

Tigrayans and Tigrinya-Speaking Eritreans: Shared Language, Separate Political Destinies

One of the most important and frequently misunderstood realities in the Horn of Africa is that **linguistic and cultural proximity does not necessarily produce political unity**. Tigrayans in Ethiopia and Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans share a language continuum, historical connections, religious traditions, family relationships, cultural practices, and a long history of interaction across what is today an international border. Yet these commonalities do not automatically produce a common political identity. Over the course of the twentieth century, Eritrean nationalism and Ethiopian nationalism developed as competing political projects, and communities that shared language and ancestry increasingly found themselves belonging to different national political frameworks. Consequently, it is entirely possible for Tigrayans and Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans to recognize substantial cultural kinship while simultaneously maintaining distinct national identities and political interests.

This distinction becomes particularly important when discussing the contemporary relationship between Tigray and Eritrea. **Tigrayans are Ethiopian citizens and Tigray is constitutionally a regional component of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia**. The 2022 Pretoria Agreement between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front explicitly provided for the restoration of federal authority in Tigray and for Tigray's representation in federal institutions. The agreement therefore treated the conflict principally as an Ethiopian internal political and military conflict involving the federal government and the TPLF, rather than as an international war between an independent Tigray and Ethiopia.

This does not mean, however, that the relationship between Tigray and the Ethiopian federal government has been politically uncomplicated. The war produced enormous destruction, displacement, distrust, and allegations of grave abuses by multiple parties. A joint investigation by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the UN Human Rights Office concluded that all parties to the conflict committed violations of international human-rights and humanitarian law, some potentially amounting to war crimes or crimes against humanity. Consequently, saying that the federal government is Tigray's sovereign national authority should not be interpreted as saying that Tigrayans necessarily trust that authority or approve of its conduct. **Legal sovereignty and political legitimacy in the eyes of citizens are related but different questions.**

The role of Eritrea makes the situation even more complicated. Eritrean forces intervened in the Tigray war alongside Ethiopian federal forces. Human Rights Watch documented serious abuses by Eritrean forces, including killings, sexual violence, forced disappearances, pillage, and attacks on refugee camps. The British government's 2024 country information assessment likewise reported continuing allegations of serious human-rights violations in disputed areas involving Eritrean and Amhara forces. These experiences inevitably affected how many Tigrayans perceive the Eritrean government and, in particular, the political leadership associated with President Isaias Afwerki.

This is where an important distinction must be made. **Opposition to the Eritrean government is not necessarily opposition to Eritrean people, Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans, or Tigrinya culture**. A Tigrayan who regards the Eritrean government as an adversary is not necessarily rejecting a Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean as a cultural relative. Conversely, a Tigrinya-speaking

Eritrean who identifies strongly with Eritrean national sovereignty is not necessarily rejecting Tigrayans as relatives. The political disagreement concerns national identity, statehood, sovereignty, historical interpretation, and political power—not simply language.

The assertion that Tigrayans "consider themselves Ethiopians" therefore has substantial grounding, but it should be expressed with some qualification. **Tigrayan identity and Ethiopian identity are not mutually exclusive.** A Tigrayan may regard himself or herself simultaneously as Tigrayan and Ethiopian, just as an individual can possess a regional, ethnic, linguistic, and national identity at the same time. The Ethiopian federal system was constructed around precisely this kind of layered political identity. The Pretoria framework itself presupposed Tigray's continued position within Ethiopia while providing for restoration of federal institutions and Tigray's representation within them.

At the same time, the war generated substantial alienation from the federal political system. A 2024 UK government fact-finding report recorded assessments that many Tigrayans had lost confidence in the federal government and that the exclusion of Tigrayans from senior federal political and security institutions had deepened feelings of disenfranchisement. The report also records differing views about whether this alienation might encourage demands for greater autonomy or a separate political trajectory. These are reported assessments, however, rather than evidence that all Tigrayans have adopted one political position.

The relationship between Tigrayans and Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans is therefore perhaps best understood as **a relationship of cultural proximity combined with political divergence.** Families may exist on both sides of the border. People may speak essentially the same language or closely related varieties. Religious and cultural traditions overlap considerably. Historical memories intersect. Yet the modern political histories of Eritrea and Ethiopia produced different national institutions, different political narratives, and different conceptions of sovereignty.

This explains the apparent paradox: **people can be culturally close while politically incompatible.** History provides many examples of this phenomenon. Language does not determine citizenship, citizenship does not determine political ideology, and shared ancestry does not determine loyalty to a particular state. The fact that two populations can understand one another's language does not mean that they must support the same government, political organization, national project, or interpretation of history.

The question of Eritrean elites is more complicated still. It would be difficult to establish as a factual proposition that "most" Eritrean elites are from Tigray or that Eritrean elites as a group "love to see Tigrayans subjugated." Such statements encompass a very large and diverse population and attribute a common motive to it without sufficient evidence. What can be established is that the Eritrean government under Isaias Afwerki intervened militarily in Tigray and that Eritrean forces were accused and documented as committing serious abuses against Tigrayan civilians. The appropriate political question is therefore not whether an entire ethnic or regional group secretly desires Tigrayan subjugation, but **how particular Eritrean political actors understand Tigray, Ethiopia, Eritrean sovereignty, and the historical relationship between the two societies.**

There is also an important irony in the history of the region. The same language can function simultaneously as a bridge and as a boundary. **Tigrinya can connect people culturally while Eritrean and Ethiopian national identities separate them politically.** Indeed, the very existence of an Eritrean national identity demonstrates that linguistic similarity does not automatically erase national difference. Eritrea contains several ethnolinguistic communities, and Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans constitute only one component of Eritrean society. Likewise,

Tigrayans are one of Ethiopia's constituent peoples, with their own regional identity and political institutions.

For that reason, the final distinction in this argument is particularly important—but it should use the correct terminology. **Tigrayans are not "Tigre-speaking Eritreans."** Tigrayans predominantly speak Tigrinya, while Tigre is a separate language spoken principally in Eritrea and by some communities in eastern Sudan. Thus, the meaningful comparison is between **Tigrayans of Ethiopia and Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans**, not between Tigrayans and "Tigre-speaking Eritreans."

The deepest issue, therefore, is not whether Tigrayans and Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans are related. They clearly have profound historical, linguistic, cultural, and familial connections. The deeper question is whether such connections should determine political identity. For many Tigrayans, the answer appears to be no: **cultural kinship does not require political incorporation into Eritrea, nor does it require accepting representation by Eritrean political actors.** Similarly, for Eritrean nationalists, shared language with Tigrayans does not negate the existence of independent Eritrean national identity.

This distinction becomes particularly important after the Tigray war. Eritrean military involvement created a powerful layer of political memory that cannot simply be overcome by appeals to common language or historical kinship. Reports documenting abuses by Eritrean forces have contributed to profound mistrust, while the conflict itself also involved serious abuses by Ethiopian federal, Tigrayan, Amhara, and other forces. A serious analysis therefore has to resist the temptation to reduce the conflict to a simple story of one ethnic group against another.

The more historically useful formulation may therefore be this:

Tigrayans and Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans possess an extraordinary degree of cultural and historical affinity, but they have developed different modern national identities and political institutions. Tigrayans can regard themselves as Ethiopian while retaining a strong Tigrayan identity; Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans can regard themselves as Eritrean while maintaining cultural affinity with Tigrayans. Their shared language creates a relationship—it does not determine the political form that relationship must take.

This distinction also opens the door to a more constructive future. Recognition of separate national identities does not require cultural hostility. Tigrayans do not have to cease being Ethiopian in order to acknowledge their cultural relationship with Eritreans, and Eritreans do not have to abandon Eritrean national identity in order to acknowledge their historical relationship with Tigrayans. What could change is the political framework through which the relationship is managed: from attempts at political domination or military intervention toward **mutual recognition, non-interference, open borders where appropriate, family and cultural exchange, economic cooperation, and respect for each society's right to determine its own political future.**

The central lesson is therefore that **shared identity has layers.** Language can be shared without nationality being shared; history can be shared without political allegiance being shared; and cultural kinship can survive profound political disagreement. The challenge for both societies is not to deny the relationship but to distinguish cultural relationship from political sovereignty. That distinction may be essential if the peoples on both sides of the Eritrea–Tigray border are eventually to move beyond the accumulated grievances of war and build a relationship based not on imposed political unity, but on mutual recognition and voluntary coexistence.

One important correction to the original wording is therefore **“Tigrayans and Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans,” not “Tigrayans and Tigre-speaking Eritreans.”** That distinction matters because Tigre and Tigrinya are different languages and refer to different ethnolinguistic communities.

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September 30, 2026.