starvation, and execution resulting in their deaths.

“...In the Shiraro area, Eritrean soldiers gathered twenty disabled women who were supported by the Tigray Disability Women Association. They took their wheelchairs and loaded them onto trucks along with other looted items from Tigray. The soldiers claimed a concern for their safety but they subjected them to gang rape, starvation, torture, and ultimately execution. The soldiers falsely labelled them as TPLF veteran fighters. Similar incidents were reported in the Asgeda Tsimbila locality” (Genet-TWDA, 2023).

Sexual torture was a common occurrence in the evenings:

"...Every evening from 6 pm till the morning we hear women crying for help while being gang raped in the streets. The rape included elderly women and married women were dragged outside of their houses and gang raped in the streets. It was like a sex orgy for the soldiers to gang rape in public spaces. Commercial sex workers were taken as their property. They were doing every foul sexual activity they wished accompanied by ethnic slurs which we were listening to from behind closed doors. They were enjoying their conquest in the open air while neighbourhoods are caught in terror of being the next victim" (Residents of 05 and 14 Localities, 2021).

This story evidenced the degree of cruelty and the combination of victims shows the act was indiscriminately performed on women of all kinds: the healthy, sick, young, old etc.

Forced Sterilization, Sexual Mutilation and Torturing the Womb

One aspect of the rape of Tigray rape included the torture and forced sterilization of women's wombs, as depicted in the following accounts.

"A group of Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers came to my home in Wukro town and subjected me to a prolonged and brutal sexual assault. They also physically attacked my genitals, causing severe injuries. They told me that my ability to bear Tigraway boy posed a threat to them. They repeatedly violated me with chains and rough objects, causing further harm to my reproductive organs, saying, 'Your womb is our enemy that gives birth to Tigraway boy, our enemies. This womb should be dried from giving birth. That is why we are raping you.' Despite my pleas for mercy, they continued their cruel actions, asserting that my Tigrayan womb needed to be punished and prevented from giving birth again. Eventually, I lost consciousness due to the intense pain and excessive bleeding. I was left for dead until my neighbors discovered me after several days and took me to a medical center, where unfortunately, I did not receive any assistance." (Letay, 2021).

The torture of Tigrayan women's wombs was not an isolated incident, as evidenced by similar accounts from various locations documented in the Amnesty International report:

"...We were fleeing from [my hometown of] May Kadra. It happened after we crossed the Tekeze River at a place called Tselim. We were three [women]... It was on 29 December 2020. It was the Shabiya [Eritrean] soldiers. They spoke Tigrigna and had a tattoo [tribal scarring] on their faces... They kept me for 24 hours. They asked for my husband. They kept me at their temporary base; it was fenced in with piled-up stones. Five of them raped me in front of my children. I have three children. One was three months old, and the other two were nine and six years old. After raping me, they used a hot iron rod they use to clean the barrel of a gun and inserted it in my womb. They also inserted pieces of metal in my womb. Then they left me on the street and later found a passerby to help me. My feet were burning, and I couldn't stand, I didn't know what was inside me. The passerby found me lying on the ground and brought me to the main road" (Amnesty International, 2021, p. 16).

The medical director of the hospital where Eyerusalem was treated told Amnesty International that: In February,

"...We also saw one case of a victim with a foreign body inserted into the uterus. We removed four nails from the body that stayed there for more than two months. One of the nails was curved. It was very difficult for her to sleep and walk before we removed the nails. Three weeks after the operation, she was able to move. She stayed in the hospital for months. She is a mother of two. She also had a burn on her upper thigh when she was raped" (Amnesty International, 2021, p. 16).

A doctor working at a medical facility treating survivors of sexual violence in the town of Adigrat told Amnesty International about another such case. He explained:

“...The girl from the town of Edaga Hamus was taken from the public minibus on 6 February 2021. They let her go on 15 February and she arrived during the night and came to us the next day. We took out two nails... tissue paper, gravel, and a piece of plastic packaging measuring 9 cm by 8 cm from her vagina. The plastic looks like the kind you use to pack coffee beans and we found it on the top while the other items were beneath the plastic” (Amnesty International, 2021, p. 12).

International reports and survivor stories confirm the deliberate targeting of women and girls. Perpetrators were heard saying in Tigrigna Language, “እዚ ማህፀን ኻልኣይ ዉላድ ክፈጥር የብሉን፣ ክትመኽኒ ክትኸእሊ ኣለኪ”, which means “your womb shall not give any more! you must be sterilized!” (FGD-Shiraro localities, 2021; IDPS Shire -University Center, 2021). Forces from Amhara and Eritrea used rape as a means of sterilization, inserting objects into the wombs of mothers (TIPS, 2021). Rape was not limited to the battlefield but occurred throughout Tigray, including the capital city of Mekelle. During the curfew, soldiers engaged in a campaign of breaking into homes and raping women and girls. Some incidents even took place in the streets, witnessed by residents (Residents of 05 and 14 Localities, 2021).

The following story of sexual violence was informed by cultural beliefs and utilized by the perpetrators’ knowledge of the societal impact and consequences of their actions, as witnessed by responders.

“...During the initial week of the Axum massacre, soldiers from Eritrea and the Amhara security forces went from house to house and raped women. Four Amhara soldiers, identifiable by their military attire, forcibly entered Rosa’s home and subjected her to a gang rape, accompanied by the use of ethnic slurs. Initially, she tried to resist but was met with torture, including being tied to a bed and having her legs spread apart, while unknown objects were inserted into her womb. The soldiers cruelly stated, ‘Your womb will never forget this day! We have left an Amhara message inside you, and you will never be able to give birth!’ They then left her. For several months, Rosa experienced intense pain and bleeding, without knowledge of what had been placed in her womb. Eventually, she sought medical assistance at a hospital in Adigrat, where doctors removed letters wrapped in plastic bags from her womb. One of the letters had strange, illegible writing, while the other was heavily stained with blood and bodily fluids” (Sitel Benat, 2023).

Texts and spells are believed to possess mythical healing and protective powers in Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Christian and Muslim societies. They are also seen as tools for curses and dark magic. The Debtera and Islamic healers use texts and numbers to harness magical abilities. Many people carry small amulets containing spells and prayers to ward off evil and attract good fortune. In the Amhara Province of Gojam, which is considered a hub of mythical knowledge and magical practices, it is common for followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church to use amulets for curses and dark magic (Chernetsov, ND; Malara, 2020; Burtea, 2015; Hernández, 2017). Spells are potent mythical weapons, and culturally informed rapists have been known to send mythical spells to their victims, causing them to believe that even if they recover from the physical trauma of gang rape, they will forever carry an unforgettable spell preventing them from giving birth.

The Destruction of Fetuses

The destruction of fetuses has a historical precedent as a means to express intense hatred and genocidal intentions, even before the term “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin. According to John Docker, Lemkin recognized the destruction of fetuses as one of the biological methods of genocide, along with family separation and sterilization (Docker, 2008, p. 64). In his analysis of

the story “War, Genocide And Female And Child Suffering: The Women Of Troy” in Aeschylus and Euripides’ works, Docker, using Lemkin’s analytical framework, considers the killing of Astyanax, the infant son of Andromache and Hector, by the victorious Greeks as a genocidal act. Even in ancient times, this act was seen as a barbaric form of genocide through biological means, inflicting immense suffering on the women of Troy (Docker, 2008, pp. 82-83). In Tigray, a similar story of fetal destruction unfolds, where the unborn are killed.

“In Wukro in January 24, 2021, a group of Eritrean soldiers stormed the house of a young pregnant woman and gang-raped her for hours. They ignored the pleas of the 35-week pregnant woman, and one of the soldiers inserted his fist into her womb and pulled out the fetus, telling her ‘Even the unborn is our enemy. You think we will show you mercy because you are pregnant.’ Then he pulled out his knife and cut her vagina in four directions, mocking the victim by saying, ‘Let’s see how wide Agame vagina can expand! Now, you will not use it again. It is destroyed!’ She was left bleeding and unconscious” (Wukiro Victims of Rape, 2020).

After one week, she was taken to a hospital where she barely survived severe wounds, cuts, and internal injuries that resulted in her loss of control over her bodily functions.

Forced rape by family members

Another disturbing aspect of the crimes in Tigray was forced rape among family members, and some boys and men were also anally raped by Eritrean soldiers (Martin Plaut and Sarah Vaughan (eds.), 2023). Such kind of rape was documented in various parts of Tigray. Family members who resisted these heinous acts were executed, and in rare cases, subjected to torture or mutilation of their limbs, as seen in locations like Hawzen, Wejerat, Sheraro, Guya, and Abiyi Adi. The primary purpose behind these atrocities was to inflict lasting humiliation and break down family bonds, thereby hindering normal social life and causing a form of social death (TIPS, 2021; W/Hawzen, 2020).

Another form of this type of rape was forcing family members to be spectators of the rape of their children and loved ones. The heroic survival story of a teenage girl named Monalisa from Tembien is an example. Despite the torture and intimidation by ENDF soldiers, Monalisa resisted rape, and her grandfather resisted witnessing the assault on his granddaughter, resulting in Monalisa losing her arm and limb, and her grandfather being left with a damaged limb due to bullet injuries inflicted by their torturers, who were members of ENDF. The story of Monalisa stands today as a symbol of the unbreakable will for freedom and dignity of the Tigrayan people, representing the indomitable spirit of humanity in the face of evil (Monalisa, 2021).

Rape Camps and Sexual Enslavement

The coalition of the forces of aggression had sexually enslaved women in their camps for days and weeks. The following are some of the stories of sexual enslavement:

“In Wukro town ten women where the youngest was 16 and the oldest over 70 years, were gang raped. The underage girls were taken to the military camp and kept them for two weeks until the Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers left to the battlefield” (Wukro-FGD 11, 2021).

An FGD discussant in Shire IDPs camp also witnessed the story of two girls:

“Two teenagers named NT and TGK in Sheraro were raped for about 6 weeks in the military barracks of Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers. The soldiers finally put bullets in their vaginas. The two unfortunate girls suffered a lot until the bullets were extracted. We were shocked by then; now, similar action

prevalent everywhere. They are taking young women from IDPs camps and keeping them for weeks in the camp. Very few are lucky to return alive. There are many whose whereabouts nobody knows" (IDPs-Shire-FGD13, 2021).

Some women also reported that they were forced to move around with the soldiers from camp to camp where they were gang raped, tortured along with continuous insults and humiliation.

One of the victims of this group said:

"... They [Ethiopian soldiers] were raping us three times per day. They considered us like their property. They raped us at any place they want. They were mocking at us and insulting us. They forced us to perform like the sex actors [porno stars] in the sex films they used to see on their smart mobile phones. They were watching the sex films and practicing it on us. They had animalistic behavior. They were highly drug addicted and they stayed on us longer than any human being can expect. When we cry or show slightest resistance they intimidate us with knife, axe and guns. At the last, I become pregnant but I aborted it by the support of the UNICEF. My wombs is wounded, bleeding and bear excruciating pain. The physical pain and sleep deprivation that followed are constant reminders of the crimes committed on me " (W/Shera/KI12, 2021).

In Guroro Tabia, girls were raided like cattle and rapped in the military camps for weeks. They were kept like slaves (KoT/Gur/FGD1, 2021). Another teenager victim of a gang rape and sexual enslavement in Mekoni town also reported that,

"...They kept me for months in the camp like their slave. They would do everything they wish. They showed no mercy or know no qualms whatsoever. They gang raped me until the continuous bleeding that followed discouraged them. Since that time, I stay at home and think everybody in the town knows and talks about my bad luck. I will leave Mekoni if my health conditions are improved soon to minimize shame and stigmatization" (RA/Me/KI5, 2020).

A gang rape victim from Hawzen said,

"...We were fleeing from [my hometown of] May Kadra. It happened after we crossed the Tekeze River at a place called Tselimoy. We were three [women]... It was on 29 December 2020. It was the Shabiya [Eritrean] solders. They spoke Tigrigna and had a facial scarification ... They kept me for 24 hours. They asked for my husband. They kept me at their temporary base; it was fenced in with piled up stones. Five of them raped me in front of my children. I have three children. One was three months old, and the other two are nine and six years old. After raping me, they inserted an iron rod they use to clean the barrel of a gun into my genitals. They also inserted pieces of metal in my womb. Then they left me on the street and later found a passerby to help me. My feet were burning, and I couldn't stand, I didn't know what was inside me. The passerby found me lying on the ground and brought me to the main road" (Amnesty International, 2021, p. 16).

Form the above lived-experiences of victims, survivors and witnesses of sexual enslavement the whole matter was not about sex. It was the intent to destroy Tigray as society physically, mentally and in spirit. This is even further elaborated from the orgy of public gang raping captures by the interviews with victims and survivors, and witnesses.

Public Rape, Spoilage and Humiliation

A survey made by the commission of inquiry set by the regional government of Tigrai indicated that many women and girls were raped in public. Girls and women were herded into rape camps and raped in public in Shire, Shiraro, Guya, Guroro, Axum, Adigrat, Wukiro etc towns. Several incidents

of Gang-raping in front of their husbands were reported in many towns by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers and Amhara forces (AG/1. FGD Participant, 2021; W/2. General Interview Respondent, 2021; W/5. General Interview Respondent, 2021; DT/Ay/FGD3. General informants, 2021; AA/FGD5. General informat, 2021; Werkamba and Hagereselam FGD, 2021; Mekelle FGD, 2021). The number of raped women was huge and the humiliating orgy was unforgettably and deliberately made to be embossed in the public space and archival of communal memory of Tigray people. This intent is engraved on rock by the raping and spoilage of virgin monks, wives of priests and Catholic Church nuns in their monasteries, houses and convents respectively (Wukro-FGD 11, 2021).

In a Tabia called Ayinmbirkekin, a priest begged Eritrean soldiers to kill him first before raping his wife but they raped her in front of him. Participants in FGD's indicated that many wives of priests had been raped but unspoken of in fear for stigma. Stories of suicide among victim families of priests who were devastated by the trauma of the experience and its social consequences are prevalent. The soldiers who came to their locality seemed to have never seen a girl. (DT/Ay/FGD3, 2021) In Abiy-Addi nuns and wives of priests were deliberately targeted. (73). Catholic nuns who devoted their life with absolute celibacy were raped in Wukro town. Similar bestial acts of gang rape was committed against 78-year-old Nun from Debre Abay Monastery who disclosed her ordeal crying and appealing for humanity to listen her ordeal on camera and televised on Tigray Television,

'...The soldiers took me and they held me by my limbs opening my leg. I told them I am a Nun ever been touched by a man and begged them to leave me. They raped me and spoiled my virginity. They did many ugly things including urinating in my mouth and insulting me. They destroyed my whole spiritual life with their cruelty. Now, I feel strange pain inside my womb and abdomen I have never felt before" (Tigray TV, 2022).

More harrowing stories of gang-raped elderly, nuns, and children as old as four yours require volumes but are left out on the interest of the limited space for this article.

Rape and Erasing of Identity

The key motivation and intent of the rape of Tigray girls, women and men was not sexual. but designed for the systematic destruction of Tigray. This argument is supported by the testimony of a medical doctor named Tewodros who witnessed the horror and called it an act of genocide.

"...A CNN team in Hamdayet, where refugees from Tigray gathered in recent months, spoke with several women victims of rape and reported the following. A victim told the team the following. 'He pushed me and said, "Tigrayans have no history and culture and I can do whatever I want on you.' She told CNN she is now pregnant. Dr. Tewodros, serving at the refugee center said the following. "Many say they were raped by Amhara forces who told them they were cleansing them of Tigrayan blood" (CNN, 2021).

Deliberate Transmission of HIV

This biological technique of genocide was systematically applied through rape. Eritrean soldiers were frequently heard saying that they were there to kill all the men and to deliberately spread HIV virus. One dominant story is that they had prepared HIV carrier soldiers to infect the health women and those who tried to escape rape factually telling or faking being people living with HIV. The following story is an example.

"...The Eritrean soldiers were raping every woman they found in Tahtay Quoraro. An Eritrean soldier took a woman to rape and invited an HIV positive guy when she told him that she was HIV/AIDS

positive. The woman thought of protecting herself but ended of being infected with the Virus as a result (Shire-05- GI-13, 2021).

Similar cases were reported in Wukro town and Adi-Keyih of H/Wejerat district where the perpetrators invited their HIV infected compatriots to gang rape women. According to the victim, the soldiers were cheering and giggling about their wit and methodological effectiveness of destroying Tigray (Wukro-Agaezi- GI-5, 2021; H/Wejerat-Adi-Qaih-GI-1, 2021).

Even women living with HIV were not spared from gang rape and abuse. The following story from the key informant interview with victim of rape at Wukro town represents this cruelty.

“...I am a carrier of HIV for several years. I bring up my child as a housemaid. Two Eritrean soldiers (wedi-Keren and wedi-Asmera) stepped into my house at mid-day, dismissed my 7-year-old son, and forced me to put my clothes off; I told them I had HIV but they didn't care at all. They both had abnormal sex with me and took my 6 months Retroviral drug- life-support medicine. After the rape, they poured some substance to my womb that burned my uterus. They said to me ‘tekalat’ you deserve HIV. After the event, I initially thought of committing suicide but still live traumatized. I fear that most raped women and girls are exposed to HIV. In Mekelle, while I was in Ayder hospital, I met 80 years old woman gang raped by 5 soldiers and got the virus” (Wukro-Dedebit- KI-9, 2021).

We have seen cases where the perpetrators of the crimes took the anti-retroviral drugs of patients, a crime tantamount to killing them. But they were also engaged in direct killing of women the raped when and if they told them they were HIV carriers. Here is an example.

“...The Eritrean forces caught three girls at May- Hanse district, Mentebteb locality while they were fleeing from the massacre by Amhara forces in Humera town. The soldiers gang raped three of them for hours while beating them if and when they resist. One of the three girls beg them saying, “please leave me alone, I am HIV/AIDs positive”. Their reaction was instantaneous and cruel, they shot her on the spot leaving the two of them terrified and obedient to their demands for weeks until they were thrown in a forest as dead” (FGD-Shiraro localities, 2021; IDPs Shire -University Center, 2021).

Interview with doctors at Wukro Hospital reiterated the alarming rate of prevalence of the virus following the first month of the war. (Wukro-Dedebit- KI-9, 2021) This was only months after the commencement of the war. After two and half years of the deliberate transmission of the virus, Tigray Health Bureau suspected that the prevalence of HIV might have reached a pandemic level. The report showed that based on the WHO standards more than 1% prevalence of the virus in society is considered a pandemic level. In Tigray before the war, HIV pandemics were less than 1%. After the war, the prevalence has become more than 2% given the destruction of the health system and chronic shortage of drugs, the virus made to expand like wildfire destroying the population of Tigray (Tigray Health Bureau, 2023).

Recently, the president incumbent of Tigray Interim Government Mr Getachew Reda accused of the government of Eritrea for deliberately organizing army division composed of HIV/AIDs carrier soldiers to disseminate the virus and destroy Tigray. According his assessment and report, in effect, they have brought 50 years back in all dimensions and they have planted a time mob that will destroy the people of Tigray for years to come (Getachew, 2023).

Forced Pregnancy

The other biological technique of using rape as a weapon of genocide is the forced pregnancy and implanting of “bad Memory Babies” in Tigray mothers’ wombs. After going through the ordeal of

rape, a woman in Mekoni town argued that she was unable to conduct a checkup in the hospitals and clinics because of destruction and blockage by the enemy allied forces. Consequently, she was five months pregnant during the interview in 2021. By then, doctors advised her that abortion could be dangerous for her life that she decided to give birth to the child of rape. As of writing this article, the baby could be two years old (RA/Me/KI4, 2021).

The story of a woman from Mahbere Diego showed similar cases,

“...The unarmed Eritrean soldier raped me while the armed one stands at the gate to protect his friend. I am pregnant now. I want to get rid of this pregnancy. I don't want to be a mother this way. I don't want to raise a kid of some perpetrator who raped me. I live by selling coffee and tea in Mahbere Dego. I have not received any medical help. I hide my pain to myself. I told about the rape only to my best friends. They are offering me emotional help; they advised me not to give up on life” (N/MD/2, 2021).

“...The Eritrean forces caught three girls at May- Hanse district, Mentebteb locality while they were fleeing from the massacre by Amhara forces in Humera town. The soldiers gang raped three of them for hours while beating them if and when they resist. One of the three girls beg them saying, “please leave me alone, I am HIV/AIDs positive”. Their reaction was instantaneous and cruel, they shot her on the spot leaving the two of them terrified and obedient to their demands for weeks until they were thrown in a forest as dead” (FGD-Shiraro localities, 2021; IDPs Shire -University Center, 2021).

Rape and the Destruction of Society

According to FGD discussant of women CSOs, the impacts of the war on women and girls are diverse and immense that describing the same is tantamount to the impact of the war on Tigray:

“...Tigray has been devastated by war, causing immense suffering for its people. Our husbands, sons, and daughters have been killed; our way of life has been shattered. The elderly, disabled, and mentally ill under our care have been executed. Our children and babies suffer from starvation and the trauma of witnessing our struggles. Women in Tigray have been blamed for giving birth to and raising Tigrayan men who fight for freedom, justice, and equality. Every aspect of pain and suffering has disproportionately affected women and girls in Tigray. We have endured excessive and exceptionally brutal treatment. Our bodies, minds, and spirits have become battlefields, used as weapons to destroy Tigray. We are left in a constant state of trauma and meaninglessness, akin to death. Rape and sexual violence have been especially devastating, dehumanizing many women and girls, trapping them in a state of living death” (FGD-Women CSOs, 2023).

The war's impact on women and girls is described as “imposing social death” through violence, leaving survivors feeling empty and lifeless. The multidimensional impact of the rape of Tigray women, girls, men, and boys extended beyond the immediate victims and survivors. It affected the entire society, with the techniques and methods of rape aligning with all aspects of genocide: from rape used to kill and inflict severe physical and psychological harm, to creating life-threatening conditions such as starvation and deprivation, terrorizing and subjugating society, separating families, spoiling and forcibly displacing victims and survivors from their communities, and undermining the foundations of society. It also involved sterilization and hindering reproduction, forced impregnation and the birth of children associated with traumatic memories, and the deliberate transmission of infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS. The severe dehumanization and otherization of Tigray identity, along with the constant reminders of shame, trauma, and humiliation, illustrate the pervasive impacts of genocidal rape. In essence, “social death” encapsulates the overall terror and disorder caused by the systematic and deliberate use of rape as a weapon of genocide.

Intentions of the Rape of Tigray

This section will aim to illuminate the declared intents and accompanying sexual violence of the perpetrators against protected Tigrayan civilians. The testimonies of victims, witnesses, and responders, presented at length in the next section, expose the genocidal intent. According to the testimony of a rape survivor from Humera, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports corroborated the same story, revealing the intent to commit ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The intent to cleanse Tigray's identity from the space of Western Tigray and pursue the Amharization of both the territory and the population is evidenced by the glaring evidence documented by these independent organizations. The use of rape as a weapon of starvation, physical damage, sterilization, dehumanization, and humiliation further underscores the intent to destroy Tigray, as widely reported (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

ENDF soldiers left graffiti on the walls of the Tigray Martyrs Monument and Museum Hall, damaging and desecrating the remains of the martyrs. The graffiti stated that they had destroyed Tigray and its leaders, leaving nothing for them to rise again. They also mentioned handing Tigray over to the Eritrean army for further harm. According to a survey report from the Health Bureau of Tigray, there have been over 126,000 reported rape cases in the first eight months of the war. Considering that there are three or four unreported cases for each reported case, one would put the estimated number of rape victims well beyond half a million. Later report from the Tigray Genocide Commission actually indicate of higher figure than that of the bureau of health (Tigray Genocide Commissioner, 2023).

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initially denied the widespread rape in Tigray but later simplified the crime by comparing it to the attack of soldiers by bayonets. This message encouraged the soldiers to continue their actions (EBC, 2021). The social affairs advisor of Prime Minister Abiy, Daniel Kibret, further legitimized the destruction of Tigray by calling for the extermination of those associated with the Tigray region.

"...Weyane [Tigray] is not something we can understand. We can only erase it. For instance, Australia ... there is an island called Tasmania which is found in southern Australia. They destroyed Tasmanian tribes until only one person remained. There was only one person left for [continuity of] the race. Only one person! They have completely wiped them out. It is only by wiping it out. As I had said before, it is only by wiping out [of existence] the disease called Weyaneness ... Firstly, so that it may not exist physically ... Secondly, the [very] idea. The idea of Weyaneness must never exist. Even in the form of an idea ... There should not be a land that gives birth to such kind of people. When people say "Weyane" one ought to say "in the name of the father"! [a common Ethiopian orthodox reaction uttered against wickedness while crossing oneself]. Everyone [should say that]! [applause]. Never!" (Danial, 24)

As if reading from the book of genocide, Daniel Kibret's message made the Tigray war and its techniques unmistakably genocidal. The official nature of the rape campaign is further established by army commanders' evaluation report and video footage of the reasons for their defeat in Tigray captured from POW. The meeting chaired by General Kindu Yigezu exposed the indiscriminate targeting of civilians and the massive organized rape as a wrong strategy that created a recruitment bonanza for TDF (ENDF-Report, 2021).

Rape camps were established in hospital wards, military barracks, and abandoned construction sites in and around the town of Hawzen and Mekelle including hospital wards of Axum St. Mary hospital and classrooms of schools by the order of high military commanders. Many women were taken for months along with the moving army as sex slaves (Sarah Vaughan and Martin Plaut, 2023).

Rape was not exclusively on women and girls only. A few Tigrayan boys and men were held by the ENDF in their camp and subjected to repeated anal rape. Only the stories of those who required serious medical attention are reported. Yet, it is widely known that Tigrayan men and boys were raped by the ENDF (Sarah Vaughan and Martin Plaut, 2023).

The undeclared but inferred intent of rape by the ENDF, the EDF, and ASF and Amhara Fano perpetrators is captured by the following statements they told their victims.

“You Tigrayans make us struggle, you betrayed us, you are traitors”; “You are our prisoners”; “We want to get rid of you here”; and “We don’t like you.” Some reportedly said, “We are given a directive by the government that we can kill you, we can rape you without accountability,” and “We can do to you whatever we like.” Others said, “If we get rid of Tigrayans, we can give this land to Eritrea.” . . . “We want to clean you all, cleanse you of [your] Tigrayan identity,” and “We do not want you to perpetuate the life of Tigrayans anymore in Ethiopia” (Sarah Vaughan and Martin Plaut, 2023).

Prisoners of war (POWs) from the ENDF and EDF testified that they were aware of the consequences of their organized crimes including rape and killing, made an oath of confidentiality not to expose the crimes and ranks of their commanders. Many POW senior officers attempted to evade responsibility by falsifying their ranks in the POW camps. However, after rigorous inquiry sessions, the POW testified that rape was perpetrated by the order of senior commanders who claimed to be receiving orders from their superiors. Many POW stated that they were forced to take part in gang rape as part of a strict military order by their superiors and colleagues, and those who resisted faced pressure to collaborate with their fellow soldiers. In a display of defiance, many EDF soldiers showed no remorse about their crimes; instead, they boasted about the number of rapes committed (Dr H.Y, 2021). According to the testimony of a medical doctor at the center, many ENDF soldiers confessed to collaborating with EDF soldiers in the rape campaign following the orders of their superiors (Dr H.Y, 2021).

A report by a team of experts corroborates the testimony of victims and POW, stating that “the ENDF is not a rag-tag, out-of-control fighting force. It has repeatedly demonstrated that its members act under the orders and control of its leadership,” as demonstrated in UN missions. The EDF, due to forceful and indefinite conscription, subjection to brutal disciplinary measures, and the extreme hierarchy of control, “carry out orders to the letter. Like the ENDF, the EDF is not a rag-tag, out-of-control force. It is a force that acts according to its leadership’s orders” (Dyan Mazurana. Hayelom K. Mekonen, Bridget Conley, Alex de Waal, and Delia Burns, 2021).

The Rape of Tigray vs. Genocidal Rapes

A brief comparison between the rape of Tigray and genocidal rapes in as Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur are made in this section taking the ten dimensions of rape discussed in the previous section.

Killing, Torture and Sexual Mutilation

In the conflicts of Rwanda and Bosnia, women were subjected to horrific violence including gang rape, starvation, torture, and execution. Many were brutally murdered, with sexual abuse exerting a devastating impact. Forced sterilization, sexual mutilation, and damage to women’s reproductive systems were prevalent in Rwanda, where extreme cruelties were witnessed during the genocide. For example, a group of 22 individuals from the Interahamwe used a sharpened end of a hoe to rape a Tutsi girl, penetrating her three times until she bled profusely. Cutting the breasts of Tutsi women was also a common practice (Sharlach, 2000; Jorgensen, 2016).

Tigrayan women, in addition to facing similar kinds of suffering as the victims in Rwanda and Bosnia, also endured the unique torture of their wombs, where papers and nails were inserted to inflict infertility, inferiority, and subjugation. The destruction of fetuses was one of the genocidal acts of cruelty inflicted upon Tigrayan women. In one instance, a woman was forcibly opened up, causing her fetus to fall out, while she screamed until her death. Similar acts of barbarism were also carried out by the Janjaweed militia in the conflict in Darfur, Sudan (Jorgensen, 2016).

Forced Pregnancy and the Birth Mixed Babies

In Bosnia, an estimated 5,000 infants were abandoned or killed in the aftermath of genocidal rape. In Rwanda, 2,500 “bad memory babies” were born (Russell-Brown, 2003). Children born out of rape in former Yugoslavia and post-war Bangladesh had multiple impacts. The children became constant reminders of the horrible experience; their mothers were ostracized from their kin groups. In societies where parentage is determined through the male line, children born out of rape symbolize the elimination of an ethnicity, as they are not born from a father of that particular community, as seen in the cases of the Rwandan genocide and the Sierra Leonean civil war (Reid-Cunningham, December 2008).

Similarly, Amhara militia told the Tigrayan women they raped that they wanted them to give birth to Amhara children, while EDF soldiers told them that they wanted them to have Eritrean babies, with the intention of diluting and eventually eliminating the Tigrayan race over time, as seen exhibited in the previous chapter. The consequences of these rape-born children were similar to what was experienced in Rwanda and Bosnia.

Rape with a family member and Sexual Enslavement

Family members were forced to rape their sisters, daughters, and other relatives in the conflicts of Rwanda and Darfur. Rape among family members was coerced in family houses, camps, hospitals, and other public areas. Rape camps were established for the sexual enslavement of women and girls in Bosnia and Rwanda. Thousands were kept in camps for months until they died or were rendered unworthy of sexual use or reproduction. In both cases, rape victims were considered as sex tools, slaves, and vessels to be used for the reproduction of the conquering genocidal forces (Askin, 2006).

Similar forms of the crime are exhibited in Tigray, as seen in the case of Monalisa and her father. The forces of aggression in Tigray established camps where women and girls were enslaved for sexual use for days and months. The sexual enslavement was not limited to rape camps per se; quite a few women and girls were also kept as sex slaves in their own houses, highlighting the stark similarity of mutual rape and sexual enslavement in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Darfur, and Tigray.

Public Rape, Spoilage and Humiliation

In both Yugoslavia and Rwanda, girls were raped in public, in front of people they knew or in front of many women crowded into rape camps. This was done to humiliate the victims and make them feel unworthy of any respect from the society forced to witness their suffering. Another aspect of this crime was to force girls to strip in public and stand naked, as exhibited in the crimes in Rwanda. Public nudity is considered shameful and humiliating in Rwandan culture. Akayesu was convicted of genocide not for committing rape directly, but for orchestrating the ritual of humiliation and directing the militia to their broader task of killing (Russell-Brown, 2003). Tigrayan women and girls were similarly raped in public places, rape camps, schools, and hospitals, inflicting not only physical suffering but also shame and humiliation within their own community.

Rape and Identity Erasure

The violation of women's bodies represents the conquest of the group's cultural identity by the enemy. Forced sexual penetration, ejaculation, insemination, and control over women's bodies serve as metaphors for the dominance of the raping culture over the raped culture. Therefore, rape of women is seen as the rape of the entire group, making it genocidal rape. Raping, killing, and torturing women and girls, as seen in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur, have been identified as genocidal acts (Russell-Brown, 2003, pp. 289-293; Wasiak, 2020).

According to the dominant literature on the impact of genocidal rape, it profoundly affects the sexuality of survivors, as it transforms sex into a metaphor for brutal victimization. Many survivors report feeling that sex has become only part of their past. The social alienation and stigma they face often make victims feel emptiness and detachment from their communities. The motivations behind genocidal rape aim to break down the bonds of family and society, which are the foundations of social structure, as witnessed in Yugoslavia and Rwanda (Russell-Brown, 2003, p. 90). Women victims of such a crime often face difficulty in maintaining relationships with men, let alone engaging in marriage. Many victims of such a crime in Tigray no longer consider themselves as worthy members of their society and fail to trust even their family members, let alone distant ones.

Oral Cruelty

Oral cruelty involves the use of ethnic slurs and metaphors to dehumanize and inflict psychological torture on the victims. In Rwanda and Bosnia, victims were dehumanized by equating them with animals, portraying them as evil, sub-human, and as dirt and filth of society that should be cleansed in the interest of society. Derogatory terms such as "cockroaches," "dirty whores," "animals," "Turks," "Ustasha whores," "dogs," "slaves," and other ethnic and racial slurs were used against the victims of genocidal rape in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur (Di Caro, 2005; Flint, J., & de Waal, A., 2005; Marlowe, J., Bain, A., & Shapiro, A., 2006; Wahyuni, 2020; Jorgensen, 2016; Sustersic, 2014/2015).

The dehumanization and otherization of the victim group, treating them as dangerous animals or worthless creatures, played out in the ritualization and naturalization of cruelty. The level of dehumanization of Tigrayan victims was so immense that all names and demonizing phrases were used, including "filthy whores," "enemies of Ethiopia," "vipers," "rats," "dirty blooded," "sub-humans," "evil creatures," "daylight hyenas," and other cruel metaphors. This dimension of the rape of Tigray is at par with, if not more severe than, other cases of genocide.

Rape and the Destruction of Society

In patriarchal cultures, women are often seen as symbols of men's potency, and rape is viewed as a symbol of the husband's control over his wife's body and sexuality. In several communities, the virginity of girls is considered a crucial requirement for marriage consummation and continuity. In these cultures, girls who have lost their virginity due to rape or any other relationship are deemed unsuitable for marriage. For this reason, perpetrators aim to humiliate a society by using elaborate rituals, cruelty, publicity, and drama when committing such crimes. This has been evident in Darfur, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Bosnia Herzegovina (Askin, 2006; Di Caro, 2005; Reid-Cunningham, December 2008; Russell-Brown, 2003; Marlowe, J., Bain, A., & Shapiro, A., 2006; Wasiak, 2020; Wahyuni, 2020).

The collective comparison discussed above indicates that the rape crimes committed in Tigray are strikingly similar, both in content and form, to those perpetrated in the genocidal crimes of Rwanda,

Bosnia, and Darfur. The physical extermination, dispersion, and psychosocial destruction of the Tigrayan identity were organized systematically.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis presented in this article has made a compelling case for categorizing the rape crimes in Tigray as genocidal rape. The empirical evidence, discussions, and comparisons with other instances of genocidal rape provide strong support for treating these crimes as acts of genocide.

The characteristics of the rape crimes in Tigray align with those typically associated with genocidal acts. The victims were primarily civilian Tigrayans in need of protection, rather than combatants engaged in active warfare. Men and boys were also targeted, often accompanied by execution and killing, indicating a deliberate and systematic effort to inflict widespread harm and destruction.

Furthermore, the crimes were clearly aimed at inflicting physical, psychological, cultural, and social harm on the Tigrayan society as a whole, with the intent of destroying the society in whole or in part. The timing of the rapes and sexual violence, coinciding with military incursions, strongly suggests that these acts were part of a broader military strategy and tactics deployed for the destruction of the society.

The systematic nature of the crimes, committed by organized armies rather than uncontrolled rogue elements, further supports the argument for categorizing the rape of Tigray as genocidal. Additionally, the deliberate targeting of the reproductive capabilities of the society, through destruction, forced impregnation, and the deliberate transmission of diseases, underscores the genocidal nature of these acts.

The use of rape in public places and the deliberate humiliation and damage to the social identity and cohesion of the Tigrayan society further reinforces the genocidal intent behind these crimes. Moreover, the forcing of family members to rape each other or witness the rape of loved ones serves as a clear indication of the intention to destroy not only individual families but the society as a whole.

The comparison made with genocidal rape committed in Bosnia and Rwanda highlights the striking similarities between these crimes, further supporting the conclusion that the rape in Tigray is indeed genocidal in nature. As such, it is imperative that these crimes be treated as such in addressing the perpetrators and in addressing the physical, psychological, social, and economic rehabilitation of the Tigrayan society.

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