

How Western Media is Failing Ethiopia



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If you want to know the history of journalism in Africa, it starts with “Doctor Livingstone, I presume?” A news article about one white guy going off to find another white guy, a missionary, in what today is Tanzania. In the newspaper account, the Africans were pretty much scenery.

The situation did *not* get better with time. The correspondents who showed up to cover Ethiopia’s confrontation with Italy in 1935 were disappointed when talks at the League of Nations dragged on and the shooting wouldn’t start. They were pissed off that there was no spectacle, so most of them left. The guy who wrote for the *New York Times* covering the Fascist side was openly pro-Italian.

Cut to the 1980s, and while happy idiots danced and sang to “Do They Know It’s Christmas?”... about a country that’s had Christianity since the 4th century (eye roll here)... only *one* news organization bothered to dig around and [find out the aid wasn’t going where it was supposed to](#) in Ethiopia, and that Bob Geldof was willing to do business with a psychopathic dictator who had murdered a good portion of his own people.

You might notice a pattern here. Failure to see Africans for themselves. Failure to actually *ask* Africans what’s going on. Failure to do your homework.

I once sat in a small conference room where an obnoxious producer told a group of impressionable young journalists, “Hey, if there was oil in Sudan, we’d give a damn about the fighting there!” *Ha, ha, ha*, she laughed, thinking herself clever. So did a couple of other people. And so, a little appalled, I gently pointed out, yes, there *was* oil in Sudan, in the south, rich in natural resources, and that was one of the major reasons why the Khartoum regime had been locked in a vicious war with the region that would eventually become its own troubled country, South Sudan.

She stopped talking to me, that producer. I believe she now works for the CBC, and she can still go to hell.

Just when *are* Westerners going to do right by Africa? Because you’re often left wondering just what are the facts behind what little is covered.

All the News That Isn’t There





Only yesterday, as I write this, the *Guardian* ran a story on how “[Ethiopia falls into violence a year after Nobel peace prize win.](#)” To anyone paying proper attention, the violence has been going on for far longer than that. For those who expect me to bash Oromos or side with one ethnic group over another, sorry to disappoint, and now is a good time as any to note that back in late 2017, thousands of [Oromo and Somalis were already getting displaced by ethnic violence](#) (reported with refreshing effort at depth and balance by *The New Humanitarian*).

But back to the *Guardian* piece: If you didn’t know any better, you’d think all the trouble started because of the murder of Hachalu Hundessa, when in fact, as most Ethiopians know, his death was an incident that exacerbated a situation going on for some time. The article links back to a two-year-old piece

done by another reporter about Qeerroo, and so thanks to reading this old linked article, you're left with no idea what the movement has been evolving into.

Yet this coverage is typical of what we get lately in terms of reporting on Ethiopia's problems. I don't have an opinion on Abiy's government, and it no doubt has much to answer for. We still need answers as to how culpable or negligent the regime and the military have been in terms of ethnic violence. We still need answers over the arrests of thousands and the Internet blackout. But it sure is easy for Western reporters to fall back on binary logic, on covering the government's sins rather than explore the many sides of the issue.

I am not suggesting don't hold the government's feet to the fire, so to speak, I'm saying you can do coverage in three-dimensions, not merely two sides.

But this shallow perspective is even infecting human rights organizations. Amnesty International tweeted, "Unnecessary force has claimed so many lives in #Ethiopia, including #OromoProtests protesters and bystanders. No one should be killed for exercising their right to peaceful assembly or for being around a protest. Demand justice."

In one stupid, incredibly insensitive tweet and equally tone-deaf video, Amnesty International handed extremists validation and marginalized the rest of the Ethiopian population that genuinely mourned Hachalu Hundessa and also want answers over his murder. Faced with a backlash of criticism, Amnesty deleted it and then issued this apology: "We remain conscious of Ethiopia's complex and evolving political climate. Our comms team [recognizes the negative impact](#) of our recent media output and apologises for posting it in error."

Uh-huh. Did anyone learn anything? Nope.

The about-face [sparked the curiosity of the BBC](#), but the Beeb didn't bother to poke around much either to learn more. This is the most its story offers for any context: "Oromo youths have been accused of carrying out ethnic and religious attacks against people perceived to be outsiders in Oromia region."

It's the last line of the article.

Oromo youths. So... just anybody? No mention of militias or Qeerroo. No mention of the Oromia Special Police Force suspiciously failing to step in while some incredibly brave Oromos did the decent, human thing and helped rescue their neighbours. No mention of the recent, [appalling violence in Shashemene](#). Or Ziway. Or Dera.





To write, “Oromo youths have been accused,” even though there are multiple eyewitness accounts in several towns, it’s the *safe* line to take. It’s the so-called “objective” line because even though you know it’s bullshit and barely says anything of substance, you have not written anything that can be easily contradicted. You’re just saying they’re *accused*.

Despite the fact that less than 2 minutes of Google work would tell you the situation is more complex while confirming that episodes of violence actually happened — because check the line again, it doesn't even come out and confirm *the attacks happened!*

The reality is that a lot of “foreign news” written by Western media is typed up from the safety of a keyboard in London or New York. And if one thing has held true for decades, it's that many of these journalists simply *don't read*.

They often don't read their competition. They often don't read news from overseas and foreign sources. I've met reporters who don't even read their own newspaper or watch their own broadcasts.

How else to explain *Time* magazine handing over space to Ribka Ayana? Ribka is co-chair of the Oromo Advocacy Alliance, which bills itself as advocating “peace” and “justice” but who then chose to spin a fairy tale for *Time* over Hachalu's murder, suggesting it was the cause of all the unrest. As Professor Keadu Mekonnen Gebremariam pointed out in a thoughtful [Medium article of his own](#), “First, it is dishonest to characterize what transpired following Hachalu's murder as an uprising when in fact what happened was a deliberate targeting of ethnic (and at times, religious) minorities in Oromia regional-state; and second, this particular episode of ethnic cleansing may have been triggered by the killing but did not arise from it.”

How else to explain the way Jawar Mohammed is treated with kid gloves by much of the Western media? A BBC profile was written in early July by Bekele Atoma of BBC Afaan Oromoo, but it's rather interesting in what it leaves out. Jawar is called a “media mogul” who “turned the OMN into a powerful voice of the youth...” The piece discusses his incarceration and the controversial murder investigation involving him — but by default, as in other Western coverage, Jawar comes across as an underdog.

No mention of the [facts that he can be less than truthful, has dangerously smeared reporters and once said, “If someone speaks against us, we cut his throat with a machete.”](#)

No mention of the fact that Jawar’s OMN has been widely accused of stoking hate and endorsing ethnic cleansing. One human rights organization, Minority Rights Group International, stands alone so far as I can see in calling out how OMN has been “[actively propagating the attacks live and giving guidance to the attackers.](#)”

Granted, Minority Rights may not have the big profile that Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch does, but this is a *huge* story.

A television network based right in Minneapolis being accused by a human rights group of promoting hate speech and ethnic cleansing?

Where’s the Western coverage? Why the sound of crickets?

Why isn’t NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, PBS, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* knocking on its door and asking hard questions?

So if you’re an ordinary person, I suggest that if you are sincerely concerned about the risk of Ethiopia becoming “another Rwanda” in terms of a potential genocide, you take these details and you write, tweet, post to these Western news outlets, and if you live in diaspora communities in the West, you call them up, and you shove the damning videos of their incitements to violence in their faces until they wake up and pay attention.

And then... They will ignore you. **Keep bugging them.** Until they get it.

Point out to them that this is infecting our youth — I'll come back to that in a bit.

And remind them how they screwed up over Rwanda and portrayed it as “tribal violence” of “both sides” until the truth came out that it was a systematic genocide.

In the end, the news is only as good as the individual reporters and editors. I have been beating up on the *Guardian* and the BBC a lot here because in so many ways, they can be and are reliable, brilliant news organizations. To watch BBC World is to see African reporters from the actual countries they're reporting on, which is *heaven* compared to the American TV networks who parachute someone in, hire a local “fixer” to show them around and then give 30 seconds on the latest “ethnic violence” (because they know they can longer use the catch-all, “tribal”). The *Guardian* is known for its leftist sympathies while doing hard-hitting investigations.

But again, it depends on who you hire. Who you assign to cover the story. And who edits the stuff.

And sadly, I've found many journalists who don't read *books*. Which brings us to our next problem. Because if you don't know history, how the hell can you write about what's going on today?

Ethiopia, Oromia and Amnesia

The ignorance on the part of journalists and scholars goes back far and can sometimes be appalling (fair disclosure: my own ignorance can be appalling, but I like to think I'm trying to fix it). Take for instance a feature in 2016 on a young woman publishing children's books in Oromiffa. It includes this claim: “Under the dictatorship of Haile Selassie in 1941, the Oromo language was

banned, including from political life and schools, and the Amharic language and culture was forced upon the Oromo people.”

The syntax is interesting here: “dictatorship,” not *rule* by a king. That Haile Selassie was an autocrat isn’t disputed by even those who knew him and worked for him, but his reign hardly resembled the dictatorships of African leaders of other countries. The journalist clearly took what was fed her and didn’t bother to check her facts. Funny how, as if by magic, the “dictatorship” starts its policy in 1941, which is when an Allied force pushed Italian Fascists out and won Ethiopia back, with by the way, the help of such Oromos as Patriot hero, Jagama Kello.

The best contradiction to this silliness is an [AP newsreel archives clip](#) — and I am still trying to pin down the date, but looks to be in either the 1940s or 1950s— that is floating around social media and **shows a local court operating in the Oromo region with an Ethiopian soldier on hand to keep order. The proceedings are done in Oromiffa.**

So really? The language was “banned” yet the imperial regime allowed legal proceedings in the native tongue of the residents? Just how was such a ban enforced in a country with a population that was largely pastoral and rural?

There’s a difference between “forced” and *chosen*. This would be like saying children are *forced* to learn English and/or French in my country because they’re the official languages of Canada. Those who point out — *gasp, horror* — that Amharic was made the official language in the Ethiopian constitution will be disappointed to learn my country made their official languages the law of the land in 1969.

No one can deny that Amharic has dominated and was used as the *lingua franca* of the country for centuries, but with multiple ethnic groups in the

double-digits, what language would you expect to be adopted as the primary one? Especially when Ge'ez proliferated, followed by Amharic and the written script for Oromiffa didn't even exist until the 19th century. The situation is clearly more nuanced than it's being pushed in news articles.

The article claims, "During this time the Oromo were jailed, abused and executed. Oromo texts were destroyed."

Where is the evidence for this? What are the specifics? If Oromo were "jailed, abused and executed," let's get details: *Why* were they jailed? For what alleged crimes exactly? *Who* specifically was jailed? Which decade? Because in 1974, while Haile Selassie still held power, there were exactly and only *eight* political refugees from Ethiopia, while in our modern era, there are tens of thousands.

Oh, and let's talk about the issue of the texts. The claim doesn't hold up to much scrutiny either. Are we talking about handwritten manuscripts? Again, details. Are we talking about printed books? Because depending on when you're talking about, printing presses — then as now, an expensive piece of machinery— would be with printers in urban centres where they could make a profit. Addis Ababa is one. At best, you might have had a printing business in Harar around the turn of the 20th century. But if you're going to suppress a language, you'd clamp down on printers first.

Now you can dump a lot of sins on the doorstep of the regime of Haile Selassie in the post-war period. Those who knew him will even make these criticisms, pinning most of the blame on the court that surrounded an increasingly ailing and out of touch ruler. And you know what one of those sins would be? *A high rate of illiteracy across Ethiopia, right into the 1960s*. So it's quite a stretch to suggest the regime went to a lot of trouble to suppress a language which few people could actually access in written form.

Don't you think they would have started first with court hearings like the one in that newsreel clip?

Someone may counter, "Oh, but you're asking for a lot of historical detail for a simple newspaper feature on children's books." Tough. You make a sweeping indictment like that, *back it up*.

To be clear: I am *not* saying there were not human rights abuses in the last two centuries. But this is sloppy, lazy reporting without even a minimal effort to check facts. Or get any facts. It relies on only one identified source.

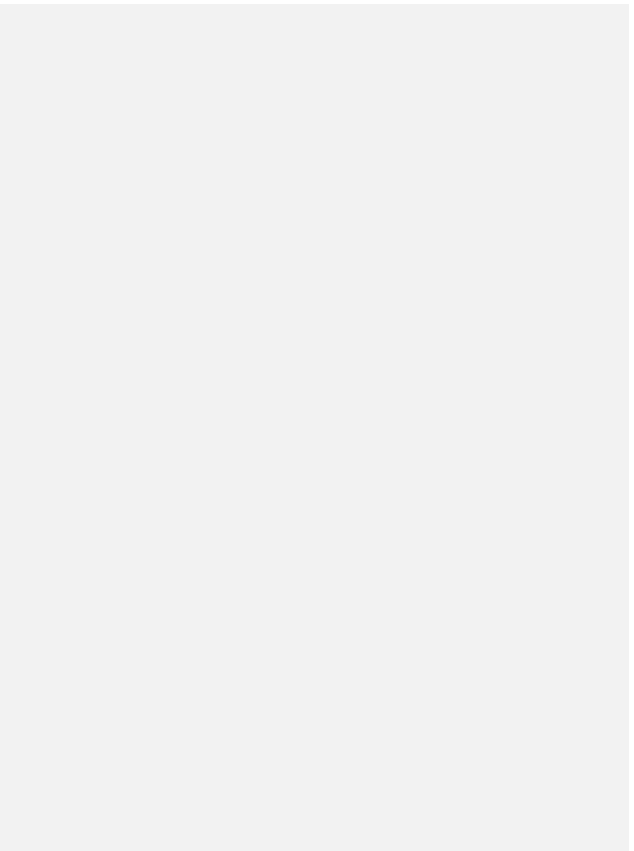
And then there are those willing to adjust history for their own narratives. And that's been going on for quite a while.

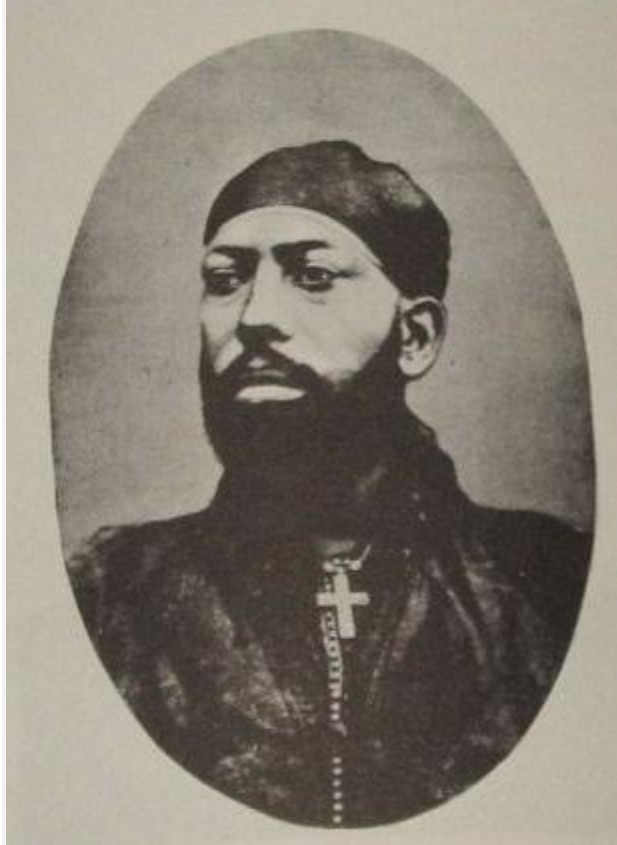
For Al Jazeera in 2013, two scholars wrote up a [version of Oromo history](#) that can only be called a gross distortion of the record. We're told the Oromo "lived for centuries as independent people under their indigenous system of law" and "In various places the Oromo also had their own kingdoms."

This is cute. Of course, there's some validity to these statements, but it leaves out *a lot* of history, whole centuries of it. It completely ignores the Oromo Migrations into others' territory. It ignores the fact that when Susenyos was young and before he was emperor, he was captured by Oromo, spent time among them, married an Oromo princess and to assert his claim to the throne, marched at the head of an Oromo army. It ignores the fact that Oromo were integral to the reign of Iyasu II.

And it includes this paragraph: "The Amhara under emperors like Menelik II utilised modern weapons and European advisors against their opponents, who fought with spears. The result was devastation and death on an enormous

scale. Between 1868 and 1900, half of all Oromo were killed, around 5 million people.”





Menelik II

There's a lot to unpack here. We can start with the fact that several historians consider Menelik to have had Oromo heritage on his mother's side, and the whole thing about emperors using modern weapons is highly misleading, when before Menelik, certain emperors were lucky if they could get their hands on matchlock rifles from abroad, but let's zero in on those 5 million people allegedly killed.

Well, no, they weren't. And this statistic finding its way into various news reports is ridiculous on its face. It's asinine, made all the worse by the fact that *no one bothers to question it before they repeat it in news stories*. Where does it come from?

It's from a 2002 academic journal article by Mohammed Hassen, a historian of the Oromo people who's made it quite clear he has an ax to grind. And where did Hassen get it from? A *single* source: a French missionary, Martial de Salviac, who offered this casual estimate in a book he wrote on the Oromo.

If you read Salviac, you won't find any critical methodology, the kind we would accept today. How would he know his figures and confirm them? Did he perform a census of Ethiopia all on his own? *If not, then he's guessing.* But what's worse is that this guess has been passed along and accepted, because well, they conveniently fit the narrative.

Could there have even *been* 10 million people in all of Ethiopia in the late 1800s? I find that questionable, but ethnographers can duke that one out. At one point, Salviac made the outrageous claim there could have been 25 to 30 million Oromo before this alleged genocide. Really? And yet he still posits that Amhara were in the minority. That would mean massive figures as well for other ethnic populations. You can only get there if you want to throw out certain basics that would have held populations in check like infant mortality, disease, occasional famine, etc. Plain common sense tells you the population would have been far less, and the idea is absurd. France's population, for instance, in 1800 was at best 47 million.

Moreover, when the Nazis set out on their evil mission of exterminating Jews and other populations, they soon discovered that simply shooting them quickly depleted their ammunition stores. It's why they came up with their other horrific means. Not to be grotesque, but the sheer manpower required, not to mention the *months*, the *years* needed for such a genocide to be conducted with rifles, let alone hacking swords and spears could not be done without word getting out of such a horror, without more fierce resistance. Even the worst African genocide that's recognized universally today by historians, that of

the Herero and Nama peoples in what today is Namibia, doesn't come *close* to the figure claimed for Menelik's "genocide," and we have ample evidence that it happened, and that there were revolts.

And besides all of that, the idea of 5 million slain still doesn't hold up because *we'd find them*.

Italian Fascists didn't kill anywhere near this figure either, but in the late 1940s when travel writer David Buxton explored the area of Debre Libanos, he found scores of human remains. "Here were innumerable bones and skulls — bones in bags and bones in boxes, bones lying in confused heaps, awaiting burial..."

The Fascists killed at least 20,000 people during the Graziani Massacre alone, and we have photos and written evidence of the atrocities. They killed thousands more at Debre Libanos, and Buxton found remains of some of them. Myself and others have pored over the evidence for Italian war crimes against Ethiopians from 1935 to 1941. And we know the Derg slaughtered perhaps as many as half a million people. I saw with my own eyes human skulls and bones in plastic trays at the Red Terror Museum.

So show me the archaeological evidence for Menelik's supposed genocide — because we have the tools today to *date* the remains. Where is it? Prove your case.

There is overwhelming evidence for the crimes above and the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the slaughter of Kurds by Saddam Hussein, the Bosnian Genocide. So —

If there was indeed a genocide on this scale, it deserves the same rigorous scrutiny of historical inquiry. In fact, we owe it to the

victims. So where is it and why is this claim being accepted without proper examination?

Now does this mean massacres didn't happen? Of course, not. The explorer Wilfred Thesiger, who was born in Ethiopia, grew up there, knew its people and knew its history, wrote authoritatively in his memoir, *The Life of My Choice*, of the infamous cruelty of Balcha Safo, and how he was a ruthless governor of Harar, hated by the populace. Thesiger wrote how in 1916, a Shoan army took on the "Wollo hordes" — oh, and with Oromo cavalry, by the way. "Forty-four years later I visited the battlefield and saw skulls and bones in crevices on the rocky hillock where Negus Mikael had made his final stand."

In other words, there's usually evidence for such events. And when you find evidence, there's a big difference between contextualizing feudal and pre-industrial warfare and trying to shoehorn the events into modern definitions for genocide and how we understand it today.

This is not meant as an apologist note. Was it a colonial war? Well, *duh*, yes — it was an empire. This cannot be denied. In rebellions against imperial rule, the Arsi Oromo used guerrilla war tactics and a scorched earth policy, handing Menelik's forces some nasty defeats. That means if the "result was devastation and death on an enormous scale," it wasn't just for the Arsi Oromo.

But in the propaganda of extremists, every battle is "heroic resistance" instead of a clash of cultures that *both* fought for expansion.

Now let's stop for a moment and consider what this revisionism implies. Ask a good portion of Ethiopians today what their ethnic background is, and many — if they know it at all — will tell you they are a mix. They have combinations of Amharic ancestry, Oromo, Gurage, Tigrayan — I've spoken with individuals who have at least three.

So in pushing this narrative of the great evil, Darth Vaderish Amharic Empire (or Amharic-Tigrayan) vs. the heroic Oromo, you are trying to divide the loyalties of millions of people, many of whom can't split themselves down the middle to conveniently adapt to your politics of the day. Who are they supposed to identify with? A couple of individuals have told me that in trying to engage with, well, let's call them the more "passionate" believers in the cause, they volunteer that their background has Oromo, but it also may have Amharic or Gurage.

And what answer do they get back? Oh, they're not *real* Oromo.

Can anyone not recognize how dangerous this is? This is how ethnic cleansing gets started. In the insane search for purity.

Diaspora Dangers

For weeks now, social media has seen a spate of videos, tweets and postings on protests across the U.S., Canada and Britain in which certain activists quite openly call for violence against non-Oromos and use the term, *Neftegna*, which has evolved into a slur (whether some people take it as a slur depends on who you ask, but it's quite clear that commentators like Awol Allo of Keele University mean it to be a slur). There are videos in which protesters chant their violent slogans. There have been ugly confrontations between Oromo protesters and pro-Ethiopia counter-protesters.

Many of those involved are young people. And how do they get caught up in this madness? Well, they don't read either. Or they get their history from the Internet. Or at best, they are reading the wrong articles and books, and I can do a whole riff as I've [done on Twitter](#) about how British and American historians brought their own partisan biases and helped screw up Ethiopian history.

Meanwhile, the Western world yawns. It sometimes sends a reporter or a camera guy. And the usual line goes that they're protesting against the Abiy government. On camera, the protesters tow that line — which is accurate up to a point. Funny how the chants and speeches openly calling for murder don't get included, but find their way on to the social media.

And this is not to say every protest for more rights for Oromos is a hate march. There are always legitimate protests. I'm a Canadian. In the history of my country, we had the province of Quebec in which a good number of people with no ill will and good intentions wanted separatism back in the 1960s and 1970s. You can't lump those people in with a small group of terrorists, the FLQ, who did bombings, kidnapping and murder to reach their goals (and failed).

But we're concerned here with a network of extremism that has warped politics on an international scale to serve an agenda of death and destruction. **And the world is ignoring it.**

That's for two reasons. One, reporters in London in the UK or Edmonton, Canada can be forgiven if they don't understand Oromiffa. Or Amharic. Imagine what your reaction would be if you went down to cover a demonstration by Serbs, and its leader marched along the street, waving a poster with the face of Slobodan Milosevic and shouting *in English*, "Kill all the Bosnians!" You'd have a very different story, wouldn't you?

Those peddling hate are smarter than that. Like Trump constantly casting himself as the victim, they have managed to build a fair amount of sympathy in the West — even among representatives in the U.S. Congress always looking for useful political capital, despite the fact that the situation is more complex than the sales job that won them over. But hey, if you want heroes and villains and don't want to think too hard, it's *easy*.

I have interviewed Kurdish Peshmerga and stood at one of their battle fronts as they faced down ISIS. I have been interviewed on television about the Rohingya in Myanmar, where I briefly taught journalism 15 years ago. I know the aspirations of a minority people need to be respected, and Westerners *want* to be on the side of the underdog, to feel that they're the good guys sticking up for the oppressed.

Add to that the fact that Oromos no doubt have legitimate grievances which should be worked out with the Ethiopian government. But we don't need to respect a manufactured narrative and a falsified history on the part of extremists, who openly call for Amhara and other groups to be burned alive in their homes.

Now, without fail, there will be a jackass (actually, there have been a few already in the past few days) who tweet back and tell me to "stay out of it." How dare I comment on such things? You ignorant white man, blah, blah, blah. To which I respond: *No*. I say, How dare you spread your poison across the waters? How dare you bring it into my city and my country and teach young people to hate their brothers and sisters? How dare you threaten a few million of my friends in Ethiopia?

Sorry, not sorry, that I might annoy you. Too bad. Tough. I'd rather be with the innocent, ordinary people both in Ethiopia and the diaspora communities who don't buy your toxic bullshit.

They are Amhara. They are Gurage. They are Oromo. They are a mix of all three and many other variations and combinations. If they label themselves, it's by their own choice, not yours. But they can be Ethiopians. They are *human beings*.

And they are sick of your slurs and your stigmatizing. They are sick of your violence. Happy to help them if I can.

And I humbly suggest they get more vocal. They should bug the hell out of Western media outlets until their stories get told. Because right now, only *one* side is getting out there and controlling the narrative.

Go down to their offices if you have to. Seek out a specific reporter you think you might be able to trust and share material with him or her, provide them with translations — in other words, yeah, do the homework for them. Because journalists are, with a few notable exceptions, some lazy-ass individuals, trust me, but they will appreciate solid preparation.

Just give them the truth. Don't embellish it. Don't slant it. State it plainly. Back it up with dates, times, places. Make it so bulletproof, they can't "tweak" a quote, they have to use what you give them.

Do it soon, please. Before we have another Shashmene or Dera.

Ethiopia is bleeding. There are those who want to slash at it, and those who want to bandage its wounds and help it heal.

It's up to you, which one you choose.