

Heritocide in Tigray region of Ethiopia

The northernmost of the country's nine ethnic regions **Tigray Region Ethiopia** is the cradle of Ethiopia, the name of the latter first being mentioned as an alternative name to the kingdom of Axum, the then the epicenter of power of the Red Sea and second only to the Roman and Persian empires, with which it had a very active trade of ivory and salt.

The first known kingdom to arise in what is now Tigray, was "D`mt" about 800 BC - from which period the Yeha Temple remains -, later to be replaced by the Aksumite Empire, which lasted from at least 400 BC to the 900 AD. Spreading far beyond modern Eritrea and Tigray, the empire and left many historical monuments like majestic stelae, the ruins of many palaces whose archaeology still remains to be studied.

The Tigray people are descendants of early Semitic-speaking peoples who date back at least 4000 years, making the region the oldest continuously inhabited place of Africa South of the Sahara. Ethiopian tradition has it, that the Ethiopian nobility, which originated from Tigray, trace their ancestry to king Menelik I, the, sun of the Queen Sheba and King Solomon, as do the priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Through its Red Sea port the then Adulis , the Axum empire became the region through which trading caravans reached all the way out to Persia and beyond trading salt and ivory.



The Chapel in Aksum where the original Ark of the Covenant is kept.

The cliff rock hewn churches of Tigray show the most dramatic landscapes and the longest Christian tradition. Unknown to the world outside, these churches were first described by the British explorer Ivy Pearce as ‘the greatest of the historical-cultural heritages of the Ethiopian people’. The rock hewn churches are semi-monolithic (only partially separated from the congregation rock) or hewn out of caves. There are more than 200 of such cliff churches between Gheralta and Adwa, many of them relatively easily accessible, but some can only be reached by climbing up difficult terrain or even up cliffs.



The 4th c AD Debre Damo Monastery

Tigray is also home to Nejashi mosque which is said to be the first mosque in Africa and one of the oldest mosques in the world, where the first followers of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) were persecuted and oppressed in their own land by the Quraysh tribe of Mecca for their belief in Islam. “*The Prophet Mohammed realized that he could not protect his followers from the attacks, and said ‘go to the Habesha, there is a Christian king there. There is justice in his kingdom. Habesha is the land of truth. Therefore, go there until we achieve victory with the help of Allah.* Fifteen companions of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) had their first migration (hijira) and arrived in the Axumite Empire territory in 615 AD followed by a second migration with a bigger group of around 101 people.



The Nejashi Mosque before the damage.



The same mosque after the war

Tigray contributes much of Ethiopia's tangible and intangible heritages and some of the Tigrayans' contribution is not to Ethiopia but to our human history in the globe. Below are some of the rich heritages from Tigray.

- The final resting place of the biblical Ark of the Covenant a gold-gilded wooden chest constructed under instruction from God with the Ten Commandments.
- The first people / civilization to mint coin in Africa.
- The Geez alphabet and numeric.
- The Ethiopian calendar.
- The first people/ civilization to officially accepted Christianity.
- The first Muslim settlement.
- Home to the oldest and most complete bible on earth.
- The tallest obelisk ever erected, the Axum Obelisk.
- The victory of Adwa.
- The first music notation in the world.

What Happened to the Heritages?

The war in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region - pitting the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies against the elected government of Tigray since 4 November - has caused concern over its humanitarian toll, with tens of thousands of Tigrayans fleeing to neighboring Sudan and allegations of genocide and violent crimes against civilians. The allegations Atrocities, rape, genocide and crime against humanities are becoming the front page of all western media but little attention is given to the crimes against heritages. As the former Director General of UNESCO once said *"The destruction of culture is one element of a global strategy of hatred, and the fight against impunity and respect for the rule of law must be part and parcel in a broader vision for peace."* Due to the active war, it seems tough to know the exact damage on heritages. So far what is known is

- Hundreds of civilians are massacred in Axum by Eritrean troops while defending the original Ark of the Covenant.
- The al-Nejashi Mosque the first mosque in Africa was shelled. Its dome, the minaret and tombs of Islamic figures were damaged.
- More than 86 ancient and medieval churches and monasteries are looted, destroyed or damaged.
- The ancient Axum coins are reportedly stolen from the archeological museum in Axum town.
- The Ancient Monastery of Debre Damo only accessible by robe is looted and bombed.
- Manuscript heritages from several churches and monasteries are stolen by the Ethiopian and Eritrean troops.

- Movable heritages such as ancient crosses, cestrums, crowns from churches and monasteries are taken by the Ethiopian and Eritrean troops.

One can imagine why the Eritrean troops are involving in such crime against heritage, but why Ethiopian troops are actively involved in such crime against their own heritage remains unanswered. Are they committing crime against their own heritage or are they telling the world Tigray is not part of Ethiopia? time will give us the answer.

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