

## Performing *Guzo Adwa*: Power, Politics and Contestations

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### Abstract

*This paper documents a history and politics of memory project called Guzo Adwa. It highlights how, over the last eight years, Guzo Adwa emerged as a popular, performative commemoration of the battle of Adwa. Organised spontaneously by ambitious young men, who are passionate about history and adventure, culture and national politics, art and memory, Guzo Adwa emerged as a political performative, poetic and symbolic pilgrimage of the victory of Adwa. In its multiplicity, Guzo Adwa, which could be roughly interpreted as 'Journey Adwa', added to the already contested memory landscape pertaining to Adwa. The particularity of the project is that it has been organised neither as a mode of rule nor as an instrument of resistance. Moreover, the paper highlights how even this annual ritualized journey, as the memory project, embraced official and marginal political narratives, serving as a stage where varied economic interests and political issues surrounding national history were transpired. The paper is based on both primary and secondary sources. A total of ten formal interviews were conducted with key informants participating in Guzo Adwa in addition to informal discussions with others who have played some role in in the event , and other related memory projects. Newspaper archival research was conducted considering Addis Zemen reporting of Adwa commemoration as an ethnographic site. An attempt is made to attend events organised by the Guzo Adwa, especially the farewell ceremony of the eighth journey to Adwa. Finally, we try to locate the particular history of this memory project into national politics of memory and theoretical and conceptual debates in memory studies.*

**Keywords:** Adwa, Guzo Adwa, memory, mnemonic actor, political economy, Ethiopia

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## Introduction

Taking the case of *Guzo* Adwa—an innovative, popular, performative commemoration of Ethiopia’s Adwa victory against Italian colonial ambition—this paper highlights the place of the memory project within the contested national politics of memory and the internal politics of organizing *Guzo* Adwa. While the external contestations between memory projects are well-known (on Adwa see Biniam, 2004; for a general discussion on the topic see Gustafsson, 2014), this paper goes beyond the apparent internal coherence such memory projects display by looking into the terms of contestations between key mnemonic actors within one project.

*Guzo* (Amharic, Journey) Adwa involves a cohort of individuals walking all the way to Adwa, the site of the decisive battle between Ethiopia and Italy in 1986. This has become an annual ritualized pilgrimage whose point of departure is from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital where the major war mobilisation was made. The journey covers over more than 1,000 km and happens over a month and a half. In early 2021, the eighth *Guzo* was made by 125 participants, marking the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory. It occurred in the midst of an unprecedented political crisis in the country that was eventually followed by and in the midst of an armed conflict pitting the federal government and Tigray regional government and its security forces.

In divided societies such as Ethiopia, the past is contested not primarily for an objective determination of what transpired at the time. Rather contending memory projects are constructed to inform current political projects. A contested terrain is thus in place, produced through writing Ethiopian history as “great tradition” and its counter-narrative, and inviting a third alternative, i.e. writing history of the Horn of Africa transcending these two polarized discursive traditions (Clapham, 2002). The case of Adwa is therefore illustrative of both the memory battles and the contested history as seen from the dynamic present. As will be shown in later parts of this paper there are contending memory projects which aim to put some aspects/heroes in the limelight and relegate others to the shadows, while others (mis)take Adwa to be a war between European and Ethiopian colonialists (Maimire, 1997; Truilzi, 2002).

The paper is primarily based on key informant interviews. The interviewees were purposely selected from each *Guzo* cohort using a snowballing technique. A total of ten informants participated in formal interview sessions. Informal conversations were also conducted with members of the *Guzo* and with affiliated personalities. We also attended the farewell ceremony of the eighth *Guzo* Adwa. Furthermore, a review of the Adwa celebration reporting at *Addis Zemen*

newspaper from 1992 to 2020 was used to explore the change and continuity in commemorating Adwa.

The paper is organised into eight sections. The second section which follows this introduction presents a theoretical discussion focusing on the memory studies in relation to power. The third section covers the Adwa commemoration and its politics since 1991. The segments from the fourth to the sixth section focus on *Guzo* Adwa itself. Accordingly the fourth section covers a brief history, the fifth section discusses politics, poetics and pilgrimage, the sixth section goes into remembering the birth of *Guzo* Adwa and the seventh covers contestation about *Guzo* Adwa. The eighth section concludes the paper by highlighting the terms of contestation by memory agents involved in the *Guzo* Adwa project.

### **Collective memory, performativity and power**

The conundrum of forging a collective memory and what to do with the past is at the heart of our interrogation of *Guzo* Adwa. Arguably the past is never laid to rest.<sup>3</sup> Rather it lives and influences contemporary (and the future) cultural, social and political life. It gets reconstructed to fit the contemporary needs of the collective—the ethnic group or the nation—which shares it (Liu & Hilton, 2005). Contestations over the past will be more pronounced (and at times become possibly visibly acrimonious) when a state (or a collective) experiences a major rupture in its political history, letting the repressed, erased and forgotten subaltern narratives come to the fore as part of the contestations to reimagine the past and re-make the future (Verovšek, 2016).

Memory, as Pierre Nora (1989, p. 9) notes, “takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things.” As a construct, collective memory is an assemblage of various practices, commemorations, stories, monuments, books and music/films. These practices are (re)produced and consumed in a socially negotiated manner within the frame of the identity/political group (de Saint-Laurent, 2017; French, 2012; Zubrzycki & Woźny, 2020). Therefore, a reconstructive and dynamic process of remembering involves acts, and thereof agency, deployed within the scope of a certain cultural schema (de Saint-Laurent, 2017). The process of producing memory occurs through three

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<sup>3</sup> Mulugeta Gebrehiwot (2019) titled his book on TPLF’s history and Ethiopia’s political trajectory under the EPRDF ‘Laying the Past to Rest: The EPRDF and the Challenges of Ethiopian State-Building.’ We wanted to implicitly respond to the bold claim here.

inter-related dimensions: through memory acts, drawing from archives and in relation to the audience.

*Guzo Adwa* is a product of few memory agents or mnemonic actors without whom this popular performative memory would have been unimaginable. In this project, memory is the action of representing a certain collective past, be it through simple description or interpretation. The focus here is on active agency in the (re)construction, reification or erosion of shared memory, rather than taking collective memory as a passive field based on which individuals *merely* recount the past. Thus, “memory as an action—not as a mental process... is performed through discourse: It is constructed verbally or materially through the use of signs and symbols” (de Saint-Laurent, 2017, p. 10). Memory acts necessitate memory agents (Popescu & Schult, 2020) or mnemonic actors (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014), who are active organisers of memory projects and producers of memory regimes. These social actions are enacted for a certain audience (de Saint-Laurent, 2017), often making memory acts performative. Taylor (2003, p. 16) strongly argues performance is “a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge,” especially outside Western epistemologies.

In our case, it will be important to highlight that ‘knowledge about the past’ is stored in non-written formats often narrated in various performative manners. For a certain action to qualify as performance it would need to centre on and describe a certain memory and impact the audience and their future action (see Popescu & Schult, 2020). The descriptions, or memory acts, will not be made out of thin air though. The memory agent will be ‘drawing’ from an existing ‘store:’ which could exist in more enduring forms (examples being texts, documents, buildings, bones) or in “ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” (Taylor, 2003, p. 19). In his discussion of future-making, Appadurai (2013, p. 288) also differentiates between a state’s archive on the one hand, and “personal, familial, and community archives”<sup>4</sup> on the other. While the enduring (or state) archive represents the official memory and history, the ephemeral (or community) archive (or repertoire to use Taylor’s terminology) sustains the subversive subaltern memory. As the subsequent sections clearly show, *Guzo Adwa* is a journey that informs memory. Moreover, this journey in addition to its creative and poetic acts of remembrance becomes a site where the history and archive of Adwa is retold, discussed and debated.

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<sup>4</sup> A historian could also argue that the latter constitutes oral history based on memory (Vansina, 1985).

In societies with weak social cohesion, such as Ethiopia, there will be an inherent tension between the multiple archives; between official and subaltern collective memories. Different forms of power will be deployed to erase and ignore some aspects, and/or make the official history hegemonic (Zubrzycki & Woźny, 2020).

One could thus engage in a productive study of the politics of memory in the intersection between these three dimensions to memory production (i.e., memory act, archive and audience), and how these are co-constituted. The politics of memory essentially “concerns debates about the past and how the past should be recorded, remembered, and disseminated, more broadly, or else silenced and forgotten” (Zubrzycki & Woźny, 2020, p. 176). In such contexts, we have two currents. The first concerns elite produced sites of memory (or projects), which amounts to a “compelling invention of tradition,” involving a collage of images, inscriptions in languages, monuments, etc. (Kansteiner, 2002). Such elite projects will further be entrenched by the creation of a memory-media ecology, which will help make the particular type of collective memory hegemonic through the production and dissemination of commonsensical knowledge (Merrill, 2019). In effect, the memory agents engage in certain acts—which could take various forms and be transmitted through diverse platforms—to galvanise a collective memory.

The other current refers to the construction of memory sites by ordinary persons and communities who have some power to differently construct and/or maintain collective memories of an event remembered by the larger society. This would normally contest the official memory. Far from absolute truths, as French (2012) states, collective memory is receptive to individual’s positions, mediated representations and are (re)made in complex societal processes. The contestation and relative internalisation and remembering of past events are very much linked to social identities and the shared memory within that social group.

Thus, the field of politics of memory is an interesting social field where differing collective memories circulate, often centred on the logics underpinning the contentious identity construction projects. Through the use of soft/hard power, elites attempt to erase,<sup>5</sup> forget, and hide some interpretations, and write and build permanent representations of the past (Gusterson, 2007 cited in French, 2012). The contested nature of this politics of memory is recognised in the literature. But the internal dynamics of memory projects are essentially left as a ‘black box’

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<sup>5</sup> The erasure could happen at three distinct moments: during creation of sources, during assembling of facts/archiving and during retrieving (French, 2012).

which needs to be unpacked and examined. That is what we intend to do in this paper, namely explicating the terms of contestations within one memory project, with a focus on the key mnemonic actors, which commemorates the victory of Adwa, *Guzo* Adwa. We tried to open the ‘black box’ of this popular memory project by mobilising the poetic of ‘Wax’ and ‘Gold’, comparing the superficial or surface meanings to the subtexts and the undersurface meanings and interpretations of the *Guzo*. Moreover, we want to note how *Guzo* Adwa as a memory project has been mobilised neither by the official state mnemonic actors nor by resistant forces.

### **Remembering Adwa in EPRDF’s Ethiopia: Muzzled official commemoration as a prelude to popular celebrations**

The 1896 Adwa battle and its victory is perhaps the most defining moment in Ethiopia’s modern history. Among others, the victory elevated Ethiopia to an *equal of sorts*<sup>6</sup> to the European colonisers and led to the commencement of diplomatic exchanges and signing of border agreements, treating the Ethiopian monarchy as a recognised member of the community of states. The victory in effect defined the external image and relations of Ethiopia (see Maimire, 1997). The victory and Ethiopia were also inscribed in black consciousness and Pan African movements beyond the African continent. Its sentimental value was notable in terms of serving as intensification and inspiration for the movement of Ethiopianism where Sub-Saharan Africans aspired for political and religious freedom.

The internal meaning of Adwa is contested (Biniam, 2004; Maimire, 1997; Truilzi, 2002; 2003; 2006). On the one hand, the victory is viewed as a culmination and cementing of Ethiopia’s millennia-long state tradition. Accordingly, Adwa is viewed as a strong indicator of ‘biographical continuity’ in the state identity by socio-political actors in the narrative of the ‘great tradition’. On the other extreme, in the counter-mainstream history writing, ethno-nationalists take Adwa only as a solid starting point of Ethiopian history and view Adwa only as a colonial war between the forces of Emperor Menilik and Italy (see Maimire, 1997; Truilzi, 2002; 2003; 2006). This view in effect takes the expansion of the state in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a part of the colonial scramble (Ibsa & Holocomb, 1990). As such, the Adwa victory is taken as the final nail that closed the

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<sup>6</sup> In recognition of the fact that Ethiopia finds itself in a semi-colonial arrangement with imperial forces in the immediate years following the Victory, see Bahru (2001, p. 85) and Hailegabriel (2016).

possibility of the independent existence of the ethno-linguistic groups. Other ethno-nationalists, especially those from Tigray, would contest that their contribution is reduced/erased, while that of Emperor Menelik and other war generals of Amhara descent has been over-emphasised (Biniam, 2004).

The commemoration of Adwa is almost as old as the victory itself. It was during the emperor's time that commemoration began for spiritual and secular reasons. Commemorations during Menelik's era had two intentions: paying "homage to Saint George who was considered to have assisted the Ethiopians at the Battle of Adwa" and showing "the military potential of his country to neighbouring colonialist countries" (Binyam, 2004, p. 123). The first official commemoration was held in the seventh year of the victory. Since then, Adwa has been used as a practical and usable past to cultivate patriotism and resistance mainly during foreign invasion, to cement the national unity vis-a-vis the contested and divided nation-building process, and for objectives including for regime and state survival before 1991.

During the EPRDF's period (1991-2018), both remembering and forgetting were consciously crafted when it comes to the annual commemoration of the Adwa victory. After taking power, the EPRDF followed a strategy of silencing and forgetting the key actors of the anti-colonial war. Biniam (2004) documented these silences as exhibited in the state's media platform and by the absence of top political leaders from commemoration sites. In short, EPRDF mobilised a particular form of interpretation to counter 'the great tradition' of Ethiopian history writing. This short era of silences and forgetting from the official space was followed by contested memory, involving multiple mnemonic actors and subjects.

The EPRDF's historical interpretation of the victory of Adwa is aligned to the ethno-nationalist views of Ethiopian history and has made the annual celebrations contentious, especially the centenary in 1996 (Biniam, 2004; Truilzi, 2002; 2006). The Federal Government established a committee to celebrate the centenary in 1996. The official celebrations were not limited to the usual rituals of annual commemorations—including wreath-laying ceremony, cannon firing, playing instrumental music by the police and military marsh band, and speeches by the Speaker of the House of People's Representatives, and representatives of Addis Ababa city administration and Ethiopian Patriots' Association. There were panel discussions in various ministerial offices and there was an official ceremony in Adwa for the first time, primarily organised by a committee established by the Tigray Regional Government.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Various issues of Addis Zemen, 1996

Two points illustrate EPRDF's unease with Adwa. The first is related to Emperor Menelik and his role in the victory (see Biniam, 2004 for details on this). In a speech delivered at the centenary celebration in Adwa, the then President of the Republic, Negasso Gidada, who was from the Oromo People's Liberation Front (and was a member of the Oromo Liberation Front before 1991), explicitly indicated the source for the Adwa's thorny internal politics in the following words:

In addition to the critical role played by our peoples in this anti-colonial struggle, we should have a proper understanding of the role of the rulers of the time. As it is known, before the Adwa war Emperor Menelik invaded the people of southern, eastern and western Ethiopia and imposed upon them brutal national oppression. King Menelik conquered various peoples and alienated their national rights, in the process forming a centralized state. The expansionist invasion that *Atse* Menelik had carried out caused the massacre of numerous people, inflicted humiliation and national oppression. Despite this typical nature, it will be remiss to not remember the role the Emperor played in mobilising the people and in the fighting (Speech made on the centenary celebrations and printed on Addis Zemen issue of *Yekatit* 24, 1988).

What is clear from the above is the inevitability of raising the crucial role played by the Emperor in the victory, and the difficulty this causes given the kind of state and ethnic identity the EPRDF has all along planned and worked to construct (see Biniam, 2004; Maimre 1997; Truilzi 2006; 2003; 2002). As a result, rather than framing the victory as an Ethiopian victory against colonialism, the official centenary celebrations were made around the motto of 'Adwa: An African Victory.'<sup>8</sup> This was only a compromise made to bypass demands of opposing narratives from two opposing centres of nationalism, Amhara and Oromo nationalism, including from within the ruling party (Truilzi, 2006; 2002).

Moreover, a review of the news articles and editorials published in late February and early March over three decades (1992-2020) illustrates various

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<sup>8</sup> This can be contrasted to the motto adopted at the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Adwa in 2021, 'Adwa-an Emblem of Multinational Unity.' This is a strong reflection of the change of state ideology and discourse towards less emphasis on ethnicity.

instrumentalist attempts to use the memory of the battle to current challenges.<sup>9</sup> The first of such attempts was during the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrea war. The war was equated to the Italian aggression of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was further justified by the victory of the war at the end of February 2000. After discouraging spontaneous public expression of joy in the immediate days following the news of victory, a massive demonstration in Addis Ababa and other parts of the country were held on the same day as the commemoration of the victory of Adwa, further entrenching the linkages between the two fundamentally dissimilar wars.

As of the early 2000s, the framing of speeches and editorials changed with the increasing importance developmentalism started taking in the state's discourse (Skjerdal, 2011). The central message went something like: "as we won against colonial aggression by fighting in unison, we should pull forces towards winning the fight against poverty."<sup>10</sup> This mobilisation of the memory of the battle of Adwa for an ideology of state developmentalism is a continuation from previous regimes as HaileSELLASIE mobilised it for anti-colonial resistance mobilisation and unity, and later the *Derg* mobilised it for revolutionary state ideology (Biniam, 2004). This is a textbook case of how a particular past is selectively made usable and practical from the vantage point of different mnemonic actors.

This dominant frame experienced some shift only in the second half of the 2010s, together with the increase in youth-led protests mainly in Oromia and Amhara regions. The new framing emphasised the importance of national unity, and brotherhood, somehow reducing the centrality of developmentalism. It was during this period of immense pressure to reform, internally within the party and from outside, that a grand project to build a mega memory site at Adwa incrementally became a policy agenda of the EPRDF regime. Adwa War Memorial Museum became an idea for which Ethiopian Science Academy was given the responsibility by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2017. There were already different initiatives by then, initiated by multiple mnemonic actors, both individuals and groups. The Ethiopian Science Academy organised a team of scholars to develop a project document. The team presented the document to the public in November 2017 at a conference attended by historians and actors involved in different memory projects in relation to Adwa. Most supported the idea of the museum, while others considered the team as hijackers of earlier initiatives.

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<sup>9</sup> This and the following paragraphs are based on a review of Addis Zemen publications in Yekatit (February-March) of each year since 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Speeches of the President of Ethiopian Patriots' Association consistently raised the importance of the youth to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS also.

The government was also criticised for not embracing different initiatives of Adwa memories, including by *Guzo* Adwa.<sup>11</sup>

The contested memory of Adwa continued after Abiy Ahmed assumed the premiership on 02 April 2018. In 2020, however, what became central was the US (and World Bank) facilitated negotiations over the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Although concern about the proceedings of the negotiations was visible for the entire four months of the negotiations under the US, the immediate trigger for this association was the statement<sup>12</sup> released by the US Treasury reprimanding Ethiopia for failing to attend the last meeting on 28th February 2020 to sign on a draft agreement it prepared. Thus, it was a good opportunity for all government officials<sup>13</sup> to relate the negotiations to a struggle to assert sovereignty and put it on a par with Adwa. Understandably, the 2021 official commemorations were conducted under the deep political complexities the country is in. More importantly, the raging violent conflict in central Tigray, near the Adwa Mountains, hindered the possibility of holding an event at the site of victory as planned and it remained to be a heavy reminder of the remaining long road to meeting the virtues of emancipation and freedom Adwa bestowed.

What became clear from the above discussion is the impoverished attempt to debate and re-interpret Adwa. The celebration of the Adwa victory as a public holiday annually on Yekatit 23 mainly served as an opportunity where the victory and the fallen heroes get commemorated, with very little reflection of what the virtues we inherited are. If there is any discussion it is restricted to freedom, anti-colonial struggle to ensure sovereignty, without getting into the details of what these really entail. In 2017, Abebaw Ayalew compared the much greater attention Nationalities Day, an unofficial holiday, gets for obvious political reasons.<sup>14</sup> We

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<sup>11</sup> Informal Discussion, Historian 20 October 2020

<sup>12</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/secretary-statements-remarks/statement-by-the-secretary-of-the-treasury-on-the-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam> (last accessed on 4 April 2021)

<sup>13</sup> Ranging from the then President of Tigray region, Debretsion Gebremichael to PM Abiy Ahmed (various issues of Addis Zemen, March 2020)

<sup>14</sup> He went to some length iterating that there was no celebration for the first six years, mainly due to the fact that (despite the victory) many have died from the Ethiopian side too. Empress Zewditu was committed to a more colourful celebration and financed Emperor Menelik's statute, where the annual celebrations happen annually until now. Following restoration of HaileSELLASSIE to the throne, greater attention was paid to Miazia

could further add here that although many African countries celebrate their Independence Day as a national day in their embassies, Ethiopian embassies celebrated May 28, when the EPRDF toppled the *Derg*. As such, one could easily discern that not a lot of attention was paid to Adwa during the EPRDF era. It is not only the EPRDF-led government that did not have a clear and strategically crafted official memory project to use Adwa in the nation/state-nation building process. The imperial and *Derg* governments could also be taken responsible for the negligence of the story of Adwa. But even if the EPRDF discouraged commemorations, which emphasise the ‘old Ethiopia’ (as could be discerned from the political wrangling surrounding the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary by Addis Ababa University), the 1991 regime change also allowed for counter-narratives to take centre-stage. The EPRDF period also gave birth to various forms of non-official, popular, citizen-led commemorations. These especially became more important in later years. The most notable among these is *Guzo Adwa*, which the next sections cover.

### **A brief history of *Guzo Adwa***

The first *Guzo Adwa* (Journey to Adwa)—a unique performative memory project involving walking the 1010 km distance from Addis Ababa to Adwa over some 45 days—was conducted in 2014. It has now become an annual journey. This mode of commemorating Adwa commenced at the peak of the EPRDF’s power and in the midst of a very constricted space for alternative interpretations of Ethiopian history. Moreover, the space for popular non-official celebrations of Adwa was muzzled too. The early 2010s also witnessed other forms of popular, non-official celebrations—including *Fano* and *Zekre Adwa*. *Guzo Adwa* by far has emerged into the most visible form of Adwa-related memory project over the years.

Thus far, all *Guzo* participants would spend the night before their date of departure at Taytu Hotel, Ethiopia’s first hotel named after *Etege Taytu*, Emperor Menelik’s consort.<sup>15</sup>

The Hotel sponsors travellers a one-night accommodation annually. The *Guzo* officially starts from Emperor Menelik’s statue, which is very close to the

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27. The *Derg* gave equal attention to both, while the EPRDF showed a general disinterest (Addis Zemen 02 March 2017; see also Biniam, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Women travellers (at least in the first rounds) appear to stay at Semien Hotel (KI-GA3-2-29 October 2020; KI-GA3-4-29 October 2020), as Taytu Hotel might be offering group lodging facilities to the team. They also stand to get better treatment in distribution of mattresses and also in choosing better hotel rooms on ‘resting days’.

hotel. The travellers would be send-off with a formal event, a marsh band for the first *Guzo*<sup>16</sup> but a more elaborate one in the sixth, seventh and eighth *Guzo* (after the change of government in 2018).

From Menelik II Square, the route taken passes through Adwa Bridge to Sendafa on the first day. On average *Guzo* Adwa participants travel 25-30 kilometres daily, with ‘rest days’ interspersed every few days. Except for the first *Guzo*, participants were invited through an open advertisement through mass media, notably Ethiopikalink for the second and third *Guzo*, and as well as social media.<sup>17</sup> The conscious utilisation of the media (both popular social and mainstream) depicts the entry of the audience into this mnemonic act. The call of registration gets announced on *Tikemt* 2, intentionally chosen to overlap with the date Emperor Menelik proclaimed the commencement of war mobilisation (*Ketet Awaj*).<sup>18</sup> The number of travellers continued to increase across the years: 5 in *Guzo* I, 6 (1 female) in *Guzo* II, 12 (2 female) in *Guzo* III, 8 in *Guzo* IV, 25 (4 female) in *Guzo* V, 48 (6 female) in *Guzo* VI, 63 (9 female) in *Guzo* VII and 128 (18 female) in *Guzo* VIII.<sup>19</sup>

There are different rules and sanctions to be followed in *Guzo*. Some of these norms aim to re-enact the situation of the forefathers, among others, by ‘not touching’ or taking a ride in a vehicle for a however small distance and by prohibiting that travellers have any significant cash with them. Drinking alcohol is also prohibited. An amiable relationship with fellow travellers is also a requirement. Failure to live up to these will be met with punishment (usually of doing push-ups), and in extreme cases, one might be forced to not continue the *Guzo*. Yared Shumete, who has been the lead coordinator and logistician of the *Guzo* throughout the eight *Guzos*, has assumed the power to oversee this matter.<sup>20</sup>

All *Guzos* start with formal support—be it through a signed support letter or a formal seeing off ceremony—from the federal government and the city government of Addis Ababa. Moreover, the *Guzo* coordinator—Yared Shumete—accompanies the *Guzo* participants by car, often going ahead of them and arranging practicalities with the next town administration. Often the *Guzo* participants would be welcomed to stay in school or clinic compounds or rooms, and are treated to official dinners by town administration/people in the towns they

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<sup>16</sup> KI-GA1-1-26 October 2020

<sup>17</sup> KI-GA3-1-29 October 2020; KI-GA3-2-29 October 2020; KI-GA3-3-29 October 2020

<sup>18</sup> KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020

<sup>19</sup> Various interviews

<sup>20</sup> KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020. See also Ermias (2020)

cross. In cases where such invitations do not come by, they camp, sleep in sleeping bags and food will be bought by the coordinator. *Guzo* participants will be fully sponsored. This amounts to about a thousand Birr per day for *Guzo* I, 1,500 Birr for *Guzo* II, but a staggering 40,000 Birr per day for *Guzo* VIII.<sup>21</sup> (Of course, this is a reflection of the inflation experienced over the past years and increase in the number of travellers across the years.)

Crossing more than a thousand kilometres, mnemonic actors of the *Guzo* traverse through three regional states: Oromia (20 percent of their journey), Amhara (40 %) and Tigray (40 %). Except for the obvious implications of the war in Tigray for *Guzo* Adwa VIII, the previous *Guzos* have been largely safe. This is despite the fact that the 2015-2018 *Guzos* (*Guzo* II to *Guzo* V) occurred in the midst of the Oromo and Amhara protests which rocked the country. Moreover, *Guzo* I was preceded by the saga related to the controversial inauguration of Anole statue in Arsi allegedly commemorating victims of Menelik II and the successful Oromo-led mobilisation to force Bedele Beer to drop its sponsorship of Teddy Afro's world tour.<sup>22</sup> As such, *Guzo* Adwa's formative years were under unfavourable situations not only when it comes to the EPRDF government but also from the trip environment. A much more favourable political environment emerged for *Guzo* Adwa organisers after the 2018 change in government, although less so in Tigray.

Despite the challenging situation under which *Guzo* Adwa functioned it emerged as a major success. A hallmark of its success is the fact that it won the fifth *Bego Sew* Award, an institution committed to recognise and honour individuals and institutions which made generous and remarkable contributions to Ethiopia, in 2017 in Culture and Heritages stream. The award signified an emblem of *Guzo* Adwa's success in memorialising not only Adwa, but also other historical figures and events. The noted interventions are related to the initial steps taken towards the establishment of a museum at Yesma Negus, where the Wuchale Treaty was signed, and the launching of an open air museum at Endayesus campus of Mekelle University, where the remains of unknown Ethiopian soldiers used to litter the grounds. These successes aside, *Guzo* Adwa as a memory project is however full of contestations. Before highlighting the contestations between the lead figures of *Guzo* Adwa, the next section explores the form and mode of memory that *Guzo* Adwa may inform.

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<sup>21</sup> KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020

<sup>22</sup> KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020

### **The politics, poetics and pilgrimage of *Guzo* Adwa**

*Guzo* Adwa is a site where multiple memory forms unfold. It is performative, poetic, communicative and interactive in its mode, and political, cultural and a kind of pilgrimage in its content. It is simultaneously individual and collective. Those who undergo such a journey have their own individual historical and cognitive connection with Adwa victory, and will produce an individual connection with and memory of Adwa thereof. At the time of joining the *Guzo*, some have little historical knowledge about Adwa but are impressed by the news of the long journey accomplished by the first team and joined the subsequent cohorts out of passion, curiosity and adventure.<sup>23</sup> This resonates very well with the very idea of *Guzo* Adwa as borne out of Mulugeta Megerssa's passion for adventure.

Others are historical subjects whose cognition of history motivated them to take part in this commemorative practice. A significant portion of the mnemonic agents of *Guzo* Adwa, including those from the first cohort, had historical knowledge and were involved in various commemorative projects of the Adwa victory. For example, Mohammed Kassa used to organize the remembering Adwa festival, dubbed Zekre Adwa, through Art: theatre, poetry and painting.<sup>24</sup> Few have a family history with the war itself or were influenced by their family members' memory to join this performative memorial project.<sup>25</sup>

In this sense, *Guzo* Adwa is linked to the life of participants' family memory as it is a social, collective and shared remembrance. Some joined the project spontaneously, while others planned for long to be part of it.

For mnemonic actors, *Guzo* Adwa is a political memory project with an ambitious mission of contributing to the contested nation-building process. Most are frustrated with the manifold and deepening political crises and the contestation and fragile nation-building process in Ethiopia. Particularly they aspire to use their act of remembrance as a political remedy to the political crisis in the country which they believed to an extent emanates from failure of regimes to uphold some values the victory of Adwa embodied. The *Guzo* embraces the official narrative of Adwa victory and uses memory sites officially produced for the commemoration of the battle and the victory of Adwa despite being organised by young Ethiopians who are neither members of the political elite nor active political party members. For

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<sup>23</sup> KI-GA3-1-23 October 2020; KI-GA7-1-24 October 2020; KI-GA5-1-24 October 2020

<sup>24</sup> KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020; KI-GA1-3-20 September 2020. Many other interviewees mention their prior experience with Adwa, its history and memory

<sup>25</sup> KI-GA7-1-24 October 2020; KI-GA7-2-24 October 2020

example, the *Guzo* always begins, after spending the preceding night at Taytu Hotel from Menelik II square, where the emperor's statue is erected. Moreover, the *Guzo*, to the extent possible, takes the same route purportedly followed by the army which departed from Addis Ababa back in 1895-96.<sup>26</sup> The form, not the mnemonic actor, makes *Guzo* Adwa official.

*Guzo* Adwa not only reproduces the official narrative but also allows new narratives to take a central place, among others, by striving to remember the forgotten, unsung and unknown actors of the battle of Adwa. The warriors, writers, singers, leaders and followers, all women and men actors of the Adwa battle get remembered in *Guzo* Adwa. Moreover, there is an intentional project of 'remembering those who made Adwa possible,'<sup>27</sup> i.e., Emperor Menelik, his wife, Taytu and the war generals, and thereby contesting the political project of the EPRDF which underplays them. Not only does *Guzo* Adwa embrace the official memory of the battle and its victory, it also enforces the official memory to embrace popular ideas. The perfect example for this comes from *Guzo* III, when Yared Shumete, by writing an open letter to the President of Mekelle University in 2017,<sup>28</sup> pressed for a proper burial of the remains of the dead (which were irresponsibly left unattended on campus), and establishment of an open-air museum at Endayesus Campus of the University. Moreover, the *Guzo* organisers have managed to have pressured the Amhara Region to put up a proper fencing and in due course establish a museum at Yesma Negus, where the Wuchale Treaty was signed.

To be sure, *Guzo* Adwa does not limit itself to remembering the political elites of the time. Instead, it is committed to multiply the icons of Adwa victory, (excavate and) remember the unknown and nameless heroes and heroines' names and deeds. This openness and effort to make the memory project inclusive, embracing the official and the popular, gives the memory project many possibilities to be more popular, thereby contributing toward bringing the divided communities of Ethiopia together.

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<sup>26</sup> The only exception we heard of is the re-routing done to pass through Angolola Seminesh Kidanemeheret, where Emperor Menelik's was born (KI-GA3-1-29 October 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Among others in the 'anthem' of the *Guzo* there is a clearly intentional term to this effect.

<sup>28</sup> The University's main campus, Endaesyesus Campus, is a historical site where the Italians camped and many Ethiopians died to break that camp.

By participating in *Guzo Adwa*, the memory agents aspire to send messages to the masses, making the memory project particularly political (more will come on the political dimension in coming sections). Such acts of remembrance are broadcasted and narrated via mainstream and social media to the public, making *Guzo Adwa* also a cultural memory project as it actively mobilizes media infrastructures such as radio and TV shows, social media pages, and film production.<sup>29</sup> As it is organized by young adventurous mnemonic actors mainly from the entertainment industry, *Guzo Adwa* inculcated a strong core of cultural memory. Some aspects of the form make it an official memory while the use of popular media outlets and the nature of the organizing team makes the *Guzo* more of cultural memory (Assmann, 2011).

As a cultural memory site, *Guzo Adwa* became a stage where mnemonic actors, or the travellers, every year stride from Addis Ababa to Adwa as commemorating act while reciting and performing narratives, songs and dances (Shelela and Qerereto) which Ethiopians performed while marching to Adwa some five generations ago.<sup>30</sup> This is an effort to reproduce aesthetic forms which were believed to have been produced and used during the war in 1896, and before that to mobilize people. This makes *Guzo Adwa* a performative act.

Reading is also an integral part of the *Guzo*. Through reading and discussions, performative memory of the victory is made possible, at the same time contributing to moulding the political and historical subjectivities of the travellers. Most claim that they reconnected to this history through the reading sessions of *Guzo Adwa*, and finished the *Guzo* with a transformed historical consciousness about Adwa victory. Participants got connected to ‘their’ glorious past through this act of memory.<sup>31</sup>

*Guzo Adwa* agents are encouraged to walk barefoot for short distances as a performative act of remembering the warriors who travelled all the way to Adwa on barefoot. The extreme case is that of Ermias Mekonnen who walked barefoot the entire length of the *Guzo* in 2019 (see his memoirs at Ermias, 2020). Travellers are also expected to carry luggage to commemorate the hardships of marching to Adwa as an army. The attempt is to embrace the spirit and conditions of the time.

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<sup>29</sup> Nationalities mobilised the cultural aspect of their participation. For example, horsemen are mobilised as aspect of this memory project in Oromia and Agew; it is worth mentioning Agew Awi’s equestrians (horse- riding) festival and its association.

<sup>30</sup> KI-GA3-1-23 October 2020; KI-GA5-1-24 October 2020; KI-GA1-1-26 October 2020; KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020

<sup>31</sup> KI-GA3-1-23 October 2020

*Guzo* Adwa appears to be a pilgrimage as it is a form of engagement (see Minchin, 2012)<sup>32</sup> with historical sites of the Adwa battlefield as well as a reconnection to and commemoration of the war heroes' deeds of the dead in relation to the victory. In this sense, *Guzo* Adwa involves reconnection with the martyrs and their deeds and the historical places such as the Adwa Mountains. This makes the journey not only a cultural memory but also elevates it to a spiritual journey that traverses sacred spaces. The victory itself is presented as a sacred moment not only to humans but also to divine figures such as St. George whose *tabot* actually accompanied the national army marching to Adwa. The battle itself took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Yekatit, a day the Ethiopian Orthodox Church ascribes to the Saint.

Ethiopia is known for several pilgrimage sites. For example, the numerous annual pilgrimages of Orthodox Christians, Muslim pilgrimages to Bale and Wollo and the Ireecha annual ceremony are worth mentioning here. *Guzo* Adwa commemorating the mobilization and marching to the battlefield from different parts of Ethiopia to Addis Ababa and then to Adwa in Tigray became a recent secular addition to the countless religious pilgrimages in the country. As it re-enacts the barefoot walking, carrying 'ammunition' and other necessities, singing war songs and dancing as well as praying and blessing each other, no other term can best and powerfully describe *Guzo* Adwa other than a secular pilgrimage. This apparent secularity however is complicated given the sacred element interwoven in narrating Adwa victory itself. Moreover, one could also further extend this argument by making the point that Adwa is essentially viewed as the 'soul' of Ethiopian independence and symbol of uninterrupted sovereign existence.

*Guzo* Adwa also appears to have an aspiration to be integrative. As *Guzo* Adwa's participants leave from various cities, ceremonies would be held upon their departure. At one level this could symbolize commemoration of how fighters were going to the warfront from different corners of the country. In this respect, the *Guzo* is not just an aspiration about commemorating the past but an apt reminder on the need to come together counteracting the centrifugal forces that have been reeling the country in recent years.

For those who undertake the *Guzo*, it was not only Adwa but many localities between Addis Ababa and Adwa that appear to be sacred and hence celebrated as historical places worth visiting. The view is that the Adwa victory is a product of many historical episodes and all places that hosted these numerous episodes are

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<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Minchin (2012, p. 77) defines pilgrimage "some active engagement with the site."

sacred and historical. Taytu Hotel (the first hotel in Ethiopia owned by and named after the Queen, who is also a key historical figure of the victory of Adwa), Ankober, Yesma Negus, South Wollo (the birthplace of Menelik II), Yesma Negus, South Wollo (where the infamous Wuchale treaty was signed which was the major cause of the war), Mekelle (where a historical siege and one of the victories Ethiopians gained against the invading Army) are some of these historical sites.

Therefore, as memory agents are multiple and involve political elites and actors from the masses, one may argue that memory is not always an instrument of power from above or resistance from below. It may also serve as a site of negotiation and contestation. The above mentioned political, poetic (cultural) and pilgrimage aspects of *Guzo Adwa* conceal its contested aspects. As Goffman (1956) indicates, performances (including in everyday life) have more than what is displayed for the outsider to see/witness. This could be seen as the 'wax' or the surface meaning in the Ethiopian wax and gold poetry. The front stage performance tells us only what the performers want the public to see and view as the central message. The contestations in producing the message and content of the frontstage as well as other personal innuendos get hidden in the backstage which is the 'gold' or the undersurface, core meaning in the Ethiopian poetic structure. Goffman (1956, p. 69) had the following to say about the backstage:

A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. There are, of course, many characteristic functions of such places. It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed.

We take these two stages as 'wax' and 'gold' in the Ethiopian parlance. The previous and this section presented the Wax interpretation (i.e., the surface meaning which is meant to be coherent, official and less contested among dominant memory actors) of *Guzo Adwa*. The politics unfolding behind the unsuspecting eyes of the broader public, i.e., the 'gold' meaning found in the backstage, will be detailed in the following two sections. The first illustrates the politics of remembering the memory project itself, while the second zooms onto the central terms of contestation.

### Remembering the birth and first *Guzo Adwa*

All interviewed key informants attribute the idea of *Guzo Adwa*—though not in its current performative and commemorative form—to Mulugeta Megerssa (also called W). Informants state that Mulugeta on a certain fateful momentous day in late 2013 told a group of media and film professionals<sup>33</sup> at a film shoot a ‘surreal idea’<sup>34</sup>, that he wants to ‘walk all the way to Adwa.’<sup>35</sup> He meant ‘walk’ in the adventurous sense of braving the mountainous terrain and distance. All informants describe Mulugeta as a man who loves adventure and such physical challenges.<sup>36</sup>

The close friends who were with him at the time transformed the idea, developing it into the memory project in its current form. They actually discouraged Mulugeta from doing it just for the adventure and hence impressed on him the great national significance such a *Guzo* may have. One informant<sup>37</sup> insisted that Berhane Negussie, a film and media professional, was so impressed with the idea that he immediately started making detailed plans on how to develop it into a memory project. Obviously, the purpose in mind was remembering Adwa, through various symbolic initiatives. Obsession with adventure and memory met and *Guzo Adwa* as a popular memory project was born out of this beauty of spontaneity. Every year this sort of individual reason and collective memory entwine to create a yet another mnemonic actor who would take part in *Guzo Adwa*. This depicts the complexity of the private and public, the individual and the sharedness of any act of memory.

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<sup>33</sup> This group consisted Berhane, Ermias, and Yared. Later on, Berhane and Co. mentioned the idea to Mohammed Kassa after doing some reading and discussion as he already was preparing *Zekre Adwa* before then (KI-GA1-1-23 October 2020).

<sup>34</sup> KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020

<sup>35</sup> KI-GA1-1-23 October 2020; KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020; KI-GA1-3-20 September 2020

<sup>36</sup> At the time of interview (late 2020) we were told by different informants that Mulugeta Megerssa, who lives in Finland, was walking from the southern tip of South America to northern tip of North America. One of the *Guzo* participants from the first cohort also remembered that Mulugeta was all about the adventure and pushing himself across the mountains of northern Ethiopia, not the history of Adwa (KI-GA1-1-23 October 2020; KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020; KI-GA1-3-20 September 2020). Another informant (KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020) stated that Mulugeta first had an idea of ‘walking’ with a group from Gafat to Maqdala pushing a replica of the Sebastopol mortar with an equivalent weight. That was not deemed practical, thus dropped.

<sup>37</sup> KI-GA1-1-23 October 2020

Volunteers came forward to enrich the project. Berhane Negussie offered Ethiopikalink,<sup>38</sup> a famous radio programme he used to run, as a media partner. Ethiopikalink in the following two years covered the *Guzo* in its *Berera* (literal translation, flight) programme, and was very instrumental in making *Guzo Adwa* reach the wider public. More importantly, *Berera* helped create a vivid picture of the *Guzo* by taking listeners through the experience in each major town/location and did advertisements for the second and third *Guzo*. This makes *Guzo Adwa* not just a private act of remembering but an attempt to bring on board the masses as the audience and object of the memory project. Therefore, it became popular from its very inception and at the same time political. Yonas Hagos, a staff of Ethiopikalink, provided logistical support for the first *Guzo*.<sup>39</sup>

This much—i.e., that Mulugeta initiated the idea and Ethiopikalink and its staff had a crucial role—is agreed by all those interviewed from the first *Guzo*. Everything else appears to be contested between the two major blocks. The currently dominant block is the one led by Yared Shumete, with close assistance from Mohammed Kassa, who is the lead organizer and ‘face’ of *Guzo Adwa*. Yared was with the team when Mulugeta made the enunciation about the ‘walk to Adwa.’ Informants from the second block<sup>40</sup>—for sake of convenience called Berhane and Co., with Dawit Gebre-egziabher as their financier—diminished Yared’s role in the first *Guzo* to only recording their memories and doing logistical arrangements by driving ahead of and accompanying them.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, he is depicted as a paid service provider—as he eventually demanded 30,000 Birr to compensate for the income foregone as he accompanied the team in the *Guzo*, and later demanded an additional payment for editing video recordings of the *Guzo*<sup>42</sup> and collected half of the agreed amount.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> <http://ethiopikalink.net/>

<sup>39</sup> KI-GA1-1-23 October 2020; KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020

<sup>40</sup> For the ease of referring to the two blocks, we will use Yared and Co. and Berhane and Co. in the rest of the paper.

<sup>41</sup> One informant stresses that he agreed to do this if “there is a sponsor and a vehicle” (KI-GA1-1-23 October 2020). As such, Yared (according to this informant) joined them only after the pick-up from Adika was available, some seven days after they started their journey.

<sup>42</sup> Yared is further criticized for failing to deliver on this as well. *Guzo III* participants were also told that the recording was stolen (KI-GA3-2-29 October 2020; KI-GA3-3-29 October 2020).

<sup>43</sup> KI-GA1-1-23 October 2020. Informants (KI-GA1-1-23) October 2020 from *Guzo I* also remember that Yared left the team when he got a call to do a job in a different part of the

Compared to Berhane and Co., Yared eventually emerged as the face of *Guzo* Adwa primarily thanks to the accident of assigning him and Mohammed Kassa to be the media contact persons for *Guzo* I. The thinking among a part of *Guzo* I participants—particularly Berhane and Ermias—was that Ethiopikalink would do the *Berera* programmes after their return to Addis Ababa, thus relegating the regular updates on the way to Adwa to Yared and Mohammed.

In retrospect, this illustrates that the birth and evolution of *Guzo* Adwa has been contested from the beginning. The contestations on the memory of the first *Guzo* centre on key processes like garnering support from the Federal Government and getting financial and material sponsors for the journey.

Getting a support letter from the federal government is crucial to make such a *Guzo*. While Berhane and Co. claim to have garnered such a support letter from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Yared and Co. questioned this since, according to them, the Minister at the time was hesitant to sign it. Instead, another close contact, the Minister for Government Communication Affairs Office (GCAO), Redwan Hussien, who had no qualms to support the project, was claimed to have provided the required support letter.

The second line of support was solicited through *Ato* Sebhat Nega, to whom Berhane was allegedly close. Yared recollects that Sebhat—a key figure in the TPLF/EPRDF—‘co-developed the idea of the *Guzo*’<sup>44</sup> and even made the first enunciation of ‘*Adwa yekeber yezeker le-zelalem*’ (Adwa shall be celebrated and commemorated for eternity) which continues to be one of the central mottos of the *Guzo*. This depicts how the actors of the official memory project may individually centre to the popular memory project in an unofficial manner; Sebhat did not directly support the *Guzo* financially at the time.<sup>45</sup>

More concrete support was garnered from Awad Mohammed, owner of Adika Travel Agency, who loaned them a pick-up vehicle to accompany them and support the crucial logistics demand. The vehicle was not however ready by the time the first *Guzo* started (Tir 9). With the intention of keeping the historical

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country. He flew from Mekelle and was replaced by Yeshiwas Habesha temporarily. Yared does not contest doing so neither, he only argues that he took that job to finance the remaining of the journey.

<sup>44</sup> According to various informants, this motto was repeated morning and evening, and at other occasions.

<sup>45</sup> Later on, Yared mentioned that *Aboy* Sebhat gave him 15,000 Birr in an envelope, and dubbed him as the ‘first sponsor’ of *Guzo* Adwa.

nature of the *Guzo*, members of the first *Guzo* Adwa requested Taytu Hotel to host them for the night before their departure date, which also was granted.

Therefore, given the little success to raise funds, they had to contribute from their own pockets when they started the journey. All interviewed members of the first *Guzo* contributed small sums, which they were reimbursed when a Dubai-based wealthy and influential person, Dawit Gebre-egziabher, agreed to sponsor them after they did more than three quarters of the *Guzo*.<sup>46</sup>

Preparation of operational and logistical issues for *Guzo* I range from estimating how many kilometres should be covered per day to establishing a ‘mobile library.’ Yared and Co. claim that they initially made the estimations based on Mulugeta’s capabilities and planned they would cover 40-50 km per day, but to change it to 25-30 km per day level considering the lower capabilities of the other travellers.<sup>47</sup> Berhane and Co. however claim they had done a full day walk through Addis Ababa following the ring road by way of testing. Through this experience, they came to decide that 25-30 km will be a fair distance to be covered per day.<sup>48</sup>

What is more important is the establishment of a list and copy of mandatory reading books, a ‘mobile library’. The mobile library gets updated across the years, but the mandatory and central reading remained to be *Atse Menilik ena Ethiopia* (Emperor Menelik and Ethiopia)<sup>49</sup> by Tekeltsadik Mekuria. We have commonly observed across participants of the *Guzo* that adventure remained to be among the single most important drivers for joining the journey. One informant captured this by stating that “we managed to finish the *Guzo* not because we had the energy, but

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<sup>46</sup> He used to be a TPLF fighter in the 1980s, but is better known for amassing wealth in the Gulf. He was known to the public when he bought a major share of Raya Beer about a decade ago and for his family relations to some key TPLF officials. He heard about the *Guzo* from a VOA interview, and called them the next day. He appears to have claimed that he always wanted to support such an initiative, and automatically promised to cover full expenses (KI-GA1-1-26 October 2020; KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020; KI-GA1-3-20 September 2020).

<sup>47</sup> It is interesting to note here that Yared also insists that Mulugeta brought and discussed the idea of ‘walking to Adwa’ to him only, and that the others only joined the *Guzo* in later days. This is unlikely as other respondents with close knowledge of the first *Guzo* do not corroborate it, and for other factual reasons.

<sup>48</sup> KI-GA1-1-26 October 2020

<sup>49</sup> KI-GA2-2-29 December 2020; KI-GA1-3-20 September 2020. Some would record the readings and listen to them the next day as well (KI-GA3-1-29 October 2020; KI-GA3-2-29 October 2020).

because we had books.”<sup>50</sup> There are mandatory two to three hours of reading on a daily basis, and longer hours on off ‘resting days.’<sup>51</sup> For each cohort a reader is assigned, while Yared selects the reading for the day, primarily depending on the area they passed through or are getting to, and facilitates the whole process.<sup>52</sup> Eventually, they all came out satisfied with getting acquainted with the history of Ethiopia and Adwa.

Mohammed takes pride in initiating the idea of the mobile library. He reiterates that during *Guzo* I, “the others came with a bag full of cloth and other necessities, while I came with books.’ The reading exercise was complemented by another practice of speaking to knowledgeable individuals and elders in the villages and towns they pass through. These two practices enabled the mnemonic actors to come to know heroes and heroines who are not celebrated in official narratives. This also is linked with the practice of adopting a *nom de guerre* (war name) for the unrecognised heroes and heroines at the end of the *Guzo*.<sup>53</sup> The idea is to recognise more and more Ethiopians, with a ban on repeating names lasting until 2020.<sup>54</sup> This shows how conscious and unconscious action is taken to embrace elements from the great tradition as well as from the counter-history project in a quest for integrative remembrance. Moreover, upon return, all participants would get recognition from the Ancient Ethiopian Patriots Association (AEPA) as honorary members.<sup>55</sup>

In some respects, *Guzo* I was very successful in casting major traditions on stone. These include fixing the start date, the average distance travelled per day, regular ‘rest days,’ mobile library with mandatory reading, assumption of *nom de guerre* and getting honorary membership to the AEPA. It has also created a strong culture of welcoming events in major towns along the way (see Ermias, 2020). Despite these major achievements, however, the rift which started to show before the completion of *Guzo* I has surfaced, widened and became deeply politicised in

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<sup>50</sup> KI-GA1-1-23 October 2020

<sup>51</sup> Every week or so participants of *Guzo* Adwa spend a full day or two to recuperate, visit some historical towns along the way, and read.

<sup>52</sup> KI-GA2-2-29 December 2020, see also Ermias (2020).

<sup>53</sup> For example, one traveller took the name of a slave girl, Welete Amanuel (KI-GA3-3-29 October 2020).

<sup>54</sup> KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020

<sup>55</sup> Various informants

succeeding *Guzos*. The following section will focus on the rift, the narratives and terms of contestation underlying it.

### **Contesting *Guzo* Adwa**

Perhaps it is important to start this section with a disclaimer. We do not intend to bring hard evidence to show which contestant is on the side of truth. Our intention is primarily to explicate the terms of the debate between the contestants. Framings of the contest and narratives that each side has about the other, irrespective of the truth, tells volumes about the backstage actions of the memory agents and the real motivations behind investing time and energy in such a memory project. With this in mind, we explore how economic relations define, shape and affect mnemonic actors' interests and participation in a memory project. In this brief story, contestation confirms how "memory and economy are fundamentally interwoven" (Allen, 2016, p. 371).

The terms of contestation involve differing interpretations of the Adwa victory and political-economic relation in the making of a memory. Yared and Co.—representing the publicly recognised *Guzo* Adwa—present themselves as defending the memory project from a political, and perhaps an ethnicised re-interpretation of history financed by the largesse of Dawit Gebre-egziabher. Their claim is that Dawit is 'buying' a section of participants in *Guzo* I in his 'sinister' attempt to advance a Tigrean re-interpretation of Adwa.<sup>56</sup> This re-interpretation, they argue, reduces the contribution of Emperor Menelik and his generals and the historical significance of the victory.<sup>57</sup> One informant<sup>58</sup> even claimed that Dawit wanted the name of the *Guzo* to change to '*Guzo to Ye-Adwa Del Hager*' (Journey to the Land of Adwa Victory). This alternative naming demonstrates how divergent the meanings attached to the victory. Nationalism is here the author of this contestation (see Biniam, 2004).

It is important to note at this point that Dawit (the businessman mentioned earlier) had a major role in the earlier *Guzos*. He reimbursed all expenses *Guzo* I participants paid from their pockets and brought media personnel to Adwa,<sup>59</sup> in effect increasing the visibility of the *Guzo*. All informants stress that he has been insistent on establishing a non-profit organisation to which all *Guzo* participants

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<sup>56</sup> Various informants

<sup>57</sup> The *Guzo* Adwa Philanthropic Association put a founding stone at Wereilu for Emperor Menelik (Ermias, 2020, p. 38), probably to fend off such criticisms.

<sup>58</sup> Yared

<sup>59</sup> The total journalists were 46 according to KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020

will be shareholders to ensure the continuation of the *Guzo*. Obviously, economic power plays a significant role in the realisation of collective memory projects. Yared and Co. however mobilised cultural power mainly through access to media and digital connectedness to influence the government and tried to mobilize other business people to reduce Dawit's leverage. Therefore, *Guzo* Adwa seems to have succeeded from being from being a pawn of capital. Dawit's role in *Guzo* Adwa shows the power and limitations of capital. Yared explains that Dawit wanted a majority share in the non-profit organisation he insists to be established to dictate the life of the project but the resistance was formidable. Mohammed recalls to have responded to Dawit polemically by saying "a driver who takes my children to school cannot become a father to them." In effect, Mohammed is saying, it is true that Dawit contributed financially but this was far from enabling him to own the memory project. What we see here is the contestation between cultural and economic elites in shaping how we remember Adwa and owning the *Guzo* Adwa memory project. Cultural power, popularity and fame is used here as a counter bastion to economic power that has a power to invest its capital on mnemonic infrastructures. In this struggle the different meanings and values each actor associates with Adwa, most of which have not been not brought to the front stage, played a role in deepening the contestation.

Informants from the other side of the contest add that a lot of money is involved in the *Guzos*, and more importantly no one audits it. They stress that Yared was paid to edit the videos of the first *Guzo*, but he did not hand in the final product. Similarly, all cohorts were supposed to get documentation of their *Guzo* but in vain. In the words of one *Guzo* participant, "as we engaged in the *Guzo* to remember history, ours was snatched from us."<sup>60</sup>

Many organisations and individuals sponsor the *Guzo*, including the large sums of money dedicated by the Addis Ababa City Government since 2019 and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, while there is no way of knowing where the money is spent.<sup>61</sup> Some expenses are also offset by the welcoming events that town administrations prepare.

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<sup>60</sup> KI-GA1-1-26 October 2020

<sup>61</sup> Ermias (2020) claims that Takele Uma sponsored the event in 2019, although no figure exists publicly, and that Artist Debebe Seifu pledged to fully sponsor one traveller. The city government continued sponsoring the *Guzo* afterwards too. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has been sponsoring the return flight tickets to travellers since *Guzo* IV.

Yared however is quick to claim that it is impossible to collect receipts<sup>62</sup> since the restaurants in small towns do not issue receipts as a matter of fact. When it comes to establishing an institution under which the *Guzo* gets registered and proceeds, Yared (and Mohammed) was reluctant. SoloRaeyo<sup>63</sup> Events and Communication—the name of a media company combining Soloda and Raeyo, two key battle locations—was established immediately after *Guzo* I by the five participants of the first *Guzo* and the two lcoordinators, viz. Yared Shumete and Yonas Hagos. Dawit sponsored the first activity of SoloRaeyo, i.e., fencing the location where Wuchale Treaty was signed, and the remaining sum from the lumpsum received from him was used as capital for the establishment of SoloRaeyo. But as Dawit did not agree to finance *Guzo* II, on top of other causes, SoloRaeyo was disbanded.<sup>64</sup>

In the meantime, Berhane and Co. established the *Guzo* Adwa Philanthropic Association 2019 right before *Guzo* VI and proceeded to organize this journey. By dubbing it *Guzo* VI, the Association essentially attempted to establish continuity and graft their *Guzo* to the previous ones headed by Yared and Co. Yared managed to establish a legal entity known as *Guzo* Adwa Hiking, Events and Communication only in 2021 after travellers of *Guzo* VIII left from Addis Ababa. This entity—is a private limited company and intends to make profits from its activities. As such, one could argue that Yared and Co.’s intentions in organising *Guzo* Adwa is not just altruistic commemoration of the victory. At the very least, there is the intention of getting some lustre, more fame and popularity, which comes with organising *Guzo* Adwa, while the interest of making money out of the *Guzo* itself could be there as well. Moreover, since 2018 the lead organisers of *Guzo* Adwa—Yared and Mohammed—are getting approached (and possibly co-opted) by the new Addis Ababa City Administration. Mohammed has joined the Board of Addis Media, and Yared is the lead figure in organising donations to victims of various ethnic-based attacks settling around Hager Fikir Theatre.

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<sup>62</sup> The cost, excluding logistics and return flights, was about a 1,000 Birr per day for the first *Guzo*, 1,500 for the second, and reached 40,000 Birr per day by *Guzo* VIII. The main cost relates to meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) and hotels (some towns). This increase has to do both with increased number of travellers and inflation (KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020).

<sup>63</sup> KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020

<sup>64</sup> Yared, Berhane and Mohammed allegedly raised some money (including through loan) to sponsor at least part of the *Guzo* II (KI-GA1-2-29 December 2020). Registration for *Guzo* Adwa II was possible by e-mail through [solorayo1888@gmail.com](mailto:solorayo1888@gmail.com).

Through these engagements members of the new administration are broadcasting the image of a new political elite, while opening possibilities for garnering some economic favours through contracts on the side.<sup>65</sup> In 2021, Mayor Adanech Abiebie gave each of the 125 traveller's *agelgils*<sup>66</sup> (a symbolically important gesture) and an additional 2 million Birr support. This would amount to a little more than 44,440 Birr per day budget for each traveller for the 45 days of the *Guzo*. This however did not stop the organisers from mobilizing more resources on the route to Adwa, including covering of some expenses by town administrations along the route.

The terms of contestation—with economic and ethno-nationalist/centrist re-interpretations of Adwa at its centre—are opaque to most travellers though. Most informants are aware of the issues, but are disinterested. One informant stressed that “the problem is at the top, primarily with the sponsor.”<sup>67</sup>

When it comes to the memory project though the following quote is interesting to end this section with: “[Mulugeta Megerssa] came up with the idea, Berhane and Ermias developed it, and Yared pushed it through.”<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper examined the internally contested nature of memory projects, taking the case of *Guzo* Adwa. Pre-existing works primarily take memory projects which are powered by political elite as coherent entities. The first mnemonic actors and lead figures of *Guzo* Adwa have contesting visions and interests. They have emerged into the realm of memory entrepreneurs who intend to actively create and shape memory projects, among others with the intention of garnering personal benefits from thereof.

The terms of the contestations over Adwa centre on economic benefits on the one side, and disagreement over which interpretation of Adwa the memory project should carry on the other hand. The currently dominant group is leading the organization and logistics of holding annual *Guzos* over the past eight years. While there is an obvious inclination to align with the official memory of the victory which accords a greater role to the emperor, his consort and war generals, the *Guzos* also intentionally bring popular non-official memories of poetics,

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<sup>65</sup> Informal Discussion, public figure, 23 February 2021

<sup>66</sup> A traditional ‘lunchbox’ carried by individuals travelling long distances

<sup>67</sup> KI-GA3-2-29 October 2020

<sup>68</sup> KI-GA3-3-29 October 2020

pilgrimage and cultural dimensions. Similarly, this arduous task of organising the *Guzo* appears to give Yared and Co. fame and possibly routes to economic gains.

In organising this performative project, Yared and Co. have succeeded in pushing through a certain interpretation of Adwa which puts Emperor Menelik, Empress Taytu, and senior war generals at its centre, while at the same time not ignoring other less known heroes and heroines. If looked at superficially the story ends here, while this paper highlights contestations happening in the backstage with Berhane and Co. The terms of contestation primarily have two pillars: economic gains and interpretations of Adwa. *Guzo* Adwa has managed to conceal the ‘gold’, personal and private economic gains to the organisers. The ‘wax’ is what the memory project is known and recognised for, while the ‘gold’ is related to attempts at amassing some cultural capital and material gains, and ‘fending off’ a Tigrean/ethno-nationalist re-interpretation of Adwa. The two levels of meaning do coo-exist while the memory entrepreneurs ‘play’ the two games simultaneously.

The case of *Guzo* Adwa also illustrates how popular sites and projects of memory are as contested as the official memory project. In these micro- and macro-contestations, political economy, ideology, personal ego and competition for fame, and even minor disagreement in organising or performing a particular memory project get interlocked. The hidden contestation within *Guzo* Adwa serves as a metaphor to national memory contestations, forgetting and remembrance with regards to Adwa victory and national history in general. The inability of the political and cultural elite to discuss and come to an overarching agreement over the differing and contested interpretations of the victory and what that means to today’s Ethiopia and Ethiopians, primarily due to the contested nationalisms, is a major hindrance to having an official memory project. Moreover, economic power is deployed to drive, influence and co-opt key mnemonic actors into a certain monocolour of remembrance. However, although lacking in economic power, the cultural elite successfully contested the EPRDF’s instrumentalist interpretation and utilisation of the memory of Adwa.

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