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Frewayni's Garden

Preserving Tigrayan Culture During a Period of Ethnocide

Gabrielle Tesfaye

Who am I
underneath all this
destruction?

This war
does not define me.

Her tears watered seeds
planted long ago

Frewayni's Garden

Preserving Tigrayan Culture During a Period of Ethnocide

Acknowledgments

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Thank you to my mother for raising me in a home full of art, warmth, culture, and inspiration. You have created the artist I am today and the rituals I still carry in every country create home in.

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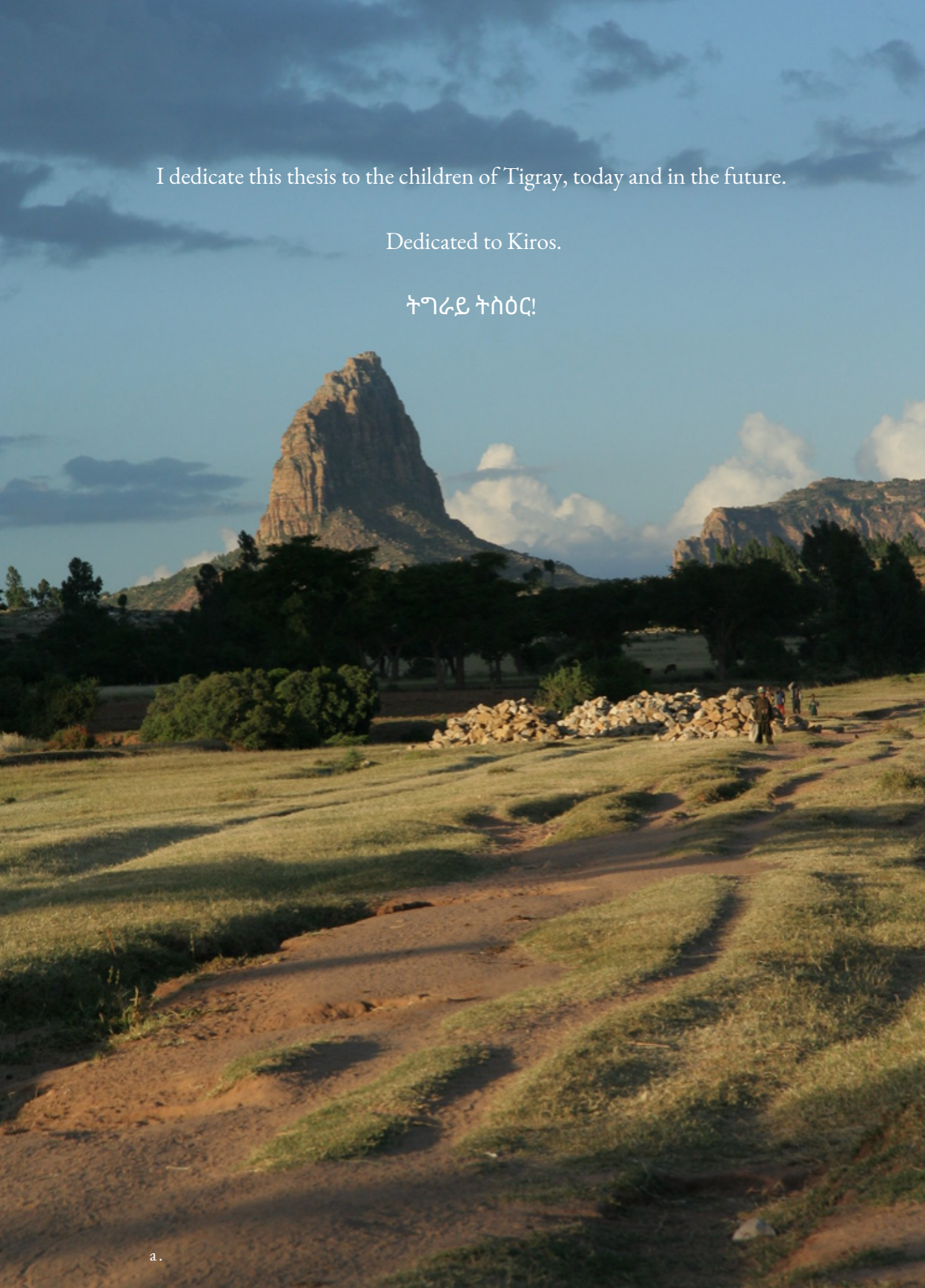
Thank you Teklehaymanot Weldemichel and Fessahaye Mebrahtu for your insightful wisdom and inspiration. Thank you Meaza Gidey Gebremedhin and Agaziy Asefa for inspiring me with the incredible work you do for Tigray.

I dedicate this thesis to the children of Tigray, today and in the future.

Dedicated to Kiros.

ትግራይ ትስዕር!



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Abstract

The recent and ongoing genocidal war in Tigray, Ethiopia, has witnessed the destruction and looting of countless historical religious sites, ancient manuscripts, and artifacts, leaving Tigray's remaining cultural heritage extremely vulnerable. Such cultural loss erases a shared understanding across generations, robbing them of their history and identity. My work contributes to the safeguarding of Tigray's cultural heritage and collective memory, informed by literature on cultural preservation efforts in post-war societies, and a series of interviews with Tigrayans in the diaspora and in Ethiopia.

The outcome of this thesis is embodied in a series of distinct jebenas, traditional Tigrayan clay coffee pots, featuring near-field communication (NFC) technology —the same technology that enables wireless card payments. The NFC chip in the jebenas links to an online Tigrayan archive, created within the format of an interactive garden. Each coffee pot is also entirely functional, and can withstand high amounts of heat and water.

Coffee is ceremonious in the Tigrayan household, representing a time of togetherness and intergenerational cultural exchange. Each unique jebena's form represents a different time, place, or piece of history, directing viewers to its specific story in the garden via the NFC interface. Frewayni's Garden is inspired by the community gardens Tigrayan refugees have created in Sudan since being displaced by the war, poetically symbolizing new life, beauty, and healing after pain. In this way, I illustrate how cultural heritage can be preserved, and passed down using the latest technology within traditional Tigrayan objects.

Months before Mekelle was bombed
I had a dream that woke me in tears
I couldn't believe what I had seen
Visions of my deepest fears

We were together on the market day
The sun shining in the peaceful sky
Then the sound of warplanes struck
Loud enough to make angels cry

I saw your body turn to ash
And smoke arise from the ground
I could barely move, paralyzed
By the screams and bombing sounds

Your corpse spoke to me,
reaching your hand
And this is the hardest thing
I've ever wrote-

You told me:
"Frewayni, go back to school
And don't let your heart turn to stone

Promise me you'll have a happy life
And I'll be watching from above"
And then I jumped out of my sleep
Crying like a mourning dove

The next day I went back to school
Unknowing what I'm going through
When they ask, How are you?
I smile, like you'd want me to

I dedicate my thesis to you
And then I graduate in May
I pray you are still out there so
I can show it to you someday

Introduction

Personal Background

I was raised in a multicultural household by a Jamaican mother and an Ethiopian father. My mother initially came to America as a Jamaican immigrant with family to attend college. My father arrived with other young boys as a refugee at 15 years old, escaping Ethiopia's brutal "Red Terror" war of the 1970s.[1] My hardworking parents raised my brother and I in a similar way to many other young immigrant parents from different backgrounds in the United States, blending our mixed identities to be a part of American society. We didn't grow up with much information on our cultural heritage, perhaps due to not being brought up in a community that reflected our parents' origins. I began to take a liking to my cultural background in high school and researched Ethiopian and Caribbean art as inspiration for my own work. In April of 2019, I traveled to Ethiopia for the first time with myself, my camera, and a sketchbook of storyboards for an aspiring new film.

I traveled the monasteries hidden in the lakes of Bahir Dar, touched the ancient walls of the Lalibela church, adventured through the castles of Gondar, and weaved back in time through Harar's colorful alleyways. I revisited Ethiopia three times in one year, making new friends, hosting film screenings, and sharing my work with a community of artists that embraced me. I began to come to terms with the awkwardness of being the illiterate diasporic traveler, slowly learned the language, and imagined a future where I could call Ethiopia my forever home. I hoped my father would come with me on one of these trips, but on my third solo trip to Ethiopia, I decided to finally visit his hometown of Mekelle, Tigray.

"Welcome to Tigray, your country!" was the first thing my Uncle Kiros said to me at the airport, after greeting me with the traditional three kisses on my cheeks. Meeting the family I only ever saw in photos as a child, or spoke to on holidays through a muffled phone connection, felt like gaining a missing piece to the puzzle of my identity.

I was finally in the land where my own father was born, exploring its pastel-painted buildings and calm aura, much different from the chaos of Ethiopia's capital city Addis Abeba. I formed a deep bond with my uncle, who is now a second father to me. Arm in arm, we walked the relaxing cobblestone streets of Mekelle and spoke of dreams, family, and life plans. As he held my hand on my last night, I promised him I would be back soon, and slept on the plane with dreams of the new life I planned to build there.

Tigray War

I was sitting in my room in the United States when I read the news that Ethiopian troops had invaded Tigray, and that Mekelle was under attack. I called my family immediately, but it was too late, the government had already cut all internet and telecommunications. I cannot accurately describe the panic, anger, grief, and depression that I experienced in the months that followed. On November 4th, 2020, the day the world was watching the U.S Presidential Elections, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, strategically declared a genocidal war on Tigray[2] –falsely promoted as a "law enforcement operation"--in collaboration with the President of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki.[3] Since then, Ahmed's administration has limited and blocked access to electricity, aid, food[4], and water for millions of Tigrayan civilians.[5] Since that terrible day, my life and the lives of all Tigrayans within Ethiopia and the diaspora have changed forever.

For over 30 months, Tigray has remained under siege by the invading Ethiopian and Eritrean governments. While plenty of evidence shows the destruction of important cultural heritage sites, and the Tigrayan diaspora continues to call for Abiy Ahmed to be investigated and held accountable for his crimes, the international community remains inactive.[6] It all still feels surreal, like a nightmare that can't be real, but one that I still wake up to every day. A heavy question weighed on my mind: how can I, as an artist and designer, create something meaningful, useful, and healing for Tigrayans? What can bring healing to people suffering genocide and ethnocide?

Ethiopian Political Background

To understand the complexities of the war in Tigray, it is necessary to analyze the complex history between Ethiopia, Tigray, and Eritrea. Ethiopia is a Federal Democratic Republic consisting of nine regional states, each with its own state government, capital, language, flag, and unique culture.[7] Tigray is the northernmost state, bordering Sudan and Eritrea. PM Ahmed declared war after the Government of Tigray hosted its regional elections in September 2020, going against the central government's decision to delay all elections indefinitely.[8] Ahmed previously delayed the country-wide elections that were to take place in August 2020, claiming that holding the election would risk the continued spread of Covid-19 and would be rescheduled "sometime in 2021", thus extending PM Ahmed's rule for at least 9 months.[9] Many Ethiopians saw this as an unlawful and selfish ploy to keep the then-unelected PM in power. Despite Ahmed postponing general elections, the Government of Tigray continued with regional state elections and followed Covid-19 protocol to ensure the safety of voters.[10]

> *Hailu Kiros, 62, was one of many wheelchair-bound TPLF veterans who cast votes Wednesday morning. "This is important for me. We fought for this so that elections could be held every five years."*
> *-AFP*[11]

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), was reinstated as the regional government on September 11, 2020. Less than two months later, Ethiopian troops and allied forces, as well as the Eritrean army and ethnic militia from Ethiopia's different regions loyal to Ahmed, declared a full-scale invasion of Tigray on November 4, 2020.

02. Mekelle residents in line for voting, 2020

The Ethiopian national government declared a genocidal war on Tigray for defying the central government's decision to not hold regional elections due to Covid-19, but the government's declaration of war doesn't make any sense. Why would a central government commit genocide against its own civilians, and invite a neighboring country to join in, all to prevent a regional election? The hate towards Tigray's ruling government party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), started long ago. Ahmed and Afewerki both share a strong resentment against the TPLF, dating back to power struggles within the Ethiopian leadership prior to 2018, and the Ethio-Eritrean border war of 1998, under the former Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi,[12] a Tigrayan himself and a TPLF leader.

Zenawi was in office for twenty-one years. To a large degree, he successfully transformed Ethiopia from a once impoverished and war-torn country to one that saw rapid economic development and modernization. [13][14] He is held in Tigray's collective memory as an intellectual, revolutionary, and transformative leader. Meles led the rebellion against the brutal dictatorship of the Derg and ended the infamous Red Terror War. [15][16] The Red Terror was a war that all Ethiopians collectively remember as a terrible and indelible stain on the country's memory. The Derg was a communist military regime that seized power in 1974 after the deposition and assassination of Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia. The TPLF was formed by young Tigrayans who fought for 17 years and successfully defeated the Derg.[17]

03. TPLF Fighters, 1980s

Despite the TPLF freeing Ethiopia from the Derg, and the rapid progress of Ethiopia's economy that followed, many Ethiopians see Zenawi's leadership as a period of darkness over the country, following accounts of authoritarian leadership, alleged discrimination, and abuse of the human rights of non-Tigrayan groups in Ethiopia.[18] In response, many Tigrayans assert that these accounts are false, propaganda-motivated representations of Tigray and its people, believing that ethnic divisions in Ethiopia were experienced long before Zenawi took office.[19] Zenawi died unexpectedly due to an unknown illness in 2012, after which his deputy, Hailemarian Dessalegn, assumed power from 2012-2018. Dessalegn resigned due to growing pressure from civil protests and was then succeeded by Ahmed as Prime Minister in 2018.[20] Ethiopians celebrated their newly elected prime minister with excitement and hope that his youthfulness and seemingly democratic speeches would finally open the doors to a newly transformed Ethiopia.[21] Unfortunately, the hopes for the once inspiring Ahmed have been crushed by his engagement in this brutal war.

04 Derg remnants, 1980s

Disinformation campaigns by Ethiopians, Eritreans, and their supporters denying this genocidal war flood the internet. These include repetitive public rhetoric in Ethiopia that Tigrayans should be wiped from all historical records, and vanish from the human mind and conscience.[22] The war has also destroyed Tigray's civilian infrastructure, churches, mosques, neighborhoods, agricultural systems, historical artifacts, and more.[23] Tigray is being physically looted of its history and is also under the attack of constant disinformation and historical erasure. Tigrayan artifacts, from Bibles to manuscripts, and ancient relics,[24] are shamelessly being sold on eBay.[25]

This war has devastated Tigray on countless levels, with effects that could linger long after the war ended. The next generation of Tigrayans will have little left from which to learn who they are or where they come from. Many previous dictators have deployed remarkably similar tactics in wars all over the world, taking away what people hold most dear to them, including religious, historical, and cultural sites.[26] Ancient structures, often unprotected in war zones, are vulnerable to being lost forever, and the stories that they carry simply vanish over time.

Tigray's Ancient History

Understanding the significance of the Tigrayan heritage that is being lost forever requires a journey that goes back thousands of years. The history of Tigray is both rich and ancient, beginning as far back as the first millennium B.C.E. in a society called Di'amat in Yeha, Tigray.[27] By the first century, the Axumite Kingdom had arisen to power with territories that extended across the Red Sea and into modern-day Yemen; Axum was one of the great cultural and economic empires of its time,[28] comprising one of the four known civilizations established in the first century, the others being Rome, Persia, and China.

05. Queen of Sheba

Axum controlled the trade routes between the Roman Empire, the Middle East, and India.[29] Axum gave rise to ancient Ethiopia, which is credited by scientists as the birthplace of humanity. Ethiopia is believed to have more than 3,000 years of history.[30] Interestingly, most of the historical artifacts for which Ethiopia is famous are originally from today's Tigray. For instance, Tigray is home to Africa's first Mosque as well as the oldest Christian manuscript in the world, predating those in Europe.[31] Tigray's alphabetic system, Gəʿəz/Fidäl, is one of the few ancient writing systems still functional in modern Africa, and it predates both Arabic and Hebrew.[32] Axum is remembered amongst Ethiopians as the origin of the Solomonic Dynasty, that began with Menelik, the son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon as written in the Kebra Negast.

06 Axum, old painting

07 Axum, today

Tigray is known for its mountainous terrain, which has served as protection against invaders. Ethiopia became the only country in Africa that was never colonized due to the famous battle of Adwa in 1896 when the Italians were defeated in the historic mountains of Adwa in central Tigray. This historical legacy is why Ethiopia was chosen to host the headquarters of the African Union.[33]

08. Warriors, Battle of Adwa

During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941), Italian forces took with them one of the ancient obelisks of Axum back to Rome.[34] Tigray's government eventually had it returned to Axum in 2005.[35] The obelisk of Axum is the heaviest object ever transported by air, and it took multiple trips to return it in pieces.[36] The obelisk stands today over Tigray as a pillar of pride and history for both Tigrayans and Ethiopians, yet the people of modern Axum–the Tigrayans– have faced unbelievable horrors on the steps of religious and historical places at the hands of other Ethiopians.

09. Al Nejashi Mosque, Tigray, 2020

Tigray's cultural heritage is again at risk of being erased. This has already taken place in the Tigray diaspora following the tragic Red Terror campaign of the 1970s, a war that both culturally and psychologically damaged prior generations. Destroying people's identities is like destroying the people. Generations will grow up on their own land, surrounded by ruins whose stories have vanished through time with no reference to their past. Teklehaymanot G. Weldemichel, born and raised in Tigray and currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, has researched and published various works regarding the disastrous impact the war has had on Tigray's land itself. Weldemichel grew up seeing ruins around his neighborhood with no reference to the life that once occupied them. Such loss erases a shared understanding across generations of socio-cultural identity and is a prerequisite for the continuing success of a community. While international laws have been put in place to hold war criminals accountable for their crimes,[37] little is being done to protect Tigray's heritage today.

"A key premise of community archiving is to give substance to a community right to own its own memories. ...a community archive is more overt in its mission to include those fragments and perspectives that ordinarily would not be recognised as valid or worth preserving by a more conventional repository. Community participation is a core principle of community archives."

Eales, 1998[38]

Literature Review

Tigray's cultural heritage is at risk of being non-traceable through time. It is thus imperative that cultural heritage is preserved so it may continue to exist in the future. In the absence of concerted efforts to preserve it, future generations may never know their history or cultural identity, due to the destruction, violence, and cultural erasure previous generations have endured. The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage is not unique to Tigray. It has been used in wars throughout history all over the world.[39]

Ethnocide Around the World

"Emesa, the ancient name of Homs, was shrouded in mystery, because nothing was left to tell its story. The fact that Emesa was the center of a kingdom that mediated between the Roman Empire and its eastern adversaries was not relevant to the way we, as local architects, looked at our city. This was mainly because there was no trace left of those earlier cultures: not because of natural processes of erosion, but because of deliberate actions of erasure." [40]

Destroying cultural heritage during a war is not a political move, but a direct attack on civilians and their connection to their homeland and identity. Not only is the destruction of cultural heritage harmful to future generations' connection to their history and collective identity, but it also breaks a community as if the bones of a society have been broken. To reiterate a critical point that is not to be forgotten: the loss of heritage we speak of is not the kind that happens naturally through old age, natural disasters, or the fading of a footprint in the sand. The loss is the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage conducted through systematic violence and resulting in an incomprehensible, man-made catastrophe. The deliberate destruction of historical heritage sites and property is a common weapon of ethnic cleansing used in wars all over the world. During World War II, the Nazis not only imprisoned and exterminated the Jewish population but also destroyed their personal property in an effort to erase all traces of their existence in Germany. In the desert of east Damascus lies the famous ruins of Palmyra, Syria's ancient city and UNESCO heritage site, whose destruction by ISIS shocked the entire world.[41]

10. Palmyra, Syria

11. Palmyra, Syria

During World War II, the Nazis not only imprisoned and exterminated the Jewish population but also destroyed their personal property in an effort to erase all traces of their existence in Germany. Al Mahdi, a member of the Tuareg Islamist militia Ansaw Dine, was sent to prison for nine years by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the destruction of the significant cultural and religious heritage of Timbuktu.[42] The ICC's prosecution of Al Mahdi was the first of its kind, internationally recognizing the destruction of cultural heritage as a crime against humanity.[43]

The work of cultural preservation cannot be carried on the shoulders of an individual; it must be a collaborative effort. Preserving cultural heritage specific to war zones requires a multi-armed collaboration that demands the work of scholars, artists, designers, librarians, archivists, art history specialists, the international community, and the public. It must be fully supported by policy and the active participation of political and institutional leaders.[44] Due to the nature of war zones, archivists and professionals in cultural restoration cannot do this work alone. In some cases, it may also require citizens on the ground. One such case is a group of students who successfully rescued over 11,000 books in Syria and created their own library system for Daara's city-wide usage.[45] This is a prime example of DIY efforts by civilians volunteering themselves to act and preserve their cultural heritage. Similar measures have been made elsewhere in Syria, such as the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq (SHOSI), a consortium of Smithsonian and other US-based universities and institutions. Syrian professionals were trained on how to protect cultural heritage victims from damage by the war.[46] As the need for the protection of cultural heritage consciously grows, national and international laws have been created to protect heritage sites. The possible use of military action on the ground is even being debated.[47] However, more work must be done to implement such laws. The War on Tigray has just entered its second year and the region has been under siege by the invading Ethiopian and Eritrean armies and allied ethnic militia loyal to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali. While plenty of evidence shows the destruction of important cultural heritage and the loss of about 600,000 civilian lives, the international community remains inactive.

Post-war Grieving in Tigray

"Hazen hazen yemetze" -Tigrigna, (sorrow brings sorrow)

Communities who have lived through war are affected by the trauma from what they have experienced and witnessed, even decades after a war occurred. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is widely untreated in post-war societies, in addition to a plethora of undiagnosed mental illnesses.[48] This leads to unhealthy coping mechanisms being passed down, intergenerational trauma, and an extreme focus on survival instead of one's health. In Tigrayan culture, facing such trauma is avoided and ignored, buried deep within the psyche. While healing trauma has become widely ignored, it is seen that this way of life has been embedded in the culture and used to replace what has been lost.

Jerusaliem* shares "The first thing that comes to mind (when asked about the erasure of Tigrayan Culture) is Ashenda." Ashenda is a cultural holiday for women and young girls, originating from Tigray and recently being seen celebrated across Ethiopia. "I think to see it being co-opted in the diaspora by people who don't care for our families, and the people whom this celebration originated from- It feels very like a commodity. Tigray as a whole being reduced to this commodity, like we aren't people, are just numbers and something you can take from."

12. Senayit grieves for her 12-year-old son. She was drugged, tied to a tree, and raped by Eritrean soldiers for 10 days. At one point she awoke to find her son dead at her feet. "I never buried him," she screams, between sobs. "I never buried him."

Like nature, culture is a living, collective organism that changes and evolves over time. When one's land and culture are violently and systematically destroyed, what is left with the people is their trauma and a need for survival. Even after a war has 'finished,' the war continues internally. When a generation is focused on the need to survive, the next generation accumulates this way of being whether they have lived through war or not. Instead of culture or family memories being passed down, which could trigger trauma responses if invoked, the prior generation leans towards avoidance of pain and employs a 'keep going' approach to life.[49]

Death has a psychological and economic aftermath that cannot be separated, as they set the path for the next generation's road to a future of poverty. In Tigrayan households, work is equally distributed to each member of a family. When a father dies, not only has one lost their father and husband, but they have also lost the one who tends to the farm and puts food on the table for the family to eat.[50] This is not to say the grief of losing a person is only for what they provided economically, but that the grief is felt and echoes on multiple levels. It has also been studied that Tigrayan culture has developed a perspective of grieving being taboo.[51] Grieving is given a period, and when one crosses a period of prolonged sorrow, it is seen that person is disobeying God. This has created shame around the experience of grief, suggesting that the Tigrayan persons' expression of loss of life, land, and culture is silent and rigid. Such silence further exemplifies the erasure of identity, culture, and humanity in both tangible and emotional planes.

Analyzing the texts of on-the-ground restoration efforts in Syria against ISIS's destruction, to the Nazi's erasure of Jewish presence on German soil, exposes how cultural erasure has been used as a weapon of war that traumatizes communities under siege. Such acts bleed into the future generation's inability to claim their cultural identity or reinvigorate their silenced presence in the world- birthing generations born in repetitive trauma.

The Coffee Ceremony

"The loss of social networks, customs, rituals, relationships, authority structures and institutions, through which forced migrants had previously engaged and negotiated their sense of self on a daily basis, is key to an understanding of the experiences of migration and, in particular, its impact on personal well-being." [52]

The 1970's Red Terror War created more than a million internally displaced people (IDP's),[53] and more than 3 million Ethiopians are scattered throughout the world.[54] Studying the texts of post war grieving practices in Tigray has highlighted the emotional coping mechanism of traumatized individuals, but it may be just as important to study the relationship traumatized communities have with their cultural artifacts in the reconstruction of identity and home.

Growing up in the United States, every Ethiopian household I visited had a jebena and coffee set. As a young diaspora, the jebena not only was a tool for serving coffee but an important cultural symbol in a Habesha household. Diaspora kids growing up abroad may not speak their parents language fluently, or be knowledgeable about Ethiopia's history, but they will know what a jebena is and how it is used. This proves apparent that the coffee ceremony is an important practice for communities in exile, and was not something that could ever be given up. The jebena is used across Ethiopia, and can also be found in Sudan. It is believe to have originated in Tigray in the year 1200.[55] It is commonly created with clay, but can also be found in metal. In many families, the jebena is passed down through generations as an heirloom.

In David Palmers article *The Ethiopian Buna (Coffee) Ceremony: Exploring the Impact of Exile and the Construction of Identity through Narratives with Ethiopian Forced Migrants in the United Kingdom*,[56] Palmer conducts oral interviews with various Ethiopians in the United Kingdom, sharing the importance of the continuation of the coffee ritual since moving abroad. The article breaks down the coffee ceremony in depth, its artifacts and the meanings of them. These objects include the jebena (coffee pot), buna (coffee), the finjal (cup), the netela (shawl worn by woman making coffee), itan (incense of frankincense and myrrh burned during ceremony), and the green grass put on the floor during the ceremony, symbolizing prosperity. Interviewees note the smell of the coffee and the sounds of the grinding bring back memories of home, and the importance of maintaining a sense of community within the diaspora.

"Because they don't have any barriers when they come for the coffee ceremony, they can chat in their own language; they are with familiar people, their friends, their family, so there is no problem. They share if they have any health problem, any worries inside them, any frustrations about something in the future. They will share for their family and friends, they will work it out together (Haile, interview, July 2009)."[57]

13. Roasting coffee in my home, Thailand 2021. Photo by Lian Markovich

Participants shared that the coffee ceremony was healing, with the combined smoke of the roasting buna (coffee) and burning of itan (frankincense and myrrh inscense) would dispose of bad spirits and release stress.[58]

The Role of Women in Tigrayan Society

"In fact, in every war, since the dawn of time, women have been active, present, conscious participants. Sometimes they have been soldiers. Sometimes they have been spies, hospital workers, messengers, resistance members, community leaders, cooks, informants, generals, logistics managers, journalists, pilots and more. They have been responsible for nationalism, morale, ideas, strategy. I could go on. Yet, they are missing from so many histories of wars, their roles dismissed or dimmed in the re-telling of that conflict. We paint war as a predominately masculine phenomenon and women who interact voluntarily in spheres of violence are recast as wives, followers and other supporting roles, rather than the engaged, deliberate participants which they are. This happens because of the prevailing idea that femininity is somehow incompatible with violence and with war" - Chessie Baldwin[59]

14. Tigray Women Fighters, Red Terror War , 1980s

15. Tigray Women Fighters, 2021

16. Anna* prepares traditional coffee in the kitchen area of her tent in Tunaydbah refugee settlement, eastern Sudan

The coffee host is usually always a woman in the household. Women are intrinsically linked to the coffee ceremonies' continued existence and the preservation of Tigrayan rituals. This holds true for the ceremony being preserved both in modern day's forced migration, and the preservation of the coffee ceremony for the past 800 years. Tigrayan women are not only seen making coffee or cooking, they also fight alongside men on the battlefield in wars throughout history.[60] In Tigray, the annual holiday *Ashenda* is a two week long celebration of the feminine, honoring women and girls, through dance, singing and adornment.[61] Celebrated in August, women are given food, drinks, and money by the community. signifying their importance in the society. Today, Tigrayan women continue the coffee ceremony. Many displaced Tigrayan women in Sudan's refugee camps have started small coffee shops in the camps, greatly symbolizing the significance of the jebena as a cultural artifact that Tigrayan refugees have chosen to carry with them as they fled home. While this thesis could have explored various other cultural objects, such as jewelry or clothing, the coffee ceremony creates a gathering among communities in exile and strengthens their bond, thus creating a space for healing, family, dialogue, and nostalgia.

"Heritage artefacts offer historical evidence and are a means of tourism development. But more than that, they are a social ingredient, upgrading human existence and giving it more meaning. People are emotionally connected to their heritage, beliefs, language and identity.

Religious objects and ecclesiastical materials are transcendent, emotive instruments between believers and their God/creator. They are also a display of genetic memory between descendants and their ancestors. In this conflict, the people of Tigray have been denied their natural and human rights. They have had both their existence and meaningful life challenged."

Hagos Abrha Abay[60]

Precedent Study

Shilo Shiv Suleman, *Incarnate*

In Shilo Shiv Suleman's vast body of work, "Reincarnate", she takes viewers on a journey through stories of life, love, death, and the afterlife through various materials and installations interwoven with poetry.[63] Broken into four subtitles, each phase of work within Reincarnate expresses itself through a different medium, including painting, brass, stone, paper, and film. I am particularly drawn to Reincarnate's third body of work, "Picking up the pieces of myself," inspired by the story of Sati, whose burning body parts fell across 57 places in India.[64] Suleman cast her own body parts out of brass, inspired by temple sculptures and embellished with mirrored jewels and decorative engravings. She displays them in the gallery suspended in the air as if they are floating. Suleman wears the brass parts in photographs, expressing the metaphor of the breaking nd mending of ourselves. Reincarnate is an inspirational work that connects ancient stories, the self, and the current day in conversation with each other.

As I look to my culture to resurrect new life and beauty from the pain of war, I too am resurrecting my own voice in writing a new story through myself. Suleman's work is an example of honoring tales of the sacred past, creating space for them to breathe into our now, while simultaneously becoming the author of your own ending.

17. Shilo Shiv Suleman, Reincarnate

18. Shilo Shiv Suleman, Reincarnate

> *"Perhaps the story of an asura returns as a virus that sweeps across the world. Perhaps the story of Laila and Majnu re-incarnates through text messages and missed calls. Perhaps in this lifetime, the lovers do not perish but reunite after the War." -*
> *Shilo Shiv Suleman*[65]

June Marieezy, The Sundrop Garden

June Marieezy's "Living Library" is an Educational, zero waste Ethnic grocer that operates as a library. In an effort to preserve the Philippines' indigenous plants, members are able to "check out" seeds so they may start planting their own, with the promise of returning seeds that grow from the matured plants. Marieezy's aim is that through the community having access to these seeds and supporting biodiversity, the Philippines' indigenous plants, foods, medicinal herbs and barks, culture, and ancestral connection to their land will foster once again.[66]

Through the history of colonization by Spain, America, and Japan, Filipino identity has become a collage of the different feet that have been implanted on Filipino soil. Marieezy explains, *"First, I was looking for the true Filipina; the one that wasn't conquered by Spain, and Japan and America, and deleted our history. Then once I found the original Filipino, I wanted to go deeper; I found out that there was something even deeper than that, and it was the roots, literal coming back to your roots- and there is the seed. And that is actually not a national thing, it is universal."*[67]

20. The Sundrop Garden

21, 22. The Sundrop Garden

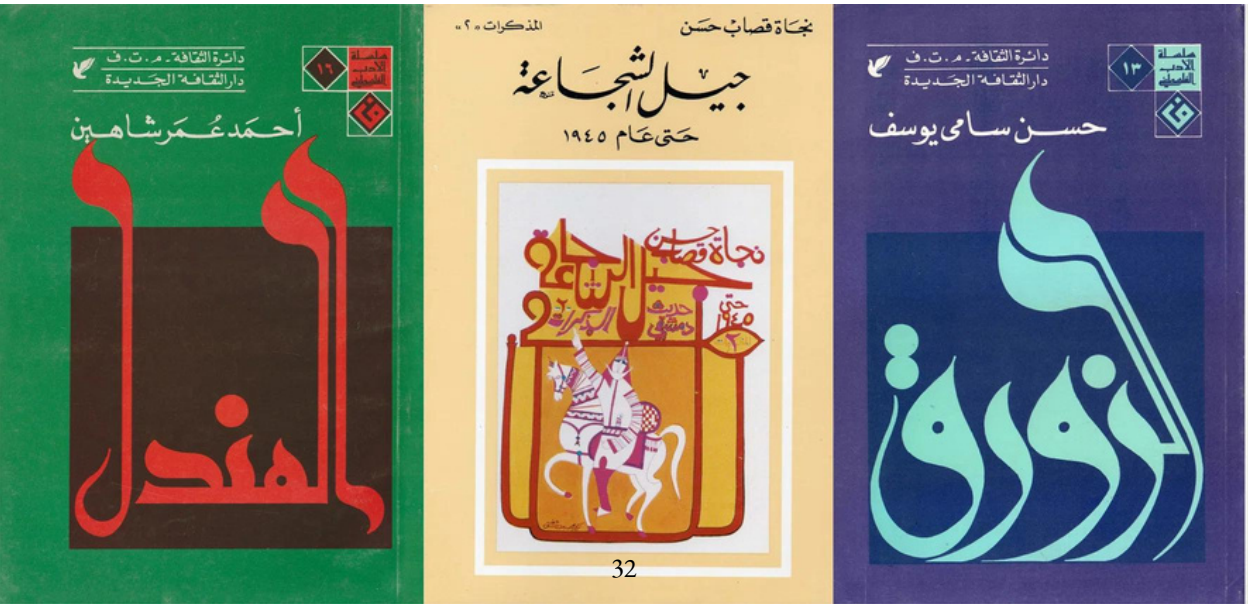
Marieezy's magnetism towards seeds and gardening ideology is also seen in her music, creating a series of albums titled "The Sundrop Garden". Users can access her music on an interactive and animated website. Visitors are met with a symbol in rotation, which, upon clicking, grows like a seed taking form. This symbolizes the beginning of new life. This symbol not only exists online and as the cover of her albums, but is also the literal shape of her physical garden in the Philippines. The world she has crafted around herself has inspired me. The tangible living library seed collection is a tangible method of preserving her cultural heritage through generations. Her interactive, musical archive online is a strong precedent for the digital archive I've created for Tigray.

The Syrian Design Archive

The Syrian Design Archive is a digital archive consisting of a stamp archive, print archive, media archive, and type archive. Founded by Kinda Ghannoum, Hala Al Afsaa, and Sally Alassafen, the Syrian Design Archive exists to fill the holes in the documentation of Syria's rich design history.[68] It is apparent that significant parts of Syria's historical and cultural places have been destroyed due to war, and while cultural preservation projects have been initiated, culture is such a vast body that not every reparation project can touch.[69] The Syrian Design Archive has shown that preserving the tiny details of culture is meaningful and profound.

The details of a culture and time, such as an old stamp or movie poster, trigger a nostalgia that can awaken stories and memories. Finding the names of the artists and removing their work from anonymity means that the archive helps to map the cultural contributions of the creatives who have enriched Syria's history in the past century. The stamps in the archive not only[70] trigger memories of the past but often depict historical figures, crafts, agriculture, technology, and Syrian folk stories, offering an insight into Syria's literary heritage as well as its visual history.[71]

23. Syrian Design Archive: Palestinian Literature Series, New Culture House, 1989-1991, Cover design Mouneer Alshaarani



Through my thesis research interviews with Tigrayans of the diaspora, many of the stories people have shared with me lay within the details of precious memories; the names of their cows and their personalities, the gathering of elders under the village tree to make a decision; the things you won't find in books- the things that seem unimportant to publish. Is this the unique magic of culture that is held within a place? The Syrian Archive asks the vast question, “what is culture and what are the elements that help shape someone's identity?” Through my research of diving into Tigray's rich history, stories, and collective memories; I've come to understand that culture is a vast body, a living organism that encompasses many parts and identities. Culture cannot be defined by one person in that culture, though individuals certainly both absorb and contribute to it.

Culture is not a static image of artifacts, but a motion picture of many different realities -evidently, never-ending. Culture is a bridge where people meet and connect with each other.

The Syrian Design Archive has shown that by creating archives of what is seemingly insignificant, like stamps, types, and prints- They do not aim to define culture- but to discover its diversity through a mosaic of material.

24. Syrian Stamp Archive

25. Burhan Karkoutly 1978
English text: Palestine lives, Arabic translation: The Palestinian revolution lives

Candide Uyanze, Digitized Memory Graph: Networked Memory Graph

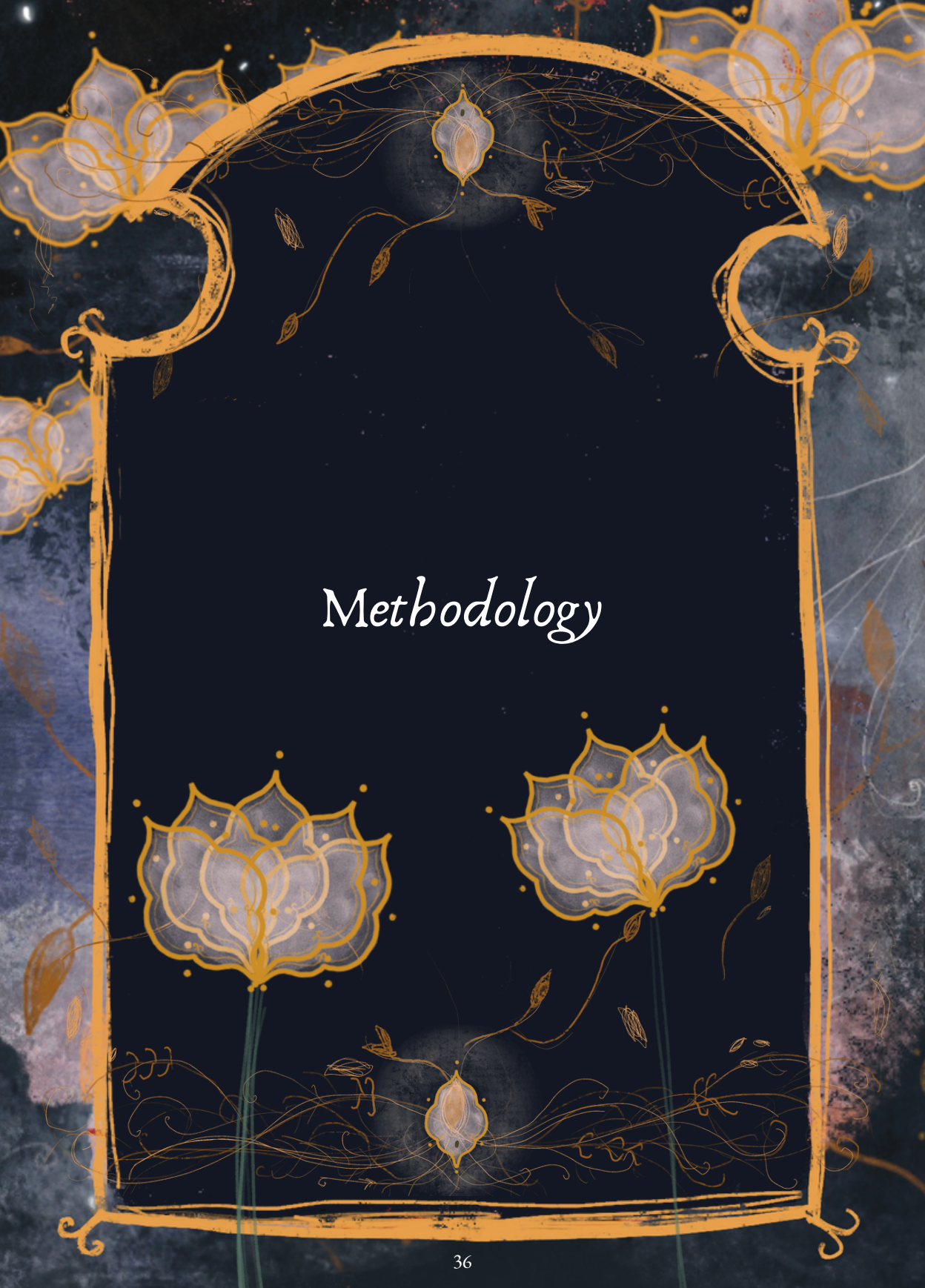
The Digitized Diasporic Memory Graph is an award-winning thesis project by Candide Uyanze at the Ontario College of Art & Design.[72] Uyanze reimagines the African diaspora as a connected network on the web, through the creation of a "memory graph" that she describes as being a 'non-linear documentary, conversational archive, open-access library, collective memory bank, or chain of memories'. [73] Visitors can access the memory graph online, and explore by clicking the points with different titles.

Each point opens a dialogue where participants converse about various topics through voice notes. Uyzanze's thesis is an inspiring precedent for my work as I create my own digital and interactive archive. The Digitized Diasporic Memory graph serves as a powerful example of a non-traditional archive, reimagining it in various ways online through the usage of the words `memory chain, memory bank, or open access library'.

26. Networked Memory Graph

"I have been noticing ruins around our neighborhood which we know nothing about, where they come from, and where the people that occupied them before disappeared. But now in hindsight when I think about it, Tigray has been going through similar experiences over the centuries. There are oral stories of what happened in the 16th century, what happened in the 19th century during Menelik's time, and following that. One of the ruins we have in our neighborhood is called Adi Qashi, the "Home of Priests". But the priests are not there anymore, and nobody knows who they were, or what their stories were."

Teklehaymanot Weldemichel


Methodology

Interviews: Tigrayan Voices
Phase I

I interviewed Tigrayans within the diaspora and within Ethiopia. I organized the conversation into three sections in the first round of interviews. I began with a short meditation, transporting them back to a memory of safety in Tigray. I asked them to describe everything they observed– the smells, sounds, people, places, feelings, and movements around them. Many interviewees cried and some were unable to continue the interview. The intent of this meditation was to analyze Tigrayans' relationship with their memories of Tigray. Some were unable to do so due to emotional pain and trauma. This identified a key problem relating to ethnocide and war; when one's own memories of home are unattainable due to trauma, it disrupts the passing down of cultural identity and stories.

Following the meditation, I asked interviewees to share the first things that came to their minds when they heard the word "erasure" of Tigray. Many registered similar responses, including historical monuments, religious buildings, family artifacts, art, nature, cultural celebrations, and language. This allowed me to observe what people saw as most vulnerable to destruction in war.

> *Whoever is left from this extermination campaign will never feel the same as they were before because they don't have cultural and historical references, they don't have references to the past. The Eritrean soldiers were going into every house, every historical building, church, and mosque, to erase the stories- to take away- to remove whatever represents a sense of being Tigrayan, the Tigrayaness. That includes cultural heritage, but also whatever we depend on, the environment itself. The Tigrayan landscape is not what is formally known as a natural landscape, it's a man-made landscape. We made it, our ancestors made the land the way it is. So destroying that is symbolic; symbolic that the aim is to erase the population, erase our history, our culture*
>
> Teklehaymanot Weldemicheal

Interview question: *When you hear the word "erasure" of Tigray's culture, what are the first things that come to your mind?*

"If you think about a family that has a lot of significant trauma, it affects them and how they communicate, how close they are , because there's someone who has endured trauma and maybe they have not found a way to talk about it. So when I close my eyes and could not imagine any joy, then what does that subconsciously do? I feel like maybe in the future, when I have my own kids, maybe I would just start associating Tigray with pain, and I will turn my back away because it will be too painful. And if all of us did that then what do we become? We become a society who is so hurt that whenever we're together we just remind each other of our own pains."
- Liya Gebreab

"Religious celebrations, our art, our history, taking credit for something that isn't yours. As you know, they basically destroyed the Al Negashi mosque. That to me is.. unacceptable." - Anonymous, USA

"I think of it on a secondary where it effects me, for example. Where they don't want me expressing my culture, they want me to assimilate more, so in a sense they're trying to get rid the next generation, by telling youwe're "all Ethiopians." It's to the extent where if I hear Tigrinya words or Tigrinya music, or anything related to Tigray I feel like I'm not suppose to be doing that. I get scared or I get worried." - Anonymous, Ethiopia

"The Kunama and Irob societies that are just disappearing before our eyes."
- Jerusaliem, USA

"Silencing someone so much that they have to keep everything to themselves and there's a fear of passing down that knowledge to the coming generation. You see it in your own family kind of.. There's a fear of if you've seen too much of something, you could be a target, so slowly just erodes.. it's violence. I think that's what I think, I think of violence."
- Anonymous, Ethiopia

The last question asked, *"If you could plant a seed in Tigray, and it could grow into anything you wanted, what would your seed be? Keep in mind that Tigray's weight is not on your shoulders alone. You are in a land with many farmers, planting their seeds alongside you. What is yours?"*

This opened a plethora of creative responses, ranging from tangible cultural elements, including libraries, musical drums, schools, irrigation systems, and homes. Intangible elements were also given, including protection, freedom, seeds that never die, and tolerance. Not only was this a lighthearted way to end a heavy and emotional interview, but it also opened the doors to limitless imagination and inspiration, something I find to be vital for the soul of the suffering. These interviews gave me an idea of what aspects of Tigray's land and culture are seen as most vulnerable to erasure. One interviewee mentioned she wished you had a place to go to access Tigray's stories. With so much history passed down orally, there is nowhere for descendants to access in this digital age to their cultural heritage.

> *I would love for one day to see homes for art all over Tigray growingeing from the seeds that you and I and so many of the people who are artists in our community start. our people need multifaceted and multi- armed forms of intervention to help us heal.*
> Jerusaliem G.

> *If my seed could grow into anything including buildings, mine would be libraries. That could spread, to have multiple branches.*
> Anonymous

> *We need continuous protection. We went through so much suffering in the last two years, so much in the 70s and 80s, that there should not be any recurrence of this ever again. I would plant a seed of protection that would be endless and infinite.*
> Anonymous

> *I would plant a whole bunch of Kerberos (Tigrayan drums). It sounds really stupid but thats whats in majority of our music. Tigrinya music has always had a place in my heart and I think thats why I became so fluent in it too.*
> Bereket

Interviews: Tigrayan Voices
Phase II

In my second round of interviews, I asked questions that are less imaginative and more tangible. I conducted the second interview with no meditations, and questions only. This was vital in identifying specific symbols to then translate into a final outcome for the artifacts and archive. I ask six questions:

- What would you most want your children to know about Tigray, as a diaspora growing up afar?
- What information do you feel is vital to incorporate in an archive of Tigray?
- [Depending on who is being interviewed] Even though you grew up in Tigray, is there anything you feel wasn't passed down to you due to past trauma of the land and its people? How do you feel this affected you and other children growing up in Tigray?
- Is there anything you think can't be "passed down", without living in Tigray?
- What questions about Tigray do you wish you had answers to?

The answers I received were eye-opening and inspiring. In analyzing what Tigrayans most yearned to know about Tigray, I identified key voids in the collective memory to attempt to answer in my project. These conversations also challenged my own views on Tigray, asking myself what is my archive being based on, and how am I measuring my pride for Tigray? In my interview with Weyni Tesfai, she speaks about how identifying with our ancestors through romanticized history to combat the pain, creates a fractured understanding of the past and of ourselves. Many interviewees also expressed the desire to explore cultural heritage through a diverse range of media, including music, videos, recordings, vintage photographs, and art.

Material: Learning Clay Handbuilding and Pottery Wheel

The first pots I created were born from my hands, as are the many vessels one will find throughout Tigray. Working with clay was therapeutic, as my fingers sculpted a clump of heaviness into a beautiful object. For many weeks, I committed myself to making a different pot every day by hand. I was also able to test their heaviness, pot handle usability, and contemplate if they were vessels my people could actually use to make coffee. The hand-building was productive in learning the possibilities and limitations of the material. I created numerous jebenas hand-building in red clay and white clay.

I tested the potential of making the pots with a combination of hand-building and wheel techniques. Learning the pottery wheel was a steep learning curve full of frustration. This practice was necessary for understanding the nature of the clay, the limitations of what can be created on the wheel, and the understanding that this material is a journey that will last long after this thesis to master. The wheel and hand-building sessions also resulted in the creation of small coffee cups, a grounds holder, and a sugar holder to accompany the pots, tools that support the coffee ritual and functionality.

Making the jebena pots by hand allowed me to expand both my knowledge of clay and design outside of the constraints of three dimensional modeling. As I worked with the clay more on my own, moving away from both the commissioned pottery and 3D printing, I began to take more ownership of the pieces. Initially, I thought it best to commission an experienced potter to make these pieces so they could look refined and professional. It felt more authentic to me to make them myself and not let a computer or another person determine the flatness and curves of the object. I packed up my tools and brought the clay home with me and established a daily ritual. Each jebena came out unique and different from the last, and the process of shaping the clay was deeply therapeutic when I began working from home. I began embodying myself, my environment, and my thoughts in the clay. I made the jebena pots while in the ritual of drinking coffee in my own home.

Material: Painting and Engraving

I explored glazing techniques, with both underglaze (first layer of paint), glaze (the 'shiny' effect) and overglaze (gold embellishments). With each attempt I took notes on the cone temperature on the kiln, the changing of the clay's color, and glaze outcomes to try what elements I wanted in the final outcomes. Through this trial and error process I came to learn the changing of the clay's raw and painted colors, and become ecstatic every morning to open the kiln door and unveil the next creation.

For the final designs I chose to paint the jebenas reminiscent colors inspired from ancient paintings found on the walls of Tigray's monasteries. Carbon black, white, red and yellow ochre, and green earth was the basic color palette used by painters in the 14th and 15th century.[74] Red lead, orpiment, and vermillion made with dragon's blood extracted from the dracaena genus tree can also be found painted in the Debre Tsion Church in Gheralta, Tigray.[75]

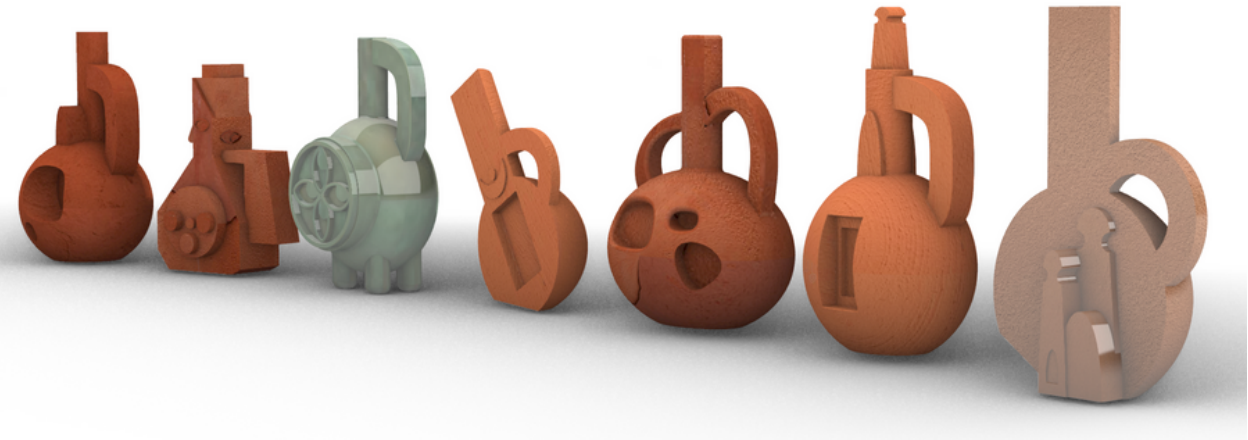
27. Virgin and Child painted on plaster, this time dating from the second half of the 17th century and at the church of Pétros Tefetsamé Semaet, Mellahayzengi.

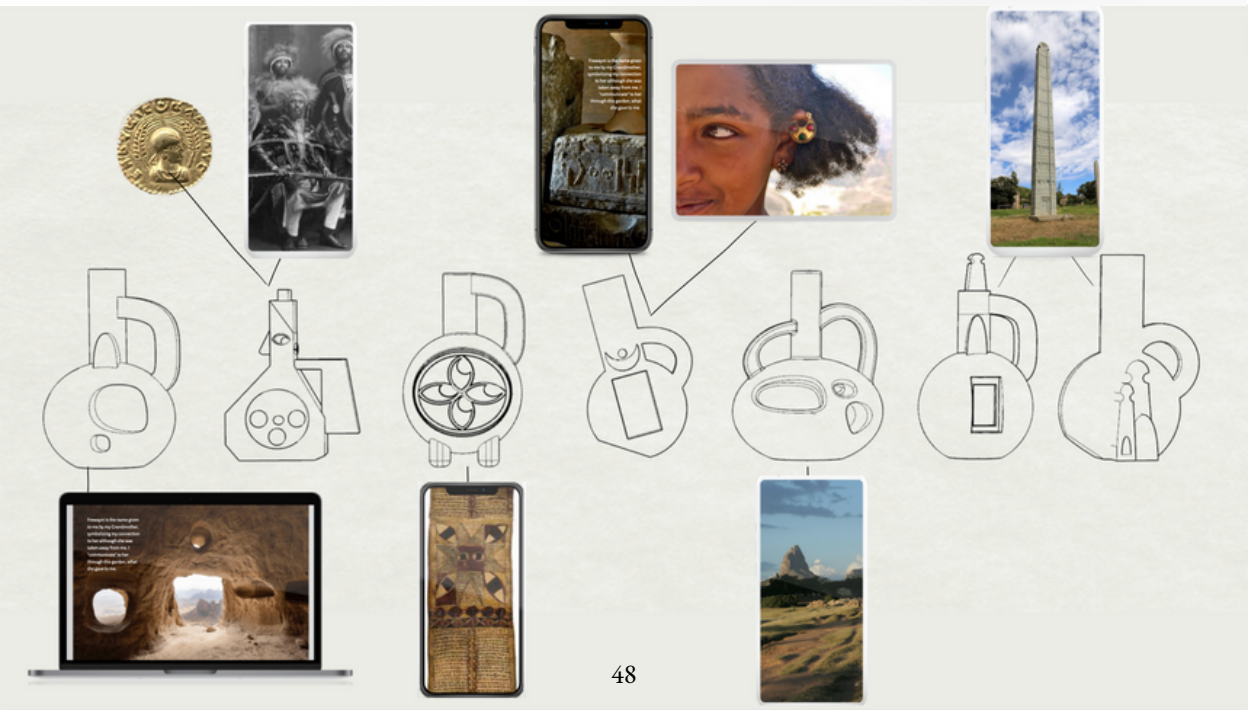
28. The Nine Saints (important missionaries in the early spread of Christianity through Ethiopia) are painted on plaster on the dome of Abuna Yemata Guh. The paintings date from the second half of the 15th century.

Design Direction

At the beginning of my research process, I created a visual map to represent Tigrayan culture, directly inspired by the interviews. The map takes the form of a garden and also became the starting point for the design of the digital archive. The map has different branches, including monuments and sites, manuscripts, religion, jewelry/clothing, stories, traditions, stories, dances and music, and language. On top of each branch are pinned physical objects or photographs and quotes that correlate to the various written topics on the map. As discussed in the Coffee Ceremony section of this thesis, there are many objects that represent Tigray, and I landed on the Jebena coffee pot for this project. As stated in the Literature Review, the jebena represents a significant ritual in the Tigrayan household. It signifies a time of cultural exchange and conversation.

Due to the war, this time has been taken away from Tigrayans, as well as the people and the passing of stories by families. Inspired by the cultural mind map, I designed seven Jebena pots, each representing a different place or history in Tigray. I designed the pots based on physical form of the place they are inspired by combined with and poetic symbolism for their design. From these seven pots, I lowered it down to three as final outcomes to be fabricated. I 3D printed the three final designs, allowing me to see them in their three dimensional form. This served as an aid to begin replicating the pots with hand-building in clay.





It was meaningful to see the pots in their intended material and outside the rigidness of the three-dimensional printed plastic. The traditional jebena pot in Tigray is also made of brown clay, usually kept in its natural brown color, or is painted black. While jebena's are used across Ethiopia for making coffee, the one spout jebena is distinct to Tigray's design versus the two spout pot in other regions. For this reason, I chose to design my jebena pots with only one spout.[76]

The pots are not meant to mimic the traditional jebena pots, but to serve as both a functional coffee pot and a tool to preserve Tigrayan culture, through the collaboration of technology and storytelling through its form. This opened up many reflections during the process on what is 'modernizing' a traditional object. What does a contemporary, Tigrayan object look like, unique to itself? Oftentimes, the idea of modernization comes with an aesthetic approach of minimization, alongside a western sensibility regarding "craft" as primitive. A minimalistic object is not something that felt Tigrayan to me, and in fact, contributes to the erasure of culture thus contradicting my intent of this project. Within this process, I found myself at a crossroads of preserving Tigrayan idenity initiated by Ethiopia's war, and preserving Tigrayan identity under a pressure of creating a contemporary object within an Art and Design university. In addition to being apart of a program that has supported us in designing objects that innovate functionality, it was important for me to stay true to my specific design challenge here: designing an object that communicates cultural preservation of a vanishing region under war. If this thesis's aim was to design a jebena to innovate its usage, this thesis may look very different.

29. Jebena, Ethiopia

Jebena, Tigray region

Can you plant a garden to stop a war? It depends how you think about time. It depends what you think a seed does, if it's tossed into fertile soil.

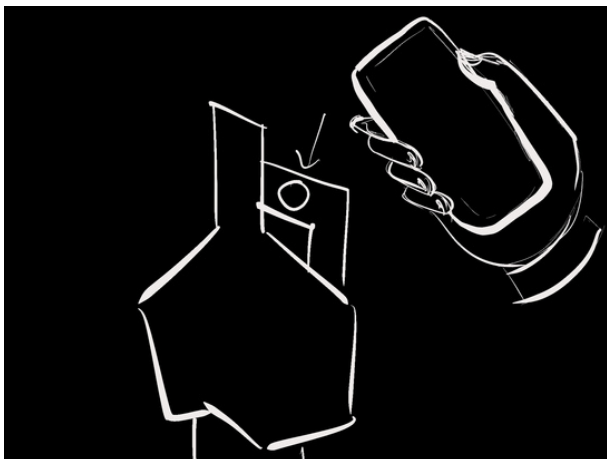
"The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end… Here is the Amen beyond the prayer," Derek Jarman wrote as he grieved his dying friends, faced his own death, and contemplated art, mortality, and resistance while planting a garden between an old lighthouse and a new nuclear plant on a barren shingled shore.

BY MARIA POPOVA

Outcome

Outcome

The outcome of this thesis takes the form of three jebena pots, accompanied by a digital garden accessible online. Each pot is functional to serve coffee and represents a different place, piece of history, and poetic story in Tigray. Each pot's handle features an NFC chip that can take viewers to a digital garden of Tigrayan history. Near Field Communication (NFC) is a wireless technology that allows for the transfer of data between two devices.[77] NFC tags are similar to QR codes, except instead of scanning a code with your phone camera, the NFC reader built into our phones automatically communicates with the NFC devices. We experience this on a daily basis, using the tap-to-pay option when checking out at stores. NFC technology can also be seen as an option for boarding the metro and trains, replacing the original metro card. NFC is the next rising technology for the seamless transfer of data. I easily programmed the NFC chips with the Frewayni's Garden URL on an iPhone app.



Instructional illustrations in Gallery on tapping the phone to its embedded NFC chip in the handle off clay pots

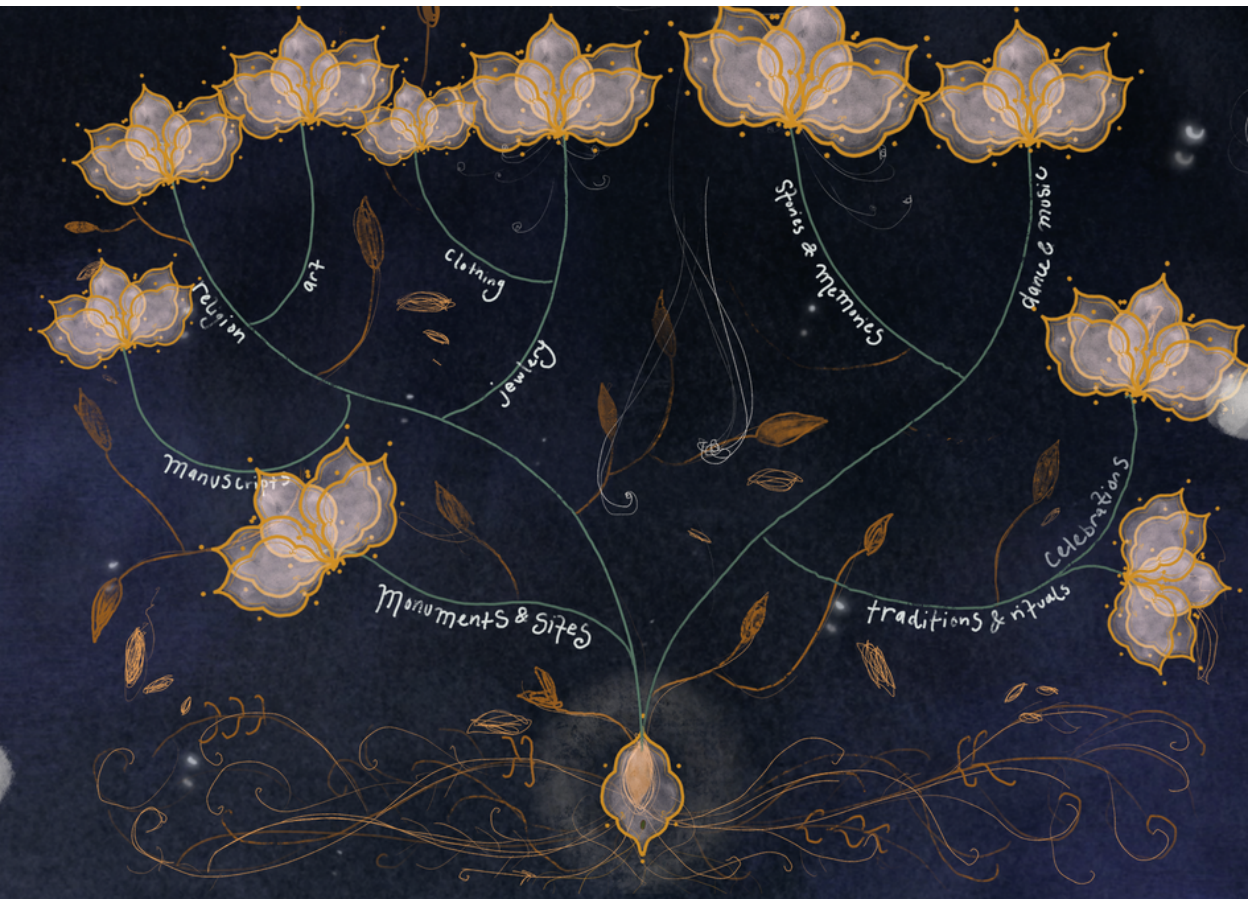
Frewayni's Garden

As discussed in the precedents, the garden is a nontraditional archive, serving as a memory bank with both collective stories and factual history. The garden can be accessed online, and automatically activated by tapping a phone close to the clay pot. Accessing the garden from a clay pot will take viewers directly to that pot's specific page in the website. Visitors can explore the different parts of the garden by clicking the various flowers that bloom into different pages of Tigrayan history, media, and stories, supported by both written information and archival images or video. The garden takes the design inspiration of the map previously created in the research methodologies (see above in the Design Direction section).

"Frewayni" is the Tigrinya name I was born with. It was originally given to me as my first name, although growing up in the United States I was rarely addressed by it unless around Ethiopians or Ertireans. I chose to name the garden in commemoration to my grandmother, as it was the name she liked and knew as before she passed away. It also has meaningful connotations to the garden. In Tigrinya, *'fre'* ፍረ, means seed, and *'weyni'* ወይኒ, means fruit, specfically it is a berry that is grown to produce red wine. *Frewayni*, the seed of fruitfulness.

www.frewaynisgarden.com

Frewayni's Garden, Opening page



Frewayni's Garden, Archive navigation page

Understanding the significance of the Tigrayan heritage that is being lost forever requires a journey that goes back thousands of years. The history of Tigray is both rich and ancient, beginning as far back as the first millennium B.C.E. in a society called Di'amat in Yeha, Tigray. By the first century, the Axumite Kingdom arose with its territories that extended across the Red Sea into modern-day Yemen; Axum was one of the great cultural and economic empires of its time, comprising one of the four known civilizations established in the first century (the others being Rome, Persia, and China).

Axum

ኣኽሱም

ንዘልኣለም ዝጠፍእ ዘሎ ትግራዋይ ቀርሲ ትርጉሙ ምርዳእ ንኣሽሓት ዓመታት ንድሕሪት ዝምለስ ጉዕዞ ይሓትት። ታሪኽ ትግራይ ሃብታምን ጥንታዊን ኮይኑ፡ ካብ ቀዳማይ ሸሕ ዓመት ቅ.ል.ክ ጀሚሩ። ኣብ ትግራይ ከተማ የሓ ዲ.ዓማት ኣብ ዝተባህለ ሕብረተሰብ። ኣብ ቀዳማይ ክፍለ ዘመን ንግስነት ኣክሱሚት ምስቲ ንቀይሕ ባሕሪ ሰረገ ናብ ዘመናዊ የመን ዝዝርጋሕ ግዝኣታቱ ተላዒሉ፤ ኣክሱም ሓንቲ ካብተን ኣብ ገዜኡ ዝነበራ ዓበይቲ ባህላውን ቁጠባውን ሃጸያዊ ግዝኣታት ኮይና፡ ካብቶም ኣብ ቀዳማይ ክፍለ ዘመን ዝተመስረቱ ኣርባዕተ ፍሉጣት ስልጣነታት (እቶም ካልኦት ሮማ፡ ፋርስን ቻይናን እዮም) ዝሓዙፈ ኣንፃ ነይሩ።

The Stellae's of Axum are recorded in history to be funeral stones, making the graves of ancient Kings. Some believe there is a deeper meaning to the monuments and holds a spiritual belief that predates Axum's conversion to Christinaity in 350 BCE by King Ezana I. Prior to Christinianity, an indigenous polythestic religion was practiced in Axum. The ancient Axumites worshiped various Gods, such as Mahram (God of War), Hawbas (Goddess of the Moon), Astar, Beher and Meder. The conversin from Axum's indigenous religion to Christianity can be seen on the change in coin designs on Axumite currency, a moon to a cross.

100 BCE

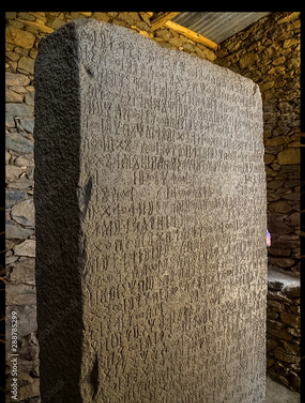
Frewayni's Garden, Axum archive page

ስቲላታት ኣክሱም ኣእማን ቀብሪ ምኳኖም ኣብ ታሪኽ ተመዝጊቡ ኣሎ፡ መቓብር ጥንታውያን ነገስታት ይብር። ገሊኦም እቶም ሓወልትታት ዝዓሞቑ ትርጉም ከም ዘለዎም ይኣምኑን ቀድሚ ኣክሱም ብ350 ቅ.ል.ክ ብንጉስ ኤዛና ቀዳማይ ናብ ክርስትና ምቕያሩ ዝነበረ መንፈሳዊ እምነት ኣለዎም።ቀድሚ ክርስትና ኣብ ኣክሱም ጀቀባት ሺርኪኣዊ ሃደማኖት ይግበር ነይሩ። ጥንታውያን ኣኽሱማውያን ንዝተፈላለዩ ኣማልኽቲ ከም ማህራም (ኣምላኽ ውግኣ)፡ ሓውባስ (ኣምላኽ ወርሒ)፡ ኣስታር፡ በሄርን ሜደርን የምልኹ ነበሩ። ካብ ጀቀባት ሃደማኖት ኣክሱም ናብ ክርስትና ዝመጽእ ምቕያር፡ ኣብ ባጤራ ኣክሱሚት ኣብ ዝግበር ለውጢ ዲዛይን ሳንቲም፡ ካብ ወርሒ ናብ መስቀል ክርእ ይክኣል።

Pre Christianity in Axum

Perhaps one of the most interesting ancient artifacts in Axum are the appearance of the South Arabian language, Sabaean, on stone tablets, such as King Ezana's stone. Sabaean is one of the three languages written on the stone, accompanying Ge'ez and Greek. The Sabaean language is also be found throughout other parts of Tigray's ancient artifacts, including the city of Yeha.

ምናልባት ሓደ ካብቲ ኣብ ኣክሱም ዝርከብ ኣዝዩ መሳጢ ጥንታዊ ንብረት፡ ኣብ ክም እምኒ ንጉስ ኤዛና ዝኣመሰለ ጽላት እምኒ፡ ቋንቋ ደቡብ ዓረብ ሳባኛ ምቕራቡ ከኸውን ይኽእል። ሳባኛ ካብቶም ኣብቲ እምኒ ዝተጻሕፉ ሰለስተ ቋንቋታት ኮይኑ፡ ምስ ግእዝን ግሪኽን ዝኸይድ እዩ። ቋንቋ ሳባ ኣብ መላእ ካልኦት ከባቢታት ጥንታዊ ቀርስታት ትግራይ እውን ይርከብ፡ እንተላይ ኣብ ከተማ የሓ።



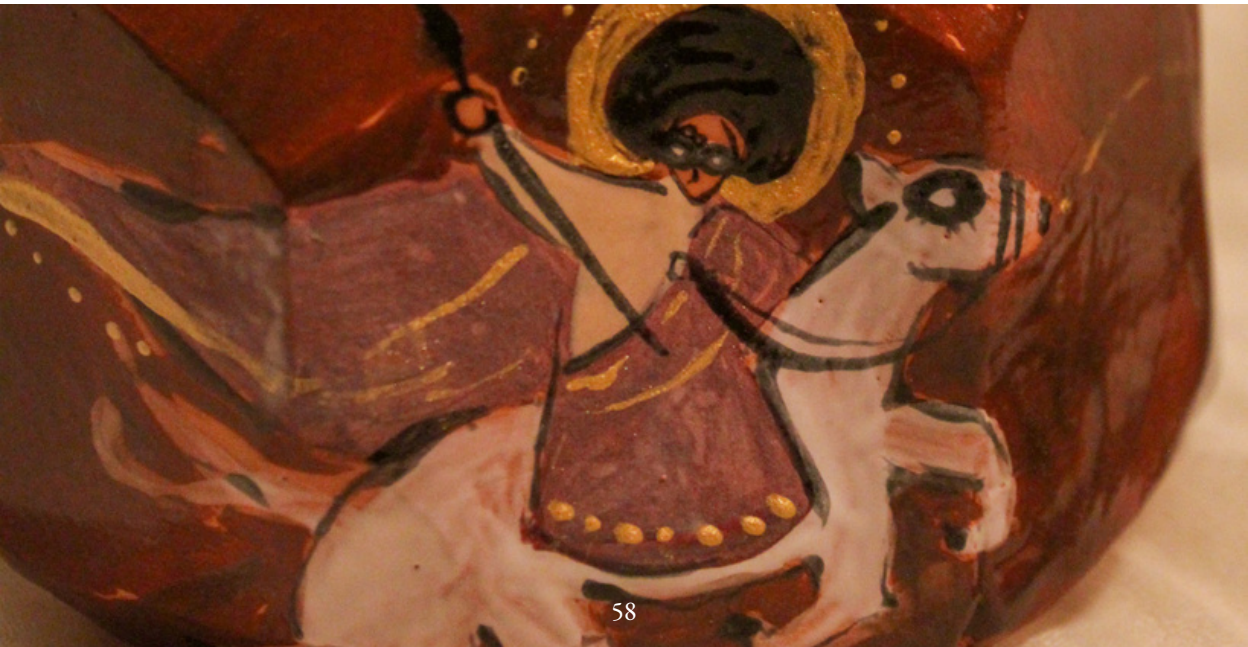
Frewayni's Garden, Axum archive page

Gheralta Mountain Jebena

In the interviews, many spoke on the importance of the Tigrayan landscape being built by the ancestors. Tigray is known as the Northern highlands of Ethiopia, and the region has been protected by its mountains from intruders. More than a natural landscape, the beautiful mountains of Tigray are a living heritage of the culture, housing rock-hewn churches in which monks have lived for hundreds of years. Within these churches are walls painted with saints and angels. The lifestyle of the monks is as old as the 4th century as when the Axumite Kingdom accepted Christianity from the Middle East in the 4th century, it was kept the same way as it was received. The killing and traumatizing of the monks are altering their concept of monastic life. It is not just looting an abandoned hold place, as the current lifestyle of people who know it as a sacred place to take care of their soul- to pray not just for themselves but for others. It is not just an ancient archeology site, these cultural and ancient spaces are occupied by human beings. This is what makes Tigray's heritage sites extremely unique compared to places that are ancient but aren't being used in the same way they have been thousands of years ago. In the pot, I represent the mountain churches through its form, with empty voids that run through the pot, but still, allow the coffee pot to be functional by the negative spaces inside, painted with angels that must look closely to see. This is inspired by Tigrayan faith and belief in angels watching over us although we cannot easily see them through our eyes but through their miracles.

Battle of Adwa Jebena

The Battle of Adwa is celebrated across Ethiopia annually on March 1st. It represents the "victory day" when Ethiopian forces defeated the invading Italian forces in 1896, thus making Ethiopia the only African country never colonized. I created this pot to initiate a juxtaposed discussion on this history. While Ethiopians celebrate Adwa victory day with great pride, the people of Adwa for the past two years have been suffering at the hands of their own government, with no empathy from non-Tigrayan Ethiopians in other parts of the country. A large part of the Ethiopian identity is rooted in ideals of the uncolonized, original, African country whose culture and language are untouched by the Western world. These ideals interwoven into nationalism are greatly weakened by the irony of the Ethiopian government's wars waged on its own citizens, ultimately holding the country back. What would Ethiopia be had they lost to the Italians? Would our coffee ceremony still be the same, and perhaps, the relationship with ourselves? This jebena is designed to represent the harshness of battle, impersonating an Adwa warrior. It also imagines a modernized, outsider jebena pot, with sharp lines similar to the Italian Moka, contrasting the traditional rounded form. In this way, I open a door to discuss the history and its nuances when related to current affairs.



Axum Jebena

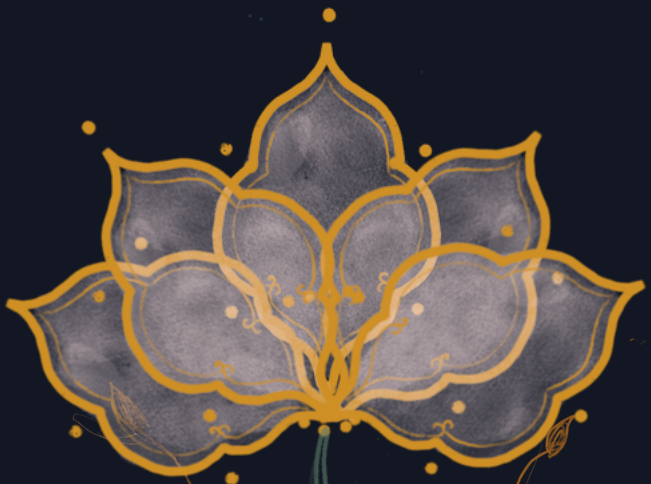
As stated in Tigray's Ancient History section of this thesis, the history of the Axumite Kingdom is fascinating and endless. This pot serves not only as an object representing Axum's powerful story through its renowned monumental stelae, but it also serves to commemorate the 200+ victims who lost their lives in the terrible Axum massacre on November 19, 2020. [78] The coffee pot design is split into two halves, depicting the stelae of Axum in extruded and extracted form. These two halves are each their own functional pot, symbolizing: a Tigrayan's broken heart is still full of spirit, strength, and vitality. This is what "ቀዳማይ ወያነ" ('woyane', Tigringna word meaning revolution) means to me, and beats within the heart of every Tigrayan.

“They tried to bury us,

they didn’t know we were seeds.”

Dinos Christianopoulos

Conclusion



Future Directions

There is much potential within this thesis and I will continue to experiment with embedding technology inside cultural objects and adding to the garden. For instance, I would like to perfect the use of NFC chips within ceramics. The expansion of embedded NFC technology from jebena pots to jewelry, clothing, or musical instruments is worthy of further exploration. I would also like to design other possible technologies that can interact with reinvented traditional objects. The garden also has the potential to grow to become user-friendly, and invite Tigrayans to contribute to the growing archive. The interviews with Tigrayans across the world were vital to this process in steering the design direction and affirming the importance of this project to the people it is meant to serve.

While this cannot bring back the precious and ancient artifacts destroyed in the war, it creates a place for Tigrayan culture and history to be protected and preserved. This thesis opens a future to cultural preservation projects that can be created and used directly by its descendents. This is where, I believe, the true continuation of culture begins.

Reflection

A Tigrayan friend of mine came to dinner one evening with a gift. In a tiny plastic bag were tiny rocks from our homeland, found on the grounds of a sacred church. I massaged the rocks in my fingers, still moist with Tigray's dirt... I brought the small rocks to my nose, a familiar scent of home lingered into my body and triggered a feeling I cannot describe.

When I mold vessels out of clay, I imagine my hands are touching the land of my country. Everyday I sit here, shaping a block of dirt into a work of art. Could an angel grant me the power to do the same with our lives? I close my eyes and imagine the earth beneath my feet, what it felt like to walk on the earth of my home.. how I will touch the ground differently, the trees, how I will count the stars slowly and not rush so much... The truth is I will bring these vessels back home and the reality may be different than my imagination. But at least, I will be there instead of crying out for my family in my dreams every night. How I miss them, how broken I have become in their absence, and this brokenness has seen to become a part of me. I am reminded of it when my clay begins to break, as if revealing what can never be fixed.

When I took my first jebena that survived the firing kiln, my doubts were put to rest. While we have been broken by this war, the crippling grief and the inescapable depression; I am reminded of the beauty I continue to make with my own hands, the joy it gives to others and the spaces we are creating for the coming generations.

In a thousand years from now, will my jebena be found? Its body cracked with history,
its smell conjuring the conversations of the lips it has served, its land watered
by the tears of God.

ትግራይ ትስዕር

Fetari ye'helewena alo

30. Debre Mariam Squrti

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