



**Blending trauma intervention principles with traditional and cultural healing practices: The HEAL Project (Healing Maryam Dengelat), Eastern Tigray, Ethiopia**



**Healing Maryam Dengelat**



**Implementor** – The HEAL Team (Healing Maryam Dengelat Project)

**Funding Partner** – Simon Fraser University via the HEAL Project organized by Professor Catherine D’Andrea and the Faculty of Environment

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## Background

The project entitled *Healing Maryam Dengelat (HEAL)* is part of a broader humanitarian program designed to assist in the re-establishment of cultural heritage infrastructure in Eastern Tigray, known as the **RELIGHT** project (*Restoring Religious Heritage in Eastern Tigray: Initial Steps*). This project was initiated by Professor Catherine D’Andrea of Simon Fraser University who has completed archaeological fieldwork for more than 20 years as director of the Eastern Tigray Archaeological Project (ETAP). Along with the RELIGHT project, Catherine has been working to raise funds to support HEAL, which recruited a trauma counselling team to assist one of our heritage site communities. The main goal of HEAL is to support the work of priests and elders of the Orthodox Church of Maryam Dengelat, community leaders and grassroots level government social workers in Eastern Tigray.

The HEAL project aims to assist rural communities of Maryam Dengelat who require trauma counselling services, following a massacre which took place there in November 2020. Our intention was not to replace the current counselling role of the church, but to support it. Our colleagues Brenton Diaz (Registered Social Worker and Trauma Therapist, Faculty member of the Universities of York and Lakehead, Canada) and Hagos Gebremariam (Faculty member, Department of Sociology, Adigrat University, Ethiopia) developed a program working closely with local leaders to ensure that it takes into account cultural and religious heritage in healing the trauma experienced by the Maryam Dengelat community. This trauma service was evaluated and modified by community leaders, elders, and priests and trauma professionals to ensure its maximum appropriateness and effectiveness so that it can be replicated in other areas of Tigray.



Maryam Dengelat community participating in a service commemorating the Dengelat massacre held on 9 January 2023.

## Introduction

HEAL Dengelat was a community mental health trauma training project that took place on October 7-9, 2023, in Adigrat, Tigray, northern Ethiopia. The 56 participants in the training consisted of community leaders, such as Orthodox priests, administrative leaders, social workers and teachers from Maryam Dengelat in Eastern Tigray. On November 20, 2020, a massacre occurred at a religious gathering at Maryam Dengelat. A total of 164 unarmed worshippers (including children) were killed by Eritrean armed forces as part of a larger conflict in the region. HEAL Dengelat trained community leaders, many of whom were present during the massacre, to help them to better support their people. We combined Tigrayan cultural/religious practices and structures with trauma theories and practices to create an informed response.

The project was initially conceived by Catherine D'Andrea, an archaeologist working out of Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. After completing research in Tigray for more than 20 years, she felt the need to offer local people some kind of trauma healing as she resumed her work after the war. After consulting with Joanne Hodges, a Canadian of Tigrayan descent living in Toronto, Canada, Catherine linked with her colleague Hagos Gebremariam, a faculty member of the Department of Sociology at Adigrat University, who did the bulk of the organizing work to design the approach of incorporating cultural/religious practices of the people along with the mental health material. The Faculty of the Environment at Simon Fraser University provided a fundraising platform for the project, and many generous donors contributed and to ensure its success. The training material was composed and delivered by Brenton Diaz, a Registered Social Worker, and Trauma Psychotherapist for Refugees and Newcomers based out of the Greater Toronto Area in Canada. He is also a part-time faculty member of Social Work at two Toronto-area universities. Hagos offered translation and other assistance in the training, and Brenton was also assisted in translation and teaching by Binyam Tesfalem of the Mekelle, Tigray-based organization Maedot, which offers assistance to expectant mothers in an internally displaced persons camp outside of Mekelle.

## The Maryam Dengelat Massacre

In a documentary entitled “Massacre in the mountains”, CNN presented a detailed report of the Maryam Dengelat massacre, which left 164 innocent civilians murdered during an annual St. Mary of Zion religious festival in November of 2020. The spokesperson of the US State Department at the time stated, “reports of a massacre at Maryam Dengelat are gravely concerning and demand an independent investigation.”

This description of the Dengelat Massacre was accurate. Dengelat is a small village near the town of Edga Hamus, situated between the much larger cities of Adigrat and Wuqro. Dengelat is noted for its centuries-old rock-hewn Mariam Dengelat Church. Based on claims by the Ethiopian government, this area was under the control and monitoring of the ENDF (Ethiopian National Defence Forces) starting from 26 November 2020. A few days later, on 30 November, the Eritrean Army arrived in Dengelat. Their arrival coincided with the celebration of the feast of St. Mary of Zion when the faithful were celebrating mass at the historical church in Dengelat. According to reports, many were killed in and around the church grounds. (*Tigrayan Massacres in Chronology and the Emerging Picture of Tigray Genocide – Tghat*).

Priests in Dengelat believe that their ancient and historical rock hewn church was deliberately attacked. The Addis Standard newspaper also supports their conclusion:

*The harrowing massacre by Eritrean forces at the Maryam Dengelat Orthodox Church in Eastern Tigray and the massacre of hundreds in the holy city of Axum including in the Saint Mary of Zion church were among other widely reported atrocities committed during the war that targeted Orthodox churches in the Tigray region (How the war in Tigray threatens to split ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Church - Addis Standard).*

International human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have written about the Maryam Dengelat Massacre. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet’s call for an investigation also follows separate reports by Amnesty

International and CNN in early March 2021, about massacres allegedly committed by Eritrean troops in the city of Axum and the ancient church of Maryam Dengelat.

A report of the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict in October 2023 described the Maryam Dengelat Massacre as follows:

*Towards the end of November 2020, just after the Federal Government announced it had captured the city of Mekelle, EDF forces [Eritrean Defence Forces] killed large numbers of Tigrayan civilians around Mariam Dengelat church, [Subha] Saesie woreda in Eastern Zone. The area was busier than usual as many civilians had fled the fighting in nearby Edaga Hamus, while others had travelled to the area to mark the feast of St. Mary of Zion, which falls on 30 November. On the morning of 30 November, EDF soldiers approached the town and opened fire. They then went house to house, pulling out civilians, mainly men and boys, and shooting them. One interviewee recalled how EDF soldiers came to her house: “We told them, ‘All of us are civilians. Some are even university students.’ They told us they didn’t care. They said they had come from Eritrea and would kill every male over five years old. Then they separated the men and women, and ordered the women to tie the hands of the men behind their backs... They began beating us using sticks and guns. We were crying. Finally, we had to tie all the men.”*

*The soldiers then took the six men, including her 16-year-old son from the house and led them to a nearby river where they shot them. The interviewee said she heard one of the soldiers say, “Don’t waste your bullets on the women, just shoot the men.” After the killing, EDF soldiers threw the bodies in the river. Other interviewees also witnessed EDF soldiers coming and killing relatives and friends. Three witnessed the killing of seven people – four men, one woman, and two girls – in one house. Another interviewee said that EDF soldiers took away seven males, two of them her underage sons, from her house and executed them. She also saw EDF soldiers take away young men from other houses. The killings continued the next day, while EDF soldiers proceeded to loot homes and vehicles in the area.*

*EDF soldiers prevented people from burying the dead for three days. When they were permitted to do so, they were not allowed to perform individual burials; most were buried in mass graves. Sources told the Commission that up to 164 people were killed that day. A man who buried some*

*of the dead said he buried 86 people. The Commission has the names of 23 civilians, men, women, and children who were killed during the attack: 17 of these names appear on a list of 65 victims shared with the Commission by Tigrayan civil society groups. The Commission has the names and/or nom de guerre of three EDF soldiers who were present in Maryam Dengelat that day, including the commander in charge.*

The residents of Maryam Dengelat have been highly traumatized by the massacre. The burials of their murdered loved ones are still present near their homes and in nearby fields where residents see them regularly. They have been instructed to delay burials of the dead until authorities can gather more evidence of the massacre. The pain and horror of the massacre continues to impact the people of Dengelat on a daily basis.

It was following the massacre that the HEALproject was initiated by Catherine to support the Dengelat community by inviting a team of experts including Joanne Hodges, Brenton and Hagos to work together to develop training in trauma healing.

## **Preliminary Activities**

The Tigray war ended with the signing of a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) between Ethiopia and Tigray, in Pretoria in January 2023. From this point onward, the HEAL team began preparing the project in earnest through discussions regarding the mode and modalities of the training and its expected positive impact on the community. Catherine D’Andrea arrived in Tigray in May 2023 for the first time since the war had ended and visited Maryam Dengelat with Hagos Gebremariam. After appreciating the magnitude of the trauma and the scale of death in the village, Catherine and Hagos continued discussions with Brenton Diaz. In addition, consultations within the local community, religious leaders, and local administration and the district also took place. The team decided to initiate a new approach of trauma healing training that can be blended with indigenous trauma healing practices, acknowledging that the priests of the village must be at the heart of any solution, and that they should be trained along with community leaders and social workers in the district.



## 1. Screening

After further discussion among the team members and the community, it was decided that all priests, community representatives, community leaders and social workers in the district should be a part of the training, and a screening process was conducted through active community participation.

## 2. Themes explored in HEAL Dengelat

The training of HEAL Dengelat consisted of several trauma counselling topics that were offered as forms of North American knowledge that were then contextualized to the rural Tigrayan context:

- Definition of trauma
- Trauma symptoms
- Etiology of trauma
- Broad approaches to trauma counselling
- Specific trauma counselling skills

**The definition of trauma** included an exploration of the DSM-5 PTSD Criterion A (Fisher 2009), as well as some broader ideas on the kinds of experiences that people have which are often called “trauma” in colloquial speech. We also explored notions of collective trauma, which was a topic that participants noted, and it resonated with their experience of the massacre and the overall war/genocide in Tigray.

The **trauma symptoms** discussion followed the symptoms noted in the DSM-5 for PTSD, as well as some common clinically presented symptoms, as articulated by Fisher (2009). We discussed the presentation of symptoms in detail, while striving to communicate with participants using non-technical language.

For discussing the **etiology of trauma**, we investigated the neurobiology of trauma, looking at the role of the brain structures such as the limbic system and frontal cortex. We discussed how these brain structures operate in the moment of the initial trauma, as well as subsequent triggering,

all delivered in a manner to give participants a broad idea of these processes and their ramifications for intervening in trauma counselling.

Next, we explored **general principles of trauma counselling**, otherwise known as trauma-informed values that leaders can apply to their work with individuals and families. We examined perspectives which serve to reduce the stigma of Gender Based Violence and Substance Abuse, as these are key issues that are further complicated by historical stigma directed towards people with these experiences. In Brenton's perspective, discussing these principles of trauma-informed care led to important realizations among the attendees on how to best care for traumatized people in their community.



HEAL training sessions held at the Adigrat Vision centre.

The training also offered specific **trauma counselling skills**, which primarily drew from portable and discrete grounding techniques from interventions such as Mindfulness Based Skills Reduction, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Dialectical Behavioural Therapy. The skills that were chosen to be shared were ones that were selected for their effectiveness, ease of utility, and those that were deemed to be the most culturally appropriate to implement in the rural Tigrayan context.

### 3. Communal healing

During HEAL sessions, time was devoted to considering with the community leaders how the people of Tigray work to grieve and heal from trauma on a communal level. The consensus during the training was that the people of Tigray, including Maryam Dengelat, already have strong structures in place to assist with supporting community members through the trauma of the war. The participants noted that each priest is responsible to visit a set number of families, providing

leadership, encouragement, care, and counselling to each family, and that this tradition is a time-honored one which promotes community cohesiveness. As such, the priests are uniquely able to deliver regular, caring and culturally appropriate support to the families in the community. They greatly appreciated the opportunity to learn some trauma counselling principles which would greatly assist them to help people work through the trauma of the massacre and genocide.

The community of Maryam Dengelat was also planning events to mark the third anniversary of the massacre which were planned to take place several weeks after the training, with the priests fully involved in the commemoration. The commemoration would consist of religious services and expressions of mourning. The priests noted that their increased knowledge of trauma, received in HEAL training, would help them to better design a memorial that is trauma-informed and contextually appropriate to their community.

It was also disclosed at the HEAL training that the people of Tigray would soon be officially informed by government sources which soldiers of the Tigray Defense Force have perished in the conflict. When a name is disclosed to a family, it is usual for other family and community members to gather around the family to mourn, starting from the early morning onward. Key leaders would be selected to disclose the news to the family. After this period of mourning, a mass gathering of people from the community will take place in memory of all fallen soldiers. The gathering may occur in a large open area, such as a stadium or large field, and religious ceremonies, led by the priests, are offered in the memory of the lost soldiers. These various structures point to the highly organized ways that the people of Tigray collectively mourn, helping them to mitigate the impact of collective trauma, and highlighting again the important roles the priests take to offer leadership to the people during their times of grief and trauma.



HEAL training sessions at Adigrat Vision.

## Understanding cultural and traditional healing practices

As stated above, the community has its own cultural and traditional trauma healing practices. These are mainly organized by priests and religious leaders, whom the community deeply respects. During the training, participants were asked to articulate their cultural trauma healing practices, and these were discussed congruently with scientific trauma healing principles, enabling the integration of both practices so as to increase the impact of the training to benefit the village community.

While providing examples for the community we tried to explain the methods of healing from trauma using their own community resources such as Mariam Dengelat Church and other sacred locations, such as Holy-water sites. When a person is in stress or anxiety, he or she can seek relief by going to Mariam Dengelat Church or other sacred places. In such locations, community members can access healing sources such as fresh air, listening to the relaxing sound of wind chimes on the roof of the church, taking in the beautiful views from the top of the church, using holy water to wash or drink, praying and communicating with God, and having privacy to communicate with oneself, in addition to other benefits. These were a few examples mentioned by a participant regarding methods of relieving stress or trauma. The feedback from the community and religious leaders was supportive, and they confirmed that they will advise the community to use such techniques, in addition to their religious services and guidance provided by hopeful words from the Bible and other religious practices.

The participants were also informed about the value of seeking help and support from close family, friends and priests during times of distress. One participant told us that at one time he received a call from Saudi Arabia that his son was arrested and that he should pay 26 thousand birr to have him released. The father had no money. He tried to ask people around him, but no one had the funds to help him. The only solution was selling his ox, but he only could raise 13 thousand birr which was not enough for his son to be released from prison. He did not give up: he went to governmental banks to get a loan and he was able to secure the rest of the money. Unfortunately, he lost some of the money, and he became hopeless once again. He then began a plan to commit suicide. His old friend noticed his emotional state and asked him what has happened. The father tried to deny at first, but his friend asked him in a calm and reassuring way, so he told him about the stress and hopelessness, and his plan for suicide. His friend knew that he liked to drink 'siwa'

(a traditional alcoholic drink in Tigray) and took the distraught father to a place to drink it. The father enjoyed this, but the friend worried that the father might run away from him (he would not be able to catch him because of a disability), so he decided to call his elder brother to help. His brother (who was also a friend of the father) came, and he asked him what happened. He was told everything, and he helped by providing some money and offered his ox to assist the father to complete farming tasks. The father sent the money to his son to be released from the prison and he was relieved from his stress. He was able to progress with his life: his wife also give birth to 2 children after this situation, and now he is in a good state of mind. The man says that if my friend had not helped me, I am sure I would have committed suicide and many thanks to him for saving my life. This is a good example of the importance of having close supportive ones around us during times of distress.

## How are trauma healing principles and traditional healing processes blended?

Brenton Diaz and Hagos Gebremariam discussed the details of integrating scientific trauma healing principles and traditional healing practices. As a result, the training was given with a mixed approach of presenting both principles with the help of Binyam Tesalem (a psychiatric worker from Mekelle) who helped translating the training to the trainees and to Brenton. The priests used ample time to explain indigenous practices of trauma healing to the trainers and forwarded their recommendations on how it could be integrated with scientific principles of trauma healing. With this approach, priests felt encouraged about their potential of healing people with the knowledge they have gained, given the status they have in their community. More details of the blending is included in the collective healing part of this report.



The third year memorial service of the massacre held at Maryam Dengelat Church on 1 December 2023

## Household and community levels

Once the religious leaders received the training, we agreed that they were to return to implement household level healing processes in the village. Each priest is assigned to be a Godfather for approximately 30 households, which they visit at least once per month. The community has deep respect for their Godfather priest from whom they receive religious education and advice on other family matters during the monthly visit. It was agreed in the training that priests should make frequent visits to the households and conduct household level trauma healing interventions. If there is serious need at the individual level, they agreed to arrange a one-to-one healing discussion in their church in a confidential manner. They will continue this process of family level trauma healing process with all of their assigned households.



Household healing sessions given by priests trained by the HEAL team, November 2023

Once religious leaders confirmed that all households and individuals received this counseling in their homes, they met and discussed challenges and opportunities they faced. They also shared experiences of their discussions with household members under their religious supervision. Learning from each other and asking for further support from the HEAL team, they arranged regular visits to their households for almost two months. High priority was given to households who lost loved ones during the massacre. Since completion of the HEAL training, Hagos Gebremariam has been fully engaged with priests making frequent visits to the village. Priests were also communicating through mobile phones if they have questions. Hagos is also directly communicating with Brenton Diaz through the internet if advice is needed on sensitive counseling points in the village.

After the individual and household level counseling sessions were completed and deemed to have been successful both by the trained priests and the HEAL team, they were followed by a community level collective healing event scheduled on 30 November and 1 December 2023, in the church of Maryam Dengelat, where many people attended the St. Mary of Zion annual religious festival. The priests were expecting up to 5000 people to attend the festival and were ready to conduct collective healing blending religious and cultural practices. During the event, the priests were divided into four groups to conduct this collective healing:

- A. Inside church collective healing team: This team blended the trauma healing principles with their overnight mass and praying services inside the church, which was filled to capacity.



Inside church religious services embedded with trauma healing teachings.

- B. Outside church collective healing team: As the church could not accommodate all participants, this team preached the Gospel integrated with trauma healing principles.



Religious services held outside the church informed by trauma healing principles.

- C. Holy water collective healing team: Many people participated in holy water rituals which were integrated with trauma healing principles.



Ritual practices at holy water sites integrated with trauma healing principles.

D. Church dinner collective healing team: A large dinner was held for people who joined the St. Mary of Zion festival. The people of Dengelat also participated in this holy dinner in the church of Maryam Dengelat. These represented two great opportunities to have community members together for another religious purpose and proceed with trauma healing principles. When the priests blessed the food and drinks, they used the Holy Bible and included a healing blessing before and after the meal.



Church dinner held at the St. Mary of Zion festival at Maryam Dengelat Church, November 2023

## Collaborating with practitioners

The collaboration among trained priests and community leaders and the HEAL team created an environment conducive for further expansion of the blended traditional and scientific trauma healing approaches. The HEAL team was actively engaged through Hagos Gebremariam who was on the ground and in constant contact with the community. Catherine D'Andrea continues to connect with both Brenton Diaz and Hagos to regularly communicate on ways to improve the HEAL project. In addition, HEAL team member Joanne Hodges, was also consulted on how the HEAL project could have a positive impact on the lives of Maryam Dengelat community members.



## Evaluating effectiveness

Monitoring and evaluation of the HEAL project is important because it is a new approach that is being pitched as a pilot project for possible expansion to other traumatized communities in Tigray. Therefore, regular follow up and evaluation has been implemented at the early stages of the project. The results are promising, indicating that the goals of the HEAL project are being achieved. As the newly trained priests and community leaders need continuous support and evaluation of their new role to manage their community trauma healing, the priests are taking it upon themselves to arrange immediate learning meetings and asking questions when they face challenges in their work.

## Assessing the Impact of the Training

To measure the success of the project, the HEAL Dengelat team has been largely relying on qualitative reports from Hagos Gebremariam, who is not only a speaker of Tigrinya and able to converse with community members in their mother tongue but is also from Dengelat and an eyewitness to the massacre. During the training, presenters frequently sought feedback from participants to gauge how the training was going, and feedback from the participants was overwhelmingly positive. The trainees noted how helpful it was to learn about trauma symptoms, explaining that they could personally relate to the list of symptoms, and they also spoke about how their perspectives changed in such areas as the stigmas on gender-based violence and addiction. After the completion of HEAL training, Hagos has been able to secure follow up quantitative reports from the priests as to how the training has positively affected their work with the community while supporting them in the acute mourning period that occurred in Tigray immediately after the training took place. Hagos continues to collect quantitative data and is a witness to how the priests have been able to apply some of the trauma counselling principles in the midst of their work supporting the local people. It is our conviction that this strategy of augmenting and equipping the traditional leadership already in place in rural communities in Tigray, usually led by Orthodox priests, to better address trauma experiences, is a highly effective one that combines best practices of community-led projects with trauma counselling knowledge.

Some of the direct testimony presented by the priests after the training was completed is summarized below.

### 1. Priest Abreha Gebru

Priest Abreha Gebru lost his 44-year-old son (Priest Hiwot Abreha), three grandsons (two are Priest Hiwot Abreha's sons -Amanuel 19 years old and Filmon 13 years old) and Daniel (20 years old) in the Maryam Dengelat massacre. Priest Abreha commented on the training:

*“It is very interesting training. We were overwhelmed by pity and tragedy. But today is like an awakening for us and we are really happy. We look like bridegrooms, not the ones who suffered a great deal. All the training, the time, the education, everything, was amazing. Our hearts which were broken and in pain have experienced relief and happiness. I have lost my priest son and three grandsons:four in total. When I thought of this loss, I walked like someone who can't walk. Those sad memories came to my mind even while sleeping, and I was always confused. But today I felt happy that for a short time I forgot that I have lost someone. This education and your contribution to help our people who are in pain made us happy. We have seen different foreigners coming but no one was able to do the things you did for us a traumatized community. You brought us a good foreigner and good workers who made us feel happy and relieved. May God bless you and your children. We religious leaders will teach about the massacre and advise the community to find a path to healing and to respect the church as it too was part of the massacre. They should also pray and serve the church not just being heartbroken and sad.”*



## 2. Priest Hadush Berhane

*“The training is very helpful. For example, my harvested crops were burned by Eritrean troops and a massacre happened in the field. Several children and elders with animals from one house were killed. It was an unforgettable massacre. It was something I have never seen or heard of in my life. I am 60 years old, and I was a child in the Haile Selassie regime, but I have never seen such actions. It was a terrible deed by the government on Mariam Dengelat. But now, with this training which heals the mind, we are experiencing some relief, and we are healing ourselves and our minds. But to other countries or you, we ask if you could come to the villages and provide this training to everyone. And it should be continuing. Because the people are not comfortable with the dead bodies in the middle of cultivating land, not yet properly buried in the church cemetery. The dead bodies are still visible around the river and scattered on the ground. This training should be continued so that we can return to our normal lives. Thank you!”*



## 3. Alganesh Teklay (Representative of the Women of Maryam Dengelat)

*“The mind [trauma] healing training given to us was very good and it has produced positive changes for us. We were really happy that the training included representatives from all members of the community, such as religious leaders, local community leaders, and elders but it also included people in the village. However, over 160 people from one village in our area are still displaced, living around a river, bushes and in the forest. We thank you so much for the training given to us but the displaced people who are living in the forest need to be able to return to their homes and their church. They include children, men, women, priests and community service*

workers who are still living in the forest where their family members were killed. They need to heal their mind.”



#### 4. Priest Alem Beyene

*“It is [the training] according to our culture because as we know every human being faces both problems and happiness. For both problems and happiness, you need someone to discuss and talk with. You need to talk with your people. The massacre was terrible because within a few minutes we lost many children, priests, elderly community leaders, elderly blind people, mothers separated from their children and killed. It was really unforgettable. It is so hard to find relief, but we have a culture, when someone faces problems, especially death, the elderly fathers go and console them, advise them and teach them based on writings in the Bible. They teach them by providing an example of what happened in past times to give them hope that if they are strong, everything passes. Everyone has faced problems and grief, but it all passed and life continued. This is how our fathers [priests] console their people. That’s our culture. This is because elderly people and religious leaders are the most respected figures in the community, and we have been experiencing this and we should keep this great culture. When there are challenges our own people will help us. We will support our people and this training has been useful and related to our culture. We have learned a lot from the training, and we will help the people. Thank you.”*



## 5. Priest Weldegebreal Kahsay

*“It has been a very interesting training. You cannot train someone more than this. And if we do not do this practically, what else could we do? We can teach our sons and daughters at home. We can advise our people how to heal themselves and their families and their community, and eventually we will all return to our normal way of life. With your support we will do that, and we will be successful.”*



## 6. Priest Kahsu Gebrehiwot

*“The Bible says, “if there is love, it cleans out our sins.” As stated in Mathew Chapter 7: “Peter asked Jesus Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? And Jesus replied to you should be forgiven for all your lifetime.” A person should forgive, especially we the priests. We must be an example for everyone. As Jesus asked Peter: “Do you love me? And Peter replied yes. And Jesus said if you love me, protect my sheep and goats.” The sheep are the believers and goats are the youth and children. So, we have*

*an important responsibility. In my opinion these troubles came because of senior religious leaders from the top leaders of the church to the priests. As you remember at the beginning of the war, the Ethiopian Bishops were calling us devils and they blessed the soldiers who were sent to kill us. This is why I am saying the problem started from senior religious leaders. Here in our area, we could change everything if we had done enough. If a priest is right, everything becomes right. As our Bible says, "In difficult times be patient, be happy with hope and pray constantly." So, if troubles come, we need to pray for the return of better days. As we have passed three difficult years with prayers and patience, now we are able to see a little light of peace. We are not angels; we are people who make mistakes, but it should be solved immediately. We cannot solve our believers' problems without solving our own problems. If you do things politely and spiritually you can solve every problem, you face. The lesson your brother gave us travelling the whole way from your country [Canada] coming here to us makes us to see you like Tigrayan saints such as Abune Aregawi, Abune Tsahima and Aba Gerima. You should continue doing this training. We learned like a word from the Bible today. Our Bible also says the same. The one who is humble and strong until the end will survive. We should be strong. This training will help us to solve our problems and be an example to our people so they will accept us. If we didn't do what is expected from us, tomorrow the people will judge us. We must learn from our past mistakes, if not, we will not continue like a community. And we should read the Bible as it is written in Tigrigna. With the training given to us today we will try to help our community. Finally, our brother [Brenton Diaz] who gave us this training we thank him a lot, as he came safe from his country to us. May God return him back with safety too. God bless him."*



## **Collective Trauma Healing Intervention During an Event to Mark the Third Anniversary of the Dengelat Massacre**

Collective trauma healing is a critical aspect of addressing the emotional and psychological scars of communities that have experienced large-scale traumatic events like the Maryam Dengelat

massacre. Collective trauma healing in this context refers to the process of healing and recovery of the people of Dengelat who experienced shared traumatic events during the massacre of November 2020. This type of healing recognizes that trauma is not just an individual experience, but also a collective one, and this healing process involves the entire community. The process mainly involves religious and community leaders to address the trauma experienced by the entire community as a result of the massacre during the Tigray war.

For this community-based trauma healing project for the victims of Maryam Dengelat massacre, it was essential to incorporate indigenous trauma healing practices that are specific to the cultural and historical experiences of the Tigrayan people. It is known that indigenous trauma healing practices are rooted in traditional knowledge and wisdom of a particular community, and they play a crucial role in addressing the psychological and emotional impacts of traumatic events. By embedding these practices into scientific trauma healing initiatives, it becomes possible to create a more holistic and culturally sensitive approach to addressing the needs of the Maryam Dengelat community who are still experiencing the aftereffects of the trauma due to the massacre.



Planning the collective trauma healing at Maryam Dengelat

## Key Components of the Collective Trauma Healing Program in Maryam Dengelat Church

### 1. Acknowledgment of the trauma within the community

The first step in collective trauma healing is acknowledging and validating the trauma experienced by the community. The impact of the trauma on the community's mental,

emotional, and spiritual well-being was assessed and recognized through direct observation and discussion with the priests and victims.

## **2. Designing community-based trauma healing interventions**

A community-based intervention was established as a project that includes professionals from Canada and Ethiopia aimed at providing training for all priests and community leaders of Maryam Dengelat that can help to apply the initiative at a household level intervention by the trained priests.

## **3. Faith and spirituality**

Faith and spirituality play a significant role in collective trauma healing. The Orthodox priests of Maryam Dengelat have provided a sense of hope and comfort to their community to help them cope with their trauma.

## **4. Community empowerment and capacity building**

Empowering community members and building their capacity to address their trauma was accomplished through an effective strategy in collective trauma healing during the initial training provided to the priests. This enabled community members to take control of their healing and recovery.

## **5. Suitability of the project and the intervention**

As noted during a comprehensive follow up after the training, the priests were observed to integrate the trauma healing interventions with their spiritual and religious teachings, depending on the needs of the people. This was manifested in both individual, household (family) and community level interventions in Maryam Dengelat.



## Major Interventions Conducted in the Collective Healing of Maryam Dengelat Community Members

The Tigrayan people have a rich cultural heritage that includes traditional healing methods deeply rooted in their history and belief systems. After experiencing the trauma of a massacre in Maryam Dengelat, these traditional healing practices were embedded with modern trauma healing principles to provide a more holistic support for the affected individuals and communities.

A traditional healing practice that was integrated into trauma healing principles is the use of indigenous rituals and ceremonies. These rituals involve communal gatherings, prayers, and symbolic actions that helped individuals process their emotions and experiences within a supportive community setting during the St. Mary of Zion annual festival held in 2023. By incorporating these rituals into trauma healing principles, the community created spaces for collective mourning through a candlelight evening remembrance and healing.



Candlelight evening of remembrance and healing during the St. Mary of Zion celebrations on 30 November and 1 December 2023

Another important aspect of traditional healing in the St. Mary of Zion celebration was engaging elders and spiritual leaders to lead the collective healing process. These individuals hold

significant wisdom and authority within the community and provided guidance, counseling, and spiritual support to those who have been impacted by the trauma of the massacre. Their involvement in the trauma healing initiatives offered cultural continuity and brought a sense of connection to ancestral knowledge, which is essential for the community.



Priests and elders leading the collective healing process.

Storytelling and oral traditions are fundamental to the community's culture and were used as powerful tools for processing trauma as per the healing initiative by the HEAL project. Through storytelling, individuals shared their experiences, expressed their emotions, and made sense of what has happened in a culturally relevant manner in front of the community. This form of narrative therapy aligns with the Tigrayan tradition of passing down knowledge through oral means and fosters resilience within the community.



Narrative therapy used in collective healing.

Lastly, community solidarity and mutual support are central to traditional Tigrayan values. In the aftermath of a massacre, fostering social cohesion and collective resilience through communal activities such as religious songs, collective prayers and shared meals were part of the healing and recovery in Dengelat. These practices reinforce a sense of belonging and interconnectedness among survivors while honoring their cultural heritage as a community. Overall, embedding traditional healing practices in trauma healing principles experienced by the Maryam Dengelat community after three years of the massacre acknowledges the importance of cultural context, spirituality, and community dynamics in addressing collective trauma healing through the involvement of religious leaders.

## **The Graves in the Fields and Near Houses: The Community's Concerns**

A serious and unresolved issue in Denglat are the shallow graves next to homes in the neighborhood. The graves have been left for specialists to document further evidence of the massacre. These have had several detrimental effects on both the community and individual victims. These effects have included social and psychological impacts and have and justice implications.

**Psychological Impact:** The relatives and friends of the victims of the Maryam Dengelat massacre continue to suffer greatly by the proximity of massacre sites to residential areas. Survivors have higher degrees of trauma, anxiety, and despair because of the ongoing reminder of the horrors carried out during the massacre. Alem Teka gave the following explanation: "I cry almost every day when I see the grave of my beloved daughter next door. I always remember the act of the killing." Alem lost her teenage girl who was buried nearby. The presence of such graves may also hinder the process of healing, as they are a constant reminder of the massacre and loss of loved ones in the community.

**Social Impact:** The community's social cohesion is being strained by the location of massacre graves close to homes. Alganesh, who lost her spouse and children, stated that those who require our attention should alter their route to avoid the graves. This has made it more difficult for the survivors and their families to reintegrate into society and result in further stigmatization

and prejudice against them. According to Ato Berhane Tesfa, “there are no words to say about the graves next to my house,” which contributes to social isolation and a breakdown in communal cohesion. Living near such sites is also equated with fear and trauma. The people of Maryam Dengelat are always requesting that the graves be moved to the church, in accordance with Christian teaching. According to Ato Semere Abay, who lost his older brother who is buried in the field behind their home, having burials of the massacre in fields signifies that the victims are not buried in sacred ground, and it is considered to be a form of punishment which they do not deserve.

**Justice implications:** The absence of justice afforded to the community of Dengelat is highlighted by the proximity of graves to residential homes. The lack of legal action on this issue has added to the people’s perception that justice has not taken place. Priest Abreha Gebru posed the question, “If there is no justice for us from the international community and justice organizations, then why have the graves remained here in fields and near our houses for the past three years?” Dengelat residents are still requesting justice and authorization from the authorities to relocate graves to the church. However, they have been told to keep the burials as they are until they are investigated properly. Unfortunately, the existence of mass graves close to residential areas has detrimental effects on the survivors, their family, and the community, particularly in the form of social and psychological pressures.

## **Measuring and Evaluating the Impact of the HEAL Intervention as a Collective Healing**

The effectiveness of the HEAL trauma healing training given to the religious and community leaders of Maryam Dengelat involved a comprehensive approach that considered various factors. As traditional trauma healing practices are deeply rooted in the cultural and religious beliefs of the community, their effectiveness can be assessed through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The following are key considerations of measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of the HEAL training.

**Cultural relevance:** The evaluation will consider the cultural relevance of trauma healing practices. This involves assessing whether the training aligns with cultural norms, values, and

belief systems of the community. It is important to determine if the practices are accepted and respected within the community, as this can impact their effectiveness.

**Community engagement:** The level of community engagement with the trained religious leaders and their application of the traditional trauma healing practices was crucial. The HEAL project assessed how well the religious leaders are able to integrate the training into their roles within the community and how open the community members were to these practices. This openness to trauma healing practices and ideas was mainly evaluated in a qualitative manner during the first training conducted by Brenton Diaz in his interaction with the priests and community members.

**Psychosocial impact:** The evaluation of the psychosocial impact of the traditional trauma healing practices on individuals who have experienced trauma in Maryam Dengelat will involve conducting interviews, surveys and focus groups to understand changes in mental well-being, coping mechanisms, and social support networks. There will also be a continued assessment of the experience of trauma symptoms that community members might be experiencing as a result of the trauma, which will have hopefully been mitigated by the HEAL Project's intervention. The HEAL team will conduct studies into the long-term impact of this psychological impact in due time in collaboration with religious leaders.

**Behavioral changes:** Observing and documenting behavioral changes among community members who have participated in the traditional trauma healing practices is being considered by the HEAL team. This includes changes in attitudes towards trauma survivors, increased support for mental health initiatives, or a reduction in stigmatization of trauma-related issues.

**Long-term sustainability:** Assessing the long-term sustainability of the training is important for the HEAL Project. This involves examining whether the religious leaders continue to apply the traditional trauma healing practices over time and if there are mechanisms in place to ensure continuity beyond the initial training period and the collective healing process.

In conclusion, evaluating the effectiveness of this traditional trauma healing practices training given to religious leaders in post-war communities in Tigray requires a holistic approach that considers cultural relevance, community engagement, psychosocial impact, behavioral

changes, and long-term sustainability. Our team members have been continuously and regularly visiting Maryam Dengelat for such purposes and provide support in this matter.

Let us conclude this report with Priest Hadush Berhane's words who explained about peace and reconciliation along with the training he received.

*"I am a community member of my village and I also have a religious function. I am a priest, and the Holy Bible says "forgive those who have grudges and problems with us. Forgive those who have harmed us and victims of wrongdoings should forgive and make peace. If someone has a grudge in his mind it can lead to bad intentions, and he could be tempted to engage in bad actions. So, we should solve the problems between the people in order to maintain a peaceful life. Peace is the most important thing in our lives. If we had peace in Tigray, we wouldn't be in this situation. We wouldn't be hungry and mourning the death of innocent people. The grudges and bad intentions led us to lose people and animals, crops, and displacement from our homes. But now with the training and education that we received, which was related to religious education from the Bible and Christ, we will work to help our people. We have learned many lessons. We first must make peace with those who have brought us problems. If we want to put our people on the right way, we need to be on the right track ourselves. Are we on the right way? This question is so important. So, this training should continue by government or humanitarian organizations to help the people like us who are in grief and mourning. Thank you."*

## **Closing Remarks of the Training and Collective Healing**

### **Priest Kahsu Gebrehiwot, Head of the Woreda Diocese**

*First of all we have to be grateful to God because nothing can be achieved without the will of God. And we are grateful to God for your presence here.*

*Our Brothers and sisters,*

*For the last three years we haven't slept, because of the difficult times we experienced. We as spiritual leaders have been trying to help our people with prayers and advice so they can have hope to get them through the dark times. And your being here my brothers and sisters has helped us a lot. Your education [the trauma healing training] like the teachings of the Holy Bible has been very helpful in soothing our pain and healing our wounds. We call our brothers who passed in Maryam Dengelat, Martyrs. The Bible says, "Those who die on the way of God are Martyrs." We have lost 24 of our Sunday school children and*

*6 of our religious leaders in addition to our community members. In total, 164 innocent people were killed by “Sha’ebya” (Eritrean Army) here at Maryam Dengelat. They committed no wrong and were devout followers through prayer and fasting. And today you are giving us an important responsibility to advise and teach our people to not hold grudges and bring them back on the right track and we should do this practically. Everyone here who received training should teach our community members whenever possible. We as priests we can teach them during mass or prayers because our people are believers who accept their fathers’ advice, and God will help us too. God is with us because he sent us these people from far, far away [Canada] to teach us and heal our spirits. And for this we should thank you our brother Hagos. That is because we have a brother who thinks responsibility for his people and his community. We did not expect that the guests who are here giving us this interesting training were coming. We still face many problems and difficulties. We have a lot of people who remain displaced from their homes. They are still without food, shelter, and clothing. We ask you to support us in every power you can to identify the responsible body and who can help these people. After the training you have given us today, with the hand of God we will teach and advise our community to heal their mind. Finally, our brother [Brenton Diaz] and sister [Catherine D’Andrea] who came safely from their country, may the almighty God return them safely back home. Thank you for the respect you gave us. Thank you!*



**Berhane Abay, Woreda Sibuha Sa'esie Administrator**

*“First of all, I want to thank the one who organised this training, Catherine D’Andrea and her team. I want to thank you very much and I want to thank the participants of the training for your patience. This program should not stop here. It should continue. We must clear and heal our minds. If we don’t do this, no change will come. We must heal and continue to move forward. We should not think back about the things happened; we should think of our future. The lessons we have learned here should be shared with the community and our families. Now we are facing different problems such as drought, trauma and so on. In order to solve these problems, we first need to heal our mind. For that we need these experts who can train us to overcome our problems. Those problems are being experienced by every member of our community, including students, priests, farmers, civil servants. etc. So, we ask you to give [expand] this training to everyone who is in need of mental healing as much as possible. Thank you! “*





## **Professor Catherine D'Andrea**

*It is great to see you all here. You have suffered a lot, and some difficulties still lie ahead. You now have the strength of religion which is number one supported by the strength of trauma healing principles. Together it is a powerful combination and I have a lot of hope that you will help your community to heal, and I pray for you.*



## **Brenton Diaz**

*My name is Brent Diaz, and I am a trauma therapist from the Toronto area of Canada. I also teach at couple of universities in that region in the school of social work. I first heard about the massacre and genocide that happened in Tigray through social media, and I became concerned very quickly about it. As a trauma therapist for refugees and newcomers around the world to come to Canada I worked with other people in other places that experience genocide, and my heart always breaks for people like this. Since I heard about this, it turned out that a friend of mine in Ontario who has family here in Tigray and she told me much more about what happened here. I was just again very heartbroken. So, with the work I do, I found that it was*

*really important for me to figure out a way to help. Eventually through different contacts that I made online, especially during the time of the war when there is no contact for Tigray with the rest of the world, I was able to get connected with various groups that are doing work to support people. Eventually I got linked up with Catherine D'Andrea who is an archaeologist at Simon Fraser University in Canada. She has already done work in this area for many years. She told me about the idea that she wanted to bring some trauma healing services to offer to the people while she resumes her archaeological work here. So, she invited me to come and that is why I am here.*

*It has been a profound and moving experience. I know I have been interviewing right now but it's hard to me to put the words that actually what it's been like. The people have been so generous, they have been sharing, they have been so open and so vulnerable, so honest and the fact they would share with someone like me who they just met all of their pain and trauma is truly something that I will always take with me and that I will always appreciate.*

*The unique about this project is that through the design of the person in the ground Hagos who is a community member and university professor himself. He thought it was best to unite the religious and spiritual aspect of the Tigrayan culture as well as the trauma knowledge and information that I can provide through my training. And we thought it the best way to do it is through a model of culturally relevant sharing. The people of Tigray are deeply spiritual, and the church and the priests occupy central place in their lives. So, to try to conduct some of the trauma healing training mechanism without regarding that is a mistake, especially with Maryam Dengelat where is a specific massacre that occurred during the war and these are people who are attending the training, so we have here the priests, as well as people like social workers like me, teachers and other officials. Coming together, to unite together to discuss healing to unite the traditional healing, religion spirituality with the scientific base and the counseling and therapy aspect of the trauma that I am able to bring. I found that bringing these together creates incredible opportunities for collaboration and for designing new services, new approaches to deal with the tragedies the people of Maryam Dengelat are facing. It has been again truly amazing and truly remarkable, and I am really happy to be part of a project that is so responsible in providing culturally appropriate services for people and really regarding and taking spirituality seriously. You know it is a serious part of their lives and I think that again would have been a deep mistake for us to try something without regarding that. So that makes it special. I had the opportunity to go to Maryam Dengelat myself. It is an incredibly beautiful place, deeply significant not only archaeologically and historically but also spiritually and I can even sense that...it's just incredible. But at the same time there are shallow graves, and the people are waiting for UN and other officials to come and to see this so that they can be documented, and they will properly bury the people including young people. So, the world needs to go to Maryam Dengelat not only to take in the beauty but*

*to see the site of the massacre and to document the attempted genocide against the people there. If I can offer anything that somebody has that kind of ability to be able to connect the people who can really do an investigation, then maybe with the proper burial of the people afterwards the community of Maryam Dengelat can have even more healing that can put this trouble history it happened behind themselves. But again, it has been a wonderful opportunity and a wonderful week I can't say enough how pleased I am about and how it has gone. It is truly an honor for me to work with the people of Tigray in this way and I really appreciated! Thank you very much Yeqenyeley from the bottom of my heart and thank you for having me.*



## **Hagos Gebremariam**

*We have managed to have this project through the support of Catherine D'Andrea of Simon Fraser University. We organized a different model of trauma counseling for the people of Maryam Dengelat who are victims of a horrible massacre in November 2020 perpetrated by Eritrean troops during the Tigray war. The model is about blending trauma healing practices with traditional trauma healing practices of the community with a central aim of integrating the spiritual aspect of the people. Religious leaders and priests play a great role in this matter where all the priests of Maryam Dengelat have attended the training and shared their experiences. After the training, priests have been involved in each household and used many methods to heal their community at the individual, household and community levels using their religious status and knowledge acquired in the HEAL training. I have no words to express how people are traumatized in Maryam Dengelat and this training is a window of hope to start a healing process. Along with the healing*

*process, people are asking for justice to be served. Graves of the massacred are still in the fields and in the neighbourhoods which has been a source of new trauma every day, as the people decided to wait until responsible human rights and justice experts will visit the graves and understand the situation clearly before they move the graves to the church. As a survivor, this also has been tortured me personally when ever I visit my relatives and my village in Maryam Dengelat.*

*Finally, I am very happy to be part of the team and would like to thank Catherine D'Andrea, Simon Fraser University and the Faculty of Environment, and individual donors to our small project. I also want thank Joanne Hodges for following up from a distance after the Maryam Dengelat massacre took place. Most importantly, thank you so much Brenton Diaz for traveling to Tigray, providing the trauma counseling training, sharing your experiences and for visiting Maryam Dengelat in person to sense the pain of the community. Thank you Binyam Tesfalem (Maedot) for assisting Brent during the training. We highly value Adigrat Vision's support for allowing us its library for the training. Finally, I want to thank all participants of the training and for their open minded and courage to support their community.*



# Photo Gallery



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