

Amhara genocide and Accusations, Collective Memory, and Political Narratives of Mass Violence in Contemporary Ethiopia: A Study of Conflict, Policing, and Accountability

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Abstract: Contemporary Ethiopia has experienced profound political transformations accompanied by ethnic conflict, political polarization, competing historical narratives, and recurrent episodes of mass violence. Public accusations concerning the role of political leaders, security institutions, armed groups, and local actors have increasingly influenced collective memory, identity formation, and political mobilization. This study examines the relationship between public accusations, collective memory, political narratives, and perceptions of accountability in contemporary Ethiopia. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study utilizes content analysis of media reports, political speeches, public statements, policy documents, and scholarly literature to investigate how narratives of victimization, responsibility, and justice shape social and political dynamics. The findings reveal that competing narratives of historical grievance and political responsibility contribute significantly to polarization, distrust, and conflict escalation. The study further demonstrates that public accusations serve both as mechanisms for seeking accountability and as instruments of political mobilization. The absence of universally accepted truth-seeking mechanisms and independent investigations has intensified competing interpretations of violence and collective suffering. The study concludes that sustainable peace-building in Ethiopia requires evidence-based investigations, inclusive political dialogue, transitional justice mechanisms, institutional accountability, and independent historical inquiry capable of addressing contested memories and promoting reconciliation.

Keywords: Ethiopia, collective memory, political narratives, mass violence, policing, accountability, transitional justice, conflict studies

1. Introduction

Ethiopia's contemporary political history has been characterized by profound transformations, contested political identities, ethnic mobilization, and periodic episodes of violent conflict. Since the introduction of ethnic federalism in the early 1990s, political participation and state administration have increasingly been organized around ethno linguistic identities. While this system has provided opportunities for political representation and cultural recognition, it has also generated challenges related to intergroup competition, territorial disputes, historical grievances, and political polarization.

Recent conflicts in various regions of Ethiopia have intensified public debates regarding the causes, consequences, and responsibility for episodes of mass violence. Political actors, civil society organizations, media institutions, diaspora communities, and ordinary citizens have actively participated in constructing and disseminating narratives concerning victimization, justice, historical memory, and political accountability. These narratives frequently shape public perceptions of conflict and influence broader political processes.

The relationship between collective memory and political mobilization has become increasingly important in understanding contemporary Ethiopian conflicts. Historical experiences of violence, political exclusion, and perceived injustice are frequently invoked to justify political claims, mobilize communities, and frame contemporary conflicts. Consequently, competing narratives of victimhood and responsibility have emerged as significant factors influencing political legitimacy, social cohesion, and peace building efforts.

In this context, examining public accusations, collective memory, and political narratives provides important insights into the social and political mechanisms that contribute to conflict escalation and reconciliation. Understanding these dynamics is particularly important for developing effective accountability mechanisms, promoting transitional justice, and fostering sustainable peace.

2. Background of the Study

The Ethiopian state has experienced multiple political transitions, regime changes, and conflicts throughout its modern history. Historical events, including imperial governance, military rule, revolutionary movements, ethnic federal restructuring, and contemporary political reforms, have produced diverse and often competing interpretations of national identity, historical responsibility, and political legitimacy.

The political reforms initiated in 2018 created both opportunities and challenges. While reforms encouraged greater political participation and freedom of expression, they also contributed to intensified political competition, renewed ethnic mobilization, and increased public contestation regarding historical and contemporary grievances. Social media platforms, traditional media outlets, political organizations, and diaspora networks became influential arenas for constructing and disseminating narratives concerning violence, victimization, and accountability.

During periods of armed conflict and political instability, public accusations regarding responsibility for violence have become increasingly prominent. Political leaders, security institutions, armed groups, and community organizations have frequently presented competing accounts of events. These narratives often reflect broader political interests, identity-based affiliations, and historical grievances rather than universally accepted empirical evidence.

Collective memory plays a central role in shaping these processes. Collective memory refers to the shared interpretations and recollections of historical experiences maintained by social groups. Such memories influence identity formation, perceptions of justice, and political behavior. In conflict settings, collective memory can contribute both to reconciliation and to renewed conflict, depending on how historical experiences are interpreted and mobilized.

Similarly, policing institutions and security organizations occupy a critical position within conflict narratives. Public perceptions regarding the neutrality, legitimacy, and accountability of security institutions significantly affect social trust and political stability. Allegations concerning the conduct of security institutions often become central components of broader political narratives and debates regarding accountability and justice.

The increasing politicization of collective memory and public accusations highlights the need for rigorous scholarly investigation into the relationship between historical narratives, political mobilization, conflict dynamics, and accountability mechanisms in contemporary Ethiopia.

3. Statement of the Problem

Contemporary Ethiopia continues to experience challenges related to political polarization, ethnic conflict, historical grievances, and competing narratives of responsibility for violence. Public debates concerning conflict and accountability frequently involve competing claims regarding victimization, historical injustice, and political responsibility.

These competing narratives often contribute to social fragmentation, mistrust, and conflict escalation. In many instances, accusations and counter-accusations emerge without the support of independent investigations or universally accepted mechanisms for establishing truth and accountability. Consequently, political narratives may become instruments of mobilization rather than pathways toward reconciliation and justice.

Although numerous studies have examined ethnic conflict, political violence, and state-building in Ethiopia, relatively limited research has explored the relationships among public accusations, collective memory, political narratives, policing institutions, and accountability processes. Understanding these relationships is essential for developing effective peacebuilding strategies and transitional justice mechanisms.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine how public accusations and collective memory influence political narratives of mass violence and perceptions of accountability in contemporary Ethiopia.

4. Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To examine the relationship between public accusations, collective memory, political narratives, and perceptions of accountability in contemporary Ethiopia

Specific Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine the role of collective memory in shaping political narratives of mass violence.
2. Investigate how public accusations influence political mobilization and social identity formation.
3. Assess the relationship between political narratives and perceptions of policing institutions and accountability.
4. Analyze the effects of competing narratives on social cohesion and conflict escalation.
5. Propose strategies for strengthening accountability, reconciliation, and peacebuilding mechanisms.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Collective Memory Theory

Collective memory theory suggests that social groups construct shared interpretations of historical events that shape identity, political behavior, and social relationships. According to this perspective, memories of conflict and victimization are not merely historical records but active social processes influencing contemporary political action.

5.2 Political Narrative Theory

Political narratives provide frameworks through which individuals and groups interpret political events and assign meaning to historical experiences. Political actors frequently utilize narratives to establish legitimacy, mobilize supporters, and define collective identities.

5.3 Transitional Justice Theory

Transitional justice theory emphasizes the importance of truth-seeking, accountability, reconciliation, and institutional reform following periods of political violence and conflict. Effective transitional justice mechanisms seek to balance accountability with social healing and long-term peacebuilding.

5.4 Conflict and Identity Formation

Research on ethnic conflict demonstrates that identity-based mobilization often relies upon historical grievances and narratives of collective victimization. Such narratives can strengthen group solidarity while simultaneously increasing intergroup polarization and mistrust.

6. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach utilizing descriptive and interpretive research designs. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows for in-depth examination of social meanings, political narratives, and collective interpretations of historical events.

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative content analysis framework to investigate political narratives, public accusations, collective memory, and accountability discourse in contemporary Ethiopia.

Data Sources

The study utilized multiple sources of qualitative data, including:

- Public speeches and political statements
- National and international media reports
- Academic publications
- Policy documents
- Human rights reports
- Historical documents
- Publicly available interviews and commentaries

Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic document review and archival analysis. Materials were selected based on their relevance to contemporary Ethiopian conflicts, political narratives, and accountability discussions.

Ethical Considerations

The study utilized publicly available information and maintained strict adherence to principles of academic integrity, neutrality, and evidence-based analysis. The research avoided assigning legal responsibility to individuals or institutions without judicial determination or independent investigation.

7. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This approach enabled the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and relationships within political narratives and public discourse.

The analysis involved several stages:

Stage One: Data Familiarization

Documents and texts were reviewed repeatedly to identify major themes and patterns.

Stage Two: Coding

The first thematic category focused on **victimization narratives**, which examined how individuals, communities, and political actors constructed and communicated experiences of suffering, loss, displacement, and violence. Particular attention was given to the ways in which narratives of victimhood were used to shape collective identities, mobilize political support, and influence public perceptions of justice and accountability.

The second theme addressed **historical grievances**, exploring how historical experiences, perceived injustices, and collective memories of past conflicts were invoked to explain contemporary political tensions and episodes of violence. This thematic category analyzed the role of historical interpretations in shaping political discourse, intergroup relations, and competing claims of legitimacy.

The third thematic area examined **political responsibility**, focusing on public accusations, claims of accountability, and narratives concerning the alleged roles of political leaders, institutions, armed actors, and other stakeholders in episodes of conflict and violence. This theme sought to understand how responsibility was assigned, contested, and communicated within political and public discourse.

The fourth theme explored **collective memory**, investigating how shared recollections of historical events, conflicts, and social experiences contributed to identity formation, political mobilization, and perceptions of justice. Particular emphasis was placed on understanding how collective memory influenced contemporary political behavior and social relations.

The fifth thematic category focused on **accountability**, examining public demands for justice, institutional responsibility, legal processes, and mechanisms for addressing conflict-related grievances. This theme analyzed how different actors perceived the importance of truth-seeking, judicial processes, and transitional justice initiatives in promoting reconciliation and social stability.

The sixth theme investigated perceptions of **security institutions**, including policing organizations, security agencies, and other state institutions involved in maintaining public order and responding to conflict situations. The analysis examined issues related to institutional legitimacy, public trust, effectiveness, neutrality, and perceptions of accountability within security governance structures.

Finally, the seventh theme addressed **reconciliation and political mobilization**, examining how narratives of peacebuilding, social healing, political organization, and collective action emerged within public discourse. This theme explored the complex relationships between political mobilization, identity-based activism, reconciliation efforts, and the pursuit of sustainable peace and social cohesion in contemporary Ethiopia.

Stage Three: Theme Development

Codes were organized into broader analytical categories to facilitate interpretation.

Stage Four: Interpretation in genocide

Public allegations concerning mass violence and the conduct of security forces have become a significant component of political discourse in contemporary conflict settings. In societies experiencing armed conflict, political transition, or social instability, public accusations regarding the actions of state security institutions often shape political narratives, collective identities, and perceptions of legitimacy. Research on political violence demonstrates that allegations of state involvement in civilian harm can influence public trust, intensify political polarization, and increase demands for accountability and institutional reform (Tilly, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2023). In contemporary conflict environments, public discourse surrounding security institutions frequently becomes intertwined with broader struggles over political authority, historical interpretation, and social justice.

Reports of civilian casualties attributed to security operations have generated extensive debate regarding the responsibilities and accountability of state institutions during periods of conflict. International human rights organizations, civil society groups, and scholars have emphasized the importance of transparent and independent investigations when allegations of civilian harm emerge. Such investigations are considered essential for establishing factual evidence, protecting victims' rights, strengthening public confidence in state institutions, and ensuring compliance with national and international legal standards (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2022; International Center for Transitional Justice [ICTJ], 2020; United Nations, 2004). Calls for accountability frequently reflect broader societal concerns regarding governance, justice, and the legitimacy of public institutions.

The emergence of competing narratives regarding responsibility for violence has significantly influenced collective memory and public perceptions of justice in many conflict-affected societies. Scholars of memory studies argue that historical experiences of violence, victimization, and political exclusion often become central components of collective identity formation and political mobilization (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011). Competing interpretations of conflict events may reinforce social divisions, contribute to political polarization, and complicate efforts to achieve reconciliation and social cohesion (Bar-Tal, 2007; Volkan, 1997). Consequently, contested narratives of violence frequently become important political resources that shape both contemporary conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction processes.

Scholars of conflict studies, human rights, and transitional justice have consistently argued that allegations of mass violence and serious human rights abuses require rigorous, evidence-based investigations conducted by independent and credible institutions. Establishing factual records through judicial proceedings, truth commissions, forensic investigations, and independent inquiries contributes to accountability, prevents impunity, and strengthens the rule of law (Teitel, 2000; Hayner, 2011; Minow, 1998). Moreover, evidence-based investigation reduces the risk of politicization and promotes greater public confidence in accountability mechanisms, thereby supporting long-term social stability and democratic governance.

Addressing allegations of large-scale violence requires comprehensive approaches that integrate judicial accountability, truth-seeking mechanisms, institutional reform, victim participation, and inclusive political dialogue. Transitional justice scholarship emphasizes that sustainable peace and reconciliation depend upon balancing the pursuit of justice with broader efforts to rebuild trust, strengthen institutions, and promote social healing (United Nations, 2004; Mani, 2002; Sriram, 2007). Effective accountability and reconciliation processes can contribute to restoring institutional legitimacy, reducing social polarization, and promoting sustainable peace in societies affected by political violence and armed conflict.

8. Findings

8.1 Collective Memory and Historical Grievances

The findings indicate that collective memory serves as a powerful mechanism shaping political identities and conflict narratives in contemporary Ethiopia. Historical experiences of marginalization, violence, political exclusion, and perceived injustice continue to influence contemporary political behavior and intergroup relations.

Participants in public discourse frequently invoke historical grievances to explain contemporary conflicts and justify political positions. These narratives often reinforce collective identities and contribute to perceptions of historical continuity between past and present experiences.

8.2 Public Accusations and Political Mobilization

The study found that public accusations play a significant role in political mobilization. Political actors, advocacy groups, and community organizations frequently utilize accusations of political responsibility, injustice, and victimization to mobilize support and strengthen collective identities.

However, competing accusations often produce contradictory narratives, making it difficult to establish consensus regarding historical events and political accountability.

8.3 Political Narratives and Social Polarization

The findings reveal that competing political narratives contribute significantly to social polarization. Different communities often maintain distinct interpretations of historical events and contemporary conflicts, leading to increased mistrust and fragmentation.

Social media platforms have amplified these divisions by facilitating rapid dissemination of competing narratives and reinforcing existing political identities.

8.4 Perceptions of Policing and Accountability

The study found that public perceptions of policing institutions and security organizations vary considerably across communities and political groups. Trust in security institutions is strongly influenced by collective experiences, political affiliations, and perceptions of institutional neutrality.

Public demands for accountability frequently reflect broader concerns regarding justice, representation, and political legitimacy.

8.5 Challenges to Reconciliation

The absence of universally accepted truth-seeking mechanisms and independent investigations has contributed to persistent disagreement regarding responsibility for violence. This situation complicates efforts to promote reconciliation, institutional reform, and sustainable peacebuilding.

9. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that collective memory, public accusations, and political narratives are deeply interconnected components of contemporary Ethiopian political life. Historical experiences and collective interpretations significantly influence political mobilization, perceptions of justice, and conflict dynamics.

The study supports existing theoretical literature suggesting that collective memory functions not merely as historical recollection but as an active political resource. Political actors frequently mobilize historical narratives to establish legitimacy, strengthen group identity, and justify political claims.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that accountability processes cannot succeed without broadly accepted mechanisms for establishing truth and addressing competing historical narratives. Independent investigations, inclusive dialogue processes, and transitional justice mechanisms appear essential for promoting reconciliation and institutional legitimacy.

10. Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among public accusations, collective memory, political narratives, policing institutions, and accountability in contemporary Ethiopia. The findings reveal that collective memory and political narratives significantly influence perceptions of victimization, responsibility, justice, and political legitimacy.

Competing interpretations of historical events contribute to social polarization, mistrust, and conflict escalation. Public accusations function both as mechanisms for seeking accountability and as instruments of political mobilization and identity formation.

The study concludes that sustainable peacebuilding requires evidence-based investigations, independent historical inquiry, inclusive political dialogue, and effective transitional justice mechanisms. Strengthening institutional accountability, promoting historical understanding, and facilitating reconciliation processes remain essential for addressing the challenges posed by competing narratives of conflict and collective memory in contemporary Ethiopia.

Recommendations

The study recommends that policymakers establish independent and credible truth-seeking mechanisms capable of investigating historical and contemporary episodes of violence. Educational institutions and researchers should promote evidence-based historical scholarship and encourage interdisciplinary research on conflict and reconciliation. Civil society organizations and media institutions should support inclusive dialogue initiatives that encourage mutual understanding and reduce political polarization. Finally, transitional justice mechanisms should prioritize accountability, victim participation, institutional reform, and reconciliation to strengthen social cohesion and promote sustainable peace in Ethiopia.

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